

The new reality for American academia

H. Holden Thorp

The endless churn of damaging actions from the Trump administration toward science—from freezing and canceling grants to ending programs that encourage greater participation in science—has wreaked havoc in American universities and reverberated around the world as worries about international collaborations and access to American scientific resources threaten the global scientific enterprise. The situation has created anxiety and stress on campuses in the US as administrators contemplate their next moves and faculty and students wonder how to respond. As I travel to campuses around the United States and talk with research faculty, trainees, and students, a common question I hear is “What can I do?”

As with any long-standing institution, there are surely things that can be improved, like better communicating the value of scientific research and academic freedom to a public that supports academia with their tax dollars. But the vitriol from the White House only makes talking about needed changes that much harder. How can academia engage in honest conversation about reform in a way that rebuilds the partnership with the country without seeming to give affirmation to the political attacks?

After reading her insightful piece in *The Atlantic* about a potential way forward, I talked to Danielle Allen, a professor at Harvard University who studies political science, democracy, and philosophy. She argues for a new social contract between higher education and the American people that simultaneously calls for a firm commitment to academic freedom and what she calls a “horizontal” relationship between universities and the public—one that is based on mutual respect and reciprocity. She also makes a compelling call for universities to do a better job of expressing appreciation for the support that the American taxpayers have provided to higher education in the decades since World War II. In her estimation, gratitude from academia has been scant or not apparent. It’s important to remember, she noted, that politicians who are carrying out the Trump agenda are not speaking for the majority of the American people. Despite recent losses of confidence, members of the public “continue to have aspirations for the value of colleges and universities to our society,” she told me. Indeed, in a recent poll, 70% of the public opposed an increase in the federal government’s role in the operation

of private universities, whereas only 28% were in favor.

Exploring this idea further, I talked to Ryan Enos, another Harvard professor and a political scientist. He also supports the idea of acknowledging higher education’s obligations to the American public. Given the tremendous responsibility that universities in the United States are given to educate society and the influence that higher education has on the public, he told me there is “an ethical obligation to ask whether we are effectively fulfilling our duty to the country.” What all of this suggests is that academia needs to find a new way forward—one that involves admitting where it has fallen short and where reform is needed while continuing to defend the values that have led to the many contributions that science and universities have made to enable American success. That way forward will require substantial change. As Allen told me, “I think this is like going through a divorce and then trying to get into a new relationship when you’ve discovered that all kinds of habits and patterns and expectations have to adjust.”

After World War II, in which American science played such a pivotal role, universities in the United States entered an agreement with the federal government in which they were granted sizable federal research support for science and guaranteed freedom from government interference. In return, they would produce medical and other scientific advances and enable a strong economy through new technologies and an educated and technically skilled workforce, all of which would help support a strong defense. This social contract stoked tremendous growth in universities and their research efforts, but it also gave the government great leverage—the power of the purse—which is now being exploited by the Trump administration. Another side effect of this long-reliable social contract may have been to give universities and investigators an excuse to avoid taking responsibility for the social consequences of their research, because the focus was on the knowledge gained rather than on any impacts on the public. “It’s not a crazy strategy,” Allen told me, “but it does have this accidental by-product of cultivating a habit or an ethos of not taking responsibility for downstream consequences of choices that we’re making.”

So, how can higher education reorient its relationship with the American public? Allen argues for counteracting the elite image of private universities like Harvard by ex-

**How can
academia
engage in honest
conversation
about reform in
a way that
rebuilds the
partnership with
the country...?**

panding enrollment, though she acknowledges that the consequential increase in teaching load might face resistance from faculty that prefer doing more research. Enos points out another downside to that approach: “Admissions in the top universities is a grain of sand on the beach of the American population and so increasing the student body size might be nice, but doing so would have no practical implications for American society.” It’s important to keep in mind that much of what Allen is recommending is already being done by larger public universities. Shifting the focus away from Ivy League institutions in the coming months is a crucial strategy because public and land grant universities are already sending the message that all of higher education needs to embrace—solving problems while showing a strong sense of public commitment and service.

Allen also suggests that medical schools shift more attention from research to medical education and primary care. Today, many academic physicians lobby for less time caring for patients and more time for research that might advance medical science. This makes sense, both in terms of what the system rewards but also in fulfilling the social contract. Biomedical research remains politically popular: 77% of the public opposed reducing funding for biomedical research, whereas only 21% supported the cuts. Still, many medical schools have emphasized research over medical education and patient care to the point that a rebalancing is required to maintain public support.

Taken together, these ideas set the stage for more consideration of how higher education can move forward in these critical times. Meanwhile, what should individual researchers and faculty do on a day-to-day basis? In her *Atlantic* piece, Allen recounted a story about the terrorist attacks of 9/11. When the planes were hitting the World Trade Center towers, she and her colleagues elected to continue with a planned workshop on Thucydides rather than gluing themselves to televisions to watch the news. She sees this as a parable for how academics should respond to the current moment—by ensuring that amid the chaos, activities that are the core mission of a university are maintained. At a time when forces are trying to distract and disrupt the scientific enterprise, doing the important work of finding and sharing the truth is now a great act of resistance. □

H. Holden Thorp, Editor-in-Chief, *Science* journals. hthorp@aaas.org

10.1126/science.ady7672

Where Science Gets Social.

AAAS.ORG/COMMUNITY



AAAS’ Member Community is a one-stop destination for scientists and STEM enthusiasts alike. It’s “Where Science Gets Social”: a community where facts matter, ideas are big and there’s always a reason to come hang out, share, discuss and explore.

**Member
COMMUNITY**
AAAS