

SEPTEMBER
20
26



inquisitive

A quarterly periodical
of Heterodox Academy

Trust



"Trapeze Artists" by Francis Luis Mora. Bridgeman Images, Public Domain.

A Matter of Trust

Like so many core American institutions, the academy is in the midst of a trust crisis

BY DAVID MASCI

One hears the phrase “trust crisis” so often these days that it has become a cliché. But just because a term is overused doesn’t mean it isn’t true. Indeed, many of the most important recent social trends in the United States, from populism to polarization, stem at least in part from the growing lack of trust that Americans have in elites and elite institutions.

Higher education has not been immune from this trend. In fact, sizable majorities of Americans now routinely say that they don’t have confidence in colleges and universities. Perhaps more surprisingly, majorities now also say that attending college is no longer worth the time or money—a sentiment that more than 40 years ago, when I set off for college, would have struck my parents and my friends’ parents as absurd.

So what went wrong?

In a wonderful new essay in this issue of *inquisitive*, Martin Gurri tries to answer that question by pointing to what he believes is a profound ideological disconnect between the ideas and priorities of university faculty and administrators and those of most average Americans. This sense of alienation, he writes, combined with the advent of social media makes it increasingly hard for the academy to command any respect from a large and growing share of the population.

In a pair of excellent companion essays, James Lileks and Heather McGrew tackle many of the same issues, but from a slightly different angle. Both point out that the entire spectrum of the academy, from top to bottom, leans heavily left,

making it harder for Americans who don’t share these views to trust universities, particularly in such a politically polarized age.

Meanwhile, Kevin Wallsten tries to answer a different question: not what went wrong, but what should be done. The short answer, he says, is that universities must first reestablish *trustworthiness* before they can hope to be trusted.

On a different note, this will be the last print issue of *inquisitive*. As HxA’s work increasingly centers on direct partnerships with universities and concrete reform on individual campuses, we’re putting more of our energy into those areas. Exploring open inquiry through essays like these remains important to us, so *inquisitive* will live on with contributed pieces on our *Free the Inquiry* Substack. More information about these changes can be found on *inquisitive*’s website.

Meanwhile, let me thank all of our wonderful authors as well as Alice Dreger (the founding editor of *inquisitive*); our amazing graphic designer, Janelle Delia; my incredible colleagues on the communications team, Nicole Barbaro Simovski and Jake Klein; and our crackerjack copy editors, Elizabeth Miles, Lyndi Schrecengost, and Amy Stern for all of their hard work and creativity. And finally, let me thank you, our readers, for making the last two years such a fun and worthwhile journey.

All the best,

David

4

The University May Not Survive the Digital Age

BY MARTIN GURRI

7

What Higher Education Owes the Public

BY KEVIN WALLSTEN

12

A Bridge Too Far

BY JAMES LILEKS

16

Beyond the Echo Chamber

BY HEATHER MCGREW

21

Writing Is Dead. Long Live Writing.

BY SCOTT PARKER

23

Show Your Work

BY DYLAN MORDAUNT

26

Stoke Not the Flames of Hate

BY CHRISTIAN PULVER

29

How I Learned to Teach Socialism at Berkeley

BY NEIL GILBERT

32

“What Color of Nothing?”

BY IRSHAD MANJI

36

Restoring Trust at Yale

BY JULIA ADAMS

The University May Not Survive the Digital Age

"Ship on Stormy Seas" by Ivan Aivazovsky, c. 1858. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

With the arrival of the digital tsunami, universities have lapsed into a crisis of authority

BY MARTIN GURRI

Much of the trust crisis that has engulfed higher education stems from the fact that in the minds of a growing number of Americans, universities have been implicated in many of the intellectual maladies that afflict the present moment. Indeed, the academy, particularly at its most prestigious institutions, is increasingly seen as a breeding ground for anti-democratic elites as well as ground zero for the spread of the cult of identity, which aims to abolish history and even learning on behalf of perfect "equity" among victim groups.

Meanwhile, a significant number of university faculty promote the postmodernist notion that truth and science are empty constructs wielded by oppressors, which must be rejected by all right-thinking people. As if this wasn't enough, universities have also been charged with training a generation of students to fear the clash of ideas as "harm" and to demand "safe spaces" from disagreeable opinions.

At the same time, and not coincidentally, the academy has been battered by the turbulence inherent to the digital age. A feudal institution reformed along rigid German lines more than a century ago, the university confronts an environment of instant communication and collapsed categories, defined by a deafening cacophony of voices and a near-infinite supply of information. This development, more even than concerns about "wokeism" and the like on campus, poses the greatest threat to the future of higher education.

The leading institutions of the 21st century received their structural form in the 20th, and based their authority on the possession of

information when this was a rare commodity. With the arrival of the digital tsunami, institutions have lapsed into a crisis of authority—and the university is no exception. In the last century, academic scholarship mapped out many domains for general discussion, in economic and constitutional affairs, for example.

Today, everything gets shouted out in the Babel of the web. Every institutional failure, too, is exposed to the eyes of a mistrustful public—from corrupt university admissions policies to actual research

fraud. Academics who speak *ex cathedra* are mocked without mercy for their pretension. Those who claim to be scholars or experts either get buried alive in the digital din or learn to scream along with the amateurs.

The hemorrhage of authority, on the face of it, appears

surprising. An institution dedicated to learning and research should be expected to thrive in a "knowledge economy" and an age of information. However, the digital landscape favors speed and fluidity, and the university remains frozen in an inflexible industrial model driven by funding and growth, which must prioritize relations with patrons in the great hierarchies of government and business.

Typically, in the U.S., the president of a university isn't a beacon of scholarship but a proficient and well-connected fundraiser. The university, as an industry, does still manage to produce the "meritocratic" elites that populate our society's hierarchies; otherwise, students are almost incidental to its functions.

At many universities, the average American student has become a mere conduit for massive government largesse: federal loans that inflate the system to the tune of \$1.8 trillion (2026).

A feudal institution reformed along rigid German lines more than a century ago, the university confronts an environment of instant communication and collapsed categories, defined by a deafening cacophony of voices and a near-infinite supply of information.

These universities take the money but make no commitments regarding the quality or usefulness of their product; in fact, they are resistant to most efforts to quantify the value of their credentialing. The student is guaranteed only the debt. The federal government also bestows \$65 billion on academic research grants (2024). Corporate and private “endowments” to universities—gifts with strings attached—reached a market value of \$944.3 billion in 2026. At \$1 billion per year, the income extracted from the performance of unpaid student athletes amounts to pocket change.

Increasingly [Harvard] seems to be less a place of learning than a miniature but pleasant nation-state, like Monaco or Dubai. If Harvard so wished, it could easily dispense with students altogether.

The current purpose—if not quite the mission—of the university is increasingly focused on the accumulation of large sums of money, which are lavished on magnificent construction projects and a fast-growing army of administrative drones. Success is highly skewed. On the far tail of the power curve, 521 U.S. colleges closed or merged during the last 10 years. At the top, Harvard, whose endowment of nearly \$57 billion is more than double the gross national product of Nicaragua, increasingly seems to be less a place of learning than a miniature but pleasant nation-state, like Monaco or Dubai. If Harvard so wished, it could easily dispense with students altogether.

The marginalization of the student in the digital age has brought the university to a moment of reckoning. Because of access to easy federal money, the cost of attending a four-year school has doubled since 2000. The ballooning student debt burden has become a political scandal. The economic sacrifice is now prolonged and often futile: nearly 4 out of 10 students never graduate, and those who do take an average of six years to earn a four-year degree. Not surprisingly, overall enrollment peaked in 2010 and has since declined by more than 10%. An ever-expanding array of other choices, often involving online education, are both available and affordable.

So far, the decline has been relatively gentle. Students are marginalized but not yet alienated. Despite the cost and the institutional indifference,

there has been no revolt or mass migration away from the university system. However, much of the perceived value that lures 20 million young Americans to campus every year depends on two uncertain and increasingly dubious propositions. One is that the university offers a gateway to

truth and can initiate individuals into the methods of science and wisdom. The other is that college networking and degrees are necessary for material success in the modern world.

Neither claim conforms to current reality. The wisdom of the Western tradition that might have served as

an anchor to young minds in the midst of the digital storm has largely been repudiated in favor of a robotic activism on behalf of the great progressive omnicause. For the same reason, the only networking that is considered legitimate runs along racial, sexual, and other identitarian lines.

Sitting atop a mountain of money, prestige universities increasingly play with the sanity of students they no longer really need. The other schools, though less privileged, follow their lead. This can't last. The old norms of higher learning have been abandoned by its practitioners. A revolt may soon be coming that will sweep aside what remains.

Whether it comes from the abused and indebted students, the parents who often pay exorbitantly for the miseducation of their children, or new schools with more adaptive norms and curriculums—or all of the above—I'm in no position to say. But a glimpse at the present system should be enough to see that the American university is moribund, and that without a major reassessment of its mission and methods, what we now call higher education might no longer exist in a few decades time.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Martin Gurri, a former CIA analyst, is a visiting fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University and the author of *The Revolt of the Public*.

"The Floor Scrapers" by Gustave Callebotte, 1875. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.



Higher education can only restore trustworthiness through accountability

BY KEVIN WALLSTEN

What is college for and why should the public have confidence that it will fulfill this mission?

In *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, Columbia University historian Andrew Delbanco tries to answer the first part of this question, arguing that higher education serves three purposes. The first is economic: providing individuals with marketable skills. The second is civic: cultivating what he calls a “well-functioning bullshit meter” that inoculates people against specious arguments. The third is personal: developing an inner life rich enough that, as former Barnard College president Judith Shapiro puts it, “the inside of your head is an interesting place to spend the rest of your life.”

The public broadly endorses each of these purposes. According to a 2025 poll conducted by New America, the vast majority of Americans said colleges should equip students with the necessary skills to succeed in their chosen fields (96%), develop their critical thinking (93%), prepare them as informed citizens (91%), and expose them to diverse ideas (84%).

Yet recent surveys show that the same public doesn't think colleges and universities are

fulfilling this mission. There are a number of reasons for this loss of trust, but one underexamined factor is a lack of clarity among the public about just what universities are and aren't accomplishing. Indeed, higher education is now publicly accountable for only the economic component (i.e. will my degree help me find a job in my chosen field?) of its broader mission.

But while prospective students can compare nearly every school in the country on graduate earnings and debt through the College Scorecard, no comparable resource exists for civic and formative outcomes. The lack of data is surprising because colleges and universities routinely promise to cultivate critical thinking, foster intellectual humility and prepare students to engage across ideological and other differences. But a prospective student currently has no way of assessing whether a school's graduates leave campus better on any of these crucial formative dimensions than when they arrived.

Transparency about economic outcomes cannot underwrite confidence in the whole enterprise as long as civic and formative promises remain unverifiable. What the Scorecard really proves then is that standardized, mandatory public

reporting can render at least part of higher education's mission legible to the public. But if colleges and universities want confidence to extend beyond their economic mission, they will need to make their civic and formative missions publicly accountable as well.

Make the Curriculum Verifiable

If colleges and universities are truly serious about civic formation and exposure to diverse perspectives, their curricula should make those commitments clear. Currently, many do not. In one analysis of general education requirements at 120 nationally prominent schools, none required students to take economics and only 15% required them to study U.S. government or American history. But 51% mandated that students complete diversity, equity, and inclusion coursework. This particular curricular balance is difficult to reconcile with the claim that preparing students for citizenship is a central institutional priority.

The same problem appears within courses themselves. While colleges and universities say they teach students to engage critically with competing arguments, course content does not always bear that out. A recent analysis of millions of syllabi from the Open Syllabus Project, for example, found that on contested issues such as criminal justice, the Israel-Palestine conflict and abortion students are often assigned readings that reflect a narrow range of left-wing perspectives and do not engage with scholarly counterarguments. Not every class needs to stage an artificial debate around every question, of course, but institutions claiming to cultivate intellectual breadth should be able to show how and where that breadth is appearing in the curriculum.

The first step toward fixing this is to mandate a broadly defined, civic education course covering American constitutional government, the

history of the American political tradition, and basic economic principles. Requirements alone, however, are not enough. Syllabi for courses used to satisfy these requirements should be publicly accessible. Outsiders should be able to determine whether schools that promise civic formation actually require civic learning, whether courses advertised as exposing students to

diverse perspectives actually do so, and whether curricular reforms announced by campus leaders or state legislatures actually reach the classroom.

To be clear, these reforms should not be interpreted as a license to micromanage every course or prescribe a single canon for every campus. Instead, these changes should be narrowly focused on making the civic

curriculum answerable to the public purposes universities already claim to serve.

Measure What Colleges Claim To Produce

It is worth, however, being very candid about the limits of curricular reform. As American Enterprise Institute senior fellow Samuel Abrams has recently argued, gains in civic knowledge (i.e. the growing percent of Americans who can correctly identify the three branches of government) have not been matched by improvements in civic formation (i.e. the small and declining share of Americans who can productively engage across difference and reason in good faith). Changing general education requirements and publishing course syllabi are the easiest part of reforming higher education. Verifying that a school requires civic coursework tells the public what is taught but nothing about whether students were actually transformed by it.

Colleges and universities must also, therefore, measure and report on the outcomes of their civic and formative efforts. Admittedly, civic and formative outcomes are harder to gauge than graduation rates, eventual earnings, or student debt. But colleges and universities are better

equipped than almost any other institution to meet that challenge. After all, they employ faculty who specialize in survey research, measurement, and statistical analysis; administrators experienced in standardized reporting; subject review boards to ensure ethical data collection; and communications teams capable of explaining results to the public.

And, they would not have to start from scratch. Over the past several decades, higher education has developed a substantial assessment infrastructure devoted to tracking formative educational effects. Some tools, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), track students' experiences and educational development at scale. Others, including the Wabash National Study, The American Association of Colleges and Universities' VALUE rubrics, and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), measure outcomes such as critical thinking and civic-related gains. More recently, Harvard's Academic Flourishing Initiative has developed and tested a survey instrument designed to tap dimensions of meaning, character, and intellectual formation among undergraduates.

While these efforts show rigorous measurement of civic and formative outcomes is possible, they have not accumulated into anything like the kind of public accountability system that tracks the economic mission. For instance, NSSE results typically belong to the school that pays for them and are rarely disclosed in standardized form. CIRP functions primarily as an internal research instrument rather than as a public-facing accountability tool.

The Wabash National Study last completed its longitudinal collection in the early 2010s, and VALUE rubrics are adapted for use and scored by each individual school, making them useful for campus assessments but limiting their value as a common public benchmark. The CLA, for its part, has only been voluntarily adopted among a select group of schools and so yields nothing close to a comprehensive picture of learning across colleges and universities. Despite a considerable effort at measurement, in other words, prospective students still cannot compare their expected civic learning gains or indicators of intellectual

formation across campuses.

What's missing is a centralized, public reporting system built on open science principles. Colleges and universities should preregister what they will measure, which students they will include, how the data will be analyzed, and what results they will publish. Doing so would make it far harder to redefine success after the fact or selectively report only flattering findings. Schools should, of course, be free to add mission-specific measures to their data collection efforts, but a small set of common questions should be mandated so that institutional strengths and weaknesses become visible and, more importantly, so that schools can begin to learn from one another.

There is no reason this has to be a government undertaking. In fact, a federal mandate may do more harm than good by inviting politically driven standards and by raising the stakes in ways that intensify the temptation that comes with the imposition of any measurement scheme to focus on what is tested rather than on what ultimately matters.

The most credible approach, therefore, would be led by a consortium of colleges and universities themselves or an independent nonprofit clearinghouse modeled on how institutions currently pool data through bodies like NSSE. This approach, of course, would not be easy to implement. It would require coordination across disparate institutions, agreement on shared standards, and a willingness to accept a form of public scrutiny that many campuses have long sought to avoid.

But the alternative is continued drift in a system that does little to improve public confidence. Imperfect measurement is better than no accountability at all, and the time for deferring reforms has passed.

Public reporting would also reshape how excellence in higher education is evaluated. Conventional judgments of "quality" are heavily influenced by what is easiest to measure (e.g. selectivity, graduation rates, earnings, debt, etc.). As Brendan Case and Tyler VanderWeele have recently pointed out in an article in The Harvard Crimson, standard rankings largely omit the broader outcomes colleges and universities promise to deliver. Schools that excel at civic

learning or intellectual formation currently have no way to make that excellence legible to prospective students, policymakers, or to the public more broadly.

Standardized public reporting would change that. Without comparable data on these dimensions, however, the prestige system will continue to reward the outcomes it can measure and ignore the ones it cannot.

What Trustworthiness Requires

There is a difference between earning public trust and establishing institutional trustworthiness. Trust is an attitude that is shaped by what institutions do but also by polarization, media environment, and forces well beyond any single institution's control.

Trustworthiness is more directly within institutions' reach: It belongs to those that verifiably do what they claim they will do. The reforms proposed here cannot guarantee that Americans will trust higher education, but they can help ensure that colleges and universities deserve that trust.

This distinction matters because distrust of higher education is often dismissed within the academy as a problem caused by conservatives. This deflects from the more fundamental question facing higher education, which is why anyone, regardless of their ideology, should trust an institution that rarely provides outsiders with enough evidence to judge whether it is fulfilling its own promises. When curricular commitments are difficult to verify, syllabi are inaccessible, and civic learning is not systematically measured, skepticism is predictable and hard to dismiss.

These reforms are not about winning back the support of conservatives. They are about giving institutional legitimacy a defensible foundation for people from across the political spectrum. Regardless of whether they move survey numbers, institutions that claim to form citizens and prepare students for democratic life owe the public

evidence that proves those claims.

Nor do these reforms impose a single telos on higher education. Civic formation can coexist with other educational purposes rather than displacing them. What's more, they do not invite federal coercion. In fact, the most credible answer to looming external interference is internal action that makes such coercion less necessary.

Higher education's economic mission is surrounded by an accountability infrastructure because public legitimacy came to require it. Its civic and formative missions have remained largely exempt from comparable scrutiny because they are inherently harder to measure, because the federal government has not compelled colleges

to report on them the way it has compelled reporting on economic outcomes, and because the public has long simply taken universities at their word. If trust, let alone trustworthiness, is to be restored, that exemption is no longer sustainable.

We May Not Like What We See

What will be revealed when formative measurement does break into public view

may not please supporters of higher education. For example, in their book *Academically Adrift*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa used data from the Collegiate Learning Assessment to show that a large share of more than 2,300 undergraduates across two dozen schools showed little improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning, or written communication during their first two years of college.

But while the book provoked substantial debate within higher education, it failed to produce a durable apparatus for assessing formative or civic outcomes. Indeed, 15 years later, the CLA remains voluntary and there is no centralized public database, website, or dashboard that publishes scores across colleges and universities.

Work emerging from Harvard's Human Flourishing Program also shows what more

serious measurement has the potential to reveal. In early analyses of "student formation" measures, Ivy League scores on meaning, character, intellectual formation, and the capacity to work across differences were not especially impressive despite the schools' dominance on more conventional measures of academic quality.

These are the kind of findings that have the potential to build the foundation for institutional trustworthiness. They subject colleges and universities to a serious, repeated, public test against the ideals they claim to serve, and they illuminate patterns that a focus on economics alone can obscure. But reporting one-off survey results is not the same as building a consistent accountability system. Higher education now has the tools to make evidence of this kind routine and comparable. Colleges and universities should take the initiative for this work themselves rather than leaving outsiders to assemble it piecemeal.

Until recently, higher education received the kind of trust almost no other institution had, namely, trust based on deference to prestige and, at least on its civic and formative claims, largely insulated from public verification. The 2026 Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education report, more than any other development in recent years, signals that this era of deference is over. The only question now is whether universities will build the infrastructure that trustworthiness requires or have others impose it on them.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Kevin Wallsten, Ph.D., is a professor of political science at the University of California, Long Beach.



A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

A new book takes a hard look at higher education, but also offers hope for reform

BY JAMES LILEKS

Walking around Boston the other day, I saw an exhibit of masters theses projects at the Boston School of Architecture. The school is housed in an ugly building, of course, which is like making Frankenstein's Monster the spokesman for plastic surgeons. You would like to think that the exhibit might have some grand, ennobling public structures—a train station with a broad vaulted roof, statuary showing the old Roman gods of transit and timetables, a slender skyscraper piercing the empyrean beyond.

Alas, no. Most of the exhibits had a social justice angle. They were out to fix the world. An office building for neurodivergent workers. Swoopy waterfront structures for the homeless. A prison that had nicer cells, with an entrance that was designed to reduce anxiety.

If this is the spirit abroad in *architecture* departments, how deeply soaked in dreary

modern thought are the rest of the academic disciplines? You'll find the answers in *Higher Education in America: It's Worse Than You Think*, a new compendium of philippics and prescriptions edited by Kevin D. Roberts.

The essays, written by educators and intellectuals united by a dislike of the smothering cauldron of wet-wool Marxism and modern wokery, approach the state of higher education from three directions. The first section of the book, "The Economic Model," concerns the hideous costs and low returns faced by many graduates. If you're up for a hammer-and-tongs attack on credentialism, this is for you. The second section concerns the bureaucracy, and the way the nomenklatura stifles change. It includes Jonathan Butcher's chapter on the critical race theory (CRT)/diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) problem—a brisk and damning account of the way the Frankfurt School scuttled across the ocean to burrow into

American education. It really belongs in the third section, "The Leftist Domination"—but then again, *every* aspect of the problem comes back to that.

The entire book is about the leftist domination, and that's the reason the right is alarmed about higher ed. There would be fewer conservative complaints about tenure, bureaucracy, and inflated costs if the universities leaned right. Conservatives make jokes about useless degrees in Peruvian Basket Weaving Studies, but would probably be less annoyed if someone went into debt to get a history degree with an emphasis on Betsy Ross' influence on post-colonial flag sewing.

But that's not the world in which we live. As economist Andrew Gillen notes in his chapter, "The Leftist Monopoly Problem": "By the early 2020s, for every professor on the right, there were 6.9 professors on the left."

Imagine if you were going in for surgery and learned that your surgeon had graduated from a school where 7 out of 8 doctors believed in leeches and humours. You'd get off the gurney. But we have no such problems with an imbalance in higher education. Even if a teacher isn't tamping a wad of '60s radical twaddle down the students' throats, they are dispositionally progressive or liberal, and hence that cannot help but tinge the curriculum.

Why It Matters

If you're a parent shelling out tens of thousands of dollars, you might not want your child's brain reformed at an impressionable age into something that thinks Texan Christians are the domestic Taliban but Gaza is full of queer-friendly venues.

If you're a taxpayer, you might not want public money going to an institution whose professors believe that the country is irredeemably and uniquely evil, even though it's paying them to

do nothing but put Howard Zinn and Michel Foucault in a blender and serve the brackish slop in red Solo cups.

If you're a student, you might want a more rounded education, something that holds the Western experience as unique and valuable, and gives you a grounding in your own civilization that makes you less likely to fall for a romantic vision of a deindustrialized multi-culti groupthink commune divorced from history and human nature.

If you're an employer, you might want that degree to mean something. Hah! As college president Fr. Deacon Kyle Washut observes in his chapter, "The Student Experience":

Employers who could once use a college degree as a shortcut human-resources check for the qualities of grit, critical thinking, communication skills, and basic professionalism can no longer make that assumption; more than a quarter of surveyed managers say that they would refuse to hire a recent college graduate today precisely because of this lack of basic soft skills.

What to do, then? There are proposals. You can build your own institution, such as Hillsdale College, which the elites will always regard with sneers: "explicitly traditional" equals "home-schooling for flat-earthlers." Or, you can remake existing universities from within. As former Emory University professor Mark Bauerlein writes in his chapter, "The Woke University Decline":

The alternative is this: to build centers that do what humanities departments used to do in a more prosperous era. These centers would run as independent units in schools of arts and sciences, integrated into the undergraduate program, not standing merely as extracurricular add-ons . . . These centers

"Howard Clifford Running off the Tacoma Narrows Bridge During the Collapse" by Jim Bashford, 1940. University of Washington Special Collections, Public Domain.

If you're a taxpayer, you might not want public money going to an institution whose professors believe that the country is irredeemably and uniquely evil.

hire their own people, mount their own classes, graduate their own majors, and report directly to the provost. Funding would come from state coffers and private donors, not drawn from the regular budget and thus resented as a drain on other departments. The curriculum would impart exactly what the professors have renounced: Western civilization, Great Books, high art, and the American heritage, all of it taught in a mode of understanding and appreciation, not nihilism and discontent.

Sigh. What a wonderful world that would be. This is preferable because—ideally—you end up with the institution intact, but improved. Lots of nice old buildings with ivy, a good brand name with a solid rep everyone respects out of habit. But there's no guarantee of success, and it takes a while. We want a quick trot through the institutions, not a long march.

A Cultural Correction

Also, while we're at it, we need to remake the entire coddled, bratty culture. Editor Roberts has an entry on the necessity of "A Cultural Correction," and he's right to call for college culture to get more rigorous, honest, and safe for free speech. "America's students are owed a campus culture that is conducive to the pursuit of truth," he asserts. "Delivering that culture requires administrators who will insist on academic seriousness and who will lead with moral clarity. Policies and mission statements mean nothing unless they reinforce a community strong enough to resist mob intimidation."

True. But he's talking about college culture. It will take a larger cultural correction to fix

higher education. Collectivism, identity politics, oikophobic contempt of America specifically and the West in general, romantic attachments to violent "liberation" movements—they have to become *uncool*. Showing up on campus with a Che shirt should be like swanning around on the quadrangle wearing a duotone picture of Hitler. When it is uncool for youth to be leftists, the institutions will change.

But don't hold your breath; there's something in the Western breast that makes the adolescent heart give in to its left ventricle, especially

if they were swayed by a charismatic history teacher in high school who showed them the *real* truths.

So, should we just give up on the humanities? You could say it's time.

Too many people go to college. Society falsely equates a degree with knowledge and wisdom. The state subsidizes degrees that serve no useful function. When these three things change, the

debate about bias will fade because there will be fewer people saddled with debt and irrelevant skill sets. This doesn't consign the humanities to oblivion—it returns them to the autodidacts who have the drive and desire to learn.

It's not as if an education in the humanities can only be found on campus. The *bien-pensant* may sniff at those who studied Euripides and Suetonius and Luther and Bastiat on YouTube, but these online students of the world didn't sit down and learn because a test was coming and a paper was due. They did it because they were hungry and had discovered that this hunger was a delightful appetite that could never be sated. There is always so much more to learn. There is never a day when they walk in robes to Elgar's

"Pomp and Circumstance" and think, *well, that's done*. For them, class is always in session.

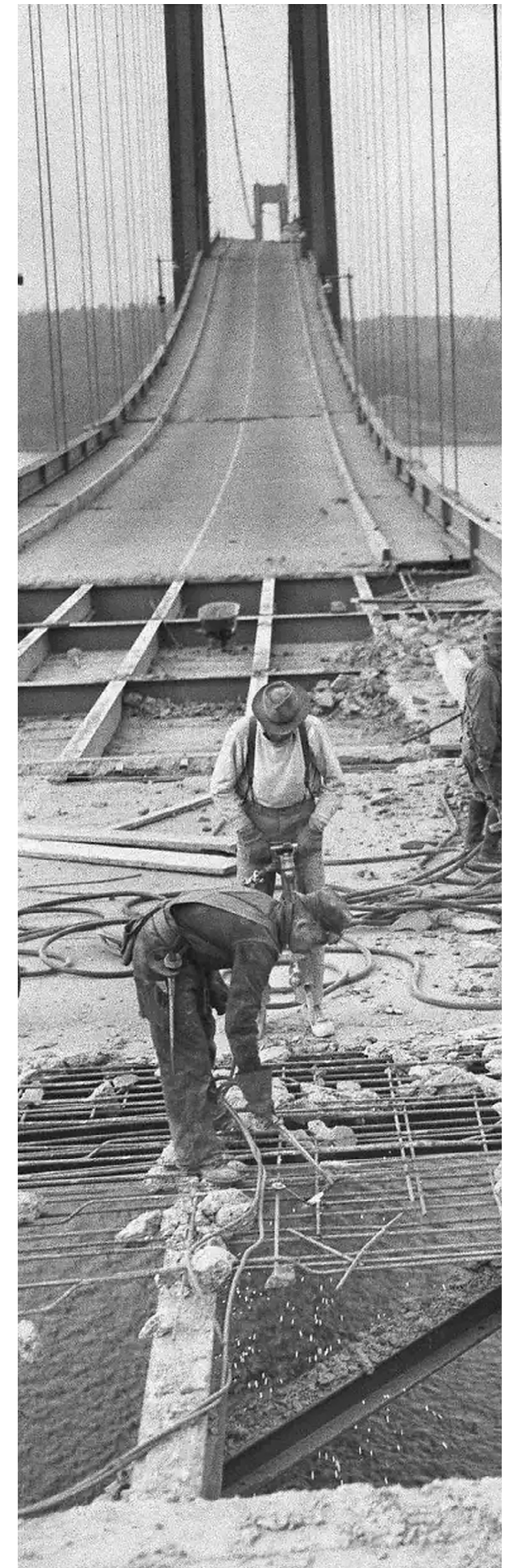
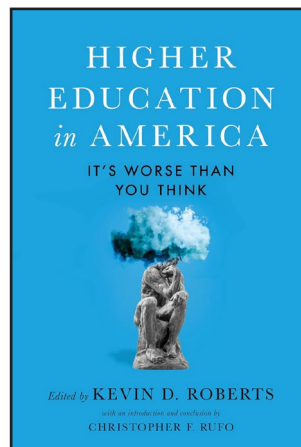
If you think it's all worth saving, conservative activist Christopher Rufo provides the rallying cry at the book's conclusion:

Legislation eliminating DEI mandates and elastic clauses in accreditation law, executive orders demanding merit-based standards and outcome accountability, philanthropic capital redirected from corrupt institutions to competitive startups, legal enforcement through Title VI and other civil-rights laws, trustee assertions of authority over captured faculty, civics centers with independent hiring, and the construction of alternative pipelines for classical education—these are all mantles ready to be taken up.

Yes. And, as the fellow said in "The Princess Bride": *Have fun storming the castle*—although if a Boston School of Architecture Ph.D. student designed it, don't worry, the drawbridge will be down in the name of inclusion and accessibility.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

James Lileks is a freelance writer living in Minnesota.



"Workers Removing Debris from the Tacoma Narrows Bridge Deck" by Unknown Photographer, 1940. University of Washington Libraries Special Collections, Public Domain.

BEYOND the Echo Chamber



"Narcissus" by Caravaggio, 1597-1599. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Restoring public trust in higher education requires a new commitment to intellectual pluralism

BY HEATHER MCGREW

Until recently, college was almost unquestionably valued as a natural next step for graduating high school seniors: an opportunity to expand their knowledge, gain valuable soft and hard skills, and learn about adulthood. But in the last decade or so, these perceptions have changed significantly.

Recent surveys of Americans show that our institutions of higher education now have a serious trust problem. A number of factors have contributed to this loss of trust, but perhaps the most important is the perception of ideological capture and indoctrination, specifically that most universities have become left-wing echo chambers that encourage adherence to one set of views at the expense of open inquiry and viewpoint diversity.

The dynamics that create such an environment are admittedly varied and complex. But the fact is, on most American campuses today there are real reputational, academic, and societal risks involved in sharing heterodox viewpoints in the classroom even though learning is supposed to be about openly exploring, investigating, and interrogating competing ideas.

The Progressive Professoriate

Earlier this year, Heterodox Academy's Erin Shaw and Shiri Spitz Siddiqi performed a critical review of surveys and studies to investigate the political affiliations of faculty in higher education in the United States. Their work confirms that while statistics and percentages vary based on institution and discipline, in general left-leaning faculty are significantly overrepresented in academia. The researchers refer to FIRE's large-scale 2024 survey, which found that at 55 private colleges and public flagship universities 62% of respondents identified as Democrats, a mere 13% as Republicans, and 24% as other.

Some fields of study had much higher ratios of Democratic-to-Republican faculty than others. For instance, there was a 42 to 1 Democrat-to-Republican ratio in the field of anthropology.

Indeed, the report found that even in the more ostensibly objective STEM fields, there was a significant liberal leaning. In biology, for example, the ratio of Democrats to Republicans was 9 to 1.

All of this means that in many fields, conservative or even moderate viewpoints easily go unheard entirely or, at the very least, remain marginalized, while accepted viewpoints and narratives are unchallenged or prioritized. This inevitability carries over to the classroom, where faculty determine readings, unit topics, and lecture themes that advance these "acceptable" viewpoints. This limits students' exposure to perspectives that may carry legitimacy more broadly but are unpopular in academia.

Indeed, the well-intentioned and understandably revered commitment to academic freedom means that professors can curate their curriculum carefully to reflect their ideological biases. Meanwhile, conservative students may abandon academic disciplines in which their views are mocked, minimized, or just ignored, helping to perpetuate a vicious cycle that promotes a monoculture.

Some in higher education dismiss, downplay, or even deny that this indoctrination occurs. But a recent nationwide report by the National Association of Scholars examining the general education requirements at 100 elite private and state institutions of higher education found that at most of these institutions progressive ideology is now an integral part of the curriculum.

In fact, over half of the universities in the NAS study included a progressive ideology requirement, most often under the umbrella of identity politics or a new version of civics rooted in the progressive political activism of the 1960s that supports the left's plan to fundamentally transform America. The report also found that the vast majority of higher education institutions offer courses that use social justice, feminist, and gender studies frameworks in lieu of classical

or traditional classes that focus on Western civilization.

A Progressive Assumption

Meanwhile, stroll around an average college campus in the United States, and what you will observe is the way literature, flyers, communications, and faculty offices will confirm the overwhelming progressive bias discussed here. An occasional posting about a college Republican group or conservative small group meeting will be dwarfed by dozens of postings, papers, and advertisements for the Young Democratic Socialists of America, environmental action coalitions, pro-Palestinian groups, and various other left-wing “resistance” movements.

Professors’ doors are often papered with such materials as well, leaving passersby and visitors with no doubt of their political affiliations. Having spent over two decades in higher education, I have become used to seeing mostly progressive messaging throughout hallways, in classrooms, and in break rooms.

In addition, there is a consensus in meetings, group chats, and water cooler conversations that assumes everyone at the university is on the same page politically. In a recent Heterodox STEM Substack titled “Five Rules for Conservative Faculty in a Liberal Academy,” James Shuls offers an example of what I’m talking about: “The day after Donald Trump’s surprising 2016 victory, I sat in a committee meeting. The chair began somberly: ‘I know we are all very upset about what happened yesterday...’ I, for one, was not. While not a fervent Trump supporter, that election brought Republican victories down the ticket in every major office in my state.”

These are not isolated incidents but regular occurrences in the workplace for those who work in academia. And this progressive monoculture

is undergirded by everything from performative Indigenous land acknowledgement statements to pronouns in bios.

Norms and expectations like these shut down genuine opportunities for open inquiry and healthy, respectful debate. This affects all constituents of the university. Students wonder if their grades will be negatively affected if they express unpopular or conservative viewpoints. Faculty have legitimate concerns that they may compromise opportunities for promotion or tenure if they express heterodox views or engage in—or publish—research that doesn’t advance approved narratives. Faculty, staff, and students all wonder about reputational risk.

On most American campuses today there are real reputational, academic, and societal risks involved in sharing heterodox viewpoints in the classroom even though learning is supposed to be about openly exploring, investigating, and interrogating competing ideas.

These concerns are not unfounded, and they have real impacts on the way students and faculty conduct themselves. In an article last year for *The Hill*, psychologists Forest Romm and Kevin Waldman discuss confidential interviews with 1,500 students at

the University of Michigan and Northwestern University in which 88% of students admitted to pretending to hold more progressive views than they actually do. The study also shows that many faculty understand that a conservative viewpoint could hinder their opportunities to secure a job in academia or achieve tenure.

Other studies make the same point in different ways. For instance, in the largest survey ever conducted on the topic of faculty self-censorship, FIRE found that a mere 20% of faculty thought a conservative would be a good fit for their department. The FIRE study also found that three times as many conservative versus liberal faculty keep quiet about their political beliefs for fear of losing their jobs.

Finally, at many universities, DEI statements (which faculty and others are often required to write to show their commitment to diversity,

equity, and inclusion) are sometimes used as ideological litmus tests for hiring as well as advancing research in certain fields. In an examination of over 10,000 faculty job announcements from the 2024-2025 hiring cycle, a Heterodox Academy study found that nearly one-quarter (22.3%) of those ads requested DEI statements from their applicants. One example of such a requirement is a statement of commitment to “equity” in the classroom.

Such statements force some applicants to craft a narrative that isn’t in line with their beliefs about how to help students succeed in the classroom. Though every good educator supports making mentoring and tutoring opportunities and other resources available to students who need them, not everyone agrees that all students will, or even should, end up in the same place. Furthermore, some faculty members report that in their role on search committees, they’ve seen incredibly competitive and deserving applicants dismissed due to DEI statements that are perceived as not being sufficiently enthusiastic.

So we are left with a preponderance of left-leaning faculty, the over-representation of progressive courses and curricula, and an environment that assumes and promotes progressive perspectives almost exclusively. The average citizen must weigh these realities alongside the high cost of attending (or sending one’s children to) university as well as the reality that many newly minted college graduates struggle to find meaningful employment. These factors and more have left higher education in a precarious place.

Where Do We Go From Here?

As we look to the future, we must acknowledge that there is much hard work to be done. For starters, we need a genuine commitment to viewpoint diversity from the top down and all across campus. Admittedly, this is no easy task, as many administrators and academics aren’t interested in giving a platform of any kind to certain views, even if a sizable share of their fellow citizens hold those views.

To see how daunting the challenge is, look no further than the recent example of the cancellation of CBS News president Bari Weiss’

talk originally scheduled for Feb. 27, 2026, at UCLA. Although Weiss herself ultimately decided to cancel the event, the decision was precipitated by security concerns resulting from an organized campaign to ‘deplatform’ her, as evidenced by a petition signed by nearly 11,000 faculty, students, and others in the campus community. In one notable case, a faculty member threatened to resign if Weiss’ lecture occurred.

Unfortunately, this example is not unique or even that rare. But honest, open, and difficult conversations cannot happen if people on campus are unwilling to even listen to certain voices.

Another positive step would be to better define terms. As George Orwell and others have taught us, those who control definitions control the conversation. To be intellectually responsible, we must take time to carefully craft shared definitions of terms used on our campuses for concepts such as civil discourse, viewpoint diversity, and open inquiry. Without a shared understanding of terminology, we cannot productively move forward.

Moving into the classroom, we must actively work to embed into course curricula diverse viewpoints, with the intention of discussing all of them in a fair manner. It’s perfectly acceptable, of course, to discuss why some viewpoints are not as popular as others or why some opinions are embraced in certain contexts for specific reasons, but unpopular or heterodox opinions should be discussed and considered honestly and openly.

This requires a diversification of the curriculum and reading lists. Students who graduate with a robust, wide-reaching knowledge of scholars in their field should know about such important figures as Thomas Sowell (economics), Jonathan Haidt (social psychology), Jordan Peterson (clinical psychology), and many others who currently are outside the intellectual mainstream on campus. If we are graduating students without a full range of exposure to scholars across the political spectrum, we are cheating them by severely limiting their intellectual development and educational experience.

Although it may be unpopular with many practicing academics, it also would behoove

us to consider instituting some accountability measures. Of course we want to preserve academic freedom to the fullest extent possible, but we need to balance that with the assurance that our students are getting a comprehensive, diverse education that doesn't overtly favor certain narratives.

In addition, we need a commitment to genuine—not simply performative—dialogue. Martha McCaughey's article "Next Time, Try Dialogue" in the June 2026 issue of *inquisitive* discusses a recent practice on some campuses to pass along beach balls for students to draw or write on as a form of expression. Although framed as a way to safely express oneself, this practice has reportedly devolved into acts of incendiary performance, as students intentionally write or draw "political slogans, insults, and provocative symbols" to elicit shock and outrage.

Campuses must instead commit to doing everything they can to foster meaningful opportunities for dialogue. One example is Stanford University's recent "Disagree with a Professor" event series (an idea that started as a student-led podcast at the University of Virginia), which invites students to actively contend with positions presented by professors by using precise, evidence-based arguments rather than just knee-jerk reactions. This format mitigates the power dynamic, as students are not being graded by the professor; as a result, it allows for a more open and honest exchange.

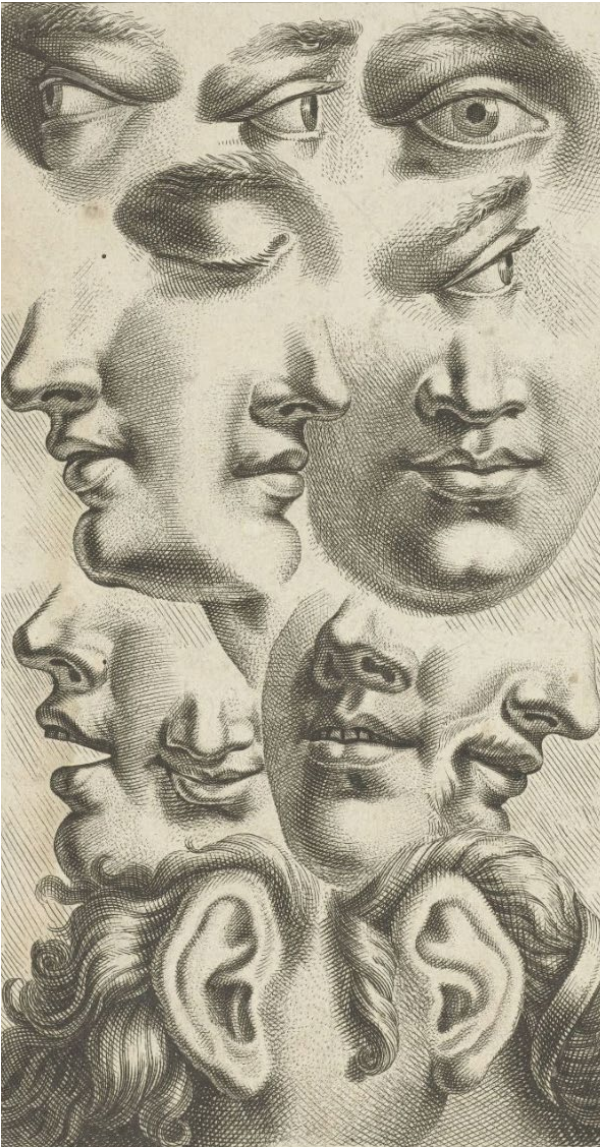
Another great option for faculty or staff is to start a Heterodox Campus Chapter at their institution or, if possible, join an already established one. Administrators who are committed to civil dialogue should encourage and promote such practices, as well as make funds available for faculty or student leaders who wish to receive training.

There are other opportunities as well. For instance, Braver Angels brings people together to practice dialogue across differences; the Constructive Dialogue Institute takes a research-based approach to practicing civil discourse; and The Discussion Project works with campuses to create spaces where productive dialogue can occur.

Ultimately, if higher education is going to regain lost trust and thrive in these rapidly changing times, it will require, among other things, a genuine commitment to the principles of intellectual diversity and pluralism. When we openly share, debate, and defend positions on nuanced, complex topics, we leave the echo chamber that is prevalent on so many college campuses and instead engage in the type of learning that produces responsible, well-rounded citizens with dignity, character, and conviction.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Heather McGrew is a teaching professor in the Department of Writing, Language, and Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Superior.



"Details of Faces" by Jean Lepautre, 1682–1706. Rijksmuseum, Public Domain.

"Man Writing a Letter" by Gabriël Metsu, c. 1664–1666. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.



Writing Is Dead. Long Live Writing.

AI is making the art of writing more obsolete, and more necessary, than ever

BY SCOTT PARKER

In the university right now, there is a paradox at the core of our project. Thanks to the pervasiveness of artificial intelligence, writing has suddenly become effectively obsolete and essentially impossible; it also has simultaneously become more necessary than ever.

This past semester was my first back in the rubble of freshman composition since GPT-4 bulldozed the pillars of what had been my writing composition class. For the past few years I had been teaching creative writing, blissfully ignoring most of the hazards of AI's infiltration of the university. Returning to teaching composition, I found the situation to be as bad as I had feared.

Few pieces of student writing were beyond suspicion—and then usually only because of their very low quality. Sometimes I would use an AI to catch student AI use, sometimes I caught it myself, and sometimes I failed to catch it or didn't bother trying. Students used AI not only for analysis and research in their essays, but for personal narrative and reflection, too.

I don't blame them. In their shoes, I would have done the same. I didn't want to write essays I didn't want to write when I was a student. I still don't. If, at 18 or 22, I'd had a way to produce better written work with almost no effort, I would have done so too.

The case for why students should have to take freshman writing has always been a challenging one to make to the students themselves. Often,

The case for why students should have to take freshman writing has always been a challenging one to make to the students themselves.

we tell them writing is a foundational skill that can be applied in any major and any career. That's true as far as it goes, but I never wanted to present students with such a reductive and prosaic view of writing. Instead, I told them that writing is a tool of thought, the primary practice by which we cultivate our minds; we don't write to acquire skills that can be leveraged for success, we write to discover and create our very selves.

It was a self-consciously inspirational note I tried to strike. But how swiftly has AI relieved me of my best rhetorical maneuvers. Why do we need to think when there's a machine that will do it for us? In the same way I can defeat five-time World Chess Champion Magnus Carlsen with access to a chess engine, a student with AI can think and write better than their professors, an employer, or anyone else in their life might require of them. Either they recognize the intrinsic rewards of writing as a profound tool of personal development (as I eventually did) and pursue it for that reason or they don't and don't. Either way, the trump card of "writing as thought" is off the teacher's table.

A world that outsources writing to machines is a world that devalues human thought. Like most things most worth doing in this life, writing isn't easy. Neither is teaching it to students who have no reason to do it at a university that doesn't really care about education.

Am I too hard on my employer? As it stands by while professors use AI to grade work students produce with AI, I don't think so. The tuition dollars keep coming in, the graduates keep going out. Isn't that how this factory is meant to run? Never mind the decline in student effort and ability over the past several years. The world is still turning. Nothing to see here.

If I'm right that writing is obsolete and, for many, becoming impossible to master in the current environment, we have two options: either accept a world in which college graduates aren't competent writers and thinkers or change the college environment.

So what exactly should we do? *The Atlantic* staff writer Tyler Austin Harper's suggestions to ban artificial intelligence from student life are, at least for now, probably impractical. But what's the alternative? Whatever we end up doing, we of the university must create the kind of environment in which our students no longer escape the responsibility of thought.

I don't know what this means across the university. I know what it will mean in my classroom this fall: paper and pen, writing and revising, sentence by sentence, forever and ever, amen.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Scott Parker is an assistant teaching professor at Montana State University.



Show Your Work

Universities recover trust not by projecting certainty, but by making criticism, correction, and revision visible.

BY DYLAN A. MORDAUNT

When Stephen Colbert coined the word "truthiness" on the first episode of "The Colbert Report" in 2005, the context was not trivial. The United States had recently invaded Iraq, with the administration successfully making the case for the war with much confidence but much less evidence.

Colbert's point was not merely that people sometimes accept something by trusting their gut; it was that a gut feeling can sway the public, even in something as important as whether or not to go to war. Truthiness is what happens when the case feels settled before the evidence has even been presented.

That sounds backwards, particularly in the academy. Universities are supposed to be the institutional enemy of truthiness. They have laboratories, libraries, peer review, seminars, archives, and all the rituals of organized doubt. Their public claim rests on a simple promise: They do not merely announce what is true; they repeatedly test it.

Yet public confidence in higher education remains well below where it stood even a decade ago, and not all or even most of that distrust can be dismissed as cheap anti-intellectualism or partisan theater. Indeed, while the trust crisis at universities has a number of causes, one of them is certainly related to this question of truthiness, namely that they often ask the public to accept conclusions without showing the argument, criticism, and revision that produced them.

We trust surgeons, engineers, and pilots not because they never fail, but because failure in those professions is supposed to be examined, learned from, and corrected. Universities should be no different. Their authority cannot simply be based on claims of infallibility. It has to rest on a visible willingness to test these claims, answer



"The School Examination" by Albert Anker, 1862. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

"Saint Jerome in His Study" by Caravaggio, c. 1605-1606. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

criticism, and revise the record when they get things wrong. Trust grows when inquiry is visible.

Truthiness is not simply false belief. It is a way of dealing with reality, one that is more concerned with “what feels right” than “what the world might force me to acknowledge.” Someone who embraces truthiness forms a picture of the world, then treats contrary evidence as noise, bad faith, or contamination.

As Princeton University philosopher Harry Frankfurt once wrote, the liar still has to track the truth closely enough to hide it; the bullshitter does not. Truthiness has a similar carelessness: It does not always bother to defeat the evidence. It simply demotes it.

Institutions can do that too. A university can become attached to a flattering narrative about itself—that it stands with science, progress, justice, reason, expertise. The trouble starts when the story of the university matters more than the process of generating knowledge. Then criticism sounds less like a contribution and more like an attack. Reputational defense crowds out honest reflection. The university still speaks in the language of truth, but it begins to act in the language of truthiness.

Erosion of Trust

The damage shows up most clearly in research credibility. When major findings fail to replicate, when a prominent paper is withdrawn, when incentives reward novelty more than robustness, the wound is not only technical. Trust erodes because outsiders see not just error, but an institution that is offended by being questioned.

Recent university crises have made the pattern hard to miss. For example, after weeks of high-profile public criticism, Harvard was ultimately forced to acknowledge that its review of plagiarism allegations against university president Claudine Gay was insufficiently transparent.

By contrast, Stanford University’s board of trustees handled a potential scandal with its president Marc Tessier-Lavigne quite differently, promptly releasing both a public statement and a full report that concluded that he had repeatedly failed to take sufficient steps to correct mistakes in his research papers, forcing him to resign.

Together, these two episodes show the distinction that matters for trust: Visible correction can restore confidence even in a scandal, while an opaque process quickly starts to look like institutional self-protection. Because Gay and Tessier-Lavigne are presidents of two of the most prestigious universities in the world, the allegations against them made headlines around the country. But every day, universities are

dealing with similar if less newsworthy reproducibility problems that are steadily eroding trust in higher education as a whole.

For instance, a 2026 *Nature* study of 600 research papers across the social and behavioral sciences found that authors made data available for reproducibility assessment in just 24% of

the sample. And among the claims that could then be assessed, only about 54% were judged precisely reproducible. The fact that problems like these are so common weakens trust in the institution that houses and vouches for these scholars.

A second problem—conformity and self-censorship on campus—further sharpens the impression that universities are more interested in truthiness than truth. Universities are unusual institutions in the best sense. Their legitimacy depends on allowing highly educated people to disagree with one another in public. That disagreement is not a flaw in the system; it is part of the system. Yet on many campuses, students and faculty alike have absorbed the lesson that some questions are better left unasked, some doubts better left unvoiced, and that some inquiries come with potential reputational costs that far exceed their intellectual merits.

In a 2024 Knight Foundation survey of college students, 2 in 3 said self-censorship limits educationally valuable conversations on campus, and

2 in 3 said they self-censor on some topics during classroom discussions. What’s more, FIRE’s 2024 faculty survey also found disturbing evidence of self-censorship on campus. In this case, 35% of faculty said they had recently toned down their writing for fear of controversy.

And sometimes the chilling effect is not just ambient but direct. At the University of Southern California, for instance, administrators canceled valedictorian Asna Tabassum’s commencement speech after saying the backlash had created “substantial risks relating to security and disruption.”

A university does not owe every idea equal esteem. Some ideas are obviously foolish and empirically bankrupt. Standards matter. But standards are not the same thing as anticipatory silence. A community of inquiry becomes less trustworthy when people suspect the boundaries of the sayable are being tightened before the conversation even begins.

Outsiders do not usually see the fine distinction between rejecting a weak argument and discouraging a risky question. They see a university nervous about contestation. That is why official institutional language matters here. Princeton, for example, clearly states that the university must protect “free and open inquiry” while remaining a place where students can “think for themselves.” The institution’s job is to keep inquiry open enough that weak claims can be met with argument rather than preemptive closure.

Revision Is Not Defeat

Trust in universities is not won by marble facades and inspiring Latin mottos, and it is not only the responsibility of administrators and tenured faculty. Trust is also built into seminars, labs, archives, and the daily labor of graduate students and junior researchers. Reputation may be conferred at the top, but credibility is produced lower down, where claims are tested, methods are defended, and people learn how to revise a view without treating revision as defeat.

That is why visible heterodoxy matters. It is one of the ways a university shows that its knowledge is being stress-tested rather than stage-managed. Students should see senior academics reward replication, criticism, and correction—not only more often, but more visibly than they do now.

They should see retractions treated as evidence that quality control exists, not merely as scandals to be contained. The well-known Chicago Principles are useful; they show what it looks like when a university states plainly that free, robust, and uninhibited debate is part of its educational mission.

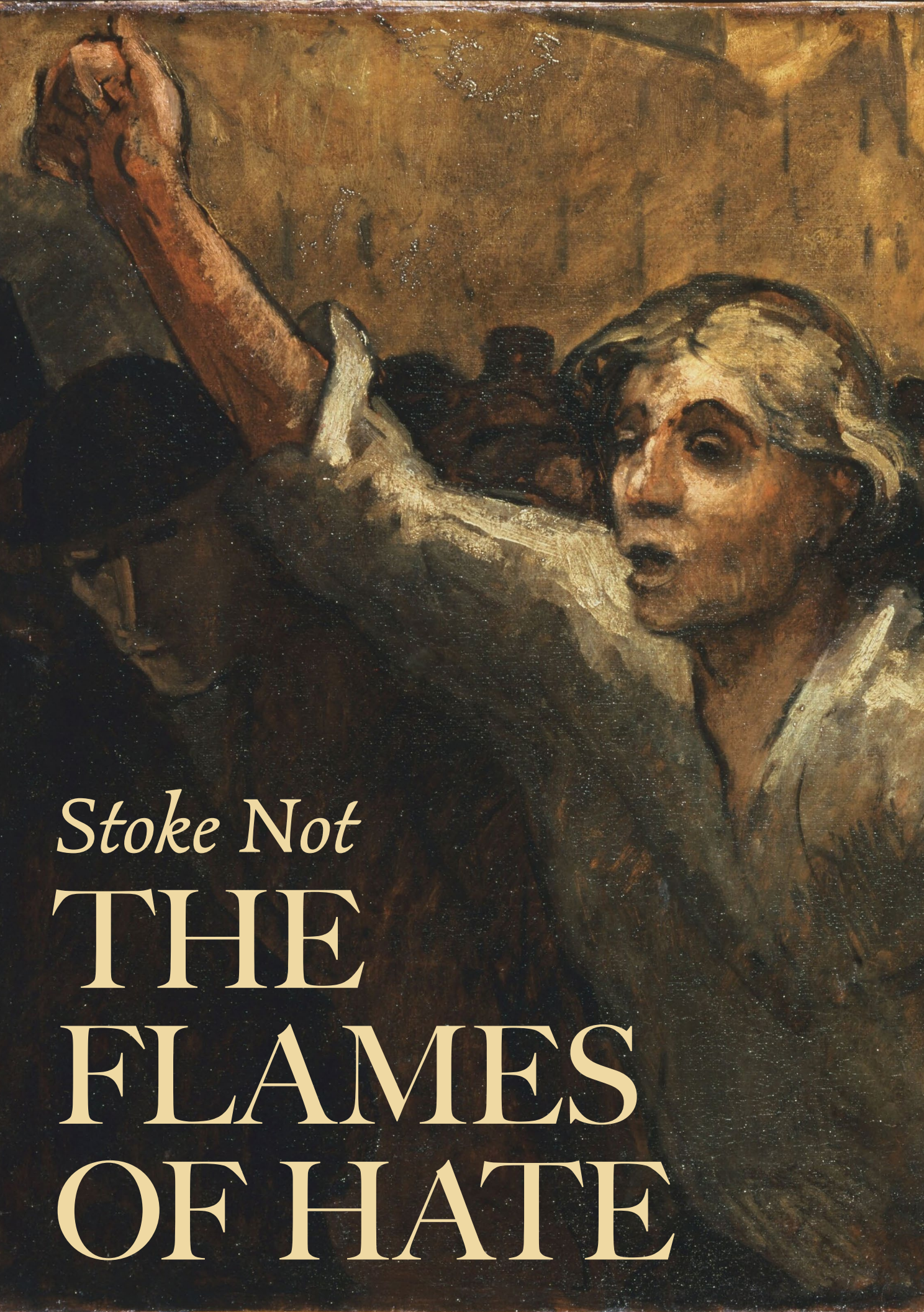
None of this requires universities to endorse grotesque ideas or to give every provocation the same platform. Instead, their public task is to defend the conditions of inquiry in which researchers test claims, challenge one another, and sometimes pursue bad ideas far enough to show why they are bad.

It also requires universities to stop imagining that confidence can be outsourced to a communications strategy. Polished language cannot substitute for appropriate conduct. That is the logic behind restrained institutional speech policies that are becoming more common at universities. That’s because official pronouncements by an administration on contested public matters can interfere with free inquiry and the diversity of views within the university. Institutional restraint is not indifference. Instead, it preserves the space in which scholars, students, and teachers can argue, test, and revise claims for themselves.

Universities do not deserve confidence because they sit high atop the social hierarchy. They deserve it when they make themselves answerable to reality in ways ordinary citizens can recognize, even from a distance. The public does not need to watch every lab meeting or read every referee report. It does need to see an institution that publicly tests its claims, answers criticism, and treats revision not as embarrassment, but as part of the work.

Colbert’s word still matters because it names a permanent temptation. Truthiness appeals to every person and every institution that would rather preserve their self-image than submit it to correction. It is easier to look certain than to show the work. But trust does not grow where revision is hidden; it grows where people can see the failed result or contested claim and hear the awkward question. Arguments survive because they have been tested rather than protected.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.
Dylan Mordaunt is a Ph.D. student at the University of Melbourne’s School of Population and Global Health.



"The Uprising (L'Émeute)" by Honoré Daumier, 1848 or later. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Stoke Not THE FLAMES OF HATE

If universities want to help combat polarization, they must work to fix political bias on campus

BY CHRISTIAN J. PULVER

It's no secret that a majority of Americans have lost trust in universities. Survey research from Gallup and Pew points to similar causes, including unfair admissions practices, high tuition costs, limited job opportunities for many graduates and, most importantly, extreme political bias. As universities across the country seek to address these concerns, I'd like to make a suggestion: Start at the heart of the matter and fix the political bias first. By doing so, universities can signal their commitment to institutional neutrality and take the lead in decreasing the political polarization that plagues U.S. politics and culture.

Since the 1960s, university faculty have consistently leaned liberal, but never to the extremes we see today. Nationwide survey data from the "Report of the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education" shows that over 90% of college and university faculty are registered Democrats. Granted, there's a range of beliefs within this large of a group, but it's a glaring disparity, and it certainly doesn't reflect the actual political makeup of the United States. The current homogeneity of thought on campuses has created a political monoculture that actively discourages viewpoint diversity, compels conformity, and divides society into tribes typically based on racial or gender identities.

No doubt, the suite of current progressive ideas about identity and culture are well intentioned, but as they've played out in institutions throughout the country over the past decade, it's clear they've profoundly exacerbated polarization in the United States. There are many examples

one could point to, but I'd argue the most harmful and far-reaching has been the normalization of *hyperbolic hate*.

The word "hyperbole" comes from the ancient Greek word to "throw beyond." It is common in everyday speech. We hyperbolize when we exaggerate the details of a story ("I walked five miles to school, uphill both ways") or when we feel passionately about something ("It's the worst movie I've ever seen!"). Aristotle (384-322 BCE) considered hyperbole to be primarily a stylistic device orators

used to express strong emotion. A few centuries later, Roman rhetorician Quintilian (35-100 CE) expanded this definition to emphasize how hyperbolic language subverts the truth:

It is enough to say that hyperbole lies, though without any intention to deceive. But we must be careful to notice how far hyperbole is permissible... for if it goes beyond the proper bounds, the effect is lost, and the figure becomes ridiculous.

For Quintilian, effective hyperbole was a kind of controlled fib that exceeds the truth without exceeding the credibility of the claim. Taken too far, hyperbole becomes ridiculous.

While exaggerating a point can be rhetorically effective in the right situation, the stakes grow larger when the object of hyperbole is *hate*—the deliberate, exaggerated use of extreme language to malign the motives and beliefs of people who disagree with us. When we place this penchant for exaggeration into a media environment driven

The current homogeneity of thought on campuses has created a political monoculture that actively discourages viewpoint diversity, compels conformity, and divides society into tribes typically based on racial or gender identities.

by profit and algorithmic control, hyperbolized hate becomes not just ridiculous but dangerous. Research on social media shows that extreme opinions on culture and politics go viral more often and circulate longer than more moderate content.

This is especially true of inflated expressions of moral outrage that exaggerate hate to denounce ideological opponents and unduly attribute harm where it doesn't exist. Conservative groups that oppose abortion claim that pro-choice liberals are "murderers!" while progressive groups who support transgenderism claim that conservatives are "fascists!" It's one thing to exaggerate how far you had to walk to school; it's another to label someone's motives as hateful because they disagree with your political and/or moral beliefs.

Universities are, in part, responsible for the rise of hyperbolic hate. Beginning with the shift to identity politics and critical theory in the 1960s, new "systemic" frameworks were developed for the study of culture. These frameworks focus on structural questions of power and inequity in search of the root causes of oppression in Western, capitalist, liberal societies. While they certainly can be an indispensable tool for studying social and cultural dynamics, systemic frameworks are rife with methodological and knowledge-based problems that ultimately encourage hyperbolic expressions of hate. In particular, their emphasis on vague, abstract "systems" of power makes those who embrace these ideas prone to erasing individual agency and the rich pluralism of real groups in favor of monolithic identity tribes.

This process of tribalization intensifies polarization by persistently distorting our perception of citizens who disagree with us. When coupled with the reach and speed of modern social media, the use of these "systemic" frameworks to make extreme claims about ubiquitous racism or misogyny leads us all into a kind of mental inferno where hate is present everywhere and at all times.

Nothing could be worse for the mental health of our society than hyperbolized hate. Psychologists who study hate have shown that excessive exposure to hate speech leads to an array of social problems including elevated threat perception and more frequent cycles of dehumanization between

opposing groups. Such inflated perceptions of hate are known to contribute to chronic stress and excessive catastrophizing in individuals.

According to clinical psychologist John P. Kline, as more perceived hate circulates, it creates a noxious loop that "activates stronger affective responses than warranted, biases perception toward negativity." It also escalates conflict, spreads hostility and erodes trust, Kline adds. In such emotionally elevated environments, the brain's empathy response toward opponents is known to shut down. Stuck in an empathy vacuum, we begin to perceive politics as a mortal struggle that, over time, conditions us to experience political and moral disagreement as a form of hate.

If universities are ever to help mitigate the polarization that plagues our society, they must renew their commitment to traditional liberal values of civil debate, free speech, open inquiry, and viewpoint diversity. This is only possible in an environment where we prioritize our common humanity over the echo chambers of our different identity tribes. By promoting a culture of shared optimism and hope over one of hate and division, higher education can begin the long process of restoring the public's trust.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Christian J. Pulver, Ph.D., is an independent researcher who writes about the ways rhetoric and literacy evolve in digital culture.



"Girls, Come to the Tractor!" by Pál György, c. 1950s. Hungarian National Museum / Europeana, Public Domain.



How I Learned To Teach Socialism at Berkeley

Fairness looks different when you're the one giving things up

BY NEIL GILBERT

New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's appeal to young progressives is as unsurprising as a lecture on intersectionality at Berkeley. Indeed, his plans to offer free public transportation, universal housing, and government grocery stores resonate through college classrooms across the country where equity is routinely invoked in the name of social justice.

For nearly half a century, I've been teaching social policy at the University of California, Berkeley to students who arrive with these and other predictable opinions on issues of the day. In 2025, they're all for forgiving student loans, firmly against privatizing Social Security, and eager to expand rent control. Work requirements for welfare recipients strike them as unjust and welfare benefits for undocumented immigrants as a moral imperative. When it comes to guaranteed incomes, they're ready to sign on yesterday.

These views are less the product of critical reflection than the expression of youthful idealism nourished in the social sciences and humanities by progressive professors, whose tenure shields them from the destructive consequences of social engineering. Wielding the power of language, many faculty cast capitalism as red in tooth and claw: privileging wealth over need, individualism over solidarity, and the market over social welfare. It doesn't hurt that such convictions also attract

grant funding and publishing opportunities in the softer sciences. The classroom becomes not just a site of learning, but a greenhouse for cultivating the seeds of democratic socialist activism.

Ideals Without Costs

Few of my students give serious consideration to the costs of generous welfare transfers or where the limits of redistribution might lie. Why would they? Most have paid little or nothing in taxes. Many have received student loans, scholarships, health insurance subsidies, and food stamps. The redistributive state has been their benefactor, not their burden.

When they speak of “social justice,” it is from the lived experience of benefits that come without costs. Their faith in the fairness of redistribution derives from the conventional view of equity, which demands that everyone deserves roughly the same share of society’s wealth. Aristotle characterized this egalitarian perspective as “numerical equality,” an attractive but flawed vision that fails to reward individual contributions to the creation of worldly goods. In contrast, he argued that distributive justice was based upon “proportional equality,” which involved differential rewards for merit—in essence, exploiting the language of equality to endorse the justice of inequality.

From Theory to Practice

Recently, I wondered how I might bring the egalitarian and meritarian views of distributive justice down from the clouds of abstraction into the tangible world of consequential experience. After weeks spent analyzing social policies and their underlying assumptions, costs, and benefits, I posed a thought experiment in the final class of the semester: I asked the students to imagine that they were founding members of a small agrarian commune. Each family started with identical resources: 50 acres of fertile farmland,

a few animals, seeds, and basic tools. They then had to decide how to distribute the harvest. Three principles were on the table:

Egalitarian — Pool everything and divide it equally.

Need-based — Allocate according to health and appetite.

Meritocratic — Each family keeps the fruits of its labor, contributing a modest tithe for those unable to work because of illness or misfortune.

As one might expect, after some deliberation a consensus emerged in favor of the egalitarian option. It was just, they said. It fostered solidarity. No one should suffer for being weaker or less efficient than their neighbor.

Wielding the power of language, many faculty cast capitalism as red in tooth and claw: privileging wealth over need, individualism over solidarity, and the market over social welfare.

Then came the real test. If theoretically as farmers they would be inclined to redistribute the fruits of their labor so that the community’s members all had an equal share of the harvest, in practice would they be

disposed to engage in similar behavior to advance solidarity and social justice in the classroom? Would they be willing to redistribute their grades on the final exam? It was a classroom experiment in applied socialism that offered an opportunity for experiential learning.

I asked if they would like to participate in a communal grading pact, voluntarily, of course. There would be no penalties, no incentives, and full confidentiality. Those who wished to join the “commune” were invited to email me before the exam and would receive the group’s average score. An “A” student might lose a few points; a struggling classmate might gain a few. Together, they would create an egalitarian community—one that traded individual contribution for collective welfare in grade point averages.

Although a simple test with low stakes, the communal grading option highlighted the tangible

Few of my students give serious consideration to the costs of generous welfare transfers or where the limits of redistribution might lie. Why would they? Most have paid little or nothing in taxes.

consequences of redistribution. The opportunity to experience these consequences firsthand offered a meritarian challenge to the egalitarian perspective on social justice, at least as far as marginal academic rewards were concerned. As the emails came in, the egalitarian consensus withered; only about half the class joined the commune.

Grappling with the tension between the principle of communal wellbeing and individual self-interest, with small but still real consequences at stake, proved a sobering experience for many. The point of this experiment wasn’t to expose hypocrisy, but to encourage critical reflection on the normative assumptions about equality and social justice, which are rarely questioned within the intellectual bubble of campus life. These were intelligent, well-meaning students, whose embrace of socialist ideals was sincere though largely theoretical, shaped in an environment where scarcity is abstract and trade-offs are academic. For most, the costs of idealism are safely deferred until after graduation.

The Wider Lesson

In an age when campus culture cultivates moral certainty over intellectual humility, the exercise in experiential learning serves to remind students that policies have trade-offs, social values compete with one another, virtue often comes with personal sacrifice, and that fairness looks different when you’re the one on the giving side of the redistribution.

Welfare generosity can cushion the poor but may also discourage work. Rent control helps low-income tenants but inevitably shrinks the housing supply, ultimately raising prices for many. Forgiving student loans relieves debtors but transfers costs to taxpayers, some of whom could not afford college because they didn’t want to assume the debt. I introduced the egalitarian experiment to test the convictions of social justice warriors who see the world through a

Manichaeian lens of oppressed vs. oppressor, rich vs. poor—a comforting perspective that allows for no ambiguity.

Which brings us back to Mayor Mamdani. Speaking the language of social justice, equity, free public transportation, rent control, and government groceries, he strikes a chord with this generation of college students. He sounds like their activist professors. Playing on their untested values, he doesn’t talk much about what things cost or who pays for them, beyond making vague references to billionaires—many of whom are already packing their bags for Florida. Making no mention of shared sacrifice, he is the ideal political leader for a generation long on ideals and short on experiential learning.

After all, flirtation with socialism is exciting—as long as someone else picks up the tab. But in the world beyond the gates of Berkeley and other college campuses, ideals meet limits, trade-offs, and unintended effects. A teacher’s job is not to quash his students’ idealism, but to inculcate a respect for evidence and a disposition to question prevailing assumptions.

References available at inquisitivemag.org
Neil Gilbert, Ph.D., is Chernin Professor of Social Welfare and Social Services at the University of California, Berkeley.



"Color Study. Squares with Concentric Circles" by Wassily Kandinsky, 1913. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

“What Color of NOTHING?”

How a souvenir hawker schooled me in cultivating trust

BY IRSHAD MANJI

Years ago, when I visited the West Bank to support Palestinian democracy advocates, I found myself beetling through the Arab quarter of Jerusalem’s largest open-air market. It was late, and I was late. My dinner with friends had begun. Nearly all the vendors had closed up shop and so, given the light foot traffic, I felt optimistic about making up lost time.

As I scurried past a young man standing outside his store, he bellowed, “Yes, madam! What can I get for you?”

With my back toward him, I waved and yelled, “Nothing, thank you!”

He hollered, “What color of nothing?!”

My feet froze. My mouth let out an involuntary cackle. I swung around. The cheeky bastard was beaming. At that very second, he’d made the sale. To this day, my mother prays on the green velvet rug that I supposedly *didn’t* have the time or interest to buy.

Ever since that night, I’ve been reflecting on the souvenir guy. How did he succeed in disrupting my earnest intention to hoof it to a supper that had begun more than an hour ago? And why did I let him not only grab my attention but then sell me merch that I could have picked up anywhere else at a better time?

For starters, his cleverness totally surprised me. While our brains coast on patterns formed by past experiences, curveballs break these patterns. This guy’s curveball widened my brain’s aperture and multiplied my conscious choices. I didn’t have to be fixated on beating the clock. I could slow down and check this joker out.

But why *buy* from him, too? Having studied it

every which way, here’s my conclusion: I wasn’t buying his product; I was buying his spirit. Jaunty. Buoyant. Uplifting.

The souvenir guy didn’t resign himself to my *nah*. He posed a second—witty— question. In effect, he rejected my rejection of his wares, thereby risking further rejection from me. Mull that one over. Besides choosing vulnerability, he made hay with his choice, all while respecting my autonomy to choose whether I’d humor him.

In this context, the word “respect” matters. It comes from the Latin root to “re-spectate,” or look back. I looked back at the merchant because

he went first in the respect department. By asking, “What color of nothing?” the merchant elevated me from a customer to a fuller human being, capable of both determination (gotta

get somewhere, like, yesterday) and playfulness (go ahead, impress me with your tchotchkes).

By switching his communication from transactional to relational, he made a statement alright. He also made the kind of difference he wanted. Cha-ching, darling. If all this strikes you as overthinking a classic charm offensive, you may need one more bit of context.

My Unforced Error

The souvenir guy’s impact on me had a lot to do with my personal circumstances. Although I couldn’t articulate it at that moment, he had smoked out how ineptly I’d been making the case for my ideas in my book, *The Trouble with Islam Today*. There, I had passionately argued for reforming the cultural customs that many of my fellow Muslims confuse with our faith, Islam. By the time I encountered this street vendor, I’d soaked up the stress of defending the arguments

In its highest form, trust is the confidence I feel that you see me as more than an object for your immediate purposes.

in my book.

Even before it was published, the voice in my head had whispered, “They’ll crucify you for daring to critique how mainstream Islam is interpreted. Don’t be intimidated. When you’re punched, punch back harder. Show “them” you mean business.” Already, I was othering my future “enemies.”

The voice in my head deserves some credit. It conjured up death threats from online randos and denunciations from self-appointed religious authorities. Sure enough, I got both. But there’s one reaction I wish I hadn’t swatted away. A lot of my detractors quipped that the book’s title should have been *The Trouble with Irshad*.

They weren’t wrong.

For the record, I stand by my message that Muslims ought to invoke the most glorious of our traditions to reform ourselves. What I’m ashamed of is how I communicated that message—with a win/lose posture that did no favors to me or my capacity for influence.

I warped the possibility of productive discussion into the probability of rancorous debate so I could psychically pulverize my critics. I minimized these opponents as bad-faith actors rather than recognizing their love for the version of Islam that spoke to their souls. I torpedoed rich opportunities to earn from Muslims what the souvenir guy had garnered from me: trust.

In its highest form, trust is the confidence I feel that you see me as more than an object for your immediate purposes. If I trust you to “see” me, I’m more likely to devote the time and energy to seeing you and then hearing you. Blatant hints about the bedrock need to foster trust sailed over my hot head.

Early on, a Jewish friend who championed interfaith peace told me, “You need more love in your narrative about Islam.” I silently scoffed. “More love? I love how Islamic civilization

once led the planet in creativity, ingenuity, and diversity. I say so in my book. If Muslims don’t read, that’s their problem!”

It didn’t occur to me that I was mangling my friend’s benevolent advice into yet another win/lose debate. And that this habit ensured Muslims felt no emotional tug to read my book. And that

“their issue” would thereby become mine.

Later, a Muslim influencer acknowledged that I had potent

arguments. But, she asked, “Where’s your reverence for Islam?” I dissed the question because reverence doesn’t win arguments. Reason does.

False. Reverence—emotion—does win arguments. Why? Stand by.

Thinking and Feeling

Still clueless, I recall an imam summing up the trouble with me. He said, “You don’t have any feeling for Islam.” Can you say, “Triggered”? As a professor at New York University, I resented catering to the feelings of my students so we could milk them for donations down the road. Of course, this wasn’t remotely the imam’s point, but his reference to “feelings” pushed my buttons. Or, more accurately, I permitted him to push my buttons.

You know the meme, “Facts don’t care about your feelings?” The reverse is at least as true: Feelings don’t care about your facts. If I’ve ragged on your convictions and you feel belittled, you’ll be impervious to my facts. You won’t give them, or me, the time of day.

Neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor sheds light on why that is so, reminding us that humans aren’t thinking creatures with the capacity to feel, but feeling creatures with the capacity to think. Whatever stimuli hits our brains, we’ll first feel something about it. Unless we’re superintentional, even *thinking* about it will only amount to rationalizing our initial feelings.

Which returns us to the souvenir guy, who radiated joy as he persisted with his pitch. His verve made me feel good about him. Emotionally, I reached a judgment—that somehow, I liked this character. Then I justified my judgment by deciding to peruse his shelves.

Here’s the bottom line for my own attempt at “sales.” I didn’t exactly respect my Muslim skeptics, so how could they respect and ultimately trust me? I consistently reacted when I could have responded. I lapsed into assuming more than engaging. Above all, I duped myself into maintaining that I wanted to make a difference, when my actions (um, reactions) suggested that I wanted, mostly, to make a statement.

Contrast my approach to that of Sabrina Bhojani, the Muslim principal of a Jewish school in my Canadian hometown. Let’s just say she catches it from individuals on all sides. Sabrina is a professional through and through, so when she’s tempted to react to the “us against them” shenanigans of others, she first asks herself, “What’s my purpose here? And how would that purpose be served by what I’m bursting to say?”

It echoes the most powerful question we can ask ourselves before a potentially tense encounter: “Do I only want to make a statement or do I also want to make a difference?”

Sometimes you have to make a statement. Understood. But just beware of the trade-off. You can’t legitimately fault others for not listening if they can’t trust that you’ll listen too, which is where millions of us are now.

A version of this essay will appear in Irshad Manji’s upcoming book, *Moral Courage: The Gutsy Practice for Influencing What You Can’t Control—at Work, Home, and Beyond*, to be published in spring 2027.

References available at inquisitivemag.com.
Irshad Manji is the founder and CEO of Moral Courage College.

I didn’t exactly respect my Muslim skeptics, so how could they respect and ultimately trust me?

Support Open Inquiry with a Gift to HxA

Heterodox Academy is leading the way in campus reform and ensuring that open inquiry and viewpoint diversity are at the heart of higher education and campus culture.



Please consider making a gift to support our work!

inquisitive is made possible by the Mike & Sofia Segal Foundation

inquisitive Core Staff

David Masci, J.D. – Managing Editor
Lyndi Schrecengost & Amy Stern – Copy Editors
Janelle Delia – Graphic Designer
Nicole Barbaro Simovski, Ph.D. – Director of Communications
Joseph (Jake) Klein – Communications Content Manager

Supporting HxA Staff

John Tomasi, D.Phil – President
Michael Regnier – Executive Director
McKay Stangler, Ph.D. – Director of Advancement

Printed by

BRD Printing (Lansing, Michigan)

Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND
The text of this issue is licensed under Creative Commons. All images used with permission.

Cover Illustration

Original illustration by Pat Thomas, 2026 (used with permission).

Call for Proposals

inquisitive welcomes submissions for our next issue. For details, please visit inquisitivemag.org/open-call.



Become a member of Heterodox Academy



Heterodox Academy
82 Nassau Street #646
New York, NY 10038
heterodoxacademy.org



Subscribe to stay *inquisitive*.

NON-PROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
LANSING, MI
PERMIT NO. XXXX

Restoring Trust at Yale

The university has made a good start
at implementing the recommendations of its trust report

BY JULIA ADAMS

This past April, the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education delivered a final report to university president Maurie McInnis on the problem of declining trust in higher education. The work of the 10-person faculty committee, established by President McInnis in spring 2025 and co-chaired by me and Professor Beverly Gage, focused in part on how Yale could right its own ship, ultimately recommending 20 steps that the university should take to help restore trust.

Fortunately, President McInnis took the report and its recommendations seriously, starting by taking responsibility (the report's first recommendation) on behalf of the university for its role in the trust crisis. Most significantly, the university mission statement was rewritten to refocus it on academics—on creating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge. The university also reaffirmed its commitment to academic freedom, exemplified by Yale's historic 1974 Woodward Report, tying it to its continuing commitment to free speech. And in June, in sympathy with the committee's recommendation to "open the gates" to the local community, Yale launched a fund directed toward helping local nonprofit groups working to make substantial investments in New Haven's neighborhoods.

Other important efforts are ongoing, some too soon to evaluate. For example, Yale continues to work

through the committee's recommendation that grading be made much more rigorous. Likewise, the university is still grappling with the recommendation that Yale re-examine and reform its admissions process, starting with a push for greater transparency on how decisions are made. On other matters, the jury is still out.

This coming academic year, the rubber will meet the road when we tackle the injunction to "open minds." Part of this process will involve faculty self-scrutiny. Each department and school should examine "the breadth of its intellectual and methodological commitments; the range of scholarly approaches represented on its faculty; the diversity of perspectives in its curriculum; and the openness of its hiring and admissions practices to dissenting or underrepresented traditions."

Academic year 2026-2027 is going to be a testing one for Yale. Some of the thornier recommendations are bound to raise major challenges, especially for the university leadership and faculty. But the depth and seriousness with which the Yale trust report has been received offers hope for the time ahead.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Julia Adams, Ph.D., is Margaret H. Marshall Professor of Sociology at Yale University.