



PRINT & PIXELS

## Academic Freedom in an Era of Globalization

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*The campus free speech wars aren't the only threat to American higher education.*

**F**or the past few years, the American principle of academic freedom has been under attack. On campus after campus, these attacks have come from extremists on both ends of the political spectrum. And while university administrators have struggled to cope, most of their efforts have been so ineffectual that zealous activists themselves are now proposing remedies—from even stricter campus speech codes on the Left to convoluted lawsuits on the Right—that will only make the situation worse.

Yet curiously, the international reputation and drawing power of the U.S. system of higher education remains high. Despite fluctuations in world opinion toward the United States as a whole, America's universities continue to bask in the glow of global approval. As John Waters, former president of the American University in Beirut, once put it, "The word *American* is to education what *Swiss* is to watches."

The American traveler will hear this sentiment echoed everywhere. In Jakarta a few years ago, the eminent Muslim intellectual Azyumardi Azra told me, "Even those Indonesians who oppose U.S. foreign policy have America as their first choice for higher education." In Dubai, a Lebanese media executive remarked, "Even when Arabs have negative stereotypes of Americans, we dream of sending our kids to an American university." And in Mumbai, a prominent Indian businessman commented, "Education is an incredibly farsighted form of public diplomacy for America."

These two phenomena, campus disruption and global renown, may seem unrelated at first. But there is a real and troubling similarity between them. Surprising as it sounds, both phenomena pose a threat to academic freedom.

**Q**uestion: Which part of the university is most affected by protests and disruption? Answer: The undergraduate liberal arts college, especially the social sciences and humanities. Question: Which part is least affected? Answer: All the rest. No matter who is marching, attacking monuments, or shouting down speakers, the gleaming science centers, the imposing professional schools, and the lavishly funded research institutes keep humming along. These precincts of the university are not pleased by the disruption, but they are not really affected by it either.

Why is this? Back in the 1970s, the sociologist James Coleman explained that, like Gaul, the American university is divided into three parts, each with its own distinctive history and ethos.

First is the small liberal arts college, whose roots date back to 1636, when Harvard College was founded to train the Puritan clergy of Massachusetts. It's worth remembering that until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of small colleges in the United States were devoted less to the classical *artes liberales* than to transmitting the heritage of a particular Christian denomination, primarily by preparing men for the ministry but also by molding the moral character of a social elite.

Second is the basic research university, devoted to "pure," disinterested scientific inquiry directed by an individual researcher or team. This model emerged in Germany during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was introduced into America in 1876, with the founding of Johns Hopkins University. Hopkins began life without a liberal arts college because its stated goal was not to transmit a heritage but to push back the frontiers of knowledge. Notably, it was this part of the university that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century asserted the principle of academic freedom against interference by outside authorities, whether religious or political.

Third is the technocratic university, serving the interests of agriculture, industry, and government through applied research and workforce training. The starting date here is 1862, when through the Morrill Act Congress mandated grants of Federal land to all the then-existing states on the condition that they create colleges for the study, not just of traditional academic subjects, but also of "agriculture and the mechanical arts."

Since Coleman's time, U.S. higher education has become a global institution. Indeed, former New York University president John Sexton has led the way by proclaiming NYU the world's first "global university." Strikingly, this may be one of the few instances in which the adjective "global" retains its 1990s glow. But perhaps it shouldn't, because while all three parts of the contemporary American university have become globalized, the part that has benefited most from the process is the technocratic university. And this has emboldened it to launch ambitious projects with powerful overseas partners, some of whom are indifferent, indeed hostile, to academic freedom.

**T**his is not really breaking news. In the late 1930s, when Saudi Arabia began sending students to the University of Southern California to gain technical skills related to oil production, the exchange was welcome because, as one American geologist recalls, USC at the time was "basically a nuts and bolts university as far as the oil patch was concerned." The pattern has repeated ever since: Authoritarian regimes have sought to benefit from American science and technology, while at the same time avoiding liberal arts and basic research, which they warily regard as repositories of unwanted ideas about society and (especially) politics.

For example, after the U.S.-Soviet cultural agreement of 1958, the Soviets began sending students to U.S. campuses. As noted by veteran diplomat Yale Richmond, the "fields of study were determined by an interagency governmental committee according to the needs of the Soviet economy," and "the Soviet participants were simply told, without prior consultation, that they were being sent to the United States."

Needless to say, the U.S. government also tapped the technocratic university. During World War II and the Cold War, many Federal agencies, including the Defense Department and the CIA, relied heavily on campus expertise. This was considered prestigious until, in the late 1960s, the New Left rose in protest against “university complicity in the war machine.” Not everything changed as a result of the antiwar movement and the counterculture that got hitched to it, but at least as regards social science connectivity to government, this did change, and in no small measure, over time.

In response, the most controversial defense-related projects retreated into think tanks and R&D contractors. But that did not cramp the technocratic university’s style. Its impressive facilities continued to attract external funding from the U.S. government, foundations, and corporations—as well as from foreign governments. Not surprisingly, this growing dependence on outside funding has been criticized for weakening the technocratic university’s commitment to academic freedom.

This is not just disturbing in the domestic context. It is also troubling in the global context. For example, some of America’s leading universities have in recent years agreed to help authoritarian regimes build their own state-of-the-art research facilities. There are, for example, several medical school satellites of U.S. institutions—Duke’s partnership with Singapore was one of the first of these, dating to 2005. One of the most prominent non-medical examples of these ventures is the Masdar Institute in Abu Dhabi, developed in cooperation with MIT. Masdar wears the benign aspect of a richly resourced institution devoted to finding new sources of sustainable energy. But given the lack of transparency in the Persian Gulf kingdoms, not to mention the susceptibility of American researchers to flattery and especially generosity, it is not hard to imagine some dubious outcomes.

An even greater challenge arises when an American university agrees to plant a full-fledged liberal arts college in authoritarian soil. Three prominent examples would be NYU-Abu Dhabi; NYU-Shanghai (developed in cooperation with East China Normal University); and Yale-NUS (a partnership between Yale and the National University of Singapore). Because these transplants do not confine themselves to science and technology, it seems inevitable that their commitment to academic freedom will be tested.

So far, the record is mixed, with NYU and Yale both trying to sidestep the fact that their overseas partners do not share the assumption, deeply ingrained in U.S. higher education, that there is a necessary connection between liberal arts education and democratic citizenship. In the case of NYU, Sexton is on record saying, “I have no trouble distinguishing between rights of academic freedom and rights of political expression. These are two different things.”

Less facile is this comment from a Yale professor who served on the Yale-NUS curriculum committee: “Some leaders in Singapore’s government see the link between academic freedom and political freedom. They think that at least some degree of liberalization and democratization [is] inevitably in Singapore’s future, and they hope that institutions such as Yale-NUS can help.”

These comments reflect the default position of most American educators toward these ventures: cynically compromising on the one hand and, on the other, reflexively expressing optimism that any exposure to U.S. higher education, no matter how circumscribed, will ultimately sow the seeds of freedom and democracy. Reinforcing this position is the rhetoric of overseas partners who, despite their authoritarian values, sound a lot like U.S. businessmen when singing the praises of innovation and creativity as the fuel for a dynamic and growing economy.

But make no mistake. These partners may praise the spirit of free inquiry, but under their regimes free inquiry is a privilege, not a right. And their real purpose in partnering with U.S. universities is to nurture their own technocratic elites.

A research topic *not* likely to be funded is the underlying connection between

these growing ties to authoritarian regimes and the anger and protest presently corroding campus life. The only connection I can discern at the moment has to do with the seeming inability of university administrators to exercise mature judgment when their campuses blow up. This may be unfair, but their attitude seems to be along the line of: “Give them what they want, so we can get back to business as usual.”

The current campus disruptions over what is and isn’t acceptable speech cannot be judged a blessing in disguise—they are far too illiberal and misguided for that. But by interfering with business as usual, perhaps they will also make it harder for the purported leaders of U.S. higher education to speak in lofty clichés while selling their birthright to deep-pocketed authoritarian sponsors.

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