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This Is How Universities Can Escape Trump's Trap, If They Dare

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Almost three months into the Trump administration's war on universities, and a year and a half into the Republican Party's organized campaign against the presidents of top colleges, it is clear that antisemitism and D.E.I. are mere pretexts for these attacks. Like much of what this administration does, the war on higher education is driven by anti-intellectualism and greed. Trump is building a mafia state, in which the don distributes both money and power. Universities are independent centers of intellectual and, to some extent, political power. He is trying to destroy that independence.

There is a way for universities to fight back. It requires more than refusing to bend to Trump's will, and it requires more than forming a united front. They must abandon all the concerns — rankings, donors, campus amenities — that preoccupy and distract them, and focus on their core mission: the production and dissemination of knowledge. Intellectuals have adopted this strategy to fight against autocrats in other countries. It works.

Because Trump views everything as transactional and assumes everyone to be driven by profit, he has approached universities the same way he approached law firms and, arguably, countries: by deploying devastating financial threats against each one individually, to compel compliance and prevent coalitions. Trump could have started by imposing a tax on universities' endowments, a move that almost certainly would enjoy broad popular support. That, however, would presumably affect every major university, which could prompt them to band together. Research grants, which are specific to each university, are an ideal instrument to divide and weaken them.

His first target, Columbia University, acceded to his demands within two weeks of losing \$400 million in grants and contracts. When Columbia's first sacrifice didn't bring back the money, the university made another: its interim president, Katrina Armstrong. That didn't satisfy Trump, who now reportedly wants Columbia to agree to direct government oversight. He is also brandishing financial threats, separately, at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, Cornell, Brown, Johns Hopkins and Northwestern — and still there is no sign of organized resistance on the part of universities. There is not even a joint statement in defense of academic freedom or an assertion of universities' value to society. (Even people who have no use for the humanities may see value in medical schools and hospitals.)

It shouldn't be this easy to cleave universities from one another, but, so far, it seems to be easier even than making law firms compete for the don's business and favor. This may be because law firms define success in a way that is at least marginally closer to their ideal function (helping to uphold the rule of law) than the way universities define success is to their ideal function, which is producing and disseminating knowledge. Most prominent American universities, most of the time, measure their success not so much by the degree to which their faculty and graduates contribute to the world as by the size of their endowment, the number of students seeking admission and their ascent in rankings by U.S. News & World Report and others, which assess the value of a university education in part by looking at graduates' starting salaries. As for professors, while universities do compete for the best minds, they more frequently compete for the loudest names, in the hopes that these will attract the biggest bucks.

In conversations with my colleagues on these pages, I have compared the universities' current predicament to the prisoners' dilemma, the game-theory model in which two people accused of a crime have to decide to act for themselves or take a chance and act in concert. It's a useful model to think about, but it doesn't quite fit. The universities are not co-conspirators: they are competitors. And they want more than to return to the status quo ante: They want growth. They might even want to win the research funding that the other guy lost.

Trump has threatened to use many different tools against universities: pulling federal financial aid, revoking accreditation, rescinding nonprofit status, imposing an endowment tax and blocking the flow of international students. Nor — as the case of Columbia has already demonstrated — will submission end the attack. Slashing and burning its way through the National Institutes of Health, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Wilson Center, the United States Institute of Peace, the Smithsonian, and others, the administration has shown that it considers knowledge production worthless. In the rare areas where the president — or perhaps Elon Musk — may see value in research, the emergent mafia state is almost certain to distribute funds to its friends. One shudders to think what universities would have to do to fit themselves into that category.

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In the late 1970s and through the 1980s, Polish dissidents operated what they called a “flying university” in apartments across the country. Run by the country’s leading intellectuals, this university wasn’t selective and didn’t charge tuition; its only goal was to get knowledge to as many people as possible. These were the people who went on to build the only post-Communist democracy that, so far, has been able to use electoral means to reverse an autocratic attempt. In the 1990s, Kosovo Albanians responded to the Serbian regime’s forced takeover of their education system by walking out and creating a parallel underground school system, from first grade through university. Classes met in boarded-up storefronts. I met Albin Kurti, the current prime minister of Kosovo, in 1998, when he was a student — and a student activist — in the underground university.

Adopting such a radical approach, and forsaking the usual concerns of development offices and communications departments, would be costly, to be sure. The universities most actively targeted by Trump have the resources necessary to weather such a radical reorientation. But as Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, told me, “Too many of our wealthiest universities have made their endowments their primary object of protection.”

I called Botstein because he has long practiced the approach I am advocating: At Bard (where I taught for three years and continue to work with an archive of Russian media), he seems to respond to every crisis by figuring out ways to teach more people. In the last quarter-century, Bard’s expansion has focused on people who would ordinarily not have access to a university education. The university works in New York State prisons, where it currently has more than 400 enrolled students; in six cities it operates 10 high schools from which students graduate with a Bard associate degree; and it runs “microcolleges” at the Brooklyn Public Library, in Harlem and at a center for young mothers and low-income women in Holyoke, Mass.

The students at these places, who far outnumber students at the college’s main campus, don’t pay for their university education, are unlikely to boost Bard’s post-graduation income statistics, and probably won’t be able to make significant donations to the endowment in the future. But their lives are often transformed by Bard’s intervention. Many private universities have extension programs and several have prison programs and other community projects, but they tend to position them as charity sidelines rather than part of their core mission. Bard, on the other hand, is a private college that acts like the best kind of public university.

I asked Botstein how he balanced this kind of expansionism with his fiduciary responsibilities as president of the college. He said that he is a “naïve believer” in good ideas and so far the ideas have been good enough to attract philanthropists. He doesn’t think a university has to be rich, he told me — and Bard, with its \$270 million endowment, decidedly is not. In his view, universities, “portals to tolerance and the expression of fundamental equality of all human beings,” are essential to democracy. A child of Holocaust survivors who came to this country as a stateless person in 1949, Botstein is particularly sensitive to the ways of an autocratic government. Three weeks

into the Trump administration, he called on universities to band together in the face of an existential threat posed by the government. That was three weeks into the *first* Trump administration.

So this is my radical proposal for universities: Act like universities, not like businesses. Spend your endowments. Accept more, not fewer students. Open up your campuses and expand your reach not by buying real estate but by bringing education to communities. Create a base. Become a movement.

Alternatively, you can try to negotiate with a mafia boss who wants to see you grovel. When these negotiations fail, as they inevitably will, it will be too late to ask for the public's support.

M. Gessen is an Opinion columnist for The Times. They won a George Polk award for opinion writing in 2024. They are the author of 11 books, including “The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia,” which won the National Book Award in 2017.

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