

# A Strategy for Reforming American Universities

*by Warren Treadgold*

**A**lthough the new Supreme Court decision outlawing affirmative action in college admissions is constitutional, equitable, and approved by a large majority of Americans, by itself it will probably increase leftist dominance of American universities. After all, an increase in leftist dominance was the effect of the constitutional amendment outlawing racial preferences in college admissions and hiring that California voters easily passed in 1996 and heavily reaffirmed in 2020. That amendment eventually led to a requirement by California's state universities that applicants for academic jobs must submit statements explaining how they have contributed and will go on contributing to "diversity, equity, and inclusion"—DEI for short. The University of California at Berkeley instructs search committees to approve only DEI statements that favor preferences by race and gender, and often if not always to eliminate applicants whose statements are judged unsatisfactory, regardless of their academic credentials. About a fifth of American faculty jobs are now esti-

mated to require DEI statements, and the number is growing steadily.<sup>1</sup> DEI statements are also required of current faculty at California's state universities and many other universities (including my own) for purposes of determining salary increases, tenure, and promotion.

Required DEI statements assume and enforce the main tenets of current academic ideology, which can be summarized as follows. America and Western civilization are evil and oppressive and cannot be defended or approved. The groups whom America and the West presumably oppress, including women, racial and sexual minorities, and their enlightened defenders, must never be criticized or offended. "Systemic racism" is integral to American society and no evidence that it is not can even be considered. The idea that anything is objectively true is an instrument of oppression, and the only grounds for judging ideas, arguments, or people should be whether they favor the oppressors or the oppressed. The overriding mission of American universities must be to promote social justice, and education

and scholarship have value only when they support that mission. Free speech and academic excellence are oppressive slogans that must never be allowed to obstruct social justice. The oppressed and their defenders must always be preferred in student admissions and in faculty and administrative hiring. The oppressors should not be admitted as students, hired as professors or administrators, or even permitted to speak on campuses, and any oppressors already there should be expelled or dismissed if they express their views. Affirmative action in favor of the oppressed is mandatory, and when an oppressive Supreme Court rules otherwise, it must be thwarted in any possible way.

This ideology is not shared by a large majority of Americans or even by a clear majority of professors. A recent survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) found its sample of professors split 50-50 between those who thought DEI statements “are a justifiable requirement for a university job” and those who thought such statements “are an ideological litmus test that violates academic freedom.” (The absence of undecideds seems striking evidence of polarization.) The 50 percent who disapproved of DEI statements included 90 percent of conservative faculty, 56 percent of moderates, and 26 percent of liberals. Of the whole sample of professors, 11 percent identified themselves as far left, 38 percent as liberal, 17 percent as moderate, 25 percent as conservative, and 1 percent as far right. The survey concluded that both hostility to conser-

vatives and lack of interest in academic freedom are disturbingly common at universities, and most common among faculty under 35, less common among faculty between 36 and 55, and least common among faculty over 56.

The surveyors observed that they found a “somewhat higher” percentage of conservative professors than in other recent surveys, perhaps because some respondents considered FIRE sympathetic to conservative views.<sup>2</sup> It is unclear whether this perception meant that conservative professors were more likely to respond to FIRE’s survey or that leftist professors were less likely to respond—or both. In 2017 a study not directly comparable to FIRE’s found that, among over seven-thousand tenure-track professors in five fields in forty leading American universities, registered Democrats outnumbered registered Republicans by 11.5 to one. The same study found that the ratio of Democrats to Republicans had grown over the previous decade and was “highest among young professors.” Although 54 percent of the professors in this study considered themselves neither Democrats nor Republicans, in my experience the main reason that professors call themselves independents is that they think the Democratic Party is too conservative.<sup>3</sup>

Leftist ideas have grown steadily more prevalent, powerful, intolerant, and extreme since the 1960s, and have increasingly spread from the universities to society at large. Those of us who once hoped that such ideas would be a

transitory intellectual fashion have been proved wrong. They grow stronger every year among university students, professors, and administrators. Even someone who graduated from a typical American university ten to twenty years ago would be surprised to see how far universities have turned to the left since then. The partisans of this leftist ideology think, with good reason, that they are on the verge of a lasting victory that will completely silence or eliminate their critics within universities, except perhaps for critics even farther to the left than they are. The great majority of the 50 percent of professors who think a DEI statement is “a reasonable requirement for a university job” have incorporated the DEI ideology so thoroughly into their teaching and research that they can readily demonstrate their allegiance to it and are content to exclude applicants who will not.

In a book on reforming American higher education published in 2018, when the leftist bias of universities was less overt than it is today, I expressed skepticism that existing universities could be reformed anytime soon. (I favored founding a new one.) I wrote, “In theory, no doubt, enlightened trustees could choose a determined and forceful new president for an already distinguished university. . . . Yet I am not aware of any existing major university that has such enlightened trustees. If it did, the president whom they chose would probably face a faculty revolt” backed by administrators and students. “Even if the trustees and president kept

their nerve and managed to maintain their policies, only after fifteen to twenty years of rancor would the majority of the faculty have been hired under the new system.”<sup>4</sup> While I still think that this sort of reform would be hard to implement, the demand in some states to reform state universities has grown so strong, and the need for reform has become so obvious, that I am now more optimistic about prospects for enlightened university trustees and determined university presidents to keep their nerve.

As of now, reforming existing institutions seems possible only for state universities in conservative states where governors and legislatures can appoint university presidents and a majority of university trustees. Otherwise legislation is unlikely to help. Even if requirements for DEI statements are outlawed, as they should be, administrators can merely read the letters of application to eliminate those without spontaneous declarations of fealty to DEI principles. Even if spending on DEI administrators is eliminated, as it should be, the same administrators with different titles can go on enforcing the same ideology. Even if ethnic and gender studies departments and requirements are eliminated, the same ideology can be taught in departments and required courses with different names. Trying to force ideologues not to teach their ideology is doomed to failure, and would provoke (often justified) denunciations of violating academic freedom. Even most professors with no commitment to leftist ideology will go on teaching it, as long

as their salaries and employment are determined by ideologically committed administrators and colleagues. Abolishing tenure, which some misinformed legislators think would help, would make everything worse, cementing leftist dominance by removing the only protection conservative and moderate professors now have from being fired by leftist administrators.

The only solution I can see is to hire administrators and professors who do not share the leftist and racist DEI ideology. That solution is harder than it may seem. The Florida legislature has mandated that new professors at Florida's state universities be hired and promoted by the university presidents and trustees, who in most universities already have (though seldom use) power to approve or veto professorial hiring and promotions. But even the most conscientious presidents and trustees can have effective influence over hiring and promotion only in a few small state schools like New College of Florida (with 600-odd students), where such a strategy is now being tried. Most state universities are much too large for their presidents and trustees to examine thousands of applications for faculty positions every year, in fields ranging from philosophy to computer science, and to choose intelligently among them. This hiring is likely to be delegated to the usual administrators and faculty, who will submit to the president and trustees recommendations to hire the sorts of applicants who are usually hired now.

Something like the following strategy would be needed to have a chance of success. A university president familiar with universities and scholarship should appoint a small group of deans (or vice-presidents, if that non-academic title must be used) who also have academic credentials and hold the rank of professor. With their help, the president should begin an international search for new chairmen (or chairs, if political correctness cannot be avoided) for every academic department in the university. These chairmen should have the rank and credentials of full professors. The advertisement could include something like the following: "We are open to hiring people of all points of view except those who would restrict academic freedom and dilute academic standards to promote 'diversity, equity, and inclusion.'" The new chairmen should have more authority than most departmental chairs have had for a long time: they, not the usual department committees, should advertise their department's jobs, read the job applications, recommend job candidates and candidates for promotion and tenure, and set requirements for departmental majors and graduate programs. After consulting with the deans and other chairmen, who should meet frequently as a steering committee, the president would approve or reject the chairmen's recommendations. These new appointments could easily be paid for by dismissing many administrators, who in most universities are far too numerous and highly paid.

Some people may doubt whether enough suitable candidates can still be found for such departmental chairmen and the other professors they would hire, especially if several state universities adopted this sort of reform. No one can be sure quite how many moderate and conservative professors there are now, because they have excellent reasons to hide their real opinions. A related problem is that what passes for “moderate” or “conservative” views on today’s campuses can be well to the left of what most non-academics would consider moderate or conservative. But even if FIRE’s sample of 17 percent moderate and 25 percent conservative professors (and 50 percent who consider DEI statements “an ideological litmus test that violates academic freedom”) are higher than the actual overall percentages, FIRE is surely right that older professors and full professors are much more likely to defend academic freedom and to be moderate or conservative than younger professors of lower rank. Of the roughly half a million professors in American universities, about 190,000 are full professors, and if even a quarter of them reject leftist ideology they would number around fifty-thousand.<sup>5</sup> The National Association of Scholars has about four-thousand members and Heterodox Academy about 4,400 members who are professors, and though their memberships overlap somewhat, they have been willing to go on record as defenders of academic freedom.<sup>6</sup>

Identifying suitable applicants for department chairman should not be partic-

ularly hard. An advertisement specifying that candidates should be committed to free speech and academic excellence would eliminate many unsuitable applicants. Today leftist academics and others who want to be hired by leftists are easy to identify because they have good reasons to publicize their ideology in the content and even in the titles of their books and articles; but such incentives matter less to tenured professors, especially those who are near retirement. In fact, recently retired professors, many of whom have retired before they otherwise would have in disgust at the leftism of their institutions, should be encouraged to apply. The usual application materials and interviews should almost always be enough to make the applicants’ merits and suitability clear. The positions as chairmen should be well paid, and in view of their heavy administrative duties their teaching loads should be light. I expect that many older professors would be delighted to apply for and to accept such appointments. The chairmen should as a rule be hired from outside the university, both to signal a sharp break with existing practices and to reduce tensions between the new chairmen and existing department members.

Once hired, the chairmen should regularly be assigned new faculty positions to fill at open or senior ranks, since relatively few junior candidates can be found who are not committed to DEI ideology. The American academic job market is so unbalanced and biased that many talented associate and full profes-

sors, especially those with moderate or conservative views, have spent years at institutions that they want to leave but cannot because most advertised jobs are at the assistant professor level and go to leftist applicants. Although the university president should probably not appoint as chairmen provocateurs with extremely unconventional views, the chairmen should be ready to hire such scholars, as well as scholars from outside the academy and outside the country, as regular professors. The chairmen should however avoid the explicit goal of “ideological diversity” that some have suggested, which would inevitably lead to appointing some candidates on the basis of ideology rather than academic merit.<sup>7</sup> Ideological hiring is what we have now but should try to stop.

New chairmen should try to be on as good terms as they can with earlier faculty, many of whom would naturally resent a new system that curbed their authority over hiring, promotion, and the curriculum. Their views should always be heard, even if seldom accepted, by the new chairmen. In my opinion trying to avoid unnecessary tension would mean that assistant professors already hired should be granted tenure even if they are dogmatic leftists, as long as they clearly meet the university’s tenure standards for teaching and research. To do otherwise would be to deny tenure on ideological grounds, give protestors a chance to claim the professors were being denied tenure for exercising their right to free speech, and risk the reputation of the whole cause of university reform.

Many existing faculty think that political correctness has gone too far in universities, and if reasonable efforts are made to conciliate them they will accommodate themselves to the new system, however grudgingly.

Governors, state legislators, and university presidents and trustees who enact such reforms should still be prepared for strong opposition from faculty, students, accreditors, and others in the form of protests, boycotts, strikes, and lawsuits. The reformers’ defense should be that they are representing the views of their constituents and taxpayers, which have been suppressed and insulted on campuses for years. The opponents will talk about “academic freedom,” but their own freedom of speech should be carefully respected, and only their freedom to discriminate against those who disagree with them should be curtailed. Their blanket charges of “systemic racism” should be disregarded, though any specific complaints should be carefully investigated. Their charges that they are being subjected to “microaggressions” should be answered by citing their own pervasive hostility to their ideological opponents, like refusing to hire those who fail to submit DEI statements that agree with leftist ideology.

Though in the present state of universities this strategy would work only for state universities in states with conservative governments, that would include many important universities in Texas, Florida, and some other states. It would also issue a strong challenge to the conventions of American higher education.



For the future, it would radically alter the calculations of graduate students or undergraduates considering graduate school, who now have little hope of employment at any major university unless they are committed leftists or are willing to pretend to be for the foreseeable future. We must change those prospects before we can conscientiously advise even the most courageous students who are not leftists to aspire to become professors. Even if the strategy suggested here is widely adopted and successful, there will still be many private universities and public universities in Democratic-dominated states that will go on hiring leftists and excluding dissenters. But at least we would have avoided the very real danger that dissenters from DEI ideology will be totally excluded from major universities.

Many people still think this danger is exaggerated. Some moderates think requiring DEI statements from job applicants is not all that bad, because applicants will just write whatever they are expected to write without believing any of it. One law professor at Harvard says, "I think it's a fad. . . . People will utter the hocus-pocus. They know that they're being required to put on an act. And that's going to create cynicism about the very values that the people who put these requirements into place care about." She seems to think that the leftists in universities have finally gone too far and will provoke a backlash, perhaps leading the courts to outlaw DEI requirements.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile we should apparently be satisfied with universities where everyone

lies to everyone else for fear of leftist colleagues and administrators. But such universities prevent free and honest discussion and cannot deserve or receive our respect. DEI requirements are not a "fad," but a blunt formulation of what universities have already been doing less openly, as part of a steady march to the left that has gone on for more than forty years. Something needs to be done to change our universities now.

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1. "Universities: New Testaments," *Economist*, February 11, 2023.
2. N. Honeycutt, S.T. Stevens, E. Kaufmann, *The Academic Mind in 2022: What Faculty Think About Free Expression and Academic Freedom on Campus* (Philadelphia: The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, 2023), <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/academic-mind-2022-what-faculty-think-about-free-expression-and-academic-freedom>.
3. Political Party Affiliation Among Academic Faculty, National Communications Association, (March 2017), [https://www.natcom.org/sites/default/files/publications/NCA\\_C-Brief\\_2017\\_March.pdf](https://www.natcom.org/sites/default/files/publications/NCA_C-Brief_2017_March.pdf).
4. Warren Treadgold, *The University We Need: Reforming American Higher Education* (Encounter Books, New York, 2018), especially pp. 142-43.
5. Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, 2020-2021, Table 315.20, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21\\_315.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_315.20.asp).

6. Though these two organizations are different in significant ways, I belong to both. For the membership of Heterodox Academy, see [file:///C://HxA-annual-report-2022-spreads-1.pdf](file:///C:/HxA-annual-report-2022-spreads-1.pdf).
7. Suggested in "Academic Freedom: Wanted: Severe Contests," *The Economist*, February 11, 2023.
8. "Universities: New Testaments," *The Economist*, February 11, 2023.