

OPINION

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EDITORIAL

Compact would put UT’s academic excellence at risk

In the 1957 U.S. Supreme Court case that affirmed academic freedom as a First Amendment right, Chief Justice Earl Warren likened the restriction of it to a strait-jacket imposed upon an unwilling faculty by an outside force. Such an act would “imperil the future of our Nation,” Warren wrote.

Nearly 70 years later, the University of Texas appears on the verge of putting that straitjacket on itself if it signs the Trump administration’s “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education.” The proposed agreement, from the U.S. Department of Education, offers preferential federal funding in exchange for concessions on viewpoint diversity, student admissions, faculty hiring and binary gender definitions, among others.

While none of the other eight universities that initially received the compact agreed to sign it, UT is still considering the deal. The Trump administration later extended the offer to other colleges, and this week, New College of Florida became the first taker.

Despite some good ideas, such as a 5-year freeze on tuition, much in the compact is unconstitutional and untethered to reason. Further, it puts UT’s top state and national rankings at risk by ceding academic freedom in exchange for federal dollars. If the Board of Regents wants to keep landing dozens of academic programs in top 10 spots, it should protect the scholarly independence that fosters such achievements and reject this deal.

A majority of Americans — including Republicans — believe the federal government should not interfere with universities’ admissions, hiring, curriculum and research decisions for good reason: Professors and researchers are the experts in their fields and should have the freedom to pursue knowledge for the advancement of truth, not a political agenda. This is what fosters innovation. Countries with greater academic freedom consistently see stronger economies and more patents, evidence that free inquiry drives real-world progress.

The American Association of University Professors and the American Federation of Teachers aptly describe Trump’s compact as a “clumsy attempt at thought policing” that “sets us backward toward an era of less innovation, fewer cures for diseases, and a shrinking economy.”

The Orwellian document binds signatories to inherently contradictory agreements such as protecting academic freedom by recognizing that “academic freedom is not absolute.” It obligates them to maintain a “broad spectrum of ideological viewpoints” on campus by “transforming or abolishing institutional units that purposefully punish, belittle, and even spark violence against conservative ideas.”

Such terms are paradoxical, logic holds. Eugene Volokh, a senior researcher at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, says the compact crosses a constitutional line.

Volokh — whose renowned legal blog The Volokh Conspiracy describes itself as “generally libertarian, conservative, centrist, or some mixture of these” — told us that while the federal government can dictate how grants are spent, it cannot levy institution-wide conditions in exchange for federal dollars.

“The government is saying essentially all these funds that we give you for a wide range of purposes ... will be subject to this condition, and that is unconstitu-

tional,” he said.

Universities should aspire to foster viewpoint diversity, but that range of perspectives does not come from the top down. Rather, it is built up from a foundation of the entire spectrum of ideas being discussed by students and faculty in the classroom.

The compact aims to mandate this spectrum “not just in the university as a whole, but within every field, department, school, and teaching unit” of UT. This, as Isaac Kamola, director of the AAUP’s Center for the Defense of Academic Freedom said, is “patently absurd.”

In fact, injecting political viewpoints not based on scientific research, such as the compact’s requirement to interpret “male,’ female,’ ‘woman,’ and ‘man’ according to reproductive function and biological processes,” will throw a wrench in decades of empirical study.

Karma Chavez, president of the AAUP’s UT chapter, told us that this binary definition of gender “will require units from the hard sciences to the social sciences to the humanities to adopt views that are contrary to the best knowledge in their fields.”

That, of course, appears to be the point. For all its gilded language about protecting viewpoint diversity, Trump’s compact is clearly meant to install homogenized, dogmatic ideas of what American thought should be in the very places where disagreement should be the norm.

Conservative ideas aren’t so fragile as to require special government safeguards on campus. They are surely strong enough to hold their own in the marketplace of ideas. There should be just as much room on the university campus for the pro-Palestinian protester as there is for the Charlie Kirk follower.

Texas seemed to be on the right track in 2019, when Gov. Greg Abbott signed a law protecting “free, robust, and uninhibited debate and deliberations by students” at state universities. But Abbott and lawmakers clawed back those protections this year after Republican lawmakers didn’t like what pro-Palestinian protesters had to say. And now, even without Trump’s compact, UT and other public universities face an alarming injection of politics into their academic mission, from state laws banning DEI programs and curbing faculty senates to Abbott demanding the firing last month of a Texas A&M professor over a gender identity lesson. That prompted UT to review all gender studies courses.

All of which stifles the welcoming climate of rigorous inquiry and debate that Texas’ flagship university should foster.

Chairman Kevin Eltife wrote this month that the Abbott-appointed Board of Regents was “honored” to be offered Trump’s compact. We can only hope that enthusiasm has cooled, given the passage of the initial Oct. 20 deadline without a deal.

UT is a top-tier university, an engine of innovation and investment and a source of generational pride — none of which should be traded for extra federal funding.



"I JUST HOPE I GET A SYMPATHETIC JUDGE."

To fight extremism, colleges must develop better citizens

By Aaron Pomerantz and Garion Frankel

GUEST COLUMNISTS

Amid recent political violence, higher education is back in the public’s crosshairs. As controversial speakers are threatened and students get into altercations over political beliefs, it’s unsurprising that the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) recently found that one in three students believe violence against controversial campus speakers is acceptable. That’s a terrifying statistic for anyone who values free speech or a pluralistic society.

That doesn’t mean that higher education is solely to blame for radicalizing America’s youth — contrary to what some are claiming. However, higher education isn’t blameless. For too long, universities have neglected their purpose of shaping students into citizens who can engage across differences without violence. To lower America’s political temperature, higher education must reclaim and fulfill that developmental mission.

Such an outcome won’t be realized by mandatory trainings or video libraries — although such resources and programs are certainly welcome. However, people who support political violence aren’t born that way; they emerge from environments that promote narcissism, dishonesty and disagreeableness. To fulfill our developmental mission, higher ed must intentionally counter these corrosive tendencies by intentionally fostering environments that demand self-reflection, pushing students to think about who they are and who they want to become.

At Rice University’s Doerr Institute for New Leaders, students who engage in our executive coaching programs — receiving the same coaching normally reserved for CEOs — become observably more self-aware, purposeful and intellectually humble, all essential traits for lowering the current sociopolitical temperature.

Importantly, our coaching is both nondirective and non-political. We don’t tell students *what* to think. We achieve results by provoking meaningful self-reflection about *who* they want to be.

If higher education is serious about countering political violence, institutions must prioritize prompting students to reflect on their strengths,

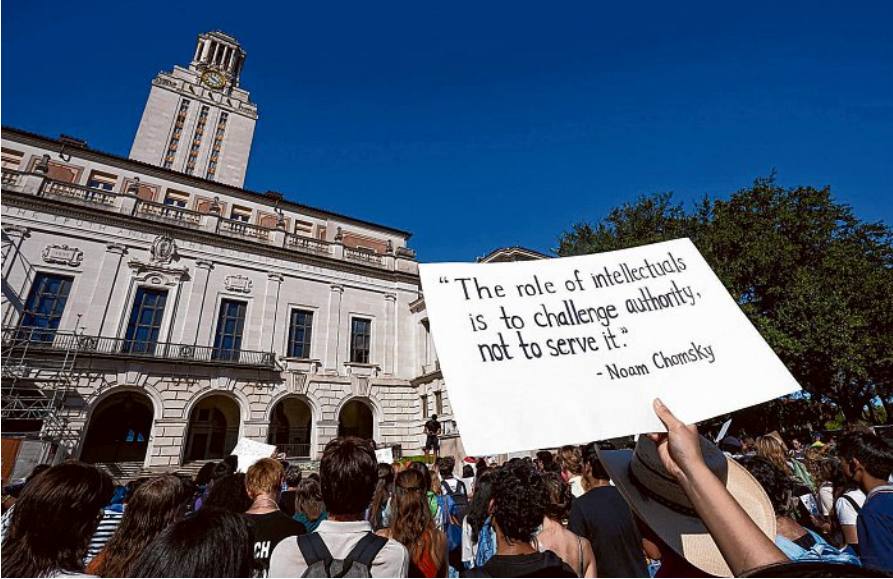
weaknesses, values and aspirations. Not every university needs the Doerr Institute’s executive coaching model, but many other approaches can build self-reflection, including intergroup dialogue initiatives or embedding self-reflection into course materials.

Some of these developmental efforts can even take more surprising forms. For instance, preliminary evidence indicates that participating in the arts — such as the visual arts, dance, music and theater — produces students who are more civically engaged, socially tolerant, active in their communities and respectful of others’ interests. Similar findings hold in K-12 education, where arts access (especially for disadvantaged students) is limited by testing mandates. Meanwhile, universities strip arts funding, viewing it as inefficient. Shaping students means undoing these efforts.

Museums could be another source of healthy civic engagement. After all, museums are one of America’s most trusted public institutions, with trust in museums actually *increasing* after the COVID-19 pandemic. College students might not flock to museums on their own, but when given the same intention and care as any other developmental effort, museum-based education introduces students to balanced perspectives, increases students’ awareness of the world around them, and empowers students to engage with and experience other cultures, viewpoints and traditions. This alone would go far towards alleviating the narcissism present in students who support political violence. Students might not pursue such developmental opportunities on their own, which is why higher education must take the initiative in creating them.

Regardless of what form these changes take, universities must take a proactive role in defusing political violence. Going to college can’t simply be about absorbing information — it should develop students into the kind of citizens who strengthen, not undermine, our democracy.

Aaron Pomerantz is a research psychologist and the assistant director of research and evaluation at Rice University’s Doerr Institute for New Leaders. Garion Frankel is a doctoral student in Pre-K-12 educational leadership at Texas A&M University.



Aaron E. Martinez/Austin American-Statesman

Protesters gathered on Oct. 13 to urge UT not to accept the compact that would provide more federal funding if it agreed to several concessions.



Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman

Universities can help calm America’s political turmoil by teaching reflection, empathy and civic responsibility, Aaron Pomerantz and Garion Frankel write.