

Reforming Higher-Education Reform

 realclearpolitics.com/articles/2025/07/06/reforming_higher-education_reform_153000.html

Peter Berkowitz

July 6, 2025

To constructively reform an institution requires understanding its problems and challenges. To understand an institution's problems and challenges, one must grasp its aims, structure, and spirit. Many well-intentioned would-be university reformers who recognize the crisis of higher education fail to appreciate the aims, structure, and spirit of liberal education, the capstone and highest justification of undergraduate study. This causes well-intentioned would-be university reformers to miss the center of the target with their criticism and impels them to advance inadequate or counterproductive remedies.

In a late-June online conversation, "[Are We Past Peak Harvard?': 3 Writers Mull Higher Education's Woes](#)," sharp-minded New York Times writers discussed "the state of higher education in Trump 2.0 and beyond." Host Frank Bruni, a thoughtful man of the left, is a Times contributing opinion writer and a professor of journalism and public policy at Duke University. He exchanged views with Ross Douthat, a Times columnist and a wide-ranging and well-respected conservative thinker; and Lawrence H. Summers, a centrist Democrat, who is also a Times contributing opinion writer, a former Secretary of the Treasury from 1999 to 2021, Harvard president from 2001 to 2006, and a longtime Harvard professor with appointments in the economics department and at the Kennedy School.

The roundtable covered considerable ground. Bruni's comments and questions recognized that elite universities needed a course correction while condemning the Trump administration's interventions as springing from resentment of elite universities' power and influence and causing considerable harm. Douthat and Summers argued that whatever the president's motives, progressive orthodoxy on campus has vilified and excluded conservative ideas. And they both espoused viewpoint diversity as an urgently needed corrective.

Yet only obliquely did they recognize that fixing higher education depends on rediscovering the aim of liberal education, revising the structure of the curriculum, and setting aside the spirit of party that many professors bring to the classroom in favor of the spirit of curiosity, fallibility, and free inquiry.

Suggesting that the spell elite universities exercise over America has been broken with many parents "rethinking the Ivy League," Bruni asked whether we have moved "past peak Harvard – past peak Ivy – forevermore?" Summers saw elite universities retaining their cachet because of their ability to fast-track the best and the brightest to top-echelon positions in government, business, and especially the sciences. Douthat, however, maintained that

elite universities would remain under pressure since they “are unlikely to thrive as institutions that are seen as intensely ideological, hyper-progressive, while depending so substantially on government funding and public-private partnerships.”

Shifting to the right’s motives, Bruni suggested that “Trump and his allies” only pretend to defend free speech. “They correctly called out intolerance on the left,” Bruni acknowledged, “but are now replacing it with intolerance from the right.” Douthat and Summers acknowledged that the Trump administration’s approach to higher education has been marked by confusion, hypocrisy, and a desire to tear down rather than reform. But Summers emphasized that the administration’s excesses should not distract from the reality of universities’ progressive monoculture and censorship of conservative dissent: “[T]he overwhelming inhibition on Ivy League campuses remains of chilling conservative speech,” he wrote. “Among students and faculty you have to be brave to support the Supreme Court’s judgments on affirmative action.”

While insisting that left-wing critics of “Trump’s attack on higher education” are “rightly alarmed,” Bruni helpfully observed that progressives overlook how they set the stage for the president. The left embraced substantial tax benefits for universities and generous federal funding, and progressives backed Obama and Biden administration use of Title VI to intervene aggressively in “matters of gender equality and the patrolling of sexual misconduct.” Douthat and Summers agreed that the left embraced the transfer to government of the powers that Trump was using against the universities, even as the two Times writers deplored the administration’s proceeding like a bull in a china shop. Douthat challenged Bruni’s invidious contrast between Trump’s heavy-handed interventions and the left’s decorous efforts to reshape campus life. The conservative columnist pointed out that progressives had no need to proceed heavy-handedly when they occupied the White House, since their demands – for example, conditioning federal funding on universities’ curtailment of men’s due-process rights in cases involving allegations of sexual misconduct – reflected universities’ preferences.

Returning to Trump’s true motives, Bruni suggested that administration efforts to root out campus antisemitism, ideological conformity, and liberal bias “are more a cornerstone of his larger push to delegitimize – to vilify – experts and expertise, which get in the way of his complete control of the narrative and his twisting of truth.” Douthat and Summers expressed concerns about Trump administration intemperance but insisted that the White House is targeting real ailments in higher education. Trump builds on but did not create the widespread perception, argued Douthat, that elite universities cannot be “taken seriously as disinterested truth-seeking enterprises.”

Bruni added that elite universities do themselves no favors by snobbishly flaunting their exclusivity. Douthat noted that a corrective was underway with talented students opting for opportunities in the South and West. Summers stated that elite universities should recruit

more aggressively among the disadvantaged and expand their adult and continuing education programs.

The Times writers were divided on whether universities can repair themselves. Bruni maintained that most students are not intolerant social justice warriors and that “there has been a boom in centers and programs and initiatives devoted to free inquiry, to discourse across political divides, to heterodox thinking.”

Douthat and Summers were less optimistic. Douthat argued that viewpoint diversity on campus tends not to extend to conservatives but to stop with the “heterodox liberal,” like Harvard’s Summers himself. Summers agreed: “I am on the left’s 40-yard line in America and the right’s 10 at Harvard.” Stressing viewpoint diversity, Douthat contended that it is reasonable for conservatives to demand “that if you have a set of elite universities that are deeply entangled with the American government, with a profound and ancient relationship with the American people, they should make an effort to contain within themselves the actual diversity of ideas and worldviews that define America today.”

It would have been better if one of the interlocutors had gone beyond questions of fair representation to underscore the educational benefits that conservatives bring to campus. These include counteracting progressives’ dogmatic slumber, fostering toleration by creating a community in which left and right share a way of life, and spurring both to recognize their opinions’ limitations and the other side’s insights.

Failure to go beyond the formalities of viewpoint diversity also hobbles Douthat’s and Summer’s response to Bruni’s query about what measures they would adopt “to address any legitimate aspects of the MAGA-Republican case against higher ed, to protect higher ed from a dangerous degradation and to guarantee its continued, vital role as an incubator of leaders and an economic engine?”

In addition to urging universities to invite more prominent Republicans to campus and to find opportunities to cooperate with the Trump administration, Douthat again stressed viewpoint diversity. Universities, he counseled, “should promise to take the cultivation of intellectual diversity as seriously as they have taken other forms of diversity, and outline concrete steps – new centers, new hiring and recruitment policies, etc. – that go beyond just general statements of free-speech principles.”

Summers also summoned universities to renew their dedication to free speech. He advised them “to embrace the now unfashionable idea of patriotism.” And he called on them “to signal reorientations toward the pursuit of truth and away from pursuits of social justice, toward the veneration of excellence and away from mutual self-esteem and toward diversity of perspective and away from identity politics.”

This approaches closer to the crux of the matter but still falls short of identifying the essential elements of elite-university reform.

We need reformers who can explain that liberal education aims to form cultivated human beings capable of exercising wisely the rights and discharging effectively the responsibilities of free citizens.

We need reformers who understand that liberal education must be structured around study of American ideas and institutions; the seminal intellectual achievements – scientific as well as literary – and decisive events of Western civilization; and the languages, culture, and history of other civilizations.

And we need reformers who know that universities don't in the first place need conservative professors or progressive professors but rather professors endowed with the old-fashioned liberal spirit. Such professors furnish students' minds with facts and observations, methods and interpretations, and evidence and arguments. And such professors assist students in thinking for themselves by teaching that authors and texts must be understood before one refutes or embraces them, and that understanding an idea or an institution involves examining not only where it breaks down but also how it gained acceptance and why it exerted influence.

The paucity of such reformers gives rise to the widespread need for remedial education focusing on the university's mission, not least for faculty and administrators, many of whose teachers failed to introduce them to the aim, structure, and spirit of liberal education.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](https://peterberkowitz.com) and he can be followed on X @BerkowitzPeter.