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College Town

What Harvard (and the rest of higher ed) still needs to do to fix itself

Steven Pinker

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Steven Pinker is a professor of psychology at Harvard University. His most recent book is "When Everyone Knows That Everyone Knows ...: Common Knowledge and the Mysteries of Money, Power, and Everyday Life."

His submission is part of a new Globe Opinion section called College Town. You can sign up for College Town's free weekly newsletter [here](#).

In the pages of this paper almost three years ago, I immodestly offered my employer "A five-point plan to save Harvard from itself." Though I don't take the credit (my arguments have been made by many others), the points are being implemented, albeit haltingly and incompletely.

The Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard has put free speech in the spotlight. The university has adopted a policy of institutional neutrality, forbearing from issuing proclamations on the issues of the day that aren't any of its business and on which its faculty and students may have their own opinions. It no longer indulges thuggish protesters who eject deans from their offices, invade lecture halls, commandeer the university commons, and intimidate their fellow students. Several initiatives are seeking to broaden the diversity of viewpoints expressed by students and faculty. And much of the hegemony of the DEI bureaucracy is being wrested back to responsible university leadership.

Hovering over these efforts is an awareness that for Harvard and other elite universities to credibly defend themselves against the Trump administration's campaign to cripple them, they must undertake substantial reform from within.

Much work remains. Here I'll offer two recommendations to strike at the root causes beneath many of the maladies.

Universities have one job: to create and transmit knowledge (OK, that's two jobs). Yet at some point we arrogated the mantles of prophet, preacher, moral beacon, and advocate of social justice. For many reasons, this was a mistake:

This last problem is far more pernicious than poisoning the atmosphere. When people are demonized or humiliated for expressing an opinion, it creates a spiral of silence in which no one dares express the opinion, and hence no one hears it. This in turn leads to "pluralistic ignorance," where no one believes the opinion but everyone mistakenly believes that everyone else believes it.

That spiral helps explain the recurring phenomena of extraordinary popular delusions and the madness of crowds. A tragic academic example commanding attention this summer was the Jason Arday fiasco, in which a mendacious charlatan parlayed a ziggurat of self-aggrandizing whoppers into a professorship at the University of Cambridge. Eminent dons would not say what any 9-year-old could plainly see, because they were put on notice that they would be tarred as racists or ableists.

Evaluating scholarship requires expertise, and in most academic fields there is no objective benchmark of success like profitability in business, victory in sports, or treatment success in clinical trials. Academia long ago addressed this conundrum by adopting the custom of peer evaluation. Professors, not bureaucrats or politicians, would evaluate fellow professors, together with their papers, grant proposals, and academic programs.

In theory, scruples of objectivity combined with everyday human competitiveness could ensure that peer reviewers would apply standards of excellence and allocate precious resources to those who were best equipped to put them to productive use. But not for the first time, academia seems innocent of a basic phenomenon in social psychology: Closed circles of like-minded people can develop subcultures with entrenched norms and blind spots — especially when combined with the use of slander as a scholarly methodology.

So no one seems to have noticed the inherent problem in professors conferring prestige on one another without independent sanity checks. The result has been entire academic disciplines that have sunk into cults of intellectual obscurantism and tendentious politics, occasionally exposed by hoaxes like the Sokal affair and the Grievance Studies affair.

In theory, universities oversee their academic programs by appointing visiting committees composed mainly of professors from other universities, sometimes with the odd alumnus or donor mixed in. Yet in practice, these committees are vulnerable to regulatory capture, like a government agency infiltrated by lobbyists, and serve as advocates rather than auditors of the departments they visit.

As it happens, our nation has a considerable pool of expertise in most academic subjects that is not confined to members of the academic tribe. I am often astonished at journalists, think tankers, bloggers, Substackers, librarians, textbook writers, and the occasional grandmother from New Jersey who outknow and outthink professors in the fields they care about. Universities should figure out how to tap this expertise to let the light get in.

Figuring out how to monitor academic standards without political interference or corruption by special interests is a hard problem in organizational governance. But solving hard problems is the university's job — unlike some of the other conceits that have turned our heads.

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