

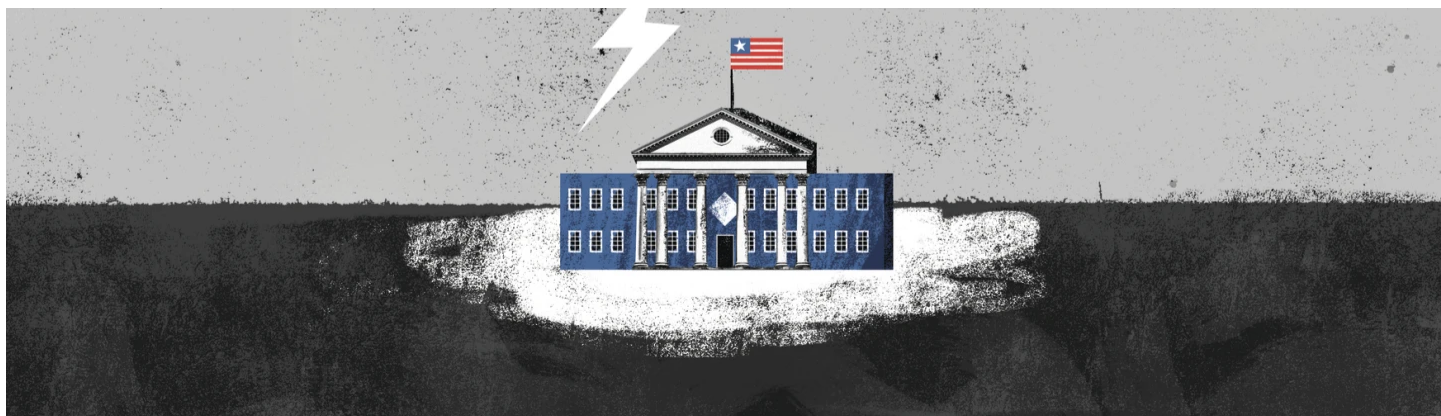


Trump's Agenda to Hurt Higher Education

His first month was a nightmare for the sector. Here's what he's planning next.



NATE KITCH FOR THE CHRONICLE



THE REVIEW | OPINION

By *Kevin Carey* February 18, 2025

A few weeks after Donald Trump's re-election, I found myself talking to an old friend at a higher-education conference overlooking the Capitol dome in Washington, D.C. The meeting had been organized by some elite research universities that were confounded by how the mood of Congress had turned so suddenly and violently against them. The friend, a Republican, had recently left a high-level job in education research. I asked him what, exactly, was going to happen next.

"We're going to hit them on indirect," he said. "We're going to hit them on antisemitism and affirmative action and whatever else we can find."

"Then what?" I asked. "You're going to hurt them and hurt them and then they'll ... agree with you? Change their ways? Is that how you think things work?"

He stared at me and didn't say anything. I'm not sure he had thought that far ahead.

A month into the second Trump administration, the agenda to hurt higher education is in full swing. If you're not sure what the second month will look like, they made it easy — in true Bond-villain fashion, they wrote it all down.

In December, Max Eden of the conservative American Enterprise Institute published a plan titled "[A Comprehensive Guide to Overhauling Higher Education](#)." Eden, a Yale

University graduate, works as a kind of roving culture warrior. In 2019, *The Huffington Post* published an [in-depth story](#) about how he bumbled into a community torn apart by school gun violence and made everything worse. In 2021, he was on X, [randomly accusing](#) a public-school gender-identity presentation of “grooming” and pedophilia. What Stephen Miller is to immigration, Eden is to education.

The second item in Eden’s scheme is “destroy Columbia University,” as an example to “scare universities straight.” The third is to indict Lee C. Bollinger, Columbia’s former president. Number four: Go after the University of California’s president, Michael V. Drake, and assert federal control over admissions at the University of California at Los Angeles medical school. Five: The soon-to-be secretary of education Linda McMahon should “assign Office of Civil Rights employees to the Harvard admissions office and direct the university to hold no admissions meeting without their physical presence. The Office of Civil Rights should be copied on every email correspondence, and Harvard should be forced to provide a written rationale for every admissions decision to ensure nondiscrimination.”

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Ordinarily, this could all be dismissed as the ravings of a man who chose to work out unresolved issues about his undergraduate experience by publishing a manifesto on the internet instead of finding a good therapist. Except the *first* item on Eden’s list is to raise endowment taxes and reduce the indirect-cost rate on federal research grants to 15 percent. The Trump administration announced that indirect-cost policy earlier this month.

That was followed by news that the Department of Government Efficiency commissars assigned to the Department of Education had [abruptly canceled](#) nearly all of the outstanding contracts managed by the Institute of Education Sciences, illegally gutting

the department's congressionally mandated studies and jeopardizing jobs for scores of education researchers nationwide. It's unclear from news accounts if the DOGE staffer who deep-sixed the "Condition of Education" — a [report](#) required by Congress — was the one who said he's a racist who hates Indian people or the one with the porn-sharing website who goes by "Big Balls." It's hard to keep track.

From 2018 to 2024, IES was run by Mark Schneider, now an AEI fellow. Last week, he [told](#) an interviewer that he was "envious" of the DOGE team's ability to vandalize the organization he ran for six years and that they were "smart" about the way they canceled contracts that he chose to sign. "We've broken a lot of stuff that needed to be broken," he explained, before characterizing the wholesale destruction of America's federal education-research infrastructure as an opportunity to carry out reforms that he himself failed to achieve.

At her [confirmation hearing](#), Linda McMahon refused to say that the Trump administration wouldn't outlaw Black history courses as illegal diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, and reiterated her willingness to chop the Department of Education into pieces and distribute the spare parts to other federal agencies. Presumably, that won't include the Office for Civil Rights lawyers who have the task of carrying out AEI's plan for ideological persecution. The Trump vision for the department is a federal office building empty of everything except the Inquisition.

On cue, the Office for Civil Rights released [new guidance](#) on Friday describing affirmative action as "repugnant" and warning colleges that it's not only forbidden to consider race in admissions, but also illegal to consider information that has nothing to do with race if, in the inquisitor's judgment, the college is secretly thinking about race, somehow. "It would, for instance, be unlawful for an educational institution to eliminate standardized testing to achieve a desired racial balance or to increase racial diversity," the OCR declared. How will the OCR know what the college "desires"? They have ways of making you talk.

his is all incredibly dumb and depressing. But higher education can fight back.

The Trump agenda is unconstitutional at every turn, and much of it has been stayed in federal court. The White House is trying to reshape the entire federal government in a term-limited presidency with tiny legislative margins in Congress. They're banking on Republican-appointed federal judges to rubber-stamp blatant illegality. As they learned during the mass resignation of Department of Justice prosecutors with impeccable conservative credentials who refused to drop the indictment of New York City's mayor, Eric Adams, in exchange for his support for the Trump mass-deportation agenda, many right-leaning lawyers still have ethics and principles. Limited-government jurists may not acquiesce to Trump's desire for an all-powerful executive branch.

The plan to persecute and destroy elite research universities is also complicated by the fact that many of those institutions are in Republican-dominated states. The political power structure in Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Indiana, and Ohio is dominated by people who graduated from Ole Miss, 'Bama, USC, IU, and OSU. These universities provide tens of thousands of good jobs from Monday to Friday and kick gridiron tail on Saturday afternoons. Even the Trump administration would have a hard time creating a different indirect-cost rate just for universities with winning records in the Big Ten and Southeastern Conference.

Overreach is inevitable. As Deep Throat says in *All the President's Men*: "The truth is, these are not very bright guys, and things got out of hand." Donald Trump and Elon Musk's cadre of henchmen are running amok through the capital city because nobody thought to build defenses against an executive branch determined to despoil itself. But most of their ideas have no policy logic or legal foundation.

Colleges need to be disciplined and persistent in defending their scholars and students for the next four years. The Trump administration can't be bargained with — only defeated with every legal and political defense higher education can muster.

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