

How Silence Spreads in Academia

Patterns and Implications

Von: Ferenc Hammer

The first one hundred days of the Trump administration have tested all major features that define academic freedom anywhere in the world. Teaching and research lay at the centre of these principles. Freedom to define teaching and research subjects and methodologies, including corresponding rights of students to study, appear in all defining discussions of academic freedom. Most treatments of academic freedom also highlight the importance of protecting conditions of participation in academic exchange and debate, and self-government in academia.¹ Certain documents further underline the importance of the economic security of scholars.² Since universities often function as global knowledge powerhouses,³ their finances also can appear in academic freedom policy documents.

In various forms of institutional policies, the Trump administration challenged virtually all of these basic principles in its first three months, mainly under the umbrella topics of eliminating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies, changing definitions of sex and gender, and the Gaza-Israel conflicts at US campuses. These policies affected research budgets, university curricula, employment situations, and campus regulations, to name just a few areas. In light of the proverbial “robust public debate” motif in the US free speech tradition, the relatively low level of visible reactions from institutions and individuals was palpable. From November 2024 onwards, silence started spreading in academia in America. And even almost half a year after Trump’s takeover, articles in professional publications are appearing with titles such as “Why aren’t US students protesting against Trump’s university attacks?”⁴

Trump’s first 100 days were not only a memorable shift in US government, but also a rarely available in vivo opportunity to observe a steep decline in academic freedom together with a surprising phenomenon, a relatively low level of corresponding resistance from actors in a free country. The most significant resistance response came on April 14, when Harvard University notified the government that the university would not comply with the government’s demands.⁵ The present short assessment highlights major streams of reactions in academia to the US government’s restrictive measures, and shows how news analyses have pointed out aspects of silence in these reactions. For the analysis I collected 52 articles with references to aspects of silence from the period of January 29-March 10, largely from the pages of *University World News*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and a few other news outlets.⁶ The

patterns that emerge from the interwoven phenomena of silence, silencing efforts, and attempts to break silence provide valuable insights into the collective processes that led individuals and institutions to remain silent in the first months of the Trump administration. One word is perhaps due here about silencing. The term *chilling effect* in media studies usually refers not to one or two factors resulting in faint-hearted journalism, but rather to a range of interlocked reasons, altogether constituting a culture of self-censorship. Quite similarly, in studies of academic freedom *silencing* is more a process than an act, more a coordinated sequence of material and immaterial forms of intimidation of free thought than a particular case of a particular person. And most importantly, the recognition of the inevitability of the conditions for remaining in silence, as well as the eagerness to speak up against it, are all collective social actions. Acts of witnessing, assessing, and documenting silence in academia are central to measuring academic freedom in any country through assessing opportunities to research and teach freely, and to participate in spreading knowledge and opinion connected to academic inquiry.

As an early reaction, by the end of January (01.31/1), journalistic commentators had already conducted comprehensive assessments of the Trump administration's first week of education-related measures. These included significant restrictions on expressions of identity, such as race and gender, as recognized by university policies in course curricula and student life at campus. The administration's attack on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies, justified by an expansive interpretation of a US Supreme Court ruling, included key silencing elements. The combined effects of cuts to science funding, student loans, and restrictions on campus expression contributed to a broader suppression of discourse. Some of these measures appeared to counteract public sentiment, as polling indicated no strong majority support (03.08.) for abolishing inclusivity policies.

Understandably, early reviews emphasized the impact of government-imposed content restrictions, particularly those on college curricula (01.29., 02.19/2, 02.19/3, 03.03/2, 03.05/1) and research topics (02.20/1, 02.26/1, 03.05/2, 03.06/3), as fundamental violations of academic freedom. *Nature* observed: "Even some scientific societies and private research organizations scrubbed DEI mentions from their websites" (02.21/1). Similarly, analyses have examined the responses of academic actors, paying particular attention to individuals and institutions that sought to break the silence surrounding these governmental attacks on academia (01.31/2, 02.05/2, 02.08., 02.13/1, 02.13/3, 02.19/1, 02.20/3, 02.20/4, 02.25., 03.06/2). These responses have included legal rulings, op-eds by professors, and public statements from various organizations.

Daily media reports on education-related events frequently highlight dissent against silencing while also documenting the relative silence of university leadership, faculty, and students in the face of these developments (02.01., 02.06/1, 02.06/2, 02.13/1, 02.14/1, 02.17., 02.19/3, 02.20/3, 02.26/2, 03.04., 03.06/1). Some reports explicitly note fear among academics, often expressed anonymously (02.20/2, 02.26/3). Given the significant editorial focus on university and campus silence, methodologies for

measuring academic freedom have increasingly considered institutional actions or inactions – for example in supporting faculty in their choice of academic content or protecting them against external smears and intimidation – as key indicators. Unsurprisingly, nearly a quarter of the examined sources warn against anticipatory obedience and overcompliance within academia (01.31/2, 02.01., 02.08., 02.12., 02.13/1, 02.17., 02.19/1, 02.20/4, 03.03/1).

Institutional adaptation to silencing pressures has produced notable consequences. A young faculty member described a lack of guidance from university leadership:

Many institutional leaders provided little to no guidance on navigating these legislative pressures. Some adopted a ‘wait-and-see’ approach, delaying meaningful communication with faculty, while others issued vague internal messages supporting academic freedom without addressing those most affected by these proposed bills – primarily faculty of colour who disproportionately study and teach about race and racial disparities (02.19/5).

These accounts illustrate the insidious spread of a chilling effect – an empirically elusive phenomenon – with significant implications for academia and broader society, mainly in the form of trivializing interference with academic freedom.

A particularly American dimension of this debate involves university neutrality, often framed in reference to the 1967 Kalven Report from the University of Chicago. Today, both academic activists opposing government regulation and compliance-minded administrators cite the Kalven Report in arguments over when universities should take a public stand versus when they should remain neutral (02.11., 02.13/2, 02.18., 02.25., 02.26/2, 03.03/3).

There is an interesting flow of commentary in the analyzed sources about presumable more general aims or consequences of government silencing attacks. When those in power “repeat a paradigm ad nauseam, people start to believe it” opines a university professor (02.05/1), somewhat echoing the strategy of Eviatar Zerubavel’s illuminating small book, “to explore the structure and dynamics of conspiracies of silence”.⁷ Apart from repetition as a silence inducer, destruction through challenging prestige is indicated as another silencing machinery by a professor assessing the government’s grievous attention to Columbia University (03.10.)

An intriguing small collection of media pieces, interviews, analyses, and op-eds refer to an assumption that what we are witnessing today in US academia is partly a hugely exaggerated but nevertheless significant backlash against certain negative DEI manifestations in the US academic culture that were not voiced enough in past years.

Education news outlets have offered a variety of explanations and frames for understanding the Trump administration’s unexpectedly solid thrust of actions on higher education and research. There seems to be a consensus in the analyses that a good part of the campaign against academia in the first months of 2025 functioned as a political theatre where universities’ antidiscrimination policies concerning mainly race

and gender were deemed to embody a perceived harmful liberal dogma that Trump and his government are dedicated to fight against, somewhat ironically under the flag of antidiscrimination. However, this argument stressing a predominantly political motivation in the government has been amended by a set of observations based on analyses of debates about antidiscrimination policies in the years preceding 2025. In a collection of media pieces, interviews, analyses, and op-eds, the assumption appears that policies against academia can be understood as a hugely exaggerated backlash against some debated features of the pre-2025 antidiscrimination policies. Daarel Burnette, senior editor at the *Chronicle of Higher Education* singled out two measures that had sometimes brought controversies at the departmental level. Referring to unvoiced disagreements about diversity trainings at departments, which were aimed to alleviate race related conflicts, and diversity statements highlighting personal efforts towards inclusive education that faculty members had to produce for job applications, Burnette contended: “So I actually think – we’ve reported this so I don’t have to say I think – a lot of the friction was already happening on college campuses before this was a political movement. So the way that this industry has collapsed so fast, I think the tinder was there” (02.04/1, 02.19/4, 02.26/3, 03.03/4). Since most of these DEI-related debates at university departments had not been articulated for the larger public, we could even come to a surprising conclusion that silence about existing tensions in university faculties prior to 2025 and academia’s somewhat unexpected low level of reaction against the first thrust of the Trump era in early 2025 may strangely overlap; these seemingly divergent yet still intertwined phenomena contribute to today’s regimes of silence in US academia.

The January 2025 presidential orders and the February 14 “Dear Colleague” letter provoked significant stress and confusion among affected institutions. The Dear Colleague letter format, particular to the US government system, is a non-binding communication regarding desired or forthcoming government measures. The February 14 message was sent to educational institutions about presumed consequences if they were to keep up with DEI operations. Analysts and academic professionals not only documented sources of confusion but also speculated on the strategic intent behind the government’s ambiguous policies. The *Chronicle* noted: “Federal funding was frozen and then unfrozen. The National Science Foundation payment system went off and then – after a judge’s order – back on.” This quip of the *Chronicle* journalist exemplifies the prevailing mental climate in academia in the stormy days of January and February 2025 (02.04/2). The resulting uncertainty led many university and research administrators to adopt precautionary financial measures, reminiscent of decision-making under shortage economies.⁸ In shortage economies in communist countries before 1989, uncertainties regarding balance sheet matters often forced decision makers into unnecessary precautions that could make the unit’s economic expectations even bleaker, rendering organizations more dependent on any kind of external forces, and leaving them with a smaller degree of autonomy.

A US judge ruled that the presidential orders were “unconstitutionally vague,” enabling law enforcement to apply regulations selectively based on political considerations (02.22). A university association leader expressed his growing uncertainty about the regulatory landscape: “We all anticipated disruption and the flurry of executive orders. The challenge was we weren’t sure what they would say. [The federal funding order] is no longer in effect, but we anticipate other executive orders, and maybe even a modified version of this one” (02.05./4). Student activists, sensing the potential impact of these regulations on their futures, also expressed confusion and concern (02.05./5). The author of an op-ed stated clearly that the content and the aim of the vague and ambivalent formulation of new regulations are equally important; for context, one just needs to take a look at the curious career of “diversity”, once a progressive policy tag, which has become appropriated by their political opponents to create new notions of diversity: “Anti-CRT and anti-DEI laws, often couched in vague language about protecting students from ‘divisive concepts’ or ensuring ‘viewpoint diversity’, have had an insidious impact that goes beyond what is explicitly banned under the law” (02.19/5).

“The Dear Colleague” letter penned in the US Department of Education on February 14 brought a second wave of uncertainties to academia, as an American Council of Education representative put it bluntly to an UWN journalist in the title of his article: “‘Stop DEI’ order lacks force of law but set to sow chaos” (02.20./4). Enforcing silence while simultaneously maintaining uncertainty about silencing is the most explicit feature of recent political intentions in the US, masked as policies of diversity, free speech, and especially antidiscrimination. For example, while diversity and antidiscrimination have been key concepts in policies, scholarship, and advocacy over the last century, very recent initiatives – one from the US government⁹, another from the Indiana Senate (02.21.) – simply appropriated them for their policies aiming to yield political goals for the current GOP leadership; all of this could lead observers to an eerie Orwellian feeling, namely “which antidiscrimination is the new enemy, after all?” Similar examples are analyzed by Naomi Klein in her book *Doppelganger*: “And this is the catch-22 of confronting your doppelganger: bark all you want, but you inevitably end up confronting yourself.”¹⁰ Somewhat surprisingly, with all different examples, a similar conclusion was offered by a study on uncertainty as a tool for the exercise of power in the state socialist period in Hungary.¹¹

The present collection of the first academia-related measures of the Trump administration offers insight into an often discussed but empirically sometimes unapproachable set of phenomena, namely silencing and self-censorship. Peculiar to the changes outlined here is their lightning speed and occasional zigzagging direction. Key events that happened after mid-March appear undocumented in this collection, including events at Columbia, Princeton, and especially Harvard, which make all the fine-tuned analyses in this text as obsolete as last years’ news. New patterns of conflicts and new forms of reflections from all parties involved in the struggles in US academia are on the rise. One mechanism seems to be remaining: Processes of blunt censorship with accompanying propaganda about antidiscrimination and free speech, supported by

auxiliary forces aiming to enforce silence about silencing along with incentives to stay in silence, all contribute to the emerging political communication system of a new autocracy.

References

1. Think Tank European Parliament (2024): EP Academic Freedom Monitor 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU\(2024\)757798](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2024)757798), 27/02/2024 (Last Access: 15.05.2025).
2. American Association of University Professors: 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments, <https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure-1970-interpretive-comments> (Last Access: 15.05.2025).
3. Tholen, Gerbrand (2024): The Role of Neoliberalism in the Marketisation of Higher Education, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66281-2>.
4. Jack, Patrick (2025): Why aren't US students protesting against Trump's university attacks?, in: Times Higher Education [https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/why-arent-us-students-protesting-against-trumps-university-attacks?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=editorial-weekly&spMailingID=31112883&spUserID=MTUwMzQyNzE5OTA1MQS2&spJobID=2710055390&spReportId=MjcxMDA1NTM5MAS2], 01/05/2025 (Last Access: 15.05.2025).
5. Read Harvard's Response to the Trump Administration, in: The New York Times [<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/04/14/us/harvard-letter.html>], 14/04/2025 (Last Access: 15.05.2025).
6. The list can be accessed here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/13zdYiKuk39myUgXbTEISvz9ctcoQ_VwoJNL-8O64U3w/edit?gid=0#gid=0
7. Zerubavel, Eviatar (2006): Elephant In the Room. Silence and Denial In Everyday Life, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, p. 17, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195187175.003.0002>.
8. Kornai, János (1980): Economics of Shortage, Amsterdam et al.: North-Holland Pub. Co.
9. The White House (2025): Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-illegal-discrimination-and-restoring-merit-based-opportunity/>, 21/01/2025 (Last Access: 15.05.2025).
10. Klein, Naomi (2023): Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 30.

11. Rév, I. (1990): A bizonytalanság mint hatalomgyakorlási technika. Az átmenet megközelítése. In: Ibid. (ed.): Gazdaság- és társadalomtörténeti szöveggyűjtemény a szocializmus magyarországi történetének tanulmányozásához, Budapest: Aula Kiadó, pp. 658-676.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Hammer, Ferenc: How Silence Spreads in Academia. Patterns and Implications, in: KWI-Blog, [<https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/how-silence-spreads-in-academia/>], 10.06.2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20250610-0830>