THE JAMES G. MARTIN CENTER FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL

Rules for Academic Reformers

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For decades, observant Americans have looked upon our institutions of higher learning with dismay. The reasons for their anxiety varied; some were upset at the increasing politicization, others at rising costs, and so on. But it seemed as if there were no way to turn back the tide of higher education's degradation.

That may be starting to change. Academia is moving into very extreme territory politically, promoting false, conjectural, and dogmatic theories such as critical race theory and indigenous science instead of long-accepted theories tested by proven methods. This extremism is heightening awareness among ordinary Americans about academia's alarming direction, and some are starting to get involved in campaigns to push back against the radical agenda.

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal has been on the forefront of the struggle to end the abuse of our colleges and universities for several decades. Today, with increasing potential to attract new allies to its cause, it is providing this manual, titled *Rules for Academic Reformers*, to encourage those who are concerned about higher education's degraded state—particularly alumni, but also trustees, students, and other potential activists—to start a "long march through the institutions of higher education" of their own. And to offer suggestions about how to build a successful movement, how to deal with academic adversaries, and where to find allies.

INTRODUCTION

The academic left never sleeps in its drive for total domination of higher education. Its campaign to level society and upend traditional structures advances in a seemingly infinite number of ways and from an infinite number of directions. On the rare occasions it suffers a setback on one issue, it advances doubly elsewhere. In just a brief period in 2021, academia witnessed hundreds, if not thousands of colleges and universities instituting "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" training programs, not just for students, but for faculty, staff, and trustees as well. At the same time, large numbers of schools—including the entire University of California system—dropped requirements that applicants must submit standardized test scores.1 And a survey revealed that a majority of college students now believe that government should punish so-called "hate speech."[2]

So how can the wholesale takeover of our academic institutions be prevented? It will be no mean feat; the campus left has advanced so far at many schools that they seem a lost cause. But at least several positive pieces to the puzzle are currently in place to offer some hope for reform:

- The Law: Boards of trustees are still statutorily and contractually in charge of colleges and universities.
- The Tools: Today's Internet enables disgruntled alumni and others who wish to reform higher education to communicate and organize in ways unfathomable in the past.
- The Lever: Administrators must (or want to out of greed) raise funds by pleasing donors and, for public institutions, legislators.
- The Opportunity: While it may seem as if the left's stranglehold on the Ivory Tower is permanent, there is a growing undercurrent of dissatisfaction with its excesses and failures. The time may be ripe for reformers to exert whatever influence they have.

The following manual is intended to encourage those who are concerned about higher education's degraded state—particularly alumni, but also trustees, students, and other potential activists—to start a "long march through the institutions of higher education" of their own. And to offer suggestions about how to build a successful movement.

THE STATUS QUO: SHARED GOVERNANCE

Higher education governance is almost completely dominated by a concept called "shared governance." While suggesting a system of equal power and a flattened hierarchy, in practice it inverts the traditional hierarchy and legal framework that placed trustees in charge. Even though founding statutes and charters still give trustees the final authority over university affairs, board

members have gradually abdicated that authority over the last 150 years, and the faculty and administrators now dominate academic policy-making.

The system developed in the early 20th century after knowledge became too advanced and specialized for trustees to make specific intellectual judgments, and the faculty pushed themselves forward to take over the curriculum and other matters since they were the "experts." As the universities became more complex and difficult to manage after World War II, administrators emerged as the most powerful faction. This new hierarchy places boards of trustees—who should be atop the system according to law, tradition, and law and common sense—at the top at the bottom of the decision-making tree. When it comes to the most important educational decisions, trustees are often reduced to little more than "rubber-stamp committees."

Most of the power grab has been accomplished through what is known as "soft governance"—in which the actual conduct of low and medium-level workers matters more than the formal bylaws—rather than by a rewriting of rules. For example, the rules may state that faculty are to be politically neutral in the classroom, but some faculty just ignore it without any repercussions, thereby making classroom indoctrination an accepted convention.

But now that more alumni, citizens, and reformers have started to push back, academics are beginning to rewrite the basic bylaws of their institutions to fend off future conflict. For example, in 2018, school officials at George Washington University ended all ties with the school's traditionally independent alumni association and started a new one that is officially part of the leftist administration.[3]

Without some reversal of this trend, academia will likely continue moving in the same disastrous and degrading path it has been for the last few decades.

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WHERE CHANGE COMES FROM

Change is a certainty, even when the powers-that-be exert all their energy to prevent it. Change in higher education is the result of human actions: sometimes due to deliberate planning, sometimes due to reactions to events, and sometimes due to a new "spontaneous order" produced by a shift in consensus.

The radical transformation of higher education has largely been deliberate, caused by those motivated by political agendas or naked self-interest. For too long,

the establishment right has ignored this remaking of the academy occurring directly under their noses; it has preferred to take a moderate, hands-off approach instead of pushing back. But reform is unlikely to come from those who don't want to rock the boat or are afraid of offending. The hallmark of that mindset is the ability to compromise and concede ground graciously.

Such conciliation must stop. Restoring higher education to a common-sense perspective will require fighters—albeit sensible ones—instead of appeasers.

People

The impetus for change can come from either inside or outside of an organization. In higher education, any number of stakeholders can initiate change internally or at least highlight the need for it. Administrators and faculty are unlikely to press for meaningful governance reform, since they currently hold the reins of power, at least in practice if not in law. And they are the ones advancing the progressive agenda. That leaves the following on-campus groups and individuals who may initiate reform:

- **Students** who can effect change either as leaders of student organizations or as individuals who have a personal reason to press for change
- **Well-connected alumni** who can effect change by building up a large constituency through a network of personal connections and applying pressure on the administration
- **Donors** can effect change by threatening to withhold contributions (or conversely, promising to donate)
- **Trustees** who can use their legal authority to effect change

The latter two are most likely to be school graduates themselves, making alumni potentially a constituency with enough power to force real change.

Those outside the institution who may get the ball rolling include:

- **Legislators** (for public institutions), who can change university governance statutorily or by appointing reform-minded trustees
- **501(c)3 policy researchers and non-profit organizations**
- **Independent grassroots activists**

Events

Campuses are not museums that remain fixed in time. They are living institutions in which policies are changed, new faculty are hired, students create disturbances, and so on. More often than not, the campus community has no alternate voices to stand up when these events advance the radical agenda. It is up to somebody—especially alumni—to offer opposition and to take the reins of leadership.

Such events should be viewed as opportunities for organizing. A few examples include:

- **A pattern of hiring inappropriate faculty or administrators.** There seems to be no bottom end to the caliber of person hired for higher education today. Consider a couple of professors hired in the University of North Carolina system in the last decade. One is Alexander Porco, whose only scholarship at the time he was hired by the English department at UNC-Wilmington was one book of obscene poems dedicated to a kinky porn actress and another that was an "X-rated rumination of his drunken experiences and thoughts in a Montreal strip club."[4] Then there is Dwayne Dixon, whose online presence at the time he was hired by UNC-Chapel Hill's Anthropology department amply revealed that he was a violent anarchist.[5] Both of these appointments could have been stopped by trustees, but were not. And there have been far too many similar appointments in academia to list here—including many at the most prestigious schools.

- **Policy changes.** There has been a spate of new policies in academia that give administrators and faculty greater control. In 2021, Yale University's administration attempted a power grab by disallowing the election of independent "petition candidates" to the board of trustees.[6] The rest of the board is "self-perpetuating" and closely allied with the administration; the new policy means that it will be unlikely that any dissenting opinions or alternate views will ever again be considered by the board.

  Colleges and universities are also implementing "diversity, equity, and inclusion" programs that subject faculty, staff, and students—sometimes even trustees—to ideological litmus tests on the politics of race and gender.[7] Some of these programs may violate participants' First Amendment rights.

- **Disinvitations, shout-downs, and lack of viewpoint diversity among campus speakers.** In 2020, a San Francisco State University event included as speakers at least three confirmed terrorists: Leila Khaled, an unrepentant member of the terrorist group Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who participated in plane hijackings in 1969 and 1970; Laura Whitehorn, a member of the Weather Underground who served 14 years in prison for a 1983 bombing of the U.S. Capitol, and Sekou Odinga, a former member of the Black Liberation Army who served 40 years in prison for attempting to kill six police officers and also took part in the 1981 robbery of a Brink armored

car in which two policemen and a guard were killed.[8]

Contrast this to the treatment of conservative speaker Charles Murray in 2017 when "hundreds of students at Middlebury College in Vermont shouted down a controversial speaker." They not only prevented him from speaking but also confronted him in "an encounter that turned violent and left a faculty member injured."[9]

Renaming buildings or removing monuments for political reasons. An attempt by the administration of Washington and Lee University in 2020 to remove Robert E. Lee's name from the school's name angered a great many of the school's graduates. It led to the formation of an alumni organization called the Generals Redoubt, which rapidly grew its email list from a few friends to 9,000 alumni, students, and parents. Partly in response to the group's pressure, the trustees voted to keep Lee in the school name in 2021.[10]

- **Disturbing statements by faculty or administrators.** In 2021, a transgender sociology professor at Old Dominion University insisted that "it was important to use the term 'minor-attracted persons' instead of 'pedophile' because it's less stigmatizing." After the statement received national attention, the resultant uproar caused the professor's resignation.[11] A similar situation occurred at Drexel University in 2017 when political science professor George Ciccariello-Maher tweeted "All I want for Christmas is white genocide."[12] He, too, was forced to resign; however, he is now teaching at Vassar College.

  And administrators are frequently worse than the professors, as Sarah Lawrence professor Samuel Abrams attests. Abrams surveyed roughly 900 administrators nationwide, discovering that there are roughly 12 who consider themselves liberal for every conservative, "making them the most left-leaning group on campus."[13]

- **Unacceptable classroom behavior by faculty.** In 2009, a physics professor at the University of Ottawa was fired for what he termed "squatting" a course. That is, he turned a physics course into a series of long rants about social activism, ignoring the expected curriculum.[14]

- **Intimidating Political Protests.** In 2017, Evergreen State University tolerated mobs of students intimidating others with baseball bats, occupying buildings, and briefly holding staff and faculty hostage.[15] For one day, the campus was declared off-limits to white people; when professor Bret Weinstein

refused to cooperate with the radicals, he was driven off campus and eventually resigned.

Outrage

Many of the above events share a common element: they instill a sense of outrage in observers and participants—and rightfully so. Incidents of outrage can alarm ordinary people and jolt them out of their complacency, spurring them to action by giving them a sense that some moral wrong has occurred or is occurring that cannot be ignored and therefore must be corrected. They can also impel those who are already inclined to activism to put their beliefs into action.

There is no shortage of outrageous incidents on campuses that provide a springboard to activism. New ones appear almost every day on such websites as Campus Reform, The College Fix, the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, the National Association of Scholars, and Minding the Campus, plus many more generalized news sources.

Today is especially promising for organizing opportunities due to the omnipresent outrage, with beloved statues torn down, campus buildings renamed for political reasons, and such highly charged initiatives as critical race theory and "diversity, equity, and inclusion" dominating the higher education administrative agenda.

A Non-Ideological Approach

Taking advantage of outrage, or perhaps instigating it, is not the only way to make progress. Sometimes a more cautious approach is preferable. It may be better in some circumstances to focus on non-ideological issues in order to gather a broader base of support. Incidents of outrage often force the campus community to choose sides according to political inclinations, whereas ongoing non-ideological problems may irritate alumni across the political spectrum. Some of these issues include leadership failures, incompetence, administrative bloat, lack of transparency, or wasteful spending. A couple of examples are how the campus administration handled the COVID pandemic or a failure to support free speech (although the latter often appears ideological since it is usually speakers on the right who have their speech rights curtailed).

It is also possible to find non-ideological issues to exploit by examining bylaws, statutes, handbooks, and manuals for troubling rules, standards, and processes for longstanding problems that have been ignored.

One recent non-political incident that spurred a passionate alumni reaction occurred at Davidson College, where the administration-controlled board voted to end rules in the charter that the president and trustees be affiliated with Christian

churches. Christian alumni of all political persuasions objected.[16]

Long Game or Right Now?

One consideration is whether to jump on an opportunity in the present to effect immediate change or to play a "long game. A lot depends on the chances for success; if victory is near, grasp it. But there are many campuses where the situation seems hopeless concerning reform—at least in the near future.

That doesn't mean, however, that prospects for change will always be dismal at such schools. Campus politics are fluid. New ideas come out of conflict and negotiation. The activist must be nimble enough to pursue new paths and capitalize on the opponents' errors.[17] The left has mastered this; campus radicals jump on every opportunity to press their agenda forward, and it has worked for them to a spectacular degree.

Sometimes it may be best to fight a losing battle just to plant a seed of awareness or to provoke a defensive reaction. And organizing on a seemingly hopeless campus may allow reformist ideas to gain at least a toehold where before there was only a blank wall of unanimity. By maintaining even a minimal presence on campus, activists may be able to capitalize should an opportunity for reform arise.

Working through campus student groups or independent academic centers may make the long game possible by providing a continuing framework for action.

Whatever specific tactics are used, the key is to keep the pressure on, to keep exposing problems, to provoke reactions. One can simultaneously confront the opposition in the present and build an organization for the future.

WHERE TO ORGANIZE

Every situation in higher education is unique; each institution must be examined individually for its reform potential. State universities can be forced to respond to legislative demands. And less prestigious private schools can be influenced by market forces, particularly when enrollment drops and results in a loss of revenue. Elite private institutions (except for those with significant vestiges of conservative or religious traditions) are often the least open to reform since they are impervious to enrollment decreases and political pressure. However, they also tend to have a broader base of alumni donors than other institutions. Such donors have strong ties to their alma maters and can exert pressure.

Some guidelines for determining whether a school has significant potential for reform efforts are:

1. Look for public schools in states where the legislature may be open to reforming the university system or be

willing to reduce funding unless schools make significant changes.

2. Examine the culture of the area surrounding public schools, looking for the greatest mismatch between the native population and the university. For instance, the highly conservative state of Idaho contrasts greatly with the very "woke" Boise State University. In such situations, it may be easier to spur public resistance.

3. Some schools have a very strong free speech tradition that can be used as a foundation for reform efforts.

4. Find schools with some conservative inclinations, such as Washington and Lee (private) or Texas A&M (public), or those schools that, while liberal, still maintain serious religious traditions, such as Davidson College.

5. Consider organizing at the state system level rather than at individual public institutions. System trustees do not necessarily have the close ties to campus administrations and official alumni organizations that local trustees commonly have. Rather, their reasons for being a trustee may be more due to a desire to perform public service rather than misguided school loyalty. As James Koch and Richard Cebula demonstrated in their 2020 book, Runaway Costs: How College Governing Boards Fail to Protect Their Students, system boards do a superior job of holding down costs compared to campus-specific boards.[18]

6. Perhaps the most promising schools of all are those where some recent incident has provoked students or alumni into shedding their complacency.

The most crucial factor for reform, though, is the will of alumni, students, or trustees to take on the difficult job of fighting the status quo. Where that is present, there is hope.

It may be best to arrange various organizing opportunities into categories. There are two likely reasons why the time may be right for organizing:

1. A triggering event has enflamed campus passions, or

2. A longstanding situation has become exposed or is revealed as untenable.

Of course, almost all of academia needs at least some reform today.

The conditions for organizing may be of several types:

1. There is a pre-existing network of students, alumni, or activists who are already involved in reform efforts. This will make the process easier and will help provide local knowledge.

2. There may be no pre-existing framework, but recent incidents provide the catalyst for action.

3. There may be general complacency on the campus that needs to be addressed first—which can be a long, difficult task.

When activists are looking to find campuses to organize but do not initially have specific institutions in mind, there are two basic approaches:

1. One approach is to focus on people. This entails connecting to students or alumni on national social media or at conferences, in the hope that they may be interested in reforming their schools. Another way may be to take advertisements out in campus or local publications. Another still is to contact think tanks that know the higher education landscape.

2. A second—perhaps better—approach is to focus on opportunities. The activist can scan the Internet and other media for triggering events and to contact people (most likely student groups) at that specific campus. Media accounts of the incidents may mention potential allies or even be written by them. And certainly, the same processes mentioned above of contacting student and alumni groups, using social media, and taking out advertisements can be employed.

Through experience, it may be possible to formulate a "best practices" procedure to organize large numbers of campuses.

THE PROCESS

Four Easy Steps

1. **Create a network using social media and email marketing.**
2. **Build a website.**
3. **Start an email newsletter.**
4. **Incorporate as a 501(c)3.**

In the old days, organizing resistance to an institution meant holding a meeting of some type. For ordinary purposes, people would take out advertisements or post handbills on telephone poles and bulletin boards announcing a public meeting. In less than ordinary situations, such as organizing a union at a workplace opposed to such, news of secret meetings would be passed by word of mouth.

The Internet has made most such methods unnecessary. Certainly, organizers can avail themselves of the old tactics and often do. But with the Internet in operation, once a campus has been identified as having potential for reform, successful campus organizing can follow a simple process of social networking. It can begin with an individual alumnus or student, or with a group. Each participant contacts a few friends, who in turn contact other friends, and so on. Additional networks will be drawn in, exponentially expanding the network. For example, in this manner, an email list of alumni, students, and parents

concerned about aggressive politicization at Washington and Lee University rapidly expanded from nine to 9,000 in just a few months.

It may be helpful to give the group a catchy or explanatory name. For instance, at Washington and Lee, the dissident alumni named their group “The Generals Redoubt” (after generals Washington and Lee). Others include the “Princetonians for Free Speech” and the “Cornell Free Speech Alliance.”

It may be possible to access directories of alumni in some cases. However, universities guard these carefully. Furthermore, there may be privacy concerns with unofficial mass emails. Be sure to carefully review legal limitations regarding the use of official school email lists.

Next Steps

Once an initial email network has been created and named, it may be time to build something more permanent.

Creating a website as a clearinghouse for information is the next logical step. A website can store all manner of information: copies of documents and communications, first-hand accounts, strategies, financial data, and so on. The site can broadcast information to an audience beyond those who are known to the organizers and their circle of acquaintances. While producing and maintaining a website can be accomplished at a very low cost, there are a few potential problems:

- Maintaining a website and keeping it up to date can be time-consuming.
- Websites face security concerns, and there are plenty of bad actors with time on their hands to cause online mischief.
- Having a website gives the opposition a focal point to attack. Comments and message boards must be managed to prevent unwanted attention and manipulation. The same goes for the excessive zeal of supporters, who may hurt the cause by being impolitic.

Also, after a mailing list has been created, it may be useful to start an e-newsletter that is sent out at regular intervals. It can keep those on the mailing list up to date about the ongoing situation that initiated their interest, and make them aware of other new developments on their campus. It can make certain that list members are aware of the state and federal laws, events, and college bylaws that are pertinent to the situation. It can also keep list members abreast of similar situations that are happening elsewhere, as well as research that is related to events on their campus. Additionally, it keeps group members active and engaged.

Once there is sufficient membership, a governing board should be elected. Having a leadership structure helps in a variety of ways. It makes some of the most engaged members officially responsible for taking action. Additionally, having a board

provides leadership to what could otherwise amount to a mass of unorganized voices.

It may also be helpful to create a non-profit organization with 501(c)3 tax status. This will not only give the activist organization a higher profile but permit it to offer tax exemptions to donors. The subsequent fundraising will permit the non-profit to hire staff, commission research, or hold events, making it a more powerful voice for reform. And it can provide the manpower (and brainpower) for conducting investigations. Plus, it will confer the appearance (as well as the fact) of permanence.

The highest level of organizing—one that will generally require the backing of a large donor—is to have an independent academic center that gets involved with institution governance issues as a permanent watchdog. Locating it off-campus means that it is out of reach of school control. Furthermore, such centers have great potential for conducting independent research about the school (as well as about academia in general) and methods for obtaining influence.[1]

A Word of Caution About Being Too Confrontational

Enthusiasm toward reform is an important attitude for trustees to have. It is not hard to appreciate—after witnessing so many do-nothing, rubber-stamping boards—someone who is ready to hit the ground running. And there may be many times when an aggressive approach by trustees is effective. It may very well catch establishment figures off guard and enable reform-minded board members to gain the upper hand.

But activists should caution new trustees that it might not always serve their best interests to thrash about like the proverbial "bull-in-a-China-shop." There may be situations in which more can be accomplished by serving as a consensus builder or educator. The advice is equally applicable to the activists themselves.

A tough, defiant stance may be necessary at times. But surprising advances can be made by working cooperatively with trustees or administrators. This requires knowing which officials are open to reform efforts and establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with them. Perhaps sympathetic board members can be uncovered with a survey.

Friendly trustees (or former trustees) can also help by explaining the processes by which campus decisions are actually made. Trustees and administrators have long relied on backroom discussions to arrive at agreements, and the results have been

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1. More information about such centers is available here: https://www.jamesgmartin.center/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Academic-Centers.pdf

disastrous. Exposing higher education's secretive practices can be a very powerful device in an activist's toolkit.

AREAS OF VULNERABILITY

There are three areas of vulnerability that can be used for leverage to force a higher education institution or system to change.

Levers For Reform

1. **Money.**
2. **Lawsuits.**
3. **Publicity.**

Finances

The first of these levers is obvious: money. One way to influence the bottom line, for public schools, is state appropriations. Another, in theory at least, is that a state should be able to exert influence by giving or denying public universities permission to raise tuition. However, federal and state financial aid and loans have distorted the market so that tuition may be an insufficient means to influence higher education policy.

Another way to exert financial influence is to urge alumni and others to withhold donations. However, attempts to broadly affect donations by encouraging small and mid-sized donors to withhold have, for the most part, proven ineffective. At many schools, such donors no longer contribute that much. Only at prestigious private schools is there broad-based giving by alumni that makes a significant difference.

Furthermore, college and university administrators have overwhelming advantages in the control over information and undue influence over official alumni associations. Even if there is a temporary drop in giving because of an incident of outrage, schools can often wait until the anger subsides and then mount a successful fundraising campaign through its control over the alumni.

A more promising approach for activists may be to focus on a few top donors—the kind of person "who the school president has on speed dial," as one observer described them. Fundraising often comes down to a few extremely wealthy patrons who have a wide range of reasons for giving. Activists may be able to create a direct route to the president's office if a single important donor can be convinced to support reform efforts. In such cases, money doesn't just talk—it sings.

Lawsuits

Legal action is a powerful lever for initiating change. It has been the main tool for protecting academic freedom in academia. But for the most part, it has been underutilized: it is not always easy to find plaintiffs with strong cases willing to put themselves at risk. Lawyers are expensive, and matching plaintiffs with lawyers who will take their cases pro bono can be a challenge. Major universities often can hire

an army of lawyers to defend them, with an entire administration potentially serving as research staff.

Furthermore, common sense doesn't always line up with legal precedent. For instance, the current "diversity, equity, and inclusion" movement—which is creating political litmus tests for faculty, students, and staff at many schools, including public ones that must be held to a high standard of intellectual freedom—is difficult to confront in a courtroom, because the meanings intended by DEI language are different than those in standard English. College officials can claim one meaning when they are clearly using the other.

Because of such problems, selecting test cases with a high likelihood of success becomes paramount; plaintiffs often win when they have strong cases against universities. Major organizations that provide such services to conservative or religious plaintiffs are The Center for Individual Rights, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), and Alliance Defending Freedom.

One promising factor: just the threat of a lawsuit is one way to bring a university to the negotiating table. And a big part of that equation is fear of the adverse publicity that may result from airing public laundry during legal proceedings.

Adverse Publicity

One of the most potent weapons in an activist's toolkit is universities' fear of damage to "the brand" through adverse publicity. This fear is possessed not just by the administration, but by board members as well since it has the potential to hurt the bottom line through loss of enrollment or diminished donations.

College administrators often behave as if their institution is like Las Vegas: what happens on campus stays on campus. Outrages such as professors using their classrooms as personal soapboxes for political indoctrination are sometimes known to the entire school but don't always become known beyond the campus walls to the general public. In such cases, reformers merely have to find some outlet to make the problem known outside the college community.

At other times, activists have to break through the secrecy and "asymmetry of information" problem to uncover troubling occurrences or policies. The asymmetry problem arises from the fact that trustees are usually not higher education professionals and have a limited amount of time to learn about campus issues and practices, whereas administrators are intimately acquainted with everything that happens both on their campus specifically and in academia generally. Trustees are therefore forced to rely on the information given to them by administrators who have obvious incentives to present only the pieces of the puzzle that give them an advantage in decision-making.

Having allies in positions to inform the activist about campus events is paramount

to being able to expose poor campus practices.

One advantage for activists when there is a controversy adversely affecting the school's image is that the administration has to fight on two fronts, whereas the activist only has to fight on one. The administration has to address not only the underlying issue but the damage done to the school's reputation as well, whereas the activist can keep using the negative publicity to gain the higher ground over the underlying issue. One frustrating problem with this strategy is that too often trustees feel it is their role to quell the publicity rather than solve the real problem.

WHAT CAN ACTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS DO?

Once a network of like-minded individuals has been created, it is time for action. If the impetus for reform is a single incident of outrage, obviously that is where activists' energy will be devoted. But action can also be taken in a general sense. And even if the controversy is quickly resolved, activists need to keep applying pressure.

Unclogging the Information Pipeline

One of the most important things activists can do is try to disrupt the asymmetry of information problem. Initial and subsequent training for trustees provided by university administrations is intended to keep them in their "lane," to not let them realize the full range of their powers and responsibilities.

Rather than allowing trustees to be shielded from important knowledge, activists can provide it to them, using email, snail-mail, social media, and personal contact when possible.

As a result, trustees fail to use powerful tools available to them, such as their right to review new faculty hires and their academic freedom right to speak out on matters of public concern.

It is, therefore, necessary to actively fight against this asymmetry of information problem. Rather than allowing trustees to be shielded from important knowledge, activists can provide it to them, using email, snail-mail, social media, and personal contact when possible.

- Activists should give trustees—and others campus stakeholders—alternative views about a wide range of issues culled from a wide variety of sources. Trustees should know about their own campus's events and occurrences; otherwise, they are likely to adopt the administrative position. They should also be knowledgeable of the national dialogue on higher education about

policies that are being implemented or discussed elsewhere.

- Another task activists can do is to pore over an institution's by-laws, founding documents, governing statutes, and handbooks to catalog the real information regarding trustees' roles. This means finding regulations that should be changed or removed or needed regulations that should be added. The findings could perhaps be organized into a guidebook for trustees since many trustees are unaware of the full extent of their authority.

  One example of how this having knowledge of the full range of power occurred recently at Washington and Lee University, where an energetic alumni group called "The Generals Redoubt" informs the trustees. Washington and Lee has a very strong "Greek Life" tradition that is unpopular with faculty. In the Coronavirus epidemic year of 2021, the faculty was instrumental in having rush week for fraternities and sororities postponed until spring break—when most students were not on campus. The board stepped in and changed the bylaws so that faculty no longer had a role in fraternity and sorority governance. According to one observer, no trustees could ever remember changing a bylaw before.

- Another body of information that trustees and concerned stakeholders should know—but seem oblivious to—is the actual education that occurs on campus and who is providing it. Trustees often lack the background, the awareness, and the time to discover the real story about what is actually going on in the classrooms at their institution. Or they falsely assume not much has changed since they were students. Uncovering improper classroom practices can mean such activities as combing through course syllabi to demonstrate just what material is being taught. It can also mean checking prospective faculty members' syllabi to show just how unhinged they are. The latter is best done before they are hired since academic freedom protections are a condition of employment and do not begin until faculty are actually employed.

- Another aspect of the asymmetry of information problem is the way trustees are directed by administrators to seek guidance from establishment organizations such as the Association of Governing Boards and the American Council on Education. These non-profit organizations tend to be strong supporters of the existing system of "shared governance" that takes power from the trustees and gives it to the administration and faculty.

Activists can make sure trustees are also aware of alternate sources of information such as the Martin Center, the National Association of Scholars, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and the Alumni Free Speech Association. They can inform trustees about alternative sources of information on governance, such as the Martin Center's "Bolstering the Board: Trustees Are Academia's Best Hope for Reform," economist James Koch's and Richard Cebula's book *Runaway Costs: How College Governing Boards Fail to Protect Their Students*, and a new website that aggregates information focused on academic boards, *Paideia Times*.

Gathering Information

Information for influencing higher education policy can come from many sources, too many to list here. Some of the more important are:

- University board and legislative higher education committee meetings
- Official college notifications, press releases, and reports
- Alumni or activist networks
- Student newspapers
- Alumni, student, and activist blogs
- Major media outlets
- Internet media

Tools for Publicity

"Knowledge is power," and "the best disinfectant is sunlight." Such old saws are very applicable to higher education reform. University administrations and faculty departments often like to keep their real actions out of the limelight and feed a compliant media lots of feel-good stories to take attention away from their real goals. One of the activist's most powerful weapons is the ability to get the real story and make it widely known, particularly to trustees and legislators, but also to the general public and the broader university community.

Activists have a fair number of tools in their toolkits for publicizing adverse situations on campus.

- **Media Outlets.** The first tactic that springs to mind is getting your view into media outlets, including newspaper op-eds, student publications, and popular websites. Either a reporter covering the event or an activist writing an op-ed will work, but perhaps the very best type of article is the first-person narrative written by those negatively impacted by the actions of the school. Today, Internet video or audio podcasts serve the same function as written articles. And one of the most effective—and entertaining—methods for gaining attention is to produce an on-campus video to expose beliefs and attitudes by interviewing campus members.

- **Petitions.** Petitions accomplish a whole bunch of things. First, they force the activist to clearly articulate and hone his or her critique, objection, or proposal. They also are a way to engage lots of new people who may not be aware of the problems or are unaware that there is organized opposition to the school's direction. And, with enough names—and especially if some are those of large donors or prominent alumni—a petition can compel action by trustees, legislators, or school officials.

- **Letter-writing Campaigns.** Letter-writing campaigns are more personal than petitions, although the number of participants is likely to be much lower, since writing a letter is a much greater investment in time and thought than merely signing one's name. Activists can write form letters or sample letters, but personally written letters have a much greater emotional impact than having participants sign their names to a form letter and mail them in individually. Furthermore, individually written letters may force their targets to read many letters rather than one form letter—thereby having greater impact.

- **Surveys.** Another means by which an activist can bring attention to a campus issue is by conducting a survey about a campus issue. Polling members of the campus community—trustees, alumni, donors, and students—can demonstrate that a consensus against the policies or actions of the school exists. Otherwise, those with the power to affect policies may assume that the policy proposed by the school is overwhelmingly popular.

  An example of how one activist group used a survey to put pressure on a college administration occurred recently at Davidson College. A group of dissident alumni, who call themselves Davidsonians for Freedom of Thought and Discourse, commissioned the national American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) and The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) to conduct surveys about the "campus climate" among both donors and students. These surveys revealed great dissatisfaction about the direction the school has been heading and will likely force trustees to include an alumnus—possibly a member of their group—on a search committee for a new school president.

- **Research Reports.** Along with surveys, activists can produce various other forms of research that will highlight campus problems. They can count voter registrations to show ideological imbalance of faculty or staff or conduct reviews of reading assignments on course syllabi to

show the degree of radicalization in an academic unit. They can examine budgets and records that reveal administrators' lack of concern for keeping costs low, such as faculty workloads, classroom utilization, and per-student expenditures. Another area that is ripe for research is student outcomes, such as returns on investment, graduation and retention rates, graduate exam test scores, and professional certifications.

- **Public Records Requests.** A valuable tool at public universities is the "public records request." Public schools are required to provide a wide array of information on demand, including course syllabi, faculty and staff salaries, admissions information, and budgetary items. The results of such requests can be the basis for some of the above research. There may be all manner of improprieties going on at specific campuses that can be exposed merely for the asking.

  Sometimes administrators refuse legal requests; if so, it may take a lawsuit, or the threat of one, to force their hand. However, the lawsuit itself can be used to demonstrate the administration's lack of good faith.

One consideration is that, when picking an issue to address, the school's vulnerability should be considered. There may be greater injustices on campus, but finding an issue that can be won may be a more important goal. With incremental victories, it may be possible to quietly build an effective framework for overall reform.

And the activist should always be prepared to capitalize on opportunities that appear after creating the initial exchange of opinions. According to radical community organizer Saul Alinsky, "the real action is in the enemy's reaction."[19]

Legislative Pressure

A relationship with key legislators is essential for activists wishing to influence public universities. Legislators are the ultimate authority in public higher education; they control the budgets, directly make laws about higher education, and appoint trustees.

Most legislators shy away from reforming their state's higher education system, for a great many reasons. But that does not mean activists cannot tell legislators their concerns about the direction of the universities and inform them of problems; citizens have a right to communicate with their representatives. With new information, some legislators may start to see the light or lend a sympathetic ear. And best of all, one or two legislators may be willing to champion new reforms and turn them into law or budgetary items.

ALLIES

One of the academic left's most effective weapons is making objectors to the "woke" agenda feel isolated and helpless. But dissidents who attempt to push back may find a surprising number of allies ready to join them. Indeed, part of the act of organizing is creating networks with other organizations.

Students

In higher education, the most apparent factions with which to join forces are official student groups, such as the College Republicans or Young Americans for Liberty. Having students on campus to serve as the eyes and ears of the reform movement is invaluable. And, if they have enough members, administrations cannot just ignore student groups.

However, relying on student groups presents several problems. For one, students are only at the school temporarily. They become alumni, but they may not remain closely involved with the school after graduation. Additionally, students tend to be focused on life after college. They worry about being too outspoken, lest it hurt their grades or opportunities for employment. And they may join political clubs, but often only as a way to make connections for future employment in politics or government.

Trustees and/or Legislators

Activists may know, or get to know, individual trustees or legislators with whom they can ally. Most members of those groups will shy away from anything too controversial, however. On the other hand, there are no better allies than those in a position to advance the cause. And there are at least a few officials in positions of power who sincerely want to make a difference for the better.

Think tanks

There are quite a few so-called "think tanks" that specialize in academia or have a higher education expert or two on staff. They can be valuable allies in quite a few ways; part of their mission is to partner with activists to advance reform efforts. They can serve as advisors; they know the ways of academia and may have previously been involved in the very same situation activists now find themselves. They may also provide all kinds of information, know who to contact in the media to publicize a controversy, or help to conduct intensive research.

Major think tanks dedicated to higher education reform are the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, the National Association of Scholars, and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. Another "do-tank" that has opened up recently is "Alumni and Donors Unite." Major national think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Cato Institute have higher education experts on staff. On a local level, there is at least one think-or do-tank in

every state that deals with state politics, and they may be able to help. (These state groups belong to an umbrella organization called the State Policy Network.)

The "woke" revolution is starting to hit home with many people who have served their alma maters faithfully over the years and now no longer recognize the school they loved.

Bloggers and Tweeters

There may be bloggers willing to promote the activist's cause and publicize an incident of outrage. The world of journalism is not the controlled world it used to be. More real news is produced online today than in print. A single tweet by an anonymous person can reach millions, and information today often bubbles up from the bottom instead of being delivered from on high (the major media outlets).

Best of all may be alumni or students with blogs who are intimately acquainted with the campus and is willing to use their own time, resources, and connections to uncover facts the administration would rather remain buried.

Other school activist groups

There has been an explosion of dissident alumni groups in the last few years. The "woke" revolution is starting to hit home with many people who have served their alma maters faithfully over the years and now no longer recognize the school they loved. And some of these groups are looking beyond the confines of their own campuses and forming larger groups. The Alumni Free Speech Alliance (AFSA) was formed in October of 2021 with five member groups—Princeton University, Davidson College, Washington and Lee University, Cornell University, and the University of Virginia. (It currently has a dozen members and is rapidly growing).

There is strength in numbers, and groups such as AFSA can help individual campus groups in many ways. For one, they can be clearinghouses of knowledge, both about the ways universities are degrading themselves and about the best methods with which to combat that degradation.

Faculty

Conservative faculty members exist, although in small numbers. A few outspoken ones may be willing to lend a hand to activists who are trying to restore sanity to their campuses. Or they may be scared that, if somebody doesn't put a stop to the madness, their jobs may be on the line. They can be very valuable allies; they are privy to events and opinions that those outside the faculty lounge may not know.

And it's not just conservative faculty who are feeling the heat from wokeness. Ordinary liberal professors are discovering

that one can never be extreme enough to satisfy today's radicals.[20]

A FEW WORDS ABOUT CONFLICT AND NEGOTIATION

Conflict is a necessary part of activism. It is also the reason activism is necessary. University reform is a competition between two interests. On one side, there are the administrators and faculty members who are responsible for the current state of higher education and who have powerful incentives to maintain the status quo. On the other, there are reformers who want a significant change in direction. The opposition—entrenched university administrators and bureaucracy—is likely to be seeking victory by any means possible. Therefore, one should not assume the best outcome is the inevitable result. Good outcomes must be fought for.

Too often, conservatives shy away from conflict, and once it appears, prefer to negotiate and compromise rather than assert themselves and exercise their power meaningfully. These are failing tactics against an opposition that has no such constraints; the left gained control over public institutions by understanding power dynamics and using them to their advantage at every turn.

If you wish to have an effect on a seemingly invincible university administration, you must remember that winning means creating conflict and persistently pursuing your agenda.

Also, remember that it is almost always the instigator who wins in a compromise. A compromise to decide how much of your pie the opposition gets to eat always means you get to eat less; the reverse is true if you are arguing over their pie instead of yours. So, while at first, you may organize defensively to prevent a disastrous policy change or the removal of a beloved statue, the key is—once the initial issue has been resolved, or even before—to quickly find other issues for which you will be on offense.

Most university administrators are not used to persistent adversaries coming from the political right (or even from moderates). If they are radical themselves, they live in an echo chamber. If they are careerists, they assume that the smart money is to always appease campus radicals, whether students or faculty. At least, that was assumed to be the lesson learned when economist Larry Summers was chased out of the Harvard University presidency after he offended some radical feminists.[21]

But that lesson no longer holds all the time, especially at public institutions in red or purple states where the people still have some influence.

It's important to identify the approach used by administrators and adopt the correct response. For instance, an administrator may disingenuously reframe an issue to his advantage or falsely claim to the public that

both sides are in agreement (with the administrative view).

In such cases, it is up to activists to not let administrators wiggle out of answering important questions directly and honestly, and always bring the discussion back to the issue at hand, calmly and professionally. And, if possible, with those issues framed to his or her advantage. Given the situation in today's academia, once the dialogue becomes an exchange of ideas, the non-leftist view is likely to win. In most issues of university policy, reformers have the facts and moral authority behind them.

One of a university administration's most powerful weapons is its disdain for critics. In many situations, the administration can easily ignore it or deflect any criticism directed at it with help from the mainstream media, university legal counsel, and an army of advisors. But once the actual discussion begins, very often all the modern left has is the ability to call names. Do not be goaded by such name-calling into emotional responses. But do not be afraid to show resolve or passion, when necessary. Keep pressing the issue and force a response that is not simply an evasive tactic.

Boards and legislative bodies should be the preferred target for most campaigns for change. They are not only the official final authorities, but they are more likely to offer a sympathetic ear to non-establishment activists than administrators. Furthermore, they are unfamiliar with many issues and perspectives concerning academia and need to hear more than the one-sided official view.

A common problem for alumni activists is that they may be unfamiliar with the academic landscape. As a result, they may lack confidence or misunderstand the type of opposition they are faced with. They may naively assume that the school administration is honestly interested in working together to bring about some sort of resolution. Trust, but verify. In many cases, administrators are only interested in working together to get what they want while using unwitting conservatives to provide political cover.

Activists must work to overcome such vulnerabilities. They must learn all they can and realize that there is a moral force behind their cause.[22] Don't be afraid of conflict; a firm stance—sometimes even a bit of audacity—will work to the activist's advantage. Confidence will help to attract support and grow the reform movement.[23] One way to overcome a lack of confidence is to address low-hanging fruit initially to build momentum.

There may be times when the administration's superior knowledge of academia and of campus details will deflate the activist's argument. At such times, the activist should acknowledge that the administrator may have a case and commit to looking into it. This will give him or her a chance to find a counter-argument to the administration's claims without appearing too confrontational.

Personal relationships matter; activists must be aware that they are dealing with individuals. As Alinsky suggests, each person you deal with has a "different hierarchy of values."[24] In academia, administrators' main motivations are likely to be either careerist self-interest or ideological. Trustees and legislators have their own motivations which must be taken into account. Realizing which type of person you are dealing with should color your strategy.

One word of encouragement from Alinsky: "Power is not only what you have but what your enemy thinks you have."[25] Just a few alumni, activists, or trustees who are committed to change can make a difference. If they can find a way to publicly voice common sense opinions, both adversaries and potential allies will react. The minute an organization is founded, it can begin to exert pressure on the system, and demonstrating a willingness to take on important issues at such a crucial time as now will bring others into its ranks.

FINAL WORD

Higher education is entering disturbing territory. It cast off faith and tradition as standards back in the late 19th century, and now it is doing the same to their rational and empirical replacements. And even more troubling, it is replacing all of them with a new faith—one of leveling and political expediency. Add to that its tendencies toward self-preservation and aggrandizement—meaning an incessant demand for more revenues—and it is clearly an institution that has lost its way. Without reform, our nation will have handed its intellectual life and the training of the young to irrational, vengeful radicals—some of whom actually wish to erase our civilization—and politically expedient bureaucrats.

There is little chance of self-correction from within the walls of the Ivory Tower; the impetus for reform must come from outside.

There is little chance of self-correction from within the walls of the Ivory Tower; the impetus for reform must come from outside. Any committed individual can help push back against the degradation, but the groups with the best chance of developing a successful resistance movement are the alumni and trustees.

This manual is intended to help those who wish to enter the fray by giving them some idea of what they're up against and how to get started. It must be remembered that, although some of the advice given is very specific, all situations are particular and there is no precise formula for successful reform.

Not only is the need for reform imperative, it is good. No less than civilization hangs in the balance: our cultural inheritance must

be defended by addressing one bylaw, one appropriation, one syllabus, and one trustee's understanding at a time. And the opposition is not invincible, although it may seem that way at first. Hopefully, there will be some who take their inspiration from this manual.

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The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

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