American Higher 2025

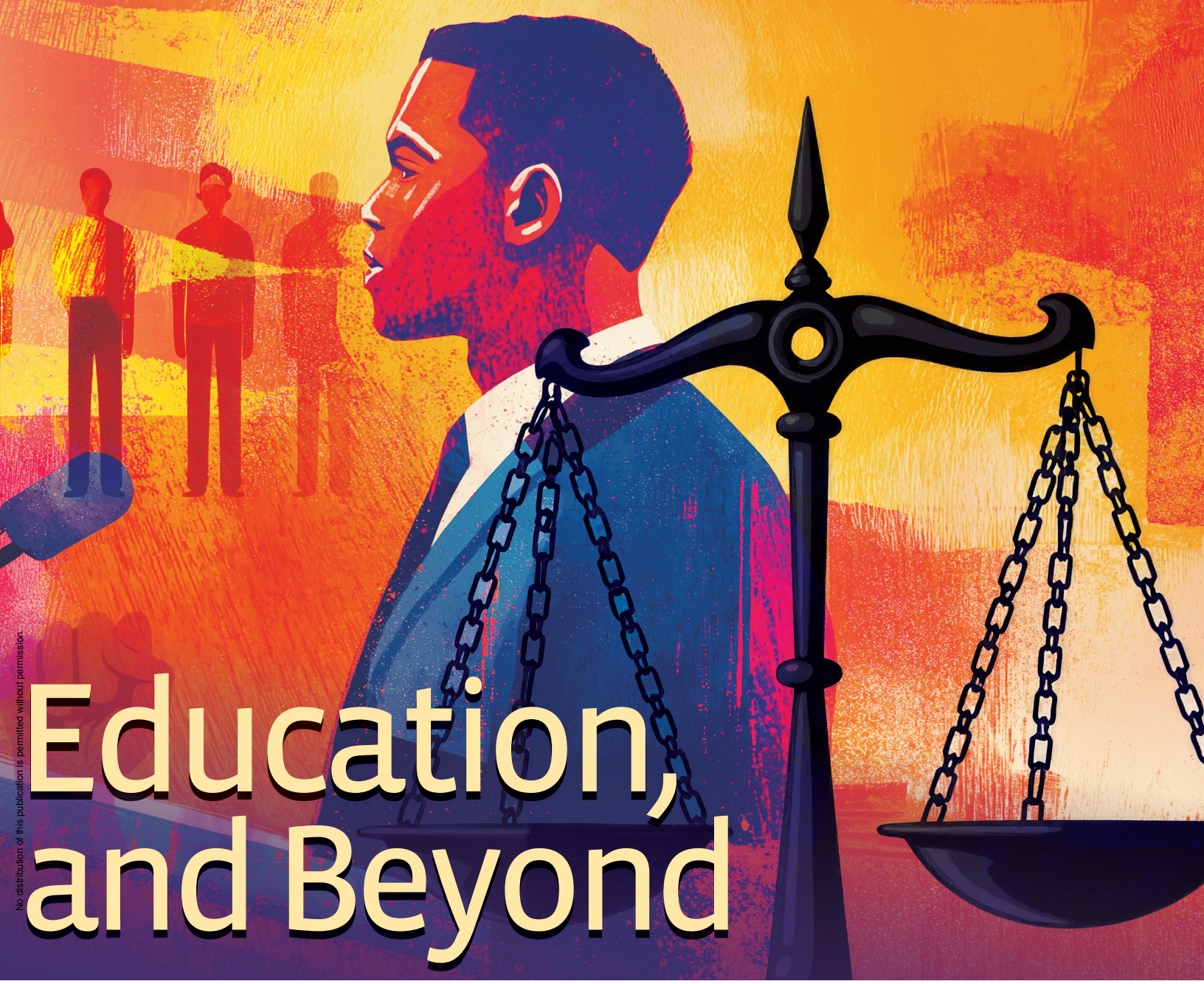
Toward a More Perfect Silence or a More Perfect Union?

BY JOHN SILVANUS WILSON JR.

IN LATE 2016, while presiding at Morehouse College, I was one of more than 200 presidents who signed a letter addressed to President-elect Trump.[1] The sociopolitical climate was explosive, and we expressed concern that many people on and around our campuses felt vulnerable to the expected increases in "harassment, hate and acts of violence." We were worried that his words and communication style were setting a virulent tone.

Our gesture was neither confrontational nor atypical. We simply invited the incoming president to prioritize and affirm "the core values of our democratic nation: human decency, equal rights, freedom of expression, and freedom from discrimination." We signed the letter believing that our campuses and our nation shared those ideals, even if we sometimes evinced an uncertain institutional commitment to epitomizing them.

> **But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.**
>
> **James Baldwin**
> *The Fire Next Time*
> (1963)



Education, and Beyond

More personally, I signed with a firm belief in the equality imperative that gives the Declaration of Independence its north star power. Our founding documents collectively commission us all to complete the process of becoming a pluralistic democracy, the sole contextual requirement for perfecting the union of humankind. I signed because our progress remains slow, our work remains vast, and our college campuses remain both obligated and able to do much more to help realize the loftiest of America's proclaimed aspirations.

In the nine years since we sent that invitation, higher education has experienced significant climate change. Several developments have made it unlikely that campus leaders will repeat such outspokenness.[2] The steady rise in political polarization has seemed to loosen America's collective embrace of democratic norms and values.[3] Only inattentive campus leaders can have overlooked the clearly negative views—symptomatic of a deepening, general mistrust of American institutions—that many policymakers and the public now have of higher education.[4]

As the volatility has intensified, numerous state officials have taken aim and sought to reconstruct their public campuses. Between January 2021 and the end of September 2024, nearly half the states enacted educational gag orders and made a variety of other moves designed to constrain and control campus life.[5] Driven more by political than educational motives, state officials have made efforts to restrict speech, shrink or terminate tenure, and shut down offices designed to ensure that campuses become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Given the controversy-laden news cycles, few who work in higher ed seemed shocked when a June 2024 Gallup poll revealed that 68 percent of adults think higher education is headed in the wrong direction.[6] And of the 32 percent who had little or no confidence in higher education, 41 percent pointed to the perceived prevalence of campus-based political agendas, presumably carried out by various administrators and faculty members.

TAKEAWAYS

- Given the polycrisis facing us nationally and globally, many campuses, seeking immunization from controversy, have eagerly treated their new or strengthened institutional neutrality policies like a vaccine. But the worst thing presidents and boards can do, in their push to be perceived as wearing the noble garb of bystandership, is to assume outcome-agnostic mindsets concerning the fate of America and the world.
- The 1967 Kalven Principles have had a well-deserved, enduring influence on American higher education; however, John Hope Franklin—the preeminent historian and the last surviving member of the original Kalven committee—once offered a clear and timeless example of how the world's strife can trigger the Kalven committee's exception clause, which must then compel institutions to shift from silence to voice.
- Looking back, the norm in American higher education has been institutional silence in the face of human devastation. Yet, only two kinds of campuses in American history—the three abolitionist colleges and the Historically Black Colleges and Universities—succeeded in proudly operating as examples of how to counterbalance the normalized ethical failures of other campuses.
- What preceded affirmative action in higher education was not meritocratic race-neutral admissions, but the kind of race-conscious decision-making in college admissions that helped segregate Americans on and beyond our campuses. The effort to remedy that protracted multifaceted segregation should be called "corrective race-conscious admissions," which the U.S. Supreme Court abandoned in 2023. It is absurd to think American higher education can spend 333 years systemically using race-consciousness to exclude people (1636–1969) and then correct it all by spending a mere 54 years tactically using it to include those previously excluded (1969–2023).
- In and beyond 2025, the most important decision campus presidents and boards will make is whether and how to ensure that their institution will use their campus cultures, curricula, and communications to perfect their silence, institutionally, or perfect our union, nationally.

Yet the substantial volatility roiling higher education since 2016 was not enough to push leaders toward the kind of viral silence that began infecting campuses in the spring and summer of 2024.

Initially, it was unsurprising when, amid the thickening haze of warfare and tensions erupting in Gaza in October 2023, many higher education leaders thought it wise to generate official statements. Like our 2016 letter, that was customary. For instance, when George Floyd was murdered in 2020, numerous presidents released statements to assert or clarify an institutional posture on racial injustice.[7] And in June 2023, when the U.S. Supreme Court abandoned race-conscious decision-making in college admissions, many leaders publicly affirmed their commitment to pluralism. But unlike in those instances and myriad others before, when they released statements about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, things got complicated.

Predictably, the statements had several objectives, including to console campus subcommunities; satisfy philanthropic allies; and clarify institutional ideals, goals, and policies. Although the net effect of those statements varied, few elevated their concerned stakeholders toward detectable campus harmony and understanding. Instead, the discord often worsened, typically with presidents in reactive, rather than proactive postures.

But as uncertain as the general higher education climate was steadily becoming, it was still striking when it all escalated in 2024 and led to the high-visibility presidential departures of Elizabeth Magill from the University of Pennsylvania, Claudine Gay from Harvard University, and later, Minouche Shafik from Columbia University.

One could conclude that Gay, Magill, and Shafik lost their presidencies because the national spotlight of congressional hearings exposed their perceived non-neutrality about the Middle East conflict. But that simple judgment blurs too many complexities. Whatever convergence of forces drove each departure, however, it is safe to conclude that the American college presidency experienced a chill, which was only expected to worsen as the country approached its most high-stakes national election ever in the fall of 2024.

So, it was somewhat foreseeable when, in preparation for the 2024–25 academic year, countless campus leaders quietly or openly moved to affirm, reaffirm, or refine a posture of institutional neutrality.[8] Free-speech and academic-freedom associations, among others, have tried to broaden the movement by urging more college presidents to embrace neutrality.[9] In addition, as of early 2025, each of the trend-setting campuses, known as the "Ivy-Plus colleges" (the eight Ivy League campuses, plus the University of Chicago (Chicago), Duke University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Stanford University), had either adopted, or been pressured by stakeholders to adopt, some version of the Kalven Principles. Many leaders believe that by perfecting their silence, they can bolster their presidency, while blunting or avoiding campus controversy and unrest.

Yet, this is nothing new. Since a primary benefit of neutrality is perceived innocence, there are clear indications that its roots in higher education run deeper than most stakeholders realize. In their attempts to truly understand those roots, many observers tend to view the past from short range, as if from a balcony. But the gaze back from a higher perch, call it "a mountaintop," is more illuminating. And it reveals the sheer folly, or perhaps the heresy, of a conscience-free curation of institutional neutrality, innocence, and silence in the face of today's starkest inhumanities.

Combined, both vantage points—the balcony and the mountaintop—can provide current and future campus leaders and board members with navigational lessons for how best to consider institutional silence versus institutional voice.

STOCK.ADOBE.COM / JUSTLIGHT

Ultimately, by centralizing and valorizing academic freedom, the Kalven Committee insisted that, even as institutions struggle, they must maintain a silent detachment regarding how the world's great controversies are debated on campuses.

From the Balcony:
The 1967 Kalven Report

The way many campus leaders today view institutional neutrality can be traced to a report published decades ago: the University of Chicago's 1967 *Kalven Report*—named for Harry Kalven, the law professor who chaired the effort.[10] Kalven and six other faculty members were charged by Chicago's president, George W. Beadle, to prepare "a statement on the University's role in political and social action" amid widespread student protests and nationwide angst over the Vietnam War.

At its best, the report underscores an inarguable truth: "A university has a great and unique role to play in fostering the development of social and political values in a society." It also acknowledges that, "by design and effect," when a good university "creates discontent with the existing arrangements and proposes new ones . . . it will be upsetting." By pointing to the nature of higher education as an arena for the often very difficult process of sifting and winnowing old and new meaning, the Kalven Committee recognized that disagreement, controversy, and debate are not unusual. Educational environments, while communities of care and growth, can generate both the light of truth and the heat of conflict.

Ultimately, by centralizing and valorizing academic freedom, the Kalven Committee insisted that, even as institutions struggle, they must maintain a silent detachment regarding how the world's great controversies are debated on campuses. The report specifically concludes that any public statements should be left to faculty members and other individuals at the institution with interests or expertise, that "the university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic." As if to emphasize the point, it elaborates, a university community "cannot take collective action on the issues of the day without endangering the conditions for its existence and effectiveness."

But the Kalven Committee members also left an empty chair where anomalous circumstances might sit and warrant institutional adjustment. They set a different tone toward the end of their report by acknowledging, "From time to time, instances will arise in which the society, or segments of it, threaten the very mission of the university and its values of free inquiry. In such a crisis, it becomes the obligation of the university as an institution to oppose such measures and actively to defend its interests and its values."

Unfortunately, the committee's brief report offers no meaningful guidance about what "matters of large principal" should compel an institution to surrender its neutrality and instead raise its institutional voice. It generally leaves that up to individual university leaders and boards. In fact, the only specific guidance on that issue came from a lone member of the original Kalven Committee roughly 40 years after the report was issued in 1967.

In early 2007, the University of Chicago campus community was embroiled in a bitter debate about whether its leaders should divest its endowment holdings in Darfur, a region of western Sudan. Many insisted that the logic behind divestment seemed straightforward. More than 400,000 people had been slaughtered in what the United Nations, Congress, and many leaders and observers worldwide convincingly referred to as a clear case of

genocide. And because the activists cared very deeply about the sound of their institution's moral voice, the harmony of the endowment's moral voice mattered.

Many other campuses were having the same intense divestment debates, but the situation in Chicago was especially important as, by then, the terms of those debates were largely drawn from the oft-quoted *Kalven Report*. Thus, Chicago's conclusion about the matter was symbolically important. The debates generally boiled down to determining which acts or events should be viewed as stark enough to trigger the report's exception clause. Were Chicago's ties to Sudan among the "paramount social values" the report cited but didn't define? Was their endowment's connection to genocide compelling enough to exchange its habitual silent neutrality in favor of actions and statements? The activists believed ending Chicago's neutrality would neither become a slippery slope provoking more institutional statements nor chill the academic freedom of those who might disagree. It was a clear tipping point.

"I am of the opinion that the desperate situation in Darfur is so tragic that it qualifies as the exceptional instance where I have no difficulty in concluding that divestment is consistent with the core values of our report and the mission of the University."

—John Hope Franklin

Yet, since Chicago's leadership had seemed so inflexible, the activists sought advice. Back in 1967, the chair of the university's history department, John Hope Franklin, was the only African American member to serve on the original Kalven Committee, and by 2007, also the only committee member still alive. Franklin had left Chicago in 1982 and was living in North Carolina, having retired as a faculty member at Duke University in 1992.

Given the stakes, the aid of Franklin seemed ideal: an esteemed coauthor of a seminal report reappears to provide clear and compelling guidance on how best to decipher its most important, yet ambiguous sequence. What could be better than a clarifying interpretation of original intent from one of the document's key framers? It represented a very rare circumstance where campus judiciaries could benefit from an authoritative and, presumably, debate-settling voice.

And when called, Franklin chose to remain neither neutral nor silent. He agreed that the genocide in Darfur indeed represented what the report called "an extraordinary instance," and "a matter of large principle." He released a statement saying, in part, "I am of the opinion that the desperate situation in Darfur is so tragic that it qualifies as the exceptional instance where I have no difficulty in concluding that divestment is consistent with the core values of our report and the mission of the University."[11]

The net result? Sixty-one institutions of higher education divested in Sudan because of the Darfur atrocity, including many peers of the University of Chicago, such as Columbia, MIT, Yale, Harvard, and Stanford.[12] Yet, even with the venerable John Hope Franklin providing a precise elucidation of the Kalven Committee's motivating purposes, the Chicago board of trustees defiantly rejected the poignant clamor for divestment. Despite striking many people as insufficiently moved by the inhumanity in Darfur, it chose to deepen the university's institutional neutrality and silence.

In general, what happened at the University of Chicago mirrored the dramatic tensions that have regularly occurred in higher education. Demonstrations against the Vietnam war erupted on more than 1,300 campuses in the 1960s; at least 500 college and high school campuses protested the genocide in Darfur in the early 2000s, and 100 campuses have had to grapple with sizable pro-Palestinian protests in the past year.[13] And in none of those cases did the distance matter. For instance, Chicago's President Beadle felt compelled in 1967 to seek faculty counsel about the impact of atrocities more than 8,300 miles away in Vietnam. Forty years later, the campus was similarly embroiled in an intense debate about an off-campus horror happening nearly 7,000 miles away in Darfur. More recently, a pro-Palestine encampment was set up on the quad near Chicago's Swift Hall because many were intolerant of lives being taken almost 6,200 miles away in Gaza.[14]

Even as the violence crept closer to American shores, one theme was unmistakable: Wherever the inhumanity unfolded—Vietnam, Darfur, Gaza, or elsewhere—student and faculty protestors saw blood on their own hands. They concluded that their institution, while boastful about being a force for good in the world, was essentially endorsing, if not cosponsoring, some of the world's most negative features, as well. Most important, in no case was there meaningful evidence that any of the protestors even casually saw their institution as somehow neutral with respect to the stark and cruel instances of inhumanity.

Yet the balcony view provides only a snapshot of recent history. What might be gleaned from a longer-range view? In the face of earlier patterns of inhumanity, how did campus leadership respond? Were they, too, concerned about perfecting their institutional neutrality, innocence, and silence?

From the Mountaintop:
Perceived Neutrality Before Kalven

The mountaintop view provokes a more sobering perspective on institutional conduct. Unlike the balcony view, the observable wrongdoing is not thousands of miles away and contained; it is

TULSAHISTORY.ORG / JASON CARRISON

nearby and scaled. And the quest for neutrality, innocence, and silence developed not as much when each campus was founded, as it did over time, led by those preferring a nobler institutional legacy.

In America, the posture of early colleges and universities was determined by what preceded the emergence of higher education. In the century before Harvard was established in 1636, the European arrival had already triggered surges of warfare, disease, and famine, which reduced the Indigenous population in the Americas from roughly 60 million to six million.[15] As higher education began to take shape, European settlers pushed west, seized land, provoked tribal conflicts, and forced the Indigenous peoples into territories and onto reservations. Simultaneously, in a nearby parallel universe of human suffering, the brutal enslavement of more than 10 million African Americans was well underway—and to quash their aspirations, all educational pursuits by enslaved Americans were deemed unlawful.[16]


Ruth J. Simmons

Thus, as higher education expanded from one institution in 1636 to 381 institutions by 1860, the relatively youthful campuses were emerging in a world already largely defined and shaped by the scaled dispossession, eradication, and exploitation of othered human beings.[17] The human devastation remains as difficult to calculate as it has been to face.

That contextualizes why the earliest institutions were so xenophobic. For instance, Alexander Lucius Twilight graduated from Middlebury College in 1823, becoming the first African American to do so. Institutional neutrality did not postpone that breakthrough. Those campuses that could have enrolled Twilight and other African Americans were far from neutral on the question of race. And for most of their existence, nor have such institutions been neutral about gender, religion, sexual preference, or any of the other categories still driving the artificial hierarchization of humankind.

Based on their undiversified enrollments, culture, and curricula, nearly all of the earliest campuses essentially advanced humanity's tribalization rather than its harmonization. And that is especially surprising since most were originally designed to produce a learned ministry, equipping enrollees with a "Christian" construction of reality. That factor alone enfeebles the logic of institutional and individual indifference in the face of human suffering. In fact, one would expect the opposite—that is, the early institutions and their graduates should have coveted reputational distinction for having clear moral voices. After all, their surrounding environment was rife with conditions in need of such voices.

For centuries, because the cultivation of institutional neutrality, innocence, and silence was the norm in American higher education, the narrative histories of most campuses became an ethical blur. We knew their leaders were too reflective of the mindsets behind the scaled wrongdoing to be corrective of them. We knew they never intended to equip students with the moral clarity to rally a scaled objection to stark inhumanity. But many of the details remained unclear . . . until 2003. That is when a fresh clarification of early higher education's general posture toward wrongdoing was stimulated by remarkable developments at Brown University. What happened there was powerful enough to trigger what one might call a long-delayed, widespread embrace of "veritas."

Just as she began an 11-year term, Ruth J. Simmons faced an immediate challenge powerful enough to define her presidency, for good or ill. After examining higher education and the slave economy, Harvard Law School's Charles Ogletree included Brown University among the institutions targeted in a reparations lawsuit. At the time, Brown's past involvement with slavery was opaque to Simmons and many others in her campus community. Yet she neither ignored nor minimized the controversy, perhaps by seeing it as too sour a note upon which to launch her tenure as the first African American woman to lead an Ivy League institution. Instead, she unblinkingly faced the challenge by appointing several faculty members to serve on what became known as the Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice. Simmons charged them to both "examine the university's historical entanglement with slavery," thereafter reporting the findings "openly and truthfully," and "to organize academic events and activities that might help the nation and the Brown community think deeply, seriously, and rigorously about the questions raised by the national debate over reparations for slavery."[18]

In October 2006, Brown released an atypically candid report, *Slavery and Justice,* that revealed its extensive ties to the slave economy via the Rhode Island slave trade and demonstrated that early campus leaders were far from neutral regarding America's inhumanity.[19] It opened a new dimension of Brown's past, compelling the institution to revise its official history to honor the truth. The response also included academic initiatives, campus memorials, curricular adjustments, and stronger relationships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

But even as the report stimulated meaningful change on the Brown campus, its impact across higher education was more

consequential. Finally abandoning neutrality, silence, and innocence, scores of colleges and universities launched similar efforts to probe and disclose their past ties with human enslavement and systemic racism. Among the discoveries and confessions: multiple Harvard presidents had owned enslaved Americans, enslaved employees outnumbered students at the University of Virginia (UVA), and enslaved people were sold at auctions held outside of the president's home on Princeton's campus.[20] On countless campuses, however, curricular materials and offerings had been molded to justify and sugarcoat all of the wrongdoing. The voluminous evidence of collegiate complicity drove MIT historian Craig Steven Wilder to conclude that, "The academy never stood apart from American slavery—in fact, it stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage."[21]

UVA's response was poignant. Even before releasing an official report in 2018, its leaders began convening all Virginia institutions grappling with their past ties to human enslavement.[22] By 2015, their effort expanded into a formal consortium of National Universities Studying Slavery (USS). By late 2024, USS had become an international, multiinstitutional collaboration of 107 members sharing best practices, guiding principles, and curricular and programmatic ideas associated with long-awaited institutional truth-telling. And, like many other institutions, UVA decided to rewrite the official story it had been telling the world about its past.

Collectively, the protracted, palpable silence about such histories had helped cultivate untrue public perceptions of institutional innocence, valor, and nobility. The discordant storylines from a buried past were too inconvenient to revive or reference. Why even whisper a counternarrative centralizing the propulsive role of human enslavement, since it may one day become loud enough to contradict the prevailing virtue-laden chronologies of the academy's rise? Why destabilize the dignity of Latinized campus mottos signifying ideals like truth, light, knowledge, and wisdom? Yet, thanks to Simmons, whereas the previous historical narratives featured only a pride of trumpets, more recent campus leaders have been wisely adding a cry of violins.

What UVA historian Alan Taylor said of his institution seems generally true of many American campuses: "There is more to celebrate in what the University has become than in how it began."[23]

Renouncing Institutional Neutrality: The Abolitionist Colleges

Two noteworthy exceptions feature institutions that proudly renounced the normalized ethical failures of their counterparts. Before the 250-year slave economy was finally abolished, not all of the nearly 400 colleges dotting America's landscape were neutral about or invested in it. Some can aptly be described as anti-slavery campuses, meaning they supported the movement to end the inhumane practice, served as a stop on the underground railroad, or generally helped to stimulate a culture of resistance. Such campuses included Guilford College in North Carolina, Knox College and Wheaton College in Illinois, and Marietta College of Ohio. But while being an anti-slavery campus was progressive, only three institutions, or less than 1 percent of all antebellum campuses, matured as abolitionist colleges. There was a profound difference.

The three abolitionist colleges—Oberlin College of Ohio, Berea College of Kentucky, and New York Central College of New York—were distinctive because, in the middle of the 19th century, they explicitly conducted experiments in racial egalitarianism. As human enslavement increasingly drove the American economy, those three institutions transcended the beliefs of the anti-slavery campuses by becoming living examples of a world well beyond such barbarism.

Assumption University historian John Frederick Bell illuminates why the abolitionist campuses were well ahead of their time.[24] For instance, in 1833, Oberlin became the first campus to educate both White men and women. They extended that welcome to African Americans in 1835. By 1863, they had enrolled more African Americans than all institutions of higher education combined. Berea College essentially shared the trajectory-shifting ideals of the Radical Reconstruction era. In 1866, Berea's leaders proudly adopted an egalitarian mindset, which helps to explain why it became the first campus in the American South to enroll Black and White women and men, with Black enrollment accounting for between a half and two-thirds of the total from 1866 to 1893. New York Central's enrollment reflected egalitarian values, too, and it was America's first college to hire women and African Americans as faculty. Whenever White students departed after becoming intolerant of the egalitarian approach, all three successfully found others who were guided less by racial prejudice than by the equality imperative clearly ingrained in both the founding documents and the Bible.

In short, those institutional leaders coveted the perfect union described by America's founders. They demonstrated that colleges need not be neutral with respect to the major off-campus conflicts and controversies but can more explicitly compose and orient their campus communities and cultures to graduate pursuers of the common good. Accordingly, they fashioned their campuses to resemble the egalitarian world they wanted their graduates to help create, believing it was all pursuant to the American dream.

But those distinct efforts to make that dream come true were short-lived. New York Central lasted a mere 10 years before closing its doors in 1858. While Oberlin and Berea stayed alive, their egalitarian experiments were ended by World War I. Assessing the headwinds thwarting such equity-minded activism at and beyond both institutions, Bell saw campus communities under constant

WIKIMEDIA

pressure to conform to the prevailing Jim Crow norms. He summarized, "The principle of preservation can outweigh the preservation of principle."[25]

Renouncing Institutional Neutrality: The HBCUs

Only from the loftier mountaintop can one observe both of the most consequential decades in HBCU history. Twenty-six HBCUs were born in the 1860s, more than in any other decade. They included Howard University and Morehouse College, two exceedingly effective HBCUs as measured by the impact of their graduates. The 1860s also saw Congress pass the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, which gave African Americans and others a pathway to enjoy new freedoms, legal protections, and the coveted right to vote. Indeed, W.E.B. Du Bois would later refer to that Reconstruction Era decade as, "the finest effort to achieve democracy . . . this world has ever seen." At a time when a critical mass of HBCUs were born, the three amendments provided a firmer basis for actualizing the nation's equality imperative.

Interestingly, as the reversal of the Reconstruction gains ushered in both Jim Crow and democracy's further disrepair, HBCUs and their graduates began targeting those noxious conditions for correction. And it all culminated precisely one century after their first momentous decade. The 1940s and 1950s were seed time for eventually harvesting the generals and foot soldiers of an effort to bolster American democracy. The resulting civil-rights movement in the 1960s influenced the trajectory of American democracy almost as powerfully as their birth decade had.

This second momentous HBCU decade featured the emergence of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Du Bois, who died in 1963, just hours before King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, might have called it a second fine effort "to achieve democracy."

But like the abolitionist campuses, the HBCUs faced problems sustaining and updating their uniquely aggressive efforts to surface America's ideal character. While their movement successfully triggered the steady desegregation of campuses in the 1970s, it also diluted their captive audience of the best Black students and faculty. Enter again the ominous principle of preservation. HBCU leaders were forced to focus on institutional survival, largely because America's philanthropic community failed to provide them with the kind of transformational investments that could encourage federal and state governments to abandon their long-standing posture of neglect.

Today, unlike their abolitionist and Civil Rights Era HBCU predecessors, few institutions have the clear and confident egalitarian voices required to pursue a perfected union. Even if they did, how many would boldly, or even detectably embrace that as our shared destiny?

Destiny Matters: The Character of Our Perfected Union

In 1940, at age 72, W.E.B. Du Bois assessed his life as a Harvard-bred African American academic and activist. He had lived outside of the world that had credentialed him, because it was too distracted by his color to acknowledge his superior competence and character. Du Bois understood that his lack of neutrality and silence about that world's hypocrisy came at a price. He was willing to pay it, because he knew his conscience would exact a higher price if he failed to speak truth to power.

Nonetheless, at the dawn of his eighth decade, a torn Du Bois grappled with his own mindset and saw signs of a fundamental flaw. In *Dusk of Dawn*, he critiqued the nature and meaning of his lifelong quest for inclusion, and he wrote, "It was as though moving on a rushing express, my main thought was as to my relations with the other passengers on that express, and not to its rate of speed or its destination."

Du Bois' insight about the lunacy of finding a great seat on a doomed train is not unlike Franklin's timely advisory in 2007. Indeed, outcomes matter. Yet the DuBoisian analogy is weightier and more nuanced. It is also instructive in the context of the recent push for institutional neutrality.

As written, Du Bois' "rushing express" referred to the flow of the Western world, led by America. But imagine the train as higher education on a commissioned journey to actualize a pluralistic democracy. What rate of speed has prevailed, to what degree has it been pointed toward democracy, and how might that inform today's debate about neutrality-based institutional silence?

First, even if the sluggish rate of speed has been inexcusable, it is also somewhat logical. The early institutions were nurtured in a toxic womb—that is, they emerged and matured in a world largely shaped by white supremacist views. That explains their original devotion to racialized belonging and celebratory campus histories that were often as distorted and stunted as the values they concealed.

But what of the speed and outcomes since?

After taking nearly two centuries to graduate the first African American, another 146 years passed before higher education finally began taking desegregation seriously. The practice of corrective race-conscious admissions first surged in 1969 and into the 1970s, when a significant number of traditionally segregated colleges and universities began enrolling critical masses of African Americans and other minoritized people, including women. The corrective practice was then ended on June 29, 2023, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against its continued use.

In hindsight, it was a breathtakingly brief experiment in aggressively enrolling those categories of citizens largely denied admission for the majority of higher education's existence. But leave aside the absurdity of thinking colleges can spend 333 years

systemically using race-consciousness to exclude people (1636–1969) and then correct it all by spending a mere 54 years tactically using it to include those previously excluded (1969–2023). Ignore, also, the recent work to optimize the newly diversified campuses. To wit, just since 2007 has a critical mass of campuses begun to enhance educational experiences by formally addressing inequity and exclusion.[26] Similarly, scaled initiatives to address the lack of belonging only began in 2020. The failure to regard all those efforts as fundamentally remedial is indicative of a larger mindset problem.[27]


Justice Sonia Sotomayor


Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson

The proverbial saying, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," is a polite tagline for the mindset that has traditionally resisted such efforts, thereby impeding those seeking to democratize and humanize higher education. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that mindset drove how race neutrality functioned in the articulation of the Supreme Court's 2023 majority opinion. With ahistorical gall, Justice Clarence Thomas used "race neutral" as a label for the pre-1969 higher education world, as if systemic fairness had been the longstanding norm that was then shattered by the unwarranted hammer of race-conscious admissions.[28]

The gross distortion was not overlooked. Justice Sonia Sotomayor cautioned, "Race neutrality will entrench racial segregation in higher education because racial inequality will persist so long as it is ignored." Her warning grew out of a concern she and fellow Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson shared about how race neutrality, real or perceived, can effectively harden a problematic status quo and painfully decelerate the rate of progress.[29]

But the Kalven Committee's guidance is for college presidents, not Supreme Court justices. Especially in the context of today's polycrisis, expecting presidents to take formal institutional positions or release official statements regarding a random mix of humanity's social and political conflicts would leave them little time to do anything else. Moreover, such statements, while chilling academic freedom, would inevitably generate more heat than light. That means, as a general practice, taking institutional positions on a variety of world affairs is both misguided and demonstrably incompatible with what transformational presidencies require and demand.

So, although the Kalven Committee's overall reasoning is sound and justifies its abiding relevance, its exception clause is precisely why and where history matters most. The mountaintop view reveals clear warnings about the dangers of both race neutrality and institutional neutrality. And considering those warnings amid today's push to adopt Kalven-like principles, the worst thing campus leaders can do is assume an outcome-agnostic mindset.

For instance, it is contradictory for presidents to brag about the careers, titles, wealth, and generosity of their most consequential alumni yet then become agnostic about the trajectory of the troubled world that continues to emerge on their watch. It is the equivalent of being proud of where their graduates sit on the western train but remaining cruelly dispassionate about their too often tepid or toxic influence on the train's speed and destination. Minimally, presidents should view the imperiled fate of our democracy and planet as two macro-destination issues that now warrant their collective attention—and that of all campus communities.

Yet a seat mindset now dominates, as much of higher education functions like a mill for training and credentialing jobseekers and wealth chasers, underscored by the corresponding shift from humanities majors to the technical disciplines. And it is telling that, for the last half century, the findings of UCLA's annual nationwide survey of incoming freshmen show that the goals for attending college have fully shifted from "developing a meaningful philosophy of life," to "being very well-off financially." We have experienced quite a regression of values. Sadly, institutions that were once wresting places for the inquisitive are now breeding places for the acquisitive. Today, on too many campuses, a seat-culture is far more apparent than a destination-culture.[30]

And that is another reason why the character of selected past leaders matters. As of 2025, the abolitionist colleges and HBCUs are still the most distinctive examples of deliberate institutional citizenship in American history. Embedded in the reason why is a timely mandate. While today's neutrality push effectively lowers or silences presidential voices, many past leaders habitually raised their institutional voices, especially in favor of pro-democracy outcomes.

The abolitionist presidents envisioned and articulated a world beyond slavery and caste, characterized instead by "human brotherhood." They shaped their campus communities mindful of that grand outcome, believing it was pursuant to America's highest ideals.

WIKIMEDIA

And many Civil Rights Era HBCU leaders shaped their campus curricula, communications, culture, and character to ensure that their graduates emerged with both a skillset for a great seat on the train and a mindset for moving the train toward the destination of both a greater America and a greater world. Their education equipped them with the kind of dual competency that MIT Professor Otto Scharmer calls, "ego and eco consciousness."[31] Scharmer's indispensable ecosystem awareness is consistent with having a destination mindset.

Both examples warrant the attention of today's most ambitious, open-minded, and patriotic campus leaders and boards. The abolitionist and HBCU leaders shaped "high-definition institutions" by privileging identity over neutrality, voice over silence, courage over fear, and upstander engagement over bystander innocence. This work will be challenging to update, but it is required to actualize a better world.

Concerned with the rise of the corporate multiversity and the related dangers of our increasingly "jobbified" campuses, Boston College educational philosopher, Chris Higgins brilliantly stresses our need "to recenter formative aims in higher education."[32] In my view, that is best done by first recentering in higher education the formative aims of America. After all, no outcomes seem worthier than a pluralistic democracy as destination and a more perfect union as destiny. T

John Silvanus Wilson Jr. has had a 40-year career in higher education, which includes serving as an advancement director at MIT, as the executive director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities and as the 11th president of Morehouse College, his alma mater. His trustee board memberships include Harvard University and Spelman College. He is the author of *Hope and Healing: Black Colleges and the Future of American Democracy,* released by Harvard Education Press in May 2023. He is now a higher education consultant, with an emphasis on institutional identity, leadership, governance, strategy, and advancement.

1. Mariko Silver, "Presidents' Letter to President-Elect Trump," November 18, 2016, https://www.bennington.edu/presidents-letter-president-elect-trump.

2. Megan Zahneis, Christa Dutton, and Garrett Shanley, "When Trump Was First Elected, College Leaders Wrote Statements About It. And Now?" *Chronicle of Higher Education,* November 6, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/when-trump-was-first-elected-college-leaders-wrote-statements-about-it-and-now?sra=true.

3. Derek E. Hollidaya, Shanto Iyengara, Yphtach Lelkesb, and Sean J. Westwood, "Uncommon and Nonpartisan: Antidemocratic Attitudes in the American public," PNAS, March 18, 2024, https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.231301312.

4. Claudia Deane, "Americans' Deepening Mistrust of Institutions," *Trend Magazine,* October 17, 2024, https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trend/archive/fall-2024/americans-deepening-mistrust-of-institutions.

5. PEN America, *America's Censored Classrooms 2024: Refining the Art of Censorship*, October 8, 2024, https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms-2024/.

6. Megan Brenan, "U.S. Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided," Gallup, July 8, 2024, https://news.gallup.com/poll/646880/confidence-higher-education-closely-divided.aspx.

7. Alexa Wesley Chamberlain, Jill Dunlap, and Paulette Granberry Russell, NASPA, *From Words to Action: The Influence of Racial Justice Statements on Campus Equity Efforts,* July 26, 2021, https://naspa.org/report/moving-from-words-to-action-the-influence-of-racial-justice-statements-on-campus-equity-efforts.

8. Novi Zhukovsky, "Dozens of Universities Are Embracing 'Institutional Neutrality'—Will the Policy Do Any Good?" *New York Sun*, September 21, 2024, https://www.goacta.org/2024/09/dozens-of-universities-are-embracing-institutional-neutrality-will-the-policy-do-any-good/.

9. See https://institutionalneutrality.org; William A. Galston, "Higher Education Is in Trouble," *Wall Street Journal,* December 17, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/opinion/higher-education-is-in-trouble-colleges-universities-policies-e4107e61.

10. Harry Kalven, Jr. Committee, *Kalven Committee: Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action, Record*, vol. I, no. 1, November 11, 1967, https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_0.pdf.

11. Adrian Florido, "Board: No Darfur Divestment," *Chicago Maroon,* February 6, 2007, https://chicagomaroon.com/10564/news/board-no-darfur-divestment.

12. "Colleges and Universities that Divested From Sudan," last accessed February 24, 2025, https://www.investorsagainstgenocide.org/about/resources/colleges-and-universities-that-divested-from-sudan.

13. "Protests and Backlash," *American Experience*, PBS, last accessed February 24, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/two-days-in-october-student-antiwar-protests-and-backlash/#:~:text=That%20event%2C%20combined%20with%20Nixon's,more%20than%20a%20hundred%20colleges; Jim Doyle, "Tens of Thousands Rally for Darfur in Bay Area and Across U.S., Protesters Demand Action," *SFGATE*, May 1, 2006, https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Tens-of-thousands-rally-for-Darfur-In-Bay-Area-2519180.php; Robin Hattersley, "Which Colleges and Universities Are Experiencing Pro-Palestine Protests?" *Campus Safety,* May 16, 2024, https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/news/which-universities-are-experiencing-pro-palestine-protests/134553/.

14. "Protests and Backlash," *American Experience*, PBS; Doyle, "Tens of Thousands Rally for Darfur"; Hattersley, "Which Colleges and Universities Are Experiencing Pro-Palestine Protests?"; Maroon Staff, "LIVE UPDATES: Pro-Palestine Encampment on Quad," *Chicago Maroon,* April 29, 2024, https://chicagomaroon.com/42199/news/live-updates-pro-palestine-encampment-on-quad/.

15. "The Great Dying (c. 1520–1700 CE)," Climate in Arts and History, Smith College, https://www.science.smith.edu/climatelit/the-great-dying-c-1520-1700-ce/.

16. J. David Hacker, "From '20. And Odd' to 10 Million: The Growth of the Slave Population in the United States," *Slavery & Abolition* 41, no. 4 (2020): 840–855, https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039x.2020.1755502.

17. Thomas D. Snyder, ed., *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993), https://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93442.pdf.

18. Brown University, *Slavery and Justice: Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice* (Brown University, 2006), https://slaveryandjustice.brown.edu/sites/default/files/reports/SlaveryAndJustice2006.pdf.

19. Brown University, *Slavery and Justice.*

20. University of Virginia, President's Commission on Slavery and the University, *Report to President Teresa A. Sullivan* (University of Virginia, 2018), https://slavery.virginia.edu/sample-page-2/pcsu-report-final_july-2018/; R. Isabela Morales, "Slavery at the President's House," Princeton & Slavery, Princeton University, https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/presidents-house.

21. Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 11.

22. University of Virginia, President's Commission on Slavery and the University, *Report to President Teresa A. Sullivan*, 2018.

23. Alan Taylor, *Thomas Jefferson's Education* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 7.

24. John Frederick Bell, *Degrees of Equality: Abolitionist Colleges and the Politics of Race* (Louisiana State University Press, 2022).

25. Bell, *Degrees of Equality,* 51.

26. J. Brian Charles, "The Evolution of DEI," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 23, 2023, https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-evolution-of-dei.

27. Amy Kurfist, "Student Belonging: The Next DEI Frontier in Higher Education," Hanover Research, https://www.hanoverresearch.com/insights-blog/higher-education/student-belonging-the-next-dei-frontier-in-higher-education/; Erik Cliburn, "The War on DEI," *Insight Into Diversity*, March 14, 2023, https://www.insightintodiversity.com/the-war-on-dei/.

28. Brown University, *Slavery and Justice.*

29. Brown University, *Slavery and Justice.*

30. American Academy of Arts and Sciences, "Bachelor's Degrees in the Humanities," Humanities Indicators, https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/bachelors-degrees-humanities; For a great discussion of this, see Chris Higgins, *Undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education* (MIT Press, 2023), 1–11.

31. C. Otto Scharmer, *The Essentials of Theory U* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2018), chap. 6.

32. Higgins, section one.