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"How Decades of Corporate Capture Enabled Today's Assault on Universities in the United States"

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Universities in the US have never been free of corporate, military, or political influence. But over the past fifty years, corporate libertarian donor networks, fossil-fuel companies, and conservative think tanks intensified coordinated campaigns targeting university governance. These networks embedded donor-aligned scholars, built research centers insulated from faculty oversight, and bypassed the shared governance structures meant to protect against external influence. This corporate capture eroded universities' already imperfect defenses against external political pressure and left institutions vulnerable when federal funding was politicized. Republican and Democratic administrations built a system of civil-rights investigations that put university funding at stake. The Trump administration weaponized that system in 2025, freezing billions in research grants, launching investigations into at least seventy-five institutions, and demanding compliance compacts that exchanged funding access for policy concessions. Withdrawing federal funding does not free universities from external influence: it deepens their dependence on private donors who operate outside public oversight. Climate and energy research are primary targets because evidence-based climate policy threatens the fossil-fuel interests historically at the center of this capture. Faculty are a critical counterforce. Their unions, senates, and cross-institutional alliances can resist because they sit outside the donor, board, and funding structures that have made institutional leaders reluctant to act. This article argues for reforms to university governance and accountability that establish faculty oversight of donor agreements. It calls for systematic research into corporate capture and the conditions under which faculty unions and collective organizing can defend and expand shared governance. (Abstract)

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