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Perspective

How decades of corporate capture enabled today's assault on universities in the United States

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ABSTRACT

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.

1. The assault on US universities

Under the Trump administration, a sweeping political effort is underway to dismantle and remake higher education [1]. Federal actions seek to reshape university governance around conservative political agendas, including threats to freeze research funding, limits on international students, and accreditation pressures [2]. These moves endanger academic freedom and undermine the institutional foundations of scientific research and evidence-based policymaking. At the center is Project 2025, a 900-page playbook by conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation [3]. It calls for defunding universities, capping indirect federal subsidies, and cutting federal grants, student loan programs, and accreditation systems as levers to enforce ideological alignment with conservative priorities [4].

The current political attack on universities builds on decades of quiet restructuring that normalized outside influence by powerful interests [5,6]. While donor influence on university governance stretches back a century, the past fifty years show this capture intensifying. Corporate libertarian donors, champions of a radical vision of free markets and limited government, moved beyond shaping research. Seeking control over how universities are governed and funded, they joined forces with fossil-fuel interests, conservative think tanks, and right-wing political

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networks. This campaign of corporate capture, defined here as the long-term restructuring of universities to serve private profit and ideological agendas, has weakened institutional autonomy and laid the groundwork for today's political assault. Individual capitalists and family foundations drive this campaign as a libertarian project, while corporations generally buy influence with incumbents [7].

Academic freedom for faculty, students' freedom to learn, the university's public mission of independent knowledge production, and the shared governance that protects them are all in the crosshairs. The Academic Freedom Index registers this decline: US institutional autonomy fell from 3.3 in 2019 to 1.7 in 2025 on the index's 0–4 scale [8]. Shared governance is the system, formalized in 1966 but developed unevenly across the postwar decades, under which faculty hold primary responsibility for curriculum, research, and appointments while boards oversee strategy and finance [9]. We argue that today's repression of universities is an escalation of a decades-long campaign of corporate

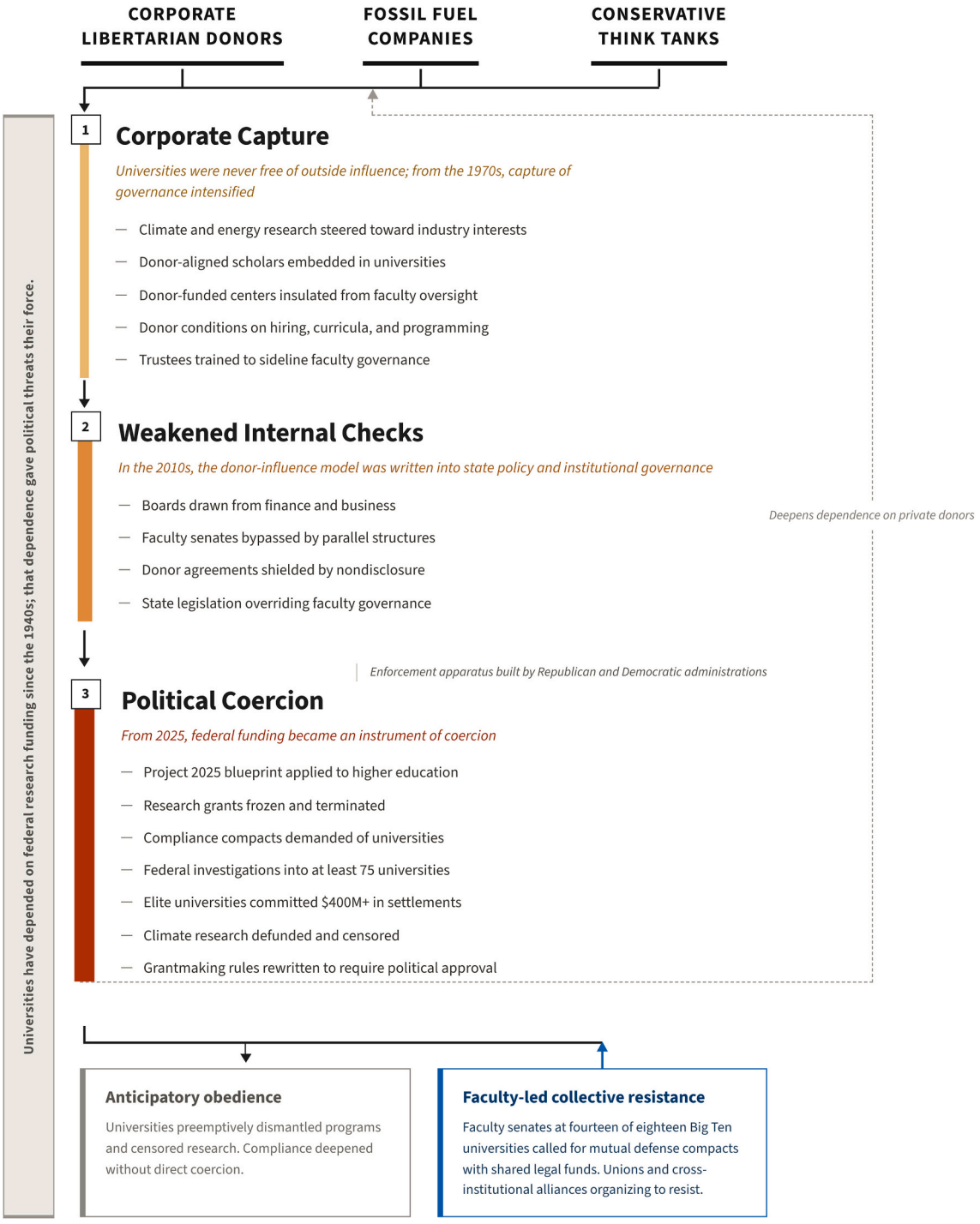


Fig. 1. From corporate capture to political coercion in US universities. Donor networks spent decades steering research toward industry interests and weakening universities' internal defenses. Universities have depended on federal research funding since the 1940s, and that dependence leaves them vulnerable to political pressure. Both Republican and Democratic administrations built the civil rights enforcement system later turned against universities. The stages overlap rather than happen one after another.
Figure designed by the lead author and produced using Claude Design.

capture. The campaign has moved from shaping research in favor of industrial interests to dismantling the governance structures that protect independent scholarship. That campaign made climate and energy research a primary target, because effective energy-transition policy depends on independent university research.

This analysis extends scholarship on climate obstruction, the climate countermovement, and fossil-fuel industry influence in higher education, and on the relationship between the decline in academic freedom and democratic backsliding [10–14]. It traces how fossil-fuel and libertarian donor networks shaped university research agendas and built institutional mechanisms that now serve as templates for broader political coercion in higher education (see Fig. 1).

2. How universities were captured

Universities in the US have never been free of corporate, military, or political influence [15–17]. As early as the 1920s, electric utilities enlisted academics to defend their monopoly positions and advance a broader conservative anti-regulatory ideology [5]. By the early 1950s the oil industry was funding researchers to contest the role of hydrocarbons in smog formation [18]. Fossil-fuel companies sit at the nexus of energy and chemical industries, with both the economic resources and the social interest to undermine independent science. Sociologists call this "anti-reflexivity" and have documented the energy and fossil-fuel sectors as key agents orchestrating attacks on university scientists [19].

We argue that donor-driven capture aimed at transforming university governance is a neglected part of this longer process. The target was the governance system itself rather than individual faculty or departments. All funders shape what universities do; postwar federal grants steered research toward national security and Cold War priorities [20]. Donor networks ran an explicit, multi-decade campaign to restructure university governance: deciding who hires faculty, who sets curricula, who sits on boards, and even which research questions are possible to ask. From the 1970s, corporate libertarian and fossil-fuel interests worked together to push higher education toward deregulation, free markets, and distrust of government. Donor influence is not unique to the political right, but the scale and coordination of this campaign are. The consequences are clearest in climate and energy science. Attacks on climate science rest on a broader conservative hostility to science that reaches health and other fields [21,22].

The modern US research university is a postwar federal creation. The 1944 GI Bill funded over a million veterans into colleges and universities and transformed higher education from an elite preserve into a mass institution [20]. Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, intensified by the Sputnik launch in 1957, expanded federal investment in academic research; through the 1960s the federal government supplied the large majority of university research funding [23]. Federal money served national security and Cold War propaganda, with universities meant to showcase capitalist democracy to the world [20]. The same anticommunism drove the McCarthy-era purges in which universities, under political pressure, fired almost a hundred faculty members or denied them tenure [24]. The 1958 National Defense Education Act created federal student loans, and the 1965 Higher Education Act added grants and guaranteed private lending [20]. Universities were federally funded but still racially segregated, and women remained largely shut out of elite institutions until the late 1960s [23]. The corporate capture campaigns of the 1970s targeted institutions that already depended on federal money, served Cold War politics, and had racial inequality built into them.

These coordinated campaigns had anti-regulatory origins. For example, John M. Olin redirected his foundation toward reshaping universities in 1973, as his chemicals and munitions company faced mounting environmental litigation and a strengthening regulatory state [25]. The operational model for this capture strategy was tested first in law schools. From 1974 to 2005, the John M. Olin Foundation spent $68 million to establish law and economics programs at top-ranked US law schools, underwriting 83% of the costs of all such programs in 1985–1989 [26,27]. Foundation strategist James Piereson described this as a "beachhead strategy" that targeted prestigious institutions so that other schools would follow [25]. The donor network invested in academic infrastructure because scholarly publication confers a legitimacy that lobbying and advertising cannot buy [26].

Echoing utility efforts in the 1920s, a 1978 industry manual for companies facing regulation advised "identifying the leading experts in each relevant field and hiring them as consultants or advisors, or giving them research grants," noting that "it must not be too blatant, for the experts themselves must not recognize that they have lost their objectivity" ([28], p.7, as cited in [29]). Twenty years later, the fossil-fuel industry applied this strategy directly to climate science. A leaked 1998 American Petroleum Institute strategy memo called for establishing "cooperative relationships with all major scientists whose research in this field supports our position" [12,30]. These documents show that university capture was a documented strategy before the Koch network scaled it up. Among the most influential actors were Charles and David Koch, fossil-fuel magnates and longtime funders and organizers of libertarian networks [25]. Their actions seem intended to support industry-friendly research, design academic programs, shape hiring, and cultivate a talent pipeline for pro-corporate policy [31,32].

This strategy accelerated after the influential 1971 Powell Memo, a confidential letter from future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell to the US Chamber of Commerce urging business leaders to reclaim ideological ground in universities. Powell pressed the Chamber to fund social-science scholars, evaluate textbooks, and push boards of trustees to correct the "imbalance of many faculties" [33]. Charles Koch and his network pushed the strategy further. They wanted universities making the case for minimal government regulation of business [31]. They embedded their own scholars in academic departments and built centers removed from faculty oversight. They then wired these centers into a larger political machine of think tanks, litigation groups, and political allies [31,32]. Three networks funded by overlapping libertarian megadonors stand out [25,34]. The State Policy Network is a nationwide alliance of conservative groups that aims to shape campus policy through state legislation [31]; the Federalist Society promotes deregulatory legal ideology, especially in law schools [35]; and the American Legislative Exchange Council works with the State Policy Network to convert shared donor priorities into model state legislation [34].

Foundation contracts routinely granted donors considerable influence over program content and faculty selection. David Koch, who donated over $185 million to MIT [36], was granted lifetime membership of the MIT Corporation, the institution's highest governing body, despite his well-documented history of funding climate denial and opposing environmental regulation [25,37]. Between 2018 and 2022, Koch-affiliated foundations directed $458.7 million to more than 300 academic institutions; 45% of that funding went to institutions with no publicly posted grant agreements [38].

At George Mason University (GMU), Koch representatives secured influence over hiring and programming [32,39]. Since 2005, GMU and two Koch-affiliated organizations based at the university, the Mercatus Center and the Institute for Humane Studies, have received a combined $179 million from Koch foundations [40]. Historian Joan Wallach Scott of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure at the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) identifies Koch-funded centers "staffed by professors of their own choosing with little or no input from existing faculty" as universities becoming dependent on the very forces that "academic freedom was invented to deter." She calls this a "seizure of curricular initiative and the denial of faculty governance by administrators willing to bargain away academic freedom" ([41], pp. 159–160).

The Koch network is the best-documented case, because litigation and public-records requests forced disclosure of its agreements. But similar arrangements across hundreds of institutions remain largely hidden from scrutiny. Fossil-fuel companies also forged long-term

partnerships with universities to shape climate and energy research and policy. In 2010–2020, just six fossil-fuel companies and their affiliates donated or pledged at least $677 million to US universities [42], helping legitimize industry solutions and marginalize stronger regulatory approaches. For example, the MIT Energy Initiative's *Future of Natural Gas* report, funded by fossil-fuel interests, helped popularize the framing of gas as a "bridge fuel," a narrative echoed by President Obama despite mounting evidence of harmful methane emissions [12]. BP similarly shaped Princeton's Carbon Mitigation Initiative for two decades and coordinated with Princeton scientists on the 2004 "Wedges paper" that made carbon capture central to climate policy [43].

These practices, and the corporate model spreading across universities, hollowed out internal protections for academic autonomy. Donor agreements gave external actors direct control over hiring, curricula, and programming, powers traditionally held by faculty, as authority shifted upward to senior administrators [31,32]. The same corporate model also contributed to soaring tuition and student debt, eroding public trust in higher education as an institution serving the common good [44]. The broader political movement that drove corporate capture also advanced cuts to state funding for public higher education, deepening universities' dependence on private donors and federal research grants [6,45]. That dependence compounded their vulnerability to both donor influence and political coercion.

3. Compliance by design

In the 2010s this donor-influence model was written into state policy and institutional governance. In 2016, Arizona established the first publicly funded libertarian academic center; since 2020, other states have followed [46]. In Florida, the legislature established such centers at three major public universities, appropriating $34 million for the 2024–2025 academic year alone [46]. Some of these state campaigns have their own political roots. But many are pushed by the same think tanks and advocacy groups that spent decades building donor influence inside universities. These centers answer to legislators rather than to faculty. Hiring and programming decisions that faculty committees would normally make are written into state law. Donor influence has been studied mostly at elite research universities, but state legislation extends capture into the public institutions where most US students are educated. Public universities were more directly exposed to state legislative intervention and gubernatorial board appointments, while in elite private universities the share of board seats held by private equity and hedge fund managers rose from 3% in 1989 to 18% in 2017 [47].

More broadly, across the top sixty US research universities from 2003 to 2017,[1] trustees whose primary vocation is in business or finance hold roughly three-quarters of governing board seats, while trustees from education, science, or medicine hold just 14%. At elite private universities, finance, including private equity and hedge funds, holds nearly a third of board seats ([47], Table 1). These boards are dominated by finance and business, and the faculty bodies that once checked them have been weakened. Such boards are poorly built to resist political pressure, and a threat to funding may look like a financial risk, not an attack on the university's mission [48]. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), a conservative nonprofit funded by Koch-affiliated networks and allied with Project 2025, has trained trustees for decades to sideline faculty governance and overpower university presidents [49]. ACTA has helped governors identify conservative trustee candidates and promoted donor-funded centers on more than seventy campuses [49].

The Olin, Scaife, Koch, and Bradley foundations helped drive the corporate capture of universities. The same four foundations also spent decades funding the Heritage Foundation [25,26]. The Heritage Foundation then went on to develop Project 2025, the blueprint now guiding federal policy on universities. Only one major law school, UCLA, is known to have rejected Olin Foundation funding because the conditions would have compromised academic freedom [25,26]. Kamola et al. [32] found similar conditions in seventy-two Koch Foundation agreements, with most signed through 2013 allowing donors to sit directly on faculty hiring committees. When the Trump administration offered its funding compacts, the exchange it proposed—money for governance concessions—was already decades old.

4. Political coercion

Republican and Democratic administrations built the enforcement tool the Trump administration used against universities in 2025 [50,51]. Between October 7, 2023, and December 2024, the Biden administration opened more antisemitism investigations against US colleges and universities (sixty-five) than for all other types of racial harassment combined (thirty-eight) [51]. The Office for Civil Rights' May 2023 Dear Colleague Letter reaffirmed that Title VI covers antisemitism as discrimination based on shared ancestry [52]. The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and the AAUP trace how this framework enabled what they call "the weaponization of civil rights law to repress campus speech on Palestine" [51]. Civil rights investigations had already pressed universities into resolution agreements and could, under the statute, cost them federal funding [51]. The Trump administration did not build this tool. When it returned to office in January 2025, it found the system already in place. A Title VI investigation puts federal funding in doubt the moment it opens, whether any wrongdoing is ever established. Weakened by decades of capture, many universities settled rather than go to court.

Where the first Trump administration relied largely on rhetorical attacks, the second used active federal coercion: it redirected funding, targeted specific institutions, and tied funding access to political compliance [53]. In the first half of 2025, the Scholars at Risk Network tracked some forty attacks on academic freedom in the US [54]. The coalition behind these attacks reaches beyond corporate libertarian donor networks to include conservative think tanks, far-right political organizations, and fossil-fuel companies. These groups differ in many ways, but they share two commitments. They oppose government regulation of business, and they oppose the science that shows why regulation is needed.

The same donor networks have also turned free-speech rhetoric against academic freedom. Free speech protects individual expression; academic freedom rests on faculty's collective authority over teaching and research [41,55]. The networks conflate the two, recasting faculty objections to donor-backed speakers or curricula as censorship: a strategy of manufactured controversy [56,57].

Project 2025 turns these ambitions into federal policy. By February 2026, the Trump administration had initiated or completed 283 of 532 recommended Project 2025 actions, more than half its domestic agenda [58]. Russell Vought, who authored its chapter on the Executive Office of the President, is now director of the Office of Management and Budget, which controls federal research funding to universities [59]. The education chapter calls for shuttering the Department of Education, turning civil rights law against diversity programs, and weakening accreditation systems. The think tanks behind Project 2025 received over $120 million since 2020 from six ultra-wealthy families bankrolling libertarian, far-right, and pro-corporate agendas [60].

Attacks on tenure and academic freedom, long advanced through corporate reforms to reduce faculty power, have become an explicit political strategy. Republican-led states are the front lines, with legislation seeking to abolish tenure, block faculty participation in lawsuits, and police curricula. From 2021 to 2023, more than 150 bills were introduced targeting tenure, faculty governance, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, often based on model legislation from

[1] Eaton and Gibadullina [47] define these as the thirty private institutions in the top 200 and thirty public university systems in the top 250 of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings for 2016–17.

conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, and Citizens for Renewing America [61]. These legislative campaigns have also targeted faculty and staff unions to weaken checks on donor and political interference [34].

Harvard, Columbia, and Princeton have been targeted with grant freezes, accreditation pressures, and threats to their nonprofit tax exemptions [53]. Climate policy, DEI, and environmental research, long framed as ideological threats by Koch-linked networks, are now explicit targets of federal enforcement [31]. Climate and public health research produce evidence that threatens corporate interests and spurs collective action to protect the public [62–64].[2] These networks funded decades of organized climate denial, and the Heritage Foundation became one of its most reliable purveyors [26,35,65,66].

In 2025, the Trump administration terminated or froze over 7800 research grants, including 5844 at the National Institutes of Health and 1996 at the National Science Foundation (NSF), targeting research it characterized as ideological [67]. As of early 2026, roughly 2600 grants worth $1.4 billion remained unfunded, and even where courts ordered reinstatement, the fate of many grants remained uncertain. Federal science agencies lost approximately 20% of their workforce, with the EPA and NASA among the hardest hit [67]. The NSF, under congressional pressure, cut funding for misinformation, disinformation, environmental, and social justice research [68]. In April 2026, the Trump administration fired all twenty-two members of the National Science Board, the statutory body that oversees NSF and approves its major funding decisions [69]. Federal officials revoked $4 million in climate research grants to Princeton, accusing scientists of fueling "climate anxiety" [70]. Terms such as "climate change," "greenhouse gas emissions," and "environmental justice" have been systematically stripped from federal websites and directives [71]. The Sabin Center for Climate Change Law recorded 304 distinct federal actions to weaken or eliminate climate protections in the current administration's first year alone [72].

The administration also moved to dismantle the National Center for Atmospheric Research [73]. In January 2026, the US withdrew from sixty-six international organizations, including the IPCC and the UNFCCC. The withdrawal ended federal support for scientific frameworks that university-based researchers helped build [74]. Although Congress moved in early 2026 to reject the most severe proposed budget cuts, the administration's FY2027 budget proposed comparable or deeper reductions, including a 52% cut to the EPA and a 54.5% cut to the NSF [75]. Even when Congress approves the money, the administration has ways to keep it from reaching climate research, regardless of what Congress intended [76,77].

Oreskes [78] argues that universities' dependence on federal research funding makes them vulnerable. In October 2025, the administration escalated its pressure by issuing a "Compact for Academic Excellence" to nine universities. The compact offered priority access to federal research funds in exchange for conservative ideological and structural reforms [79]. Large sections were drafted by Marc Rowan, a private-equity executive who allegedly helped force the resignation of the University of Pennsylvania president in 2023 and reportedly helped select which universities to target [80,81].

In May 2026, the Office of Management and Budget, under director Russell Vought, proposed a rule that would require senior political appointees to approve every discretionary federal grant and would reduce peer-review to an advisory role [82]. The rule frames itself as ending the previous administration's "unlawful DEI policies." It would bar federal awards from promoting or supporting "theories of disparate-impact liability" based on federally protected characteristics such as race, sex, or age. H. Holden Thorp, editor-in-chief of *Science*, argues that the rule is the OMB's latest effort to circumvent Congress and that it delivers the activist OMB that Vought called for in Project 2025 [83]. A plan that donors paid a think tank to write is now a proposed federal rule.

By early 2026, the administration had targeted at least seventy-five universities with federal investigations into subjects including antisemitism and student aid fraud [53]. Harvard alone faced thirteen investigations by ten federal agencies in one year [53]. Six elite universities settled; four of them—Brown, Columbia, Cornell, and Northwestern—agreed to financial commitments totaling more than $400 million alongside sweeping policy concessions on diversity programming, admissions, and hiring [53]. Columbia agreed to oversight by an outside monitor; Brown agreed to hand over its admissions data for inspection [51]. Federal judges ruled that the campaign had no legal basis. A Boston judge found the administration had "used antisemitism as a smoke screen for a targeted, ideologically motivated assault" on universities; a San Francisco judge ruled that funding freezes amounted to "unlawful coercion" [53]. MESA and the AAUP describe this campaign as part of "an authoritarian assault on the autonomy of higher education and on the very idea of racial and gender equity" [51]. Yet the broader campaign achieved its aim. Legal scholar Jacob Hamburger calls this strategy "governance by extortion." Even when courts rule against the administration, its record of following through on threats forces other institutions to weigh compliance against the risk of becoming the next target [84].

University leaders are also practicing anticipatory obedience, complying with demands the administration has not yet made [85]. Administrators are censoring speech and scholarship, scrubbing websites, dismantling programs, dissolving faculty senates, and abandoning shared governance [53]. At the University of North Texas, administrators scrubbed references to race, gender, and equity from more than 200 course titles and descriptions, despite state law explicitly exempting course instruction from its restrictions on DEI programs [86]. At Tulane University, environmental law clinic staff were told not to speak publicly about racial disparities from petrochemical pollution; emails revealed that university leaders were seeking to appease donors and state officials [87]. Self-censorship, a hallmark of authoritarian rule, is becoming normal on US campuses [88,89]. Anticipatory obedience has also moved from censoring speech to dismantling university governance. After Alabama passed a state law targeting governance at other public universities, Auburn University's board of trustees voted to dissolve the faculty senate and take direct control of curriculum and course offerings, although the law did not apply to Auburn [90].

5. Building institutional autonomy

Defending US universities means breaking with the way they are currently funded and governed. Donor influence helped build that model, and it also helped drive the public's loss of trust in universities [61]. It means renewing universities' civic mission and reforming the sector to strengthen autonomy and safeguard scholarly independence [48,91]. Administrators face severe pressure to bring in large donations, but universities cannot build the civic legitimacy needed to resist political attacks without confronting how corporate donors have shaped their priorities, eroded academic independence, and fueled public mistrust. Public mistrust also comes from soaring tuition, crisis-level student debt, and the perception that elite institutions serve private advancement rather than public good [44].

Accrediting bodies, faculty senates, and academic unions need enforceable rules that make every donor contract, advisory role, and outside partnership public. Faculty committees should have the power to turn down gifts that undermine academic freedom or work against the university's public mission. The advocacy group UnKoch My Campus [92] has already written a conflict-of-interest policy that universities can adopt.

[2] In February 2026, the EPA repealed the 2009 endangerment finding, the scientific basis for federal regulation of greenhouse gas emissions. A coalition of health and environmental organizations, including the American Public Health Association, filed suit challenging the repeal (*APHA* et al. *v. EPA*, D.C. Circuit, filed February 18, 2026).

Beyond campus policies, union contracts can protect faculty governance, accreditation rules can reward transparency, and state laws can require universities to disclose donor influence [93]. Nondisclosure clauses in donor agreements routinely prevent faculty bodies from evaluating the conditions attached to major gifts [32,94]. The clauses let donors shape hiring, research, and curricula without accountability. Banning such clauses would let faculty see the deals and terms their universities sign. These reforms matter most for climate and energy research, where donor-funded programs have shaped the questions researchers ask and produced research that supported fossil-fuel friendly policies [12,95]. Rebuilding public trust takes more than fixing governance from the inside. Universities also need to be accountable to students, staff, and the communities they serve.

There is a precedent for this kind of public accountability, and it comes from the energy sector itself. Beginning in 1928, the Federal Trade Commission investigated electric utilities' hiring of academics to rewrite textbooks and develop pro-market curricula, and concluded that the industry had run a sophisticated propaganda campaign in schools and universities [22]. Congressional hearings and litigation discovery later exposed how the tobacco industry funded academic research [96,97]. In 2024, a joint congressional investigation into the fossil-fuel industry's climate disinformation subpoenaed documents that revealed its university funding arrangements. Even then, over 4000 records were withheld or redacted [98]. An investigation of fossil-fuel influence in higher education would open the donor agreements that lawsuits, hearings, and public-records requests have exposed only in part. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse has documented how these networks captured the federal judiciary, starting in donor-funded academic programs ([99], pp. 220–226). No reform will be meaningful, they argue, without disrupting the flow of undisclosed money at every stage. We argue the energy transition requires the same reckoning.

Faculty governance needs real oversight power to protect academic integrity and resist external influence. While faculty power has long been limited and uneven, faculty senates and departments are among the few remaining internal checks on such interference. They need stronger protections for curricula, hiring, and leadership appointments. Oreskes [100] proposes one such protection, a faculty review of external funding for conflicts of interest and potential bias, modeled on institutional review boards and run as internal self-governance rather than imposed from outside. Meaningful change requires that faculty organize and summon the courage to confront corporate capture from within. Tenured faculty, who have the most job security, carry a "sentinel obligation" to speak out, organize, and defend academic independence [101].

In long-standing European democracies, university leaderships and government ministries have dismissed, sanctioned, or marginalized critical scholars, with documented cases in the UK, Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, and Germany [102]. In Hungary, Turkey, and Russia, attacks on university legitimacy paved the way for faculty purges, campus closures, and centralized political control [54]. When countries slide toward autocracy and academic freedom declines at the same time, the slide rarely reverses. Of forty such episodes between 1990 and 2024, thirty-one ended in democratic breakdown or a more entrenched authoritarian regime [13].

Against threats of this scale, US universities cannot defend themselves alone. However, faculty bodies can act because, unlike presidents and boards, they do not answer to donors or depend on their money. For example, Rutgers University Senate [103] passed a resolution adopting the Mutual Defense Compact developed by professors in the Big Ten alliance. By May 2025, faculty senates at fourteen of the eighteen Big Ten universities had passed similar resolutions, and the National Council of Faculty Senates endorsed the model [104].

More than 650 college, university, and scholarly society leaders have also signaled solidarity by signing a statement opposing government overreach in higher education [105]. The statement expressed shared values. But the faculty compacts went further and called for shared defense funds, coordinated legal counsel, and mutual aid for institutions under attack. Where faculty unions exist, they provide legal infrastructure and collective bargaining protections that faculty senates alone cannot offer [6].

6. A research agenda for corporate capture of universities

Anti-reflexive strategies have escalated from politicizing climate science to prohibiting renewable-energy development through state legislation [19,106]. The tools used to capture universities have received far less attention. Conditional gift agreements, donor-appointed center directors, and nondisclosure clauses are now common across hundreds of higher education institutions, yet few have faced systematic scrutiny. Studying them requires access to financial and contractual records that are largely closed to researchers [12].

Dewey [26] shows how bibliometric analysis of funding acknowledgments and citation networks can trace donor influence across an academic field. Climate and energy research needs this kind of analysis because no one has tested at scale whether funding sources shape research output. Corporate-funded science has manufactured uncertainty to delay regulation in other domains [96,97,107]. Ash et al. [108] found that donor-funded economics training programs measurably shifted federal judges' rulings against regulatory agencies. The downstream policy effects of captured academic programs can be empirically traced. Whether fossil-fuel-funded climate and energy programs at universities have functioned similarly demands investigation. Systematic assessments of fossil-fuel funding ties to climate-relevant research centers at elite US universities are now emerging [95,109].

Researchers have not tested whether the strength of a university's internal governance predicts how it responds to outside political pressure. A start would be to compare the strength of faculty senates, the makeup of governing boards, and exposure to donor-funded centers [46,47]. So would research on when unionization, mutual defense compacts, and cross-institutional alliances help faculty defend and expand shared governance. Faculty defend their institutions when they investigate donor influence, document changes to governance, and make their findings public.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Noel Healy: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration. **Emily Eaton:** Writing – review & editing. **Paul Lachapelle:** Writing – review & editing. **J. Timmons Roberts:** Writing – review & editing. **Jennie C. Stephens:** Writing – review & editing. **Ryan Wishart:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the lead author used Claude to produce one figure and help reduce the manuscript's word count. The authors reviewed and verified the output and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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