



A Collapsing Academy, Part II: How Cancel Culture Works on the Academy

Hal Berghel, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Cancel culture is particularly insidious with respect to higher education. The doors are closing on this marketplace of ideas.

In the past installment in this series, we described two major stresses that were introduced into higher education in the last 50 years. First, a class of professional administrators have taken over much of the academy. One consequence of this is the mismeasurement of academic quality through the introduction of relatively useless assessments of scholarship. Second, federal legislation has corrupted federal patent policy at great cost to the taxpayer through misguided legislation such as the Bayh-Dole Act. While we admitted that

such legislation has advanced technology transfer, we suggested that similar results could have been obtained by more taxpayer-friendly means. In this installment, we discuss one of the most pernicious threats to higher education—a weaponized version of cancel culture. Cancel culture attacks the very core of scholarship by suppressing ideas that don't fall within the received views of the controlling elite. This is one of the primary causes of polarization of society as evidenced by modern political life. We will also trace the evolution of cancel culture in higher education over the past decades.

THE EVIL ESSAY QUESTION

The 1959 English aptitude test for applicants to the University of California (UC) included the following optional essay question:

What are the dangers to a democracy of a national police organization, like the FBI, which operates secretly and is unresponsive to public criticism?

Only 3% of the test takers opted to answer the question, which suggests that reading the question didn't motivate



prospective UC students to open insurrection. But that's not the way Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) Director J. Edgar Hoover looked at it. At his insistence, the FBI interrogated the faculty at UC Los Angeles and UC Berkeley who were involved with the test development to identify the author of the question. After a lengthy investigation, the FBI finally discovered that the author of the question was a UC Berkeley English professor who viewed the question as both relevant and topical and a good way to stimulate the creative writing potential of the test takers. Motivated by this investigation, the FBI began a propaganda campaign against the UC system administration drawing upon reliable supporters in leadership positions of the American Legion, the Hearst newspapers chain, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and the Los Angeles Archdiocese, as well as sundry wealthy, virulent anticommunists to lobby on its behalf.¹

The FBI and its apologists looked at the phrasing of the question together with its placement on the entrance exam as an act of "communist propaganda." In Hoover's view, the author of the question and those who enabled him deserved retribution, and Hoover would see that he got it.

Hoover created his own personal "Security Index" (SI) in 1939. His index listed 26,174 U.S. citizens by 1955 who were considered potentially subversive. Hoover considered the SI a form of "preventive intelligence"—his way of suspending habeas corpus at the agency level. Although opposed by both U.S. attorneys general during World War II, Hoover refused oversight by the Department of Justice for 20 years. That's why the SI was still being used by the FBI in 1959 at the time of the essay question. By that time, the SI included the names of 72 UC faculty, students, and employees who were

deemed sufficient security risks that they deserved special extrajudicial detention in the event of a national security threat. Hoover's plan was to detain them on Angel Island in secrecy and without benefit of judicial warrant until such time that Hoover thought the threat had passed. Several hundred

invisible community that uses disinformation techniques (for example, informal fallacies, faulty statistical inferences, lies, rumor mongering, BS, slander, libel, and so on) to either a) delegitimize positions, b) intimidate people, or c) destroy the well-being of those who hold beliefs and ideas, or

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additional UC faculty were also under suspicion for the improprieties such as urging the abolishment of the House Un-American Activities Committee, subscribing to publications that the FBI found unacceptable, protesting the UC loyalty oath, engaged in "illicit" love affairs, and so on.

This backdrop to the FBI investigation of Berkeley and the UC system has been well documented.¹ One of the people ensnared in this investigation was the president of the University of California system, Clark Kerr.

CANCEL CULTURE GOES TO COLLEGE

The phrase *cancel culture* has entered our vocabulary to describe the use of (social) media to either a) delegitimize people with whom one disagrees or b) intimidate people with differing views into silence. In this sense, the term seems coextensive with "call-out culture."² This is a mistake, I think, because calling out and canceling have very different connotations. Unlike calling out, canceling can be used synonymously with gerunds like destroying, deleting, defacing, obliterating, aborting, and terminating, which are far more definitive and aggressive. For this reason, I'll extend the meaning of cancel culture to denote a perhaps

represent facts, with which one disapproves. On our account, cancel culture is not limited to partisan, vengeful social media activists but also can apply to governments and their agencies; religious, social and professional associations; and political parties and their operatives as well as networked tribalists. In the essay question investigation, the FBI inspired a cancel culture that targeted, among others, one of the most venerable academic leaders of the mid-20th century.

Clark Kerr was the first chancellor of the University of California Berkeley campus (1952–1957) and subsequently the 12th president of the UC system (1958–1967). It was on his watch that California developed its first master plan for higher education, which culminated in the arguably the most prestigious state-supported university system in the world. It was also Kerr who was unceremoniously fired by the UC Board of Regents in 1967 at the behest of then Governor Ronald Reagan who was fed derogatory information, on Kerr by the FBI.^{1,3}

The 1960s were known for student protests and social unrest over the Vietnam War and conscription, government corruption, police brutality against minorities, university administrations that were insensitive

to student interests, environmental abuse, discriminatory labor practices, and so on.⁴ We have known for decades that the FBI sought to surveil, infiltrate, and disrupt activist organizations involved with these protests through programs such as COINTEL-PRO.^{4,5} But we have recently learned that Clark Kerr was a principal target.¹ In Kerr's case, his major detractors were California Governor Ronald Reagan, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, and

have been pretty clearly articulated—social domination, right-wing authoritarianism, postmodern epistemology, and so on come to mind⁷⁻⁹—the problem still persists because so few are familiar with the literature. Ironically, Kerr was between a rock and a hard place, being attacked by the political right for being too liberal and by the student protestors for not being liberal enough! Kerr was very much the victim of the primary cancel culture of his

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a handful of regents and conservative UC benefactors. In his 1966 campaign for governor, Reagan used the UC Berkeley campus as an example of free speech gone astray and singled out Kerr's liberal attitudes as one of the causes for the student protests then taking place. The evidence indicates that Hoover and his senior staff worked with many right-wing governors like Reagan to oust university officials and faculty who were thought by Hoover to be too liberal.^{1,6}

Kerr became a target when he broadly defended the position that it is the responsibility of modern universities to encourage learning without borders (my phrase, not his). To paraphrase Kerr, universities should not be engaged in promoting safe ideas to students but rather to make sure students were safe to consider new ideas. That was the dog-whistle call for those who saw the primary function of higher education as job training and indoctrination, and this made Kerr a target of the social and political conservatives. Philosophers and social scientists have studied this general adversity to open-mindedness and corresponding curricula. So-called free thinkers have bothered social, political, and religious conservatives for centuries. Although plausible causes of such xenophobia

day: right-wing authoritarianism reacting to Cold War propaganda. Political conservatives and the FBI cost him his job with the UC system. Reagan was just the public face of the effort.

Before we leave Kerr's story, there are two other aspects of Kerr's legacy are most relevant to our chronicle of the collapse of higher education. First, he was widely recognized for his academic leadership abilities and had more than a decade of experience in administering leading research universities, so he was in an ideal position to speak about the major challenges facing higher education.¹⁰ Second, and even more important, he left us with a 50-year, diachronic analysis of higher education through five revisions of his book, *The Uses of the University*, which he updated from 1963 to 2001.¹¹ Whether one agreed with Kerr or not, the general consensus was that Kerr was an academic leader with integrity. We'll return to this topic in a future column.

GORILLA THEATER

Kerr kept good company when it came to being "canceled." The founder of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, Abraham Flexner, suffered a similar fate after his 1910 evaluation of all 153 medical colleges in the United States and Canada on behalf of

the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He reported that most North American medical schools were little more than diploma mills. His reward for such honesty was death threats and libel suits. While he suffered for his honesty, the medical profession benefitted a great deal. He convinced the Rockefeller Foundation to invest US\$50 million into medical education in the United States.¹² Moral: no great deed goes unpunished.

While silencing faculty by various means dates back to the earliest days of the republic, the marketplace of ideas concept hadn't taken hold in American higher education until the mid-19th century. It was at that point that the academic community was enlarged to accommodate wider perspectives. The censorship issue was covered in a 1901 survey of faculty abuse by Thomas Will, president of what would become Kansas State University.¹³⁻¹⁵ Will documented a spate of cases where "corporate interests on college boards had forced the resignations of faculty members who dared to question business's power in American society."¹⁴ The case that received the most notoriety was the dismissal of economist Edward Ross from Stanford at the behest of Jane Lathrop Stanford, the wife of the founder who was in effect the sole trustee of the university.

"Ross dared to call for municipal ownership of utilities and a ban on Asian immigration ... [and a] defense of socialist Eugene V. Debs ..."¹⁵ This did not sit well with the wife of the conservative railroad robber baron who built his empire on the backs of immigrant labor, so Ross had to go. His dismissal prompted several other Stanford professors to resign. To put the most positive spin on the event, university President David Starr Jordan required the remaining faculty to sign a vote of confidence in Ross's dismissal. Any faculty member who refused to sign would also be terminated.¹⁴ In one of life's ironies, Jordan also tried to cover up Stanford's death from strychnine poisoning four years

later after she had decided to fire him.¹⁶ This is the stuff of which dime-store novels are made.

Here are some more recent examples of cancel culture at work.

Consider the punishment of political scientist Norman Finkelstein for speaking out against Israel's treatment of the Palestinians in Gaza and the occupied West Bank.^{17,18} Although recommended for tenure at DePaul by his department, he was denied tenure by the central administration.^{19,20} Finkelstein was not alone in his criticisms—his views were not that different than those of Human Rights Watch.²¹ And one would think that the subject of government policies is well within the province of a political scientist's purview. What made this case unusual was the aggressiveness with which pro-Israel apologists—including Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz—pressured the administration and trustees of DePaul to have Finkelstein's application for tenure denied.²² Dershowitz's criticism went beyond his lobbying with DePaul. He also sent a vitriolic letter to the University of California Press reacting to its decision to publish a book by Finkelstein that took on a recognizable ad hominem character.^{23,24} One must ask whether Dershowitz's vitriol should have been relevant to the tenure decision. Alternatively, was the interference with the tenure decision motivated by a concern for the integrity of the institution or a way of settling an ideological score?^{25,26} Either way, it was an instance of a cancel culture at work that satisfies our condition c.

A second illustration is ongoing as this column goes to press. It involves a professor of Media, Culture, and Communications at New York University, Mark Crispin Miller. In this case, unlike the Finkelstein case, the outspoken and occasionally controversial professor's initial accuser was a student.²⁷ Apparently, the original student complainant took issue with his in-class skepticism about the effectiveness of using a mask to minimize the risk of COVID-19 infection. The topic of the class was how institutions

and governments use propaganda, and Miller asked his students to investigate whether the justifications given for mask use would qualify as such.^{28,29} From a logical point of view, it is important to distinguish the act of investigating the efficacy of mask wearing (an empirical issue) from a recommendation against mask wearing (a normative issue with legal implications). From what I can tell, the student appears to have been confused on this point, inferring the latter from the former, which would be a straightforward non sequitur. Psychologists subsume such phenomena as motivated reasoning—a mental shortcut that warps the interpretation of mental input to accord with preestablished beliefs. In any case, factions coalesced around the goal of damaging Miller's reputation because he didn't conform to the preconceived opinions of others—whether students, administrators, governing bodies, or nonacademic groups of sundry stripes.

A third example is more nuanced than the previous two. In this case, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Nikole Hannah-Jones, was denied a permanent appointment with tenure in the Hussman School of Journalism and Media (J-school) at the University of North Carolina (UNC) because of some essays she had written in support of the 1619 Project³⁰ that she had developed in cooperation with *The New York Times* to reframe the narrative on slavery. This project has produced a small but vocal group of detractors who seem to cherry-pick targets in her essays for their wrath. One such target was Hannah-Jones's claim that the desire to preserve slavery was a central cause of the Revolutionary War.³¹ I don't know whether this is true, but it certainly falls within the range of plausible. After all, in 1772 an English court had ruled that resident slaves could not be transported out of England against their will, and the Slave Trade Felony Act of 1811 made trading in slavery a felony.³² So it is possible that the colonists could see the abolition handwriting on

the wall. In any event, the named benefactor of the J-school did not share such open-mindedness, and he began a Dershowitz-style campaign against Hannah-Jones.³³ While the UNC administration supported Hannah-Jones, her tenure was still blocked by the Board of Trustees. Although this decision was overturned after student, faculty, and public criticism, Hannah-Jones ultimately broke off negotiations and accepted a position at another university.³⁴ Once again, this case illustrates the enormous external pressure that can be brought on universities by large donors motivated by bias and prejudice.

A similar situation arose with Steven Salaita, whose offer of a tenured professorship at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was revoked at the last minute by the chancellor, Phyllis Wise.³⁵ Salaita, like Hannah-Jones, had a tenured faculty appointment rescinded. Salaita, like Finkelstein, was a victim of religious zealotry for his strident support of Palestinian causes.³⁶

The underlying theme behind all of these examples is an assault on the livelihood of university faculty with ideological views that differ from those who control the universities—in some cases accompanied with death threats and litigation. Table 1 offers what appears to be a reasonable summary of the accounts reported in the literature. Different interpretations are possible and inevitable.

The table is useful because it illustrates the varied sources of the attacks directed toward members of university communities. In the Stanford case, the source was a benefactor (who also was the single trustee) aided by an administrator. In Kerr's case, head of the FBI, the governor, benefactors, and selected regents were all duplicitous in his ousting. Finkelstein was the victim of pressures from virtually all groups except students. Miller, student. Hannah-Jones, benefactors. In all cases, ideologues and tribalists.

These are not isolated incidents.^{37,38} It is not difficult to find hundreds of such cases reported by the Foundation

for Individual Rights in Education (the-fire.org), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, aap.org), the Chronicle of Higher Education (chronicle.com), and Inside Higher Ed (insidehighered.com), to name but a few.

Of course, direct academic censorship is not the only threat vector facing society. This gorilla theater can get much uglier. During the pandemic, six men were charged with conspiracy to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer because they were unhappy

The overarching theme in all of these cases is the suppression of the academic freedom that has been given to faculty since the AAUP set forth its General Declarations of Principles in 1915, and continuously revised since (<https://www.aap.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure>). The reader is encouraged to investigate the examples in this article in light of these AAUP principles and determine for themselves whether the

ideas to be controversial at some point! The marketplace of ideas cannot work if external forces determine the vendors and products and terms of exchange. The principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure set forth by the AAUP is the *only* safeguard of free speech in the academy. The First Amendment does not extend beyond the reach of governments and, as Kerr found out to his cost, academic-free speech may be silenced even then by dastardly means at the hands of unscrupulous officials. Kerr was a victim of a perfect cancel-culture storm that brought out the worst elements of government and academic governance. And the cement that held the effort together was a weapons-grade disinformation campaign, which, as it turns out, will be the topic of a future column.

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with her coronavirus restrictions. Apparently, these men, part of a group called the Wolverine Watchmen, intended to take the governor to a remote location in Wisconsin to force her to stand extrajudicial trial for “treason” against their “tribe.”^{39,40} And such violence is also present in the academy. Interestingly enough, I have lectured at two computer science departments where faculty were killed by disgruntled students—California State University Northridge⁴¹ and Wayne State University⁴²—and these were disputes over grades, so it’s not hard to imagine an even greater threat produced by ideologically animated extremists.

individuals involved comported with the AAUP guidelines. Kerr’s case is unique for he was a victim of an outright multilevel government ideological assault. But the other examples, and most other examples with which I’m familiar, are more-or-less straightforward abuses of academic freedom and the suppression of free speech.

Why does this matter? The simple answer is that successful teaching and research relies on the free and open discussion of all ideas—from the efficacy of face masks in protecting from airborne viruses to the Dred Scott decision to the quantum-theoretical account of gravity. History has shown all of these

To put this in a historical perspective, the academy is suffering the insidious effects of what James Madison called factions in *Federalist Paper* No. 10.⁴³ Madison sought to negate the effects of self-indulgent political factions with a mixed-government model that has met with about the same success as the shared-governance model in the academy. Both have worked well on balance over time but have begun to disintegrate because of an underappreciation of underlying psychological realities. The “dangerous vice” of factions of which Madison spoke has the same psychological underpinnings as the tribalism used against members of the academy

TABLE 1. The sources of university threats.

	Regents/ trustees	University administration	Benefactors/ donors	State and/ or federal government	Tribalism at work	Students	Claims of religious bias or discrimination
Ross	X	X	X				
Kerr	X			X	X		
Finkelstein	X	X	X		X		X
Miller		X				X	
Hannah-Jones	X		X		X		X
Salaita		X	X		X		X

described earlier. Compare these stories with Madison's remarks in No. 10:

*By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and **actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.** [emphasis added]*

The greatest deterrent to factions and cancel culture is free expression, but only so long as society can protect it.

Madison thought that his concept of a republic would be more of a deterrent to the influence of factions than democracy. Were he around on 6 January 2021, the capitol riots should have given him pause. The greatest deterrent to factions and cancel culture is free expression, but only so long as society can protect it. Based on the examples in this article, it is clear that society isn't doing its best.

To put a more modern political spin on the matter, Sen. Margaret Chase Smith (R, Maine) responded to the McCarthy accusations thus: "I do not want to see the Republican Party ride to political victory on the Four Horsemen of Calumny—fear, ignorance, bigotry, and smear."⁴⁴ Although she made that speech in 1950, her point still stands and is worth remembering. 

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HAL BERGHEL is a Fellow of the IEEE and ACM and a professor of computer science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada, 89154, USA. Contact him at hbl@computer.org.