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The politics of institutional neutrality: ambiguity, fear, and the effort to silence higher education in the USA

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In this paper, we use critical policy analysis to examine the strategy of institutional neutrality and its relationship to the longstanding agenda of US conservatives to limit the societal and political influence of higher education within society. Specifically, we posit that policy ambiguity creates fertile ground for fear-based narratives to shape institutional meaning making and steer policy direction. As Stone, a political theorist, pointed out, ambiguity is an inherent part of political decision-making because policy goals, problems, and solutions are open to multiple interpretations. We examine ambiguity surrounding institutional neutrality for higher education institutions, interrogating its contours, functions, and implications. Drawing on Giroux's concept of the disimagination machine and scholarship on the politics of fear, we examine how political actors have reframed the public's thoughts about higher education and attitudes toward their proper role in society. As part of this analysis, we investigate the role of fear in the recent widespread adoption of institutional neutrality policies by universities across the U.S. and critically engage the range of critiques of institutional neutrality as an organizational strategy for higher education institutions. We conclude with a discussion of alternatives to institutional neutrality and their relationship to academic freedom.

KEYWORDS

policy, politics, higher education, fear, critical policy analysis

Introduction

On a Monday evening in late November of 2024 a dozen university presidents and chancellors of universities in the USA gathered for a media dinner in Manhattan. Following the election of Donald Trump to a non-consecutive second presidential term in the U.S., the university leaders discussed the future. In the room there was “palpable uncertainty” as they laid out the issues they faced in this new political reality (Moody, 2024, para 3). As President Michael Crow of Arizona State University, moderated the discussion amid the white tablecloths and clinking of silverware, the other presidents expressed worries and fears on topics ranging from the closing of the U.S. Department of Education to possible changes to university accreditation. President Tetlow of Fordham University said, “My nightmare is linking federal financial aid funding to what we can and cannot teach about diversity, equity and inclusion” (Moody, 2024, para 3). President Schwartz of the University of Colorado at Boulder expressed fear that the Trump administration would “use the accreditation process to manipulate curriculum,” (Moody, 2024, para 3).

In addition to expressing fear of the attacks on academic freedom in higher education, the gathered leaders discussed the strategy of institutional neutrality to weather the storm.

Many presidents, including Crow, Wilcox, Holmes-Sullivan and Tetlow advocated for a strategy of neutrality and “worried that taking a stance on politically charged topics could have a chilling effect on discussion on campus” (Moody, 2024, para 2). Offering a different perspective, Rich Lyons, chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, asserted that there was a time and place for universities to speak up. He stressed “that leaders should focus public statements on issues that directly impact their core mission” (Moody, 2024, para 6).

Four months later, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), shared an open faculty letter on federal threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy, titled “We Must Leverage the Strength of Our Institutions and Stand Together (American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 2025).” The letter, which was addressed to University Presidents, Chancellors, and Boards of Trustees, did not advocate for institutional neutrality; rather, it called on university leadership to form an interuniversity coalition in defense of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the safety of targeted students and scholars. The letter stated, “we look to you for leadership” and then delineated how the Trump administration had weaponized legitimate investigations as a pretext for an unprecedented attack on higher education. It argued that “these measures threaten free speech, due process, and the very foundations of inquiry and unrestricted exploration of ideas on which academic institutions are built”.

In this paper, through a critical policy analysis (Young and Diem, 2016), we examine the strategy of institutional neutrality and its relationship to the long-standing agenda of US conservatives to limit the societal and political influence of higher education within society. Specifically, we posit that policy ambiguity creates fertile ground for fear-based narratives to shape institutional meaning making and steer policy direction. As Stone, a political theorist, (2012) pointed out, ambiguity is an inherent part of political decision-making because policy goals, problems, and solutions are open to multiple interpretations. We examine ambiguity surrounding institutional neutrality for higher education institutions, interrogating its contours, functions, and implications. Drawing on Giroux’s (2014a) concept of the *disimagination machine* and scholarship on the politics of fear (e.g., Glassner, 1999), we examine how political actors have reframed the public’s thoughts about higher education and attitudes toward their proper role in society. As part of this analysis, we investigate the role of fear in the recent wide-spread adoption of institutional neutrality policies by universities across the U.S. and critically engage the range of critiques of institutional neutrality as an organizational strategy for higher education institutions. We conclude with a discussion of alternatives to institutional neutrality and their relationship to academic freedom.

At the outset we feel it important to trace the origins and contested definitions of institutional neutrality in the higher education context. Far from a fixed or universally understood concept, institutional neutrality has been constructed over the twentieth century as a set of principles that address the university’s responsibilities to society, particularly in relation to academic

freedom (Ginsburg, 2023). The term itself is marked by deep ambiguity—not only in how neutrality is defined but also in how and when it is invoked, by whom, and to what ends.

Central to this narrative of principles is the 1967 “Kalven Report” from the University of Chicago. This report emerged during escalating campus tensions regarding the university’s involvement in social and political issues, particularly concerning the Vietnam War and its impact on young people’s lives through the draft (Kalven Committee, 1967). The Kalven Committee, appointed in February 1967 by University of Chicago President George W. Beadle, determined that,

“...university, if it is to be true to its faith in intellectual inquiry, must embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its own community. It is a community but only for the limited, albeit great, purposes of teaching and research. It is not a club, it is not a trade association, it is not a lobby” (Kalven Committee, 1967, p. 1).

The document further made the case to maintain this hospitality to diversity it must not make unified statements on political and moral issues of the day, with one important caveat. The committee wrote,

“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” (Kalven Committee, 1967, p. 1).

This exception introduces critical ambiguity: how should institutions determine when their values are under threat, and who decides when neutrality must give way to a public stance that defends the university in the political realm?

This tension became evident in the early reception of the Kalven Report. In an article in *AAUP Bulletin* in March of 1970, Donald Kostner and Winton Solberg debated the contours of the institutional neutrality strategy amongst Vietnam War protests. Solberg stated a purist version of the strategy,

“of institutional neutrality requires the university to provide a setting for the study of various ideas, how The principle ever controversial, but not to espouse any kind of orthodoxy whatsoever. It obligates the university as a corporate body to refrain from official pronouncements on disputed political, moral, philosophical, and scientific issue” (Kostner and Solberg, 1970, p. 11).

Koster described a more pragmatic approach. He agreed that the “university, in short, must hold itself aloof from the crucial political and moral questions of the day in order to protect the right of individuals to dissent” (p. 11). However, he argued that there are policy issues that “permit [the university] to speak with a single voice.” (Kostner and Solberg, 1970, p. 11).

These early interpretations reveal how institutional neutrality was never a singular doctrine but a contested and ambiguous framework, open to interpretation. The contrasting beliefs informing the framework continue to reverberate in contemporary

discussions of whether and how universities should weigh in on issues of the day, particularly arguments for adopting of institutional neutrality to protect academic freedom and the right for universities to publicly make statements on issues that directly threaten the “interests” and “values” of the university. These and other framings of the utility of institutional neutrality, however, tend to oversimplify complex institutional and societal dynamics, drawing attention away from larger questions concerning the political functions of higher education in politics and society, and offering little real protection for academic freedom.

Theoretical framing and mode of inquiry

To understand the current assault on higher education—particularly public universities—as a historically rooted and ideologically driven phenomenon, we draw on three interconnected frameworks: [Stone’s \(2012\) policy narratives](#), [Giroux’s \(2014a\) disimagination machine](#), and [Glassner’s \(1999\) culture of fear](#). These authors, though from diverse theoretical and contextual backgrounds, collectively illuminate the events surrounding institutional neutrality in the US. [Stone’s \(2012\)](#) work, for instance, offers a classic constructivist perspective on policy studies in its third edition. [Glassner’s \(1999\)](#) insights, on the other hand, emerged from observations of US war politics and their connection to societal fear. Complementing these epistemological and societal understandings is [Giroux’s \(2014a\)](#) work, which specifically addresses the political stance of US universities. Together, these frameworks help us diagnose how higher education has been symbolically redefined, historically distorted, and politically constrained through deliberate narrative and policy strategies—some seeded as early as the 1960s—that have now matured into powerful policy regimes and procedural constraints marking higher education.

[Stone’s \(2012\)](#) work reminds us that policymaking is more about storytelling and symbolism than evidence and logic. She argued that policy problems are constructed through symbolic narratives, often centered on decline or crisis. In the case of higher education, a long-standing “story of decline” ([Stone, 2012](#), p. 160) has been crafted by conservative actors: universities have been framed as: (1) hotbeds of liberal indoctrination, (2) disconnected from American values, and (3) expensive, wasteful bureaucracies requiring market discipline. These narrative tropes, which trace back to the 1960s, have legitimized policy moves such as performance-based funding, bans on diversity and equity programs, and restrictions on curriculum content. [Stone’s](#) framework helps us see these policy shifts not as *ad hoc* responses to current issues, but as part of a long-term ideological project that uses symbolic storytelling to make higher education appear broken and in need of reform.

[Giroux’s 2014 book, *The Violence of Organized Forgetting: Thinking Beyond America’s Disimagination Machine*](#), extends this analysis by exposing the broader political, cultural, and educational forces that enable these narratives. He argued that the American “disimagination machine”—a fusion of neoliberal ideology, corporate media, and consumer culture—has worked systematically to suppress critical thought, civic education, and

historical memory. In this context, the transformation of higher education into a site of workforce development rather than public good is not accidental. It is the result of a slow, strategic erasure of the sector’s civic and democratic purposes.

[Giroux’s](#) framework reveals how reframing higher education as a personal investment, not a collective commitment has produced a historical amnesia—making each new policy assault seem novel rather than part of a coordinated, decades-long campaign. From declining public funding to the adjunctification of the faculty, these transformations are rooted in a political project to disempower institutions that once played a vital role in public discourse and democratic life ([Zumeta, 2001](#)). This did not and could not have happened in the absence of a concerted, slow burning effort to politically reframe higher education.

[Glassner \(1999\)](#) adds another layer to this analysis by showing how fear operates as a political technology. In his *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, he explains how media and political elites manufacture fear to drive public opinion and policy in American society—not necessarily to address real threats, but to consolidate control. Fear, in this account, is not simply emotional but strategic policy work. Narratives that elicit fear are particularly effective in ambiguous or contested policy environments—precisely the terrain of higher education. [Glassner’s](#) framework shows how manufactured fear, such as fear of indoctrination by leftist faculty or widespread suppression of conservative speech, has been used strategically to justify the erosion of academic freedom, critical pedagogy, and institutional autonomy. These fears—often based on anecdote and repetition, rather than evidence—are particularly potent in ambiguous or contested domains like education, where moral authority and social values are at stake. [Glassner](#) helps us understand how these strategies bypass rational debates and mobilize affect to justify anti-democratic interventions.

Together [Stone](#), [Giroux](#), and [Glassner](#) allow us to diagnose how symbolic stories have displaced reasoned debate, reveal how higher education’s democratic mission has been eroded, and explain how fear is weaponized to suppress dissent and enable control. In the sections that follow, we have constructed a historical and discursive map that traces how ideological seeds planted long ago—particularly in reaction to the perceived threat of activist universities—have matured into today’s widespread efforts to reframe and restrict higher education. This framing doesn’t just clarify how we arrived at the present—it also helps us remember what has been lost, how it was lost, and what stories and strategies we might need to reclaim to move forward.

Cultivating the “strategy” of institutional neutrality

In the late morning of December 14, 1972, President Nixon reminded advisors Kissinger and Haig that they had enemies. He chided, “The professors are the enemy. Professors are the enemy. Write that on the blackboard 100 times and never forget it” ([Foreign Relations of the United States, 2010](#)). At the time, they were discussing plans to halt the bombing of North Vietnam only on Christmas day and how it would play out in the public. Nixon’s naming of academics as the enemy was part of the U.S.

conservatives' efforts to discredit higher education which they saw as a threat to their agenda.

Laying the groundwork: libertarian foundations and institutional neutrality (1960s–1970s)

The conservative movement to reframe members of the U.S. higher education system as a threat can be traced back to the 1960s, amidst a backdrop of social and political unrest. In the early part of the decade, Charles Koch, a businessman and philanthropist with staunch libertarian convictions, assumed the role of a trustee at the Institute for Humane Studies (IHS). The IHS, a think tank dedicated to promoting libertarian principles, served as a platform for Koch's nascent ambition to instill these ideologies into academia (Wilson and Kamola, 2021). This marked the commencement of a protracted approach that would gradually but significantly transform the political landscape of higher education and included the promotion of the institutional neutrality strategy.

The rise of corporate conservatism (1971)

This approach gained momentum in the 1970s, propelled by escalating apprehension among conservative figures regarding a perceived liberal bias entrenched in higher education. In 1971, Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, who in the 1950s had fought to maintain racial segregation, substantiated these concerns in a confidential memorandum to the US Chamber of Commerce (Wilson and Kamola, 2021). He cautioned that “the intellectual community... is engaged in a long-range and sustained effort to undermine... the American free enterprise system” and urged businesses to adopt a proactive stance against this perceived threat (Powell, 1971, p. 1).

Reacting to the implementation of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which broadened access to higher education for underrepresented groups, a wave of conservative concern had arisen. Using racism as a wedge between whites and people of color the conservative speakers attacked the actions of higher education institutions (Edgar, 1981; McCambly and Mulroy, 2024; Schulman and Zelizer, 2008). Many argued that admitting “unqualified” or “underprepared” minority students, often through affirmative action, would lower academic standards and overall educational quality (McCambly and Mulroy, 2024, p. 31). This sentiment was frequently and explicitly tied to race. Vice President Spiro Agnew, for example, criticized “this special black admission business,” contending that Black students were “too far below the admissions standards” (McCambly and Mulroy, 2024, p. 31).

Simultaneously, the Koch family funded foundations embarked on a discreet but deliberate initiative to fund university programs and faculty positions, predominantly in economics and law departments, with the objective of disseminating libertarian ideas (Wilson and Kamola, 2021). This initiative marked the incipient formation of an extensive network that would eventually wield considerable influence in the effort to reframe universities as a threat to society (Messer-Davidow, 1993).

From race to political correctness: expanding the cultural attack (1980s–1990s)

In the 1980s, the conservative discourse surrounding education in the United States underwent a subtle but significant transformation (McCambly and Mulroy, 2024). While maintaining its roots in racist anxieties about declining educational standards, the rhetoric expanded to claim that those working in higher education threatened traditional European epistemologies. Prominent figures like William Bennett, then Secretary of Education under President Reagan, began to stress the importance of safeguarding “Western civilization” within the curriculum (McCambly and Mulroy, 2024, p.34). This shift implied that the incorporation of diverse perspectives and the admission of minority students were potential threats to this dominant tradition (Reimler, 1999). This transformation was significant in that it widened the political issue to a societal problem. That is, the conservatives were arguing that the purpose of the university was to defend society's traditions, not critique them.

Importantly, this change in rhetoric coincided with the Reagan administration's broader efforts to divest from higher education. The cuts to student aid programs made higher education less accessible to minority and low-income students, further limiting their opportunities for social and economic advancement (Reimler, 1999). These efforts contributed to the persistence of educational disparities along racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines and reinforced a narrow, Eurocentric view of knowledge and culture. These policies also fueled the ongoing debate about the role of the university as a public good and an agent of social mobility (McCambly and Mulroy, 2024).

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a surge in manufactured criticisms of higher education from conservative factions. Books such as Bloom's (1987) “The Closing of the American Mind” and Kimball's (1990) “Tenured Radicals” popularized the notion that universities were breeding grounds for leftist indoctrination, overrun by radical ideologues. Conservative columnist George Will amplified this sentiment with a series of scathing editorials in 1991, denouncing what he perceived as rampant “political correctness” and the erosion of intellectual rigor in higher education (Will, 1991, p. C7). He wrote in *Newsweek*, “The ‘multiculturalism’ fad is a betrayal of the university's mission: the transmission of a common culture,” this statement reframed universities as a political problem in that many people believed that universities were deviating from a core purpose of cultural transmission (Will, 1991, p. C7).

Lynne Cheney and the refinement of “liberal bias” (1990s)

Lynne Cheney, then-chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities and wife of the future Vice President Dick Cheney, emerged as a prominent figure in this burgeoning reframing movement. Her 1992 report, “Telling the Truth,” excoriated what she viewed as a decline of traditional values and an embrace of “political correctness” in academia (Cheney, 1992, p. 1). She

contended that “the idea of replacing truth with politics has... had substantial influence on campuses,” and criticized the rise of various academic theories she deemed leftist, such as critical theory, feminism and postmodernism (Cheney, 1992, p 22).

Cheney’s crusade against the proposed National History Standards in 1994–1995 further intensified the culture war and higher education’s position within it. She condemned the standards as “politically correct” and biased, effectively obstructing them and solidifying the conservative narrative about the perilous state of education (Avery and Johnson, 1999, p. 220). She argued that the standards overemphasized the contributions of minorities and marginalized groups while downplaying the achievements of traditional American heroes. This critique played into a broader conservative narrative that universities were becoming overly focused on “political correctness” and were neglecting to teach traditional American values (Will, 1991). As part of the reframing effort, these talking points were repeated by conservative radio talk show hosts, such as Rush Limbaugh, repeatedly (Avery and Johnson, 1999; Blanchette, 2015).

Cheney also used more general rhetoric to attack higher education. She accused universities of being dominated by a liberal elite who were out of touch with the values of ordinary Americans. Importantly, she also suggested that universities were stifling free speech and were creating a hostile environment for conservative students and faculty. This rhetoric was part of a broader conservative effort to portray universities as adrift and to undermine their credibility with the public (Cheney, 1992). As that reframing took hold and the *disimagination machine* began to operate, the public seemed to forget the civic and transformative missions of higher education in the U.S.

In addition to the attacks from Cheney in the 1990s there was an effort by the Madison Center for Educational Affairs (MCEA) to critique universities through student newspapers, especially regarding political correctness and first amendment issues (Messer-Davidow, 1993). In the 1990s, MCEA through the Collegiate Network funded “seventy conservative student newspapers on sixty-six campuses” (Messer-Davidow, 1993, p. 47). The goal of these publications was to catalyze debate on issues of free-speech, race, gender and leftist thought as well as publish curriculum surveys (Messer-Davidow, 1993). The Collegiate Network provided grants and even provided a toll-free hotline to provide technical and editorial assistance. Importantly, the newspapers parroted the discourse being outlined by Cheney and other conservatives.

Free speech as a conservative rallying cry (2000s–2010s)

The narrative that claimed that universities were stifling free speech of conservatives continued to gain momentum into the 2000s. Organizations such as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) published reports castigating universities for a perceived lack of patriotism and for allegedly promoting a liberal agenda. These reports often employed selective evidence and misrepresented quotes to paint a distorted and unflattering picture of higher education. In 2014 B.C. Schmidt, former Yale president, published *Governance for a New Era: A Blueprint for*

Higher Education Trustees through the ACTA. In the report he called for more oversight by trustees to protect campuses from “political correctness” (p. 1).

Building on the media success of free speech on campus debates, the Koch network significantly escalated its endeavors in the 2010s, pouring substantial resources into student groups, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) and media outlets that targeted faculty and students with opposing views. Organizations like FIRE and Campus Reform became instrumental in this campus culture war, often resorting to aggressive tactics to stifle dissent and promote a narrow and partisan interpretation of free speech (Wilson and Kamola, 2021).

The publication of books such as “The Coddling of the American Mind” (2015) by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt further stoked the narrative that universities were becoming overly sensitive and intolerant of diverse viewpoints by arguing that universities were teaching a set of “untruths” that led to a desire for safety over advancement. The efforts to polarize the US public on the issue of universities was taking hold as the disimagination machine continued to operate. In a 2017 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, it was determined that a mere 36% of Republicans held favorable opinions of colleges and universities, while a significantly higher proportion, 72% of Democrats, expressed positive views (Wilson and Kamola, 2021, p. 1). As Wilson and Kamola (2021) pointed out,

“The same motivated donors and political operatives who use free speech arguments to defend plutocratic spending in elections, to break unions, deny climate change, and shield wealthy donors from scrutiny, have also invested heavily in manufacturing campus free speech controversies” (p.28).

The conservative base had now internalized the discourse that the that universities were an enemy.

Institutional neutrality and conservative oversight (2017–2025)

This free speech controversy was frequently invoked to justify calls for increased scrutiny of faculty speech and restrictions on academic freedom, raising concerns about the potential chilling effect on intellectual discourse and open inquiry (Vile, 2024). The Kochs’ championing of the “Chicago Statement” on free speech in 2017 represented another strategic maneuver aimed at consolidating the right’s influence on the framing of issues. The statement, as described above, states that universities should not make statements on issues of the day. Reacting to the manufactured claims of the censure of students on the right and hoping to not appear culpable for placing limits on free speech, over 148 institutions have adopted a version of the statement since 2024 (Arnold et al., 2025). Importantly, institutional neutrality has become a rallying cry for those seeking to curtail restrictions on campus speech, even when that speech is hateful, discriminatory, or incites violence (Wilson and Kamola, 2021).

With the higher education issues reframed, and many universities claiming neutrality, the right continued proactive work

to regulate higher education. Not satisfied with voluntary adoption of institutional neutrality by universities, the Goldwater Institute pushed forward their 2017 legislative proposal (Kurtz et al., 2017). The legislation, a version of which has been introduced in several states and adopted in Indiana and North Carolina, requires the establishment of official university policies that strongly affirm the importance of free expression, preventing administrators from disinviting controversial speakers, and creating a system of surveillance and disciplinary sanctions for those who interfere with the free-speech rights of others.

Once they ascended to power, the right filed 41 anti-protest bills in 22 states between January and April 2025 [International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), 2025]. At the federal level, the Manhattan Institute has offered similar model legislation (Lakhani, 2025; Meyers et al., 2024), which has called on the federal government to crack down on protests. In the first 4 months of 2025, five federal bills were introduced that targeted left-leaning college students, anti-war protesters, and climate activists. The federal bills, including the *Unmasking Hamas Act*, included harsh prison sentences and hefty fines (Lakhani, 2025). A bill focused on student protesters would exclude those guilty of any crime at a campus protest (including misdemeanors like failing to disperse) from federal financial aid and loan forgiveness programs. As the disimagination machine continued to generate a sense of amnesia, the right's reversal on campus free speech went mostly unquestioned and the attacks on higher education continued.

Conservative figures, such as the sitting vice president, continued to parrot the rhetoric of the past, branding universities as “the enemy” and accusing them of indoctrinating students with leftist propaganda. In fact, JD Vance gave a 30-min speech to a crowd at the National Conservatism Conference on November 2, 2021, where he declared “The Universities are fundamentally corrupt and dedicated to deceit and lies, not to truth” (National Conservatism, 2021). He concluded the speech by declaring Nixon was a saint and then he repeated Nixon's claim “Professors are the enemy” (National Conservatism, 2021).

Criminalizing dissent: the disimagination machine (2025)

With refined narratives and neutrality regulations taking root, the second Trump administration experimented with several federal tools for attacking and controlling universities. For example, the president appointed a task force of 20 administration officials to investigate universities. The task force meets “each week inside a rotating list of federal agency headquarters in Washington to discuss reports of discrimination on college campuses, review grants to universities and write up discoveries and recommendations for Mr. Trump” (Bender et al., 2025). The administration began with elite universities, like Harvard, insisting “that Harvard change hiring and admissions in departments that “lack viewpoint diversity” and “immediately shutter” any programs related to diversity, equity and inclusion” (Bender et al., 2025). When Harvard refused, the task force announced a “freeze of more than \$2.2 billion in grants and contracts for Harvard” (Bender et al.,

2025). In addition to Harvard the administration targeted 60 other institutions where grants have been canceled, funding suspended, and student visas revoked. The swift escalation of the attack on higher education left many higher education administrators “reeling from a blunt-force political attack that is at the leading edge of a bigger cultural battle” (Bender et al., 2025).

The weaponization of disciplinary and legal tools against campus dissent exposes the hollowness of “institutional neutrality” as a protective stance. Students and faculty across the U.S. have faced severe consequences for engaging in constitutionally protected protest and expression (Bender et al., 2025). At Columbia University, student leaders were suspended and barred from campus for organizing protests related to the war in Gaza, while faculty members who publicly defended the students were removed from leadership roles or publicly reprimanded (Eisgruber, 2025). At the University of Southern California, the administration canceled its main commencement ceremony and rescinded the valedictorian speech of a Palestinian American student over alleged “security concerns,” a move widely interpreted as a politically motivated act of censorship (Mahdawi, 2024). International students have faced especially harsh reprisals: student visas were revoked following their participation in protests, and some graduates were denied re-entry to the U.S. or deported shortly after commencement. Faculty have been fired or disinvited from public events, including graduation ceremonies, for expressing dissenting views that challenge prevailing political narratives. These cases collectively point to a chilling trend: the increasing criminalization of campus speech and protest, particularly when that speech contests state violence or dominant geopolitical alliances. Despite claims that neutrality preserves institutional autonomy, these responses suggest that neutrality often functions as complicity—offering no shield against, and at times even enabling, the suppression of dissent.

While we focused on the US context above, it is important to note that higher education and individual institutions are under attack in other countries such as Brazil, Turkey and Hungary. In Brazil the Bolsonaro administration has raided left leaning faculty offices. Professors noted that “there is a climate of tension and of fear” (Douglass, 2021, p. 28). In Turkey, where an academic can be dismissed if they are reported as teaching anti-government points of view, a professor in the Turkish system commented that “a climate of fear now prevails in universities” (Douglass, 2021, p. 28).

As the historical narrative above illustrates, that in the US the right's long-term campaign against universities represents a deliberate project of ideological narrative-building, consistent with Stone's (2012) analysis of how policy narratives shape public meaning and institutional behavior. The reframing of universities from a public good to an enemy effectively engaged what Giroux (2014a,b) describes as the “disimagination machine” eroding public confidence and narrowing the scope of what can be imagined as the role of higher education in a democratic society. Simultaneously, the strategic deployment of ambiguity and fear (Glassner, 1999) has created a climate of individual and institutional insecurity, in which policies and laws exist but also seem to be failing and where rights seem to be both guaranteed but also irrelevant—a situation Finnegan (2025) describes as “Schrödinger's Politics”.

Cornered in neutrality

Building on the above historical account of the systematic construction of universities as ideological adversaries, we now turn to examine how university communities have responded to this escalating pressure. We focus on the emergence of institutional neutrality as a strategic response aimed at avoiding political entanglement and reducing external scrutiny. Framed as a protective measure, neutrality has been widely adopted in hopes of safeguarding institutional legitimacy and autonomy. Yet, as we will explore, this strategy has drawn significant criticism for its unintended consequences—including the reinforcement of dominant narratives, the suppression of dissent, and the undermining of higher education's democratic responsibilities.

Proliferation of neutrality statements

In 2024, a team of researchers from Heterodox Academy (Arnold et al., 2025) tracked the adoption of institutional neutrality policies in the United States, making note of when the policy was adopted, who was involved in the decision to adopt, the specific policy language, and institutional type. They found at least 148 institutions had adopted new institutional neutrality policies by December 2024, wherein institutional leaders would refrain from speaking on behalf of the institution on contested political and social issues when those issues do not directly impact the institution or its core mission.

"The list provided in the Appendix of the report, as the Arnold et al. (2025) suggest, is incomplete. In July 2024, for example, The University of California system adopted an institutional neutrality policy for its ten university campuses, but the Heterodox list includes only two UC schools. Regardless, the list suggests some very interesting adoption trends. First, 78% of the institutions on the list were public. Second, almost half of the members of the Association of American Universities (AAU), a prestigious organization of research universities, can be found on the list. Third, most institutions have adopted institutional neutrality policies since 2024. Prior to 2023, Arnold et al. were able to confirm less than ten institutions with institutional neutrality policies" (U. of Chicago, Carnegie Mellon, Reed College, California Institute of Technology, Colby College, and Brown University).

The Heterodox research team attributes this trend to the "pressure on higher education to address the sensitive and complex issues" in Israel and Gaza in the aftermath of October 7, 2023 (p. 3). However, it may have also contributed to the trend, given that in February of 2024, Heterodox in partnership with the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and the Academic Freedom Alliance (AFA) wrote an open letter to University Trustees and Regents, urging them to "to restore truth-seeking as the primary mission of higher education by adopting a policy of institutional neutrality on social and political issues that do not concern core academic matters or institutional operations" (Academic Freedom Alliance, 2024). Their letter was followed in July of 2024 by a joint statement from the three organizations titled "College and University Trustees and Regents Must Join Peers in Committing to Institutional Neutrality," arguing that universities

should take this step by the 1st of September so it would be in place at the start of the new academic year. According to their analysis, 68% of the adopters (n=101) in their dataset were encouraged or required to adopt policies of institutional neutrality by a governing board, and another 27 public institutions were mandated to adopt institutional neutrality by state legislation.

Neutrality: a fear-based strategy

The rapid adoption of institutional neutrality policies across universities reflects less a principled commitment to impartiality and more a fear-driven strategy aimed at self-preservation. Faced with escalating political pressure, media scrutiny, and targeted legislative efforts, many institutions embraced neutrality as a preemptive strategy to avoid becoming the next flashpoint in the culture wars. This reaction aligns with what Glassner (1999) identifies as the "culture of fear"—where institutions respond not to actual threats but to amplified narratives of risk. In attempting to appear apolitical, universities hope to deflect attacks, yet in doing so, they cede moral and educational ground. As Giroux (2014a,b) argues, this is precisely how the "disimagination machine" functions: by stoking fear and narrowing the space for democratic engagement and critique. Institutional neutrality, then, is less about protecting free expression and more about managing fear—fear of political backlash, reputational harm, and loss of funding—at the expense of the university's public mission. However, rather than diffusing conflict, this neutrality has been met with renewed attacks, further reinforcing a cycle of fear and retreat (Glassner, 1999). This dynamic highlights the central paradox of institutional neutrality in the current political climate: far from offering protection, it may instead legitimize the very narratives that seek to dismantle the university's democratic mission.

Critiques of institutional neutrality

While institutional neutrality is often framed as a principled stance to preserve free inquiry and protect academic freedom, a growing body of scholarship challenges this notion, revealing it to be both theoretically flawed and practically unworkable. Critics argue that neutrality functions less as a commitment to fairness than as a mechanism for evading responsibility, masking power, and perpetuating inequity. This section draws on a range of perspectives—from U.S. campus politics to South African higher education—to show how neutrality often fails to shield universities from controversy, obscures the inherently political nature of academic decisions, and undermines the university's credibility and public mission. Rather than ensuring evenhandedness, neutrality can enable harmful forms of speech, silence institutional conscience, and abdicate leadership at precisely the moments when moral clarity is most needed.

Wood (2024) argued that institutional neutrality is a self-defeating concept that ultimately empowers radical activists, excuses college presidents from taking responsibility, undermines legitimate authority, and confuses the public. He explained that institutional neutrality empowers the mob by assuring activists that

university officials will not obstruct their path. He contended that while universities may not interfere with popular movements, they often confront less popular ones. Thus, the public is unlikely to believe that an institution is truly neutral if its neutrality seems to favor one side of a dispute. Wood noted that while true neutrality is possible, it is rare in practice when dealing with important public issues. Simultaneously the strategy allows college presidents to avoid making difficult decisions. By hiding behind the idea of neutrality, they can abstain from actions that might upset important stakeholders.

Writing from the South African context, Jansen (2025) made a similar argument regarding the illusory nature of institutional neutrality. They noted that universities are inherently political institutions. University administrators make what are ultimately political decisions about admissions, curricula, and funding. For curricular decisions in particular universities select what knowledge is considered official and what is not, determining the content of academic programs. This process involves choosing what is deemed important, relevant, or valuable, which are inherently political choices. Therefore, the decision to remain silent in the face of significant human rights violations, like genocide, contradicts a university's commitment to social justice and erodes its credibility.

Furthermore, Post (2024) argues that the idea of institutional neutrality misrepresents how universities function. Universities are not neutral observers; rather, they actively assess and shape the direction of research and teaching in service of their mission. "Universities take very seriously their responsibility to continuously and rigorously assess faculty competence. . . . Such decisions are not 'neutral' in any ordinary sense of the word." (Post, 2024, p. 2). This evaluative responsibility alone raises questions about both the possibility as well as the benefit of neutrality.

Nonetheless, proponents of institutional neutrality often claim that taking a stand on a public issue erodes credibility because they believe that it undermines the university's commitment to protecting the academic freedom of voices from the minority. Discussing the academic departments' right to issue statements of a commitment to anti-racism, Soucek (2022) disagreed and explained an institution does not censure dissenting minorities by simply taking a position they oppose. He contended that individuals could disagree with an institutional statement on anti-racism without feeling censured, therefore collective action can be taken even amid dissent.

Moreover, in a 2021 critique of the *University of Chicago Statement on Principles of Free Expression*, Rodriguez argued that the Statement prioritizes a purist interpretation of the First Amendment over values of inclusion and equal worth. This prioritization, according to Rodriguez, creates a false dichotomy between "freedom of speech" and "inclusion," which ultimately facilitates color-evasive racism and protects white privilege. Rodriguez (2021) contended that the University of Chicago Statement's framing enables a form of racism that avoids explicit racial language or discrimination, while still perpetuating racial inequality. By upholding an absolutist view of free speech, the Statement allows for expressions that, while not overtly racist, can create a hostile environment for marginalized groups, particularly people of color. This emphasis on unfettered free speech, Rodriguez argued, effectively protects the existing power structures and privileges of whiteness.

To counter this, Rodriguez (2021) proposed a rejection of the "free speech vs. inclusion" framing (p. 454). Instead, they advocate for approaching expressions of racial hatred and offensive (ERO) activity as a form of workplace harassment. This approach shifts the focus from an abstract notion of free speech to the concrete impact of such expressions on individuals and communities. By framing ERO activity as harassment, Rodriguez emphasized the need to create an environment where everyone feels safe, respected, and able to participate fully, particularly those who have historically been dehumanized and marginalized.

In essence, Rodriguez calls for a reorientation of the debate around free speech and inclusion. Rather than seeing them as opposing forces, Rodriguez argued that true freedom of expression can only flourish in an environment where everyone is treated with dignity and equality. This requires a commitment to addressing the systemic inequalities that underpin expressions of racial hatred and offensive behavior, and a recognition that the right to free speech does not absolve individuals from the responsibility to treat others with respect.

Discussion

Given the academic critiques of institutional neutrality, it is important to analyze the forces that have led to its widespread adoption across so many universities, as well as the emerging responses that challenge this trend. In the first subsection, we discuss how our theoretical frameworks help make sense of these events and their relationship to policy adoption. We first examine how Stone's concepts help us understand the power of storytelling in the conservative push for neutrality policies, situating this strategy within a broader effort to reshape public higher education. We then turn to Giroux's notion of the disimagination machine to trace how neoliberal ideology, corporate media, and consumer culture have contributed to the erasure of the university's democratic mission, and how fear has been strategically deployed to secure policy change. In the second subsection, we shift focus to explore the legal, institutional, and collective acts of resistance that are pushing back against this narrative. Drawing on the strategic use of ambiguity and the work of educators as public intellectuals, we highlight how university leaders, faculty, and students are actively reclaiming higher education as a space of inquiry, dissent, and democratic purpose.

Manufacturing the need for neutrality

Institutional neutrality policies are political responses to an ongoing conservative attack on universities, which utilizes metaphors and analogies. Conservatives argue universities have veered from their mission due to liberal faculty, a narrative amplified by figures like Lynn Cheney and George Will, and disseminated via talk radio. This established the "lost ship at sea" metaphor, leading to calls for trustee regulation, as seen in *Governance for a New Era* (2014), which decried "rampant political correctness".

This metaphorical campaign aimed to erase the democratic origins of public universities, a process facilitated by the

convergence of “neoliberal ideology, corporate media, and consumer culture” (Giroux, 2014a,b). This involved funding neoliberal academics to criticize universities, with corporate media then spreading these critiques. The redefinition of universities as solely for human capital development resonated with a growing consumerist culture.

By the early twenty-first century, universities, fearing being seen as “politically correct,” adopted neutrality policies. This was a consequence of the conservative movement’s strategic cultivation of ambiguity around free speech on campus, using media and watchdog groups to instill fear, leading to widespread adoption of these policies. University leaders continue to grapple with this ambiguity and fear. The Trump administration’s recent attacks, leveraging the “lost ship” metaphor and institutions’ desire for neutrality, are part of this longer pattern of challenging university funding and legitimacy.

Legal, institutional, and collective acts of resistance and reclamation

“Academia Needs to Stick Up for Itself” (Dirks, 2025).

In response to escalating political encroachments, universities have begun to reassert their institutional values through collective statements and compacts. Efforts like the AAU’s “Statement on Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy in the United States,” the AAC&U’s “Call for Constructive Engagement,” and the Big Ten Academic Alliance’s Resolution to Establish a Mutual Defense Compact for the Universities of the Big Ten are not merely symbolic; they function as collective acts of resistance, public reaffirmations of the university’s role as a site of free inquiry, intellectual diversity, and democratic participation [American Association of Colleges Universities (AAC&U), 2025; Big Ten, 2025]. These declarations reframe the dominant narrative—countering portrayals of universities as ideologically corrupt or anti-American—by restating foundational commitments of higher education to academic freedom, evidence-based inquiry, and public mission.

A few voices, including Wesleyan University’s President Michael Roth, have been especially visible in this regard, issuing courageous and explicit statements defending not only his own campus community but the broader values and mission of higher education in an era of political hostility. “We must not let the loud voices of political opportunists drown out the quieter, consistent work of education—of helping students expand their thinking, encounter difference, and wrestle with complexity,” Roth has argued, making clear the stakes of this moment. His leadership, situated in both moral clarity and institutional conviction, exemplifies the narrative reframing work Giroux (2014a,b) associates with educators as public intellectuals. Statements like Roth’s and declarations like those offered by AAC&U and AAUP also embody what Stone (2012) describes as the strategic use of ambiguity. Just as ambiguity can be used to stoke fear and uncertainty, it can also be used opportunistically to marshal unifying language, understanding and narratives. In doing

so, university advocates have begun to reclaim the narrative of higher education not only as a driver of discovery and democratic vitality, but as a guardian of shared American values—intellectual freedom, civic responsibility, and the collective pursuit of the public good.

Alongside statements from institutional leadership, resistance has also emerged from within universities through faculty and student organizing, departmental statements, and legal challenges. Across the country, faculty senates and departments have defied calls for silence by issuing public statements on racism and genocide, asserting their disciplinary authority and ethical responsibilities even in the face of administrative discouragement. Student protests, walkouts, and encampments—though often met with suppression—have insisted on the university’s obligation to stand against injustice and uphold human dignity. These forms of resistance represent what Giroux (2014a,b) describes as counter-public pedagogies: efforts to reclaim the university as a democratic space of critique and political engagement. They also challenge what Stone (2012) calls the “narrative certainty” constructed by dominant actors—in this case, the political right—by reframing higher education not as a partisan threat but as a site of social responsibility and moral courage.

Legal action has also served as a powerful response. Harvard University, for example, refused to comply with federal overreach into institutional decision-making related to hiring, curriculum, and admissions. In response to politically motivated funding withdrawals and regulatory threats, Harvard along with other universities, faculty and advocacy organizations have filed multiple lawsuits challenging the legality of federal withdrawal of funding, revocation of SEVIS access, and cancellation of student visas—demonstrating resistance to state overreach and assertions of institutional autonomy and the rule of law. These lawsuits exemplify Edelman’s (1988) framing of policy as a symbolic arena, where meaning and legitimacy are contested through formal mechanisms as well as public narratives. Moreover, they confront policy tools weaponized to produce fear, ambiguity, and control.

Taken together, these acts of resistance—lawsuits, public declarations, departmental dissent, and grassroots mobilization—reflect higher education’s contested terrain, where power, knowledge, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated and where public reaffirmation of the university’s role as a site of learning, discovery, free inquiry, intellectual diversity, and critique can be cultivated. They also reframe the narrative, countering the portrayal of universities as ideological monoliths or cultural threats by reasserting their foundational values in the face of political pressure, and they push back against the disimagination machine (Giroux, 2014a,b) by reclaiming the narrative of higher education as a public good. By reframing public discourse and insisting on institutional autonomy, these responses aim to interrupt the ideological project in the US that has cast higher education as an enemy of the state.

At the same time, these efforts carry limitations and tensions. They are often reactive rather than proactive; they may mask internal contradictions within the institution; and their rhetorical commitments may not always translate into material protections—especially for faculty, staff, and students from historically marginalized communities who continue to

experience institutional precarity and political targeting (American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 2025). Yet, even with these tensions, they are critical artifacts for understanding and advancing the political struggle over the university's meaning in the US—and for envisioning the possibility of reclaiming higher education not only as a place of learning, but as a force for principled inquiry, democratic engagement, and moral responsibility.

Conclusion

The strategic deployment of institutional neutrality has become a powerful yet problematic tool. As we have shown, neutrality is not a fixed or apolitical stance but rather a historically constructed and ideologically charged framework, one that can be mobilized to suppress dissent, obscure power, and render invisible the broader societal responsibilities of the university. The recent intensification of fear-based narratives in the US—invoking threats to funding, accreditation, and political retaliation—has deepened the appeal of neutrality as a defensive posture for some, even as it risks eroding the very academic freedoms the stance of neutrality purports to protect.

However, not all leaders in the US are cornered in neutrality. Michael Roth, the president of Wesleyan University has publicly spoken out against the attacks. Roth asserts that remaining silent or neutral, especially in the face of escalating political attacks on education, does not ensure protection—it cedes the narrative to those who seek to delegitimize higher education. He believes that educational leaders should defend the core values of their institutions—including academic freedom, diversity of thought, and liberal education—explicitly and consistently. In essence, Roth advises that institutional autonomy is best protected by principled, visible leadership, not by retreating into supposed neutrality. Yet, he also recognizes the real risks of this approach. Indicating that neutrality is often rooted in fear he commented,

“I’m friends with a lot of these guys, and I had wrongly assumed that what was holding them back from speaking out against Trump was they were afraid of losing their jobs, [...] But what they’re afraid of is their own personal security. They tell me that their wives tell them, ‘Don’t contribute to us getting harassed at church or at the grocery store or at the club.’” (Bumiller, 2025).

Rather than retreat into silence, this is a moment for higher education to reconsider what it means to lead with integrity in times of political crisis, to reject the false binary between politicization and neutrality and instead embrace a more nuanced understanding of the university's public mission—one rooted in

academic freedom, intellectual pluralism, and social responsibility. As the AAUP's open letter powerfully suggests, the moment demands collective leadership and solidarity—not withdrawal. By foregrounding these values and resisting reductive appeals to neutrality, universities can reclaim their rightful role as critical, engaged institutions in democratic life. If universities in the US do not work as a collective and instead rely on the courage of a few, then a great public good will be lost for future generations.

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