

DIVCO STATEMENT ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN SERVICE OF THE PUBLIC GOOD

“...the right to education, teaching and research can only be fully enjoyed in an atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy for institutions of higher education.” -UNESCO 1997

The fate of higher education is uncertain. Recent actions by the federal government are chilling open inquiry and undermining self-governance at American universities. The federal government’s interference in the internal affairs of Columbia University weakens both intellectual freedom and the institutional self-governance that ensures not just the survival of free and open dialogue, but its consequence.

The *project* to suppress academic freedom aims to cripple higher education through economic sanctions, by delegitimizing its public mission and public value, and eroding self-governance. The tactics are familiar – reminiscent of dominant tropes of the 1970s, and the ensuing culture wars of the 80s and 90s. Current efforts to curtail academic freedom will stifle the rights of faculty to teach and conduct research without external interference. If allowed to prevail, these actions will undermine the rights of students to study and learn through free inquiry into controversial material, master their chosen disciplines, and develop as independent thinkers ready to contribute broadly to society. The actions taken by the federal government in recent weeks run counter to a core principle of universities working in service of a free society: to honor and defend the equality and rights of our students, irrespective of their origins and identities, while ensuring that the university provides an environment in which critical thinking can flourish. As Clark Kerr noted in his memoir, “The University is not engaged in making ideas safe for students. It is engaged in making students safe for ideas.”

In 1879, the University of California was designated as a public trust, independent and free from political influence and free to administer its own affairs. Political pressure intended to facilitate acquiescence to the political agenda of the current federal administration not only violates the university’s constitutional rights but undermines academic freedom, a cornerstone of the university’s pursuit of its core academic mission: teaching and research. The free exchange of ideas is a vital element of innovation and excellence and key to our ability to realize our public commitment to serve the State of California through research discovery and teaching the next generation of Californians, and innovators worldwide.

Berkeley is an ideal: a living proposition that knowledge and education serve the public interest. We serve through our teaching, which makes Berkeley an engine of opportunity for students irrespective of race and gender or class and national origins. We serve through our research, which expands the frontiers of knowledge and sparks innovative applications, novel solutions, and artistic creation. And we serve through our students, who lead and serve in California, the United States, and the world beyond. Our service is testament to the idea that is Berkeley: a societal asset for the public good.

What moves us towards a more perfect realization of the idea of Berkeley is the convergence of varied, and many times contradictory, ideas and perspectives that occur daily on our campus. Bringing divergent ideas, experiences, and purposes together is essential and also challenging: often divisive, sometimes disruptive. And yet, this collision of ideas and experiences under conditions of intellectual and academic freedom is necessary; it is the very essence of Berkeley.

The assaults on academic freedom have the potential to damage the fundamental mission of Berkeley in irreparable ways, and undermine the professional standards of academic inquiry. The stakes go beyond the university itself. California's successes are tightly connected to the University of California system, the California State University system, the California Community Colleges, and our K-12 public schools. These interlocking elements of California's public system of higher education—a vital foundation for California's flourishing in the twentieth century and beyond—demand our support and protection if we are to continue to play this catalyzing role for the people and economy of California.

The Divisional Council of the Berkeley Academic Senate calls on our campus leadership to join university leaders across the United States to resist unwarranted, and illegal, political interference in the internal affairs of the university. We call upon the Regents of the University of California and the UC Office of the President to stand firm and safeguard the world's greatest public university system. And we appeal to the legislature, governor, and people of the Great State of California to join us in defending our schools, colleges, and universities—a vital engine of California's flourishing and ongoing economic prosperity.

Divisional Council
Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate

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