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The Purpose of a University Isn't Truth. It's Inquiry.

Defenders of academic freedom forget this at their own peril.

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THE REVIEW | OPINION

By *Amna Khalid* and *Jeffrey Aaron Snyder*

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At the moment, there are [at least](#) 38 bills in state legislatures across the country attempting to restrict discussions around race, gender, and American history at public colleges and universities. PEN America has aptly termed these bills “educational gag orders.” In the face of these and other threats to campus free expression — including the proliferation of [Bias Response Teams](#) and [scholars coming under fire for ideological reasons](#) — organizations like the Academic Freedom Alliance, Heterodox Academy, and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education are increasingly vital.

But such groups find themselves at present hampered by a narrow conception of higher education's mission, which they invariably characterize as the "search for truth." This focus draws on the American Association of University Professors' [influential 1940 statement](#) on academic freedom, which asserts that "Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and ... the common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition." Eighty-some years later, it's time for an update. As active members of the AFA, HxA, and FIRE, we'd like to offer a friendly critique to help expand and diversify the coalition of faculty members enlisted in the cause of protecting academic freedom and advancing viewpoint diversity.

The most succinct expression of this emphasis on truth appears on the AFA's banner: "Solidarity in Pursuit of Truth." Similarly, Jonathan Haidt, a co-founder of HxA, delivered a series of influential [talks](#) arguing that truth, and not social justice, should be the telos of the university. FIRE, too, places a heavy accent on truth, looking to John Stuart Mill as a kind of patron saint. As its president and chief executive Greg Lukianoff [noted in a recent interview](#), the university occupies an "utterly historically unique space" where the primary aim is to discern "the world as it really is."

The pursuit of truth does not come close to capturing the range of research and teaching at colleges and universities today. As a result, too many faculty members do not see their professional work reflected in the concerns of academic-freedom organizations. When it comes to threats to academic freedom and free expression on campus, they shrug their shoulders and think to themselves, "Not my fight." For principled and pragmatic reasons, then, we propose embracing a more expansive vision of higher education focused on what we call critical inquiry.

Indeed, a glance at the mission statements of the top 25 schools for free speech in FIRE's 2021 College Free Speech [Rankings](#) suggests that "truth" is not a particular priority (the word appears only once, in Duke's mission statement). Across the mission statements of these 25 schools, the main themes we noticed were critical thinking, diversity, preparation for citizenship, public service, the production and dissemination of knowledge, and active and engaged learning in the liberal-arts mold.

Some might claim that these mission statements do not explicitly refer to the pursuit of truth because it is a given, an objective so central to university life it goes without saying. This would be a mistake, as the truth telos itself is a product of particular historical moments. In the medieval university, the search for biblical truth through scholastic method was of paramount importance. The motto *Dominus Illuminatio Mea* (“The Lord is my light”) on Oxford University’s coat of arms, and *Hinc lucem et pocula sacra* (“From here, light and sacred draughts”) on Cambridge University’s, harken back to those times. By the turn of the 20th century, the quest for theological truth as the mission of the university had given way to logic, reason, empiricism and the search for objective truths about nature and humankind.

Over the last hundred years, this positivist conception of the truth has come under pressure from various quarters, including but scarcely limited to Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts, Michel Foucault’s emphasis on discursive truth regimes, postmodern critiques of Enlightenment rationality, and standpoint theory’s focus on the socially situated character of “objective truth.”

In our discipline, history, the idea that historians can capture history as it *really* happened has been rejected as a fool’s errand by most of its practitioners for more than a century. As the British historian Edward H. Carr wrote in the early 1960s: “The reconstitution of the past in the historian’s mind is dependent on empirical evidence. But it is not in itself an empirical process and cannot consist in a mere recital of facts. On the contrary, the process of reconstitution governs the selection and interpretation of facts: this, indeed, is what makes them historical facts.”

Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob put it pithily in their landmark 1994 book *Telling the Truth About History*: “The bits and pieces of records left from the past can be arranged into different and contending pictures.”

Consider, for instance, the question of why South Boston resisted school desegregation efforts in the 1970s. Looking at the same evidence, two historians can reach very different conclusions. One might claim it was primarily a result of anti-Black sentiment and an explosive racist backlash. Another, emphasizing different aspects of the record, might argue it was driven largely

by anger at the erosion of local school control. Both interpretations can have merit. Rather than a sign of failure, that scholars can end up with opposing views is often, [per Judith Butler](#), “a sign of [a] field’s intellectual vibrancy.”

In other words, “truth” is not a stable enough category to bear the weight of higher education’s entire mission. It does not adequately reflect the teaching and research done by faculty in the arts, humanities, and interpretive social sciences. Consider that, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there [are](#) some 15,000 postsecondary teachers in history, 39,000 in English and 69,000 in art, drama, and music — that is, thousands of faculty members for whom the pursuit of “truth” may not be central to their work — versus approximately 11,000 in economics, 12,000 in physics, and 36,000 in biology, fields with a stronger natural affinity for truth-seeking.

So what might serve as an alternative ideal, one that actually reflects what universities do? John Tomasi, the new president of Heterodox Academy, recently [suggested](#) that “curiosity” should maintain pride of place in the mission of colleges and universities. Curiosity, he argued, is a necessary precursor to the pursuit of knowledge, truth, and social justice. We agree with Tomasi that “curiosity is a sacred value within every learning community,” but we don’t think it quite captures what is distinctive about higher education. We propose a different telos: “critical inquiry.”

There may be a sliding scale for how much “truth” matters, from the periodic tables at one end to throwing a clay pot at the other.

Our notion of critical inquiry is informed by the work of John Dewey, specifically a set of three lectures he delivered at the turn of the 20th century on [“The School and Society.”](#) Dewey defines critical thinking as “the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.” Critical inquiry harnesses the power of what Dewey saw as four natural human instincts or interests: conversation and communication, investigation, construction, and artistic

expression. These, Dewey says, are the “natural resources” for deep, transformative educational experiences.

Critical inquiry knits these four instincts together, giving them shape, purpose, and direction. How? By placing them in an educational context characterized by discipline, self-awareness, and reflection. Critical inquiry seeks to cultivate habits of mind that go beyond mere curiosity about the world. It combines creativity, experimentation, and evaluation in an ongoing, iterative process. It can encompass the full range of learning, teaching, and research activities on college campuses, from experiments in particle physics to orchestra rehearsals of Brahms’s concertos.

At the moment, the memberships of organizations like Heterodox Academy and the Academic Freedom Alliance skew in predictable demographic directions. Members are disproportionately white and male, while social scientists and natural scientists significantly outnumber members from humanities and the arts. Such groups could be far more effective if they extended their reach. If appeals to academic freedom based primarily on “truth” alienate many people in the academy, why not articulate a more expansive telos?

Let us be clear: we are not advancing an “all that is solid melts into air,” anything-goes argument about knowledge, interpretation, and intellectual production. Different disciplines have different standards for assessing the quality of evidence and claims. These standards should not be abandoned. Appeals to truth or truth-seeking may play an important role. There may even be a kind of sliding scale when it comes to how much truth matters, with the periodic table of elements at one end, the meaning of Huck’s raft in the middle, and throwing a clay pot at the other.

Still, university life should equip us with the skills to be able to navigate a world in which spin and misinformation are the order of the day — and critical inquiry is a better ideal for this project than “truth.” We live, as the philosopher Susan Haack [notes](#), “in a pervasive atmosphere of lies, deception, obfuscation, hyperbole, loose talk and plain old-fashioned bullshit.” Critical inquiry offers a framework for navigating the epistemological pitfalls of competing information

ecosystems, especially when we face complex public-policy questions that don't have "right" answers — such as whether public schools should stay open through the pandemic.

The stakes are high. Between [adjunctification](#), the [erosion of tenure protections](#), political litmus tests for [campus speakers](#), the [banning](#) of professors from offering expert testimony, and the wave of censorious bills attacking critical race theory, we need an all-hands-on-deck approach to the defense of academic freedom and free expression. In addition to political and ideological diversity, the viewpoint diversity promoted by academic-freedom organizations should include differing perspectives on the purposes of higher education. That way, more faculty members who do not see truth-seeking as their chief vocation may be encouraged to join the academic-freedom cause. By opening our doors in this way, we can prevent academic-freedom organizations from turning into precisely the kinds of echo chambers that they critique.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

OPINION

SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

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