

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



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THE REVIEW | OPINION

By *Amna Khalid* and *Jeffrey Aaron Snyder*

FEBRUARY 25, 2022

In [his response](#) to [our proposal](#) to reorient the telos of higher education from “truth” to “critical inquiry” — a reorientation that we think will broaden the support for academic freedom — the philosopher Michael Veber makes two key claims: First, that truth alone is what the enterprise of higher education is after; and second, that if we give up on truth, we won’t have any other compelling reasons to defend free expression.

We never suggested that truth-seeking be abandoned. We are in favor of a big tent. If you are a faculty member whose work is motivated by the pursuit of truth, you do you.

Veber, though, is a truth-or-bust guy. Indeed, he thinks it's "insane" that there are scholars like us — historians, no less — whose work is not trained on truth like a heat-seeking missile.

He alleges that we have discarded truth-seeking because it's "not cool anymore," as if a century of rich intellectual debate about what the great meta-historian Peter Novick called, in 1989, the ["objectivity question"](#) was nothing more than a passing fad. Professional historians have been skeptical that it's possible for us [to step off our own shadows](#) since the First World War. That's why history has to be "rewritten in every generation," as we pose new questions and investigate novel angles in light of our present-day interests and intellectual frameworks.

Veber insists that historians should stick to what *really* happened. Either Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 or he did not, Veber proclaims. The fact that Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 is one among thousands of different facts that historians draw from to build our knowledge about Nazi Germany. But, as our first-year students are delighted to discover in our classes, history is much more than merely "one damn fact after another."

The most significant historical questions cannot be reduced to a "true" or "false" trivia format. Regarding World War II and Nazi Germany, here are just a few questions historians continue to grapple with: To what extent was Hitler's incursion into Poland driven by premeditated expansionist aspirations? Why did so many ordinary people participate in the Holocaust? How did Britain navigate the ethical pitfalls of joining forces with Stalin to forge an alliance against Hitler?

For Veber, truth and knowledge are one and the same; "What are teaching and research," he asks, "if not efforts to obtain, maintain, and disseminate knowledge and, therefore, truth?"

Keeping in mind that our goal here is to convince more people in higher ed to care about threats to campus free expression and academic freedom, we much prefer the term "knowledge" to

“truth.” The latter suggests absolutes, fixed points, and infallibility. The former, in contrast, signals that questions, claims, and findings are dynamic and always subject to revision.

For us, critical inquiry is capacious enough to include truth-seeking and knowledge-production, but extends beyond that to include interpretive and artistic endeavors as well as skill-building and know-how, from parsing an Emily Dickinson poem and playing the role of Macbeth to learning Spanish and mastering the art of welding.

“Independent of a desire to get at truth or to get at something that entails truth,” Veber says, “Khalid and Snyder offer no good reason why we should value free speech. And I don’t think they can.”

Beyond the pursuit of truth, there are many good reasons to value free speech, most of which would fall under the general heading of self-expression. In addition to promoting creative projects, viewpoint diversity, and independent thinking, there is intrinsic value to being able to freely share your thoughts and feelings and to express your point of view.

Consider the [case](#) of Kimberly Diei, an African American graduate student in pharmacy at the University of Tennessee. Before reversing course when [a](#) free-speech advocacy group sent a letter, the University expelled Diei for her “crude” and “sexual” posts on social media, which included a photo of her in a tight dress and some rap lyrics inspired by her love of Cardi B. “UT spied on my social media activity,” Diei said. “I can be a successful and professional pharmacist as well as a strong woman that embraces her sexuality.”

“It’s so important to me to just have my voice,” she explained, “because people that look like me are often told ‘be quiet, stay in the back,’ and that just does not suit my personality.”

Here is a quick survey of some noteworthy campus free-speech controversies from the past couple of years:

- The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [denied](#) Nikole Hannah-Jones tenure, reportedly under pressure from conservative members of the university system’s Board of Governors who objected to Hannah-Jones’s “1619 Project.”
- The University of Florida [blocked](#) faculty members from testifying as expert witnesses in litigation against the state.
- Collin College summarily dismissed at least four professors, including Michael Phillips for [leading](#) a campaign to take down Confederate monuments and suggesting his students wear masks, and L.D. Burnett for [mocking](#) former Vice President Mike Pence on Twitter.
- Several colleges and universities investigated, sanctioned, and/or dismissed faculty members for [mentioning](#) the N-word for pedagogical purposes, including [Laurie Sheek](#) at the New School, [Gary Shank](#) at Duquesne University, and [Jason Kilborn](#) at the University of Illinois at Chicago. (The University of Southern California even [pulled](#) Greg Patton from his classroom for using a Mandarin word that sounds like the N-word.)
- MIT’s Department of Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences [canceled](#) a lecture by the geophysicist Dorian Abbot after a social-media furor erupted surrounding his criticism of campus DEI initiatives.
- George Washington University [removed](#) satirical posters critical of the Chinese government on the grounds that they offended and negatively impacted the Chinese-student community.

Free speech in the name of truth is relevant in some of these cases. But it mostly hovers on the periphery. When Burnett tweeted that Pence should shut up “his little demon mouth” during the vice presidential debate, Collin College penalized her for allegedly [violating](#) their core values of “dignity and respect,” calling her post “hateful, vile, and ill-considered.” Whether her statement was “true” or “false” was immaterial. The best defense in cases like these is that students and faculty members have a right to express themselves without fear of punishment for touching on taboo topics or expressing “offensive” political views.

We wrote our original piece to provoke conversation. Veber’s spirited response suggests that this moment is ripe to revisit debates about the university’s telos and the value of academic freedom and free expression.

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

OPINION

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