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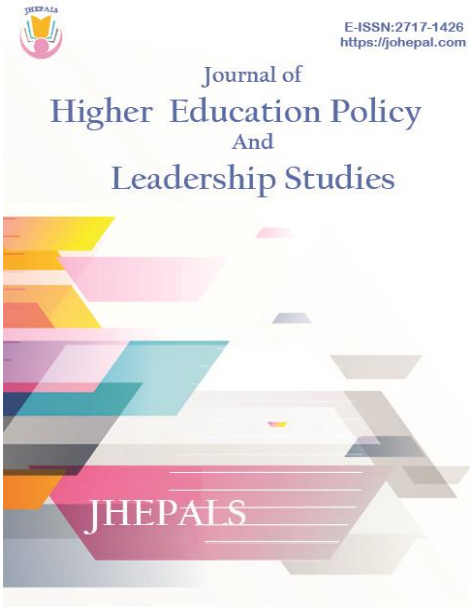
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PhDead: The Erosion of Academic Freedom by Ignorance

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Abstract

This article explores the gradual erosion of academic freedom in contemporary educational institutions, attributing this decline to the pervasive influence of ignorance. Through examination of both historical and contemporary examples, this piece highlights how ignorance—manifested through censorship, lack of critical thinking, and the suppression of diverse viewpoints—undermines the foundational principles of academic freedom. The paper argues that when academic freedom is compromised, there are detrimental effects on educators, students, and society at large. It is essential to foster an environment of open inquiry and intellectual rigor to preserve the integrity of academia. Furthermore, intellectual freedom and critical thought are requisite for a thriving society and a secure union between democracy and education. Recommendations for policy changes and educational reforms are proposed to counteract these detrimental trends and promote a culture of knowledge, tolerance, inclusion, and understanding. Ultimately, this paper underscores the critical importance of combating ignorance to safeguard the future of academic freedom and to ensure the continued progress and vitality of educational institutions.

Keywords: Anti-intellectualism; Ignorance; Academic Freedom; Critical Thinking; Higher Education; Free Speech; Illiberalism; Agnotology

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Introduction

The question of what counts as knowledge and who counts as its producers is confounded by ignorance. The exaltation of anti-intellectualism (Niose, 2015) and its manifestations as anti-science fervor (Hotez, 2020), rejection of critical thinking (Burbules, 2022; Garry, 2023), censorship and book banning (Scussel, 2024), "truth decay" (Roy, 2024), moral tribalism (Bocian et al., 2021), cancel culture (Dholakia, 2020; Garry, 2023), fake news, alternative facts, conspiracy theories, and the spread of dis- and misinformation (Ordway, 2017; Renze, 2021; Zadronzy, 2024) undermine traditionally accepted ideas of knowledge and expertise. Each trend supports the notion that "We live in an age of ignorance…" (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008, p. vii, as cited in Barbier et al., 2021). A major casualty of ignorance is academic freedom, threatened by growing authoritarianism, state overreach, geopolitical conflict, and the onslaught of right-wing populism and religious nationalism globally (Berg et al., 2023; Douglass, 2023; Goodman, 2024; Klein & Norris, 2022; Lerch et al., 2024; Pap, 2021; Schofer et al., 2022; Unal, 2024).

Academic institutions face increasing attacks from groups seeking to shut down intellectual inquiry and discourse (Kirstein, 2004; Sultana, 2018) that disagrees with their worldview. Ideologically driven efforts to censor, silence, and intimidate faculty threaten academic freedom. Dependency on philanthropic support has weakened academic institutions, leading administrators to potentially yield to donors' demands (Benn, 2015; Moody, 2023) –even when conflicting with institutional values and interests—resulting in universities violating standards of academic freedom and free speech rights (Sultana, 2018).

Last April, a New York Times opinion piece asked, "Is this the end of academic freedom?" (Chakravartty & Nesiah, 2024). The article examined censorship during a pro-Palestinian demonstration at New York University's Bobst Library atrium, where a poetry reading was interrupted. University administrators halted the recitation of a poem by Palestinian poet and scholar Refaat Alareer, killed weeks earlier in an Israeli offensive. The poem, "If I Must Die," concludes with "If I must die, let it bring hope — let it be a tale." Shortly after these lines were read, the university administration intervened to stop the reading. Students and faculty participants were summoned to disciplinary meetings, and written warnings were issued (Chakravartty & Nesiah, 2024).

Although this paper does not take sides on the horrific genocidal conflict in Gaza or the vile rise of anti-Semitism on U.S. college campuses, a commitment to democratic values enabling free speech should not be used to harm or devalue another human being. This is especially true in a collegiate environment where open-mindedness and freedom of expression are imperative for constructive learning and research. The disruption of a peaceful poetry reading at NYU by campus officials to quash free speech illustrates restrictions on academic freedom, manufactured ignorance, and anti-intellectualism. Censorship of faculty and student-organized events is not beneficial "if one believes that universities should be open spaces for civil and informed discussion and debate" (Douglass, 2023, p. 8). Encouraging constructive debate can bridge ideological rifts and promote intellectual engagement (Sterling, 2024b, para. 9). The consequences of constraining academic freedom are dire, including loss of scholarly knowledge, intellectual community, career curtailment, uncertainty, self-censorship and detachment.

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Freedom and enlightenment share an inextricable bond; the pursuit of one is inseparable from the other. For knowledge to grow in the spaces between rival ideas (Bartell, 2007, p. 147), freedom of expression and tolerance for opposing views is needed. The discovery of truth depends on unrestricted speech, making the individual and intellectual right to free speech a cornerstone of academic freedom (Kabasakal Badamchi, 2022). However, an important qualification must be made: While “free speech makes no distinction about quality; academic freedom does” (Scott, 2017, p. 14; Sultana, 2018, p. 232). Unlike free speech, academic freedom demands the pursuit of truth; it is informed, reasoned, intellectually-driven and knowledge-based, founded on principles of scholarly rigor and verification (Sultana 2018), not a license to incite intolerance, hate or violence, spread propaganda, or stifle dissenting voices or the right of speech by minorities, the oppressed, and marginalized groups.

This article will illustrate how academic freedom is enveloped in a haze of "unknowing" (Sultana, 2018), where radical ideologies and baseless assertions by pseudo-intellectuals have infiltrated higher education, posing as genuine discourse. This situation is partly self-inflicted and threatens its own downfall without organized opposition, resistance, and a plan to combat illiberalism and support democracy (Douglass, 2023).

With ignorance as our departure point and anti-intellectualism as the modus operandi, we consider the confluence of these developments to make sense of it all; foreseeing its impact on higher education (HE) and what this may portend for the future of academic freedom, academe, and their role in knowledge creation. Though not intended as political screed, we ignore the ramifications of politics at our peril. Partisan polarization is a significant factor with a multiplier effect on antecedents affecting HE. As an open system, the academy is not immune to its external environs. As political divisions deepen within the surrounding landscape (Kelly, 2021; Kleinfeld, 2023); these phenomena can significantly impact policies, funding, and academic discourse in universities. The growing conflation of partisanship, populism and polarization (Kelly, 2021; Mudde, 2004, 2018) necessitates consideration of political dynamics, which is woven throughout the discussion where useful or instructive.

Working Definitions

Definitional diversity pervades the literature informing this article, shaped by prevailing values and standards of the time, place, and socio-political-cultural processes from which it emerges (Hofstede, 1993; Pinto, 2019; Stel, 2019). While variety may be appealing when exploring options or trying new activities, it complicates analysis here. Definitional variety does not negate the necessity of defining terms for shared understanding. Establishing an unambiguous meaning is an essential first step in scholarly work, providing a foundation for mutual understanding (Dholakia, 2020), leading to clarity and insight. The following paragraphs offer working definitions for key concepts, curated from various scholarly sources.

Many Shades of Ignorance

The Merriam-Webster (n.d.-b) online dictionary defines ignorance as "the state of lacking knowledge, education, or awareness". Ignorance has been a major research topic for over

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twenty years with abundant literature in fields like science, technology, sociology, philosophy, history, and anthropology (Barbier et al., 2021). The study of ignorance shifts the question from "how do we know what we know" to "how or why we don't know" (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008, p. vii as cited in Barbier et al., 2021).

Pinto (2019) submits, "We seek knowledge because we are ignorant" (p. 196), from which we could infer, ignorance is "the opposite of knowledge, [a state of] not knowing" (Stel, 2019, para. 2). While this makes intuitive sense, such a definition is too open-ended to be practical.

Contrary to Pinto's perspective, Peels (2010) argues that "being ignorant is not equivalent to failing to know," and contends that "one's definition of ignorance crucially depends on one's account of belief" (p. 57). Pritchard (2021) describes this alternate view as the "state of lacking a true belief in the target facts" (p. 225). Other treatments view ignorance as epistemic insouciance or "bullshit" in Frankfurtian parlance (Cassam, 2018, p. 1; Frankfurt, 2005), a matter of professional levels (Abbott, 2010), and as a survival strategy and tool for oppression, e.g., racialized ignorance in the context of racial bigotry and white privilege (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007).

Given the growing and varied literature associated with ignorance, it is unsurprising that ignorance as a knowledge domain is not within the purview of any one discipline. As Smithson (2015) so aptly puts it,

> [The study of ignorance] splatters across disciplines without any respect for disciplinary boundaries. From astrophysics to zoology, most disciplines have perspectives for dealing with the unknown, employing methods from mathematics to discourse analysis. These perspectives have, understandably, their own specialized linguistic-conceptual frameworks and usually are disconnected from one another (p. 385).

Consequently, the study of ignorance can be interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinary (Smithson, 2015). Interdisciplinary research involves collaboration between disciplines for knowledge transfer. Multidisciplinary research addresses a common problem from multiple perspectives. Transdisciplinary research develops knowledge simultaneously across and beyond all disciplines (Dodig-Crnkovic et al., 2017).

Here, we focus on a specific type of ignorance—deliberately fabricated and spread for unscrupulous ends. Agnotology, a subfield studying ignorance, examines its origin (Scussel, 2024). Described as "the new political sociology of science" (Barbier et al., 2021, par. 1), agnotology explores how ignorance is manufactured, shaped, and culturally provoked (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008; Scussel, 2024, p. 12). Knowledge is manipulated to create ignorance (Jalonen, 2024). The concept has been used to illuminate connections between ignorance and power, explain climate change non-acceptance, reveal how political discourse discounts science, weaponize critical race theory (CRT), foment election denialism, and uncover industry practices designed to mislead and foster uncertainty (Barbier et al., 2021; Jalonen, 2024; Scussel & Norris, 2023). By examining the dynamics underlying purposive ignorance production, researchers can discover its contextual dimensions and exponents' intentions.

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Proctor differentiates three types of manufactured ignorance: ignorance as a native state, ignorance as a lost realm, and ignorance as a strategic ploy (Scussel & Norris, 2023, p.51). For this paper, our working definition focuses on "strategic ignorance" (Barbier et al., 2021), defined as deliberate actions created and sustained through social interactions, symbolic processes, organizational structures, or institutional mechanisms to sow doubt, misinformation, disinformation, and other forms of not knowing (Jalonen, 2024; Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008; Scussel, 2024).

Anti-Intellectualism, It's the American Way

Over the past 60 years, anti-intellectualism has become a fashionable, "recurrent interpretive lens to make sense of society and politics" (Lecklider, 2014, para. 2). Aaron Lecklider (2014), a cultural historian and professor of American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, describes the depiction of Americans as anti-intellectual as a "relatively recent phenomenon," exploding after the publication of Hofstadter's "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life" in 1963. Lecklider found that "anti-intellectual" has appeared in the New York Times over 650 times since 1870, with about 75% occurring after Hofstadter's book release. However, history suggests anti-intellectualism has been part of America's heritage since the nation's infancy, rooted in 17th-century Puritan ideology (Hofstadter, 1963; Huang et al., 2021; Kang, 2009). Deeply rooted in the framework of modern culture (Díaz Villarreal, 2021, p. 2), American anti-intellectualism has historically influenced current public dialogue, policy-making, societal health (Huang et al., 2021; Niose, 2015), and the venerated institution of higher education. While we cannot trace the full lineage of anti-intellectualism in the U.S. here, we begin with a paradox and brief discussion of historic precedents to demonstrate its long-standing tradition in American society.

History as Destiny and Paradox

America is the only nation on earth founded on an idea (Galen et al., n.d.), a nation conceived in liberty. This lofty idea, borne in the minds of America's founding fathers, is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence.

Intellectualism is an endeavor founded on ideas that embody the "capacity to ponder in detail about things" (Šrol & Galasová, 2022, para. 1). With ideas as its currency and critical thinking as its method of engagement, intellectualism involves imagining, reflecting, interpreting, evaluating, and analyzing circumstances to enrich our understanding of the world. Through the ages, ideas—the product of exercising the intellect—have sparked revolutions, reshaped societies, and spawned innovations. When cultivated with purpose, ideas can be an inspiring force driving positive change.

Paradoxically, anti-intellectualism is part of America's DNA, notwithstanding the country's origin as a nation spawned from an idea. Generally understood as hostility toward intellectual pursuits (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a), anti-intellectualism refers to mistrust of intellectuals and experts (Barker et al., 2022; Lunz Trujillo, 2022; Merkley, 2020; Motta, 2018), who are perceived as elitist and out-of-touch with mainstream society (Huang et al., 2021; Long, 1996). Following Huang et al. (2021), anti-intellectualism is defined as "a social attitude that systematically undermines science-based facts, academic authorities, and the pursuit of theory and knowledge" (p. 3). Pervasive in American culture (Hofstadter, 1963),

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anti-intellectualism advances an implosion of truth that provides a structure for alternative facts; to believe things based on personal opinions with little or no supporting evidence (Huang et al., 2021, p. 15).

American anti-intellectualism is grounded in “the framework of our religious history” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 47), dating back to the early days of European colonization in America (Long et al., 1996) and the confluence of Evangelical–Puritanical Protestant* beliefs of America’s first European colonists (Huang et al., 2021, Kang, 2009).

Puritanism reached North America during the Great Puritan Migration of the 1620s and 1630s, when English Puritans sought refuge in the New World to escape religious persecution and spread the Christian gospel (Kang, 2009). Puritanism is a strict form of Protestantism that aimed to "purify" the Anglican Church of Catholic influence following the 16th-century English Reformation (Kang, 2009, p. 148). The term "Puritans" was initially a derisive label, later describing reformers who opposed Anglican hierarchy and sought a purer form of worship based on biblical literalism (History.com Editors, 2025; Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). In America, Puritanism influenced culture beyond religion, shaping values like individualism, egalitarianism, and the sanctity of hard-work (Kang, 2009).

Kang (2009) submits that the Puritans' "zeal for education" significantly shaped pedagogy in the United States. Upon reaching the New World, they prioritized establishing colleges and public schools where the main goal was "Christian nurture and growth" (p. 151). The Puritans considered functional literacy necessary for people to read and understand the Bible themselves, rather than blindly accepting church doctrine and depending on clerics (AHEF, 2017; Kang, 2009; Shipton, 1958). An educated citizenry was viewed as necessary for a virtuous life.

The Puritans created the first free public schools for children, passed education laws mandating basic literacy skills, and founded many early American colleges, including Harvard, Yale, and Dartmouth (AHEF, 2017; Kang, 2009). These advances were built on Christian purpose and values. Kang (2009) notes that while Puritans emphasized Bible literacy, they also recognized the importance of a broader, liberal arts education with religious and classical elements to prepare learners for "all God's truth" (p. 151) through a curriculum including language studies in English, Greek, and Latin as well as Greek and Latin classics (Lytle, 2018). Puritan education, while religious in intent, reflected Renaissance humanism, emphasizing a "Christian liberal arts" education (Chambers College, n.d.) to cultivate an educated clergy and promote an educated populace (AHEF, 2017; Kang, 2009; Lytle, 2018).

The Puritans' devotion to education presents a paradox, as their focus on practical piety often conflicted with intellectual exploration, creating a battle between faith and reason (Worthen, 2014). The first "Great Awakening" in America, circa 1730s and 1740s, marked a shift from Puritanism's self-restraint and intellectual rigor toward religious emotionalism (e.g., ecstatic experiences, speaking in tongues, emotional healing) (Berg, 2019). The secularization of U.S. higher education evolved over time, influenced by historical

* For the purpose of this paper, I have grouped together Evangelical Protestants and the Puritans that came to the New World to escape religious persecution. The Puritans and Evangelicals share some common theological roots but they are distinct movements within Protestant Christianity that approach evangelism differently (History.com Editors, 2025).

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context, scientific developments, and changing views on religion's role in academia (Johnson, 1992). By the 20th century, American higher educational institutions had largely divested their religious content and functions to embrace new forms and structures (Goldin & Katz, 1999). These developments included the rise of research universities, growth of public universities, and integration of professional schools (e.g., law, medicine, business, and public administration) into broader university systems (Goldin & Katz, 1999).

Nonetheless, the legacy of Puritanism has significantly influenced the evolution of the United States' higher education system, from their commitment to literacy and learning to the enduring need for knowledge in contemporary American society. The paradox is that Puritans also felt intellectual endeavors would result in moral decay. Excessive intellectualism was a distraction from spiritual obligations and practical responsibilities. Puritans believed pleasing God was through diligence, faith, and thrift, creating tension between worldly success and scholarly undertaking, placing material gain over the intrinsic value of knowledge. While Puritans sought prosperity as a reflection of divine favor, they also prized education and intellectual pursuits, mainly when aligned with their religious beliefs.

Given the competing values, early America struggled to balance society's pragmatic needs with intellectual enlightenment (Long et al., 1996). Practical knowledge (farming, craftsmanship) was considered righteous, while intellectual pursuits (philosophy, literature) were seen as ungodly for not venerating religious absolutes. Puritans feared intellectual endeavors distracted from religious duties, leading to sin, while practical skills were viewed as more relevant to daily life and community. On balance, America was built by hard-working settlers who valued bible study, thrift, self-reliance, tireless effort, and followed the Protestant work ethic:

> Be laborious and diligent in your callings … ; and if you cheerfully serve [God] in the labor of your hands, with a heavenly and obedient mind, it will be as acceptable to him as if you had spent all that time in more spiritual exercises (Richard Baxter, as cited in Ryken, n.d., para. 16).

Adapting to the new environment demanded a fresh set of skills focused on action rather than contemplation—it was about doing instead of thinking. The pioneers had to cultivate land and construct homes in a harsh and untamed territory, where literacy offered little advantage (Long et al., 1996).

By contrast, the founding fathers prioritized religious tolerance and envisioned a "wall of separation between church and state" to ensure religious freedom (Davis, 2003, p. 9). Their revolutionary ideas about scientific progress, religious independence, and democratic self-government aligned with Puritan philosophy—emphasizing individual rights, integrity, and societal progress (Huang et al., 2021; De Tocqueville, 1998, as cited in Zang, 2009, p. 149). The founders' principles, influenced by Europe's Age of Enlightenment, led to modern democracy, the war for independence, and the creation of the United States. Despite Europe's ascent from the Dark Ages, American enlightenment fostered a populist mindset equating education with elitism (Jouet, 2017). It embraced pragmatism and the "self-made man" ideal (Huang et al., 2021, p. 5) to shape the nation and its people (Burns, 2013). The sanctity of common sense and folk wisdom (Jouet, 2017) made education seem unnecessary for success. This became "good old American know-how," favoring street smarts over

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intelligence (Long et al., 1996, p. 33). Educated intellectuals were seen as effeminate and ineffectual compared to the rugged self-made man, who succeeded "because he made himself" (Huang et al., 2021, p. 5).

Thus, if history teaches us anything, it demonstrates the long-standing tradition in American society for mistrust and hostility toward intellect, intellectuals, and intellectual pursuits, consigning intellectualism as "un-American" (Long et al., 1996, p. 33). While its form may change with time and place, anti-intellectualism is fundamentally American, as seen in its historic roots. Education is needed for social progress and economic prosperity. Incongruously, anti-intellectualism is a persistent counterforce that pits populist attitudes against knowledge, widening the chasm between informed discourse and the propagation of dis and misinformation (Huang et al., 2021).

The Normalization of Ignorance and Anti-Intellectualism

Anti-intellectualism has been described as a "virus" (Peters, 2019), the "kryptonite of a democracy" (Childs, 2020), and the leading threat to modern society (Berezow, 2016). These judgments are recognizable across the geo-political-social stratum, from the rhetoric of politics, popular culture, religion, and business (Asimov, 1980; Hofstadter, 1963; Huang et al. 2021, Jacoby, 2009; Motta, 2018; Peters, 2019; Scott, 2014), to their intrusion within higher education (Giroux, 2015; Pap, 2021; Sterling, 2024a). The consequences of this assault are far-reaching; undermining the nation's ability to deal effectively with complex issues (Sterling, 2024a, para. 2) and suffocating academic freedom, stifling intellectual diversity, and suppressing the pursuit of knowledge (Norris, 2020a; West, 2022). As Childs (2020) eloquently explains,

> [An] uneducated, ignorant citizenry can greatly weaken or completely kill a democracy. Indeed a lack of respect for education can render a society unrecognizable as a democracy and actually usher in a totalitarian government. When we as a society begin to discredit knowledge and intelligence, and undermine the value of education we relegate ourselves to a great loss of freedom. The mistakes made at that point would have great economic consequences, which will ultimately cost lives (para. 2).

Democracy and education share a critical bond (Hytten, 2017). Democracy's essence is independence and liberty, with spiritual cornerstones of mind emancipation and unhampered freedom to think (Dewey, 1903), essential for dissent (West, 2022). Education strengthens democracy's foundations and facilitates citizen participation by imparting knowledge and boosting critical thinking (Sterling, 2024b). A robust egalitarian society relies on intellectual freedom and critical thought to secure the union between democracy and education (Dewey, 1903, p. 204).

On top of historical precedent, three inextricable trends have normalized the apparent ubiquity of anti-intellectualism: the democratization of information (Hofstadter, 1963; Peters, 2019; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012; Wallace & Van Fleet, 2005); the politicization of everything (Baker, 2017; Douglass, 2023; Salzmann, 2018; Szalai, 2017); and public tolerance for hate speech, name calling, and condemnation of the messenger's character rather than the message (Brown, 2021; John et al., 2019; Niose, 2015; Paz et al., 2020). In

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this intellectual milieu, ongoing tension between reason and belief systems pose ominous consequences for universities, nonprofits, and think tanks (West, 2022).

Democratization of Information

The democratization of information is a direct result of the internet providing open access to information. An average person can easily access information digitally via Google and other search tools. From pooling global knowledge to the speed, access, and emergence of various communication modes, the internet links humankind such that "We are all now connected like neurons in a giant brain" to paraphrase Stephen Hawking (Goodman, 2023). Unfortunately, the internet has also brought disadvantages such as information overload, lack of privacy, cybercrime, and information piracy. It is also a means of spreading dis- and misinformation, leading to a false sense of knowing. Conspiracy theories and distorted narratives compete with expert knowledge, offering overly simplistic or flawed alternatives. This promotes anti-intellectualism, breeds mistrust, and erodes confidence in objective truth. Dr. Richard Baron (2019) makes this very point and others in his TED Talk, “Please Don’t Confuse Your Google Search with My Medical Degree,” where he discussed the essentiality for trust between doctors and patients when making personalized healthcare decisions.

Modreanu (2017) opines that we are living in a post-truth era, where "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (p. 7). Empirical proof and rational discourse compete with postmodern pseudoscience, fortunetelling, astrology, paranormal beliefs (Sokal, 2008, pp. 263-370, as cited in Sidky, 2018) and conspiracy theories to shape people's perception of reality and decision-making. Conspiracy theories are exemplars of anti-intellectualism, rejecting established facts for self-reinforcing sources. Bowes Costello and Tasimi (2023) state that conspiracy theories involve (a) conspirators, (b) secret plans, and (c) malicious intent against others or society (p. 2). From Kennedy's assassination to contemporary intrigues about birtherism, election fraud, vaccines, and racial replacement theory, those endorsing conspiracy theories believe they possess insider knowledge, fulfilling important identity needs (Jordan, & Whitmer, 2024). Conspiracy theories reflect current social conditions, proliferating during crisis events (Basit, 2021). Built on anti-intellectualism and often powered by political extremism and far-right radicalization, they may lead to violence, as seen at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. Sterling (2024a, para. 6) notes, "In a society where expertise is devalued and ignorance is glorified, demagogues and charlatans can easily manipulate public opinion, undermining the foundations of a healthy democracy".

Politicization of Everything

Politicians, often unqualified, offer opinions contradicting historical and scientific evidence on topics from vaccines to climate change (Merkley, 2020; Merkley & Loewen, 2021; Sidky, 2018). The pandemic's politicization highlights this issue (Druckman, 2022). Of the 1.1 million US COVID-19 deaths (Gamio et al., 2023), about one-third could have been prevented through vaccination and adherence to public health guidelines (Martinez & Aubrey, 2022). President Trump and Republican leaders downplayed the virus risk and CDC advisories, negatively influencing public behavior. Following health advice became a matter of political affiliation rather than science-based decision-making (Druckman, 2022; Lopez,

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2021). Republican leadership's politicization of the pandemic and spread of misinformation led to more infections and deaths, as well as diminished faith in scientific protocols and expert knowledge.

The Backlash against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

To address concerns about minority underrepresentation, universities have prioritized diversity in recruiting and retaining faculty and students. Critics claim this emphasis on underrepresented groups is reverse racism or just racism (Betts, 2024), arguing individuals may lose opportunities by not belonging to certain groups. They question the cost of "DEI bureaucracies" and view DEI as virtue signaling rather than meaningful affirmative action. DEI is a politically charged issue, attacked mainly by conservative operatives (Alfonseca, 2024), emboldened by a Supreme Court ruling ending affirmative action in college admissions (Olson et al., 2024). The backlash against DEI is part of a larger shift away from political correctness, civility, cultural sensitivity, and "wokeness" (Florida Governor, 2021; Moss & O'Connor, 2020; Russell-Brown, 2023; Zavattaro & Bearfield, 2022) in contemporary society.

If one is "woke," it means they are aware of and concerned about significant societal issues related to racial and social justice. While this seems a reasonable goal for liberal education and promoting equity in a democratic society, an "anti-woke crusade" is underway across the US, led by Republican-led states (Hanley, 2023). According to a recent tally, "44 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism. Eighteen states have imposed these bans and restrictions either through legislation of other avenues" (Schwartz, 2021, as cited in Hanley, 2023, p. 1). One such state is Florida, where Governor Ron DeSantis signed the Stop WOKE Act into law. WOKE in this case is an acronym for "Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees." The law, which took effect on July 1, 2022, regulates the content of instruction and training in schools and workplaces (Florida Governor, 2021). It prohibits teaching critical race theory, white privilege, and material that could make individuals feel responsible for historic injustices due to race, gender, or national origin. The law carries penalties up to $10,000, and non-compliance could result in a university losing state funding (Burt, 2022). President Fuchs of the University of Florida has described the current political context as "encroaching authoritarianism" (Burt, 2022), where the larger story is a moral panic at odds with academic freedom despite claims to the contrary by conservatives (Hanley, 2023).

Metaphorically depicted as "beleaguered citadels in a vast ocean of irrationality", institutions of higher education are under siege globally (Sidky, 2018, para. 22); their academic liberty, institutional autonomy, and core values are under attack, requiring them to balance academic integrity with external pressures (Hao, 2020).

The Role of Media

The signs of anti-intellectualism in contemporary society are numerous. In Western democracies, “cognitive rigidity, dogmatism, intolerance, prejudice, and other forms of irrationalism” threaten liberalism (Baron & Jost, 2019, p. 292), benefiting authoritarianism and its disdain for heterogeneity and critical inquiry. Fueled by nativism, nationalism, and extremist movements, anti-intellectualism is advanced through social media propaganda,

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erosion of trust in traditional institutions, and false equivalencies by corporate news outlets (Childs, 2020; Ordway, 2017; Renze, 2021; Sterling, 2024b; Young, 2017; Zadronzy, 2024) claiming to be "fair and balanced". Ironically, the virtues of neutrality and objectivity in journalism sometimes get distorted, unintentionally by avoiding bias, and purposefully through lies, omissions, and propaganda, e.g., the $787M settlement between Dominion Voting Systems and Fox to avoid a trial that would have exposed network lies about the 2020 presidential election (Bauder et al., 2023). According to McKenzie Huitsing (2024), a researcher for the Media Bias/Fact Check website, an independent, reader-supported resource,

> Overall, we rate Fox News right-biased based on editorial positions that align with the right and questionable due to the promotion of propaganda, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, the use of poor sources, and numerous false claims and failed fact checks. Straight news reporting from beat reporters is generally fact-based and accurate, which earns them a mixed factual rating.

Despite the less than stellar rating on the Media Bias/Fact Check website, Fox News consistently beats competitors in viewership across all ratings categories (Seitz, 2023). Appealing to a particular echo chamber, even at the cost of truth, is apparently lucrative. Viewer preferences and profitability may not align with objective truth but shape corporate news media (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Renze, 2021). The press corps' inability to tolerate asymmetry is a job hazard of preserving impartial reporting. High ratings mean increased advertising revenue as advertisers are drawn to networks with large audiences (Seitz, 2023). Still, should facts (truth) and alternative facts (lies) receive equal time in the news or academic discourse?

False Equivalences and Other Populist Strategies

Alterman (2013) maintains, "Journalists create a sense of false equivalence between positions that rest on data and logic and those that don't" (para. 3). False equivalence is an insidious form of cognitive bias that leads people to believe two separate things are equally bad or equally good (Sarkis, 2019). Fairness does not require giving equal weight to opposing sides when a topic is a matter of fact that can be substantiated or refuted (Apperson, 2020). That the earth is round, climate change is real, neither ivermectin nor hydroxychloroquine cure COVID-19, and the 2020 U.S. election was not stolen are demonstrable facts. As the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan stated, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts" (Apperson, 2020, para. 5).

Anti-intellectualism is not accidental or passive. Research shows a positive correlation between anti-intellectualism and populism, which is rising globally (Merkley, 2020; Motta, 2018; Norris, 2020b) and more vociferous than before (Kyle & Meyer, 2020). The numbers are alarming. Evidence reveals populism at a 30-year high, with almost "five times as many populist leaders and parties in power now than at the end of the Cold War, and three times more since the turn of the century" (Kyle & Meyer, 2020, p. 3). "Populist Zeitgeist," coined by Mudde (2004, 2018), fittingly describes the world and era in which universities function.

Grievance politics, book-bannings, fake news, and manipulative messaging have been employed as tools to distract attention and delegitimize arguments through obfuscation (Huang et al., 2021). This tactic has successfully solidified power and garnered support (Cole,

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2023; Schneider, 2023; Scussel & Norris, 2023) by those seeking to protect their interests through ideological reasoning (Merkley, 2020). The GOP has embraced anti-intellectualism as a conservative form of populism (McManus, 2022; Shogan, 2007) to appeal to John and Jane Q Public. Political figures often emphasize anti-intellectualism in their public statements (Scott, 2014). As Scott (2014) observes, "politicians work hard to distance themselves from intellectualism, or to attach it to their opponents" (p. 13). By mocking and rejecting intellectual elitism, the disparager establishes a shared enemy, gains support from ordinary citizens, and enhances political currency.

Populists employ various stratagems to subvert deliberative norms and practices (Cheshier, 2019). Logical fallacies are the most common tactics used alongside anti-intellectualism (Huang et al., 2021). Table 1 below, compiled mainly from Huang et al. (2021, pp. 15-18), highlights several common anti-intellectual strategies.

Table 1.
Common Strategies of Anti-Intellectualism (Source: Huang et al., 2021, pp. 15-18)

Strategy	Explanation
Whataboutism	Responding to an accusation by making a counteraccusation or raising a different issue (Huang et al., 2021, p. 15).
Willful Ignorance	Upholding a firm stance — often defended by values, intuition, emotions, or anecdotal evidence — and selectively disregarding contrary evidence. Willful ignorance is a conscious and calculated choice (Huang et al., 2021, p. 16).
Tareyton Effect	The Tareyton effect, coined by the author, occurs when willful ignorance becomes an excuse to fight. Named for the famed Tareyton cigarettes ad campaign from 1963 to 1981 (Vintage News Daily, 2021), it features the tagline "Us Tareyton smokers would rather fight than switch!" The ads' protagonists sported a black eye, demonstrating defiance, brand loyalty, and readiness to fight for their beliefs.
Strategic Ignorance	Any deliberate action(s) aimed at sowing doubt, misinformation, disinformation, and other forms of not knowing (Barbier et al., 2021; Jalonen, 2024; Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008; Scussel, 2024).
Circular Argument	A circular argument occurs when the premise assumes the conclusion rather than providing supporting statements (Huang et al., 2021, p. 16).
Strawman Arguments	Rather than providing a whole picture, strawman arguments focus on portions of an argument that support their own assertions by reducing, generalizing, or mischaracterizing the opposing argument into something easily overturned to avoid dealing with the complexities of an opposing viewpoint (Huang et al., 2021, p. 17).
False Causality	False causality occurs when someone erroneously believes a causative relationship exists between two objects or events (Huang et al., 2021, p. 17).
False Equivalence	False equivalence occurs by making comparisons based on flawed reasoning, when no such similarity exists (Alterman, 2013; Apperson, 2020; Sarkis, 2019).
Assumed Authority	This is the fallacy of assumed rational-legal authority where none exists. It occurs when someone cites the presumed expertise of an individual, irrespective of their actual knowledge, to prove a point (Huang et al., 2021, pp. 17-18).
Cherry Picking	This is the fallacy of incomplete evidence. Cherry-picking, a ploy used by propagandists, entails selecting details from genuine research to skew data to one's own ends (Hardy, 2023).

Weaponization of Language: What's in a Name?

Anti-intellectualism spreads false information, discourages dealing seriously with complex issues, and fosters complacency and intellectual sloth (Sterling, 2024b). Public figures

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ridicule expertise, push opinion as fact, white wash history, and advocate violence (Giroux, 2022; Pascale, 2019). Their rhetoric attacks opponents, intimidates perceived enemies, and discredits interpretations of reality that don't support their agenda (Pascale, 2019; West, 2022) since agreement and compliance matter more than objective reality and truth –e.g., asserting that 2 + 2 = 5, as in Orwell's 1984 (Cole, 2023).

The public has frequently shown contempt and skepticism towards intellectuals, associating them with communism, immorality, and other dubious qualities viewed as anti-American (Hofstadter, 1963). During the McCarthy era of the 1950s, universities faced intense scrutiny over the perceived threat of communism on campuses, a consequence of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. Faculty members were accused of being communists or having communist sympathies, leading to firings, blacklists, and a climate of fear on campuses (Kirstein, 2004; Klein, 1997). This has left an unfavorable legacy for American higher education where professors, researchers, and students were often targeted, creating a climate of fear and suspicion within academia, and one in which education became the focal point of anti-intellectual narratives (Moore, 2017).

Moore (2017) submits that epithets and disparaging names distance intellectuals from mainstream society, perpetuating the stereotype that these individuals, while highly intelligent, lack social skills and are out-of-touch with accepted norms. Using pejoratives such as egghead was a deliberate form of ostracization that disassociated intellectual thought from that of ordinary Americans. Consequently, intellectuals were linked in public discourse to communism, immorality, and other nefarious values considered anti-American (Hofstadter, 1963).

Merkley (2020) provides evidence of a strong association between anti-intellectualism and opposition to scientific positions on climate change, nuclear power, GMOs, and water fluoridation. This connection is especially pronounced for respondents with higher political interest. Evidence shows anti-intellectualism is connected to populism, a worldview that sees political conflict as primarily between ordinary citizens and a privileged, societal elite.

Merkley and Loewen (2021) examine whether anti-intellectualism influenced the public's response to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). They show a consistent link between anti-intellectualism and the response to COVID-19, including risk perceptions, adherence to social distancing, mask usage, misperceptions and information acquisition. Anti-intellectualism posed a significant challenge in maintaining public compliance with expert-recommended health directives during the pandemic.

Barker et al. (2022) highlight the partisan nature of anti-intellectualism, particularly epistemic hubris—an inflated certainty about one's knowledge, linked to power, arrogance, and overconfidence. Their findings reveal that epistemic hubris is partisan: intellectuals are mostly Democratic, while anti-intellectuals are mostly Republican. The intellectualism of Blue America and anti-intellectualism of Red America contribute to the intemperance and intransigence in current U.S. civil society.

According to Long (1996), negative portrayals of academics in popular culture stem from growing anti-intellectualism in American society. College faculty is often derided as those whose work is primarily theoretical, too esoteric for practical use. The professoriate is also portrayed as foolish or eccentric. Popular culture and public opinion reflect general dissatisfaction.

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PhDead?

The rhetoric of anti-intellectualism has attained a "new high water mark" (Dewitt, 2020, para. 25) in recent years. Examples of ignorance, particularly attacks on higher education, are ubiquitous and observed globally, echoed by political figures, religious leaders, comedians, and relatives who subscribe to conspiracy theories. Professors are routinely condemned by right-wing organizations such as Campus Watch (Means et al., 2024, p. 3) and groups who have embraced anti-intellectualism as a "badge of positive Americanism" (Fedorova, 2012, p. 2).

For instance, President Eisenhower first popularized the use of anti-intellectual oratory during his campaign, describing intellectuals as men who “take more words than necessary to tell more than he knows” (Hofstadter, 1963; Huang et al., 2021, p. 9; Moore, 2017).

When George Wallace ran for president in 1972, he blamed “pointy-headed intellectuals” for all evils, from growing crime rates and changing sexual mores to busing and the war in Vietnam (Morley, 1986, para. 1).

"Universities are the Enemy" was the title of a keynote speech given by then-Senator J.D. Vance of Ohio at the 2021 National Conservatism Conference. The title echoed Richard Nixon's statement to his national security advisor, Harvard professor Henry Kissinger, "Professors are the enemy … write that on a blackboard 100 times and never forget it" (Hett, 2021, para. 2-3). Vance, like many conservatives, opposes academia as part of their culture war against "wokeism" and believes universities indoctrinate learners in critical race theory, radical gender ideology, and DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) rather than teaching "an honest, patriotic account of American history" (Hett, 2021, para. 4).

In Hungary, a bastion in Central Europe for pseudo-Christian styled nationalism and authoritarian rule, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has declared war on higher education, attacking professors and democratic values (Means et al., 2024) under the banner of his 'illiberal democracy,' a term appropriated from political commentator Fareed Zakaria (Laruelle, 2022). Advancing his illiberal agenda, Orbán has closed the Central European University and Center for Social Sciences, dismantled research centers, censored scholarly publications, terminated scientists' employment, defunded and banned academic programs, and stripped the Academy of Sciences of its autonomy (Pap, 2021). Orbán has adopted a campaign to eliminate the teaching of climate science and other erudite disciplines that conflict with far-right ideology (Means et al., 2024).

A less consequential example but no less striking; at a recent fundraiser for Kari Lake’s Arizona Senate campaign, Roseanne Barr delivered an alarming admonition to college students via video rant (TYT, 2024):

> …So I’m just going to say to you, please drop out of college, because it’s going to ruin your lives. Do me a favor, drop out, they don’t teach you nothing good, uh, email me or Twitter me or whatever you call me, and I’ll help you with your life, but you gotta get out of college, because it isn’t nothing but devil-worshipping, baby blood-drinking, Democrat donors.

In just 24-hours’ time, the video went viral. Mocked by some and praised by others, Roseanne’s histrionics on the evils of college proliferated at an exponential rate across the

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Internet and multiple social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube), as well as on cable stations and late-night T.V.

Ramifications for Academic Freedom

Anti-intellectualism and its correlates, ignorance and populism, pose significant challenges to the survival of academic freedom and core principles of higher education. Table 2 summarizes the impacts and implications of anti-intellectualism for the future of academe.

Table 2
Anti-Intellectualism's Challenge to Academic Freedom

Threat	Consequences
Threat to Free Inquiry	Anti-intellectual postures stifle research and critical inquiry. This mindset makes it harder for scholars to explore controversial or unconventional ideas without fear of reprisal or censure (Alibašić et al., 2024; Burbules, 2022; Garry, 2023).
Weakens Scholarly Values	Anti-intellectualism undermines higher education's ideals of open dialogue, rigorous research, and intellectual curiosity. Academic independence suffers when these ideals are compromised (Alibašić et al., 2024; Sultana, 2018).
Outside Pressures	Anti-intellectual forces like authoritarianism, state overreach, geopolitical conflict, right-wing populism, and religious nationalism globally may pressure universities to conform to specific ideologies or suppress dissenting views. This can limit academic freedom by discouraging scholars from expressing unpopular opinions or pursuing unconventional research topics (Berg et al., 2023; Douglass, 2023; Goodman, 2024; Klein & Norris, 2022; Lerch et al., 2024; Pap 2021; Schofer et al., 2022; Unal, 2024).
Market Mechanisms	Academic freedom is in jeopardy due to market-oriented forces driving university corporatization. When educational institutions prioritize consumer-oriented objectives over intellectual endeavors, education quality may suffer (Alibašić et al., 2024; Benn, 2015; Moody, 2023; Sultana, 2018).

To combat anti-intellectualism and advance critical thinking and open inquiry, universities need to take several actions. Antidotes to anti-intellectualism that emerge from this paper include promoting intellectual diversity; supporting academic freedom for all faculty, even those expressing unpopular opinions or engaging in controversial research; building bridges by engaging with all stakeholders inside and outside academe to facilitate informed citizen participation and public debate; and calling out misinformation and disinformation via media literacy.

Conclusion

This paper examined anti-intellectualism in its forms, considering the confluence of historic roots and current developments to foresee its impact on higher education and implications for its future. Combating anti-intellectualism's reach is crucial to safeguard academic freedom, shared governance, and higher education's integrity. Whether that future is bleak or bright, portending the academy's death or renewal, remains an empirical question, intertwined with democracies' survival globally, both hanging in the balance. If taken for granted, their demise is inevitable. A strong egalitarian society depends on intellectual freedom, critical thought, and civil discourse to secure the mutuality shared by democracy and higher education.

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