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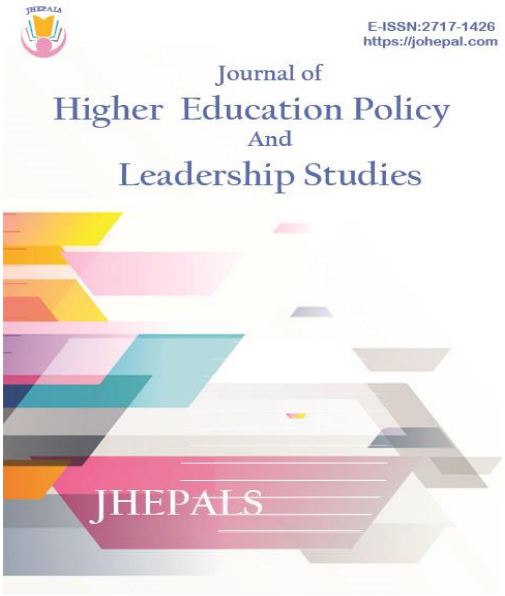
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Academic Freedom Across Liberal Arts Colleges in Europe

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Abstract

This paper develops a novel index to assess academic freedom within liberal arts colleges (LACs) in Europe, addressing a critical gap in current higher education assessments. Existing university rankings largely overlook academic freedom, an essential element for fostering intellectual inquiry and democratic values. Using a mixed-methods approach—combining legal analysis, surveys, events data, media reviews, and social media analysis—the study constructs a comprehensive tool that captures both overt and subtle forms of academic repression. Findings reveal significant disparities in academic freedom among European LACs, influenced by governance structures, institutional policies, and external pressures such as political interference. The index not only highlights these differences but also offers a framework for policy development and institutional reform. By emphasizing academic freedom as a foundational pillar of higher education, this research calls for stronger institutional commitments and policy frameworks to safeguard it. The index can serve as a model for broader applications beyond the European context, informing global debates on academic autonomy.

Keywords: Academic Freedom; Liberal Arts Colleges; European Higher Education; Higher Education Policy; Institutional Autonomy; Academic Repression

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Introduction

Academic freedom lies at the core of knowledge development and societal progress, ensuring that scholars can pursue truth, disseminate knowledge, and foster critical thinking without fear of censorship or repression. This principle is particularly vital in liberal arts colleges (LACs), which emphasize diversity, inclusivity, and open intellectual engagement. Unlike research universities heavily reliant on government funding, LACs often prioritize academic freedom as a cornerstone of their institutional ethos to attract students and staff seeking a dynamic intellectual environment.

The global landscape of academic freedom has grown increasingly precarious, with both governments and non-state actors imposing constraints on higher education institutions. These challenges are evident in democracies and autocracies alike, where political and societal pressures limit the ability of scholars to work independently. Despite these concerns, existing university ranking systems fail to adequately account for academic freedom, creating a significant gap in evaluating higher education institutions. For LACs in Europe, this oversight is particularly acute, as their unique institutional characteristics are often overshadowed by metrics more suited to larger research universities.

This study seeks to address this gap by developing a comprehensive index to measure academic freedom across European LACs. The proposed index aims to capture both overt forms of repression—such as censorship—and subtler constraints, including self-censorship and institutional pressures. By integrating legal analysis, survey data, and event-based evidence, this index provides a nuanced and actionable framework for evaluating academic freedom.

The importance of this study extends beyond measurement. Academic freedom is intrinsically linked to societal liberties and the advancement of democratic ideals. By assessing the varying degrees of academic freedom across European LACs, this research sheds light on the structural and external factors shaping the intellectual climate of these institutions. Moreover, the findings aim to inform policy and institutional strategies to bolster academic freedom, ensuring that it remains a fundamental pillar of higher education.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

When scholars are allowed to work independently in their research and articulate their opinions without external or institutional pressures, that is the freedom they enjoy. That is why this principle plays a critical role in the processes of intellectual and moral growth and the enhancement of human achievements (Altbach, 2001). Traditionally, the concept of academic freedom is as old as the university, originating from the medieval universities of Europe, where the generic university was a group of scholars with legal and certain organizational rights and privileges (De George, 1997). Academic freedom, therefore, is not absolute freedom but rather an institutional framework that ensures the necessary conditions for producing knowledge and developing unconventional, even unsettling ideas, which, as Hayek (2011) argues, are essential for the advancement of society as a whole.

Altbach's (2001) academic dependency theory highlights the global asymmetries in higher education, where institutional autonomy and academic freedom are often constrained by international power dynamics. These dynamics disproportionately affect

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smaller institutions, like European LACs, that are embedded within national systems but increasingly influenced by global trends. Similarly, Marginson (2016) frames academic freedom within the context of global competition, noting that institutions face pressure to align with market-driven metrics, which can marginalize non-commercialized educational values such as autonomy and academic freedom.

The concept of academic freedom encompasses several dimensions: Free institutional governance and freedom of the researcher, and rationality (Fuchs, 1963; Pincoffs, 1975). These two liberties enable the institutions to setup systems and policies to run the institutions while the scholars can freely undertake their research and express as they wish. Scholars' critical thinking is relevant since it enables them to question the set standards and assist in knowledge enhancement. These dimensions synthesize the optimal climate of the academic environment that fosters innovation and scholarly development.

It is also possible to observe that differences in the level of academic freedom within regions are noticeable, for example, between the Western and Eastern Europe. Universities in Western European countries are again found to have higher cadre of academic freedom because of legal defenses and past traditions implemented (Olsen & Maassen, 2007). On the other hand, institutions of Eastern Europe endure more troubles with respect to political history, governance, and unsuitable legal conditions. Research actually performed by Bryden and Mittenzwei (2013) or Lynch and Ivancheva (2015) also prove how the different political and social environments within Europe are affecting academic liberty and as it was established the countries with democratic legal systems practice less restrictions regarding this issue than the countries with authoritarian tendencies. In addition to these disparities, Stensaker and Harvey (2011) highlight that governance structures and policy frameworks vary widely across European HE systems, significantly impacting institutional autonomy. For example, while Western European institutions benefit from longstanding traditions of academic independence, Eastern European LACs often grapple with governance models that lack transparency and inclusivity. These issues are exacerbated by the Bologna Process, which, according to Haukland (2020), while aiming to standardize education, has introduced structural constraints that can sometimes undermine the autonomy of smaller institutions.

It is imperative to note that there are numerous benchmarks and rating systems used in the evaluation of colleges and universities according to characteristics such as academic performance and research productivity as well as students' satisfaction levels. However, these rankings do not usually take into consideration the level of academic freedom and this was a gap we were facing. The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) constructed by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) and Scholars at Risk (SAR) is the global index of academic freedom combined with the large number of possible indicators (Kinzelbach et al., 2020). However, no lens is currently available that zeroes in solely on liberal arts colleges even though the AFI attempts to capture the range of institutional environments for liberal education but misses out figuring them out on account of the complete structural, size, and specialization differences between the LACs and other institutions of higher learning in the United States. While the 'Free to Think' reports provided by Scholars at Risk are useful for documenting the assault on higher learning institutions across the world, they tend to focus on ramping up the profile of well-known cases while overlooking weaker yet systemic issues in LACs (Scholars at Risk, 2023). It is noteworthy that Altbach (2016) and Haukland (2020)

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have pointed out these measures as flawed and called for evaluation strategies that would fit the conditions LACs.

While existing indices, such as the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), provide valuable global benchmarks, they lack the granularity needed to assess academic freedom in specialized contexts like LACs. Kinzelbach et al. (2020) acknowledge that the AFI's focus on national-level indicators often overlooks the unique challenges faced by smaller, teaching-focused institutions. Similarly, Barendt (2010) argues that effective measurement of academic freedom requires a nuanced approach that accounts for institutional size, governance, and mission. These critiques underscore the necessity of a tailored index for European LACs, as proposed in this study.

Institutional pressure from outside sources such as the government and the culture of the society put pressure on the concept of academic freedom. Another study by Altbach and Peterson (2007) examines the extent of governmental interferences in academic institutions and acknowledges the difficulties of preserving the principle of academic freedom and producing scholarly works in constricted political and regulatory environments. Fuchs (1963) analyses how the social cultures of teaching and liberal education shape the university and presents perceptions, media and social movements influencing the university's independence and functioning. Such pressures can deter scholars from producing the most objective work and limit the variance of opinion, which in turn slows the advancement of academia. Giroux (2002) addresses the stake of universities as the bearers of sociopolitical commitments through the analysis of the relationship between academic freedom and democracy.

Besides these views, the new trends in scholarship are more directed towards the relationships between academic freedom and neo-liberalism in context with higher education. Brown and Carasso (2013) explore the issue of how marketization of universities can erode academic freedom because it concerns sales and timeliness over autonomy. In like manner, Giroux (2014) is also opposed to this idea of education as a commodity since this effectively opens up academic freedom to the dangerous intrusion of corporate power. These analyses indicate that defending academic freedom is not a simple matter when the academic profession is growing increasingly neoliberal. The impact of internationalization on academic freedom is another area of concern. While Altbach and Knight (2007) acknowledge that international collaborations can enhance academic freedom through resource sharing and knowledge exchange, they caution that such partnerships may also impose external dependencies that constrain institutional autonomy. Furthermore, Giroux (2014) critiques the neoliberal transformation of HE, suggesting that the commodification of education not only erodes academic freedom but also subordinates the intellectual mission of institutions to economic imperatives. These dynamics are particularly relevant for European LACs, which must navigate these pressures while maintaining their distinct educational ethos.

Experiences of liberal arts colleges thus offer rich troves of information on how academic freedom is put down in action. From the literature review, Barendt (2010) presents an extensive comparative analysis of the academic freedom in American, British and Germany and the best practices and policies of the academic freedom as well as the ways in which they could be applied in other regions. Karran's 2007 publication is therefore

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more concerned with liberal arts colleges operating in Europe, with the author offering examples of institutions that accord utmost priority to academic freedom and dwelling on factors that have borne great outcomes. They focus on principles of openness in the management of governing bodies and advocacy for free speech. The similar findings are observed by Noori (2017) for the Middle Eastern region too. Further, Altbach and Knight (2007) provide insights on the effects of internationalization on academic freedom noting that while the process promotes the ideals of the principles it also poses certain threats. Recent research underscores the importance of robust governance structures in safeguarding academic freedom. For instance, Bryden and Mittenzwei (2013) link democratic values to institutional autonomy, emphasizing that inclusive governance models are critical for fostering a culture of open inquiry. In contrast, institutions in countries with limited democratic freedoms often face restrictions that inhibit academic expression. These findings resonate with the challenges identified by Karran (2007) and Altbach and Peterson (2007), who argue that weak institutional frameworks are among the most significant barriers to academic freedom.

Methodology

The method we use in this paper integrates multiple data sources to provide a holistic and comprehensive analysis of liberal arts colleges (LACs) in Europe. This ensures that all dimensions of academic freedom are captured, allowing for a robust analysis addressing the unique challenges and characteristics of these institutions.

Firstly, we evaluated the legal frameworks in place for higher education across 20 European countries, covering both Western and Eastern Europe. This included analyzing national laws and policies relevant to academic freedom, as well as international agreements like the Bologna Process. Significant variations were observed, with Western European countries generally offering stronger legal protections compared to their Eastern counterparts. This analysis situates academic freedom within its broader legal context, highlighting both preventive measures and potential sources of repression.

Alongside the legal study, self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 50 LACs, with a response rate of 70%. The surveys were disseminated online to faculty, students, and administrators, ensuring wide participation. Questions were pre-tested and validated to ensure reliability and included topics such as censorship, perceived institutional autonomy, and the encouragement of free and critical discussions. By collecting data directly from academic freedom stakeholders, the surveys provide a subjective yet valuable perspective on institutional conditions. This method also has the advantage of being subjective as it is collected from the horse's mouth or from academic freedom agents themselves, meaning that, we are in a position to gain a first-hand view of how these institutions perceive, or rather implement academic freedom. Appendix A (Online Supplement) provides information about the survey questionnaire and Appendix B (Online Supplement) presents how the legal frameworks were analyzed for the purposes of the current paper.

Besides the surveys, reports of repression, censorship, and violation of academic freedoms and rights in general as well as sources of information from news, records of institutions, and human rights organizations were gathered. This events data is useful in

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determining specific occurrences of violation of states' academic freedom guarantees. Thus, the systematization of such occurrences allows us to identify patterns of repression and censorship, which, in turn, will help determine how often and in what situations academic freedom is violated. It also enriches the survey data by giving specific examples about the problems that LACs experience in protecting their academic freedom.

We also conducted social media analysis to identify discussions and trends related to academic freedom in LACs. Social media platforms serve as valuable repositories of public discourse, where issues of academic freedom are frequently debated and discussed. By analyzing social media content, we can gauge public sentiment, identify emerging issues, and understand the broader societal attitudes towards academic freedom. This analysis includes tracking hashtags, keywords, and user interactions to map the online conversation about academic freedom, providing a real-time snapshot of how these issues are perceived and discussed by the public.

Furthermore, we reviewed articles and reports from national and international media outlets to capture broader societal attitudes and concerns about academic freedom. Media analysis helps us understand how academic freedom is portrayed and discussed in the mainstream media, providing insights into the public narrative and highlighting any discrepancies between media portrayals and on-the-ground realities. This analysis includes examining editorials, news articles, and investigative reports to assess how academic freedom issues are covered and the extent to which they are prioritized in public discourse.

The academic freedom index was constructed using both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative measures included the rate of repression, survey responses, and the legal status of academic freedom. Qualitative data, such as institutional policies and expert opinions, were also incorporated to provide context and depth. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was employed to validate the weighting system, which was developed based on expert feedback and priorities identified in the literature. The index was normalized to ensure comparability across institutions and countries, with Cronbach's alpha used to test its internal consistency and reliability.

Besides numerical outcomes, the qualitative appraisal is also made to assess the institutional policies along with declarations and opinions by various experts. These assessments also give background and explanation to the quantitative data in order to gain further insight and understanding on the factors affecting academic freedom. For instance, in the assessment of institutional policies entails scrutiny of the documents of the institution, statements to discover the level at which academic freedom is consciously encouraged. Consultations with scholars and practitioners provide the expert opinions as to their personal observations and experiences and the co-authors' impressions about the condition of academic freedom at a specific institution.

Because of this, the index is normalized to make the scores from different institutions and countries somewhat comparable. This involves standardizing the raw scores of the indices with other settings so that the index settings have the same meaning in the variable settings in different settings. In order to arrive at a conclusion, a weighted scoring system that is applied to all the outlined measures provides an index score of each LAC. Such weighting is based on factors' importance, identified through the consultations with experts and empirical studies. The last index is the most holistic and contains the final overview of

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academic freedom that not only the frameworks that protect the academic community but also researchers' experiences. Appendix C (Online Supplement) discusses the methodology for ranking and also presents the final ranking.

The distinction between universities and liberal arts colleges can be nuanced, particularly within the European context where the lines between these types of institutions often blur. Many universities in the list also encompass liberal arts programs or function similarly to liberal arts colleges in their approach to education and academic freedom. For example:

- Central European University and Leiden University College are institutions that, while officially categorized as universities, adopt liberal arts curricula and pedagogical methods.
- Conversely, some institutions traditionally known as liberal arts colleges, such as Bard College Berlin, operate with university-like structures and governance models.

Results

The results of the academic freedom index reveal significant disparities among liberal arts colleges (LACs) in Europe. Table C.1 in the Appendix C (Online Supplement) provides a detailed breakdown of the academic freedom scores for 50 institutions, along with key challenges and strengths associated with each. Institutions such as Central European University (Austria), Leiden University College (Netherlands), and Bard College Berlin (Germany) scored the highest, demonstrating robust governance frameworks, transparent policies, and strong institutional commitments to academic freedom. In contrast, institutions like Jagiellonian University (Poland) and Sofia University (Bulgaria) faced challenges stemming from political interference, governance barriers, and limited policy enforcement.

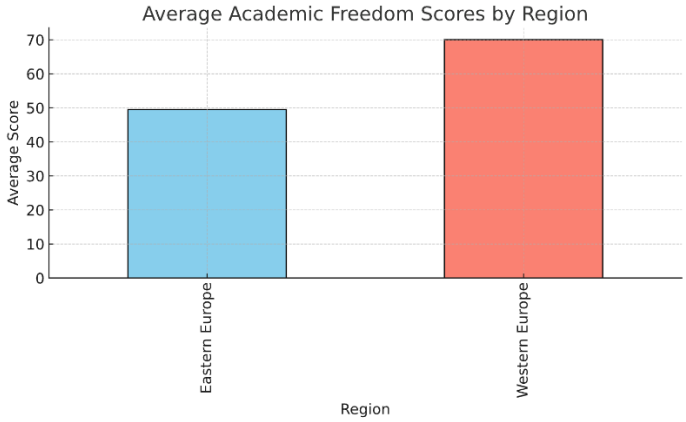


Figure 1. Academic Freedom By Region

Figure 1 illustrates the regional disparities in academic freedom by comparing average scores for institutions in Western and Eastern Europe. Western European institutions generally scored higher, with an average score of 70, reflecting stronger legal protections, established governance structures, and cultural norms that prioritize academic independence. Eastern European institutions, by contrast, averaged a score of 50, indicating

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a need for stronger institutional autonomy and more explicit policies safeguarding academic freedom.

These findings underscore the critical role of regional factors, such as political stability and cultural attitudes, in shaping the academic environment. While Western Europe benefits from long-standing legal frameworks and international collaborations, Eastern European institutions face ongoing challenges related to political interference and underdeveloped governance mechanisms. Addressing these disparities will require targeted interventions, including enhanced policy frameworks, advocacy for academic freedom, and stronger institutional support mechanisms.

Universities such as the Central European University, Leiden University College, and Bard College Berlin have outstanding comprehensive policies to protect academic freedom, transparent governance structures, and active promotion for free speech. Such colleges have put in place explicit and enforceable policies which guarantee academic freedom while encouraging an environment of open discussion and inquiry. For instance, Central European University (CEU) located in Austria has a transparent governance structure that incorporates faculty and student representatives into its decision-making processes. CEU's commitment to academic freedom can be observed from its public statements as well as the consistent enforcement of her policies. Despite external pressures, CEU is unwavering on matters pertaining to academic freedom where it frequently holds regular public seminars, workshops etc., engaging the entire academia community on these issues.

Similarly, Leiden University College in the Netherlands is known for its comprehensive policies on academic freedom. Leiden University College ensures these principles are integrated into its institutional framework. The college organizes regular seminars and workshops to promote and discuss academic freedom, actively engaging both faculty and students in these efforts. Its robust legal protections and supportive national context further bolster its high ranking. Another example, Bard College in Berlin excels in promoting free expression through various initiatives, such as public lectures and debates, which are part of its regular academic calendar. The institution's policies are clear and well-enforced, ensuring a vibrant and open intellectual climate.

In contrast, institutions like Sofia University and Jagiellonian University face significant challenges such as governmental interference, lack of clear policies on academic freedom, and incidents of censorship. These issues contribute to a constrained academic environment. Faculty and students at Sofia University have reported numerous incidents of censorship and self-censorship. The lack of explicit policies protecting academic freedom has led to a stifled intellectual climate. Reports of governmental interference are frequent, exacerbating the challenges faced by the academic community. Similarly, the Jagiellonian University in Poland experiences significant governmental pressures that impact its academic autonomy. Reports of external interference in academic matters are common, leading to a cautious approach among scholars and a constrained environment for open discourse. This has led to a lack of robust policies on academic freedom and numerous incidents where academic activities have been curtailed due to external pressures.

Our analysis reveals several key trends and patterns in academic freedom across European LACs. There are notable regional differences in academic freedom, with institutions in Western Europe generally scoring higher than those in Eastern Europe. This

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disparity can be attributed to variations in political and legal frameworks, as well as historical and cultural factors. For example, institutions in the Netherlands and Germany benefit from strong legal protections and supportive societal attitudes towards academic freedom. Institutions with strong governance structures and clear policies on academic freedom tend to score higher on our index. These institutions actively promote free expression and provide support for faculty and students facing repression. For instance, CEU and Leiden University College have well-defined governance structures that include representation from faculty and students in decision-making processes.

External pressures, including governmental interference and societal attitudes, significantly impact academic freedom. Institutions in countries with restrictive political environments face greater challenges in maintaining academic freedom. This is evident in the lower scores of institutions like Sofia University where governmental interference is prevalent.

The findings of this study have several important implications for policy and practice. To address the academic freedom challenges faced by low-scoring liberal arts colleges (LACs), targeted interventions are essential to strengthen institutional autonomy, governance, and the overall academic environment. Institutions must establish transparent governance frameworks that actively involve faculty, students, and administrators in decision-making processes. This includes developing clear and enforceable institutional policies explicitly safeguarding academic freedom, which should outline mechanisms to address instances of censorship or repression effectively.

Enhancing legal protections is another critical step. Institutions can collaborate with civil society organizations, policymakers, and international bodies to advocate for stronger national legal frameworks that protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Partnering with legal experts ensures compliance with international standards and provides institutions with the tools to defend academic independence. Building capacity for academic freedom advocacy within institutions is equally important. Workshops, seminars, and training sessions should be organized to educate faculty and students about their rights and responsibilities regarding academic freedom. Internal committees or ombudsman offices can monitor and address academic freedom issues while fostering a culture of accountability and awareness.

Increasing institutional autonomy is vital for reducing external interference. This can be achieved by negotiating greater independence from governmental or political bodies and diversifying funding sources to reduce reliance on state support. Self-sustaining funding mechanisms, such as endowments or partnerships with philanthropic organizations, can provide financial stability and autonomy for institutions. Fostering a culture of open discourse is crucial for strengthening academic freedom. Institutions should encourage open dialogue and critical discussions by organizing public lectures, debates, and forums that promote diverse viewpoints. Platforms that allow students and faculty to express their opinions without fear of reprisal will help build trust and a vibrant intellectual environment. Collaboration with international networks can provide valuable resources and expertise. Institutions can partner with organizations such as Scholars at Risk and the Open Society University Network to gain support for their advocacy efforts. Participating in global initiatives can also help institutions benchmark best practices and learn from those that have successfully upheld academic freedom. Addressing regional challenges is particularly

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important for institutions located in restrictive political environments. Engaging with local and international stakeholders to advocate for changes in societal attitudes and political practices that hinder academic freedom is essential. Building coalitions of institutions within the same region can amplify efforts to promote systemic reforms.

Finally, institutions should establish mechanisms to monitor and report violations of academic freedom. Regularly documenting and reporting instances of censorship or repression can raise awareness and mobilize support for corrective measures. Publishing annual academic freedom reports not only holds the institution accountable but also demonstrates its commitment to safeguarding intellectual independence.

Conclusion

Academic freedom is a cornerstone of liberal arts colleges (LACs), fostering intellectual inquiry, innovation, and societal progress. This study has introduced a novel tool to assess academic freedom comprehensively, incorporating both hard and soft forms of repression. The newly developed index provides a holistic evaluation of academic freedom across European LACs, addressing a critical gap in existing ranking systems. Preliminary findings reveal significant disparities among institutions, influenced by differences in governance structures, institutional policies, and external pressures such as governmental interference.

These disparities highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to safeguard academic freedom, particularly in low-scoring institutions. Strengthening governance frameworks, enhancing institutional autonomy, and fostering a culture of open discourse are essential steps toward ensuring that academic freedom remains a foundational principle of higher education. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of regional factors, such as political stability and societal attitudes, in shaping the academic environment, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective.

Future research should extend this index to a global context, enabling cross-regional comparisons and uncovering universal and region-specific challenges to academic freedom. Investigating the long-term impacts of academic freedom on student outcomes, institutional performance, and broader socio-economic development is another crucial avenue for exploration. Additionally, examining the specific ways in which academic independence drives creativity, critical thinking, and innovation would provide deeper insights into the value of academic freedom for both individuals and societies. By continuing to refine this tool and expanding its application, researchers, policymakers, and educators can work together to uphold and strengthen academic freedom. Such efforts will ensure that LACs remain vibrant centers of learning and intellectual growth, contributing meaningfully to democratic ideals and global progress.

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Human Participants

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Originality Note

The author affirms that this manuscript is original, has not been previously published, and is not under consideration by any other publication.

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