



EXPERT INSIGHT | Higher Education Reform Initiative

HOW A COMPACT RESTORES PUBLIC TRUST IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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COMPACT FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Americans have lost faith in their institutions of higher education. According to [Gallup](#), [only 42%](#) of Americans expressed confidence in American higher education in 2025, down from 57% in 2015 and up only slightly from [36%](#) in 2023 and 2024. [Findings from the Pew Research Center](#) confirm this trend: a [2025 poll](#) found 70% of Americans believe higher education is “going in the wrong direction,” up from 56% in 2020. Only 28% think higher education is “going in the right direction,” down from 38% in 2020.

These recent, depressing public assessments contrast sharply with the seven decades following World War II, during which Americans overwhelmingly trusted higher education and celebrated its successes. Time and again, taxpayers expanded their commitment to higher education, highlighted by the G.I Bill, which focused on returning veterans (1944 – 1956); the National Defense Education Act, which focused on building a workforce to compete with the Soviets (1958); and the Higher Education Act of 1965, which expanded access to higher education for millions of Americans. [Enrollments exploded](#), rising from 2.3 million students in 1950 to 8.6 million students in 1970, 13.8 million students in 1990, and peaking at 21.0 million students in 2010.

During this period, there was an unwritten social compact between taxpayers and America's higher education institutions that said, “Since you do great things for us, we will provide the freedom and the funding to do it.” Research dollars poured into campus coffers, and enrollments surged, even after the post-war Baby Boom receded. Institutions were largely left to govern themselves autonomously through peer-driven promotion, research, and accreditation processes. Even during the Red Scare and the tumultuous Vietnam War era, universities were held in high regard and given considerable autonomy.

So why is today's relationship between the public and higher education so different? The real reason the public has lost confidence in higher education is that America's universities no longer share the mainstream American values that formed the foundation of the unwritten compact.

In recent decades, universities have been conquered by ideologies that are overtly hostile to American free expression and ideas—for example, calling Americans “colonizers” and demanding “land acknowledgements.” Higher education institutions went beyond creating opportunity for all students (especially the disadvantaged) to demonizing huge swaths of the population because of their skin color, calling them “fascists” and “oppressors”—a far cry from “All men are created equal.” [Official policies](#) at many leading universities call the Puritan work ethic—the backbone of American culture and tradition—an unacceptable “microaggression.” Identity-driven ideologies even intruded into science, mathematics, and history as the core value systems on campus in all fields, resulting in conclusions like “Math is racist” and “America is and always has been built on racism.” A sense of entitlement to privileges overtook gratitude for being American, and those who held those traditional values were silenced and ostracized on campus for their beliefs.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought this university reality into American homes, and, for the first time, parents saw what their tuition dollars were paying for in these institutions. They were shocked. The culture clash between campus ideologies and mainstream American values came to a head on December 5, 2023, when three elite university presidents were unable to call out as evil the vile actions of Hamas on October 7 of that year, and refused to condemn cries for genocide of Jews as



unacceptable on their campuses. It was clear that our universities had abandoned their commitment to American values, common sense, and the shared public interests of the American taxpayer.

President Trump's Election Brings an Era of Accountability

During the 2024 presidential election, this collision of culture and values was a central theme as elite institutions, led by higher education institutions, systematically worked to oppose the re-election of populist former President Donald Trump. President Trump ran on a platform of traditional American social values and traditions, and the voters rallied behind that cause, restoring him to office despite the determined efforts of academia, mainstream media, social media, technology companies, Hollywood, and the elite business class. His central promise in this campaign was simply that he would put America (and American values) first.

In higher education, his initial actions have focused strongly on bringing direct accountability to higher education for those values. He has leveraged the considerable privileges and funding historically afforded to higher education in order to bring accountability to institutions where there was previously none. Anti-Semitism and the overtly discriminatory ideology of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have been the central focus of these efforts, but the Trump Administration has also focused on cost-related reforms, student loan simplification, research costs, and national security concerns.

For the first time in its long history, external accountability has come to higher education. Not in the slow-moving form of accreditation and regulatory reform—which were dominated by peer-review processes and were co-opted to accelerate the ideological capture of universities—but in the form of real, direct transparency through negotiated settlements, lawsuits, and delayed or canceled research contracts. President Trump has also called for much greater real-time transparency that is based on advances in data analytics and artificial intelligence.

In October of 2025, the Department of Education introduced a draft [Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education](#) (Compact) that (1) clarified and defined the public's interests in higher education (represented by the federal government) and (2) introduced ways institutions could demonstrate their commitment to those interests. In short, this unprecedented move spelled out the taxpayers' expectations of what higher education should be doing on their behalf to justify the support provided by the federal government.

The Opportunity to Restore the Public Trust

The draft Compact was not well received by academia. Why would higher education embrace accountability where none had existed before? Faculty protested the infringement on their vision of academic freedom—a concept that seems to take on whatever meaning will justify allowing them to continue business as usual. Institutions pushed back against the pressures the draft Compact's tuition freeze and modifications to the lucrative overhead payments they receive on their research contracts. Ideological interests in the university bristled at the concept that they would engage with any ideas that violated their specific perspective, and they opposed any efforts to unwind the stranglehold their ideological blinders had imposed on admissions, hiring, and promotions. The institutions that engaged with (and largely rejected) the Compact cited subsets of these concerns in their responses.

However, **such a Compact is precisely the instrument that higher education needs to restore the public's trust.** Institutions must find ways to show the public that they do share their interests and reflect their broader values. They need to make the case to American taxpayers that they are serving the public interests, not their own. They also need to make the case that all Americans are welcomed, valued, and equally served by the institutions.



A Compact between higher education institutions and the federal government that reflects a clear statement of the public interest in higher education would clarify expectations and norms for both the government and academia. Institutions that sign on to that Compact would be making a public pledge to pursue those interests. They would also agree to electronically publish data and information documenting their progress in meeting those commitments. This transparency would allow American parents, students, donors, and the government to ensure that the institutions are actively putting American values and American students first and serving their interests. In exchange, the government would continue its generous support of institutions that are living up to their obligations under the Compact.¹

What should be in the Compact?

First and foremost, the Compact should present a clear statement of the federal interests in higher education, including:

1. Ensuring equal treatment and equal opportunity.
2. Promoting civic virtue, civility, and open discourse.
3. Providing education value to students, communities, and our nation.
4. Conducting valuable research responsibly and in pursuit of the public good.

These goals are not controversial; nearly every college and university president would agree with these public purposes (and argue vigorously that their university is pursuing them). The challenge lies in the details. For example, critical theory, which has become the core operating system on most university campuses, directly contradicts the first interest. The political and ideological imbalance on college campuses today makes it nearly impossible for institutions to achieve the second interest. Spiraling tuitions and degrees that do not provide enough value to pay off the debt incurred to obtain them undermine the value proposition offered in the third interest. Widespread failures to report foreign monies and activities on campus (even though explicitly required under federal law) undermine the fourth point. These are all reflections of the disconnect between the denizens of the Ivory Tower, who have allowed for a cultural takeover of their institutions, and the residents of Main Street America. This is where institutions need to focus their attention and energies if they are to restore public trust.

The Compact should clarify the meaning of these federal interests and provide a clear explanation of each. An upcoming report by AFPI provides a detailed discussion of the components of each of these public priorities and how they should be handled in a Compact.

The Compact should also provide clear accountability mechanisms for ensuring that institutions meet those public interests. *This is the key to rebuilding trust.* **Universities must show that they are pursuing the public interest**, not just paying lip service to it. This would include both real-time evidence and formal accountability through regulatory review and/or accreditation.

The real-time accountability would take the form of disclosure by the universities of the work they are conducting on an ongoing basis to serve each of these interests. The focus should be on outcomes: who did they admit, promote, or hire? What is the economic value of a given degree program? How much does the program actually cost the students who are in it? How many students on campus are

¹ Note that there would still be pathways for institutions choosing not to enter into the Compact to participate in government programs, but it would require additional documentation and support to ensure that the institutions are indeed meeting the public interest in exchange for taxpayer support.



international and how many are not? Who has given them money and what strings were attached? The above-referenced AFPI report contains detailed discussions of the accountability measures that could be used in this real-time process.

Additionally, accreditation needs to be revised and reformed. Much of accreditation today is focused purely on inputs: How many faculty with Ph.D.s do you have? How many books are in your library? Do you have a credentialed librarian? How many square feet of classroom space do you have? Current accreditation dialogues emphasize these inputs and the process to manage them rather than the outputs and purposes of those processes.

Instead, the focus should be on the results institutions are producing: Are you treating your students equally? Do you have conversations on campus where different ideological and political perspectives are engaged? Can your students navigate disagreement in a civil fashion? Does your institution provide a level of access to American students commensurate with the public investment you have received? Are you providing programs that prove valuable to students when they leave campus?

Accreditation should be an extension of the real-time accountability and should focus on the long-term processes and strategies required to produce the desired outcomes. How do they reduce the cost of a degree? What actions and strategies are they pursuing to ensure a range of perspectives are present, not just on campus, but in each classroom? How well are students progressing, and how do they measure success? The focus should be on what the current outcomes are, what the desired outcomes are, and how they are going to get there.

As a matter of principle, our federally chartered accreditation processes should align around fundamental federal interests and should formally hold institutions accountable for meeting them. This reform is critical in a new world where social media, digital information, and artificial intelligence (AI) are redesigning social institutions and student learning in real time. The historical, input-based approach presupposes an educational system built on brick-and-mortar institutions. AI, in particular, necessitates rethinking how we create performance metrics and accountability in the next generation of higher education institutions as the limitations of the legacy university model are stripped away.

The Need for Action is Real

What will not change are the public purposes that create the rationale for public support of higher education institutions in the first place. The Compact can serve as a stabilizing framework to ensure that the aspirations of our nation are balanced against the countervailing pressures of technology and change.

We need our higher education institutions to succeed. American higher education institutions are the foundation upon which America's success of the past century has been built. Not only has the research and new technologies they pioneered transformed and advanced the quality of life in America across nearly every dimension, but they have also been central to the social mobility that has made the United States truly the land of opportunity. Our universities and colleges represent our best hope to continue that success in the future and a working Compact that correctly lays out the public interest and is essential for getting the sector back on the right track for America's future.

