

Editorial: Authoritarian Threats to Higher Education Require a Response

Philip G. Altbach and Gerardo Blanco

Universities everywhere are in crisis. Fiscal difficulties, the challenges of artificial intelligence, declines (or unanticipated spikes) in enrollment, and the problems of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic are among these crises. There is a new set of serious challenges that, with some exceptions, university leaders worldwide have been largely silent about. Our argument is that this new set of challenges requires the attention and courage of university leaders. Of course, speaking out comes with, in some places and circumstances, considerable risk—losing one’s job or perhaps worse.

Examples, unfortunately, abound. In the United States, populist right-wing Florida governor Ron DeSantis is literally reshaping the public higher education system in the country’s third largest state by appointing politically connected presidents, firing boards of trustees, and signing legislation that blocked courses and programs that cover systemic racism and privilege. None of the presidents of Florida’s 40 public colleges and universities have spoken out against these actions. Similarly, almost all of the rectors of Russia’s universities signed a letter of support for the Ukraine war—none protested. In that case, opposition would have meant immediate loss of job and perhaps much worse.

For the past decade, Hungary’s universities have been stripped of autonomy and academic freedom by Victor Orbán, and in Turkey, 15 universities have been shut down for alleged ties to a failed coup against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In India, prime minister Modi’s government has curbed academic freedom and appointed leaders who are supportive of his populist-nationalist agenda. In 2021, the state government in Puebla, Mexico, ruled by the left-leaning MORENA party, the same as the country’s president, seized a private university called the Universidad de las Americas. Many Mexican public universities have also seen their budgets slashed by state and federal governments. The Jesuit-run Central American University (UCA) in Nicaragua was considered one of the top universities in Central America but had been critical of the authoritarian government of president Daniel Ortega. Ortega accused the university of being a “center of terrorism,” and the government confiscated its property, buildings, and bank accounts. Since 2018, over 26 universities have been closed in Nicaragua in a similar manner.

Academic leadership concerning these existential threats is crucial, but how to exercise such leadership is much more complicated. As these and many other examples illustrate, attacks against universities are not exclusive of any ideological or political doctrine. Conservative and populist regimes on both the left and the right have targeted universities, accusing them of elitism, terrorism, or indoctrination. Thus far, reactions have been measured and oriented to appeasing these regimes to avoid further escalation. While the potential for personal and institutional reprisals is real, academic leaders need to account for the risk of silence or inaction. Academic leaders will need courage and coordination, and will need to act in solidarity with other institutions—or they will risk their universities becoming the next victim when it might be too late to take action.