
University leaders cannot be public intellectuals

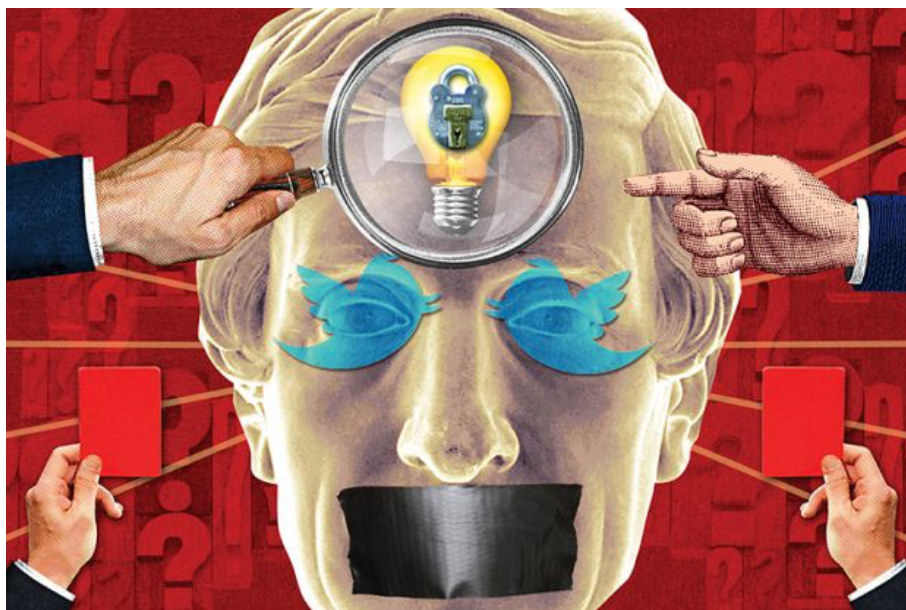
A Twitter storm over a remark he made on diversity policy reminds Jeffrey Flier why he was so wary of speaking out while a Harvard dean

November 22, 2018



By [Jeffrey Flier \(/author/jeffrey-flier\)](#)

Twitter: [@jflier \(http://www.twitter.com/jflier\)](#)



Source: Miles Cole

During nine years as dean of Harvard Medical School, I enthusiastically supported efforts to enhance diversity, equity and inclusion. Two years after leaving that role, I recently tweeted (<https://twitter.com/jfliier/status/1061400170515054593>) my view of a new policy at the University of California, Los Angeles (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-california-top-appeals>) requiring diversity, equality and inclusion issues to be

I also noted that I could not have said this as dean – and the ensuing tweet storm of positive and negative comments about my views only served to reinforce that point.



A leader's role as public intellectual: approach with care ([/comment/opinion/a-leaders-role-as-public-intellectual-approach-with-care/2008176](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/a-leaders-role-as-public-intellectual-approach-with-care/2008176).article)

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In principle, leadership roles in academic institutions perfectly position incumbents to be public intellectuals, robustly engaging with educational, scientific and political issues of the day from their distinguished perches atop the academic pyramid. Unfortunately, anyone holding this view would be severely mistaken.

Academic leaders, such as university presidents and deans, can issue anydne pronouncements on various matters as long as these safely align with the views prevailing in their communities. Most do so with regularity, occasionally edging a wee bit from the centre lane. But when academic leaders engage in intellectual discourse by expressing views that diverge from prevailing opinion, the

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ensuing reactions – even when expressed only by a vocal minority – can easily disrupt their ability to fulfil their primary duties. Such disruption, if severe enough, can even end their leadership tenure. Just ask former Harvard president Larry Summers, the reaction to whose provocative speech on potential explanations for the dearth of women at the highest levels of mathematics and engineering led to his having to step down.

Two major factors account for this state of affairs. The first is in the realm of the practical. Leadership jobs are complex and demanding, requiring full-time effort to manage the areas for which the leader is ultimately accountable. These include choosing among competing academic goals, addressing faculty, answering student and alumni concerns, managing facilities and budgets, devising and refining numerous policies, and, of course, leading fundraising efforts. At best, offering public opinions is seen as a frill – surely not essential but perhaps nice to do if time permits.

In addition, the skills, traits and accomplishments that elevate people to such positions rarely prioritise an ability or inclination to speak cogently and creatively on issues outside their domain of primary expertise. When leaders look around at their peers, they see few, if any, role models for such efforts, and several cautionary tales. Hence, most conclude that the best path to survival and success is to focus on their core responsibilities.

My own time as dean revealed to me several other reasons to favour public taciturnity. These revolve around the hyper-polarisation of political debate, the tendency to tribally demonise those you disagree with, the surprising wariness of academics to express or tolerate heterodox opinions, and the possibility that expressing such perspectives will be construed as harming individuals or communities seen as marginalised or weak, regardless of whether that was the intention or the reality. Add to that the fact that even if a statement is portrayed as representing a personal perspective, many will take it to reflect the institutional view, for better or worse.

The same concerns also apply to opinions and decisions that are directed internally, to the business of the institution itself. A president or dean must appear balanced and judicious, and official statements must run the gauntlet of dozens of eyes and endless special interests. This accounts for why they so often seem unresponsive to deeper questions, and most often appear trite.

Leaders are aware that institutional statements, even when they sign them, are not taken to represent their personal views, but are, rather, an amalgam resulting from the process established to develop and approve them, on behalf of the school. When leaders have strong personal views that differ from the prevailing consensus on an issue, pressures are great to minimise conflict and achieve consensus. Having said that, some of my proudest moments resulted from managing conflict rather than minimising it, as I did by closing one longstanding department and creating a new one, amid opposition from some influential members of the community. You just don't get many such opportunities, given the limits on political capital, time and energy.

Until and unless the academy changes to become more interested in and tolerant of leaders with the time, inclination and skill to be public intellectuals, presidents and deans will have to go on waiting until their leadership tenure is over before taking on the role. From my perspective, I am now in the best possible position to enter the arena as a public intellectual, having experienced life within the academic

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pressure-cooker ecosystem. The height of my bully pulpit may now be less elevated, but, released from most of the constraints imposed by the expectations of deanship, I'm now free to challenge, provoke, surprise and hopefully even enlighten some of the people who will read what I have to say.

Twitter storms notwithstanding, so far I am relishing it.

Jeffrey Flier is a Harvard University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/harvard-university>) distinguished service professor and former dean of Harvard Medical School.

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#1 (</comment/33032#comment-33032>) Submitted by Ian Sudbery on November 27, 2018 - 12:39pm

I think this misses the point. It is definitely better for leaders to speak out on what they believe. Then we know what they believe. Its just that we don't want to be lead by some who have particular views. That is we care about what their views are, not what they say their views are.

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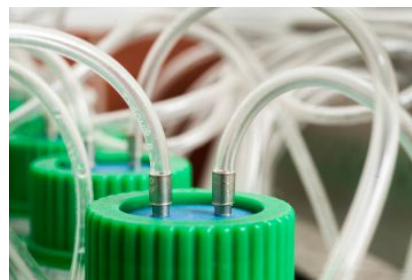


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*Personally I'd rather be lead by someone who *believed* (and not just said they believed) that in the long run increasing diversity the academy is synonymous with prioritizing excellence in the academy.*

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University leaders must engage with public debate

Those who fail to articulate the issues their communities feel strongly about do the academy and society a disservice, says Sandro Galea

January 10, 2019



By Sandro Galea (/author/sandro-galea)

Twitter: @sandrogalea (<http://www.twitter.com/sandrogalea>)



Source: Mat Needle

When Dwight Eisenhower began his tenure (https://www.amazon.com/Eisenhower-Peace-Jean-Edward-Smith-ebook/dp/B00540PBAA/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1543765092&sr=8-1&keywords=eisenhower+jean+edward+smith) as president of Columbia University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/columbia-university>) in 1948 (http://c250.columbia.edu/c250_celebrates/remarkable_columbians/dwight_d_eisenhower.html), he was immediately thrust into a controversy. The university had appointed renowned scholar Manfred Kridl as an endowed chair for the study of Polish language and literature. The position was funded by

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the Polish government, but the Polish-American Congress claimed (https://books.google.com/books?id=IrpHDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT158&lpg=PT158&dq=Manfred+Kridl+eisenhower&source=bl&ots=h382_mBdtL&sig=g4EoaaAKvd9V-MXtNCOJ8-0Z9g&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjfqLa6tIbfAhWwg-AKHdGDsEQ6AEwAHoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=Manfred%20Kridl%20eisenhower&f=false) that it was part of a Russian “academic infiltration” campaign and demanded that the funding be rejected.

Eisenhower was new to academia, but did not shy away from the public debate. He stood squarely in defence of academic freedom, saying at his inauguration that “there will be no administrative suppression or distortion of any subject that merits a place in this university’s curriculum. The facts of communism, for example, shall be taught here...no intellectual iron curtain shall screen students from disturbing facts.”



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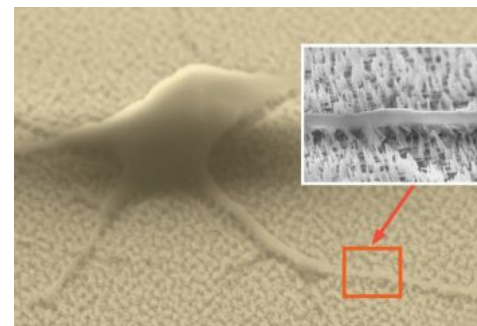
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Eisenhower’s stand is part of a long history of educational institutions engaging with the public debate about issues of consequence. By the end of the 1980s, for example, about 150 US educational institutions had divested

(<https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/does-divestment-work>) from apartheid South Africa. In the previous decade, universities played a key role in efforts to end the Vietnam war. Eisenhower is also part of a tradition of individual university leaders both weighing in on political issues and standing for political office. In successfully running for the presidency soon after assuming leadership of Columbia, he was following in the footsteps of former Princeton president Woodrow Wilson (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=js955GULZNY>), whose effective administration of university affairs led to his successful candidacy for New Jersey governor and, eventually, president.

But it is now substantially less common for university leaders to engage with public debate, much less run for office themselves. In the 1990s, John Silber, then president of Boston University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/boston-university>), ran (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/John-Silber-Transformative/134750>) for governor of Massachusetts, but his is an isolated (and unsuccessful) example. Indeed, former Harvard Medical School dean Jeffrey Flier recently argued (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/university-leaders-cannot-be-public-intellectuals>) in *Times Higher Education* that university leaders *cannot* be public intellectuals. His core reasons are that the modern demands of administration make it hard to find the time, and that our increasingly polarised discourse has amplified the perils of such engagement.

These concerns are valid. It is true that Twitter can lend itself to sudden spasms of mass opprobrium, but it is just one of myriad modern technologies that make it easier than ever to reach an audience: from podcasts and YouTube to online publications and Facebook Live. The trick, for university leaders, is to choose the medium with care. Even within Twitter’s character limits, it is possible to link to articles that provide a deeper dive into complex issues, making space for more reasoned, less instantly reactive debate. I will promote this article, for instance, with a tweet or two from my personal account (https://twitter.com/sandrogalea?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor), which will allow others to see both Flier’s argument and my response. An effective point and counterpoint, efficiently produced and broadcast in a flash: this is what technology offers, and it is an opportunity that university leaders could seize in these turbulent times.



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As the concept of truth itself comes under attack, and ideas are judged solely by what they contribute to the economic marketplace, the primacy and inherent value of facts, which are the foundations of the academic enterprise, must be defended. Individuals in other sectors are already jumping into the fray. Chief Justice John Roberts publicly corrected (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/rebuking-trumps-criticism-of-obama-judge-chief-justice-roberts-defends-judiciary-as-independent/2018/11/21/6383c7b2-edb7-11e8-96d4-0d23f2aaad09_story.html?utm_term=.45b23674e6f5) President Donald Trump's characterisation of a judge who ruled against his administration as an "Obama judge", stating that "we do not have Obama judges or Trump judges...what we have is an extraordinary group of dedicated judges doing their level best to do equal right to those appearing before them." Businesses, too, are taking stands on issues of consequence, as Delta Air Lines did when it opted to cut ties (http://time.com/5182755/delta-airlines-nra-atlanta-georgia/) with the National Rifle Association after the Parkland shooting. What excuse do academic leaders have for standing down when threats to our core values emerge?

Moreover, when they do so, they risk falling behind their communities. During my four years as dean of the Boston University (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/boston-university) School of Public Health, our students and staff have mobilised over a range of issues, from gun safety reform (https://www.bu.edu/research/articles/busph-enough-gun-violence-campaign/) to transgender rights (https://www.bu.edu/sph/2018/09/06/a-yes-on-3-vote-protects-a-vulnerable-community-and-it-endangers-no-one/). Turning a deaf ear to such internal conversations would be an untenable position for a leader of any institution.

Flier is right that the skills that help people rise to positions of academic leadership do not always make for instinctive participation in the national debate. But we are living in a moment of cultural and political transition, and academic leadership must change with the times, or be left behind by them. Moreover, we have a moral responsibility to use our voices to influence the conversation for the better. Here, the Kridl imbroglio is again instructive. Perhaps sensing the attitudes of intolerance that would fuel the rise of Joseph McCarthy just a few years later, Eisenhower found his voice. As we tackle the challenges of our own time, we should aspire to nothing less.

Sandro Galea is professor and dean at the Boston University (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/boston-university) School of Public Health. His latest book, *Well: What We Need To Talk About When We Talk About Health*, will be published in May.

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#1 (/comment/34189#comment-34189) Submitted by jkelmar@inet.net.au on January 10, 2019 - 3:55am

During my 10 years as a Lecturer at one of Australia's Universities I was criticised for speaking out against Lecturers accepting bribes from students for higher grades. Unfortunately this practice was rife in the School of Management, and my Head of School abused, discriminated, and threatened me for discussing this issue on ABC radio. Whilst nearly 90% of staff in the School of Management readily accepted bribes (money and sex) I continued to refuse which resulted in me being ostracised and even banned from talking to a fellow Lecturer from Durham, even though I had encouraged this person to visit Australia during his sabbatical. The Head of School had a vested interest in encouraging staff to take bribes from students, as he had \$500,000 in a Singapore Bank account - all from students paying for higher grades. Senior staff sided with this HOS because they also filled their pockets with "kickbacks". I complained to the Government, Crime Commissions etc, but nothing was done - I suspect that Universities were classified as "Sacred Cows", and many investigative persons had gained their degrees through nefarious means - the police were well know to dismiss speeding fines from these Lecturers - told to me by one such person who was proud that he had connections in the police force. In this case CRIME paid very well!

PS - I was forced to resign whilst undergoing psychological treatment for stress, which resulted in a later diagnosis for PTSD.

reply (/comment/reply/665640/34189)

#2 (/comment/34195#comment-34195) Submitted by m.robertson8_291084 on January 10, 2019 - 9:37am

Consider Proverbs 29:2 "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn." To be righteous, you need not only to BE good, you have to be SEEN to be doing good, speaking out as necessary. That's something we all ought to be doing, not just those in leadership roles: but if you are a leader, you are expected to, well, lead!

reply (/comment/reply/665640/34195)

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