

How to Reform Higher Education

By R. R. Reno
First Things

Congress is deadlocked over a \$1 trillion coronavirus relief bill. As our representatives hash out their differences, I'd like to propose they carefully consider how to distribute relief funds for higher education. (I draw some of these ideas from "Critical Care: Policy Recommendations to Restore American Higher Education After the 2020 Coronavirus Shutdown," a position paper from the National Association of Scholars.)

Most important: Avoid shoveling money into the super-rich colleges and universities. The 2017 tax bill established a tax on income earned by gigantic university endowments. Institutions enrolling 500 or more students that have \$500,000 or more in endowment principal per student are subject to a 1.4 percent tax on their endowment income. Congress should use the same metric of endowment wealth to determine which colleges and university receive relief funds. None that have endowments above \$500,000 per student should receive federal money.

In recent decades, higher education has been bloated with money from federally guaranteed student loans. At the same time, a generation of young people has been saddled with debt. It's past time for institutions to put some skin in the game. Colleges and universities that accept relief funds must be held liable for a significant percent of the principal of student loan defaults.

Legislators should avoid the temptation to "save the system." It's a broken system, one built on an unrealistic and harmful "college for all" approach. This mentality has led us to over-invest in higher education and shortchange vocational education. To make things

worse, over the last generation the American taxpayer has increasingly subsidized the graduate training of foreign students, not American students. The relief bill should reverse this trend, giving priority to community colleges that serve American citizens rather than universities that position themselves as global institutions.

Elite scientists at American universities receive generous pay—and hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Chinese Thousand Talents program. This double game has to stop. Our universities enjoy extraordinary tax advantages and receive federal support through many mechanisms. The American taxpayer should not be asked to subsidize the transfer of intellectual and technological leadership to China. No college or university that employs a professor who has received money from the Thousand Talents or similar programs should receive relief funds.

The cancel culture has its roots in academia, which means we need to start with colleges and universities if we're to reverse this destructive, totalitarian trend. We should respect freedom of association in this country, which means private college and universities can give themselves over to leftist totalitarianism if they wish. Not so public institutions, which have a duty to embody American principles. Public universities that receive relief funding must incorporate the rights of the First Amendment into their bylaws.

Ordinary people are required to obey the laws of our country. But some colleges and universities imagine themselves exempt and have declared that they will not cooperate with the American government's efforts to control illegal immigration. This refusal undermines the rule of law and teaches our country's future leaders to believe that the law does not apply to them. No college or university that has adopted "sanctuary campus" policies should receive relief funds.

There's certainly room for more thinking about how to shape the relief bill to reform higher education. But I'll leave it at that. The important point is that we must put an end to business as usual. Over the last two months we have seen university politics take over the streets of many American cities. We are being subjected to the rotten fruit of too many decades of feckless academic leadership that will not stand up to leftist totalitarians. It is past time to challenge our colleges and universities rather than coddle them. We should remind them of their civic responsibilities. The extreme imbalance of wealth must be corrected. The smug political correctness needs to be checked.

The lockdowns and concern over the coronavirus have disrupted a great deal. Our institutions and citizens need relief. But Congress should not be indiscriminate. Good government means encouraging good behavior, especially among sectors of society that have wandered astray. Higher education is becoming a harmful force in America, not a helpful one. The relief bill offers an ideal opportunity to redress those harms and move our educational culture in a direction that serves all Americans.