


EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

# Democracy and Free Speech on Campus

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In recent months, protests at US colleges and universities—replete with sit-ins, anti-war slogans, tent villages, and arrests of students—have inspired comparisons with 1960s-era activism.<sup>1</sup> During that convulsive period, students responded to the Vietnam War by turning their campuses into sites for civil disobedience and forums for free speech. In response, politicians like Ronald Reagan decried the permissiveness of college and university leaders and denounced student agitators.<sup>2</sup>

Those who went to college in the 1960s see obvious parallels between past and present.<sup>3</sup> The summoning of police to disperse protestors has polarized the public and raised questions about the limits of democracy.<sup>4</sup> Student activism has renewed disagreement over the meaning of higher education. And conflicts over free speech have spilled far beyond campus, with congressional hearings effectively ending the careers of several college presidents.<sup>5</sup>

Such conflicts and uncertainties are clearest in times of upheaval. Yet they are always lurking beneath the surface in higher education. What does it mean to live in

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<sup>1</sup>John Semley, “Police Raids Are Nothing New’: Student Protesters from 1960s See History Repeating Itself,” *Guardian*, May 10, 2024; Noah Cadwell and Brianna Scott, “How the College Protests Echo History,” *Consider This*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/04/29/1198911364/student-protests-palestine-israel-vietnam-compared-history-1968-columbia-campus>.

<sup>2</sup>W. J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War: The 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Richard Gonzalez, “Berkeley’s Fight for Free Speech Fired Up Student Protest Movement,” NPR, Oct. 5, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/10/05/353849567/when-political-speech-was-banned-at-berkeley>.

<sup>3</sup>Alyssa Lukpat, Joseph Pisani, and Suryatapa Bhattacharya, “What 1960s Antiwar Protesters Think about Today’s Unrest on College Campuses,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 12, 2024.

<sup>4</sup>Kevin Young, “The Threat of Democracy on Campus at UMass,” *Nation*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/the-threat-of-democracy-on-campus-at-umass/>.

<sup>5</sup>Gabriella Borter and David Morgan, “U.S. Lawmakers Demand Harvard, MIT, Penn Remove Presidents after Antisemitism Hearing,” Reuters, Dec. 8, 2023, [https://www.reuters.com/world/us/wharton-letter-adds-pressure-penn-president-resign-2023-12-08/#:~:text=Dec%20%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20More,a%20letter%20seen%20by%20Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/wharton-letter-adds-pressure-penn-president-resign-2023-12-08/#:~:text=Dec%20%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20More,a%20letter%20seen%20by%20Reuters). Hannah Natanson and Susan Svrluga, “Penn President’s Resignation Stirs Debate about Limits of Free Speech,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 10, 2023; Josh Moody, “Harvard President Resigns amid Controversy,” *Inside Higher Ed*, Jan. 2, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2024/01/02/harvard-president-resigns-amid-controversy>.

a democracy? What are the appropriate uses of political speech? How should young people be prepared to participate? These questions are inescapable in a nation like the US, and as this issue illustrates, in many other parts of the world as well.

The articles in this issue of *HEQ* highlight the interplay between education, democracy, and campus speech, shedding light on the past and potentially informing our contemporary context. Nicholas Tate's "Unsettling the Reflections in a Pond," for instance, takes us on a journey through the educational thought of José Ortega y Gasset. This celebrated Spanish professor of philosophy lamented the decline of democracy and the rise of Franco's dictatorship in Spain. His anti-Franco views led to a period of exile in Argentina and important reflections on the purposes of education. As Tate's article reminds us, the education of leaders is a matter of central importance, and a thriving democracy requires education that upsets and "contaminates" the existing order.

In "Democratizing Education, Adjusting Students," Patrick Naoya Shorb offers us another vantage point on the relationship between education, democracy, and speech—this time from Japan. Examining the occupation government in postwar Japan, Shorb shows how the US sought to inspire democratic sentiment through education. As he finds, the US occupation government succeeded in garnering support of many elites in Japan for an approach that would transform the relationship between students and society; other educators, however, remained skeptical. And ultimately, the project was limited by an insufficiently democratic engagement of the Japanese people.

The desire to inspire democratic sentiment through education reappears in Julie Reuben's "The Other Gen Ed." In this essay, Reuben takes aim at a common interpretation of mid-twentieth-century general education courses—that they took form chiefly as classes in "Western Civilization." As she argues, historians have not attended sufficiently to a different set of general courses that emerged in the era—those focused on preparing college students to participate in a democratic society. While cultural reproduction was the chief interest of some leaders in the general education movement, Reuben shows us that others were more concerned with preparing independent-minded, engaged citizens who would embrace democratic values regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

Will Teague's "Resistance/Rise," meanwhile, examines the understudied development of Iranian student activism in the late 1970s. Scholars have written extensively about US involvement in the overthrow of democratically elected Iranian president Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953. They have also given us great insight into the rise of the brutal US-backed dictatorship that followed under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and continued until the late 1970s. But we've known far less about how Iranian college students in the US expressed themselves about US interventionism in Iran. As Teague illustrates, Iranian students directly challenged local and state governments to respect freedoms of speech, press, and assembly, and used campuses as organizing platforms to affect American foreign policy.

In addition to the four feature articles, this issue includes a policy dialogue about higher education and the annual History of Education Society Presidential Address. In the policy dialogue, historian Roger Geiger and higher education expert Philip Altbach discuss the politics of higher education—past, present, and future. They do so in ways that highlight the democratic forces that shape colleges and universities around

the world. And in her Presidential Address, Hilary Moss furthers our understanding of school voucher policies in the US and New Zealand. Examining the cultivation of a political idea, Moss shows how important speech is in democratic life, and the ways that it can be used to shape public consciousness.

What we learn from the decades of research and expertise captured in this issue is how frequently and meaningfully the spheres of education, speech, and democracy have overlapped. Across space and time, the need to express values and effect change has remained constant—as has been the important role played by educational institutions, whether as sites for inculcating values or as settings for working through our disagreements.