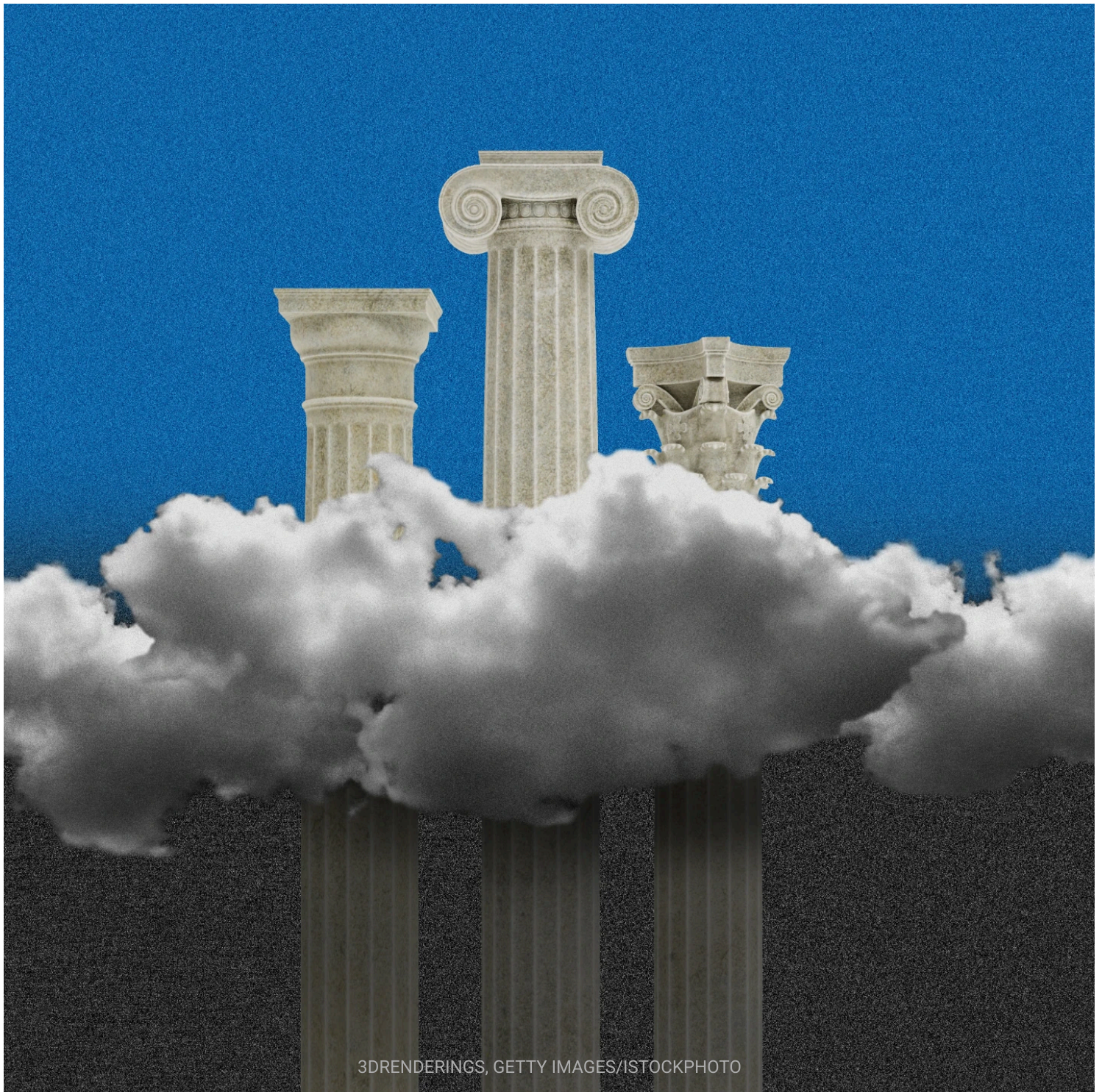


# Higher Ed Brought This on Itself

**The university made itself a target by embracing affirmative action.**



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## THE REVIEW | ESSAY

By [Richard D. Kahlenberg](#) April 21, 2025

**A**cademe is right to be alarmed by President Trump's attacks on colleges and academic freedom. His administration appears to be acting in bad faith, motivated by a desire to punish political enemies and weaken the sector's independence. The attempt to micromanage Harvard University's viewpoint



diversity is particularly alarming. Trump's dangerous approach comes straight out of the authoritarian playbook of leaders like Viktor Orbán. It should be — and has been — roundly denounced.

But to end the discussion there misses the other half of the story: It is not simply rotten luck that landed higher education in this position. And so academic leaders must take this moment to look in the mirror. The truth is that, for decades, elite higher education has been starkly out of step with the public. At top liberal-arts colleges, [one study](#) found, Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 48 to one among English-department faculty members, and 17 to one among philosophy, history, and psychology professors. While college leaders tirelessly championed diversity by race and gender, they tolerated, and sometimes abetted, an ideological monoculture.

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Some academics wore this political disconnect as a badge of honor, a sign that higher ed's leaders, faculty, and students were more enlightened than a benighted American public. And for years, they got away with it. But in our system, where even private colleges rely on enormous public subsidies, that was a dangerous game to play. Many large universities receive [at least a quarter](#) of their operating budgets from the federal government, and it was only a matter of time until we encountered an administration that sought to leverage that dependency to exact changes.

On one high-profile issue that the administration and [conservative critics](#) see as an easy target — the use of racial preferences in college admissions — elite colleges have been

stunningly out of touch. And predictably, countermeasures have begun: The Department of Justice is already [investigating](#) admissions at Stanford University and the University of California's Berkeley, Irvine, and Los Angeles campuses.

I've been writing about admissions for more than three decades, and over that time I've visited dozens of campuses. I frequently ask audience members to raise their hands if they oppose racial preferences. Very few hands go up. Often none do. When I next cite Pew Research [polling](#) showing that 74 percent of Americans, including a majority of people of color, oppose the consideration of race, my audiences seem surprised.

Maybe the American public is cold-hearted and doesn't care about racial justice the way right-thinking people in elite colleges do? The polls contradict that as well: Americans [support racial diversity](#), they just don't think racial preferences are the right way to accomplish that goal. Instead, Americans support, by a [substantial margin](#), colleges giving a break to economically disadvantaged students of all races, a disproportionate share of whom are Black and Hispanic.

This approach does not ignore America's history of racial oppression. It is precisely because of that history that Black and Hispanic Americans are more likely to find themselves in America's lower socioeconomic brackets. Moreover, as I argue in my new book, [Class Matters](#), the strong political support for economic rather than racial affirmative action makes sense given profound changes in American society over the past half century or more.

**While academics say they like to “follow the science,” on the issue of racial preferences, the public is way ahead of the professors.**

In the 1950s, the average gap in standardized-test scores between Black and white students was about twice as large as the gap between rich and poor students. More recently, however, the rich and poor test-score disparity has been about [twice as large](#) as the white and Black test-score disparity. Since passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, racial

residential segregation has [declined](#) 30 percent while residential class segregation has [doubled](#). A [2024 study](#) by Raj Chetty found that in recent years, the economic-mobility gap by race has been closing while the class gap has increased. As Robert Putnam [observes](#), “The power of race, class, and gender to shape life chances in America has been substantially reconfigured.”

The clarity of this research might have prompted college leaders to shift their policies. It did not. While academics say they like to “follow the science,” on the issue of racial preferences, the public is way ahead of the professors.

I observed these dynamics up close when I served as an expert witness for the plaintiffs in the lawsuits Students for Fair Admissions brought against Harvard College and the University of North Carolina. Duke University economist Peter Arcidiacono and I assessed extensive admissions data from applicants over several years at both institutions. The data showed that Harvard’s preference for Black students was more than [twice as large](#) as that provided to economically disadvantaged students, while UNC’s preference for Black students was [four times larger](#) than that provided to working-class students. (I testified that racial diversity is highly desirable at colleges and that race-neutral means could be used to accomplish that important goal.)

Even more politically tone deaf were the preferences these institutions granted for the privileged. Three-quarters of Americans [oppose](#) the use of preferences for the children of alumni, but both institutions insisted on providing very large preferences to legacy students. At UNC, the legacy preference was twice as large as that for first-generation college students. Harvard’s legacy preferences were, likewise, almost twice as large as those for economically disadvantaged students. (Community colleges, which serve a much larger working-class population, have a much higher [approval rating](#) than do four-year institutions.)

The result of these policies is predictable. Elite institutions have been racially integrated but economically segregated. They take justifiable pride in having large nonwhite populations, but Harvard and UNC each had about 15 times as many rich students than low-income students. [Nearly 75 percent](#) of Harvard’s Black and Hispanic students came

from the most privileged 20 percent of the Black and Hispanic populations nationally. The relatively privileged minority students whose cases epitomize the political Achilles heel of affirmative action are precisely the type of students that elite colleges recruited.

**A**cademic leaders could hardly have been oblivious to where the public stood on racial preferences. In states like California and Michigan, voters soundly rejected racial preferences in voter referenda, yet university leaders ignored this repudiation and in fact doubled down. In *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, both the University of California and the University of Michigan filed amicus briefs claiming that racial preferences were the only way to produce racial diversity. Summarizing their briefs, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that race-neutral alternatives, such as providing a preference in admissions to economically disadvantaged students of all races, had “fallen abysmally short” in producing racial integration.

Their briefs, however, were misleading. While their lawyers pleaded failure, admissions offices trumpeted success. In 2021, UCLA [said](#) it admitted the highest proportion of underrepresented minority students “in over 30 years.” UC Berkeley, likewise, [reported](#) in 2020 that it had “the most ethnically diverse freshman admitted class in more than 30 years.”

At the graduate level, the UC Davis School of Medicine also [showed](#) that race-neutral alternatives could be viable. Davis created a race-neutral “adversity scale” that considered a variety of socioeconomic factors and was lauded as a model at the national level. Although the school was highly selective — accepting less than 2 percent of applicants — 84 percent came from disadvantaged backgrounds, 42 percent were first-generation college graduates, and the entering class was 14 percent Black and 30 percent Hispanic.

The University of Michigan admissions office [said](#) its 2021 incoming class was “among the university’s most racially and ethnically diverse classes, with 37 percent of first-year students identifying as persons of color.” At the University of Michigan Law School, the class starting in the fall of 2022 [had](#) “a record-setting 42 percent people of color.” Black students constituted 10.4 percent of the entering class and Hispanic students made up 11.3 percent — shares that were both *higher* than when racial preferences were employed.

The most telling line in the University of California [brief](#) was the assertion that the 1996 state ban on race had forced the university system over the decades to spend “over a half-billion dollars” on race-neutral strategies such as outreach programs. It was a familiar refrain. Evidence Peter Arcidiacono and I presented showed that racial preferences weren’t the only way to achieve racial diversity while maintaining academic excellence. Alternatives could work. But colleges favored racial preferences because it allowed them to bring in upper-middle-class students of color who needed less financial aid. Racial preferences were a way to save money.

Colleges also objected that class-based affirmative action would end up helping some poor white and Asian students, as if that were a bad thing. UNC’s expert witness, Caroline Hoxby of Stanford, called socioeconomic affirmative action “inefficient,” apparently seeing value in economic diversity only to the extent it contributed to racial diversity. Hoxby [described](#) the admission of “a poor white student” to be “a false positive.” Such an admission decision would be a mistake, she said, akin to a university seeking basketball players instead admitting a “tall person” from a high school with an excellent team who was “not a basketball player” and did not “actually contribute to the basketball team.” This is not an argument likely to fly with the public.

Implausible arguments abounded. Yale University law professor Justin Driver [predicted](#) the effects of a ban on racial preferences would be “catastrophic.” A brief filed by about 30 liberal-arts colleges [predicted](#) that, without racial preferences, Black student admissions would drop to 2.1 percent at selective colleges, a return to “early 1960s levels.” Supreme Court justices who supported racial preferences similarly [claimed](#) the *Students for Fair Admissions* decision would have a “devastating impact.”

Shortly after the Supreme Court struck down racial preferences in 2023, it became clear that elite colleges had cried wolf — in terms of both the financial ruination they would face and the diversity of classes they would be able to produce. While UNC [had pleaded](#) “serious financial challenges” during the litigation, it quickly [announced](#) that it would increase its financial-aid budget substantially, providing free tuition to every North Carolina undergraduate coming from families making less than



\$80,000 a year (in a state where the median household income is roughly \$70,000). In 2025, Harvard also drastically [increased](#) its financial aid package.

Duke [announced](#) that incoming students from North and South Carolina (two states with large Black populations) would be offered free tuition, provided their families made less than \$150,000 a year. Stanford, the University of Virginia, Dartmouth College, Princeton University, and Vanderbilt University also all significantly expanded financial aid.

When the first post-affirmative action classes were announced in 2024, a number of colleges reported substantially higher levels of socioeconomic diversity. UVA [increased](#) its share of Pell Grant eligible students from 14 percent five years earlier to 24 percent. At Duke, the share of Pell students [doubled](#) in just two years, from 11 percent to 22 percent.

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At Yale, the admissions dean [announced](#) that “the class of 2028 includes the greatest representation of first-generation and low-income students on record.” Dartmouth [said](#) it increased its share of first-generation college students to a “record-setting” level, and its share of Pell Grant recipients increased five percentage points in a single year to an “all-time high.” Between the time the litigation was filed and 2024, Harvard [tripled](#) its share of first-generation college students.

Racial diversity followed at many (though not all) colleges. During the litigation, Harvard had claimed Black shares at Harvard in 2015 would have dropped from 14 percent to 6 percent without racial preferences, but in 2024, (using a different methodology) Harvard [reported](#) a Black representation of 14 percent, a modest decline from the previous year. Hispanic representation actually grew from 14 percent to 16 percent, and Asian representation held steady at 37 percent.

Princeton, Dartmouth, UVA, the University of Pennsylvania, and Emory University all announced they had succeeded in keeping racial diversity at roughly the same level as they had achieved in the past employing racial preferences. At Yale, Black and Hispanic representation [stayed even](#) at 14 percent and 19 percent respectively. Duke [saw](#) a modest increase in Black and Hispanic enrollment. Williams College, Bowdoin College, Bates College, and the California Institute of Technology all increased Black enrollment as well.

To be sure, some selective institutions saw significant drops in Black enrollment. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Johns Hopkins University, Brown University, Columbia University, and Amherst College all saw sharp declines. While MIT tried to put the blame on the Supreme Court, the list of institutions that were much more successful in sustaining diversity despite the Court’s ruling suggested colleges that fell short were not without blame. MIT’s president Sally Kornbluth [acknowledged](#), “We need to seek out new approaches.”

Conservatives have been understandably suspicious that colleges cheated. After all, the institutions put themselves in an awkward position: Were they stretching the truth when they told the Supreme Court that racial preferences were the only path to racial diversity, or were they lying now when they said they were complying with the Supreme Court? As

Peter Arcidiacono and Tyler Ransom [argued in these pages](#): “Institutions reporting suspiciously stable or improved diversity metrics face increasing pressure to demonstrate genuinely race-neutral admissions processes.”

It is hard to know what is going on behind closed doors. Do socioeconomic affirmative-action programs account entirely for the ability of colleges to sustain racial diversity or is something else going on as well? Only litigation will tell.

**T**he attention to race in admissions is part of a larger academic ideology that the public finds repellent. Many Americans want education to emphasize what Americans have in common across racial lines. But this is not what many colleges are peddling. At Pennsylvania State University, for example, one white faculty member in the English department alleged that diversity, equity, and inclusion officials created a hostile work environment by requiring that faculty watch a video titled “White Teachers Are a Problem.” In a [preliminary ruling](#), a Black federal judge, an Obama appointee, let the case proceed in part based on allegations that on several occasions, the plaintiff “was obligated to attend conferences or trainings that discussed racial issues in essentialist and deterministic terms — ascribing negative traits to white people or white teachers without exception and as flowing inevitably from their race.”

In 2024, the University of Michigan’s DEI program came under [withering scrutiny](#) from *The New York Times Magazine*’s Nicholas Confessore. He found that DEI hiring statements at Michigan were used to impose a rigid conformity: “A hypothetical diversity statement that called for de-emphasizing ‘the axes of identity on which we differ’ in classrooms and to make admissions a ‘level playing field,’” he wrote, could constitute “career suicide.” A faculty survey [found](#) that more than half believed “diversity statements placed pressure on professors to express specific moral, political, and social views.”

Confessore also suggested that Michigan’s programs were ineffective. Despite spending a quarter of a billion dollars on DEI since 2016, a survey found that “students were less likely to interact with people of a different race or religion or with different politics,”

than before the program started. In March, under pressure from the public and the Trump administration, Michigan [abandoned](#) its DEI programs.

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Some floated a disturbing link between the underlying logic of racial preferences, DEI, and rising antisemitism on campuses. After all, Ibram X. Kendi argued that [all racial disparities](#) are the result of discrimination, and [that](#) the “only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.” If that were true, was something nefarious going on behind the fact that Jews, who make up 0.2 percent of the world’s population, [have won](#) 22 percent of Nobel Prizes?

The troubling worldview on elite campuses came into focus when Hamas launched its brutal October 7th attack on Israeli civilians. Average Americans wondered: What sort of twisted ideology would lead [34](#) Harvard student organizations to condemn Israel even before any counteroffensive was launched? On October 9th, former Harvard president Larry Summers [posted](#) on X: “In nearly 50 years of @Harvard affiliation, I have never been as disillusioned and alienated as I am today.”

In a *Harvard Crimson* essay, “[Reaping What We Have Taught](#),” the former Harvard College dean Harry Lewis pointed to the academic theories being propagated on the far left: “When complex social and political histories are oversimplified in our teachings as Manichaeian struggles — between oppressed people and their oppressors, the powerless and the powerful, the just and the wicked — a veneer of academic respectability is applied to the ugly old stereotype of Jews as evil but deviously successful people.”

As if to confirm the worst fears that DEI was linked to antisemitism, DEI leaders at the University of Michigan [gave an award](#) to the leader of a student group that, according to *The New York Times*, “issued a statement on Oct. 7 justifying the murder of Israeli



civilians.” (The award was later rescinded after the student called for “death and worse” to “every single individual who supports the Zionist state.”)

The reckoning of 2025 is ugly. Donald Trump is taking things too far, transgressing procedural safeguards in threatening to cut off hundreds of millions of dollars to an increasing number of colleges over “antisemitism.” Trump’s willingness to traffic in antisemitism himself undercuts the credibility of his approach. But colleges have made themselves politically vulnerable on the issue because they have treated antisemitism [far too casually](#).

There is one area where Trump’s political instincts are off the mark. I’m appalled by the administration’s [Dear Colleague letter](#) of February 14th, which threatened to cut off federal funds to colleges employing race-neutral strategies if the purpose is to “increase racial diversity.” The fact that a program like socioeconomic affirmative action indirectly promotes racial diversity is an important benefit of the policy, not something to condemn. In targeting race-neutral strategies aimed at creating racially integrated environments, the Trump administration has put itself to the right of most members of the Supreme Court, including conservative justices like John Roberts, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett, who have [refused](#) endorse such a theory. If Trump pushes this line too far, he will lose the public, just as surely as supporters of racial preferences have.

But for all of Trump’s faults, it is higher education’s attitudes and behaviors on issues like racial preferences that have helped bring us to this moment. Donald Trump threatens liberal democratic norms on a daily basis. But college leaders must also ask: In a democracy, how long can institutions that rely on public funds thumb their nose at the public?

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**About the Author****Richard D. Kahlenberg**

Richard D. Kahlenberg is director of the American Identity Project at the Progressive Policy Institute and author of [\*Class Matters: The Fight to Get Beyond Race Preferences, Reduce Inequality, and Build Real Diversity at America's Colleges.\*](#)

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