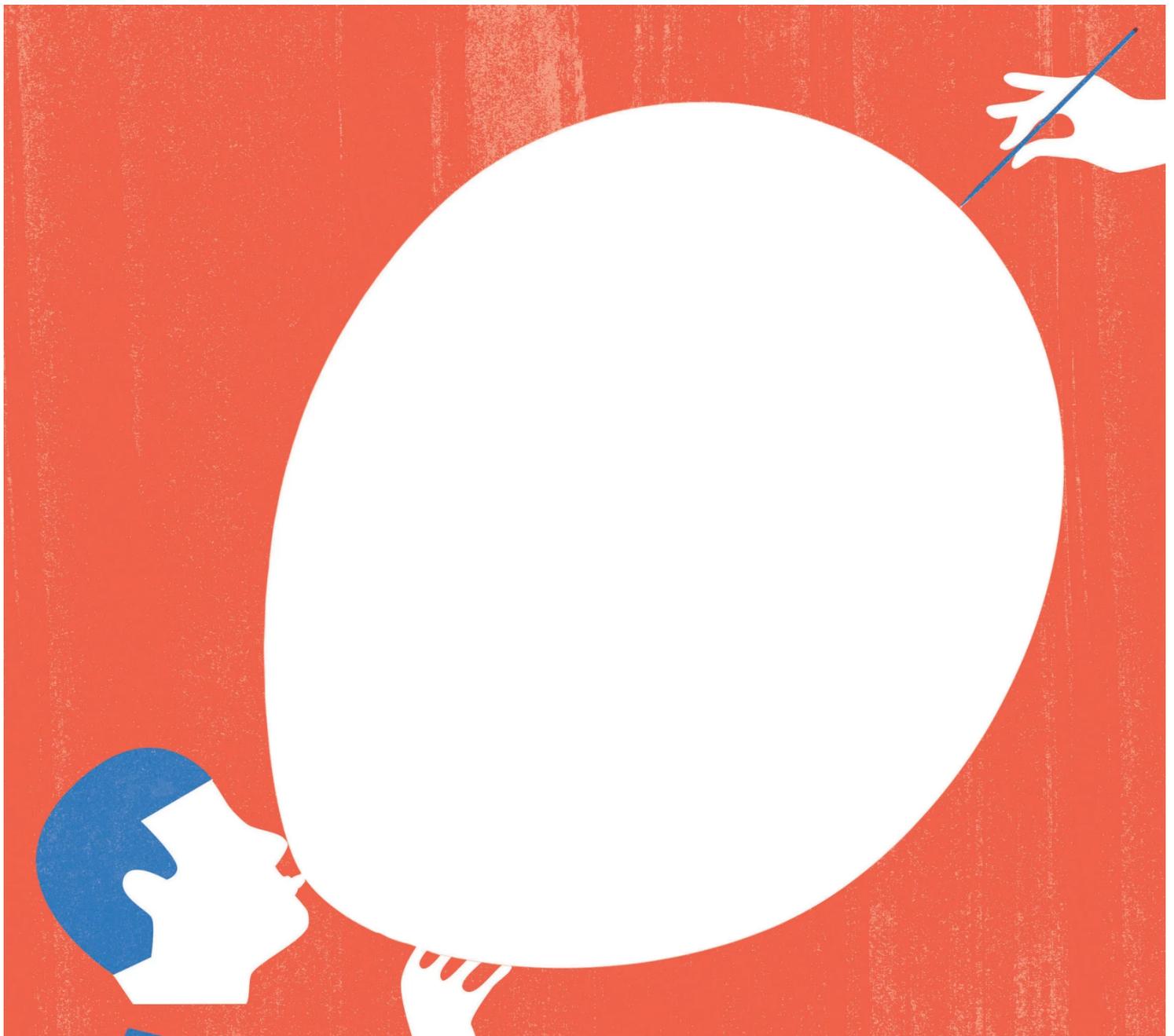


Yes, DEI Can Erode Academic Freedom. Let's Not Pretend Otherwise.

We should admit that inclusion and other values are sometimes in tension.



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“We affirm both academic freedom and our responsibility to foster an inclusive learning community. Importantly, these values neither contradict nor supersede each other.” So declared a Hamline University faculty [resolution](#) asking President Fayneese S. Miller to resign given her handling of a now-infamous controversy over the display of the Prophet Muhammad in an art-history class. While we applaud the faculty for taking a stand against administrative overreach, we think its position on the relationship between academic freedom and inclusion is mistaken. In our view there will inevitably be tensions between these two values. And when those tensions arise, academic freedom must prevail — at least, if we want to ensure a college education worthy of its name.

The assertion that inclusion and academic freedom are not in tension is an article of faith for many of those dedicated to promoting campus inclusion. In 2018, the Harvard University Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging released an 82-page [report](#) stating that the “values of academic freedom and inclusion and belonging provide each other with synergistic and mutual reinforcement.” According to this report, the two should not be conceived of as “distinct values that must be accommodated to each other” or, worse still, as “antagonistic goals.” This view is central to the frameworks advanced in books such as Ulrich Baer’s *What Snowflakes Get Right: Free Speech, Truth, and Equality on Campus*, John Palfrey’s *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education* and Sigal Ben-Porath’s *Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy*.

When campuses are facing a controversy like Hamline’s, it’s important to recognize that students, faculty, and administrators don’t have the time for careful, philosophical deliberations about the meaning and value of inclusion. Rather, they find themselves in the grip of a system we call DEI Inc.

DEI Inc. is a logic, a lingo, and a set of administrative policies and practices. The logic is as follows: Education is a product, students are consumers, and campus diversity is a [customer-service issue](#) that needs to be administered from the top down. (“Chief diversity officers,” according to an [article](#) in *Diversity Officer Magazine*, “are best defined as ‘change-management specialists.’”) DEI Inc. purveys a [safety-and-security model](#) of learning that is highly attuned to harm and that conflates respect for minority students with unwavering affirmation and validation.

Lived experience, the intent-impact gap, microaggressions, trigger warnings, inclusive excellence. You know the language of DEI Inc. when you hear it. It’s a combination of management-consultant buzzwords, social justice slogans, and “[therapy speak](#).” The standard package of DEI Inc. administrative “initiatives” should be familiar too, from antiracism [trainings](#) to [bias-response teams](#) and [mandatory diversity statements](#) for hiring and promotion.

When institutions proclaim that academic freedom and inclusion coexist in a kind of synergistic harmony, they are trafficking in PR-driven wishful thinking.

In many ways the Hamline debacle is the ideal case study for laying bare the unavoidable tensions between academic freedom and the DEI Inc. approach to inclusion. The incident has received considerable attention, but allow us to rehearse some of the key events and the language used by the various people involved.

This past fall semester, the syllabus for Erika López Prater’s global-art-history online course contained an advisory alerting students that the class would feature depictions of holy figures, including the Prophet Muhammad; if students had any concerns about the visual content they were invited to contact her. During the class session on Islamic art, Prater offered students an optional exercise: Analyze a 14th-century Islamic painting of Muhammad receiving his first Quranic revelation. Before presenting the painting, she reiterated the content warning and asked students who would prefer not to see the image to turn off their screens.

Despite Prater's precautions, a Muslim student [complained](#) that pictorial depictions of the prophet offended her Muslim sensibilities: "As a Muslim, and a Black person, I don't feel like I belong, and I don't think I'll ever belong in a community where they don't value me as a member, and they don't show the same respect that I show them."

The student complaint set the campus DEI bureaucracy into motion. David Everett, associate vice president for inclusive excellence, made a public statement [calling](#) the classroom exercise "undeniably inconsiderate, disrespectful, and Islamophobic."

Because of the incident, Everett said, "it was decided it was best that this faculty member was no longer part of the Hamline community." Prater was not given any opportunity to explain the rationale behind the class exercise.

In December, President Miller and David Everett sent an open letter to the campus [asserting](#) that "appreciation of religious and other differences should supersede when we know that what we teach will cause harm," and in particular "respect for the observant Muslim students in that classroom should have superseded academic freedom." After the news made national and international headlines, Miller doubled down, [explaining](#) that her decisions were guided by "prioritizing the well-being of our students," especially by "minimizing harm."

Miller's comments at least had the virtue of offering an honest diagnosis of the tension between academic freedom and inclusion. This tension has only ratcheted up in recent years, as colleges make grand [promises](#) to create "environments in which any individual or group feels welcomed, respected, supported, and valued." With institutions promoting such an expansive definition of "inclusion," we shouldn't be surprised when they become ensnared in their own rhetoric and policies. How will DEI administrators respond when a Chinese national complains that a political-science discussion about the persecution of Uyghurs is "harmful anti-Chinese propaganda"? Or when a Christian evangelical says her faith was insulted in a contemporary art class after seeing a Robert Mapplethorpe photograph of two men kissing? The permutations are endless and, for professors who teach sensitive or controversial material, alarming.

The American Association of University Professors clearly [states](#) that students do not have the right to shield even their “most cherished beliefs” from challenge or scrutiny:

Ideas that are germane to a subject under discussion in a classroom cannot be censored because a student with particular religious or political beliefs might be offended. Instruction cannot proceed in the atmosphere of fear that would be produced were a teacher to become subject to administrative sanction based upon the idiosyncratic reaction of one or more students. This would create a classroom environment inimical to the free and vigorous exchange of ideas necessary for teaching and learning in higher education.

The censorship of ideas because students with particular political beliefs might take offense is precisely what’s happening across the country with [anti-critical-race-theory legislation](#). The notion of harm is central to these “divisive concepts” laws, which have used Trump’s now-revoked 2020 [Executive Order 13950](#) as a template. Among the things prohibited in this EO was that “any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.” That white students could shut down discussions of “white privilege” and “structural inequality” because they make them uncomfortable is a most egregious affront to academic freedom. Laws like [Florida’s “Stop WOKE Act”](#) underscore that policies oriented around harm-avoidance in the classroom are educational dead ends.

To safeguard high-quality teaching that powerfully and accurately communicates our disciplines and fields, academic freedom must be vigorously defended. Students, DEI administrators and other campus stakeholders should understand that professors have the [right](#) to decide what and how to teach based on their academic expertise and their pedagogical goals. They should also know that there is no academic *freedom* without academic *responsibility*. Academic freedom is not a license to mouth off or teach whatever material suits our fancy. Moreover, when thorny issues arise pertaining to classroom instruction, we have a responsibility to listen to students’ concerns and take them seriously. This does not mean, however, that students should be able to dictate the curriculum.

The Hamline case should serve as a wake-up call for anyone who cares about classroom teaching, critical thinking, and the future of higher education. Some may see this controversy as an exception or an outlier. It's not. It's a bellwether of how DEI Inc. is eroding academic freedom. Let's not forget it took an outpouring of sustained, high-publicity resistance, not to mention a lawsuit, for Hamline to [soften](#) its charge of "Islamophobia" against Prater and affirm its commitment to academic freedom.

When institutions proclaim that academic freedom and inclusion coexist in a kind of synergistic harmony, they are trafficking in PR-driven wishful thinking. In the hardest cases, there is no way of upholding an "all are welcome here" brand of inclusion while simultaneously defending academic freedom. Instead, we should turn to the [wise words](#) of Hanna Holborn Gray, former president of the University of Chicago: "Education should not be intended to make people comfortable, it is meant to make them think."

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

FREE SPEECH

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

LAW & POLICY

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