



OPINION

How college presidents are quietly resisting federal attacks on higher education

Many leaders are prioritizing behind-the-scenes resistance over protests and op-eds, according to the president of the Council of Independent Colleges.

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The U.S. Capitol Dome is seen on October 24, 2023, in Washington, D.C. Many college presidents have been on Capitol Hill to urge lawmakers to take action, according to the president of the Council of Independent Colleges. Win McNamee via Getty Images

Marjorie Hass is the president of the Council of Independent Colleges.

Where are the college presidents? It's a question I've heard many times over the last few weeks as federal attacks on higher education escalate. The apparent absence of visible and vocal protest from institutional leaders has generated questions and an assumption of passivity.

But I have seen firsthand that presidents — at least those who lead the independent and mission-centered institutions with which I am familiar — are indeed doing the work to push back. The relative lack of public statements is not a sign of cowardice as some have suggested. It's that many college presidents have rightly concluded that quiet resistance rather than public protest is a more effective strategy.

The media portrays the recent presidential orders and U.S. Department of Education missives as threats to institutions, but the most immediate danger is to students.



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It is students whose freedom to learn and to assemble is under assault. It is students who are being threatened with the loss of federal Pell Grants and work-study opportunities. It is students who lose out when programs essential for their educational success are closed for a possible reference to a word or concept that is not to the liking of the current administration. It is students who lose out when the public service careers they are preparing for announce a hiring freeze. It is students whose freedom to learn and assemble is under assault. It is students who lose out when funding for the research labs in which they apprentice are shuttered.

Campus presidents know that in this climate, protests can backfire,

drawing the ire of those with the power to target individual students and individual campuses. Doing no harm to the most vulnerable on campus is top of mind right now for campus leaders. For many of them, however, resistance is active, effective and takes many forms.

Many presidents are holding the line and refusing to pre-comply with vague and harmful orders that have yet to be tested in a court of law. They are making numerous difficult decisions about how to continue to educate students whose families are threatened with deportation or job loss. They are counseling those whose future careers are decimated and raising money to replace federal scholarship grants that are under threat. They are fielding phone calls from anxious parents, serving as beacons of calm amidst chaos and educating their communities on the effects of attacks on teaching and learning.

In addition to the campus work, many presidents are actively working to influence whatever remains of legislative politics. Hundreds — maybe thousands — of college leaders have been on Capitol Hill in the last few weeks, meeting with their members of Congress to urge immediate action. Thousands more are contacting their state and local representatives, advocating for students at every level of government.

Presidents are actively engaged in supporting the legal challenges that have so far proven to be the most effective way to stop illegal and unconstitutional orders. They are providing needed evidence and information to those organizations filing suits and strategizing with civil rights lawyers. Some are serving as named participants, while others are involved in these lawsuits via the higher education organizations of which they are a part.

College presidents are not a monolith. Contrary to popular portrayal, they are not politically identical. It's no wonder their

responses vary. But the ones I know care deeply about protecting the things that are essential for student success: financial aid, a climate of free inquiry, support for students of all identities, and free speech.

More op-eds and marches may come — and there indeed are some college presidents currently engaging in these forms of protest. But for now, resistance seems to many to be a more effective course. It's quieter and often stealthier. So far, it is where a lot of the real action is for higher education.