Nonprofit Quarterly showcases an online event: The Institute For Sustainable Communities presents **Women of Color Leading the Energy Justice Transition**. This online event is hosted by Deeohn Ferris, President of ISC, the first (and only) African-American woman to lead a U.S. based international climate change organization. This event features a deep dive on how the Biden-Harris administration is operationalizing racial equity and environmental justice and how climate change organizations can help. It features Brenda Mallory, chair of the Council on Environmental Quality in the Biden Administration, Shalanda Baker deputy Director for Energy Justice and Secretary’s Advisor on Equity at the United States Department of Energy, and is the current nominee of President Joe Biden to serve as Director of the Office of Economic Impact and Diversity at the US Department of Energy, and Adrianna Quintero Senior Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Energy Foundation. This panel represents a significant shift in how the United States approaches climate change work. Climate impacts disproportionately affect people of color- around the world and in the United States. See it on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUpMgZVZu2E>.

**Chronicle of Philanthropy: The Philanthropy Roundtable’s CEO Opposes ‘Woke Philanthropy,’ Prompting Some Grant Makers to Flee and Others to Give More**

By [Jim Rendon](https://www.philanthropy.com/author/jim-rendon)

Elise Westhoff, the new leader of the Philanthropy Roundtable, has been on a media blitz in recent months, spreading the gospel of conservative philanthropy and attacking what she says is a wrongheaded rush to fund racial-justice efforts.

That has angered some philanthropic leaders, who say her arguments are misguided and she is dragging foundations into America’s toxic culture wars.

Some of the group’s 600 donors have left the group in protest. But others are cheering her pointed critiques, and they are expressing their support by donating more money than ever.

In the Wall Street Journal’s [Weekend Interview](https://www.wsj.com/articles/elise-westhoff-woke-philanthropy-cancel-culture-charity-11626448092?mod=article_inline) feature in mid-July, Westhoff said the Ford Foundation helped create minority voting blocs by “promoting separate identities based on race” as far back as the 1960s. In the National Review, [she wrote](https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/04/how-philanthropy-is-fueling-american-division/) that racial and social justice were “a cover for tearing some people down as much as lifting others up.” She wrote an [opinion article](https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/04/28/dont-hijack-foundation-philanthropy-political-ideology-column/7324811002/) for USA Today calling out two of the most prominent Black CEOs in philanthropy — Ford’s Darren Walker and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s Elizabeth Alexander — for their shifts toward funding social justice. She says that this divides people and is part of a push in philanthropy to support political advocacy and “government-run efforts to redistribute wealth.”

Time and again, Westhoff has criticized what she calls “woke philanthropy.” She says donors are under pressure to fund progressive groups bent on dismantling systemic racism, and they risk being shunned and shamed if they don’t.

At a June Heritage Foundation [event](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr7qt5dvLlA), she cut to the chase: “If ‘woke culture’ is a cancer,” she said, “philanthropy is the source of the infection.”

This move into the spotlight is part of a deliberate makeover at the roundtable dating to 2019. Westhoff says the group’s donors want it to be a leader in philanthropy and to communicate their values and ideas clearly.

The organization provides guidance on grant making to its donors, advocates for fewer new regulations on foundations, and champions rules to protect donor privacy. The group does not have an explicit membership program but allows individuals and institutions that donate over $1,000 to attend its annual conference and webinars and participate in working groups.

Westhoff, however, has been the most vocal in her attacks on racial-justice efforts and critical race theory — two approaches to America’s racial inequities that gained immense support from progressive foundations in the past year but have also become points of attack in conservative political circles.

Westhoff says that these ideas are bad for America because they divide people into different identity groups. “It creates a system of victims and oppressors, and we don’t believe that that is the right way to address these issues. I think philanthropy is using those things to choose who gets funding and who doesn’t,” she says. “I see it. It’s real, and that’s what I’m calling out.”

Some critics worry that this is a terrible time for Westhoff to be throwing down an ideological gauntlet. With one of the most sweeping philanthropy regulations in decades working its way through the Senate, her divisive rhetoric only weakens the ability of foundations to come together to lobby successfully. Her vocal approach is even dividing the group’s own donors.

Jim Canales, president of the Barr Foundation, withdrew his organization from the Roundtable over the group’s turn away from inclusiveness toward what he says is an intolerance toward the examination of systemic racism. He was particularly bothered by its attacks on the Ford Foundation. “We can all agree to disagree, but there’s no need to attack the work of an institution,” he says. “It just seems unnecessary.”

The Heinz Endowments, which has donated to the Roundtable since 1999, recently left because of Westhoff’s writing.

“There is a difference between having a broad view, wanting to work across differences in order to accomplish shared social goals, and buying into the corrosive, partisan, divisive rhetoric that we now see permeating politics,” says Grant Oliphant, the group’s president. “For that to be coming home into philanthropy is a major concern.”

**New Vision**

Since Westhoff started as CEO in June 2020, she has been remaking the organization. More than 70 percent of the staff of about 30 started in the past year or so — though a few of those new hires have already left.

The Roundtable shuttered Philanthropy Magazine, opting instead for shorter blog posts and podcasts — something that has frustrated some longtime donors who say the new format can be more ideological. And she has made a point of talking to the public at large a lot more than her predecessor, Adam Meyerson — all part of the group’s push toward a refashioned identity.

“Our vision is to build a vibrant American philanthropic movement that strengthens our free society,” Westhoff says. “As part of that vision we have to build a movement, we think that means being clear and transparent about what our values are and speaking up.”

Westhoff, who is 40, began her career in fundraising, first at the New York Public Library and then at the Indiana University School of Medicine. She came to the Roundtable from the Snider Foundation, a family foundation outside of Philadelphia, where she worked her way up from directing its grants program to become the executive director.

Jay Snider, the foundation’s president, says that Westhoff was deftly able to navigate the various personalities of family members. And though she is not Jewish, she became deeply engaged in the foundation’s efforts to fight anti-Semitism.

“Elise is a tremendous person, and that’s something that you always look for in a leader,” says Snider, who is also executive chairman of UNIT Solutions, which makes nonlethal training weapons for the police and military. “She’s honest as can be, transparent, and is overall as fine a human being as I know.”

Snider has increased his giving to the Roundtable since Westhoff took over, not only because he is fond of her work but because he sees the Roundtable taking a bigger leadership role. He is not alone. In 2020, the group raised $9.4 million, about $1 million more than in 2019.

Before coming to the Roundtable, Westhoff didn’t seem interested in politics or national issues, says Tom Riley, president of the Connelly Foundation, which supports health, education, and arts and culture groups in the Philadelphia area.

Riley has known Westhoff for about a decade and says he doesn’t even know how she voted. It might be hard to guess. Westhoff says she has registered as both a Democrat and a Republican in recent years, though she adds that politics is not relevant to philanthropy.

Riley was surprised when she took the Roundtable job. “I think it surprised a lot of other people, too,” he says. “She wasn’t a known commodity nationally.”

Riley, who worked at the Roundtable twice — in the 1990s and again about a decade ago — and who serves on its policy committee — says that in Westhoff, the group got an outsider who could make changes and follow the new strategic plan’s call for the group to be more vocal.

Snider has been impressed so far. “I think she’s courageous, she has a voice, she has ideas and opinions,” he says. “We align 100 percent with what Elise has been writing.”

**Controversial Views**

As Westhoff and her colleagues have grown more outspoken, some foundation CEOs and others in philanthropy are pushing back. To understand the group’s critics, its supporters, and what changes at the Roundtable mean for philanthropy, the Chronicle spoke to and emailed more than two dozen people — current and former donors, current and former staff, a board member, others who know Westhoff, and outside observers.

Phil Buchanan, CEO of Center for Effective Philanthropy, has been a leading critic. He criticized Westhoff’s USA Today column and a RealClearMarkets [column](https://www.realclearmarkets.com/articles/2021/05/17/philanthropic_wokeism_undermines_free_market_principles_777084.html) by Rick Graber, the Roundtable’s chairman, in a lengthy [blog pos](https://cep.org/backlash-a-sharp-right-turn/)t, and on Twitter, accusing them of misrepresentations, inaccuracies, fearmongering, and sowing division.

Buchanan and others have taken issue with arguments like one from an [op-ed](https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/04/how-philanthropy-is-fueling-american-division/) Westhoff wrote for the National Review, saying that philanthropy, which is largely urban and progressive, ignores rural white poverty, and racial equity tears some people down:

“Groups such as Black Lives Matter, which raked in $90 million in 2020, promote concepts such as ‘critical race theory’ and ‘intersectionality,’ which divide Americans based on race, gender, and sexual orientation and demand that those with ‘privilege’ be punished,” she wrote.

At a M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust [event](https://murdocktrust.org/2021/05/future-of-philanthropy/) with Westhoff in June, Buchanan accused her and others at the Roundtable of “using right-wing talking points about critical race theory and woke-ism and actually dividing rather than seeking the common ground.”

Westhoff condemned racism and accused Buchanan of “putting words into my mouth and making assumptions that are not accurate.”

The Roundtable is further airing its message on race through its True Diversity campaign, launched in June. Its website features [a video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0bk82LWwk4) of one new board member, Vivek Ramaswamy, a former biotech CEO and author of Woke Inc.

In the video, Ramaswamy says that some define people by their race, gender, or sexual orientation. But every American should reject this framework. “Pluralism isn’t about celebrating the differences between us as people. True pluralism is about the diversity of identities within each of us,” he says.

Ramaswamy has been a guest on Fox News, including Tucker Carlson’s show, and has been featured in the New York Post and Wall Street Journal, but he lacks any public philanthropic record. Forbes estimated his fortune at $600 million back in 2016, yet he does not appear in the Chronicle’s or Indiana University’s database of gifts over $1 million and is not affiliated with any foundations or nonprofits that file electronic informational returns. Westhoff says the young entrepreneur is “personally generous” and helps the group better support individual donors.

The Chronicle reached out to him through the Roundtable, but he did not comment.

His claim — that those who identify systems in America that treat people differently based on their race are dividing people by race — is similar to what Westhoff has argued. But that ignores the long histories of U.S. government and legal systems, which put great time and effort into creating racial categories and dividing people by race and gender to marginalize and control Black people and other people of color, says Susan Taylor Batten, CEO of ABFE, formerly the Association of Black Foundation Executives.

“Structural racism is not blaming white people, it is blaming systems. This isn’t a perspective that is pointing fingers at bad people. It’s pointing fingers at systems that intentionally or unintentionally are advancing some people over others,” she says. “Their pushback around structural racism does not take into account what we know about this history of racism in this country.”

Conservative philanthropists also criticized racial-justice efforts in the early 2000s, says Lori Villarosa, executive director of the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity. And the Roundtable is not helping anyone by continuing its attacks.

“Implying that looking at our problems honestly, looking at our history honestly, is somehow a detriment to solving those problems,” she says. “It’s a disservice to their members.”

Westhoff says that she is engaging in legitimate debate and presenting a view that her donors want to be aired. “You are allowed to criticize ideas, and it doesn’t make you divisive,” she says. “It’s not a personal attack. I think Darren Walker seems like a wonderful person.”

Westhoff has not spoken to Walker but has reached out to the Ford Foundation and says she has had productive conversations with some staff members there. A Ford spokesman said the organization would not comment for this article.

**New Strategic Plan**

Westhoff, of course, is not just speaking for herself. She is representing an organization that has made a deliberate decision to be more pointed and vocal. It is her role to be the face of that change and to take whatever criticism or praise that comes with advancing its point of view.

In 2019, the group came out with a new strategic plan. Westhoff was hired in 2020.

Leading up to that plan, the consulting firm American Philanthropic conducted a survey of the Roundtable’s lapsed and current donors. Many lapsed donors only gave to the group to work on a particular issue, like education, says Doug Schneider, the firm’s managing partner. Among current donors, a “significant majority” share the Roundtable’s views on preserving donor intent and promoting giving that strengthens the free market system. The loyal donors, he found, identified more with the group’s core values.

Part of the group’s new strategy is to attract donors who, like Ramaswamy, have made their fortunes in recent years. For them, ensuring that donor intent is respected and protecting free enterprise might resonate especially well, says Schneider.

Some of the Roundtable’s 600 donors have stopped giving in the past year, Westhoff says. But about 30 new ones have started donating, precisely because of the group’s new outspoken stance, she says.

Some Roundtable donors are excited about Westhoff’s critiques of what she calls philanthropic cancel culture. They, too, say that those on the left are intolerant of any dissenting views and shame those who don’t prioritize equity and anti-racism. They are happy that Westhoff is taking on this new orthodoxy.

The growing polarization in philanthropy is deeply disappointing, says Joanne Florino who worked at the Roundtable from 2013 to 2016 and is now a fellow there. But it is not the Roundtable that has changed, at least in substance, she says. “We definitely are being more assertive and more vocal,” she says. “It may seem different, but some people are seeing the full Roundtable for the first time. We’ve always stood for the same things.”

The left does not tolerate different viewpoints, says Roundtable chairman Graber, who is also CEO of the conservative Bradley Foundation. “The go-to tactic is to personally attack, and that’s what we see over and over again.”

Graber says conservatives are alarmed by that so many foundations jumped to support racial-justice efforts and want to hear their viewpoints aired.

“We hear people challenging core principles of this country, free markets, limited government, capitalism, and [we hear] this notion that the country was founded on racist principles,” he says. “That is raising concern on the right, and I think there is a need, appropriately, to talk about what we believe we stand for.”

Engaging in such a debate shouldn’t elicit such harsh criticism of Westhoff, her defenders say, especially given that she is so new to the role.

“I think that we want to encourage a woman who is new in leadership of a national philanthropic organization to have a chance to get her legs under her and find her way,” says Steve Moore, chief executive of the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, which is a donor. “Oftentimes, those who have been in philanthropy for a while do not quickly welcome the voices of those who challenge the status quo.”

**Straddling a Line**

While the Roundtable is a conservative group, not all of its donors share its ideology. Some have posted statements in favor of racial justice and fund those efforts, putting them at odds with the group’s outspoken leaders.

The Roundtable’s public statements don’t just criticize particular approaches to big problems or advocate different solutions, they discourage donors from examining race, says the Barr Foundation’s Canales. “We are interrogating the role that structural racism plays in our society. And to me, there is nothing wrong with that,” he says. “I believe that I’m being told by this membership institution that that is something that we as a foundation should not be doing. For an organization that was created espousing philanthropic freedom and donor intent, I see this as fully inconsistent.”

Another donor, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, appreciates the Roundtable’s work on tax policy, according to a written statement from its CEO, Ridgway White. But it believed that this was a time for philanthropy to come together to address big challenges, including structural racism. In August it informed the Roundtable that it would not be renewing its support.

The MacArthur Foundation, a current donor, is more circumspect. Valerie Chang, the foundation’s managing director of programs, wrote that a number of the Roundtable’s “controversial and politically conservative positions” do not align with its values, but “it is useful to identify and pursue areas of common interest, particularly regarding potential regulation of the philanthropic sector.”

Others are less forthcoming about their positions. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which declined to comment for this article, gave the Roundtable more than $2 million from 2010 to 2018. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation, another donor, did not respond to multiple requests for comment. The Lilly Endowment, also a donor, said in a statement that it does not comment on the activities of the organizations it supports to advance philanthropic objectives. (Lilly is a financial supporter of the Chronicle of Philanthropy.)

Some Roundtable donors are also members of the Black foundation executive group ABFE, and some of them were particularly troubled by the True Diversity campaign and are leaving the Roundtable, says Taylor Batten. Westhoff’s decision to stake out such extreme positions will only make it harder for those who want to support both racial justice and the Roundtable.

“It’s going to get more difficult, moving forward, to straddle the line. I worry about that because I’m an advocate for true, deep conversation and debate around issues versus just drawing lines in the sand,” she says. “Some foundations that were comfortable with straddling the line will get more uncomfortable over time. This is deepening the fault lines.”

Oliphant, the Heinz Endowments president, didn’t see a dilemma about whether to continue contributing to the group.

“To me, it is unacceptable to single out a prominent Black leader in philanthropy for raising issues of racial equity by making him the villain in a false narrative about excluding white people or undermining American ideals, especially when that leader has explicitly and clearly spoken about rural white poverty, American democracy, American principles of inclusion, creating a society of all,” he says. “It feels like the politicization of American philanthropy, and it hides behind the schoolyard game of calling people divisive.”

Asked about donors like Oliphant who are unhappy, Westhoff said they should leave. Donors should know what causes they are supporting, and they should share common goals. “When there’s not an alignment of goals and values, that’s not a successful grantee relationship,” she says. “If it is not a right fit for you, then it’s good that you walk away.”

**Racial Equity**

Many Roundtable donors and others the Chronicle spoke to are concerned about the group’s ability to advocate effectively if so many donors and others in philanthropy are unhappy with its stances. That is particularly concerning now, they say, because the U.S. Senate is considering a measure designed to speed up charitable giving by donor-advised funds and change some rules for how family foundations pay relatives of founders.

The United Philanthropy Forum, a network of more than 75 associations of foundations that focus on specific regions or causes, has worked with the Roundtable on policy issues in the past, says its CEO David Biemesderfer. It has never agreed with the Roundtable on all issues, yet it has found common ground on some. But now his group and the Roundtable are diametrically opposed on racial equity. And that may cause problems when trying to advocate with lawmakers.

“Any time you have a more united position or message for legislators on the Hill, the better in terms of the chances of getting the legislation that you would want,” he says.

The Roundtable’s big-tent approach under Meyerson helped philanthropic leaders across the ideological spectrum advance legislative priorities, such as expanding the charitable deduction, says William Schambra, a senior fellow at the conservative think tank, the Hudson Institute.

In talks with lawmakers looking to achieve bipartisan agreement, progressive foundation leaders can demonstrate a broad base of support for an issue by pointing out their conservative allies. Doing so would be easier if they were on speaking terms, Schambra says.

Policy has been an area of increasing importance for the group. It lobbied for federal measures meant to encourage giving in 2017. It helped to stall a [California bill](https://www.philanthropy.com/article/donor-advised-fund-bill-sparks-fierce-lobbying-clash-in-calif/) that would have increased state regulation of donor-advised funds. This year the group filed an amicus brief with the Supreme Court arguing against a requirement that nonprofits disclose donors in their California state tax returns. The court agreed with the Roundtable’s position.

Now as perhaps the most significant piece of [federal legislation](https://www.philanthropy.com/article/coalitions-of-foundations-and-donors-line-up-to-oppose-new-senate-measure-to-speed-up-giving) affecting philanthropy in a generation awaits a hearing in the U.S. Senate, the Roundtable has completely restructured its public-policy organization. In the past, the Roundtable’s federal outreach and policy priorities were run by an outside group of foundation executives called the Alliance for Charitable Reform. Westhoff transferred the responsibilities of that group to staff members. She says it didn’t make sense to have such an important function run by volunteers.

Those changes have confused some who serve on the alliance, say some members who spoke to the Chronicle but asked not to be named because they are still involved with the Roundtable. Some are unsure of their role or what purpose the group now serves. One felt marginalized.

Riley, the former Philanthropy Roundtable staff member who now heads the Connelly Foundation, is on the committee. He says he understands the need for the changes but isn’t sure what the group’s role will be. “If she tells you, please let me know,” he says.

**Tougher to Collaborate**

By making such harsh critiques against progressive foundations, Westhoff is making collaboration, and even learning across ideological divides, harder, say several current and former donors. Meyerson, her predecessor, was open to engaging with those from different perspectives. And, they say, there was real value in that.

Meyerson wanted to bring in donors from all across the ideological spectrum to have constructive discussions about important issues, Canales says. He thought it was a point of pride for Meyerson. “Adam created a space where all were welcome,” he says.

Roundtable conferences were great learning opportunities for staff members at Heinz, says Oliphant. “Nobody has a monopoly on good ideas,” he says.

Even Buchanan, who has been an arch critic of Westhoff, collaborated with Meyerson and had good things to say about him.

But now any opportunity for collaboration is fading because of the Roundtable’s divisiveness, critics say. We’ve lost “a space where we can have open, congenial, respectful discussion and disagreement,” says Canales.

Meyerson, who is now vice president at Stand Together, a philanthropy founded by Charles Koch, declined to speak with the Chronicle for this article.

**Differences Out in the Open**

Westhoff and some Roundtable supporters insist that the group is not being divisive. It is only engaging in an important debate about the direction of philanthropy. Everyone should welcome a robust discussion. But that sentiment belies some of the deep and growing differences between conservative and progressive philanthropists that Westhoff is forcing into the open. And those divisions mirror the larger rifts erupting over advancing racial equity across the United States.

Taylor Batten, for one, welcomes a conversation about race, she says, but in order to do that productively, the parties need a shared language and understanding of history and facts. “I wish my colleagues at the Philanthropy Roundtable would actually invest in some learning and understanding about being in tough dialogues around racism,” she says.

Westhoff says the group engages in lots of discussion about race. It hosted [a debate](https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/home/resources/videos/videos/default-source/default-video-library/1619-vs-1776-when-was-america-founded) about what the true founding date of the United States was: 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was written, or 1619, when slaves were first brought here. It has a podcast about race called [“Can We Talk About It?”](https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/home/resources/podcasts) And it hosted [a webinar](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s60SCdbEMo4) and a [talk about](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7s59wYI3MA&t=158s) teaching diversity with Irshad Manji, an author who has written about reforming Islam and whose most recent book, Don’t Label Me: An Incredible Conversation for Divided Times, focuses on diversity of thought and the problem with labeling people. Westhoff also mentors a young Black woman who grew up in foster care in Philadelphia. She says they often talk about race.

As a conservative, Westhoff says she often felt like a token in philanthropic circles. And she was often told that she had to accept certain premises — ones that she frequently disagreed with — to engage in discussions. She does not want to do that. She says she is going to keep speaking out. The things she will say will likely continue to spark outcries, forcing more foundations to pick a side, whether they want to or not.

“You have to actually be able to talk about the tough topics and disagree respectfully without name-calling and dehumanizing the other,” she says. “I am going to stand up for my beliefs, and I’m going to point out the areas we disagree on.”

*Correction (Sep. 8, 2021, 11:12 a.m.): A previous version of this article said that Westhoff said it was bad for America to divide people by race. It should have said by identity groups. This article has also been updated to note that the Mott Foundation in August informed the roundtable it was ending its support to the organization.*

Nonprofit Quarterly

Universities after Neoliberalism: How to Build a Democratic Civic University

[Ira Harkavy](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/author/ira-harkavy/) and [Rita A. Hodges](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/author/rita-a-hodges/)

US democratic institutions, always profoundly imperfect, are clearly in crisis. The chasm-like inequities laid bare by COVID-19, the visible and ongoing killing of Black Americans, and the violent insurrection at the Capitol encouraged by an outgoing president are powerful recent indicators. These developments are also signs of deep and chronic problems, including:

* Increasing economic, political, social, educational, and health inequalities
* Increasing racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia
* Increasing attacks on science, knowledge, and democracy itself
* Declining trust in nearly all major institutions

Many things, obviously, contribute to the current situation. Among the most significant is neoliberal capitalism, with its emphasis on privatization and deregulation. Government, business, foundations, schools, hospitals, and large nonprofits have not effectively countered it.

So long as market-based neoliberalism largely defines our economic system, these institutions will fail to provide effective public service and education. Opportunities for economic advancement and meaningful participation will continue to be stymied, reinforcing the shift of income and wealth to the top that we’ve seen in past decades—and have only accelerated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Higher education is at least as responsible as any sector for the continued (even if fraying) dominance of a neoliberal economic system. Creating a more humane, inclusive, and productive economy will therefore require major changes in US higher education.

The Social Responsibility of Universities

Research universities are perhaps the most influential institutions in US society. They develop new ideas and technologies, incubate businesses, serve as cultural and artistic centers, and are engines of local, national, and global economies. As [anchor](https://www.margainc.com/aitf/) institutions, they often engage in partnerships with government, the private sector, and community-based organizations to revitalize local neighborhoods and schools. Most important, they teach the teachers—and the teachers’ teachers—across all subjects, powerfully shaping student learning, values, and aspirations from kindergarten through graduate school.

Why have supposed centers of enlightened thought not only helped formulate, but also adopted and promoted, neoliberalism? Truth be told, many if not most universities have lost their way, embracing private gain and economic advancement over what are supposed to be their core purposes of educating ethical democratic citizens and advancing knowledge for the public good.

Education for profit and narrow economic self-interest are contrary to the historic purpose of US colleges to educate students, [in the words of Benjamin Franklin](https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-03-02-0166), with “an Inclination join’d with an Ability to serve.” Franklin’s call to service was echoed in the founding documents of hundreds of private colleges established after the American Revolution, as well as in the speeches of many college presidents.

That orientation found expression in the subsequent century in the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land-grant colleges and universities whose purpose was to advance the mechanical and agricultural sciences, expand access to higher education, and cultivate citizenship. With the development of the research university in the late 19th century, higher education’s purpose expanded to include creating knowledge to improve the human condition.

Of course, university history is hardly all about progress and democracy. Land acknowledgements recognizing the [dispossession](https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities) of Indigenous peoples and slavery projects by universities ([including our own](http://pennandslaveryproject.org/)) have helped to connect past policies and practices to the racism and inequities we see today. The history of US colleges and universities nonetheless strongly supports our claim that the public—indeed, democratic—mission is and should be the primary mission for higher education.

For more than 30 years, however, universities have helped shape neoliberal, free market approaches to the economy that reflected and accelerated the commercialization of higher education. They have been and remain, as economist [Andrew Seal put it](https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-the-university-became-neoliberal/), “one of neoliberalism’s indispensable nodes.”

The Rise of the Neoliberal University

Although Friedrich Hayek, the Austrian economist, is acknowledged as the academic champion of neoliberalism from the late 1930s through the 1940s, it was the economist Milton Friedman and his colleagues at the University of Chicago who took Hayek’s mantle and successfully promoted and [advanced neoliberalism](https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691151571/masters-of-the-universe) from mid-century on. The elections of Margaret Thatcher (1979) and Ronald Reagan (1980) as national leaders served to consolidate this economic paradigm in public policy.

The Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, passed under Jimmy Carter just a little over a month before Reagan became president, encouraged universities to pursue patents and earn profits for their discoveries. Despite the potential for supporting local economic development, Bayh-Dole and related measures led colleges and universities to act like capitalist enterprises, profiting from ventures spun off from faculty research.

US politics continued to reinforce this turn toward commercialism. Backed by Reagan and leaders of both parties who followed, tax cuts and market-based ideology contributed to decreasing federal and state subsidies, rising tuition levels, a shift in federal education support from grants to loans, and the transferring of costs to the individual consumer—all of which defined higher education as a private benefit.

Neoliberalism valorizes education for profit, not virtue; students as consumers, not producers of knowledge; academics as individual superstars, not members of a community of scholars. These developments reflect what Derek Bok, a former Harvard president, termed the [commercialization of higher education](https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7svxh), which contributes to an overemphasis on institutional competition for wealth and status and distorts the values and ambitions of students.

When institutions prioritize commercialization, their behavior legitimizes and reinforces the pursuit of economic self-interest by students and amplifies the widespread sense that college is exclusively for personal benefit. Student idealism and civic engagement are strongly diminished when students see universities act like competitive, profit-making corporations. Commercialism and the development of the neoliberal university not only foster an environment in which higher education is seen as a private benefit rather than a public good, but they also simultaneously contribute to rising economic [disparities both on and off campus](https://www.thenation.com/article/society/gig-academy-meritocracy-trap-universities-crisis/) and [the underfunding](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/ajes.12370) of higher education.

Returning to a traditional liberal arts model, in which the university is detached from society, [fails to counter](https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200413152542750) the neoliberal university. On the contrary, while the traditional  liberal arts college precedes the advent of the neoliberal university by many decades, its disciplinary focus and emphasis on [elite and elitist education](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=865767DEF1A02A20CE9E01BE95768982&gwt) similarly work against core democratic goals such as diversity, inclusion, and equity. Higher education needs to offer equitable opportunities to all students in accordance with their talents and aspirations.

Both the neoliberal and traditional liberal arts models studiously ignore historically based and market-supported racism, whose devastating impacts in the era of COVID are impossible to deny. Pre-pandemic economic conditions for Black Americans in particular, including lower income and wealth levels, greater food and housing insecurity, and higher unemployment, left these communities also [more vulnerable to the economic shocks](https://www.brookings.edu/research/racial-economic-inequality-amid-the-covid-19-crisis/) of COVID-19. The health impacts have been astonishing: [life expectancy](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/22/briefing/life-expectancy-falling-covid-pandemic.html) fell in 2020 by nearly three years for Black Americans and three years for Latinxs (compared to 1.2 years for white Americans). Addressing such problems would be a primary focus of the democratic civic university.

The Call for Democratic Civic Universities

Commercialization has [not gone uncontested](http://libjournal.uncg.edu/prt/article/view/1677/1209). Many colleges and universities, including our own, have programs that focus on educating students for democratic citizenship and improving schooling and the quality of life in partnership with the communities in which they reside. Service learning, engaged scholarship, community-based participatory research, volunteer projects, and neighborhood economic development initiatives are some of the means employed.

For example, a core component of the University of Pennsylvania’s civic engagement is the [Netter Center for Community Partnerships](http://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/) (where we both work) and its partnerships in Penn’s local geographic community of West Philadelphia to create and sustain university-assisted community schools. University-assisted community schools function as neighborhood centers or “hubs” and develop school-day and after-school curricula focused on solving community-identified, real-world problems. Working with the Netter Center, university-assisted community schools connect Penn and West Philadelphia resources—involving over 3,000 Penn students, faculty, and staff, along with more than 3,700 K–12 students, their family members, and other community members—to achieve improved learning and a better quality of life for all. The Netter Center also collaborates closely with the university’s [executive vice president office](http://www.evp.upenn.edu/strategic-initiatives/community-and-economic-development.html) on community economic development, which includes implementing [local procurement](https://supplier-diversity.business-services.upenn.edu/) and [hiring programs](http://www.evp.upenn.edu/strategic-initiatives/community-and-economic-development/economic-inclusion-initiatives.html), to advance Penn’s role as an democratic anchor institution that works with and for its local community.

To provide another example, [Rutgers University–Newark’s anchor agenda](https://www.newark.rutgers.edu/anchor-institution) integrates academic and economic resources to address five major Newark city priorities: building strong educational pathways (pre-K through 16) for increased postsecondary attainment; strong, healthy, and safe neighborhoods; promoting and leveraging the arts and culture; science in the urban environment; and equitable growth through entrepreneurship and economic development. The school’s [Honors Learning-Living Community](https://hllc.newark.rutgers.edu/), for instance, redefines the notion of “merit” and engages intergenerational and interdisciplinary learning communities of students, faculty, and community partners to help tackle pressing social issues in and out of the classroom.

A democratic civic university would involve significant and ongoing engagement of an institution’s comprehensive resources (academic, human, cultural, and economic) in partnership with community members to produce knowledge and educate ethical students with the ability to help create and maintain just, antiracist, democratic societies. In addition, this work of developing and implementing solutions to community-identified problems would function as a curriculum, text, and performance test for a university’s research, teaching, and learning activities.

A democratic civic university would also infuse democracy across all aspects of the institution. Participatory democracy and a culture of democracy, not just democracy as defined by voting or a system of government, would be primary goals.

US philosopher and education scholar John Dewey defined democracy as [“a way of life”](https://www.philosophie.uni-muenchen.de/studium/das_fach/warum_phil_ueberhaupt/dewey_creative_democracy.pdf) in which all citizens actively participate in the communal, societal, educational, and institutional decisions that significantly shape their lives. In line with that goal, members of a democratic civic university would treat community residents as full and equal partners. The relationship itself and the welfare of the various partners would be the preeminent value, not simply developing a specified program or completing a research project.

Contributing to the well-being of people in the community (both now and in the future) through structural improvement would be a defining characteristic. The goals of diversity and inclusion are [deeply interdependent](https://imaginingamerica.org/full-participation-building-the-architecture-for-diversity-and-community-engagement-in-higher-education/) with community engagement. Both require critical examination and fundamental change of existing [practices that perpetuate privilege](https://www.aacu.org/blog/reimagining-how-we-define-equity-gaps-decentering-whiteness-and-privilege) and inequity.

Where We Go from Here

We believe the following steps are needed:

**1. Root out institutional hypocrisy and engage field leaders (faculty as well as senior administrators) to transform their universities.**

It is time for a thorough review of the policies, practices, and culture of higher education institutions. Higher education institutions, particularly research universities, are [deeply implicated](https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/05/04/higher-ed-must-play-role-creating-antiracist-and-just-democracies-opinion) in the racial and social injustices and inequalities that permeate society. Indeed, the extreme poverty, persistent deprivation, and pernicious racism affecting communities in the shadows of powerful, relatively wealthy universities raise troubling moral issues, as well as questions about higher education’s contribution to society.

Students, faculty, staff at all levels, and community members need to call their universities to account—and to task—to do the right thing. This call should be designed to catalyze deep institutional change, including the creation of partnerships between universities and their neighbors specifically designed to achieve more just and inclusive campuses and communities. Such change would radically alter faculty work so that it increasingly contributes to the solution of core community-identified problems such as poverty, health inequities, environmental sustainability, and unequal education. This work needs to also be positively reflected in promotion and tenure.

**2. Align public policy to promote democratic partnerships that make real change.**

Universities must direct their own resources to partner with local communities in respectful, collaborative, sustained democratic partnerships that work to eradicate injustice on campus and in the community. However, government, which helped create the neoliberal university, can also help dismantle it. Now, as President Joe Biden seeks, [at least in part](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-biden-agenda-can-it-reshape-the-us-social-contract/), to move public policy away from neoliberalism, higher education policy too needs to adopt a new lens.

The [“Noah Principle”](https://www.inc.com/scott-mautz/warren-buffetts-little-known-noah-rule-is-key-to-surviving-adversity.html) should be a guide—that is, give funding for building arks (producing real change), not for predicting rain (describing the problems that exist and will develop if actions are not taken). This would not solve the problem of the neoliberal university but would help—rewarding education for citizenship and the public good, instead of for profit and private benefit.

**3. Advance the democratic mission of higher education globally.**

Many contemporary problems, such as the climate crisis—as well as racism and economic inequality—are global in scope, so the democratic civic university must also advance globally. A promising development is the formation of the [Global Cooperation for the Democratic Mission of Higher Education](https://www.internationalconsortium.org/about/), composed of four core partners: the Council of Europe; the International Association of Universities; the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility, and Democracy (which is housed at Penn’s Netter Center); and the Organization of American States. This work needs to be expanded to include democratic-minded faculty, students, staff, and community members working together to create and sustain a global movement to transform higher education.

Conclusion

Now is the time to end the destructive reign of the neoliberal university and create and sustain the democratic civic university that our campuses, communities, and societies need to improve and thrive. Replacing the neoliberal with the democratic civic university should be an institutional imperative for US—and, indeed, global—higher education. The future of democracy depends on it.