

Give In or Fight Back? Colleges Are Torn on How to Respond to Trump.

The University of California, one of the Trump administration's biggest targets so far, is in an uproar over how to respond to the president's attacks. So is the rest of higher education.



At the University of California, Berkeley, professors and students are outraged over steps the university system has taken to assist the Trump administration. Credit...Jim Wilson/The New York Times



By [Alan Blinder](#) and [Stephanie Saul](#)

Alan Blinder reported from San Francisco, and Stephanie Saul from New York.

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The Trump administration has attacked the University of California system's research funding, launched a swarm of investigations and demanded that it [pay more than \\$1 billion](#).

But people across the 10-campus system are at odds over how to fight back, stirring a war within about countering President Trump's tactics. In many ways, the conflicts reflect academia at large, which has not mustered a consensus about how to fend off [the White House's campaign to remake American campuses](#).

California administrators have tried to negotiate with the same government that professors have sued. The university system's regents have huddled behind closed doors while one, Gov. Gavin Newsom, has publicly called for defiance. And system leaders have clashed with campus-level officials over giving the Trump administration the names of scores of students and employees connected to complaints about antisemitism.

"This has nothing to do with antisemitism, and everything to do with capitulating," Peyrin Kao, a Berkeley lecturer who was included in the files that went to the federal government, told regents last week.

The White House's barrage against top schools has [sometimes proven a rallying cry](#) for higher education, especially after Harvard University [rejected the Trump administration's demands](#) and sued. But as the federal government has challenged schools, it has often faced a fractured response among campus leaders, workers, students, donors and sympathetic elected officials, even in places where there is far-reaching opposition to Mr. Trump.

The tensions stem from the question of what universities should prioritize. Should battling incursions into [academic freedom](#) take precedence? Or protecting students and cherished values like diversity? Or should retaining federal research funds come first?

Those debates have lately roared in California. They have unspooled in private deliberations among university officials, in [the public meeting of the Board of Regents](#) in San Francisco, and in conversations between people like Judith Butler and the Berkeley lawyer who signed the announcement about the California system's disclosures to the government.



The Trump administration has demanded more than \$1 billion from the University of California, Los Angeles. Credit...Alisha Jucevic for The New York Times

“I did ask him about whether he had thought about not complying, and he said no,” Dr. Butler, a gender theorist who joined Berkeley’s faculty in the early 1990s, recalled in an interview.

Professor Butler said the lawyer, who declined to comment, responded that his job was to defend the university.

“But perhaps,” Professor Butler remembered replying, “it’s your job to defend the highest ideals of the university.”

Prominent schools are grappling with how to defend those ideals as they face attacks by the government that can threaten billions of dollars. The University of California system, which has about 560,000 students and employees, receives more than \$17 billion in federal funding each year.

Most of the federal money for the university system, which includes six academic health centers, is related to patient care covered by Medicare and Medicaid. But more than \$7 billion is tied to research and student financial aid. If federal funding were to largely vanish, officials predict that the academic, economic and social repercussions would reshape California, where the university system is among the largest employers.

The Trump administration has had the system on edge for months.

The Department of Education announced in February that it was examining Berkeley after reports of “widespread antisemitic harassment.” A Justice Department task force then said it would send investigators to the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses. The following month, the Education Department threatened university officials in Berkeley, Davis, San Diego and Santa Barbara with “potential enforcement actions” related to antisemitism.

And in August, the Trump administration sent the university system terms to settle accusations of antisemitism in Los Angeles. The government’s proposed conditions included about \$1.2 billion in payments — the largest sum the administration is known to have demanded from a university — and steps to ensure “that foreign students likely to engage in anti-Western, anti-American or antisemitic disruptions or harassment are not recruited or admitted.”



James Milliken, the president of the University of California system, has said the Trump administration’s cuts would devastate its schools. Credit...USA Today Network, via Reuters Connect

The university system’s president, James B. Milliken, has said that such financial terms “would completely devastate” the system, which has all 10 of its campuses are facing some level of federal scrutiny.

“The University of California the world has come to know is now at risk,” Mr. Milliken told the regents.

Mr. Milliken, who took office last month, has pursued talks with Washington while trying to rally support in California. The university system has eagerly touted polling showing that it is

popular among Californians. But it has said far less about negotiations with the federal government, which has threatened litigation.

The White House declined to comment.



The Department of Education announced in February that it was examining Berkeley after reports of “widespread antisemitic harassment.” Credit...Erin Schaff/The New York Times

The regents met privately last week, after listening to a parade of speakers whose comments showed the pressures that Mr. Milliken’s strategy is facing.

“If the U.C. follows the example of Brown and Columbia and complies with the demands of the federal administration, it will only open up the U.C. to more demands and intensify the attacks on students, staff, faculty and the entire ecosystem of higher ed,” Aditi Hariharan, the U.C. Student Association president, told the regents.

The dilemma over Mr. Trump is not unique to California.

Harvard [won a favorable ruling from a federal judge this month](#). But the university has also [been in talks with the White House](#), infuriating some people on campus who believe there is nothing legitimate to negotiate.

At George Mason University, the school’s president, Gregory N. Washington, has [refused](#) Trump administration demands that he acknowledge wrongdoing in connection with efforts to build a diverse work force on campus. The university’s board, however, has taken a more [conciliatory](#) approach.

The unevenness of the responses has alarmed some of Mr. Trump's toughest critics.

"The idea that each university has to fight this battle by themselves, that's truly crazy to me," said Arne Duncan, one of President Barack Obama's education secretaries. "And I know it's hard. I know it's scary. But any time a university is attacked, there should be 500 university presidents standing up together, or 1,000 boards of trustees standing up together and saying, 'We're in solidarity.' And that would send such a different message."

Such a message has been hard to find.



The president of George Mason University, Gregory N. Washington, has rebuffed Trump administration attacks. Credit...Michael A. McCoy for The New York Times

A petition to oppose government intrusion, circulated by the American Association of Colleges and Universities in the spring, garnered the signatures of 662 leaders of universities, colleges and scholarly associations. But many academic leaders refused to sign. Some who balked believed such a petition would be ineffective, while others cited "institutional neutrality" policies or wanted to avoid attracting attention.

Kim A. Wilcox, who recently retired after about 12 years as the chancellor of the University of California, Riverside, said the mixed responses to the Trump administration reflected the varied risk tolerances and styles of academic leaders.

“Everyone is struggling with: What do you do to stand up to Trump, versus the harm that’s going to happen if you do,” said Dr. Wilcox, who noted that many administrators acknowledge shortcomings on their campuses. “That’s not an easy calculus at all.”

Some campus leaders have [complied with the Trump administration’s wishes](#), even without the threat of dire financial losses, by disciplining people they believed had defied Mr. Trump’s orders.

Princeton University’s president, Christopher L. Eisgruber, has sharply criticized the White House’s tactics, but he acknowledged the painful options before some university officials.

Faced with coercion, he said, universities must choose between “compromising a principle like academic freedom that matters to what you do as an institution, and on the other hand, if you defend it, giving up funding that may be essential to allowing your faculty members to make their mortgage payments.”

But for university officials who strike deals, he added, “the right thing to do is not to try to square the circle on what it is you say, but to admit to what it is you’re doing.”

In California, Mr. Newsom, a potential Democratic candidate for president in 2028, has publicly floated the idea of suing the Trump administration to challenge “disgusting political extortion.” Last week, labor groups brought their own lawsuit, implying that the university’s response had been insufficient to meet the might of the federal government. In a different case — also not brought by the university system — [a judge ruled this week](#) that the government had to restore hundreds of millions of dollars in grants.

And late on Thursday, hundreds of Berkeley faculty members wrote to system and campus leaders to “demand that the University of California cease any negotiations” about the conditions proposed for U.C.L.A.

A spokeswoman for the university system, Rachel Zaentz, made no such commitment in a statement on Friday.

“The university acknowledges our faculty’s concerns and appreciates their input,” she said. “The university remains focused on ensuring the ability to serve California and the nation through its vital education, research, and public service, consistent with our shared values.”

But for some, the university system’s sharing of information about students and employees with the Education Department suggested a willingness to surrender. The records included information concerning about 160 people from the Berkeley campus alone.

“If they’re willing to sell us out, what is stopping them from then going and selling anyone else out when it’s convenient?” Mr. Kao, who has long protested the war in Gaza, said in an interview.

Berkeley has distanced itself from the system’s disclosure decision, which the campus lawyer wrote stemmed from “directions” from system officials. Professor Butler said the Berkeley lawyer indicated in their discussion “that it was not his call, that he was following policy.”

The university system's general counsel, Charles F. Robinson, said in a statement that the decision reflected a longstanding practice to comply with "legal obligations," which he said U.C. had done "over many years and across numerous administrations."

Nevertheless, the decision unnerved people like Dr. Butler, a fierce critic of the Israeli government who had not been aware of any campus complaints against them.

"I was working on my Kafka manuscript, and then the Kafkaesque interrupted me," Professor Butler said.

University system officials have signaled no regrets about their handling of the matter, even as the uproar has persisted.

But, perhaps in a reflection of the University of California's tradition of protest and disagreement, Berkeley's chancellor, Richard K. Lyons, acknowledged the range of opinions about how to steer through Trump-related matters.

"I think there should always be robust debate," he said, adding, "We are designed for people to express themselves, and disagree."

[Alan Blinder](#) is a national correspondent for The Times, covering education.

[Stephanie Saul](#) reports on colleges and universities, with a recent focus on the dramatic changes in college admissions and the debate around diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education.

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