

The Civil Rights Project



Proyecto Derechos Civiles

Statement Against Politically Motivated Federal Censorship of Research & Training on Racial Issues

September 11, 2020

Maintaining the academic freedom of our universities and the power of state and local governments and teachers to create curricula to instruct our students are fundamental American values. The Civil Rights Project is alarmed at efforts by the Trump Administration to interfere with and limit these precious rights, and to ban ideas that they disagree with. We think that this is a dangerous step, of the kind often linked to authoritarian governments, not healthy democracies.

The Trump administration has been bitterly critical of anything it calls “cancel culture,” which usually refers to what they perceive to be silencing the voices of some right-wing provocateurs on some college campuses. It wants to stop research whose findings differ from their ideas. It wants to block the 1619 Project of Nikole Hannah-Jones and the New York Times that won the Pulitzer prize for journalism. That project has generated great interest in exploring our heritage of the massive system of slavery that played a major role in our history, and whose legacy continues to today. But this statement is not about particular works. In the academic world discussion is always continuing and research is always extending knowledge.

The administration is engaging in unprecedented interference with First Amendment rights, to teach about race relations in a country that has a long history of segregated and unequal educational opportunity. This fact has been recognized by virtually every federal court that has seriously examined the issue. An administration that knows the constitutional role of state and local control over education nonetheless is now undertaking unprecedented and dangerous censorship to block the use of curricular materials on the history of slavery, work that comes from many traditions of peer reviewed scholarship, including research in law and education. A president, who places no value on scholarship or truth, is equating teaching the truth to being unpatriotic. The administration wants to block communities from using training programs that they think are necessary. Unlike in autocratic states where distortion of the truth serves the aims of dictators, teaching the facts of our history and working to move past stereotypes about other groups are cornerstones of our democracy. They are not to be dictated or threatened on political grounds.

This appears to be an edict by a president, who has frequently been accused of supporting white supremacists, sought to reduce federal enforcement of anti-discrimination law, and strongly opposes anything that shines a light on racism.

As a collaborative of scholars across the country working on issues of civil rights and racial inequality for almost a quarter century at Harvard and UCLA, the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles believes that research, discussion, evaluating remedies to inequality, and listening to all voices on these important issues are essential. The current generation of young people in our country is the first without a majority of whites. Our population growth is being driven largely as the result of immigrations of Latinos and Asians. We are a multiracial democracy that has far to go in its quest to create genuinely equal opportunity for all groups of Americans, but that has endeavored to do so, even as we fall short. We believe that one essential part of the work of schools and colleges is for all of us to have better understanding of the roots of inequality and the history of racial disparities in order to create a more perfect union. We do not think that there is one simple solution, since the problems are deeply rooted and permeate many institutions. However, our research clearly shows that the problems have not resolved themselves, and must be attended to, but good research and training make a difference.

Our work shows that good policies produce gains for all groups and communities, a win-win situation, even while power is distributed more equally. We think that it is vitally important for schools and colleges at all levels to foster learning and understanding of these issues. We do not believe in indoctrination, and we are intensely opposed to politically based censorship at a national level. The only way to move forward is to allow students to learn about and discuss good research, and to experience and understand the differing perspectives in our society on issues like slavery, Jim Crow, the conquest of Mexico, the destruction of many Indian communities, and the creation of our urban ghettos and barrios. Civil rights movements and laws are, of course, also basic features of our history and our society, and are important topics for our schools and colleges.

We do not think the federal government should ever try to impose or block one perspective. Academic freedom in the world's best universities, and selection of teaching materials at the state, local and classroom levels are essential elements of a vibrant democracy. Prescribing and proscribing perspectives is the essence of education in an authoritarian regime. If some officials feel that important issues have been neglected, then fund more research. Don't try to block what you disagree with.

We believe that Congress and the Courts should prevent any effort to institute ideological controls. Racial issues are vital for understanding both the complexity and the great promise of our nation. We also believe that the federal government should get advice from the research community on racial issues, and should fund, support and help disseminate research meeting high academic standards, as well as provide a platform for discussion of differing findings and perspectives.