

# An Interview with Ivy Wilson

On the Current State of Higher Education in the United States

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## Abstract

This contribution provides an overview of the recent events that affected the Department of Education as well as higher education in the United States since the beginning of President Trump's second term. The second part of the article presents an interview with Ivy Wilson, Board of Visitors Professor at Northwestern University.

In March 2025, Linda McMahon was nominated and confirmed as United States Secretary of Education, and only a few weeks after she was sworn in, President Trump signed an executive order aimed at “Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities.”<sup>1</sup> The executive order contemplated the facilitation of the closure of the Department of Education. Despite the attempt to block the firing by US District Judge Myong Jung on May 22, 2025, eventually, the Supreme Court eventually allowed for the mass layoffs at the Department of Education (Hurley 2025).

This cabinet-level Department was signed into law in 1979, thanks to the advocacy of President Carter, who aimed at filling the inefficiency gaps and centralizing the fragmented federal education programs. The Department of Education engages in four types of activities: it “establishes policies relating to federal financial aid for education, administers distribution of those funds and monitors their use,” “collects data and oversees research on America's schools and disseminates this information to Congress, educators and the general public,” “identifies

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/improving-education-outcomes-by-empowering-parents-states-and-communities/>. All websites were last visited on 20/11/2025.

the major issues and problems in education and focuses national attention on them,” and “enforces federal statutes prohibiting discrimination in programs and activities receiving federal funds and ensures equal access to education for every individual” (“An Overview” 2025). The creation of a unified Department had been facilitated, in a significant historical moment, by a financial aid program for military personnel of the Second World War that “enabled an unprecedented number of veterans to attend colleges, universities, and an array of ‘postsecondary’ institutions” (Thelin, Edwards and Moyon n.d.). Allowing people from disadvantaged parts of society to access and receive a higher education naturally increased the demand, hence creating a favorable condition for the creation of the Department of Education, as well as facilitating an upward mobilization in American society.

In the following decades, other republican presidents attempted to cut the funding or even shut down the Department; both Ronald Reagan in 1980 and George W. Bush during his first term campaigned against it. President Trump pursued this conservative agenda and has moved closer to achieving this goal. One of the reasons behind these cutbacks is the allegation that the department has been “indoctrinating young people with racial, sexual and political ideologies” (Faguy 2025), hence favouring a certain ‘Woke’ culture that is being opposed by Republicans.

Another matter that is strictly connected with the battle fought against public and private institutions, especially in the field of education, is the one regarding DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), one of the programs targeted by Trump’s first executive orders as soon as he entered his second term.<sup>2</sup> The policy on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion deeply affects, among other things, the way higher institutions diversify their population by attracting both local and international students and scholars. The dismissal of the DEI program goes hand in hand with an increased control on student visas, resulting in an order from the President to the US embassies across the world to stop scheduling visa interviews for foreign students (Gedeon 2025).

Besides DEI, another immediate consequence of Trump’s political agenda has been the freezing of federal funds for some of the major private universities in the US, such as Columbia and Harvard. Northwestern University was another private institution that was highly affected by this administration’s politics, starting from the freezing of federal funds in April 2025 (Bender and Stolberg 2025) and eventually leading to President Michael H. Schill’s resignation on September 4, 2025 (Dunbar 2025). The response from these highly affected universities as well as the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the American Academy of Arts & Sciences has been a statement signed by over 150 universities denouncing

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>.

the “unprecedented government overreach and political interference,”<sup>3</sup> just a few days after Harvard University announced a lawsuit against the administration, which was eventually dismissed in early September.

As of November 2025, the case of higher education in the United States remains open and evolving (see Meckler and Douglas-Gabriel 2025). The expected outcome is a cooperation between the government and academia, as hoped by Robert Cropf, Professor of Political Science at Saint Louis University, in a two-parts series article on the state of higher education under the Trump administration published in July of 2025 (2025a). According to Cropf, higher education is affected by an internal crisis caused by the freezing of fundings. The immediate consequence is the inflation “driven by shrinking state support, costly campus construction, and a relentless pursuit of rankings and prestige” (2025b). All these factors, as well as the undoing of programs of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, contribute to undermine the freedom of education.

In an attempt to better understand the complexity of such historical moment for the condition of education in the United States, we proposed to do an interview with Professor Ivy Wilson, as someone who has been witnessing first-hand the current circumstances and is actively involved in such major discussions.

Ivy Wilson is Board of Visitors Professor of English and American Studies at Northwestern University, in Evanston, Illinois. He received his Ph.D. at Yale University and he specializes in Asian American Literature, 20th- and 21st-century American Literature, Critical Race Studies, Postcolonial and Diaspora Studies, American Literature to 1900, African American Literature, Poetry and Poetics. In 2011, he published *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (Oxford University Press). He edited *At the Dusk of Dawn: Selected Poetry and Prose of Albery Allson Whitman* (University Press of New England, 2012), and co-edited *The Works of James M. Whitfield America and Other Writings by a Nineteenth-Century African American Poet* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet* (University of Iowa Press, 2014), and *Unsettled States: Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* (NYU Press, 2014).

We met with Professor Wilson during the 2025 ALA (American Literature Association) Conference in Boston in May 2025, a few months after the second Trump administration entered office. This interview was held online on October 1, 2025.

**Rachele Puddu:** In March 2025, President Trump signed an executive order aimed at dismantling the Department of Education. What were the immediate consequences for your

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.aacu.org/newsroom/a-call-for-constructive-engagement>.

university? Overall, could you identify the most relevant differences between public and private institutions, and between colleges across the nation – Midwest, compared to West and East coast – along with colleges in democratic and republican states, which might benefit from state and/or private funding besides federal ones?

**Ivy Wilson:** This is a multi-part question, and I'll try to work through key aspects of it. By way of context, the United States has a federal government system with various departments: the Department of Justice, the Department of Defense, the Department of Agriculture, and the like. As the country approaches its symbolic 250th anniversary next year, it's worth noting that the Department of Education is relatively new compared to older ones like the State Department and Treasury Department. The Department of Education, thus, especially needs to be understood within its historical context. The idea that education is a public good – that elementary and primary schooling before college was a privilege of living in the United States – became increasingly important. Education as a concept became tied to the notion of the “American dream,” particularly after the 1920s. This connection between the Department of Defense and the Department of Education is evident in the G.I. Bill coming out of World War II. I mention this context because there's both the formal apparatus of the Department of Education and a more ethereal concept of education being intimately tied to upward social mobility. Upward social mobility is essentially the American dream: if you do well in secondary school and attend a decent college or trade school, you end up in a better situation than the generation before you.

The Department of Education, which came after Lyndon B. Johnson's “war on poverty,” had key elements related to thinking about education as part of the welfare state. This is the component that many detractors, particularly those on the right, see as either a proxy or precursor to a more full-blown welfare state in the US. In Europe, many universities don't have the bifurcated structure we have in the US. Take England, for example. Two of the most prestigious universities in the world – Cambridge and Oxford – have essentially the same fee structure as middle-tier universities in England. That is, their fees aren't meant to be cost-prohibitive.

To get back to your question about dismantling the Department of Education in the US: this is one of the departments that certain detractors of the welfare state want to dismantle.<sup>4</sup> As

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<sup>4</sup> IW: “Linda McMahon is the current head of the Department of Education; her predecessor was Betsy DeVos. Interestingly, McMahon, who is not an educator and has never been in education, came on a platform saying that ideally she'd be out of a job in six months or a year. Her whole purpose was not to reform the Department of Education but to dismantle it. That's a very different position than most department heads take in terms of streamlining, increasing efficiency, or optimizing operations. Her goal was to dismantle the Department of Education at the federal level so that education choices would become the sole province of the states. This has serious consequences for charter schools, taxation for public education, the teaching of whether humans evolved as a biological species in the physical world or were

academics working on literature, specifically American literature, we should be attentive to the language, rationale, and discourse that is being mobilized around the Education Department to recognize that there will likely be dismantling of other departments tied to social welfare programs. I'd be keen to look at how this immediate assault might presage other assaults on welfare state programs, including women's and children's food programs and housing affordability subsidies. In fact, housing affordability as a concept may come under attack – though regardless of which president is in office, the federal government has almost always subsidized large multinational corporations rather than individuals in need. I would say that where we see the dismantling of the Department of Education, we should remember that the United States, at a structural level, has an intimate relationship between what happens at the federal level of governance and the state level of governance – sometimes aligned, and sometimes contested. In this case, in this moment, I think there are folks of a certain persuasion who see this as antagonistic and threatening.

There are other historical examples. During the modern civil rights movement, federal troops were deployed to the American South to compel southern states to integrate their schools. Federal troops went to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Texas, and Arkansas, among other states, to compel school integration. That was a moment when those southern states felt their state rights were being impinged upon by the federal government. What I'm suggesting is that there's sometimes fundamental antagonism between the federal and state levels. Sometimes state-level decisions are perceived as overreach or oversight by the federal government. This is the language that states like Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia are using now, saying they don't want to be beholden to Department of Education oversight and standards. They want to be able to teach, for example, biblical creation alongside scientific biology. Part of the dismantling of the Department of Education reflects this natural contestation between federal and state government. However, I think this has very specific particularities. This assault on the Department of Education may share some mechanical functionality with other historical moments, but ideologically and politically, it's quite different. The mechanics may be similar, but they're powered by a different battery.

I wouldn't say there's any rhyme or reason between public and private institutions in terms of response. Institutions that have been heavily in the news include my university, Northwestern, but arguably the two most visible ones have been Columbia and Harvard. Columbia conceded to what we'd call a receivership. Some academic programs are under review by an external body of people from outside doing oversight work – which doesn't happen

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created by an omniscient and omnipotent God should be left to the provinces and the decision of individual states.”

infrequently, but usually involves other academic departments, not the federal government. To give an example: if a department of romance languages with an emphasis on Italian studies has internal conflicts making it difficult to function, they might get an external body from the French department to serve as the governing unit. But it's fairly rare to have someone from outside the university serve in this receivership role, which is what happened at Columbia. The other development at Columbia was the collapse and consolidation of three departments. The Department of Education mobilized language around anti-Semitism, and there may have been claims about being unpatriotic or harboring terrorist inclinations. Those concessions involved neo-pragmatic decisions that became less about intellectual freedom and protecting certain rights than about the very real immediacy of their fiduciary responsibility to their endowment. Faced with the threat of withholding hundreds of millions of dollars, the choice became clearer: they would make these changes to restore federal funding.

Another Ivy League example is Harvard University, which has resisted in stronger and more pronounced ways, legally challenging some of those mandates. They wrote and publicized a letter saying that they found these requests not tied to claims of anti-Semitism, that the university had made clear steps to address the Trump administration's issues, yet the administration continued coming after them. Perhaps the most interesting example is what's happening in California's public education system, which has resisted some of the Trump mandates around DEI. Context matters here: California as a single state is one of the largest economies in the world, including the film industry in LA and the tech industry in Northern California. It's by far the most populous state and one of the most diverse demographically. Most public education units in California are, by default, Hispanic-serving institutions because over 35% of the population is Latino. You're dealing with a very real demographic issue on one hand and what can be perceived as a political or ideological notion of DEI on the other. This year, California has resisted – and while I don't know enough to speak with certainty about Governor Gavin Newsom, California's education system has put up legal resistance to Trump's mandate. That's an amazing gesture. I would guess these conversations happened among university presidents, but it's not the Ivy League banding together, nor a handful of large public R1 universities – it's the public education system in the state of California that has formed a political bloc to contest the legal validity of Trump's actions. Regarding differences between public and private higher education: states like Florida, North Carolina, and Texas have largely embraced these changes, while others are resisting. The example of California and its public school system is perhaps the most illuminating and intriguing.

**RP:** Are you aware of any ways in which this administration's radical attack on DEI will impact or is already impacting the admission process for international students and students belonging

to specific minorities or ethnic groups, or the hiring of faculty? As a scholar working on race and political issues, do you see any effects on your own academic freedom?

**IW:** DEI has become somewhat of an umbrella term. This may sound facetious, but it's being used anachronistically to blame things from decades or even centuries ago. DEI has become too often a convenient catch-all phrase as a reactionary corrective to certain political agendas on both the left and right. Whatever we think about DEI as an acronym and operational concept, each term deserves examination. Diversity is interesting – from an academic standpoint, diversity in the physical world and biology is everywhere. The diversity of species is a well-established fact in physical sciences. When you move diversity to the social sciences, where it concerns how people interact, it gets more contested as social engineering or set-aside programs. The middle term, equity, is perhaps the most charged. Equity is different from equality. Equality is rarely guaranteed in the US under any political system. The phrase more often discussed is not equity in the social sense, but equal opportunity, which was particularly prominent in the 1980s. The idea was to give folks equal opportunity or equal access to colleges, private clubs, and golf courses, among other spaces, and then they could make what they would of those opportunities. Equity is the most contested of these three terms. DEI as a whole has been too lazily used as a catchall phrase to contest almost anything.

But the relationship between DEI and international students is less directly connected than the issue of visas and international students, which is wrapped up in ICE – Immigration and Customs Enforcement. I see this as part of a much longer issue and history with specific immigrant populations in the US. For the most part, it's not about European immigrants. Before 1924, immigration systems weren't in place, which is why you have large numbers of Irish, Italian, and English immigrants. But when most people talk about the border or immigration control in the US, they're usually thinking of someone from South America, specifically Latin America, and even more specifically Mexico.

So it's not really DEI, but ICE and how ICE has been emboldened in this particular political regime. That's part of the "build that wall" rhetoric. The focus has been on the crisis around the Mexican border, not the Canadian one. Then there's the Global War on Terror and 9/11. These are the two populations<sup>5</sup> that most conspicuously appear in the US public imagination when discussing the necessity of a strong ICE presence. This implies policing and monitoring students who overstay their visas from the Middle East and students who come across the Mexican border and enroll in secondary schools. I see this much less as a DEI issue and more as an issue around how the US has engaged with borders and immigration since at least the Bracero Program in the 1950s, punctuated again, after 9/11, with two very specific populations.

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<sup>5</sup> The Latinx and the Arab (Editor's note).

**RP:** How do you assess the relationship, if any, between what Robert Boyers calls the ‘tyranny of virtue’ – certain forms of liberal conformism around DEI in academia – and the current radical right-wing turn toward censorship and defunding of universities? As someone deeply engaged in both scholarship on race and the realities of academic life, do you see any connection between these two dynamics, or are they completely independent developments?

**IW:** I don’t think these two dynamics developed independently. I’d use the phrase *contrapunto*, meaning there are wild swings in one direction, then seemingly corrective swings in the other direction. As I remember, one thing Boyers laments is the overall erosion – not just of standard liberal values in a political sense with notions like freedom and democracy, but in a more social sense. He laments the ways Americans have become unable to engage in heated exchanges without collapsing into illogical positions alone. Things like identity, privilege, diversity, and tolerance. Boyers is really lamenting the collapse of debate itself. What you have is talking over, through, and around people rather than intense, challenging, and ultimately constructive conversation. My sense of Boyers is that he’s concerned about the limits of what could be called the commons – the space where debate and dialogue happen. In the last fifty years, we’ve become so ideologically entrenched that both sides, in what is essentially a two-party system, have their talking points and data points, but they’re not actually in conversation with one another. They’re just grabbing their microphone to proclaim something. For me, the real virtue of Boyers’ book<sup>6</sup> isn’t so much the erosion of standard liberal values or this honorific idea of citizenship, freedom, or liberty. I read it as a lament on the erosion of the space where those conversations could be had. We have very few of those occasions, and it’s not clear to me that the university is one of those spaces either.

**RP:** Extending the topic to the global geopolitical situation (e.g. the Middle Eastern conflict, or presumed Marxist and left-wing positions), many international students have had their visa revoked for participating in protests, although sometimes with no particular reason. In this regard, the request of the Department of Homeland Security to share sensitive data with the government has caused a fervent debate, especially in light of Harvard’s refusal to cave in. How has this political move affected your institution?

**IW:** Let me address this in reverse, starting with my institution. Northwestern has maintained its commitment to supporting international students, but there are caveats and limitations to what the university can do within a modern corporate environment. One thing I’d like to underscore: the modern US university, especially elite private ones, operates within a highly corporatist environment. That environment is almost always governed by a board of trustees

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<sup>6</sup> *The Tyranny of Virtue: Identity, the Academy, and the Hunt for Political Heresies*, 2019 (Editor’s note).



from the business sector, much less so from philanthropy, the arts, or education. Running the university as an economic enterprise and business entity is different from running it for the public good or education. That's one caveat the modern university deals with. We see this most clearly in how language around the endowment keeps appearing in reports about possible taxation on endowments, which would have cataclysmic results on university operations. They're running somewhat as a business, doing cost-benefit analysis of what it costs to bring in a student. Many US universities have enrolled international students – around 16% of the student body (Batalova 2025) is a sizable number. The resources these international students bring to the US and universities are quite substantial. So the university must balance what these students bring intellectually, culturally, and financially. It's very clear that in many sciences – chemistry, engineering, mathematics – international students comprise a large percentage of those populations. It's not really possible to run those departments intellectually without international students. This is something to keep in mind.

The first part of your question is more disconcerting: the geopolitics and the right to protest. This pushes at the limits of how far we can think about the US as a democracy. The right to protest has for decades been understood to fall under the purview of the First Amendment's "right to peacefully assemble." Does the right to protest only extend to citizens, or does it extend to all people in the United States? That's going to be one of the bigger legal challenges. Who is entitled to the protections of the US Constitution? Is it the space itself or a subset of people within that space? This can be a fine line that can also be egregiously crossed. Right now, this administration says they're not contesting the right to peacefully assemble. They're contesting the ways the right to protest has become violent, and how protest – even by words alone – has threatened the well-being of others. So we're confronting questions like: do words and expressions constitute a form of violence? This administration, as far as I know, hasn't laid a claim against the right to peaceful assembly guaranteed by the First Amendment. But they've put pressure on what constitutes peaceful protest. My sense is that anything this administration finds untoward, anything that doesn't toe the party line, will constitute protest and violence against the administration. Any language, rhetorical formations, idiomatic expressions, or essays that disagree with this administration will, in their imagination, constitute protest by default. By extension, they'll see it as an assault against their notion of civic polity. That's the bigger legal issue.

On the second part about sharing data: there's a notion of privacy in the US whose lines are being blurred every single day by the government. Not long ago, Elon Musk was within reach of accessing almost everyone's personal data. It's happening constantly at the federal level, but equally important is that we're offering that data ourselves through Google, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram. Data collection is happening top-down from the federal level, but data sharing

is also happening from the ground up. They're going to meet at some point. We're seeing this now because of personal computers and iPhones, but this data sharing began in the 1950s with the rise of technocrats that someone like C. Wright Mills discussed, and later Herbert Marcuse, the German philosopher, talked about as well. In essence, there has been and will be an increasing intertwining of the Department of Homeland Security and the security state apparatus, and these two things are getting closer together.

**RP:** Due to the hostility of the current administration toward scientific research, several scholars have been considering leaving the country. What is your opinion on this, also in light of some of the measures the EU has set in place to welcome American top talent?

**IW:** I know less about scientists because I'm in a different division of the university, but there have been several well-known cases published in *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, and *Le Monde*. Scientists are in a different category because they're already working in a model partly underwritten by the university but also by external entities like the National Science Foundation or National Institutes of Health. Most medical schools in the US get large sums from the federal government through the National Institutes of Health. Engineering schools get money from the Department of Defense for projects like fiber optics. In chemistry or pharmaceuticals, they might work with the National Institutes of Health and large pharmaceutical companies like Merck or Johnson & Johnson. The role the university plays in that triffecta between federal government, external entity, and university functions as a tripod – you can't just remove one leg. A scientist would have to secure a grant equivalent to what they had in the US, and expect the German university, for example, to provide laboratory space, postdocs, and lab technicians. It's much more difficult to move an entire lab, although there are examples like CERN in Switzerland with collaborative models, and SLAC, the Stanford Linear Accelerator.

This reminds me that, historically, the 20th century was more or less the American century. It was the center where finance and fluid capital came into being. There have been other economic hubs historically, in the 14th and 15th and 16th, and 17th centuries. I think there was a time when Brussels was one of the richest cities in the world. These things come in ebbs and flows. Right now, global capital almost always sits in the US, and if it doesn't, it must traffic through the US. There are global hubs including Frankfurt, Hong Kong, and London, but all those networks and nodal points intersect with the US. I mention the economic model because we may need to develop another model in other locations to allow collaboration between private entities, education, and government. Right now, as C. Wright Mills wrote in his important book *The Power Elite* (1956) – from which we get the expression “military industrial complex” – we've seen in the second half of the 20th century the Department of Defense working with companies

like BlackRock and with universities. Notwithstanding the particularities, we might need another model that has universities, foundations, and collective work in conjunction with one another to support the humanities. It's clear to me that the university alone cannot continue to subsidize the humanities. There will need to be another way of fully supporting the humanistic endeavors we do in classics, history, and literary studies.

**RP:** As a 19th- and 20th-century literary scholar, do you believe it is possible – or even useful – to draw historical parallels between past challenges to academic independence and the current state of the US academic sector? Are there moments when academic autonomy and international collaboration came under threat in ways that might offer relevant lessons for today's scholars and policymakers?

**IW:** I'll give one short answer and then one longer one. Unfortunately, there are historical precedents and analogs. The one I think most appropriate for this moment is the McCarthy era – the way the ostensible threat of communism or communist sympathizers at a key point in the early Cold War really clamped down on artistic freedom. We saw this in Hollywood cinema and in freedom of expression at universities, similar to what's happening now. More importantly, from the very beginnings of this country and this experiment with democracy, there have always been countercultural resistance movements – sometimes quiet at the margins, but always challenging us to our better angels, to borrow a 19th-century phrase. I have to believe that the “work of resistance,” to borrow from Ralph Ellison, is happening on the lower frequencies all the way to more declamatory protests. I'm not saying one is better than the other – both are needed. I put faith in the thought that people aren't just learning to adapt or adjust to these changes. In the language of Octavia Butler, they're learning to shapeshift. We're learning to transform ourselves and our sensibilities to meet, extend, and move beyond the regimes of this current administration. I don't want to be Pollyannaish or too ethereal about this. This is a very difficult, if not dire, political moment. It's going to take summoning all kinds of “Pathfinders,” to borrow from John Lewis – people who make good trouble – to protect a really fragile democracy.

Maybe this would be my final note: regardless of what we think about this current administration, the larger referendum is actually on the question of democracy itself in the US. It should be disconcerting to all of us that after a nearly 250-year experiment, it could feel like it's crumbling in less than a generation. Some will say it's been brewing for some time, which is probably true. But I would think the institutional structures and processes of democratic governmentality would be able to withstand this with more durability and predictability. The larger question is whether the US as a whole can attend to the principles and, importantly, the processes of democracy. That part is increasingly unclear to people like me.

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