

OPINION

# Stop Feeding College Bureaucratic Bloat

By Philip Hamburger

American higher education faces many difficulties, not least soaring costs and the decline of academic freedom. Administrative bloat, subsidized by the federal government, makes both these problems worse.

A 2014 analysis by the New England Center for Investigative Reporting found that from 1987 to 2012, the higher-education sector added more than half a million administrators. Their numbers have doubled

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relative to academic faculty. Financed in large part with federally subsidized tuition, this rise of administrators siphons money from the core functions of academic institutions. Colleges and universities have shifted teaching duties from full-time professors to part-time nontenured adjuncts who earn paltry wages.

Congress can combat this transformation of the university by reforming student-loan programs. The U.S. government offers student loans without regard to the ratio of administrators to full-time tenured faculty at the school receiving the funds. Congressional largess to students has thus changed the nature of the higher-education system. It has enabled colleges and universities to expand and entrench a class

of employees whose interests often conflict with a serious education.

Administrators serve many valuable functions. They can help students and save time for faculty. But their growth in numbers has coincided with some disturbing trends. Governance of academic institutions traditionally rested with the faculty, especially full-time tenured faculty. But the relative decline of faculty has shifted the balance of power toward administrators, who increasingly control academic policy.

It's no accident that as they have hired more administrators, these institutions have veered toward indoc-

trination and censorious intrusions into speech, opinion and personal life. These heavy-handed policies are often incompatible with traditional educational ideals, such as academic freedom, freedom of speech, open-mindedness and dispassionate judgment. To be sure, many faculty support such policies, but the most consistent pressure for them typically comes from the administrative bureaucracy. Congress should recognize that its funding helped create this threat to education.

When authorizing student loans, Congress should take into account the ratio of administrators to full-time tenured faculty. The amount of a student loan, and the interest rate payable on it, should come on a gently sliding scale dependent on the ratio of administrators to full-time tenured faculty at the institution that will benefit from the loan. At one end of this sliding scale, students attending a school with few administrators could get the largest loans at the lowest possible interest rate, and at the other end students attending an institution where administrators are relatively numerous

could get only the smallest possible loans at the highest possible rate.

The details would be complex. Different programs have different administrative needs, and thus the scale for medical students might have to be different from that for undergraduates. And it may make sense to exclude from the scale those administrators who care for

academic assets such as libraries and databases. Moreover, because schools may respond by replacing administrators with contract workers, the scale would have to include them, too.

An advantage of a sliding scale is that Congress would not be regulating schools by dictating any particular ratio of administrators to full-time

tenured faculty. The choice would remain with the institutions.

Student loans could be tied to a host of other considerations, such as a student's major or field of graduate study. For example, loans could be available on advantageous terms for students studying the hard sciences. But the first priority should be ending the use of federally supported tuition to subsidize the administrative bloat that threatens ac-

ademic values.

This proposal is very different from President Trump's recent executive order tying government funding to the protection of freedom of speech on campuses. As the White House recognized, government protection for students' freedom of speech cannot be taken so far as to abridge their institutions' freedom of speech—for example, the freedom of religious colleges to require commitments to their distinctive points of view. This means any government effort to guarantee campus speech rights is likely to be only partially effective. It is therefore also necessary to address an underlying structural problem: the excess of government-subsidized academic administrators.

One might still protest that Congress should not be in the business of reshaping education. But that is precisely what Congress has been doing for decades. Its loans have facilitated the growth of the education-administrative complex and thereby undermined academic governance and values. Congress should reform its lending to stop subsidizing the rise of administrators at the cost of education.

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