



Daily Briefing

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From: Rick Seltzer

Subject: Daily Briefing: Higher ed governance is failing its stress test

Good morning, and welcome to **Monday, September 22**. Rick Seltzer wrote today's Briefing. Get in touch: dailybriefing@chronicle.com.

 **What's in today's Briefing?** Jewish Americans unimpressed by antisemitism crackdowns. Red tape for Harvard. Reminders that some college presidents are millionaires.

But first, let's explore a bigger idea: that control of colleges has devolved into a struggle of ...

Crowds v. credentials

Crowdsourced governance swept colleges across the country over the last two weeks.

- **At Texas A&M University:** A tweet storm prompted President Mark A. Welsh III to terminate a professor [who'd discussed](#) gender identity in a children's literature

class. But Texas Republicans thought he hadn't acted quickly enough, and come last Friday, Welsh stepped down.

- **Across the country:** After Charlie Kirk was killed, conservative activists complained about offensive social-media posts made by college employees. Institutions punished [a growing list](#) of people.

These aren't just stories about speech. They signal a governance shift that's been accelerating for years.



classroom. Presidents tended to have terminal degrees. Boards provided oversight, especially in crises, but were largely expected to allow presidents to manage day-to-day operations.

Now institutions find themselves increasingly controlled by “the crowd.” That's not just the social-media mob. It's also politicians who draw their legitimacy from the fact that they won popular elections.

“The crowd” has long had influence. In just the last decade, elected officials have [disbanded](#) boards, [revamped](#) universities, [and seen](#) their lieutenants installed as presidents. Activists have forced colleges to [move](#) monuments.

What's new is the ease with which “the crowd” openly flexes its power. Texas Rep. Brian Harrison bragged about ousting Welsh with a social-media campaign. “If I had done what every one of my critics was trying to get me to do, Welsh would still be the president today,” the Republican [told *The Texas Tribune*](#).

It's a fraught moment for governing boards. “The board should be a strong interface between the institution and the public,” Michael B. Poliakoff, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, told The Daily Briefing. “If boards will not take up their responsibility to be active and engaged, we're going to see more and more of this kind of intrusion.”

“When the board room becomes the crowd, the president loses a partner in stewardship, and the institution loses stability,” Ross A. Mugler, interim president of the

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, told the Briefing.

The bigger question: Do colleges have any option but to hope the crowd's passions cool into reforms that might restore trust in higher ed? "The problem with waiting for this moment to burn itself out is that you're assuming the fire will contain itself," said Teresa Valerio Parrot, principal at TVP Communications.

Stat of the day

30 percent

... of Jewish Americans approve of the federal government withholding research funding when there is evidence of antisemitism on a campus, [according to polling released last week](#).

Many Jewish Americans see the White House's college crackdowns as a way to advance a larger agenda, the survey suggests. Almost six in 10 disagreed with the Trump administration's decision to withhold funding from Harvard University and the University of California at Los Angeles.

- **"Three-fourths of the sample view the Trump administration as using antisemitism as an excuse,"** James Druckman, a University of Rochester political scientist who helped design the survey, [told NPR](#).

Of course, views differed by political affiliation. Nine in 10 respondents who voted for Trump think he genuinely cares about campus antisemitism, while 95 percent of Kamala Harris voters think the president is seizing on an opportunity to advance a larger agenda.

Drill down: American Jews still largely trust the academy, the survey suggests. Just over three-quarters said they trust college professors to "do what is right," and 89 percent said they trust medical researchers — far more than the quarter or so who trusted Congress or the Trump administration. Still, worries about college climates run high, with 72 percent saying they were concerned about campus antisemitism.

Quick hits

- **Feds slap Harvard on the wrist again:** The U.S. Department of Education [placed](#) the university on a list of institutions with shaky finances, arguing Harvard could lose access to federal financial aid amid its battles with the Trump administration and therefore might struggle to repay \$1 billion in recently issued bonds. The move is effectively slapping Harvard with red tape. The university will have to post a \$36-million bond and file for reimbursement after paying out students' federal financial aid, rather than receiving the money upfront from the government as is typical. (*The Chronicle*)
- **Marshall U. president gives \$50 million:** Brad D. Smith and his wife [say the donation](#) is intended to allow all students to graduate without debt by 2037, which is the public West Virginia institution's 200th anniversary. Smith, the former chief executive of Intuit, was named [by Forbes](#) as the state's richest person in 2023, passing then-Gov. Jim Justice. (WBOY, *Forbes*)
- **Autopsy concludes Delta State student died by suicide:** The finding by Mississippi's state medical examiner [matches](#) a county coroner's initial conclusion last Monday, shortly after the 21-year-old Black student's body was discovered hanging from a tree on campus. The death set off a swirl of emotion in a state with a history of racial violence, and the student's family hired a civil-rights attorney for an independent investigation. Hundreds of people [gathered](#) at the university for a vigil last week. (NPR, *Clarion Ledger*)
- **Republicans have been more generous funders of science:** Researchers at Northwestern University analyzed public records over four decades ending in 2020 for [a study](#) published in the journal *Science*, finding that federal science and research accounts were better funded when Republicans controlled the U.S. House of Representatives and the White House than when Democrats were in power. The finding [emphasizes](#) just how sharp of a break from precedent the Trump administration represents. (*Science*, Northwestern University)

It pays to be at the top

Renu Khator of the University of Houston led all public-college presidents with \$3.1 million in compensation in 2024 — after topping the prior year's list with \$1.9 million. But this was a rare year when a boon for the top earner isn't the top story, [as *The Chronicle's* Sonel Cutler explains](#).

Most presidents of public universities saw their pay change little last year, according to *The Chronicle's* annual tabulation. Base salaries were relatively steady, and total pay ticked up just a bit.

Top earners were the exception. This year's highest-earning presidents made 38 percent more than last year's, as bonuses more than doubled.

One number stands out: \$2 million for E. Gordon Gee. That's an increase of \$1.2 million for the West Virginia University president.

- **Retention incentives fueled a big bonus for Gee,** who went on to retire in July of this year. Those incentives typically get paid out when a president resigns or retires.

It's uncomfortable timing coming on the heels of major cuts Gee led at West Virginia University. Board members approved plans to eliminate dozens of academic programs and lay off nearly 150 faculty members at the start of the 2024 academic year.

- “It's an unfortunate coincidence to have the compensation increase so dramatically at the same time that the university just got through some pretty serious budgetary issues,” said Matthew Valenti, chair-elect of the university's faculty senate. “Most of us knew there would be a fairly large payout at the end, but the alternative is that we would have been paying him more along the way.”

 **Read the full list from *The Chronicle*:** [How Much Are Public-College Presidents Paid?](#)

Footnote

Last week marked the 35th year of the “First Annual Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony,” produced by the *Annals of Improbable Research* magazine and MIT Press.

If you're somehow unfamiliar with the event, think of it as a celebration of science — and of scientists not taking themselves too seriously. If you *are* familiar, you're no doubt waiting for public radio's "Science Friday" to air this year's ceremonies on Black Friday, as is traditional.

This year's 10 prizes largely went to research falling into an easy-to-stomach theme: digestion. Listing each award below would be too much to chew on, but you can gobble up [the entire list here](#) if you're hungry enough. We're highlighting two to whet your appetite.

The Pediatrics Prize: Congratulations to Julie Mennella and Gary Beauchamp for their paper, "Maternal Diet Alters the Sensory Qualities of Human Milk and the Nursling's Behavior." Or, as the Ig Nobels put it, "for studying what a nursing baby experiences when the baby's mother eats garlic."

The Physics Prize: And congratulations to several researchers from Europe and Australia who have *very* long names for "Phase Behavior of Cacio and Pepe Sauce." The prize organizers better explained this as "discoveries about the physics of pasta sauce, especially the phase transition that can lead to clumping, which can be a cause of unpleasantness." And yes, researchers affiliated with Italian universities were fittingly among the authors.

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