Modern American History (2025), **8**, 421–428
doi:10.1017/mah.2025.10049

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Q&A

Crisis in Higher Education

Lauren Jae Gutterman[1], Julio Capó Jr.[2], Joan E. Cashin[3], Alex Lichtenstein[4], and Melanie Newport[5]

[1]American Studies Department and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA, [2]History Department and Public Humanities Lab, Florida International University, Miami, FL, USA, [3]History Department, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA, [4]History Department and American Studies Department, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA and [5]History Department, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

This Q&A series explores how the national crisis in higher education is affecting historians of the modern United States at public research universities across the nation. Lauren Jae Gutterman (University of Texas at Austin) posed a series of questions to scholars across the country: Julio Capó, Jr. (Florida International University), Joan E. Cashin (Ohio State University), Alex Lichtenstein (Indiana University), and Melanie Newport (University of Connecticut). Their comments shed light on commonalities in the attacks historians are facing across state lines, the effects of these attacks on historical teaching and research, as well as the ways historians are fighting back.

1) From financial exigencies and hostile legislation to political repression, we are experiencing multiple, simultaneous attacks on higher education. How are these crises manifesting on your campus in particular?

Joan Cashin: The current crises in academia seem to be rooted in a fear of modernity, and beyond that, a fear of democracy itself. Most conservatives long for a rigidly hierarchical society, and they demand a historical narrative focused on a few powerful individuals. For the last generation, these views have been manifest in the Republican Party, which is extremely powerful in Ohio. Only one Democratic governor has held office since 1991, for a single term. Republicans control the state legislature with an iron hand. *The New Yorker* and the *Washington Post* have written stinging exposés about the party's corruption and its refusal to abide by the law.

In early 2025, Ohio Republicans introduced Senate Bill One, which was drafted by the Manhattan Institute in New York. The political origins of the measure are painfully obvious. The bill stipulates that faculty at public universities who engage in "indoctrination" (which is undefined) can be fired if they discuss in class "controversial" topics, such as but not limited to electoral politics, immigration, and foreign policy. A professor can be terminated if they receive *a single complaint*, and that complaint can come from any student, any student organization, and any faculty member. If a professor is not fired, they can be "censured" (undefined) or forced to take "remedial training" (undefined). The university president, the dean, and the board of trustees will decide on the punishment. As it is written, the bill destroys both tenure and academic freedom. Established fact, agreed on by honest scholars everywhere, can be overturned. The bill's chief sponsor declared that historians have to teach both sides of the question, "Did the Holocaust take place?"

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2025.10049 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Staff members working at the capitol admitted to me that they did not receive any messages of support from the public, yet the bill sailed through the legislature, and Republican governor Mike DeWine signed it in March. Every president of the state's fourteen public universities, including Ohio State, kept silent. When a similar measure, Senate Bill 83, was introduced in 2023, some of them issued statements of opposition, but not this time. In 2023, the governor, whose father served in World War II and helped liberate the concentration camp at Dachau, published an op-ed declaring we have to teach historical truth in the classroom. This time he remained silent.

Julio Capó, Jr.: Goodness, where does one begin? Perhaps it is worth stating that what is occurring in higher education is best described as something closer to a full-blown offensive, considering the attacks are multipronged and part of a broader conservative movement to fully dismantle public access to quality education in the United States. I also want to stress how, in this political climate, even our participation in this roundtable, which constitutes the exercising of our First Amendment rights, is an act of political courage.

At my university and state, on any given day, we are made aware of new policies that we must learn and observe. We are bombarded with a laundry list of changes we must implement, even though we are also made aware that there are often no clear plans or resources in place to help see them to fruition. Examples include the removal and installation of new university presidents, board of trustee members, and administrators; the cancellation of federal grants and fellowships; the purging and flagging of initiatives broadly redbaited as "DEI," or as advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion; news that university police will work with ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) to assist in the enforcement of immigration law on our minority-majority campus; the overhaul of the university core curriculum (UCC) and purging of courses that diverge from centering the "Western canon" or that are deemed as the promotion of "identity politics"; or the erosion of labor laws and collective bargaining power.

Many of these and other examples are not unique to my university or my state. I still maintain that the ambush and pretty chaotic approach is intentional. It serves to exhaust us and keep us from effective protest and resistance. Often, by the time we are able to organize, a whole new policy is introduced that consumes our time and demands our immediate attention. It can easily render even the most outspoken and active defenders of academic freedom into a state of fatigue, apathy, or even defeat.

Alex Lichtenstein: I don't even know where to begin; all of these factors have already had a deep impact at Indiana University, Bloomington (IU), where I teach. Together, they represent nothing less than an existential threat to the arts, humanities, and social sciences on this campus—the very things that have made this flagship state university a great place to teach and to be a student. To give but a few examples: two dozen faculty (including myself) have been disciplined for violating a campus policy barring political speech after eleven p.m.; we all now work under an "intellectual diversity" law that enlists students (and anyone, really) as informers asked to report professors who speak to only one side of a controversial question in class (you can report me here: https://audit.iu.edu/anonymous-report/index.html); and the College of Arts and Sciences has just been told by the state legislature that it must roll up all of its majors that graduate fewer than fifteen students a year. That's about twenty-five of our programs, from American Studies to Astronomy to Cognitive Science to Slavic Studies. History, so far, makes the grade, but of course the department will likely have to absorb some of the dissolved programs. The university leadership beyond the College either stands by wordlessly or actively abets and implements these changes.

Melanie Newport: People who are not worthy of our trust are now demanding that we trust them. University of Connecticut (UConn) leaders recently declared that our mission includes "Humanities and Peace on Earth" alongside "workforce development," which in Connecticut

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2025.10049 Published online by Cambridge University Press

means funneling STEM students into companies that make war materiel.[1] There has been little effort to reconcile our university's emphasis on human rights against those leaders' directives to arrest students protesting genocide, including students who had lost family members in Gaza.[2] And yet, we are supposed to trust these folks with the safety of our international students and undocumented students, to protect the integrity of the university against federal assaults.

We are asked to trust these same administrators to negotiate the slow violence of declining state support. We are a very rich state. The ultra-wealthy think of higher education as a luxury, not something for public access. My colleagues have found that UConn's block grant has fallen 32 percent between 2010 and 2025, when adjusted for inflation. The state grant was 50 percent of our budget in 1991 and, with new cuts, will be down to 15 percent.[3] This is in a state with a Democratic house, senate, and governor. If we're lucky, the budget will be balanced through workload expansions, not layoffs.

As austerity has become our only operating condition, faculty have had to become more disciplined about how we respond. Will our president and provost really follow through on a degree of institutional degradation that can only be met by cutting graduate programs or essential teaching faculty? When our concerns are met with the bad faith, "Why are you freaking out? We said we aren't cutting graduate programs," they have created an administrative environment that asks you to deny your intellect.

2) How have these attacks affected your research and your career?

Julio Capó, Jr.: Well, in the short term, I have responded to these attacks by expanding some of my research questions and initiatives. In the last few years, I took on new research projects to better understand how the culture wars have been waged in higher education and beyond. My research has shown that Florida—with its distinct demographics, geography, and history—has long since served as a laboratory of sorts for the nation's culture wars writ large. Indeed, many of the policies we're seeing unfold in higher education throughout the nation today have deep roots in Florida and were tested here first. The last five years are simply the most recent example of it.

The long-term effects are harder to quantify or measure. Over the course of my career, my research has primarily centered on recovering the lived experiences of people who are Latinx, immigrant, Black, and LGBTQ. These are the main topics conservatives have flagged, or they have made a concerted effort to curb the teaching and understanding of those histories. Recovering these histories is exactly why I became a historian in the first place. These and other groups have been central to building our nation and expanding the parameters of democratic governance. And yet, our textbooks and dominant narratives diminish or even erase their contributions. I will not waver in—or apologize for—teaching and researching truthful, accurate, and representative history.

[1]Radenka Maric, "Message to the Community Regarding the State Budget," *UConn Today*, Feb. 5, 2025, https://today.uconn.edu/2025/02/message-to-the-community-on-the-proposed-state-budget/ (accessed July 27, 2025).

[2]Christine Dempsey, "UConn professors want criminal charges and disciplinary action dropped against student protesters," *CT Insider*, May 9, 2024, https://www.ctinsider.com/news/article/professors-uconn-drop-charges-discipline-protest-19448805.php (accessed Dec. 5, 2025); Jeremy Chen, "Protestors say dismantled pro-Palestinian camp at UConn had no 'outside agitators,'" May 2, 2024, https://www.nbcconnecticut.com/news/local/protestors-say-dismantled-pro-palestinian-camp-at-uconn-had-no-outside-agitators/3281610/ (accessed July 27, 2025).

[3]Chris Vials, "Opinion: CT's colleges and universities need more state support," *CT Mirror,* Mar. 7, 2025, https://ctmirror.org/2025/03/07/cts-colleges-and-universities-need-more-state-support/ (accessed July 27, 2025); Office of the President, "Message to the Community Regarding the State Budget," *UConn Today,* June 4, 2005, https://today.uconn.edu/2025/06/message-to-the-community-regarding-the-state-budget/ (accessed July 27, 2025); Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, "Making Sense of the UConn Budget," *CT Mirror,* Mar. 1, 2024, https://ctmirror.org/2024/03/01/uconn-budget-cuts-ct/ (accessed July 27, 2025).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2025.10049 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I'd be naïve if I didn't also acknowledge that these attacks are not just directed at the profession or the discipline of history; for some of us, they are also attacks waged on us as individuals. I am an openly queer and outspoken Latino man who is easy fodder for these attacks, regardless of how much I publish, how many grants I see to completion, how many students I supervise, or the acclaim I receive. In fact, those things can help make me a bigger target. To many of the conservative architects of these attacks, my very identity becomes a marker or referendum on my ability to effectively do my job. One of the policies passed under Governor Ron DeSantis's efforts to dismantle higher education was an overhaul of our established practice (one that had previously been overseen by faculty and approved by our union) for "post-tenure review." In effect, the law places tenured professors on five-year contracts, as they must undergo this process every five years. While it purports to measure the quality of one's research, teaching, and service, it also introduces mechanisms to dismiss tenured faculty members on ideological grounds, including those who fall out of compliance with rapidly changing and ambiguously written state laws, Board of Governors' regulations, or university policies. I was selected as the first cohort to undergo this new process. At the time, I had been tenured for five years, a status I unanimously earned through excellence in my research, teaching, and service at my former institution, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I survived my "post-tenure review" in Florida. Others did not.

Melanie Newport: I'm fortunate to operate from a place of relative safety, because of tenure, because of my union, and especially, because I work in a collegial and highly mobilized department. That has not inoculated me against an all-consuming terror that periodically takes over—will we lose everything? That's debilitating. But at this point, the projects I am active on are all collaborative—co-authoring and co-editing. Just as with my politics, where I don't want to be out there on my own, I want to be organized and part of a group that can share the load and provide insight. Research trips aren't on the menu right now—being by myself, with my own mind, is not appealing to me. I hope to feel more creative later.

Alex Lichtenstein: I am a "late-career" historian, in my sixties. While I find these changes dismaying, to say the least, I am privileged in that I can mostly ignore them. It is true that I will eventually have to undergo an insulting and infantilizing post-tenure review on the pain of losing my job, but my hope is that by the time that rolls around I can ignore or defy it and retire.

Joan Cashin: The bill has had no impact on my research thus far. This year I co-edited a special issue on material culture for the *Journal of the Civil War Era*, with excellent contributions from first-rate scholars. I continue to work on a book on the Shelby and Hart families of Kentucky, from the Revolution to the twentieth century. Whether my teaching career ends because of Senate Bill One remains to be determined.

3) How have your teaching and mentorship changed in light of these pressures? How do you advise graduate students or junior scholars in the face of these attacks?

Melanie Newport: The experience of seeing my students harmed, surveilled, and jailed by police at our main campus during the encampment, at the behest of our university president, helped me to appreciate that UConn is a carceral institution. That's clarifying. If I am made complicit by association as an employee, then in my classroom I push toward repair. I feel much more attentive to the process of learning, to the paths we take together to engage material, to try to model for my students what it means to be curious and present during scary and

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2025.10049 Published online by Cambridge University Press

disappointing times. I do not do "cop shit."[4] I focus on building a learning environment where students know their voices are needed and valued. They love this space because it doesn't feel like other parts of the university. We create a new set of expectations for the institution together.

I was already at a point where I wanted this phase of my career to be about supporting other people so they could do their best work. If you want to do something as bold and beautiful as training to be a historian, in this moment of all moments? I want to make it amazing for you. If you have a book to write, right now? I want to pick up the service load to help you do that. I want to be a manuscript reviewer. As much as possible, a politics of solidarity further motivates me to help my colleagues and my grad students. It gives me the energy and resources to fight, and fight better, in all kinds of arenas.

Alex Lichtenstein: While I pride myself on remaining outspoken in the classroom, even I have caught myself biting my tongue and hedging my words. Self-censorship is insidious, and very hard to avoid in this repressive climate. As a departmental chair (American Studies, not History) I see it as my mission to protect the academic freedom of junior faculty and graduate students to the limits of my ability. Thankfully, that has yet to be tested.

Joan Cashin: After forty years in academia, I will keep faith with the ideals of the profession. I will continue to include electoral politics, immigration, and foreign policy in my lectures because they are part of the narrative. (I should add that no historian would find these topics to be remotely controversial.) That is my first obligation to my undergraduates, to communicate basic fact. I hesitate to give advice to graduate students and junior scholars because it is impossible to predict what the future may hold.

Julio Capó, Jr.: If we, as faculty, think this is a challenging time in higher education, our students feel it twentyfold. I work with a lot of graduate students, several of whom are first generation, people of color, and/or LGBTQ. I took on more administrative roles over the past year or so, perhaps especially becoming Graduate Program Director, with the intention of offering our graduate students the most support I possibly can. I figured: I have extra energy to give right now. Not all of us do. I need to step up.

It's an especially difficult time for our international students. Many of them fear going outside. Others avoid visiting home on long breaks, worried they won't be allowed to reenter the United States and finish their studies. A few months ago, I had to seek counsel on how to tell a prospective student that we could not fund their doctoral studies because Florida law prohibits funding someone hailing from one of the seven countries legislators have deemed "of concern."

I've always taken a pretty holistic approach to mentorship, one that is transparent and even sobering about the state of today's job market, limits to funding and resources, and the future of higher education. I still do that today, but my warnings are now more imminent and profuse.

4) What do you see as the greatest challenges facing higher education and historians in the next few years?

Joan Cashin: The defense of historical knowledge and the skills that historical study can teach. Most of my students are hungry for knowledge, and they are thrilled to discover that this huge, complicated country is home to many different kinds of people. The dynamic scholarship in American history reflects this truth, as it should. On the first day of class, I tell students that studying the past can also teach valuable skills that will stay with them: the ability to read, understand, and analyze a document, to converse in civil fashion about ideas in a group setting,

[4]Jeffrey Moro, "Against Cop Shit," Feb. 13, 2020, https://jeffreymoro.com/blog/2020-02-13-against-cop-shit.html (accessed June 16, 2025).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2025.10049 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and to write clearly about ideas. These skills are necessary to maintaining an informed citizenry, which is in turn essential to the survival of democracy.

Melanie Newport: The continued fragility of academic freedom, broadly defined: the ability to set and achieve our own teaching and research agendas without interference, and our access to stability and predictability in our living conditions, especially livable wages and a reasonable workload. For public institutions, especially, the changing terrain of funding and the oversight conditions that structure our work. These were problems before fascism, and they will continue to be problems even if we make it through.

Alex Lichtenstein: I am a pessimist. Alas, I think we will need to learn how to do everything differently. Undergraduate enrollments and the number of history majors will continue to shrink to the point of no return. At IU, like most public universities, "market signals" all direct students into the business school and other pre-professional, not to say vocational, programs at the expense of the College of Arts and Sciences. The College was the heart and soul of IU when I arrived here in 2011; no longer. "History" departments will become departments of, say, "History, Politics, and Religion" (as they already are on smaller and/or regional campuses). Many PhD programs will disappear, so that in a decade or so I suspect we will have about half the number of PhD programs in history that we do now. Then there is the enormous challenge AI poses to our pedagogy. There, actually, I am somewhat heretical in that I see this as a potentially exciting path to a new way of teaching history. But it will certainly dramatically transform what we do in the classroom—perhaps even in our own research practice.

Julio Capó, Jr.: While higher education is under attack as a whole, we as historians face the brunt of this. We know well how the usurping and rewriting of history is a necessary step to taking and maintaining power and silencing dissent. We, as historians, are being forced to justify our utility and existence in a political climate that has redbaited us as "woke" radicals who are disconnected from our students and from reality. Of course, that couldn't be further from the truth. It is our deep commitment and connection to our students and to the ethics and principles of history that AI has been unable to replicate, for example. All the while, conservatives have sought to shrink the viable spaces we have to share truthful and accurate histories. That, along with the pervasiveness of AI technologies, has created a powerful vacuum or perfect storm for misinformation to topple the accurate histories we uncovered through years of tenacious archival research—histories that are being summarily purged or put into question with each new piece of conservative legislation.

5) What do you think the role of historians should be in fighting back against attacks on higher education?

Alex Lichtenstein: We need to fight on every front. Defend free speech and academic freedom on campus (against attacks from the left and the right, I might add, though I think the latter a far graver threat). Insist on the value—inherent, as well as monetary—of a humanities degree, even (or especially) if only a few students seek it out. Universities, especially flagship public institutions, can and should cater to students with "niche" interests.

Joan Cashin: We can remind the public that similar attacks have happened in the past, such as McCarthyism in the 1950s, and that universities have survived. We must be vigilant against these attacks, their irrational intensity, and the lack of understanding about how higher education works. We also need to share information about what is happening on other campuses. Isolation in this context is dangerous.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2025.10049 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Julio Capó, Jr.: We must constantly remind people of why history matters and what history offers us as a society. A decades-long conservative effort to dismantle quality public education, in particular, requires that we explain, in pragmatic terms, how history and the humanities are essential to citizenship and democratic rule.

Melanie Newport: People think fighting back requires being at the front of a march or writing an op-ed. That's great. Historians across the country are leading labor movements, they're at the forefront of mutual defense compacts, they're organizing and being organized on, off, and across campuses.

But so many of us are most effective behind the scenes. The ethical practices of research, our ability to narrate change and facilitate dialogue and identify the contours of power and strategize—these are powerful capacities that we have. I know so many historians toughing out meetings where they are working to constrain shocking, bizarre proposals that weaken our institutions and empower fascism. Historians will lay you out with the implications of your bad ideas. I love that about us. We need to keep doing as much as we can on that front, taxing as it is, because it creates openings for other possibilities.

I feel frustrated with the line of reasoning where folks say, "that will make us a target." Please, do what you need to do to feel safe, but do not limit others by pretending that doing nothing is going to protect you. We are all already targets. Organize your colleagues so you have a deep bench of people who can fight.

6) What can we do individually and collectively to defend and protect history as a discipline and a profession in the future?

Joan Cashin: Faculty do not have anything like the power of administrators, of course, and the administration's preemptive surrender on many campuses has been shocking. Their loyalty to the educational mission turned out to be weak and shallow just when the community needed strong leadership. But professors can still model the values that the university is supposed to uphold, and we can make our voices heard as members of this democracy.

Alex Lichtenstein: I am not sure that the historical profession and historical training as we know it will survive this moment. So, I think we will have to adapt creatively to some new realities. That means rethinking the nature of graduate training, the process of writing a dissertation, and the meaning of an advanced degree in history. We will have to question some very deep-rooted assumptions about graduate training in history. That also means reconfiguring our undergraduate pedagogy, and especially our "assessments," in a world that no longer values reading and writing skills, but that makes historical research infinitely more accessible to the average undergraduate. That's the one silver lining here: the almost "infinite archive" now available to anyone with an internet connection. In world-historical terms, that's unprecedented. Let's teach our students how to use that opportunity to build historical knowledge and cultivate historical consciousness.

Melanie Newport: We all have different capacities. I'm a busy working mom with a disability, but showing up for my union when I can sure means a lot to me. Staying connected with colleagues and strategizing with them, celebrating the political and intellectual work they are doing— I love to be in a community where it feels like folks are doing *something* to move us forward each day. We're better when we're sharing the load.

There is still so much possibility within the university, and historians are well prepared to identify the points of give because we can see what's still the same. I still work at a marvelously diverse, mission-driven campus, and I'm still busting ass to serve our students. I'm making sure

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2025.10049 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they understand their civil rights and their political capacity. I'm doing that until somebody says I can't do it anymore. I'm doing it in the hope that I can outlast whatever this moment is.

Julio Capó, Jr.: I've already suggested several strategies we can take to these ends, but I'll especially emphasize the critical importance of supporting and saving our unions. So many of the attacks on higher education today have been designed to pit us against one another. The privatization and corporatization of higher education have chipped away at faculty governance and academic freedom. It has also rendered the profession a zero-sum game or business. Conservatives proselytize a folkloric tale of meritocracy that ultimately isolates and divides us. Many of these political attacks distinctly take aim at our collective bargaining power. That's certainly the case in Florida, a so-called "right-to-work" state. We will only save higher education through our collective efforts and power.

Lauren Jae Gutterman is associate professor of American studies and women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of *Her Neighbor's Wife: A History of Lesbian Desire Within Marriage* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

Julio Capó, Jr. is associate professor in the department of history and the Public Humanities Lab at Florida International University. He is the author of *Welcome to Fairyland: Queer Miami before 1940* (UNC Press, 2017) and the curator of several major exhibitions.

Joan Cashin has a doctorate from Harvard University, and is a professor of history at Ohio State University. She is the author or editor of six books on American history.

Alex Lichtenstein, a former editor of the *American Historical Review* (2017-2021), is a professor of history and American Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is currently chair of the American Studies department there.

Melanie Newport is an associate professor of history at the University of Connecticut. She teaches at the Hartford campus. Newport is author of the book, *This Is My Jail: Local Politics and the Rise of Mass Incarceration* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2025.10049 Published online by Cambridge University Press