

# Toward Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath

A Proposal for Fiduciary and Epistemic Accountability in Higher Education

by Peter Kahl, 23 June 2025

## Abstract

In this paper, I address the ongoing epistemic and ethical crisis within contemporary academia, characterised by scholarly protectionism, epistemic gatekeeping, and institutional isolationism. I critically analyse traditional fiduciary frameworks and argue that they inadequately address the unique epistemic responsibilities of scholars, educators, and administrators. To rectify this shortcoming, I propose an Academic Hippocratic Oath integrating fiduciary duties (loyalty, care, accountability, non-maleficence) with epistemic virtues (humility, openness, justice, courage, compassion, transparency). Drawing on insights from fiduciary theory and virtue epistemology, as well as critical pedagogical perspectives, I offer a detailed blueprint for institutional adoption. I anticipate substantial cultural shifts toward epistemic humility, enhanced institutional accountability, and greater public trust as outcomes. While acknowledging implementation challenges, I recommend phased institutional trials and ongoing evaluation to ensure practical viability and continual refinement of the proposed fiduciary-epistemic framework.

## Keywords

Academic Hippocratic Oath, fiduciary duties, epistemic virtues, epistemic humility, epistemic justice, institutional accountability, epistemic openness, scholarly protectionism, critical pedagogy, epistemic gatekeeping, higher education reform, virtue epistemology, institutional ethics

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# 1. Statement of Originality and Contribution

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## 1.1 Originality and Intellectual Provenance

In this paper, I propose a novel normative framework—the ‘Academic Hippocratic Oath’—designed for distinct roles in academia: research scholars, educators, and institutional administrators. This framework uniquely integrates fiduciary ethics and virtue epistemology to comprehensively address critical ethical and epistemic responsibilities specific to the academic context. Fiduciary duties have been extensively theorised within legal, corporate, and financial domains {Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Miller 2014}, yet these discussions rarely incorporate epistemic virtues such as humility, openness, transparency, courage, compassion, and epistemic justice. Recognising this significant gap, I synthesise fiduciary theory and virtue epistemology to define clear institutional obligations tailored to academic professionals.

The intellectual origins of my proposal draw significantly from established fiduciary scholarship and virtue epistemology {Fricker 2007; Medina 2013; Zagzebski 1996}, yet represent an unprecedented advancement by connecting these previously distinct scholarly domains. My earlier works, particularly ‘Epistemocracy in Higher Education — A Proposal for Fiduciary and Epistemic Accountability’ {Kahl 2025} and ‘Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties’ {Kahl 2025}, provide essential theoretical groundwork for this integrative approach. Additionally, by defining non-maleficence as a fiduciary duty, my proposal further enriches fiduciary discourse within academia.

## 1.2 Scholarly Context and Positioning

I situate my proposal within a scholarly landscape in which fiduciary theories, while well-developed, remain epistemically incomplete for the academic environment. Prominent fiduciary theorists, including Tamar Frankel, Lionel Smith, and Paul Miller, have established foundational conceptions of fiduciary relationships primarily within legal and corporate contexts {Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Miller 2014}. Despite their significant contributions, these theories often neglect epistemic virtues critical for responsible scholarly conduct, notably epistemic humility, openness, and justice. Conversely, virtue epistemologists, such as Miranda Fricker, José Medina, and Linda Zagzebski, robustly articulate the importance of epistemic virtues {Fricker 2007; Medina 2013; Zagzebski 1996}, yet rarely connect these virtues directly to fiduciary duties within institutions.

My proposed framework bridges this gap by embedding epistemic virtues within fiduciary responsibilities, thereby significantly enhancing scholarly and institutional integrity. By defining fiduciary obligations and epistemic virtues tailored to scholars, educators, and administrators, this framework clearly positions itself as both a theoretical and practical innovation within fiduciary theory and epistemic ethics.

## 1.3 Contribution and Impact

My primary contribution is the provision of a clear, actionable blueprint outlining fiduciary and epistemic responsibilities tailored for scholars, educators, and institutional administrators. By articulating these obligations through the Academic Hippocratic Oath, I offer higher education institutions rigorous guidelines to confront widespread issues such as scholarly isolation, epistemic gatekeeping, and institutional protectionism. Practical implementation of this oath can significantly enhance institutional openness, cultivate epistemic humility, improve epistemic justice, and restore public trust in scholarly practices and institutional governance.

Theoretically, my synthesis substantially enriches existing fiduciary and epistemic scholarship by linking fiduciary ethics with virtue epistemology in an unprecedented manner. This comprehensive, institutionally focused approach represents a significant advancement in understanding ethical governance and epistemic accountability within academic institutions.

## **1.4 Scope, Limitations, and Further Research**

I acknowledge that this paper represents foundational theoretical insights intended to stimulate institutional reflection, scholarly debate, and empirical investigation. While focused on higher education, potential applications of this integrative framework in other epistemically sensitive professional domains remain worth exploring. Rigorous empirical testing, critical institutional evaluation, and continuous scholarly refinement are required to assess the feasibility, clarity, and effectiveness of this framework in practice.

Future research should critically explore practical outcomes arising from the oath's institutional implementation, evaluate institutional adaptations and resistances, and continually refine understandings of fiduciary and epistemic obligations within scholarly environments. Additionally, further scholarship is encouraged to examine broader societal impacts resulting from enhanced epistemic and fiduciary accountability, assessing changes in public trust and societal perceptions of academic institutions.

## **2. Introduction and Contextualisation**

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### **2.1 Defining Academia's Epistemic Crisis**

Contemporary academia faces a significant epistemic and ethical crisis characterised by scholarly protectionism, epistemic gatekeeping, and intellectual isolationism. These interrelated issues undermine academia's ability to fulfil its epistemic responsibilities and effectively serve societal interests.

Scholarly protectionism refers to institutional practices limiting free and open access to knowledge by prioritising disciplinary authority or institutional prestige {Barnett 2020; Kahl, 'The Conflict of Dual Roles in Higher Education' (2025)}. Epistemic gatekeeping involves selectively controlling the production and dissemination of knowledge, reinforcing existing hierarchies and restricting epistemic diversity {Fricker 2007; Medina 2013}. Intellectual isolationism describes institutional withdrawal into narrowly specialised intellectual communities, disconnected from broader societal engagement and interdisciplinary dialogue {Barnett 2020; Anderson 2006}.

Examples include restrictive peer-review and publication practices, disciplinary silos enforced by specialised terminology, and exclusionary attitudes toward interdisciplinary or critical perspectives. Such institutional mechanisms hinder scholarly innovation and reduce meaningful societal engagement.

### **2.2 Institutional Roots of Epistemic Failures**

These epistemic problems stem directly from institutional incentive structures prevalent within academia. Performance metrics—including citation counts, journal rankings, and competitive funding processes—

typically reward disciplinary conformity, discouraging interdisciplinary collaboration {Barnett 2020; Hicks et al. 2015}. The tenure and promotion system, originally intended to ensure scholarly quality, often favours narrowly defined disciplinary contributions over interdisciplinary or publicly engaged scholarship.

In contrast, professions such as medicine and law have established comprehensive ethical frameworks explicitly designed to safeguard public trust and professional accountability. Academia's comparative lack of such enforceable standards undermines institutional transparency and accountability, contributing to declining public trust in scholarly institutions.

### **2.3 Integrating Fiduciary Duties with Epistemic Virtues**

To effectively address these epistemic challenges, academia requires a clearly articulated ethical framework combining fiduciary duties with epistemic virtues. Traditional fiduciary duties—care, loyalty, accountability, and non-maleficence—define scholars' essential responsibilities toward students, institutions, and society {Frankel 2011; Miller 2014; Smith 2014}. However, without integration of epistemic virtues such as humility, openness, transparency, and epistemic justice, these fiduciary obligations remain insufficiently tailored to academia's specific context.

Epistemic humility involves acknowledging the limits of one's knowledge, fostering openness to critique, alternative perspectives, and interdisciplinary engagement {Fricker 2007; Zagzebski 1996}. Transparency ensures scholarly methods and assumptions are openly communicated, facilitating informed critique and accountability. Epistemic accountability requires responsiveness to criticism and alternative viewpoints, maintaining scholarly integrity and societal benefit. Integrating these epistemic virtues into fiduciary responsibilities directly counters institutional gatekeeping and isolationism, promoting greater scholarly openness and institutional accountability.

### **2.4 Limitations of Existing Ethical Frameworks**

Current informal ethical frameworks—such as research integrity statements or institutional codes of conduct—offer beneficial yet limited guidance. Typically relying on voluntary compliance, these informal standards lack clarity, consistency, and enforceability. Consequently, they cannot systematically address entrenched epistemic issues like protectionism or isolationism.

Academia urgently requires a formal, enforceable fiduciary-epistemic framework. Without rigorous normative standards, higher education institutions remain vulnerable to ongoing epistemic challenges, compromised institutional integrity, and diminished societal trust.

In response, I propose the Academic Hippocratic Oath, a clear, actionable, enforceable ethical framework combining fiduciary duties with epistemic virtues. Its institutional adoption would significantly enhance epistemic openness, scholarly accountability, and societal trust, directly addressing the critical institutional gaps identified throughout this analysis.

### 3. Fiduciary and Epistemic Obligations of Scholars

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#### 3.1 Introduction: Integrating Fiduciary Duties with Epistemic Virtues

Building upon the analysis of academia's epistemic and ethical crisis, I propose a synthesis of fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues necessary for scholarly accountability. Current fiduciary frameworks often neglect essential epistemic virtues crucial for academia. In this chapter, I define these fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues, integrate them into scholarly responsibilities, and outline how this integrated framework enhances institutional accountability, epistemic openness, and public trust.

#### 3.2 Fiduciary Duties Defined

Four fiduciary duties—loyalty, care, accountability, and non-maleficence—are particularly relevant for scholars:

- **Loyalty** involves prioritising beneficiaries (students, colleagues, institutions, society) above personal or institutional self-interest {Smith 2014; Miller 2014}, avoiding conflicts of interest, and transparently communicating scholarly decisions.
- **Care** requires methodological rigour, intellectual diligence, and responsibility in scholarship {Gold and Miller 2014}. Practically, it involves thoroughness in research, accuracy in reporting, and openness about limitations.
- **Accountability** obliges scholars to justify their scholarly methods, processes, and conclusions transparently to peers and the public {Smith 2014; Miller 2014}, through practices such as open data sharing and clearly articulated assumptions.
- **Non-maleficence** means avoiding epistemic, psychological, institutional, or societal harm. Scholars must refrain from misinformation, unjustified exclusions, exploitative practices, or harmful competition. While broader ethical implications (ecological harm, future generations) are acknowledged as important, detailed exploration is beyond the paper's scope.

While fiduciary duties establish an ethical foundation, they remain incomplete without epistemic virtues.

#### 3.3 Epistemic Virtues in Scholarly Practice

Integrating fiduciary duties with epistemic virtues ensures robust scholarly practice. I outline five key virtues complementing fiduciary obligations:

- **Epistemic humility** recognises scholars' knowledge limitations, fostering receptivity to critique and interdisciplinary perspectives {Fricker 2007; Zagzebski 1996}.
- **Epistemic openness** encourages active engagement with diverse methodologies, viewpoints, and epistemic communities, broadening scholarly discourse and interdisciplinary collaboration {Medina 2013}.
- **Epistemic justice** commits scholars to fairness, inclusion, and the active remedying of epistemic marginalisation in knowledge practices {Fricker 2007}.

- **Epistemic courage** motivates scholars to pursue truth and critically challenge dominant paradigms despite potential institutional or personal risks {Peter Kahl, ‘Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties’ (2025)}.
- **Epistemic compassion** involves empathetic engagement with diverse epistemic positions, fostering inclusive dialogue and mitigating epistemic marginalisation {Peter Kahl, ‘Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties’ (2025)}.

Collectively, these epistemic virtues substantially enhance fiduciary responsibilities, addressing crucial epistemic dimensions neglected by traditional fiduciary theories.

### 3.4 Synthesising Fiduciary Duties and Epistemic Virtues

Existing fiduciary theories (Smith, Miller, Gold) effectively outline foundational duties within corporate and legal contexts, but typically omit critical epistemic considerations necessary for academia {Smith 2014; Miller 2014; Gold and Miller 2014}. Conversely, virtue epistemologists (Fricker, Medina, Zagzebski) provide robust accounts of epistemic virtues without integrating them explicitly with fiduciary responsibilities {Fricker 2007; Medina 2013; Zagzebski 1996}.

Addressing this theoretical gap, I synthesise fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues into a coherent normative framework tailored specifically to scholarly responsibilities. This synthesis draws on earlier work, notably ‘Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness’ (Kahl 2025) and ‘Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties’ (Kahl 2025). Integrating these perspectives clarifies how fiduciary duties enriched by epistemic virtues provide scholars and institutions with actionable ethical guidelines, strengthening scholarly integrity, accountability, and openness.

### 3.5 Practical Application and Institutional Implications

The fiduciary-epistemic framework translates into concrete scholarly responsibilities. Scholars demonstrate loyalty through transparent disclosures, care through methodological rigour, accountability through clear justification of decisions, and non-maleficence by avoiding harmful practices.

Institutionally, this integrated framework significantly enhances transparency, accountability, and public trust. It promotes interdisciplinary collaboration, intellectual innovation, and equitable scholarly practices. Adopting this framework has clear potential to improve institutional credibility and societal engagement.

### 3.6 Boundaries and Practical Limitations

Despite its robust nature, the fiduciary-epistemic framework must recognise practical boundaries and realistic limits. Defining fiduciary and epistemic responsibilities clearly and realistically, considering resource constraints, methodological specialisation, and scholarly autonomy, ensures the framework remains feasible and effective. Acknowledging these limits preserves the practicality, sustainability, and institutional acceptability of these reforms.



## 4. Critique of Traditional Fiduciary Theory in Scholarly Contexts

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### 4.1 Introduction: Scope and Purpose of Critique

Having outlined my proposed integration of fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues, I now critically examine traditional fiduciary theory to identify specific epistemic shortcomings, focusing primarily on Tamar Frankel's influential fiduciary framework. Frankel's model, while foundational and influential within corporate governance, legal, and financial contexts, is notably limited in addressing academia's unique epistemic responsibilities. In this chapter, I analyse these limitations, highlighting the absence of essential epistemic virtues. My critique is respectful and constructive, acknowledging the profound contributions Frankel's work has made to fiduciary scholarship, while emphasising the necessity for a comprehensive epistemic augmentation of fiduciary duties to effectively address academic contexts.

### 4.2 Overview of Frankel's Fiduciary Framework

Tamar Frankel's fiduciary theory remains among the most significant and influential frameworks within contemporary fiduciary scholarship. In her foundational text *Fiduciary Law* (2011), Frankel defines fiduciary relationships through core duties of loyalty, care, good faith, and the imperative to avoid conflicts of interest. Her model positions fiduciary duties primarily within financial, corporate, and legal relationships, clearly establishing the fiduciary as one obligated to prioritise the beneficiary's interests over personal gain. Frankel's approach emphasises strict adherence to fiduciary obligations as a mechanism to maintain institutional trust, mitigate power imbalances, and foster reliable relationships within traditionally commercial or legal environments.

Frankel's scholarship thus has profoundly shaped fiduciary discourse, providing robust conceptual clarity and significantly influencing subsequent theoretical developments by Lionel Smith, Paul Miller, and Andrew Gold {Smith 2014; Miller 2014; Gold and Miller 2014}. However, despite its foundational importance, Frankel's fiduciary framework addresses neither epistemic virtues nor epistemic contexts pertinent to academia's scholarly responsibilities.

### 4.3 Critical Analysis: Epistemic Limitations of Frankel's Model

Although robust in traditional fiduciary domains, Frankel's fiduciary theory remains incomplete when directly applied to academic and scholarly contexts due to its lack of attention to epistemic considerations. Specifically, her fiduciary model overlooks key epistemic virtues such as epistemic humility, openness, epistemic justice, epistemic courage, epistemic compassion, and transparency—virtues crucially relevant to scholarly practice and institutional epistemic accountability.

The absence of epistemic humility and openness is particularly consequential, as these virtues underpin essential scholarly activities such as peer review, interdisciplinary collaboration, and constructive engagement with criticism. Without epistemic humility, fiduciary loyalty risks degenerating into rigid adherence to disciplinary conventions, limiting scholarly innovation and obstructing the pursuit of truth across disciplinary boundaries. Similarly, neglecting epistemic openness diminishes fiduciary care, potentially narrowing scholars' methodological rigour and undermining interdisciplinary dialogue essential for contemporary academic practice.

Frankel's fiduciary theory also notably lacks epistemic justice, thus inadequately addressing structural biases, epistemic marginalisation, and unequal knowledge production practices prevalent within higher education institutions [Fricker 2007; Medina 2013]. Without embedding epistemic justice, fiduciary accountability cannot sufficiently remedy systemic epistemic exclusions or foster inclusive, equitable scholarly practices.

Furthermore, Frankel's model neglects epistemic courage and epistemic compassion—two virtues essential to fostering ethical scholarly practices. Epistemic courage encourages scholars to challenge dominant paradigms, engage critically despite institutional resistance, and advocate for innovative intellectual positions [Peter Kahl, 'Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties' (2025)]. The absence of epistemic compassion also diminishes fiduciary care, as compassion facilitates empathic, fair engagement with diverse epistemic communities, thereby reducing scholarly marginalisation [Peter Kahl, 'Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties' (2025)].

Thus, Frankel's fiduciary framework, though foundationally strong, remains epistemically incomplete. Practical manifestations of these limitations include overly restrictive peer-review processes, disciplinary gatekeeping behaviours, and limited interdisciplinary or innovative scholarship. Addressing these limitations through integration of epistemic virtues is therefore necessary to ensure fiduciary completeness and effectiveness within scholarly contexts.

#### **4.4 Necessary Epistemic Augmentation to Fiduciary Duties**

To remedy the epistemic inadequacies identified in Frankel's fiduciary framework, fiduciary theory requires epistemic augmentation through the integration of epistemic virtues identified previously: epistemic humility, openness, justice, courage, compassion, and transparency. Such integration directly addresses the scholarly-specific epistemic responsibilities and institutional accountability concerns neglected by traditional fiduciary models.

As I argued in my earlier paper, 'Epistemocracy in Higher Education — A Proposal for Fiduciary and Epistemic Accountability' (2025), fiduciary accountability within academia necessitates embedding epistemic virtues to achieve genuine openness, transparency, and epistemic justice. This proposal lays the foundational framework for transforming fiduciary theory to reflect academia's epistemic demands, significantly enhancing scholarly governance.

In practice, integrating these epistemic virtues with fiduciary duties produces a comprehensive ethical standard applicable directly to scholarly practices. Such augmentation ensures fiduciary duties become genuinely actionable and institutionally meaningful within academia, overcoming the epistemic limitations inherent in Frankel's influential but epistemically incomplete fiduciary framework.

#### **4.5 Caveats and Scholarly Acknowledgments**

It is important to clearly emphasise that my critique of Frankel's fiduciary theory is conducted respectfully, recognising the foundational significance and substantial contributions her scholarship has provided to fiduciary theory and institutional governance. Frankel's fiduciary framework remains seminal and profoundly influential within legal, corporate, and financial fiduciary contexts, and my intention is not to diminish but rather constructively augment her framework to meet contemporary academia's unique epistemic responsibilities.

## 5. Institutional Roots of Epistemic Gatekeeping

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### 5.1 Introduction: Understanding Institutional Foundations of Epistemic Gatekeeping

Having established theoretical foundations for integrating fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues, I now examine the institutional structures and cultural norms underpinning epistemic gatekeeping. This chapter critically identifies structural and cultural factors reinforcing scholarly isolationism and limiting epistemic openness. By drawing on insights from Antonia Darder's critical pedagogy, I demonstrate how institutional practices inhibit epistemic humility, openness, and justice, and reinforce epistemic marginalisation. My critique aims at constructive institutional reform rather than wholesale rejection.

### 5.2 Structural Incentives Promoting Isolationism

Institutional practices, notably tenure criteria, promotion policies, funding structures, and publication norms, systematically reinforce epistemic isolationism. Traditional tenure and promotion systems privilege narrow disciplinary specialisation and high-impact publications, discouraging interdisciplinary or innovative research {Barnett 2020; Kahl, 'The Conflict of Dual Roles in Higher Education' (2025)}. Research funding mechanisms similarly reward established disciplinary traditions, implicitly restricting novel methodologies or critical scholarship {Barnett 2020; Anderson 2006}.

Dominant publication models, driven by journal rankings and citation metrics, reinforce disciplinary silos by favouring established methods and conventional theoretical frameworks. Peer-review processes frequently marginalise innovative or interdisciplinary contributions, perpetuating disciplinary conformity and epistemic exclusion {Barnett 2020; Kahl, 'Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia' (2025)}.

### 5.3 Cultural Norms Supporting Epistemic Gatekeeping

Academic culture itself implicitly reinforces epistemic isolationism. Prevailing norms emphasise competition, disciplinary prestige, and conformity, reducing scholars' willingness to challenge established epistemic conventions or engage across disciplinary boundaries. Institutional hierarchies, often seniority-based, limit meaningful epistemic dialogue, privileging senior academics or mainstream approaches over emerging or diverse perspectives.

Administrative practices, such as prestige-driven hiring, resource allocation, and evaluation criteria, implicitly reinforce epistemic gatekeeping. By privileging established norms and seniority, these practices further marginalise innovative, interdisciplinary, or critical scholarly voices, perpetuating epistemic inequalities.

### 5.4 Insights from Critical Pedagogy: Antonia Darder's Perspective

Antonia Darder's critical pedagogy provides valuable insight into how educational institutions reproduce epistemic inequalities through pedagogical practices, curricula, and institutional policies {Darder 2017}. Darder highlights that institutionalised education often privileges dominant epistemologies, marginalising critical perspectives and alternative knowledge systems. Institutional curricula and pedagogical methods frequently

embed dominant norms and reinforce epistemic hierarchies, limiting epistemic diversity and intellectual openness.

To deepen this analysis, I integrate further contemporary pedagogical scholarship emphasising critical consciousness, dialogical learning, and transformative educational practices. Paulo Freire's foundational ideas on critical pedagogy remain influential, underscoring the necessity of dialogue, critical reflection, and active student-teacher engagement to challenge entrenched epistemic and institutional biases {Freire 2018}. Moreover, bell hooks' emphasis on engaged pedagogy and inclusive teaching addresses institutional practices that perpetuate exclusion and epistemic injustice, advocating educational approaches that affirm diverse voices and foster authentic, inclusive scholarly dialogue {hooks 1994}.

In alignment with these contemporary perspectives, institutions should promote pedagogical approaches embodying epistemic virtues—particularly humility, openness, compassion, and justice. Pedagogical scholarship increasingly recognises that institutional curricula must consciously reflect diverse epistemic traditions, methodologies, and forms of knowledge, challenging epistemic marginalisation and exclusionary teaching practices {hooks 1994; Giroux 2011}. Henry Giroux's critical educational theory similarly highlights the institutional responsibility to foster critical citizenship, inclusive scholarship, and democratic engagement, countering narrow instrumentalist or technocratic approaches prevalent within contemporary higher education {Giroux 2011}.

Integrating these broader pedagogical insights with Darder's critique enriches my institutional analysis, clarifying the fiduciary and epistemic responsibilities educators hold within higher education. Educators' duties extend beyond mere knowledge transmission to include active fostering of epistemic humility, openness, and inclusivity through pedagogical methods and curricula choices. Institutional practices and pedagogical structures that marginalise or silence diverse epistemic voices thereby violate educators' core fiduciary and epistemic responsibilities.

Ultimately, institutional reforms informed by critical and engaged pedagogy, combined with fiduciary and epistemic duties, offer meaningful pathways toward achieving genuine epistemic openness, institutional accountability, and scholarly integrity.

## **5.5 Practical Manifestations of Gatekeeping in Academia**

Concrete examples clearly illustrate how institutions engage in epistemic gatekeeping. Peer-review processes often exclude innovative methodologies and interdisciplinary research in favour of conventional disciplinary frameworks. Tenure and promotion committees typically prioritise narrowly disciplinary contributions, implicitly discouraging interdisciplinary and publicly engaged scholarship. Funding agencies frequently privilege established disciplinary paradigms, limiting opportunities for critical or novel epistemic approaches. These institutional practices reinforce epistemic isolationism, demonstrating a clear and immediate need for fiduciary and epistemic reform.

## **5.6 Clarifications and Call for Constructive Reform**

My institutional critique seeks constructive reform rather than radical or wholesale rejection of existing academic structures. I acknowledge the complexity and intrinsic value within established institutional practices. My intention is to identify clearly defined areas requiring improvement. Institutional adoption of the

proposed fiduciary-epistemic framework offers effective mechanisms to address these structural and cultural challenges, promoting epistemic openness, institutional accountability, and scholarly integrity.

## 6. Academic Hippocratic Oath: Blueprint for Scholarly Openness

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### 6.1 Introduction: Necessity and Purpose of an Academic Hippocratic Oath

Having systematically explored academia's epistemic and fiduciary shortcomings, I now propose the Academic Hippocratic Oath as a comprehensive ethical framework tailored for distinct academic roles—scholars (research-focused), educators (teaching-focused), and institutional administrators (policy and governance-focused). Recognising the unique fiduciary and epistemic obligations of each role toward their respective beneficiaries, this oath integrates fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues, thereby directly addressing academia's epistemic crisis and fostering genuine scholarly openness, accountability, and institutional integrity.

### 6.2 Detailed Proposal: The Academic Hippocratic Oath

#### Preamble:

I affirm my scholarly responsibility, acknowledging the specific fiduciary and epistemic obligations inherent in my role as a scholar, educator, or institutional administrator. I commit to uphold scholarly openness, ethical accountability, epistemic justice, and institutional integrity.

#### A. Fiduciary Duties

All academic roles share core fiduciary duties, adapted to their specific contexts:

- **Loyalty:** I commit to prioritising my beneficiaries' interests—disciplinary communities and society (scholars), students and broader society (educators), institutional stakeholders and society (administrators)—above personal or narrow institutional gains.
- **Care:** I undertake to exercise methodological rigour, diligence, intellectual responsibility, and ethical vigilance appropriate to my role, ensuring scholarly or administrative practices are reliable, responsible, and beneficial.
- **Accountability:** I commit to transparency and openness in justifying scholarly, pedagogical, or administrative methods, processes, decisions, and outcomes, welcoming informed scrutiny and evaluation.
- **Non-maleficence:** I commit to avoiding epistemic, psychological, or institutional harm through my scholarly, educational, or administrative practices, ensuring my actions do not negatively impact students, colleagues, institutions, society, future generations, or ecological systems.

## B. Epistemic Virtues

All academic roles commit to the following epistemic virtues, with role-specific emphases:

- **Epistemic Humility:** Acknowledging my knowledge limitations, I commit to openness to critique, correction, and interdisciplinary engagement. (Particularly critical for scholars and educators.)
- **Epistemic Openness:** I engage with diverse methodologies, viewpoints, and epistemic communities, fostering meaningful scholarly dialogue and innovation. (Essential for scholars and administrators.)
- **Epistemic Justice:** I commit to fair, inclusive, and equitable knowledge practices, actively countering epistemic biases, exclusions, and injustices. (Essential across all roles.)
- **Epistemic Courage:** I undertake critical inquiry, innovation, and advocacy for truth, despite potential risks or resistance from disciplinary or institutional pressures. (Critical for scholars.)
- **Epistemic Compassion:** I commit to empathetic, inclusive engagement with diverse epistemic positions, actively supporting marginalised voices and reducing epistemic injustice. (Critical for educators.)
- **Transparency:** I commit to openly communicating methodologies, assumptions, data, and decisions, enabling informed evaluation and fostering institutional trust. (Critical for administrators.)

### Concluding Affirmation:

I affirm my commitment to uphold these fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues appropriate to my scholarly, pedagogical, or administrative role, fostering ethical integrity, epistemic openness, accountability, and institutional trust.

## 6.3 Linking Oath Components to Epistemic Virtue Ethics and Fiduciary Theory

This oath integrates fiduciary theory and virtue epistemology, tailoring each component to distinct academic roles. Fiduciary duties of loyalty, care, accountability, and non-maleficence align with traditional fiduciary frameworks established by Smith {Smith 2014}, Miller {Miller 2014}, and Gold {Gold and Miller 2014}, clearly contextualised within academia.

Epistemic virtues draw from virtue epistemologists, including Zagzebski's emphasis on intellectual humility and courage {Zagzebski 1996}, Medina's advocacy for epistemic openness and justice {Medina 2013}, and Anderson's democratic epistemic accountability {Anderson 2006}. My previous work established theoretical foundations for integrating fiduciary and epistemic frameworks, notably 'Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties' {Peter Kahl, 'Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties' (2025)} and 'Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness' {Kahl 2025}.

This theoretical integration ensures the oath directly addresses epistemic inadequacies identified earlier, providing clear normative guidelines for distinct academic roles.

## 6.4 Practical Guidelines for Implementing the Academic Hippocratic Oath

Implementation strategies tailored to each academic role include:

### A. Scholars (Research-focused)

- Adoption within peer-review practices, encouraging epistemic openness, humility, and courage in evaluating scholarly contributions.
- Clear guidelines rewarding interdisciplinary and innovative scholarship in institutional evaluations and research assessments.

### B. Educators (Teaching-focused)

- Integration within pedagogical evaluations, rewarding epistemic compassion, justice, and humility demonstrated in classroom practices, mentorship, and student engagement.
- Practical pedagogical training aligned with epistemic virtues, ensuring faculty understand and implement virtues in teaching methodologies and curricula.

### C. Institutional Administrators (Policy and Governance-focused)

- Institutional governance frameworks incorporating fiduciary transparency, epistemic openness, and accountability in decision-making and resource allocation.
- Adoption of institutional epistemic audits regularly assessing adherence to fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues, ensuring transparency and accountability within administrative practice.

## 6.5 Practical Examples of Scholarly, Pedagogical, and Administrative Implementation

Practical scenarios demonstrate the oath's applicability across distinct academic roles:

- **Scholars:** Peer-review panels integrating epistemic openness, humility, and courage, rewarding transparent communication of research methods, limitations, and interdisciplinary collaboration.
- **Educators:** Pedagogical guidelines in curricula requiring educators to demonstrate epistemic compassion, justice, and humility, incorporating diverse epistemic perspectives and inclusive pedagogical approaches.
- **Institutional Administrators:** Administrative processes requiring transparency in governance decisions, adopting epistemic justice frameworks in hiring practices, resource allocation, and institutional evaluations.

These examples concretely illustrate the oath's institutional feasibility, demonstrating practical alignment with broader fiduciary-epistemic reforms.

## 6.6 Caveats and Institutional Challenges: Realistic Implementation Strategies

Recognising likely institutional resistance, I propose phased, adaptive implementation strategies tailored to institutional capacities and stakeholder engagement:

- **Pilot Initiatives:** Recommend initial adoption within specific departments or units committed to epistemic reform, monitored and evaluated through structured epistemic audits.
- **Institution-wide Expansion:** Gradual, expansion of oath adoption institution-wide, incorporating regular reviews and stakeholder feedback, adapting implementation strategies as necessary.
- **Inclusive Implementation Process:** Advocate collaborative, inclusive, and dialogical processes involving diverse institutional stakeholders—faculty, administrators, students, external communities—to build legitimacy, institutional trust, and sustained commitment.

Recognition of practical challenges, combined with phased, realistic implementation strategies, ensures meaningful, sustainable institutional adoption of the Academic Hippocratic Oath, advancing scholarly openness, epistemic accountability, and institutional integrity.

## 7. Scholarly and Institutional Implications

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### 7.1 Introduction: Assessing the Institutional and Epistemic Impact

Having presented a comprehensive blueprint for the Academic Hippocratic Oath, integrating fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues across distinct academic roles, I now assess the scholarly, cultural, and institutional implications of its adoption. This assessment anticipates transformations within academia, highlighting improvements in epistemic integrity, institutional accountability, and scholarly openness. Additionally, I identify potential sources of resistance and propose practical strategies for successful implementation, while acknowledging the inherent unpredictability of precise outcomes and advocating for ongoing evaluation and adaptation.

### 7.2 Anticipated Scholarly and Cultural Shifts

Adopting the Academic Hippocratic Oath promises substantial shifts in scholarly culture, particularly toward increased epistemic humility, openness, and justice. Embedding epistemic virtues within fiduciary responsibilities directly addresses existing epistemic protectionism, isolationism, and gatekeeping. As Fricker {2007} and Medina {2013} argue, adopting epistemic humility and openness fosters constructive dialogue, inclusivity, and critical engagement, thereby reducing epistemic marginalisation.

In practice, scholarly norms are likely to evolve significantly. Reformed peer-review processes, guided by epistemic humility and courage, will encourage openness to interdisciplinary approaches and constructive critiques, thus enhancing innovation and epistemic diversity {Barnett 2020}. Teaching and pedagogical practices informed by epistemic compassion, humility, and justice will create inclusive classrooms that recognise and value diverse epistemic perspectives among students and educators.



Collectively, these cultural shifts will transform academia's epistemic landscape, promoting inclusive knowledge practices and reducing conformity, resulting in more innovative, collaborative, and socially relevant scholarship.

### **7.3 Enhanced Institutional Accountability and Public Trust**

Institutionalisation of fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues promises notable improvements in institutional accountability, transparency, and public trust. Governance informed by fiduciary transparency and epistemic openness directly addresses accountability deficits frequently noted within academia {Anderson 2006; Barnett 2020}. Embedding epistemic audits, peer-monitoring mechanisms, and transparent decision-making processes into institutional practices fosters accountability, enhancing external credibility and public trust.

Institutional transparency through rigorous fiduciary-epistemic standards encourages informed public scrutiny and stakeholder engagement, improving relations with funding agencies, policymakers, and wider societal stakeholders. Demonstrating a genuine institutional commitment to epistemic integrity strengthens academia's societal legitimacy and addresses declining public confidence resulting from past accountability failures.

Practical implementation includes regular institutional epistemic audits assessing adherence to fiduciary and epistemic commitments, facilitating public reporting of scholarly and administrative performance. Transparent evaluation criteria ensure greater clarity and accountability in decision-making, resource allocation, and institutional evaluations, ultimately rebuilding public trust in academia's epistemic integrity.

### **7.4 Identified Challenges and Anticipated Resistance**

Implementing the Academic Hippocratic Oath will inevitably encounter practical challenges and institutional resistance arising from established cultural norms, structural inertia, and vested interests within academia. To enhance feasibility, I identify specific institutional contexts likely to resist the proposed changes and offer practical strategies for mitigating these resistances.

#### **Specific Institutional Contexts of Resistance**

- **Tenure and Promotion Systems:**

Traditional tenure committees often emphasise narrowly defined disciplinary contributions and metrics (e.g., citation counts, high-impact publications). Such structures are deeply ingrained and may resist integrating epistemic virtues such as openness, humility, and interdisciplinary engagement into evaluation criteria.

- **Funding and Resource Allocation:**

Funding mechanisms frequently reward mainstream, disciplinary research, implicitly marginalising innovative, interdisciplinary, or critical scholarship. Institutions dependent on established funding structures may hesitate to embrace reforms perceived as potentially disadvantaging conventional disciplinary approaches.

- **Senior Faculty and Administrative Hierarchies:**

Senior academics and administrators accustomed to prevailing epistemic norms may perceive fiduciary-epistemic accountability frameworks as threats to established authority or autonomy. Institutional power

structures, particularly those heavily hierarchical or prestige-driven, are likely to resist explicit transparency and increased accountability.

- **Disciplinary Cultures and Departmental Silos:**

Strongly siloed disciplinary cultures often resist cross-disciplinary collaboration, epistemic openness, and critical pedagogical reforms. Departments may view explicit institutional expectations of epistemic humility and openness as challenging deeply embedded disciplinary identities and conventions.

## **Practical Mitigation Strategies**

To address these anticipated resistances effectively, the following practical strategies are recommended:

- **Phased and Pilot Initiatives:**

Institutions should initially adopt the Academic Hippocratic Oath within specific pilot departments or units committed to interdisciplinary or innovative scholarship. These initiatives allow empirical testing of practical feasibility, documenting tangible outcomes and demonstrating benefits that can persuade sceptical stakeholders.

- **Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement:**

Institutional reforms should engage diverse stakeholders—junior and senior faculty, administrative staff, students, and external epistemic communities—in open, constructive dialogues. Inclusive processes build institutional legitimacy and collective buy-in, reducing resistance by clearly demonstrating shared institutional benefits.

- **Institutional Incentive Alignment:**

Revising incentive structures (tenure, promotion, funding criteria) gradually to reward explicit adoption of epistemic virtues—particularly openness, humility, and justice—can effectively shift institutional norms. Incentive alignment strategies include rewarding collaborative research, interdisciplinary teaching, and epistemic transparency within tenure evaluations and funding allocations.

- **Institutional Leadership and Advocacy:**

Securing explicit commitments from institutional leaders (e.g., department chairs, deans, senior administrators) is crucial. Leadership advocacy clearly signals institutional seriousness about epistemic fiduciary reform, encouraging broader institutional acceptance. Identifying and supporting influential institutional champions committed to epistemic openness and accountability will significantly mitigate internal resistance.

- **Regular Epistemic Audits and Transparent Reporting:**

Periodic institutional epistemic audits, assessing adherence to fiduciary-epistemic obligations, provide transparent documentation of institutional progress. Clear public reporting of audit findings creates explicit accountability, encouraging institutional responsiveness and continuous improvement, thereby overcoming passive or active resistance to reforms.

These strategies provide tangible institutional pathways to successfully navigate anticipated resistance. Implemented thoughtfully, they can significantly enhance institutional feasibility, creating sustainable foundations for meaningful fiduciary-epistemic reforms across higher education contexts.

## 7.5 Recommendations for Ongoing Evaluation and Adaptation

Acknowledging inherent limitations in predicting precise institutional outcomes, ongoing evaluation and adaptation mechanisms form an essential component of long-term implementation. Institutions adopting the oath should establish periodic review cycles, evaluating adherence to fiduciary duties and epistemic virtues through epistemic audits and structured stakeholder consultations.

Regular scholarly dialogues facilitated through institutional forums or conferences dedicated to epistemic and fiduciary accountability provide platforms for critical reflection, feedback, and iterative refinement of institutional practices. Incorporating adaptive flexibility enables institutions to refine fiduciary-epistemic frameworks, responding to emergent epistemic challenges and practical institutional experiences, thereby sustaining meaningful adherence to the oath's ethical commitments.

## 8. Conclusion – A Call for Institutional and Scholarly Action

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### 8.1 Summary of Core Argument

Throughout this paper, I have argued that academia faces an epistemic and ethical crisis characterised by scholarly protectionism, epistemic gatekeeping, and institutional isolationism. Traditional fiduciary frameworks, though foundational in many institutional contexts, inadequately address academia's distinctive epistemic responsibilities. Integrating epistemic virtues—humility, openness, justice, courage, compassion, and transparency—with fiduciary duties such as loyalty, care, accountability, and non-maleficence addresses this gap. To operationalise this integration, I proposed the Academic Hippocratic Oath, a normative framework specifically designed to transform scholarly culture, enhance institutional accountability, and rebuild public trust in higher education.

### 8.2 Urgent Institutional Adoption and Scholarly Engagement

Given the urgency of academia's epistemic challenges, immediate institutional adoption and active scholarly engagement with the proposed *Academic Hippocratic Oath* are necessary. Institutions should formally incorporate the oath into governance charters, hiring policies, tenure and promotion criteria, and routine evaluation procedures. Scholars, educators, and administrators should proactively embrace, advocate, and embody the fiduciary and epistemic responsibilities outlined. Prompt institutional and scholarly commitment is essential to fulfil academia's epistemic obligations, maintain societal legitimacy, and preserve public trust.

### 8.3 Centrality of Epistemic Humility

Central to the fiduciary-epistemic framework is epistemic humility, a foundational virtue supporting scholarly openness, interdisciplinarity, inclusivity, and epistemic justice. As argued previously in my work, 'Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties' {Peter Kahl (2025)}, epistemic humility enables scholars and institutions to acknowledge their limitations, welcome critique, and engage constructively across disciplinary boundaries. Without humility, fiduciary obligations risk reinforcing rather than alleviating

epistemic isolation and gatekeeping. Embracing epistemic humility strengthens the quality, inclusivity, and societal relevance of scholarship.

## 8.4 Ongoing Scholarship and Refinement

Recognising the complexities inherent in institutional reform, I advocate for ongoing scholarly research, pilot initiatives, and structured feedback mechanisms to ensure continuous refinement of the Academic Hippocratic Oath. Institutions should trial the oath initially within targeted contexts—such as specific departments or interdisciplinary research groups—collecting empirical data to inform iterative improvement.

In advocating these institutional trials, it is instructive to consider comparative examples from other professional fields. Medicine has long embraced clearly codified ethical obligations, originating from the Hippocratic Oath and evolving into modern professional codes, such as those by the General Medical Council in the UK and the American Medical Association in the US. Empirical studies highlight that clear ethical standards and regular ethical reviews significantly enhance public trust, practitioner accountability, and professional integrity {General Medical Council 2013; American Medical Association 2016}.

Similarly, the legal profession operates under explicit fiduciary and ethical standards enforced through formal professional codes, such as the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) standards in the UK and the American Bar Association’s Model Rules of Professional Conduct. Evidence demonstrates that these well-defined ethical frameworks provide clarity in professional responsibilities and enhance transparency, accountability, and public trust in legal practice {Solicitors Regulation Authority 2019; American Bar Association 2020}.

Drawing from these comparative experiences, higher education institutions can anticipate comparable benefits—improved accountability, transparency, and public credibility—from adopting and empirically refining the proposed Academic Hippocratic Oath. To ensure the effectiveness of this framework, institutions should establish structured evaluation processes—including epistemic audits, stakeholder consultations, and scholarly forums—to refine fiduciary and epistemic responsibilities in response to empirical findings and practical feedback.

Further theoretical and empirical scholarship remains essential to examine the practical effectiveness of integrating fiduciary duties with epistemic virtues in higher education contexts. Comparative evidence from medicine and law supports the anticipated feasibility and positive impacts of this ethical framework. The scholarly community is encouraged to actively engage in critical reflection and empirical research, continually refining the fiduciary-epistemic framework to address emerging epistemic challenges and ensure its long-term transformative potential.

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## Version History

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Version	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
1	Initial release	None	2025-06-23

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