

A challenge most bigly: academic archives and higher education in the Trump Era

Higher
education in
the Trump Era

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide a critical perspective on emergent issues in the Trump era directly or indirectly relevant to academic archives. It describes current operational characteristics and trends in academic archives and considers the implications of the “Trump Effect” on academic archives in support of higher education.

Design/methodology/approach – The author examines archival studies literature pertaining to academic archives in combination with recent research and reporting on Trump Administration higher education policy to argue for increased professional awareness and vigilance.

Findings – The author asserts that Trump Administration rhetoric and policies aimed at remaking American higher education and undermining democratic norms pose a threat to academic archives as institutions that support learning, memory and historical accountability.

Originality/value – This paper adds to scholarly discussions in the library and information studies and archival studies fields about the merits of neutrality, the legacy of memory institutions and the obligation of information professionals to take a stance on difficult issues. Additionally, there are few (if any) sources that discuss the role of academic archives specifically in the contemporary political context.

Keywords Public policy, Archiving, Higher education, Academic archives, Donald J. Trump, The Trump Effect

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

In one of the many instances of crude statecraft promulgated by executive order in the Donald J. Trump era, the Trump Administration continued its streak of Orwellian absurdity with its March 2019 directive on campus free speech. The order, titled “Improving free inquiry, transparency and accountability at colleges and universities,” emphasizes free and open debate in higher education as “an essential feature of our American democracy” that “promotes learning, scientific discovery and economic prosperity” ([Executive Office of the President, 2019](#)). Without a hint of irony, the order insists that free inquiry must be encouraged at our institutions:

[...] to appropriately account for this bedrock principle in their administration of student life and to avoid creating environments that stifle competing perspectives, thereby potentially impeding beneficial research and undermining learning ([Executive Office of the President, 2019](#)).

The executive order also makes a cursory attempt to address rising tuition costs, student debt and employment outcomes. But for all the high-minded rhetoric about the importance of critical free inquiry, which apparently no longer applies to most federal agency research[1], the main purpose seems to be to threaten the real and perceived enemies of Donald J. Trump on American campuses.



Cloaked in reverence for the first amendment, the order charges all federal agencies with financial ties to higher education to ensure legal compliance with free speech statutes as a condition for maintaining federal funding ([Mangan, 2019a, 2019b](#)). Of course, there are no additional guidelines or directions in the text for measuring compliance or defining what is or is not acceptable speech or inquiry. The order was originally announced to an influential sector of President Trump's political base at the 2019 Conservative Political Action Conference and appears mostly an attempt to strengthen the foothold that his political movement has gained on American campuses in recent years ([Mangan, 2019a](#)). The order is dressed up as the positive assertion of constitutional rights guaranteed to all American citizens, but the true intent of the policy appears to be the opposite of its stated intent – to enshrine what is favorable to President Trump and denigrate what is not – while employing the well-worn tactic of creating a crisis that only President Trump can solve. The “crisis” in question is the alleged suppression of conservatives and others who dare question the liberal political orthodoxy on campuses ([PEN America, 2019](#)). Of course, multiple analyses point to a more nuanced reality across American campuses, where conservative voices do not necessarily face more suppression than others, but have found ways to amplify their argument through highly publicized instances of provocation and conflict prompted by the unwelcome presence of controversial public figures ([Mangan, 2019b; Ungar, 2018](#)).

Doublespeak and dog whistles have become pro forma in the Trump era, but the special opprobrium the Trump Administration harbors for higher education is blatant. Still, in a governing regime that welcomes chaos, it is difficult to guess what the end game is in its approach to higher education, much less how this benefits President Trump outside of the opportunity to further dismantle aspects of the administrative state that he considers hostile to his agenda. Never one to let a grudge go to waste, one might guess that his humiliating experience with Trump University probably influences his approach to some degree. However, President Trump's actions are more likely informed by the reliably sanguine response he receives from his most ardent supporters when he goes after individuals and institutions they increasingly despise, including and especially higher education ([Parker, 2019](#)). In this regard, the executive order simply represents one of the latest salvos in the ongoing culture wars playing out on American campuses since the 1930s ([Phillips-Fein, 2019](#)).

Yet the implications of the Administration's approach are potentially far-reaching, especially if it results in substantial legislation or policy outcomes that further weaken the position of higher education. In addition to the suppression of specific minority groups and the embrace of legally questionable governing tactics, the Trump Administration actively pursues an agenda of secrecy, prevarication and propaganda aimed at controlling the flow of information to citizens, the press and other elected officials. Though the immediate concern of those who stand in opposition to President Trump's agenda is due diligence and accountability in real time, his presidency has already had a profound and lasting impact on democratic institutions charged with serving as a check on presidential power. The Administration's approach to higher education aligns with this larger design and works its way into the various functions of colleges and universities, especially where federal funding and regulations are attached. Just as President Trump's bombastic social media pronouncements regularly send shockwaves throughout public discourse and financial markets, so too do his higher education policies reverberate across American college and university campuses.

The larger Trump Administration strategy to remake democratic institutions has the potential to fundamentally alter how colleges and universities operate at a deep level, thus affecting the nature of an institution's governance, functions, activities, character and associated personnel. Administrators, faculty and students will bear the brunt of policy

changes and resulting political fallout. However, librarians, archivists, records managers, information scientists and others who support higher education by documenting and preserving institutional resources and heritage must also remain vigilant as events unfold. More than a matter of professional solvency in an atmosphere of political and economic uncertainty, there are distinctive elements of the Trump Administration's approach to higher education that challenge the core values and principles of information professionals (Buschman, 2017; SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics, 2011). This article focuses attention on the possible implications of the Trump era for university archives, special collections, research centers and other campus-affiliated archival collecting bodies managed by those professionals, hereafter referred to as academic archives[2].

As should be clear by now, this article is a think-piece meant to provide a critical perspective on emergent issues in the Trump era directly or indirectly relevant to academic archives. The narrative is informed by recent studies and reportage on the Trump Administration's relationship with higher education, as well as relevant scholarly literature from the Archival Studies and Library and Information Studies fields. The analysis begins with a scan of the current academic archives landscape and discusses some organizational features and issues that academic archivists contend with now and into the future. The next section attempts to track the impact of Trump Administration higher education policy decisions relevant to academic archives. This is framed as an analysis of the Trump Effect on higher education, a phenomenon that reaches all areas of American society and is characterized by escalating levels of bullying, targeting and other unacceptable behavior toward those outside of President Trump's in-group. Any institution and its affiliated personnel who run afoul of President Trump's agenda are potential targets, and the final section of the chapter looks at how academic archives might move forward in this atmosphere. As the 2020 presidential election looms, a big question emerges: what obligation do academic archivists and others in the information professions have to ensure that the present reality does not become the perpetual normal?

A take on the academic archives landscape

As key locations for various types of archival holdings, colleges and universities are essential to the long-term preservation of American history and cultural heritage. Indeed, archives repositories documenting a full range of institutional, local, regional, national and international subjects are found at colleges and universities across the country. Traditionally, a college or university archives existed solely to maintain official records deemed to have historical or permanent value for their institution (Burckel and Cook, 1982). These record and manuscript collections might live in the institutional library, the main administrative office or a public relations department and on very few occasions existed as independently functioning campus entities (Purcell, 2012).

Academic archives evolved from this more limited scope rooted in records lifecycle management to include a wide variety of programs and services based around the stewardship of original and unique archival holdings (Burckel, 2008; Schina and Wells, 2002). This expanding operational purview is largely driven by technology and institutional demands to meet the changing needs of administrators, faculty, students, alumni and other patron groups (Maher, 2009). With exceptions based on institutional size, structure and resources, the current crop of academic archivists tend to be "professionally trained archivists, curators, records managers, special collections librarians and digitization specialists who work within or are affiliated with an academic library," though their work is not necessarily limited to official institutional records or narrow research subject areas (Purcell, 2012).

By telling the story of colleges and universities and by taking responsibility for documenting large portions of American history and culture outside of their institutional context, academic archives help tell the story of our country. Though it varies by institution, academic archives' collecting missions typically revolve around supporting the information access and research needs of campus-based patrons and – especially for tax-funded colleges and universities – the general public (Fleming and Gerard, 2014; Marshall, 2002). This includes official records and traces from these groups' presence at or interactions with the school, but may also incorporate collections related to the scholarly interests of certain academic disciplines or to support specialized campus-based research centers (Meyer, 2011; Sinclair and Salter, 2014).

In addition to campus stories, myths and folklore, it is common for academic archives to acquire and maintain collections relevant to the host institutions' local or regional heritage interests (Kellams, 2008; Speck, 2014; Thelin, 2009; Woodward, 2013). Many models exist of academic archives collaborating with outside public, private and non-profit organizations to deliver programs and services around their collections. For example, the University of Wisconsin System hosts Area Research Centers at several campuses across the state in partnership with the State of Wisconsin through the Wisconsin Historical Society. Likewise, academic archives of all sizes collaborate with volunteer-run foundations and friends groups, which provide a crucial financial lifeline for special projects and during times of economic duress. On a larger scale, dozens of public and private colleges and university systems participate in mass digitization and Web access projects with government entities and big technology firms, which help serve the need for digital preservation and expand the potential audience for academic archives holdings (Tibbo, 2008).

As with archives organizations outside of academe, the items that flow into academic archives and remain part of the permanent record amount to only a fraction of the total volume of information and documents produced by a college or university over time. However, they still require a huge effort to manage (Manning and Silva, 2012). Records related to organizational administration usually arrive at academic archives after they have passed out of current use, and these predominantly document the important events, people and functions associated with the upper levels of institutional activity, i.e. dean's and president's offices, executive boards and committees, milestones and anniversaries and anything fulfilling a legal requirement (Purcell, 2012).

As records creation and keeping have become more voluminous, ephemeral and decentralized on campuses in recent decades, the biggest challenge for academic archivists is to facilitate long term collection access, use and preservation (Brown and Yakel, 1996; Yakel and Bost, 1994; Zach and Peri, 2010). This is primarily accomplished through a variety of evolving tools, such as records retention schedules, collection development policies and content management systems, but archivists' discretion and agency over their programs often depends on their location in proximity to institutional power (Marshall, 2002; Stout, 1995; Stout and Baird, 1984). A consistent through line in academic archives scholarly literature is the need to align a repository's policies and procedures with the larger vision and operational strategy of its college or university (Burckel, 2008; Frye, 1993). Earning champions in high places can determine the quality of an academic archives' existence (Lawrimore, 2014).

Faculty and student records bring their own unique issues of prioritization and planning to effectively manage academic archives. In acquiring faculty-created records, archives must balance prestige with representation, utility with novelty and custodianship with ownership on a case-by-case basis, which occupies a great deal of time and resources (Hyry *et al.*, 2008; Laver, 2003). This also applies to acquiring collections for faculty use; academic archives

typically seek out new holdings to build on existing collection strengths that align with the usage and interests of their main research cohorts. But this changes over time, so every collection, program and service decision executed in an academic archives necessarily excludes others because of limited resources, contingent funding schemes and evolving research needs (Noonan and Chute, 2014; Prom, 2010).

All academic archives operate differently from one another, but a common goal is to position themselves for optimum control (if not full autonomy) to serve multiple publics and stakeholders. Acquiring comprehensive and granular documentation on students is especially problematic in this regard because of limitations imposed by confidentiality and privacy regulations and the temporary and transient nature of students' campus existence (Buchanan and Richardson, 2012; Christian, 2002; Chute and Swain, 2004; Wagner, 2013; Wagner and Smith, 2012). Additionally, acquiring collections is no longer a matter of simply emptying file cabinets or picking up boxes from campus offices and storage areas. The elusive digital nature of most current faculty and student communications, work product and campus activity presents numerous obstacles to effective archival capture and preservation (Swain, 2005; Tibbo, 2008; Yakel *et al.*, 2008).

Academic archives take on many forms and have many potential contributors and audiences, but most share the underlying mission to secure an accurate, inclusive and representative record of higher education institutions in the context of society at large – a historical record that allows us to better understand our past toward perfecting the future. As Neal (2008) writes:

Ideally, all college and university archives are mosaics – at once housing the often multifaceted records [...] embedded in the foundation of their institutions' histories, while also preserving the overlapping historical landscapes created by them.

However, like many other mainstream American cultural institutions, academic archives have a spotty track record of collecting stories and serving information and research needs outside of their traditional core constituencies.

In recent years, many academic archives have shifted their operational emphasis to expand their reach outside of the predominantly elite, white, straight and male perspective to more accurately reflect the historical composition of its broader campus community (Hughes-Watkins, 2014; Petit, 2019a; Pettit, 2002). Yet a forward-looking approach that honors institutional legacies while acknowledging historical flaws requires more than perfunctory measures in support of fuzzy notions of diversity or multiculturalism. Within the archives profession there is a growing sense of advocacy and activism around social justice and equality, and modern academic archives are well positioned as sites of resistance to and historical redress of the oppression and injustice that has accompanied too much of the American experience (Jimerson, 2007).

Although academic archives have had their share of controversies in recent years, they typically fly under the political radar and attempt to address hot-button issues from a position of professional objectivity (George, 2013; Peet, 2015; Quigel, 2005; Roeschley and Holden, 2019). Indeed, much internal criticism within the archives profession is directed at the pretense of neutrality and the supposed ability to rise above political squabbles to document all sides of the story. It is dismayingly true that many archives are structured as society's reactive chroniclers, but at their best they collect, preserve and share what they can in a spirit of openness about the many ways that their mediation might influence our current and future understanding of history. Overt activism certainly has its limits for academic archivists working in public institutions or other settings with specific prohibitions on political activity (Yaco and Hardy, 2013). However, any professional commitment that

favors neutrality to the detriment of other principles quickly loses its credibility when one honestly contemplates what is at stake in the Trump era. As a function of higher education and collective American memory, academic archives are in the eye of storm whether they want to be or not.

Academic archives, higher education and the Trump Effect

Academic archives document American society campus-by-campus and are well-positioned to observe and record how President Trump's agenda unfolds through Department of Education policies, the opportunism of the president's legislative allies and right-wing activism that seeks to fundamentally alter the higher education system. The purposeful shift in presidential behavior and further coarsening of the public sphere in recent years is often referred to as the Trump Effect. This phenomenon was initially identified in a study sponsored by the Southern Policy Law Center's Teaching Tolerance initiative in the lead-up to the 2016 election and later expanded upon in post-election survey results compiled by the Human Rights Campaign ([Costello, 2016](#)). The original analysis looked at the impact of Trump-inspired bullying and intimidation in grade schools toward students from identity groups targeted by Trump's rhetoric and policy proclamations ([Sword and Zimbardo, 2018](#)). The Trump Effect is now applicable to many areas of American society with the ongoing pursuit and enactment of cruel punitive measures against the enemies of President Trump and his loyal political base. The Trump Effect works through Administration staff and various political agents to actively undermine a common base of facts, evidence and the epistemological and moral framework of representative democracy.

In the higher education landscape, the most prominent manifestation of the Trump Effect is the US Department of Education under Betsy DeVos. Secretary DeVos' longevity in President Trump's revolving door cabinet may give some indication of the importance of the Administration's education agenda and DeVos' role in carrying it out, even if the department's activity is not as highly publicized as its counterparts. But what does emerge often does not bode well for the American public education system^[3]. Re-making higher education starts at the primary and secondary levels, where Secretary DeVos' emphasis on charter schools and voucher programs promotes continued diversion of federal and local resources away from public school systems with little compelling evidence of improved educational outcomes from alternative models ([Gleason et al., 2010](#)). College and career readiness are clearly at issue here, but this also advances larger neoliberal objectives to commoditize public resources and apply cutthroat corporate models to public services ([Blakely, 2017](#)).

Privatization under the banner of "school choice" undermines the American system of public education through its hostility to unionization and collective bargaining, the legitimization of questionable curricula and pedagogical methods and the further entrenchment in educational policy of powerful monied interests who are subject to minimal public oversight ([Bosenberg, 2002](#); [Kamenetz, 2017](#)). This approach carries over into higher education most visibly in Secretary DeVos' efforts to deregulate the for-profit college and university sector. In 2018, Secretary DeVos rescinded Obama-era protections against fraudulent and predatory behavior and several for-profit college and university industry representatives – including some from organizations previously under investigation – are now senior staff members at the Department of Education ([Whitman and Duncan, 2018](#)). Combined with the botched handling of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, the Department of Education seems intent on promoting an adversarial relationship between professionals in traditional public service settings and the often underserved communities

those professionals and the department's policies are meant to address ([Adamson, 2016](#); [Farrington, 2019](#); [Turner, 2019](#)).

Unfortunately, the Department of Education's current approach toward groups historically marginalized by the education system goes beyond its tone-deafness and ineptitude in financial or administrative matters. The most glaring examples potentially put students, faculty and others on campus at increased risk of persecution and physical harm. These policies mostly concern the removal of rules and guidelines meant to protect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ+) rights, sexual assault victims, equal opportunity for people with disabilities and immigrants currently in the education system regardless of their documentation status ([Jimenez and Flores, 2019](#)). This is entirely consistent with the Trump Administration's wholesale efforts to roll back recent advances made by marginalized people in other areas of American society – advances that have resulted in higher education becoming more representative of a diverse population. It is also consistent with the Administration's willingness to identify and target out-groups as a means toward solidifying President Trump's political base.

But perhaps the most pernicious aspect of the Trump Effect on higher education is that it is enacted under the guise of reform. Certainly, the overall American education system needs serious reforms. In higher education specifically, declining enrollment, flagging public investment, skyrocketing costs and constantly evolving workforce expectations are among the most pressing issues ([Grawe, 2019](#)). However, the Trump Administration and Secretary DeVos' Department of Education seem most intent on pursuing long-standing conservative political grievances against those they blame for higher education's failings. In previous eras, addressing the problems of colleges and universities engendered bipartisan cooperation, especially for flagship institutions that serve as regional economic engines ([Valero and Van Reenen, 2019](#)). However, in the current political atmosphere conservative critics are more likely to produce half-joking exhortations to eliminate higher education altogether, accompanied by actual proposals to achieve that reality ([Tennessean, 2019](#)).

Even though all movement conservatives did not necessarily vote for Trump and some who did may have only done so reluctantly, many Republican lawmakers are more than pleased to use this highly distractible political environment to make up ground on conservative policy priorities. This is most apparent in the federal judiciary, with a vast number of President Trump's nominees approved by the grand old party (GOP)-led Senate to lifelong circuit and district positions, along with the distinct possibility of filling more seats on the US Supreme Court. President Trump always intended to fully utilize the weight of his office for governing, but even with clear majorities in both congressional bodies for the first two years of his term, his biggest legislative victory remains a deficit-exploding tax cut that did not create the supercharged economy promised. All other accomplishments are the result of executive orders and bureaucratic wrangling, or, in some cases, doing next to nothing and dealing with the fallout, which appears to be the case with federal election security ([Salvo and Wilson, 2019](#)). With Democrats retaking the US House of Representatives in the 2018 midterms, the familiar cycle of legislative gridlock followed by executive order followed by protracted legal battles will likely continue at least through the 2020 presidential election. Meanwhile, the example President Trump sets in pushing legal boundaries is clearly telegraphed to his supporters at all levels of governance. With sympathetic judges manning larger sectors of the court system, local and state policymakers have every reason to pursue similar tactics.

The Trump Effect extends from the legal system to higher education through Administration efforts to reduce federal support for educational initiatives long opposed by social and fiscal conservatives on constitutional or moral grounds. Reduced federal spending exacerbates the severe post-Great Recession decline in state and local funding for

education ([Fischer and Stripling, 2019](#); [Knox, 2019](#)). All yearly budgets put forth by the Trump Administration since taking office proposed large cuts (with Secretary DeVos' blessing) to Department of Education programs relevant to higher education. Although fatal damage has been avoided because of a split Congress and public pushback, President Trump's allies continually find ways to enact this financial agenda with the Administration providing cover. For example, GOP state and national lawmakers frequently attack core academic concepts, such as tenure, controversial research and professional service activities based on political grievances, sometimes leading to dismissal and other forms of punishment against individuals and academic programs ([Salaita, 2019](#)).

A recent instance in North Carolina involving the Consortium for Middle East Studies demonstrates this well-coordinated strategy in action ([Brown, 2019](#)). The consortium is operated by Duke University and the University of North Carolina with the assistance of federal Title IV funding. In August 2019, the Department of Education began a program review to ensure that its curriculum and activities remain within the scope of Title IV statutory requirements ([Education Department, 2019](#)). However, the review was initiated at the request of a Republican North Carolina congressman responding to constituent concerns over a conference hosted by the consortium. These concerns revolved around allegedly insufficient and unfavorable portrayal of Jews, Christians and other religious minorities in predominantly Muslim countries. The congressman also took exception with the organization's alleged support for the Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, a frequent canard in conservative criticism of the academic left.

Putting aside questions on the merits of the center's work or the conference, or the credibility of the complaints against them, the clockwork response to this political grievance demonstrates impressive strategic alignment between the Administration and its congressional enablers. Indeed, any individual GOP failures to maintain total alignment with the Administration's pet policies, messaging or governing tactics risks incurring the tweeter-in-chief's wrath and subsequent political ostracism. As such, the Trump Effect has successfully quashed meaningful dissent within the core and periphery of America's conservative political and intellectual class. But in addition to the ability to utilize official government action against higher education, the Administration attracts a loose coalition of religious fundamentalists, white nationalists and free speech trolls willing to provoke confrontations on campuses and target academic opponents online.

The most extreme examples of this resulted in violence at protests in Berkeley and Charlottesville in 2017, but some organizations use more systematic efforts to humiliate and harass their academic enemies through the compilation of Web-based hit lists and gotcha journalism. For instance, the non-profit political action committee Turning Point USA maintains a watch list focused on faculty loathed by the right, while secretly pumping money into campus student body elections and not-so-secretly bolstering the profile of white nationalists ([Vasquez, 2019](#)). Supporters of these tactics might argue that they provide needed balance to higher education's ideologically skewed professoriate and its leftist indoctrination of students. However, so much of this activity – draped in reverence for concepts such as heritage, free speech and political independence – does not withstand scrutiny when brought into the light of day ([Petit, 2019a](#)). Its virtual or physical presence on campus is essentially a Trojan horse meant to legitimize actions and normalize views that are morally repugnant and legally questionable, which could very well describe the legacy of the Trump Effect writ large.

Academic archives moving forward

In the Trump era, higher education – as a network of discrete physical or virtual locations, and as an ideal for social progress – remains a focal point in the battle for American hearts

and minds (Fishman *et al.*, 2019). The distinctive and massive web of American colleges and universities shape society on an international scale and stand alongside American business and military might as the most consequential institutions in the post-World War II global economic and political hegemony led by the USA. Conversely, higher education is a microcosm of American society, each institution exhibiting its potential for discovery, achievement and greatness while mired in transhistorical systemic inequities and moral contradictions that will one day demand a reckoning. American colleges and universities are uniquely positioned as both beneficiaries of American power and privilege and as the primary locus of resistance to that power and privilege. Historian Kim Phillips-Fein (2019) recently wrote that “the university’s function as a subversive gatekeeper is what marks it as especially dangerous” to its detractors, and President Trump has successfully seized upon popular acrimony and ambivalence toward higher education (some of which it fully earns) to reshape it in his image by executive fiat.

How do academic archivists and their institutions continue to function at an adequate level under a system so seemingly unmoored from the legal, ethical and humanistic precepts that inform civil society and higher education? Academic archives mostly feel the Trump Effect in indirect ways that may not be immediately perceptible at an institutional level. Certainly archivists, librarians and other workers in these settings directly affected by attacks against their own identities or personal interests – or those who simply find such attacks reprehensible – will feel it acutely in their family lives, neighborhoods, workplaces and other everyday experiences. For instance, the crackdown on all types of immigration has inflicted a sense of fear, anger and distrust on communities across the country and has helped bring the internationalization of American campuses to a virtual standstill (Fischer, 2019a). Once the global standard for opportunities in higher education, American colleges and universities are now associated with travel warnings and visa revocations (Fischer, 2019b).

Undoubtedly, this and other repressive measures are changing the composition of student bodies, faculty cohorts and support staff in colleges and universities. But these pressures also cause individuals to modify their activities and behaviors in relation to campus life, which, in terms of social and scholarly engagement, may run the gamut from total withdrawal (to avoid public notice) to heightened involvement (to resist loudly and publicly). The most damaging scenario to the mission and operation of academic archives is needlessly severing relationships with its various campus and community partners due to externally imposed political threats or considerations. Our future understanding of the Trump era demands that academic archives work proactively to document campus movements and discussions developing in response to Administration policies and rhetoric (Zamudio-Suarez, 2017). This includes the good with the bad, what we agree with and what we oppose – not to honor a dubious commitment to neutrality or disinterested scholarship, but to help secure historical accountability for the people and communities documented.

From a financial standpoint, the prospect of diminished state funding and continuing efforts to zero-out federal initiatives such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Historic Publications and Records Commission and similar programs would have dire consequences for academic archives and the historical record they help preserve. But perhaps even more consequentially, the transition to digital ubiquity continues unabated and there is still not a comprehensive national strategy for long-term digital preservation, access and security. If the federal government does not provide leadership in this area, stewardship over personal, cultural and institutional digital records and information will become the sole province of Silicon Valley. In some ways this has already happened and the political implications of

everyday digital media use should be clear enough from the impact of Russian troll farms and Cambridge Analytica on the 2016 election. Academic archives need to be leaders on their campuses in managing the continued digital shift, but this is very difficult to accomplish without the financial and logistic capacity that federal programs and leadership help facilitate.

If archives reflect society – albeit a selectively filtered reflection – then presumably the archival record developing during the Trump era should document the various ways President Trump and his political movement have shaped society. However, this assumes that those responsible for securing the historical record are willing and able to carry out their duties, which cannot be guaranteed because of the very nature of the Trump Administration’s system: insular, opaque, hostile to examination or critique and determined to upend social institutions charged with holding it accountable. Very recent revelations about President Trump’s interactions with the Ukrainian government reveal a systematic abuse of presidential power aided by Administration-wide efforts to manipulate and obfuscate records and information that serve as evidence of its activities (Vinogard, 2019). For all their variety in subject matter and bureaucratic functions, academic archives are repositories of institutional memory and evidence and now more than ever must embrace their power to reveal and illuminate.

Laura Millar’s recent treatise on archives and records examines documentary evidence as the basis for facts and the possibility of truth, not only in how it confirms our existence and relationship to the world around us, but also in how it shapes the social and political institutions we interact with over time. According to Millar (2019, p. 145):

Evidence is not a frill. It is a cornerstone of an accountable, responsible democracy. We need to shed the assumption that evidence – records, archives, and verifiable data – will be created as naturally as breathing and then will continue to exist, authentic, whole, and intact, for as long as we want.

Archives are often the last line of accountability in the chain of activities that surround and document the lives of powerful people in and out of the public spotlight. However, archives do not function in a vacuum. They are very much a part of the network of institutions that uphold civil society and democratic principles. When these institutions are under threat, so are academic archives; that threat, in the Trump era, emanates from a selective incredulity that has no rational or ethical need for facts or evidence. Academic archivists must do everything they can to make sure this worldview is contained. Because if evidence does not matter, archives are worthless.

Conclusion

Several institutions of higher education host presidential libraries including those of former Presidents Barack H. Obama (University of Chicago), George W. Bush (Southern Methodist University), William J. Clinton (University of Arkansas), George H. W. Bush (Texas A&M), Gerald R. Ford (University of Michigan) and Lyndon B. Johnson (University of Texas-Austin). These settings generally have professional or personal ties for the presidents, but what is most notable are the partnerships between the host institutions, the National Archives and Records Administration[4] and the presidential foundations required to make these institutions permanent – even if their creation and maintenance is often problematic (Clark, 2017; Cox, 2002). Yet these libraries also demonstrate the role that higher education plays in preserving the historical record at a very high level (Carter, 2016).

It is difficult to contemplate a Trump presidential library and seems highly unlikely that it will have any association with a college or university. However, several writers have

thought about what his presidential library might look like and some versions are as outlandish as one might expect from such a wild and polarizing presidency (Frank, 2016). One version features a rollercoaster “Trump Train” and will be impervious to defacement; another version incorporates a giant stripper pole and a bald eagle with tiny wings (Stahl, 2017). Neither of these envisions any archives, books or even Twitter threads constituting a research collection, perhaps unintentionally acknowledging doubts of there ever being any kind of monument to Donald J. Trump that is not as self-aggrandizing as the ones already in existence. If our current president exits the office early and/or in disgrace, then one presumes he will at least get something comparable to Richard M. Nixon, though it is difficult to guess the limits of what Donald J. Trump’s ego will allow.

Indeed, the Trump era presents a continuous string of “if/then” statements. If President Trump does x, then y will surely result, with these variables almost always characterized by superlatives or worst-case scenarios. President Trump is the king of superlatives, especially while in attack mode or during his frequent bouts of self-praise, but no one can deny that he has attempted to run the country exactly as he said he would, regardless of our inexhaustible ability to be shocked by his behavior and policies. To those who see in President Trump’s actions exactly what they want for this country, the perspective and analysis presented in this essay undoubtedly read like the petulant scaremongering of an elite progressive snowflake intent on defending the godless left’s stranglehold on American higher education. So, in the interest of fairness, we should take a moment to consider any positive outcomes that might result from the Trump Administration’s approach to higher education these past few years.

If the Administration’s supposed commitment to free speech and inquiry is executed in good faith, it is possible that colleges and universities could once again receive proper recognition from people of all political stripes for being places of critical thought and robust debate. It is possible that the free-market deregulation of higher education could lead to innovations in the content and delivery of education services, thus making American colleges and universities less expensive for students and its graduates more globally competitive. It is possible that limited, merit-based immigration will allow our educational institutions to flourish as they attract the best and brightest students and faculty from all over the world. It is possible that shrinking public funding for higher education will be supplemented through partnerships with industry, creating a pipeline to gainful employment and new mechanisms for career readiness. All of this is possible, given the right conditions and enough time, but it appears unlikely because so much of the Administration’s approach is rooted in disruption for its own sake.

Certainly to some, the appeal of President Trump is the generative potential unleashed through the destruction of old ways that have not worked equally for everyone. But the freewheeling chaos resulting from his Administration’s policies on education, trade, national security, civil rights and environmental protections has thus far proven to be just a crude version of regressive, revanchist elitism. In this setting, President Trump has used the bully pulpit of the executive office against higher education in the most literal sense. But now is not the time for higher education to be cowed into quiet and grudging acceptance, nor should those responsible for guarding its history and heritage. The silver lining to the Trump era is that the youngest members of the electorate are increasingly aware of the implications of his agenda for their future and they are mobilizing to oppose it. Academic archives are in a fortuitous position to help educate, document, advocate for and assist this growing movement as it manifests on college and university campuses. Our ethical obligations are clear and our institutions are at risk. The moment for professional circumspection is past; it is time to pick a side.

1. See the Union of Concerned Scientists' 2019 publication "The state of science in the Trump era: Damage done, lessons learned, and a path to progress," for a comprehensive account of the Administration's impact on science research conducted or funded by the federal government.
2. In practice, the term "academic archives" is not typically used to indicate an archives unit, department, program or professional designation. In this and other writing, it is more of a conceptual term meant to denote the universal or general archival function within the academic landscape.
3. For a critical, but ostensibly accurate, timeline of Betsy DeVos' experience prior to and during her tenure as Secretary of the Department of Education, see this resource put together by the National Education Association (2019): <https://educationvotes.nea.org/2019/03/22/devos/>
4. For more legal and operational detail on presidential libraries, see this NARA FAQ page on their website: www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/faqs.html

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