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University leaders must stand behind commitments to access and equity.

As the Trump administration guts educational access and affordability programs for Pennsylvania's most disadvantaged students, silence from the Commonwealth's higher education leaders is worrisome for those of us invested in education for the public good. Last Friday, in a barrage of anti-DEI initiatives, the U.S. Education Department threatened academic institutions with funding cuts if they continue supporting programs that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Higher education institutions that once boasted these efforts as foundational to their missions have been noticeably slow to communicate how these policies threaten their ability to deliver quality education to all students.

I have dedicated my career to increasing access and equity in higher education, so I know remaining quiet is more than a disservice to the current and future students at these institutions. A diverse environment where students of all backgrounds feel included and challenged in equal measure is integral to the college-going experience; students cannot learn if they do not feel that they belong and, especially, if they do not feel safe.

Policies and practices like race-conscious admissions, targeted support for students with disabilities, programs to recruit women in STEM, and focused services for veterans (to name a few) ensure all who choose to seek a degree, certificate, or credential can access and complete it. These practices grew from legal battles where qualified individuals were denied equal access to the one thing we know leads to social mobility in this country: [a postsecondary degree](#). Now, these practices' value to all students is being distorted to serve a political agenda intended to exclude and limit that social mobility to a privileged few. And without the ability to welcome students from every corner of Pennsylvania, higher educational institutions in the state will miss out on some of the Commonwealth's best and brightest minds.

As a Penn Stater, I've grown to love the famous "We Are" chant because it serves as a living reminder of our commitment to inclusion. Just two years before I started studying in Happy Valley, members of the student Black Caucus marshaled a university-wide unity march in response to threats against Black students. Their subsequent sit-in, known as "The Village," prompted administration officials to come to the table and enact structural changes to address racism. From supporting the 1947-48 Nittany Lion football team's refusal to play in the segregated South to the Paul Robeson Cultural Center's establishment in 1972, university leadership answered students' calls to build safe and inclusive campuses and make education accessible to everyone.

Unfortunately, when university leaders are challenged by external pressures, commitments to build universities for all become expendable. Facing a tightening budget, Penn State President Neeli Bendapudi shuttered the long-promised [Center for Racial Justice](#) and launched a plan to close several commonwealth campuses, which [disproportionately serve](#) Pennsylvania's most [racially and economically diverse communities](#).

Challenging times call for difficult decisions, but commitments to access and equity that cannot withstand financial hardship and ideological attacks are not commitments; they are platitudes. To echo American Council on Education President [Ted Mitchell](#), “Dear Colleague” letters are not law. These programs remain legal and moving hastily towards compliance will not only leave universities vulnerable to actual civil rights violations and the reputational risk of being an institution that reneged on its mission and commitments. University leaders must lead with fortitude, and make it clear that pressure from federal actors to halt programs designed to mitigate discrimination are incompatible with any mission to educate and serve the public.

Pennsylvania’s educational institutions should be beacons of social mobility, academic freedom, democratic values, and intellectual integrity. This vision motivated me to run for an alumni-elected seat on the Board of Trustees at my alma mater, Penn State, and Penn Staters who share this vision can vote for me and my colleagues, Uma Moriarity and Daniel Zahn, in April. I know one election alone will not ensure education remains a tool for the public good; that requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. We must call on higher education leaders to take on the risk and defend access and equality with moral courage. And we all must roll up our own sleeves and get involved. We all have a role to play in this fight.