

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Trump Said He Would ‘End’ Political Correctness on Campuses. Could a President Do That?

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October 20, 2016

Speaking to college students last week in Columbus, Ohio, Donald J. Trump told conservative watchers of higher education something many of them might love to hear.

"In the past few decades, political correctness — oh, what a terrible term — has transformed our institutions of higher education from ones that fostered spirited debate to a place of extreme censorship, where students are silenced for the smallest of things," said Mr. Trump.

"You say a word somewhat differently, and all of a sudden you're criticized — sometimes viciously," he continued. "We will end the political correctness and foster free and respectful dialogue."

The Republican nominee did not elaborate on how he would use the presidency to "end" political correctness on campuses, and his campaign did not respond to an inquiry from *The Chronicle*. And Mr. Trump probably will not become president, according to the latest polls.

Still, he is hardly the first Republican politician to criticize political correctness on campus, and his pledge to "end" that phenomenon raises the question of whether any president could keep that promise.

"You can't 'end' it, that would be ridiculous," said Peter Lawler, a professor of government at Berry College who has written critically about political correctness.

"That's not something that you could easily reduce to the four corners of a policy proposal, as they say," said Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

Policy experts noted, however, that there are things a president could do to mitigate the federal government's role in shaping how colleges define and respond to the sort of criticism that Mr. Trump and many conservatives lament.

A Change in Direction

A president could start by reshuffling the priorities of the Education Department, and particularly the Office for Civil Rights — assuming that he does not move to eliminate the department entirely, as Mr. Trump and other Republicans have threatened to do.

The Office for Civil Rights, which is responsible for making sure colleges that receive federal aid are following federal antidiscrimination laws, is obligated — no matter who is in charge — to consider complaints and investigate those in its jurisdiction. However, Mr. Trump might direct officials to focus their energies elsewhere and put resolving sexual and racial discrimination complaints on the back burner, according to Art Coleman, managing partner at the consulting firm Education Counsel.

If an administration were really averse to addressing complaints against individual campuses, said Mr. Coleman, the civil-rights office might narrow its interpretation of what kind of conduct crosses the line. That might involve circumventing years of statutory and case law, he said, but a Trump administration might enforce its own standards until a court compels it to do otherwise.

"You could certainly see a play toward mischief there if one were so inclined," said Mr. Coleman, who worked at the Office for Civil Rights from 1993 to 2000.

The president could also influence how the office uses its discretionary authority to conduct broad "compliance reviews," which officials can open even when no complaint has been filed, he added. "You could literally shut that down."

The Obama administration has taken a proactive approach. In recent years the Education Department has aggressively sought to enforce federal antidiscrimination laws, investigating hundreds of colleges for potential violations of Title IX, the federal gender-equity law.

Title IX has been on the books for four decades, and the department has been urging colleges to use a controversial standard of proof for campus cases since the mid-1990s. But colleges didn't necessarily see investigating and resolving reports of sexual assault as crucial to their compliance until 2011, when the Obama administration reminded them they had to do it. That is a testament to the power of a presidential administration to influence campus policies from afar.

So what if a Trump administration wanted to nudge it in the other direction?

Some people would be satisfied to see the next president rein in the Office for Civil Rights on Title IX enforcement and let colleges handle their own business.

"Ultimately, the responsibility lies with leaders on campus and duly elected and appointed trustees — not federal bureaucrats — to adopt policies that protect free speech and foster robust debate at the campus level," Michael B. Poliakoff, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, said through a spokesman.

The Executive Option

Another possibility is that Mr. Trump, who has denied a string of sexual-assault allegations against him and dismissed his own sexually aggressive remarks as "locker-room talk," would use the Education Department to hammer colleges that he believes are creating hostile environments for students and professors who feel, as he put it, "viciously" attacked or "silenced" by the P.C. police.

"The Obama administration has set a precedent that you can use these really squishy executive maneuvers to tell colleges how to act," said Alexander Holt, an education-policy analyst at New America.

The Education Department used a "Dear Colleague" letter, a guidance document not subject to notice and comment, to dictate federal rules on Title IX compliance, said Mr. Holt. Colleges had to comply to avoid risking costly investigations that might conclude with the federal government branding them as hostile environments for women. That tactic, he said, could hold appeal for Mr. Trump, who is known for his blunt-force litigiousness and admiration of political strongmen.

"I could see a Trump administration going crazy on these 'Dear Colleague' letters," said Mr. Holt.

Mr. Holt referred to "The Coddling of the American Mind," an essay by Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and Jonathan Haidt, a professor of ethical leadership at New York University's school of business, which *The Atlantic* published last year.

In that essay, the authors argued that the Education Department should apply a standard that defines peer-to-peer harassment as "a pattern of objectively offensive behavior by one student that interferes with another student's access to education."

Mr. Trump's education secretary could send a "Dear Colleague" letter to that effect, said Mr. Holt.

Still, there are limits to how far Mr. Trump, or any American president, could swing the pendulum away from "political correctness." The standards of acceptable speech on campuses have been shifting for years, not because of federally enforced "speech codes" but because colleges themselves have gradually responded to the needs and demands of diversifying student bodies.

"Our colleges," said Mr. Lawler, the Berry government professor, "are going to be what they are: a little more liberal than Republicans would like."