News

The Washington campus of Trinity Washington University is seen in this May 13, 2020, photo.

The Washington campus of Trinity Washington University is seen in this May 13, 2020, photo. Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University, is one of dozens of Catholic school leaders who signed a letter decrying the Trump administration's overreach and interference with higher education. (CNS/Chaz Muth)



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This month, Catholic university presidents across the country will bestow diplomas bearing their signatures to thousands of graduating students.

But over the past few weeks, dozens of these leaders, including the heads of Notre Dame, Georgetown, Boston College and Fordham, also put their names to a very different kind of document — one speaking out against the Trump administration's unprecedented government overreach and political interference that is endangering higher education.

"While I am generally reluctant to sign statements or letters, the extraordinary actions the federal government has taken to insert itself into the internal operations of several universities necessitated a collective response," Eduardo Peñalver,

president of Jesuit-run Seattle University, told the National Catholic Reporter.

Peñalver and nearly 60 of his counterparts from Catholic universities and colleges joined some 600 administrators in academia in signing a joint letter titled "A Call for Constructive Engagement." Circulated by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the document appears to be the most unified display of opposition from college leaders in reaction to the federal government's systematic attempt, through leveraging federal funds and other tactics, to uproot "wokeness" in secular and faith-based colleges and universities and to interfere with institutions President Donald Trump and many conservatives view as liberal adversaries.



Eduardo Peñalver, president of Jesuit-run Seattle University, is among the some 600 administrators in academia who have signed a letter calling for "constructive engagement" with the Trump administration and expressing opposition to the government's "overreach and political interference." (Courtesy of Seattle University)

The number of names on the list has tripled in the three weeks since its release on April 22. Presidents from Ivy League colleges, research universities like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Catholic schools of all sizes signed the letter. Jesuit Fr. Michael J. Garanzini, president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities also put his name to it.

In response to the public denunciation, a White House spokesperson said last month (April) that the administration "will not be swayed by worthless letters by overpaid blowhards," reported NBC News.

Robert Kelly, president of the Holy Cross-founded University of Portland in Oregon, said the federal government plays an important oversight role for universities, like mandating transparency on first-year retention rates, student outcomes and loan defaults.

"I don't view this as a partisan issue," said Kelly, "and I welcome proper government oversight."



"We welcome appropriate governmental oversight, and of course we support efforts to ensure that campuses are safe for all students," said Robert Kelly, president of the University of Portland in Oregon. "However in my view, the administration's tactics do not support a constructive dialogue process that is necessary to bring about good and lasting change." (Courtesy of University of Portland)

Yet Kelly said he chose to sign the statement to affirm the University of Portland's "unwavering support of the independence that is critical to the continued success of higher education."

"We must oppose undue government intrusion in the lives of those who learn, live, and work on our campuses," the letter says. "We will always seek effective and fair financial practices, but we must reject the coercive use of public research funding."

The release of the joint statement was sandwiched between two events that both underscore the escalating stakes of the administration's reach into higher education.

On April 21, Harvard University sued the federal government for allegedly violating its constitutional rights. The lawsuit came after the federal government's decision to freeze more than $2 billion in funding for the school, most of it research grants. Harvard had rejected demands made by the administration, which included halting all diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, initiatives.

U.S. President Donald Trump smiles as he gives remarks during the annual National Prayer Br

U.S. President Donald Trump smiles as he gives remarks during the annual National Prayer Breakfast at the U.S. Capitol, Feb. 6 in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

Then on April 23 Trump signed a flurry of executive orders related to civil rights laws and the college accreditation system. During his second presidential bid Trump said the accrediting bodies have allowed higher learning to be "dominated by Marxist maniacs and lunatics."

Trump also has initiated investigations into alleged antisemitism and athletes who are transgender (fewer than 0.002% of student-athletes at NCAA schools are trans, according to a figure shared by the athletic association's president).

Two Catholic schools, the University of Notre Dame and Georgetown University, are on a list of 45 universities being investigated by the Department of Education for allegedly engaging in "race-exclusionary practices" following Trump's orders to eradicate DEI programs, and the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, lost a $6.8 million grant because the administration viewed it as focused on DEI.



Georgetown University's campus in Washington is pictured in a file photo. (OSV News/Reuters/Hyungwon Kang)

The letter likewise was published after an estimated 1,500 international students from more than 240 institutions in the United States – including at least 43 students from 14 Catholic colleges and universities – had their legal status revoked earlier this year. Catholic school figures are based on NCR interviews and its review of a list compiled by Inside Higher Ed, which analyzes education-related information.

Late last month the administration announced it would temporarily restore records in a federal database granting students legal status while it develops a framework for canceling such records. Most Catholic school students had their legal status reinstated, although the exact number is unclear.

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The State Department had said it was targeting individuals engaged in activities that run counter to national interests, including pro-Palestinian activism. Many students, saying they did not fit that description and were deprived of due process, filed lawsuits.

Peñalver echoed other Catholic school leaders when he told NCR the legal status flip-flop did not allay students' heightened anxiety and uncertainty about the future.



Patricia McGuire is president of Trinity Washington University. Trinity's student body is 55% Black and 30% Hispanic, according to the school website, and as a

designated "minority-serving institution" it is threatened by plans to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education, which helps fund such institutions. (Courtesy of Trinity Washington University)

Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University in the District of Columbia and another Catholic school signee of the letter, said students remain concerned not only for themselves but their families. "Everyone worries about what they say, where they travel, whether they will be the next victim of the authoritarian regime."

One notable Catholic school absence on the joint statement is a signature from the Catholic University of America in D.C., where one student's legal status was revoked and then restored. Founded by the U.S. bishops, the school has long been linked to conservative Catholicism.

James Harris, president of the University of San Diego, a Catholic school in Southern California, was among letter-signers who took a restrained approach when discussing his decision to add his name.

Many of the government's actions appear to constitute an overreach, he said. "But rather than debating whether what they are proposing should or should not be considered political interference, I think everyone's time would be better spent on constructive dialogue."

Several Catholic school presidents told NCR they believe the government is jeopardizing their Catholic mission, with some giving a scathing rebuke.

"The administration's wholesale assault on immigrants, rejection of diversity and equity considerations, denial of environmental dangers, undermining of life-giving medical and scientific research and innovations are all acts of hostility to Catholic social teachings," said McGuire.



Julie Sullivan, president of Santa Clara University in California (Courtesy of Santa Clara University)

It is especially important for Catholic colleges and universities, she said, "to proclaim the vitality of our mission commitments to social justice — words now banned by some federal agencies — which starts with the fundamental tenet of respect for life and human dignity."

Trinity is designated a "minority-serving institution" and serves a high number of lower-income students. Trump has set in motion plans to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education — the biggest source of federal funding for such institutions.

Julie Sullivan, president of Santa Clara University in California, said that as a Jesuit Catholic university, "we want to attract the most talented students and give them the opportunity to pursue this wonderful education, and also to care for them and hopefully ensure that they fully develop their God-given potential."

"You might say that's DEI," she said. "But that's what we've been doing since our university was founded almost 175 years ago."

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