These reflections were written by Christopher Stone after the event "Universities and the Common Good: A Global Conversation about How to Respond to Contemporary Challenges", hosted by the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights in September 2025.

Title: No Sitting Back

Author: Christopher Stone

It's been a long time since Wally Sterling described the job of a university president—the job he held at Stanford—in these simple terms: "find the best possible faculty, upgrade the breadth and variety of students, provide the needed physical plant, and then sit back and see what results." For today's university presidents in the United States there is a lot more to the job. And there is no sitting back.

So, imagine that I'm on the search committee for a new president of—let's call it Ivy University, somewhere in the USA today. What do I do? I call you! You're the top of my list! I want you to put your name in to be the next president of Ivy University. I know, I know, you think I've called you by mistake. Nope: I am calling you. You laugh. You think I've lost my mind. No, I'm perfectly serious. You sigh. You tell me: the only worse job (that you can imagine) is the same job a year from now.

No, please, let me convince you to put your name in. In fact, I need you to do it with enthusiasm and excitement. I have three points for you to consider:

First, governance, and I have good news. The members of the board of Ivy University have recognised that it is they themselves, the board, who are most to blame for the mess that Ivy finds itself in today: not former president George Lackluster, who has just resigned under pressure from the White House and some in Congress; not the students or faculty who have been so active on campus and social media; not even President Trump (though his administration is certainly the immediate cause).

Yes, the board held a two-day retreat, and after some difficult, searching conversations, they all recognised that they had misunderstood the role of president when the hired Lackluster, and had misunderstood the role of the board itself when they filled every seat with a major donor. Looking around the room, they realised no one on the board had devoted their career to higher education. They looked in the mirror and saw the problem. Ivy, like some other elite universities, had given its governance away to its donors.

The board at Ivy has 21 members: everyone a donor, most giving millions. Only two have doctorates, and neither of them ever worked at a university, but instead founded companies in biomedicine and semiconductors. No one on the board has grappled in their professional lives with academic freedom or student discipline, leave alone the purpose of the modern university. At the same time, they have tremendous resources—both money and relationships. They feel responsible and they are all ready to work with you. They are each prepared to leave the board at the new president's request and join a non-governing advisory committee, but they each are also prepared to stay and support the new president if asked. They want a board that is no more

than one-third major donors and includes at least one-third people with experience in leadership in higher education.

So, you must take this on. This is a once-in-lifetime moment when the governance failures of US universities can be reversed. You have a chance to shape the new era in governance. How good is that?

Second, federal government funding. Ivy University has followed the trend of others in our league. Today, federal government grants and contracts contribute 15 percent of our revenue, the same percent as Yale, a little higher than Harvard (at 11-12%), a lot less than Princeton (at 24%), and more than twice Chicago (at 7%). It's hard to imagine, but those numbers were around zero for most of the history of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Ivy. It's only since the 1950s that the US government became a major funder of American universities, and it's useful to note that universities thrive at very different levels of federal support.

Still, all those percentages are dangerously large if you think of the federal government as a single donor, as it has become this year. The good news here is that the federal government has not yet threatened to stop all our funding, the way they have with some others. The attacks on president Lackluster were personal. The only demand was his departure. Sure, as everywhere, some of our faculty have had individual research grants withdrawn because their titles pop-up in some administrator's search of their grant database (research descriptions that mention DEI, LGBTQ, STEM, disparities, and inequality seem most threatened), but we've faced no demands—yet—to install an outside monitor over any department's hiring as Columbia has agreed to do, or ban transgender women from women's housing, as Brown has agreed to do.

Pundits opining on American higher education often worry about the percentage of the revenue some state universities get from their athletic programmes, warning that maintaining athletic funding can lead them to compromise their intellectual mission. Yet those percentages are far smaller. The largest is the University of Alabama, where athletics contributes about eight or nine percent of revenue; but at the University of Michigan, and UCLA—big sports universities—it's just one or two percent. So, if 2 percent is worrying, our 15 percent reliance on the feds should be much more so.

It's understandable that many university presidents are making individual deals to keep their research funding in place or restore what has been cut off. As Wesleyan's president, Michael Roth told CNN, "the federal government is willing to not obey the laws as anyone has understood them before, and so the lawless federal government is very frightening…. If someone pays a ransom to get their kid back from a kidnapper, I don't criticize the parents for making a deal. It's the kidnappers that deserve our criticism."

Yes, it's understandable, but the board at Ivy is looking for a president who can mobilise the most thoughtful scholars and university leaders across the country to preserve federal funding while protecting academic freedom. We don't want to keep our heads down and cut a separate deal, but we also don't want a president who wants to play the hero solo, out there alone. We want a president who knows how to join with others and form a chorus.

President Lackluster signed the letter last April—along with 600 other presidents—criticising government overreach while accepting legitimate oversight, but that wasn't enough. We need a president to give those terms principled definition. Presidents like Michael Roth at Wesleyan

and Danielle Holley at Mount Holyoke, are showing all of us that speaking out more forcefully is actually possible. And even as Holley has been vocal, the DEI policies at Mount Holyoke remains intact.

It's tempting to agree with Harvard law professor Jeannie Suk Gersen that universities should "be willing to live on much, much less….while doing fewer things." Gersen suggests considering "splitting off medical and public-health schools, hospitals, scientific labs, and other highly grant-dependent units." Spinning them off into separate institutions, she says, is a strategy "familiar to corporations when parts of their businesses face divergent regulatory risks." What do you think of Professor Gersen's idea?

At Ivy, at least on the search committee, we're skeptical. The university today is nothing like it was a hundred years ago, when going without federal money was possible. But as federal funding grew in the 1960s, we were spared the hard work of protecting academic freedom by conservative Senators from southern states who worried that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations would use federal funding to force civil rights ideology onto university administrators. In 1963 and again in 1965, when the federal government ramped up funding, it was these southern senators who inserted "anti-control clauses" to the funding, like this one in the 1965 Higher Education Act: "Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution…."

Well, no one in the US Senate today is going to do that work for us. We need to do it, and we need to do it together—not each university on its own. We need a president who sees the latent power in our collective action and can form that chorus. That's you.

And that brings me to my third point: the opportunity to advance the role of universities in building the skills of undergraduates in democratic practice. Ivy's role in knowledge production is important, but our role in the education of democratically engaged citizens is also crucial. A hundred years ago, less than five percent of 17-to-25 year-olds in the US were enrolled in colleges or universities. When I went to university in the 1970s, it was about 25 percent. Today it's over 50 percent.

We don't expect you to be able to settle all the fights about what it means for universities to build the skills of active citizenship, but we think Ivy needs to get into the ring. President Lackluster was always banging on about Harvard president James Conant's initiative on General Education in a Free Society, but I don't think any of us on the board bothered to read it until Lackluster resigned. It's amazing. It was written in 1945, but it speaks to the same issues we're facing today: "An unceasing struggle must be fought to free education from a type of direct political control which seeks to impose appointments, restrain the legitimate freedom of teachers, and even dictate what they should teach." Some of it could have been written yesterday.

Even in 1945, Conant's committee anticipated the growing portion of citizens who would come of age at university, experimenting with new ideas, new activism, new power. Those experiments are a messy business, and that mess needs champions today. As a vice provost at New York University wrote optimistically in the New York Times last month, universities are

not in the business of transferring information, “we are in the identity formation business.” Conant understood that, and you do, too.

What kind of report would a James Conant commission today? What kind of a committee would be sensible to convene? Who can put the assaults on student activism, on independent research, on academic freedom in useful context and chart a way forward both for the university and for our democracy? Ivy needs a president ready to take up that challenge, not because they imagine Ivy to be strong, but because they know that, as former Stanford president, Gerhard Casper, put it, “universities are very fragile institutions.”

So please step forward. What good is all the debate and diagnosis if people like you aren’t prepared to lead? What hope is there for our universities and indeed our democracies if these challenges don’t command our time and commitment? You’ll never find a board better prepared to set governance right, a faculty more eager to reconcile academic freedom with public financial support, and a society more in need of citizens trained in democratic practice.

Please say yes. Raise your hand. It’s the best job in the world right now. And if it’s not for you, find another way to help. No sitting back. Get in the ring.