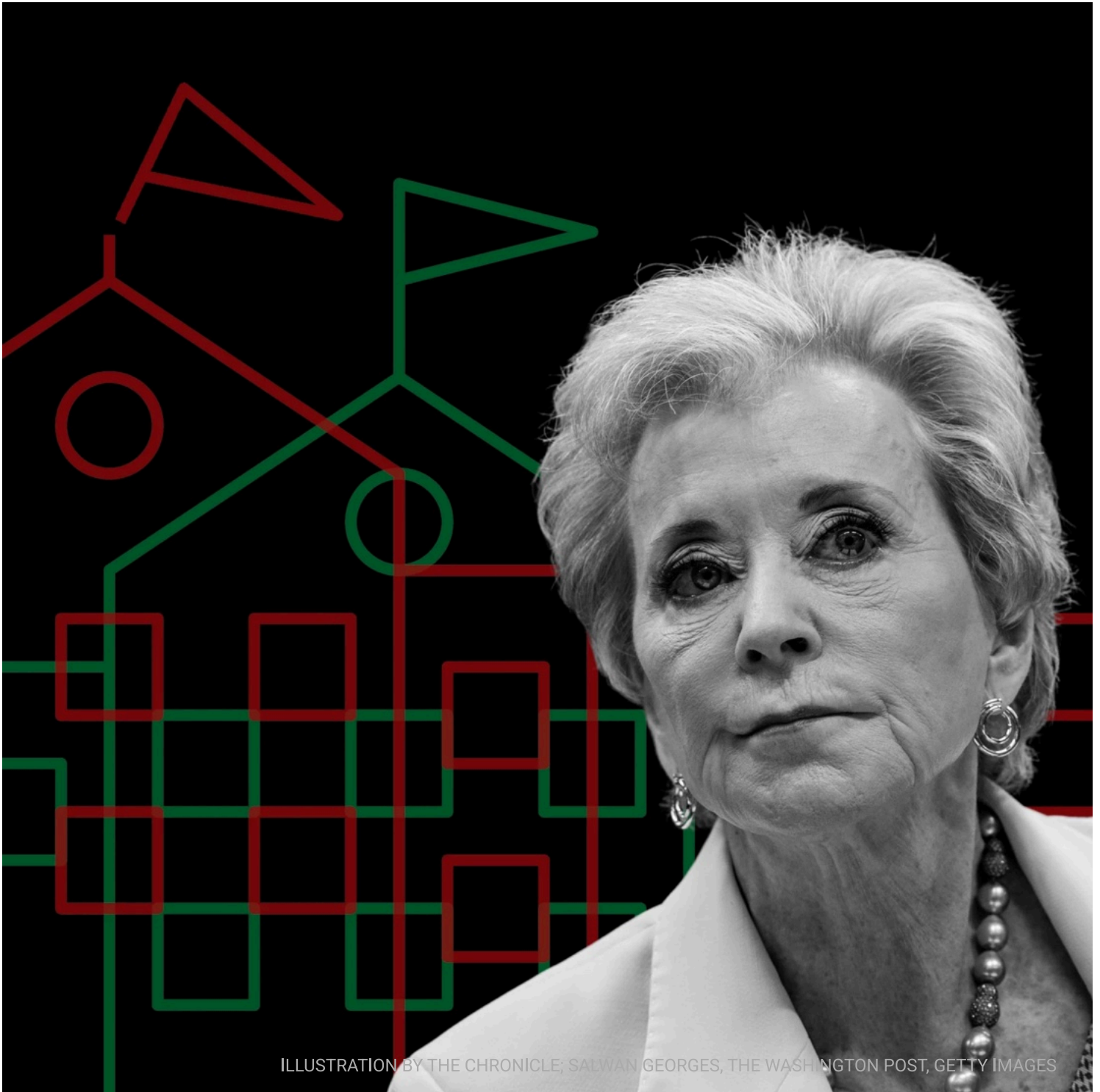




A Crisis of Academic Leadership?

Linda McMahon says higher ed has few 'true leaders.' Three college presidents respond.



THE REVIEW | FORUM

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In a **speech** earlier this week at Hillsdale College, Secretary of Education Linda McMahon **berated** colleges for having tens of thousands of administrators and yet few “true leaders.” “The crisis of higher education is first and foremost a crisis of leadership,” as she put it. McMahon ends with a plea: “I hope my talk today will be watched or read critically by higher-

education leaders.” With that in mind, we reached out to three college presidents to get their responses. Here’s what they told us. — *The Editors*

A Hypocritical Sham

BY LEON BOTSTEIN

Secretary McMahon opened with a valid criticism: that we have an overabundance of administrators in our colleges. She is right. The reasons behind excessive administrative costs include not only overregulation, but the intensely litigious nature of our fellow citizens, perhaps best exemplified by President Trump, who loves to sue for the redress of any and all perceived grievances. To protect the institution and manage the financial challenges institutions face, the university president has become a fundraiser and mere ambassador, not a thought leader.

McMahon then takes off from this reasonable premise and articulates the values she thinks leaders should promote. Her claims are contradictory and hypocritical. She asserts that “personal growth” is an institutional priority, but goes on to say that college is not a place to “find yourself,” rather it “must deliver a clear return on investment” and enable “coursework” that leads to a “career” and a “concrete vocation.” Near the end of her remarks, she forgets her enthusiastic embrace of the practical utilitarian aims of the university and concludes that seeking and serving “truth,” defending “civilization,” modeling “intellectual leadership,” and producing “future thinkers” is what colleges should really be all about.

As she contradicts herself, McMahon’s underlying hypocrisy is revealed. The search for truth and the defense of civilization are not about money or careers; they do not assure a return on investment. Yet they have been a most reliable path to successful careers because they cultivate values and habits about the conduct of life that are both practical and idealistic (reading for pleasure, for example), including many that may never be profitable or result in a paycheck.

McMahon's speech makes clear that she already knows the truth. She knows what civilization is, has been, and should be. She knows what future leaders and thinkers ought to think and promote. By appropriating the rhetoric of tradition, especially freedom and liberty, she reveals that she has no use for dissent, debate, complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. What "a free society can achieve" — to use her phrase — requires a healthy tolerance for criticism, debate, skepticism of orthodoxies, and the will to challenge authority, both divine and human. To "seek and serve the truth" is precisely what McMahon abhors, and what her boss, President Trump, seeks to suppress.

Masquerading beneath the valid criticism of how higher education is now managed and the seemingly innocent rhetoric of what our institutions should promote suggests an authoritarianism and ideological certainty about higher education that are fundamentally at odds with the freedom of inquiry, the search for truth, the life of the mind, and the defense of civilization — not to speak of "personal growth" — all virtues colleges must cultivate. McMahon is right that we do need better educational leaders. She should beware what she wishes for, though, because thoughtful, committed leaders will see through the hypocrisy in McMahon's rhetoric.

Leon Botstein is president of Bard College.

Our Public Purpose

BY PAUL C. PRIBBENOW

McMahon's speech was rooted in nostalgic longing for a past that never was and certainly does not exist today. But in framing higher education as essentially a private good intended to cultivate elites — one that is simultaneously in desperate

need of government intervention and bloated by too much taxpayer investment — the secretary's remarks throw into stark relief the leadership challenge before us today.

For those of us who believe in the public purposes of higher education, we live in the tension between negative perceptions of higher education and the reality of what we do every day on the ground to support social mobility, economic well-being, and a robust common life.

In this time of social and political division and fear, many are questioning whether or not both higher education and our democracy will survive. Our cities, country, and world have been torn apart by violence fueled by all sorts of "isms" in recent years — racism, nationalism, fundamentalism. Colleges are not immune to these tides; in many ways, we are on the front lines. Instead of gatekeeping and closing ranks around an imagined history, we are called to pursue teaching and learning in ways that advance democracy not just as a political system, but as a way of life.

It's not easy. College is not meant to be a safe place for our minds, because the world, itself, is not a safe place. It can be frightening to learn new things; it can make us angry to be challenged by provocative ideas and experiences; it can be threatening to risk our social identities in the midst of those who do not share our paths or beliefs. But for our university and countless others, we are committed to educating students for engaged citizenship, whether those students have been the children of Norwegian farmers, Hmong refugees, or East African immigrants. What has always been true, then as now, is that embracing our students' gifts and nurturing their civic imagination helps us to cultivate a more just and inclusive society. That is our public purpose, and a public good.

Paul C. Pribbenow is president of Augsburg University.

Misplacing the Blame

BY PATRICIA MCGUIRE

McMahon's Hillsdale speech earns a charitable "C" for loosely summarizing some popular criticisms of higher education, but she failed to cite any facts in support of her argument. Her four "straightforward recommendations" are classic bromides, lovely words with little meaning for the real problems we must solve. Her statement that college should be "a trial by fire" shows a stunning lack of understanding of teaching and learning in college.

The secretary's premise is that, "the crisis of higher education is first and foremost a crisis of leadership." Actually, it is a crisis manufactured by the political leadership of our nation to smother campus dissent and to silence truth-telling about American realities. The real crisis is higher education's apparent reluctance to respond boldly to authoritarian intimidation.

"How many true leaders do we have?" she muses, rhetorically. The truth is that we college leaders are in the thousands, but the secretary does not know us since she has made no effort to engage in dialogue with us. She accuses college presidents of "absentee leadership" while also "micromanaging professors' classrooms" when, in fact, it is the political sector that is sniffing through syllabi (looking at you, Texas A&M) and dictating curricula.

We can all agree with McMahon when she says, "Degree programs must deliver a clear return on investment and be transparent about how they will translate coursework into a career." But if she knew how to mine the data of her own department, she would learn that the vast majority of degrees awarded in the United States are in high-employment fields like health care, business, education, computer science, and engineering, much to the dismay of our colleagues in history, English, and the humanities.

The secretary proclaims, without irony, that “colleges were once world-renowned repositories of knowledge about our nation’s history, the great philosophical and literary traditions of western civilization, and the latest advances in science, technology, and medicine.” This from a member of a political administration that has withheld billions in research funding for science, technology, and medicine; has attacked and undermined philosophical and literary traditions that consider voices other than those of straight white men; and that denies the hard truths of American history.

Hypocrisy is on full display when the secretary declares, “censorship and its chilling effect on free speech have no place on campus.” Tell that to Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, Brown, and other universities suffering severe economic penalties for exercising their free-speech rights and protecting the rights of students to protest.

McMahon does make one important point: “University leaders must embrace their role as public intellectuals ... A college president should engage in the national discourse and chart a unique course for the ship he or she steers through complicated intellectual waters.”

An end to the pernicious doctrine of institutional neutrality? At last, something the secretary and I can agree on! For presidents to be the leaders she calls us to be, we must not be silent!

Patricia McGuire is the president of Trinity Washington University.

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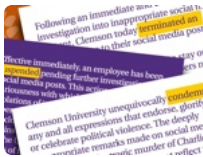
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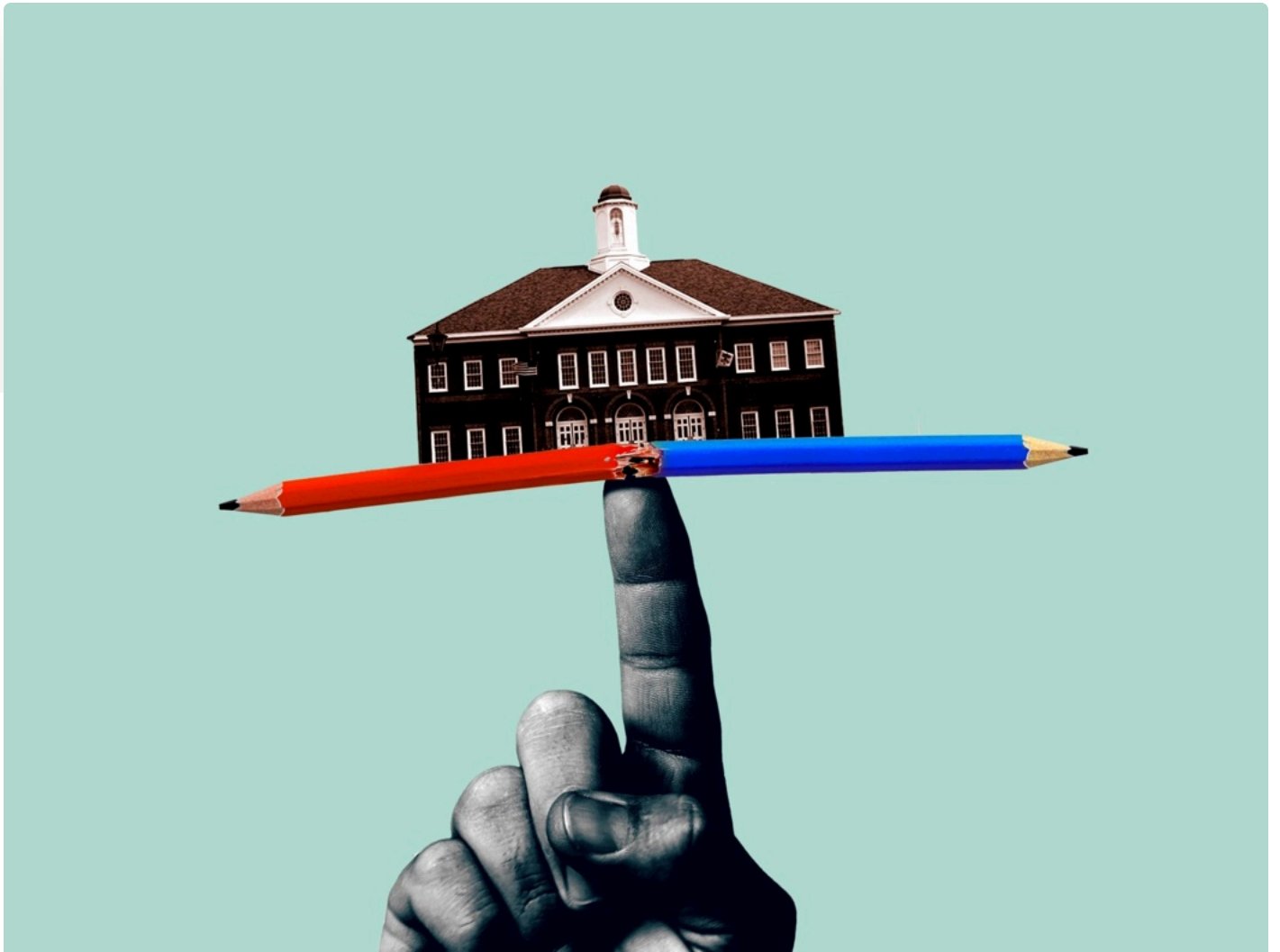
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