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I Trust This Message Finds You Well

By Rebecca Michaels

In recent years, higher education has entered a strange paradox. While campuses publicly embrace values like transparency, inclusion, and shared governance, the internal culture of many institutions is drifting in the opposite direction, toward increased opacity, centralized authority, and a chilling return to hierarchical norms that once defined the academic world.

Faculty who speak up about policy changes or question administrative decisions are increasingly treated not as participants in a shared intellectual community, but as obstacles to institutional progress. Collegial dialogue is replaced with administrative messaging, and the language of collaboration is co-opted to enforce compliance rather than invite genuine exchange.

This shift feels regressive, not only in form but in spirit. It recalls an era when access to information was tightly controlled, when decision-making was confined to a select few, and when critique, particularly from women and marginalized faculty, was treated as insubordination rather than contribution. In that earlier era, silence was the price of belonging, and secrecy was a tool for maintaining power.

Today, these dynamics have not disappeared; they have simply been rebranded. The polite tone of institutional emails, the deflection of questions toward procedural channels, the assertion that certain decisions are “not within your scope”, these are the contemporary signals of exclusion. And while they may appear subtle or bureaucratic on the surface, they echo a deeper cultural problem: the erosion of trust, voice, and shared stewardship within academia.

To protect the future of higher education, we must resist the quiet normalization of exclusion masked as professionalism. True intellectual communities are built not on secrecy, but on dialogue, trust, and shared responsibility. Anything less is a return to a past we should never accept as progress.

This work becomes even more urgent in light of escalating national efforts to dismantle academic freedom, suppress diversity initiatives, and discredit critical thought. The culture of institutional secrecy, no matter how politely worded, is not separate from these attacks. It is part of the same erosion of democratic values, where silencing dissent becomes a sign of order, and compliance is mistaken for progress.