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### Sensationalized Surveillance: Campus Reform and the Targeted Harassment of Faculty [post-print]

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# Sensationalized Surveillance: Campus Reform and the Targeted Harassment of Faculty<sup>1</sup>

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In recent years Republican politicians, conservative think tanks, and right-wing “news” outlets have launched a relentless attack on colleges and universities, describing them as “radical,” “socialist,” and hostile to conservative students and ideas. This manufactured outrage has been so effective that it has transformed support for higher education into a partisan issue.<sup>2</sup> The claim that college campuses are rife with Leftist indoctrination is based on a growing litany of anecdotes about seemingly outrageous statements and actions by faculty. For example, conservative media outlets have amped up stories about comments faculty have made about race, a blog post about white supremacists’ fetish of ancient statuary, irreverent tweets about President Trump and Vice President

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<sup>1</sup> Sam would like to thank both Dr. Isaac Kamola and Dr. Alyson Spurgas for their continuous support throughout the last two years on this project and for being incredible mentors and advisors throughout my undergraduate career. Isaac would like to thank Ralph Wilson, Sam Parsons, and Nancy MacLean who have supported this work through their activism, research, and brilliance. And to Hank Reichman, Hans-Joerg Tiede, and Alyson Spurgas. The Connecticut state conference and the national office of the AAUP have all been incredible sources of support. Thanks to Aaron Supple, Nanci Alejandra López Flores, and Jason Farrell who, along with my brilliant co-author Sam, diligently read entirely too much *Campus Reform* (you all deserve medals for your service). We’d also like to thank the editors at *New Political Science*, Judith Grant and Claire Snyder-Hall, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their support and critical comments.

<sup>2</sup> See: Kim Parker, “The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education,” (Pew Research Center, 2019); Ralph Wilson and Isaac Kamola, *Free Speech and Koch Money: Manufacturing a Campus Culture War*. London: Pluto Press, 2021.

Pence, a parody of the neo-Nazi concept of “white genocide,” and accusations that Black faculty members have called for the death of white people.<sup>3</sup>

These scandalizing stories serve a clear political purpose: they smugly position conservatives as the commonsense alternative to a supposedly unhinged and radical academic “elite.” However, faculty members at the center of these maelstroms are often sanctioned by their institution and receive a deluge of death threats and hate mail, including vile threats of physical harm. Such harassment campaigns—some which garner public attention, others which are endured in private—can have substantial effects on faculty, everything from impinging on teaching and research to requiring leaves of absence to recoup from the emotional toll. Some faculty face institutional retaliation and even loss of employment. These manufactured controversies also create a chilling effect across the academy.

Many stories fueling this online outrage originate with, or are amplified by, Campus Reform—a right-wing website specifically created to identify “liberal bias” on college campuses.<sup>4</sup> Neither of us had heard of Campus Reform prior to June 21, 2017, when our campus was shut down after receiving credible threats of violence. The previous day Campus Reform published a piece falsely accusing a Trinity College professor of calling for the death of white people. The piece was picked up by Breitbart, The Blaze, Washington Times, and other right-wing outlets, before

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Jaschik, “Saida Grundy, Moving Forward,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 24 2015; Steve Kolowich, “What Is a Black Professors in America Allowed to Say?,” *The Guardian*, August 3 2017; Colleen Flaherty, “The Dangers of Filtered Speech,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 22 2017; Marwa Eltagouri, “Professor Who Tweeted, ‘All I Want for Christmas Is White Genocide,’ Resigns after Year of Threats,” *The Washington Post*, December 29 2017; Chris Quintana, “For One Scholar, an Online Stoning Tests the Limits of Public Scholarship,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 16 2017; Isaac Kamola, “Dear Administrators: To Protect Your Faculty from Right-Wing Attacks, Follow the Money,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* 10 (2019); Nell Gluckman, “The Outrage Peddlers Are Here to Stay,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 17 2020; L.D. Burnett, “Right-Wing Trolls Attacked Me. My Administration Buckled,” *ibid.*, October 15.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Schmidt, “Higher Education’s Internet Outrage Machine,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 8, 2015.

landing on Tucker Carlson’s show.<sup>5</sup> The professor was placed on administrative leave against his will (and in violation of the faculty governance procedures) and eventually left the state after the doxing of his home address. After the dust settled, the school reported losing \$200,000 in donations and student tuition.

While Campus Reform presents itself as a media organization, we argue it should instead be understood as a surveillance apparatus. Campus Reform hires a network of students and staff to surveil faculty, on campus, in the classroom, and online, looking for so-called liberal bias. In doing so, it generates a steady stream of hyperbolic, moralizing, and often grossly inaccurate content which circulates widely within the right-wing media ecosystem, where it often encourages online vigilantes, as well as college administrators caught up in the maelstrom, to take action against those faculty members being surveilled.<sup>6</sup> We call this strategy of sensationalized surveillance.

This paper draws from research conducted as part of the Faculty First Responders project, started in January 2020. After a number of friends and colleagues had experienced targeted harassment following stories published by Campus Reform, Kamola—with the help of research assistants Aaron Supple, Nanci Alejandra López Flores, and Jason Farrell—began monitoring Campus Reform on a daily basis, sending emails to those faculty members Campus Reform accused of exhibiting liberal bias. These emails provide faculty with information about who Campus Reform

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of this attack, see: Kamola, “Dear Administrators”; Isaac A. Kamola, “Crashing the Academic Conversation,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 9, 2017; Johnny Eric Williams, “The Academic Freedom Double Standard: “Freedom” for Courtiers, Suppression for Critical Scholars,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* 9 (2018).

<sup>6</sup> To be clear, we are not arguing that Campus Reform encourages or otherwise organizes the targeted harassment of faculty. Only that their sensational pieces successfully motivate people to take action. To our knowledge, they have not taken steps to moderate the hateful comments below stories nor have they condoned the harassment that often follows from their sensationalized coverage.

is and how faculty and administrators might effectively respond.<sup>7</sup> McCarthy served as a research assistant from May 2020-January 2021, monitoring the website daily and building a database that included all Campus Reform stories published during that time. This database became the groundwork for fielding a survey, in conjunction with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), of all faculty targeted by Campus Reform in 2020. In addition to conducting content analyses and examining archived webpages, McCarthy also conducted interviews with two former correspondents—college student writers hired by Campus Reform—and six faculty members targeted by Campus Reform.<sup>8</sup>

In this article we first develop our concept of sensationalized surveillance, a panoptic form of power whereby an institutionalized and well-funded surveillance apparatus feeds outrage narratives into the right-wing media ecosystem raising concern among campus administrators and prompting online outrage and harassment. The second section challenges the claim that Campus Reform is primarily a journalistic outlet. By looking at its funders, hiring practices, and organizational strategy, it becomes evident that Campus Reform should be understood as a partisan surveillance apparatus—part of a larger “political technology.” The final section demonstrates the considerable disciplining effects of Campus Reform’s sensationalized surveillance.

### **Sensationalized Surveillance and the Right-Wing Media Ecosystem**

Michel Foucault famously drew upon Bentham’s sketch of the panopticon—a prison built by positioning cells around an all-seeing central tower—to describe modern policing and surveillance. The warden, located within the tower, could keep prisoners under constant surveillance. And since

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<sup>7</sup> For more, see: Faculty First Responders, <https://facultyfirstresponders.com>.

<sup>8</sup> As per guidance from Trinity College’s Institutional Review Board, every effort has been taken to anonymize the interviewees (including using pseudonyms). Recent Campus Reform websites referenced in this article have archived and screenshots taken, as needed to preserve the record.

misconduct was met with punishment, surveilled prisoners eventually learned to internalize their own policing out of constant fear of being watched.<sup>9</sup> In recent decades scholars have expanded Foucault's metaphor in describing the disciplining function of digital surveillance, including National Security Agency (NSA) spying operations and corporate data harvesting.<sup>10</sup>

Campus Reform engages in a similar kind of panopticon surveillance. Faculty across the United States are at risk of being surveilled by its network of campus correspondents who monitor their social media and attend their courses or public talks. However, for Foucault, surveillance alone does not change behavior but must be complimented with the constant threat of disciplinary action by the warden. While Campus Reform itself takes on the surveillance role, the disciplinary function is outsourced: to higher education administrators as well as an inspired group of online vigilantes who feel emboldened by the narrative forwarded by Campus Reform. There are numerous examples of higher education administrators sanctioning faculty, terminating their employment, placing them on leave, or publicly condemning their speech as a result of stories run by Campus Reform. These actions are celebrated by Campus Reform. As the organization's leader, Morton Blackwell, states in the CampusWire newsletter: "Campus Reform gets results. Campus Reform exposés have forced colleges to change their policies for the better. Professors have been reprimanded and even fired."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the application of Foucault to the study of surveillance, see: Gilbert Caluya, "The Post-Panoptic Society? Reassessing Foucault in Surveillance Studies," *Social Identities* 16, no. 5 (2010); Manuela Farinosi, "Deconstructing Bentham's Panopticon: The New Metaphors of Surveillance in the Web 2.0 Environment," *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 9, no. 1 (2011); Alberto Romele et al., "Panopticism Is Not Enough: Social Media as Technologies of Voluntary Servitude," *Surveillance & Society* 15, no. 2 (2017); David Murakami Wood, "Beyond the Panopticon? Foucault and Surveillance Studies," in *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, ed. Jeremy W. Crampton and Studart Elden (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Morton Blackwell, "Keep up with what's happening on campuses," *CampusWire*, Leadership Institute, September 24, 2021. Accessed October 5, 2021, <https://isaackamola.domains.trincoll.edu/items/show/10>.

The most common source of disciplinary action, however, comes from self-deputized online vigilantes who regularly bombard faculty with targeted harassment. Praying on white resentment, toxic masculinity, and resistance to cultural and racial change, the platform reassures supporters that they have a right to be angry and resentful—and that their anger should be directed at “Liberals” and “Radical professors.” Campus Reform therefore facilitates the disciplining of faculty by rallying online supporters through sensationalized stories fed into the right-wing media ecosystem.

Hence, unlike a prison, Campus Reform surveils through a panoptic *network*. At the center, a well-funded surveillance apparatus keeps tabs on those faculty it considers deviant. However, the disciplining warden in this panoptic network resides not in the tower but rather in the college administrators and online right-wing news consumers who self-deputize themselves for the task of providing distributed punishment. This panoptic network merges changes in social media and the now-robust right-wing media ecosystem—which regularly blurs the distinction between reporting and political mobilization, having largely replaced journalistic standards for “the populist logics of enjoyment and antagonism.”<sup>12</sup>

Scholars have argued that, rather than centralized surveillance, social media and Web 2.0 have blurred “the distinction between those who watch and those who are being watched.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, online surveillance and discipline is commonly distributed through a peer-to-peer “chilling effect.” For example, studies demonstrate that individuals often refrain from posting political opinions to avoid unwanted argument, debate, and harassment and many people change their offline activities for fear of what might appear online.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes distributed surveillance technologies have allowed

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<sup>12</sup> Olivier Jutel, “Donald Trump, American Populism and Affective Media,” in *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (New York: Routledge, 2018), 250.

<sup>13</sup> Farinosi, “Deconstructing Bentham’s Panopticon,” 65.

<sup>14</sup> Ivan Manokha, “Surveillance, Panopticism, and Self-Discipline in the Digital Age,” *Surveillance & Society* 16, no. 2 (2018), 229; Elizabeth Stoycheff et al., “Privacy and the Panopticon: Online Mass Surveillance’s Deterrence and Chilling Effects,” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 3 (2019); Jeremy

marginalized communities to surveil the powerful from below (i.e. “sousveillance”<sup>15</sup>) thereby making visible otherwise unseen instances of police violence, sexual harassment, and everyday racism.

While distributed digital surveillance and disciplining often take place informally through peer-to-peer networks, organized political networks across the political spectrum have also emerged to surveil their political adversaries. For example, a loosely organized “digital united front” doxes and publicly shames online fascists and neo-Nazis.<sup>16</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center, Media Matters, and Right-Wing Watch similarly monitor white supremacist groups and right-wing media. Likewise, right-wing political have also created a number of surveillance apparatuses, many of which focus on college campuses. Project Veritas produces highly doctored video content targeting groups like ACORN, NPR, and Planned Parenthood. Turning Point USA maintains the “Professor Watchlist” to “expose and document...leftist propaganda in the classroom.”<sup>17</sup> Campus Watch, maintained by the Middle East Forum, identifies faculty deemed insufficiently pro-American or overly critical of Israel.<sup>18</sup> Canary Mission similarly monitors college campuses for evidence of antisemitism, which often includes support for the Boycott, Disinvestment, Sanction (BDS) movement.<sup>19</sup> Right-wing panoptic networks are often particularly potent because they enjoy both considerable institutional funding and work closely with—and serve as a pipeline for—right-wing media organizations.

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Weissman, *The Crowdsourced Panopticon: Conformity and Control on Social Media* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Steve Mann and Joseph Ferenbok, “New Media and the Power Politics of Sousveillance in a Surveillance-Dominated World,” *Surveillance & Society* 11, no. 1/2 (2013). We understand the Faculty First Responder project as a form of sousveillance.

<sup>16</sup> Tanner Mirrlees, “The Alt-Right’s Platformization of Fascism and a New Left’s Digital United Front,” *Democratic Communiqué* 28, no. 2 (2019), 38-42.

<sup>17</sup> Turning Point USA (2018) “Professor Watchlist.” At [www.professorwatchlist.org/aboutus](http://www.professorwatchlist.org/aboutus) (last accessed June 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Campus Watch, “About,” Middle East Forum. <https://www.meforum.org/campus-watch/about> (last accessed June 2021)

<sup>19</sup> Canary Mission, “About Us.” <https://canarymission.org/about> (last accessed June 2021).



In their analysis of right-wing media, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts analyzed millions of news articles and social media posts collected from the 2016 election and identified two distinct media ecosystems in the U.S. The largest, the mainstream media, is organized around *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and CNN, and generally follow “long-standing journalistic norms.”<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the right-wing media ecosystem, organized around Breitbart, *Fox News*, and The Daily Caller, enjoy a tentative relationship to journalistic standards. Because their content is primarily disseminated through social media it is “much more susceptible...to disinformation, lies, and half-truths.”<sup>21</sup> This media ecosystem also succeeds at forging highly affective relationships with its audience, whereby news consumers construct a shared identity around their media purveyor. For example, during Obama’s presidency, *Fox News* and the Koch-funded astroturf group Freedom Works helped harness the “organic libidinal rage” among the right, blurring the boundary between news purveyors, consumers, and participants. Fox promoted Tea Party rallies, their viewers provided the “free labor” as protestors and social media activists, and then these events become Fox News’s content. This feedback loop created “an audience that consumes out of identity and enjoyment.”<sup>22</sup> The right-wing panoptic network that targetes higher education is similarly institutionalized in well-funded activist organizations with direct pipelines into the right-wing media ecosystem.

Campus Reform, a project of the Leadership Institute (LI), not only trains many of the journalists within this right-wing media ecosystem, but also serves as a specialized on-ramp for sensationalized stories about professors and university policies. In fact, many right-wing outlets simply regurgitate Campus Reform content almost verbatim.<sup>23</sup> As reported by the *Harvard Crimson*,

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<sup>20</sup> Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Jutel, “Donald Trump, American Populism and Affective Media,” 256.

<sup>23</sup> Kamola, “Dear Administrators,” 17.

Campus Reform even recruits students to appear on Fox News—often writing the “talking points” (note: *not* “interview questions”) that the Fox anchor and student interviewees work from.<sup>24</sup> Campus Reform stories also spread on Reddit, Parler as well as QAnon forums such as the GreatAwakening.win and Patriots.win.<sup>25</sup> The result is a right-wing media machine that is “well-oiled, fast moving, and made up of parts that work cohesively.”<sup>26</sup> These stories, created within a partisan activist organization, are written in a tone of moralized outrage and widely distributed through the right-wing media ecosystem. As such, they often inspire individual digital “wardens” to take action against those faculty identified as too radical, anti-American, or otherwise socially or politically deviant.

In our survey we found that the vast majority of faculty written about by Campus Reform work at large research institutions, are disproportionately tenured, with African American faculty receiving greater attention relative to their overall representation in the academy. Seventy-eight percent of Campus Reform stories cover comments made over social media. And the vast majority of faculty featured in Campus Reform stories are targeted because of their comments on race (42%) or because of comments about electoral or political matters (23.7%), often criticizing Republican politicians on social media.<sup>27</sup>

Because media consumers/activists within this right-wing media ecosystem provide the decentralized garrison of potential wardens, Campus Reform can continue to present itself as a news

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<sup>24</sup> Malaika K. Tapper, “Inside the Conservative Media Outlet Feeding Harvard Students to Fox News,” *Harvard Crimson*, March 5, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Alice Sperti, “A Billionaire-Funded Website with Ties to the Far Right Is Trying to ‘Cancel’ University Professors,” *The Intercept*, April 10, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Brandi Lawless and Kristen L Cole, “Troll Tracking: Examining Rhetorical Circulation of Anti-Intellectual Ideologies in Right-Wing Media Attacks,” *Communication, Culture, and Critique* 14, no. 1 (2021), 151.

<sup>27</sup> Hans-Joerg Tiede, Samantha McCarthy, Isaac Kamola, and Alyson K. Spurgas, “Whom Does Campus Reform Target and What Are the Effects?,” *Academe* online, American Association of University Professors, 2021.

outlet (since it doesn't publicly advocate or encourage harassment). However, a look at its history, funders, and content reveal that Campus Reform should be understood as a partisan surveillance apparatus that specializes in monitoring faculty and academic institutions within a right-wing panoptic network.

### **What is Campus Reform?**

While Campus Reform dons the self-appointed mantle of “America’s leading site for college news,” it is actually a partisan organization that specializes in surveilling faculty and academic institutions. Campus Reform is a project of the Leadership Institute (LI). Morton Blackwell created the LI in 1979 to train conservative activists “in campaigns, fundraising, grassroots organizing, youth politics, and communications.” Today it boasts over “47 types of training schools, workshops, and seminars; a free employment placement service; and a national field program that trains conservative students to organize campus groups.”<sup>28</sup>

Blackwell is a major fixture in the conservative movement. In 1981 he co-founded the Council for National Policy (CNP), along with Paul Weyrich—who also founded the Heritage Foundation, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), and the Moral Majority—and Richard Viguerie, who pioneered the Republican strategy of political direct marketing. The CNP has transformed the American right by bringing together “the manpower and media of the Christian right with the finances of Western plutocrats and the strategy of right-wing Republican political operatives.”<sup>29</sup> Blackwell understands the CNP and LI as institutions for seizing political power. Following the defeat of Goldwater in 1964, Blackwell developed the insight that “‘being right’ was irrelevant to

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<sup>28</sup> Leadership Institute, “About the Leadership Institute.”  
<https://www.leadershipinstitute.org/aboutus/>

<sup>29</sup> Anne Nelson, *Shadow Network: Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, xiv.

political victory.” Rather, electoral victory is actually “determined by the number and the effectiveness of the activists and leaders on the respective side.” Developing effective activists and leaders, however, requires creating “political technology.” Blackwell divides the necessary political technology into “communication technology and organization technology...with no neat line of separation between communication and organization.”<sup>30</sup> Campus Reform, therefore, is a communications technology which, by Blackwell’s own admission, is no different than other right-wing political technologies.

Today, the LI claims to have “trained more than 200,000 conservative activists, leaders, and students” through its “more than 1,700 conservative campus groups and newspapers.”<sup>31</sup> Its alumni include Mitch McConnell, former Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore, Karl Rove, Grover Norquist, Ralph Reed, and numerous current and past members of congress.<sup>32</sup> (As well as a number of noted leaders in the white supremacists movement).<sup>33</sup> Appealing to donors, the LI points to alumni Mike Pence and Project Veritas’s James O’Keefe as having succeeded “because [of] Leadership Institute donors like you.”<sup>34</sup> Beneath each Campus Reform story runs a statement: “They say your views are dangerous, hateful, fearful, or racist...It is time for conservatives young and old to unite as a single voice to boldly proclaim what we stand for and oppose the mob.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Blackwell quoted in: Nelson, *Shadow Network*, 26.

<sup>31</sup> Leadership Institute, “About the Leadership Institute,” available at: <https://leadershipinstitute.org/aboutus/>.

<sup>32</sup> The Leadership Institute, “Training: Get the Knowledge You Need to Win and Succeed,” 2005. Archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20050911041426/http://www.leadershipinstitute.org/02TRAINING/training.htm>; SourceWatch, “The Leadership Institute,” Center for Media and Democracy, 2018. Available at: [https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=The\\_Leadership\\_Institute](https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=The_Leadership_Institute)

<sup>33</sup> Speri, Alice, “A Billionaire-Funded Website with Ties to the Far Right is Trying to ‘Cancel’ University Professors,” *The Intercept*, April 10, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> The Leadership Institute, “Strike the Spark: Create a Legacy of Conservative Leadership for America,” 2021. Available at: <https://secured.leadershipinstitute.org/legacy/>.

<sup>35</sup> From the “What You Stand For is What Defines You” statement at the bottom of each Campus Reform story. [www.campusreform.org](http://www.campusreform.org) (last accessed June 8, 2021).

Campus Reform treats society, and higher education in particular, as a Manichean battlefield between “us” (i.e. “conservatives”) versus “them” (“liberals”). Upon this campus battlefield Campus Reform, quite literally, seeks to score victories. They define a “victory” as “any situation in which a college changes a policy, fires someone, or otherwise responds to concerns raised by the reporting on its site.”<sup>36</sup> The previous Editor-in-Chief boasted that stories written by Campus Reform “resulted in 84 policy changes on campus” between 2015-2018.<sup>37</sup> Blackwell’s 2019 Christmas letter to LI donors further tallied 26 victories that year, “including the cancellation of politically-correct schemes and the advance of conservative programs on campuses.”<sup>38</sup> Campus Reform’s Facebook page regularly declares victory, often linking to a story with the simple caption “VICTORY!”<sup>39</sup> Crucially, these so-called victories regularly occur when campus administrators fall victim to, or buy into, the Campus Reform’s narrative and therefore engage in disciplinary action against their faculty or capitulate on issues of campus policy.

The Leadership Institute is funded by wealthy right-wing and libertarian donors. In 2020, LI’s total revenue was \$23 million (up from \$19.3 million the year before), with \$5.9 million going to Campus Reform (up from \$1.3 million the year before).<sup>40</sup> According to publicly available 990 tax documents between 1995 and 2017, the Leadership Institute received donations from a number of right-wing foundations, including the Ed Uihlein Family Foundation (\$1.16 million), the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation (\$950,000), DonorsTrust (\$848,788) and Donors Capital Fund

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<sup>36</sup> Schmidt, “Higher Education’s Internet Outrage Machine.”

<sup>37</sup> Sterling Beard’s LinkedIn Profile, accessed October 13, 2020  
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/sterling-beard-73b88436/>

<sup>38</sup> Morton Blackwell, “Peace on earth, and good will towards men,” Christmas Letter to donors. The Leadership Institute, November 22, 2019. Accessed October 5, 2021, <https://isaackamola.domains.trincoll.edu/items/show/11>.

<sup>39</sup> Campus Reform’s Facebook page, accessed April 21, 2021.  
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/sterling-beard-73b88436/>

<sup>40</sup> Leadership Institute, “Our 2019 Audited Financial Statements” and “Our 2020 form 990”:  
<https://leadershipinstitute.org/aboutus/finance.cfm>.

(\$630,500), and various Koch family foundations (\$302,292).<sup>41</sup> The Uihlein Family Foundation has been called “the Koch brothers of Wisconsin politics.”<sup>42</sup> The Bradley Foundation lavishly funds organizations that promote school choice, welfare work requirements, anti-labor legislation, and climate change denial.<sup>43</sup> Donors Trust and the affiliated Donors Capital Fund specialize in anonymizing the identity of donors, garnering the moniker of “dark-money ATM for the conservative movement.”<sup>44</sup>

As a piece of partisan political technology, Campus Reform should be understood as playing the specialized role of surveilling college campuses and producing content to feed into the right-wing media/political infrastructure.

### **Campus Reform as Sensational Surveillance**

Campus Reform has not always purported to be a news outlet. The Leadership Institute launched Campus Reform on September 15, 2009 as a “new social networking site for conservative student activists,” containing subsites for each of the 2,446 four-year colleges in America. These sites were intended to serve as social media nodes “to help student groups promote conservative principles and fight liberal abuses at colleges and universities across the country.”<sup>45</sup> Blackwell

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<sup>41</sup> DeSmog, “The Leadership Institute (LI),” available at: <https://www.desmog.com/leadership-institute/>

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Bice, “Uihleins Spend Big to Help Ron Johnson Defend Senate Seat from Russ Feingold,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, October 4, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Bice, “Hacked Records Show Bradley Foundation Taking Its Conservative Wisconsin Model National,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 5 2017; Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Andy Kroll, “The Dark-Money ATM of the Conservative Movement,” *Mother Jones*, February 5, 2013; Pam Vogel, “The Conservative Dark-Money Groups Infiltrating Campus Politics,” Media Matters, <https://www.mediamatters.org/research/2017/03/29/conservative-dark-money-groups-infiltrating-campus-politics/215822#cr>.

<sup>45</sup> Leadership Institute, “News & Updates: CampusReform.org to Challenge Dominance of College Leftists,” September 15, 2009. Archived at

claimed this new platform would increase the number of battles fought against “leftist abuses on college campuses” and, “based on long experience, conservative students will win most of those new battles.”<sup>46</sup> Campus Reform’s original mission statement made clear that the site was intended to “give conservatives powerful new weapons in their fight for the hearts and minds of the next generation of citizens, politicians, and members of the media.”<sup>47</sup>

During the early years, articles and blog posts constituted a small part of the website and were written by staff members. Instead, the site mainly provided support for campus activists, opportunities to rate faculty, and listed jobs in conservative organizations.<sup>48</sup> It also included a survey of “liberal abuse,” asking students to identify whether their campus “eliminat[ed...] single-sex bathrooms in dormitories,” created transgendered bathrooms, “[e]nforced diversity in every area except for the adherence to or the teaching of conservative principles,” and mandated “[c]ompulsory freshman orientation programs and ‘sensitivity training’ designed by leftist[s] to undermine traditional values.”<sup>49</sup>

In 2013, Campus Reform altered their mission statement and drastically redesigned the website. The website moved from muted red and blue tones to black and bright red (See Figures 1 and 2). The new mission statement described Campus Reform as “America’s leading site for college news” and a watchdog organization committed to “expos[ing] bias, abuse, waste, and fraud on the nation’s

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20100620063526/http://leadershipinstitute.org/news/?NR=1522> (last accessed March 5, 2021).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Campus Reform, “About,” 2009. Archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090905232127/http://www.campusreform.org/about> (last accessed February 11, 2021).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Campus Reform, “Leftist Abuses and Bias on Campus,” 2009. Archived at [https://web.archive.org/web/20090901233109/http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=ZSGP-NM9JfSmzSrySE3cDAw\\_3d\\_3d](https://web.archive.org/web/20090901233109/http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=ZSGP-NM9JfSmzSrySE3cDAw_3d_3d) (last accessed February 11, 2021).

college campuses” through a team of student journalists who uphold “rigorous journalism standards and strive[] to present each story with accuracy, objectivity, and public accountability.”<sup>50</sup>



*Figure 1: Campus Reform Logo (March 9, 2013)*



*Figure 2: Campus Reform Logo (April 4, 2013)*

Following the evolution of the website’s menus and content links, however, demonstrates just how closely the platform remained true to its right-wing activist roots, even while attempting to pose as a news organization. This is demonstrated by the “Send a Tip” tab—the current replacement for the “Take Action” tab— which encourages informants to “blow the whistle on liberal abuse or wrongdoings taking place on an American college campus.”<sup>51</sup> Throughout 2013, Campus Reform also cycled through many iterations of its “Resources” and “Activism Resources” links which provided students with activism ideas like “effective sign-making” and directing them to the Leadership Institute’s resources page containing much of the same information for activists.<sup>52</sup> As the

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<sup>50</sup> Campus Reform, “Mission,” 2013. Archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130429135341/http://www.campusreform.org/about/> (last accessed February 15, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Campus Reform, “Send us a confidential tip.” <https://www.campusreform.org/tip> (last accessed June 8, 2021).

<sup>52</sup> Campus Reform, “Campus Reform,” 2013. Archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130429061238/http://www.campusreform.org/> (last accessed June 8, 2021). Using this weblink, one can follow the archived changes to the Campus Reform website by scrolling through the timeline at the top of the page. For a specific analysis of the changes to the Campus Reform website in 2013 see: McCarthy, Sam, “Campus Reform or Sensationalized Surveillance: The Right-Wing Media Outlet Fueling Faculty Harassment,” Senior Thesis, Trinity College, 2021.



Campus Reform website evolved it retained many of the original activist elements, even as they became increasingly obscured by its presentation as a news site.

Additionally, their current newsletter advertisement—appearing below each published article—is riddled with activist language including that “Conservative students on college campuses are marginalized, threatened, and silenced by threatening students who oppose their views, or radicalized liberal professors or administrators.” The form asks readers to register for the newsletter if they stand “for protections for conservative students who are illegally being threatened on college campuses” and “for the federal funding to be pulled from colleges and universities when they silence conservative views or students.”<sup>53</sup> Those signing up for the newsletter receive an email from Blackwell claiming “It’s not enough for conservatives to have the right principles...To win elections and the war of ideas, conservatives require effective political skills and tactics...Much of this work starts on college campuses, where the battle for America’s future is most heated.”<sup>54</sup>

Between 2012 and 2014, Campus Reform also expanded its surveillance capacity with the creation of the Campus Correspondent program. Campus Reform had started paying students to write stories for the platform in 2012, just before the revamp, evidenced by a blog post asking “Are you a conservative student on campus who witnessed a liberal abuse by a professor, student or administrator on your campus?”<sup>55</sup> This “Contributing Writer Program” paid \$50 per story published, and \$100 if it included photo or video evidence. In February 2014, the first person with the title

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<sup>53</sup> Campus Reform, “What You Stand for is What Defines You” (located below the article), April 26, 2021. Archived at: [https://web.archive.org/web/20210506105428if\\_/https://www.campusreform.org/article?id=17375](https://web.archive.org/web/20210506105428if_/https://www.campusreform.org/article?id=17375).

<sup>54</sup> Morton Blackwell, “You’re signed up for Leadership Institute emails,” *CampusWire*, Leadership Institute, accessed October 5, 2021, <https://isaackamola.domains.trincoll.edu/items/show/1>.

<sup>55</sup> Campus Reform, “Fall 2012 Contributing Writer Program” 2013. Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130828060035/http://www.campusreform.org/blog/?ID=3147> (last accessed February 11, 2021).

“Campus Correspondent” was added to the staff listed on the site.<sup>56</sup> The Correspondent Program expanded rapidly since its inception, and by June of 2014 six correspondents were listed as staff.<sup>57</sup> A previous Editor-in-Chief, and subsequent Director of Journalism Training at Campus Reform, boasted about the growth of the Campus Correspondent Program, claiming that the platform “went from publishing 489 articles in 2013 to 1675 articles in 2017” with the correspondent article tally being just 70 in 2014 but rising to 807 in 2017.<sup>58</sup> As of March 2021, there are 84 correspondents listed on the site.<sup>59</sup>

In 2020 we logged 1572 articles published by Campus Reform and only 348 were written by staff or faculty contributors, meaning that the remaining 77.9% of stories were written by Campus Correspondents.<sup>60</sup> The platform underwent an additional redesign in late 2020, with changes that make the platform appear even more like a news outlet—with a template that now closely mimics mainstream news websites.

While Campus Reform claims to be a journalistic organization, they clearly conflate journalism with partisan and activist surveillance, summed up in the call “Get paid to hold your school accountable!” and “Be the eyes and ears on your campus.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Campus Reform, “Campus Reform Staff,” February 2014. Archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140208064802/http://campusreform.org/about/> (last accessed February 15, 2021).

<sup>57</sup> Campus Reform, “Campus Reform Staff,” June 2014. Archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140626085043/https://www.campusreform.org/about/> (last accessed February 15, 2021).

<sup>58</sup> Beard, LinkedIn.

<sup>59</sup> Campus Reform, “Campus Correspondents,” 2021. <https://www.campusreform.org/correspondents> (last accessed March 13, 2021).

<sup>60</sup> Kamola, Isaac, Sam McCarthy, and Aaron Supple, “All Stories 2020--Faculty First Responders” spreadsheet, Faculty First Responders. Data available upon request.

<sup>61</sup> Leadership Institute, “What’s Going on in the National Field Program?” <https://leadershipinstitute.org/campus/> (last accessed March 5, 2021).

### *Staffing a Surveillance Apparatus*

Understanding how Campus Reform recruits, trains, and compensates campus correspondents is key to understanding how it works as a surveillance apparatus. Two former Campus Reform correspondents, Cory Young and Leah Thompson, described a hiring process that was not very competitive or selective. Young described “just one interview and [...] it was more of just a general competence screening.” Thompson had a call with one staff member “just to make sure everyone is on the same page” about their mission and what kinds of stories they are looking for.<sup>62</sup>

The Campus Reform contract, which Thompson shared, states that: “Campus Reform Campus Correspondent agrees to help produce content for Campus Reform through exposing and reporting on incidents of liberal bias and abuse occurring on U.S. college campuses.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, correspondents are *contractually obligated* to approach their topic through the prism of exposing “liberal abuse.” Once hired, correspondents earn easy money through a pay-by-the-article compensation scheme. Each correspondent begins at the lowest tier (Bronze), where they earn \$50 for each of the first four articles that Campus Reform publishes. They also receive a profile page, personalized business cards, and access to a development training. The next 5-14 articles (Silver tier) earn correspondents \$75 per article as well as access to resume prep, a recommendation letter, a personalized Campus Reform “press pass,” weekly group mentorship calls, and priority over “Level 1 story pitches.” Each story thereafter (Gold) nets \$100 each and includes access to one-on-one mentorship calls, an official Campus Reform email (which allows them to receive Twitter verification), admission to a two-day all-expenses-paid media and journalism training event, top priority for story pitches or media opportunities, a promo reel of their media interviews, access to

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<sup>62</sup> Cory Young, personal interview with Samantha McCarthy, October 26, 2020, via *Zoom*; Leah Thompson, personal interview with Samantha McCarthy, December 18, 2020, via *Zoom*.

<sup>63</sup> Campus Reform. “Campus Correspondent Agreement,” 2017. Retrieved via personal interview December 18, 2020 with Sam McCarthy, via *Zoom*.

morning editorial meetings, and invitations to exclusive Leadership Institute events and excursions. A “Tipster” can make \$50 per each approved tip. And each tier requires the correspondents to meet an (unspecific) writing proficiency standard.<sup>64</sup> Based on our calculations, the most prolific writer of 2020 made approximately \$26,250 with the 253 articles written between May, when he started, and December 31, 2020. In fact, on just one day in December 2020, he published eleven articles—earning \$1,100. Young rightly notes that this system allows Campus Reform to deploy a less competitive hiring process because “since they pay by the story, [...] it wasn’t costly for them to hire someone who wasn’t that good.”<sup>65</sup>

Correspondents are responsible for finding and pitching their own stories. This often entails scrolling through campus newspapers and faculty social media accounts as well as setting up Google Alerts for keys words that conform to Campus Reform’s desired content, such as “gender-neutral bathrooms,” “College Palestine,” or “Free Speech.”<sup>66</sup> Correspondents then pitch stories to editors, which both Young and Thompson noted was not very difficult. After writing the content, editors approved the article, requested changes, or sometimes put the piece on a shared Google Document to edit collaboratively.<sup>67</sup> The entire process “only takes a couple hours of work generally.”<sup>68</sup>

Because Campus Reform is clear about the content it publishes, this free-lance army of student correspondents becomes a fairly inexpensive method to surveil faculty. In the process correspondents becomes particularly “attune[d...] to key words, topics, and trends that focus on

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Some elements have been previously reported in: Tapper, “Inside the Conservative Media Outlet Feeding Harvard Students to Fox News”; Schmidt, “Higher Education’s Internet Outrage Machine.”

<sup>65</sup> Young, interview.

<sup>66</sup> Young, interview; Thompson, interview; Tapper, “Inside the Conservative Media Outlet Feeding Harvard Students to Fox News.” For a discussion of how “automated search bot” are used by right-wing groups to surveil faculty, see: Mariam Durrani, “Digital Infrastructures of the Internet Outrage Machine: An Autoethnography of Targeted Faculty Harassment,” *American Anthropologist* (2021), 3.

<sup>67</sup> Thompson, interview.

<sup>68</sup> Young, interview.

political correctness and identity.”<sup>69</sup> Rather than demanding well-researched and well-reported stories, which can take days and weeks to write, this payment and editorial structure allows Campus Reform to collect a sizable amount of content that fits its desired partisan narrative.

It also produces formulaic content. Each story is less than 600 words, includes similar or repetitive images and videos, as well as sensationalized headlines. They generally lack context or interviews from the people actually involved.<sup>70</sup> The few quotes actually included often come from representatives of similarly right-wing political organizations (such as Young Americans for Liberty, Speech First, etc.). Headlines regularly use quotation marks to cast doubt and skepticism, making the tone of outrage clear even before clicking on the article. In her discussion of similar headlines posted by Campus Watch, Professor Durrani describes how “quotation marks around certain keywords featured in my work seem to index a dubious validity of the terms themselves, suggesting that scholarship on these topics is ‘insane,’ according to the author, the magazine, and their audience.”<sup>71</sup> Stories that accuse faculty of liberal bias often link directly to their personal profiles and social media accounts, seeming to encourage readers to make direct contact.

Campus Reform’s network of campus correspondents, paid to surveil the academy for evidence of liberal bias, has little incentive to provide the full context, often contributing to distorted stories that emphasize outrage but not understanding. For example, one article criticized a professor for suggesting in a tweet that she would consider preventing students known to use hate speech from taking her class. Campus Reform reported this story as simply an obvious example of outrage.

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<sup>69</sup> Tapper, “Inside the Conservative Media Outlet Feeding Harvard Students to Fox News.”

<sup>70</sup> Campus Reform stories often note that the correspondent reached out to faculty for comment and did not receive a response. Numerous faculty have complained to us, however, that they never receive a request for comment, requests came with little lead time, or were made by someone other than the student correspondent. Similarly, many faculty members do not consider Campus Reform a credible news organization and therefore decline to provide comment.

<sup>71</sup> Durrani, “Digital Infrastructures of the Internet Outrage Machine,” 2.

Missing, however, was the fact that this tweet was written within a broader campus context in which a video of an incoming student using racial slurs was made public, causing public outcry, a tone-deaf university response, and continued campus unrest in the context of wider Black Lives Matter protests. This broader context was never included in the Campus Reform coverage, or the versions of the story picked up by other outlets.

Another story, following the October 2020 presidential debate, focused on faculty tweets that called Trump's treatment of the female moderator "cringe worthy."<sup>72</sup> The author of the tweets, a scholar who studies female political candidates, was pointing out the gendered nature of Trump's actions. However, the Campus Reform piece ignored the argument behind these tweets, and instead notes—seemingly as a non sequitur—that the professor's website states that she seeks "to include course material from an equal spread of male and female scholars." While presented as simply an accurate summary of a few tweets, the comments section betrays the intended affect. One comment reads "Oh, Look!! It's three manhating feminists living their perpetually offended lives" and "Being a college professor equals being a circus clown."<sup>73</sup>

Sometimes Campus Reform stories go beyond decontextualization and simply manufacture outrage out of whole cloth. One article accused a faculty member on Biden's COVID Task Force of questioning the efficacy of vaccines, a conclusion arrived at by juxtaposing two unrelated op-eds. The faculty member—a Harvard-educated public health expert and chair of health policy at Wharton Business School (where the Campus Reform correspondent is a student)—wrote one op-ed years before the coronavirus pandemic discussing his personal wishes to avoid an unnecessary prolonging of life, and therefore his plan to refuse the flu vaccine at the age of 75—a decision he

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<sup>72</sup> Zeisloft, Ben, "Profs Outraged Over Trump Being Nice to Female Debate Moderator Kristen Welker," *Campus Reform*, October 23.

<sup>73</sup> Comments post to: Ibid.

made abundantly clear represents his own personal ethical considerations.<sup>74</sup> The second op-ed, written in January 2020, also before the pandemic, discusses his father who passed away at the age of 92 from an incurable brain tumor, and following a decision not to pursue further medical treatment. The Campus Reform story grossly misrepresents and sensationalizes these otherwise thoughtful reflections on end-of-life care to concoct a false narrative that the faculty member and public health expert does not support the use of vaccines for older patients.

These represent just a few in a long litany of decontextualized, overstated, or flat-out invented stories. Sloppy journalism and exaggerated headlines are, of course, not unique to Campus Reform. However, unlike more traditional “yellow journalism,” tabloid newspapers, and click-bait websites, Campus Reform does not traffic in sensationalism to sell subscriptions or attract advertising revenue. Rather, the site—lacking any advertisements—is a partisan non-profit completely dependent on private donations.<sup>75</sup> As such, sensationalism has a political, rather than profit, motive.

Campus Reform surveils faculty, and gathers, writes, and circulates highly sensationalized stories well-suited for circulation within the right-wing media ecosystem. As these stories circulate, they whip up online vigilantism capable of disciplining faculty through a barrage of targeted harassment. Such harassment can have considerable disciplining effects.

## Disciplining of Faculty

*“lard filled house N\*\*\*\*r b\*\*\*\*b”*

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<sup>74</sup> Ezekiel J Emanuel, “Why I Hope to Die at 75,” *The Atlantic*, October 15, 2014; Ezekiel Emanuel, “My 92-Year-Old Father Didn’t Need More Medical Care,” *ibid.*, January 2, 2020. The Campus Reform version can be found here: Zeisloft, Ben, “Biden COVID Task Force Member, UPenn Prof Questions Benefits of Vaccines for People over 75a,” *Campus Reform*, November 13. <https://www.campusreform.org/article?id=16161>

<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of the economic incentives behind “yellow journalism,” see: Richard L. Kaplan, “Yellow Journalism.” *The International Encyclopedia of Communications*, vol. XI, Wolfgang Donsbach, ed., 2008, 5369-5370; Sharon McQueen, “From Yellow Journalism to Tabloids to Clickbait: The Origins of Fake News in the United States,” in *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News*, Denise E. Agosto, ed. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2018, 12-35.

—From an email received by Mary Walker

Self-identified Black femme Professor Mary Walker explained that emails like this one, sent to her work email, are typical. Walker has been featured in multiple Campus Reform articles, some of which have made it to *Fox News*, meaning she now regularly expects these types of communications.<sup>76</sup> Walker is not alone. Many faculty members across the country have been, currently are, or expect to become targets of such harassment. While Campus Reform provides the surveillance apparatus, online harassers provide the disciplining function.

In 2020, 274 articles published by Campus Reform targeted at least one faculty member for some aspect of their speech, totaling 338 targeted individuals. Most of these stories, 78 percent, focus on speech in the public forum—such as social media, opinion-editorials, letters to the editor, and public speeches (explicitly contradicting Campus Reform’s stated mission of exposing bias on campus). Just nine percent of respondents were targeted for classroom speech and eight percent for research publications.<sup>77</sup> Even former Campus Reform correspondent Young noted the hypocrisy of this tactic, pointing out that getting a professor fired for a tweet is “a huge mistake and it really runs counter to the stated goals and beliefs” of Campus Reform.<sup>78</sup> Faculty targeted by Campus Reform are 62.8% white, 14.6% are African American, 7% are Asian or Pacific Islander, 5.5% are Hispanic, and 10.1% identify as multiracial or as another race or ethnicity. African Americans are disproportionately targeted given that they make up just 6% of full-time faculty nationally, and many Black faculty are the subject of more than one story.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Mary Walker, personal interview with Samantha McCarthy, October 28, 2020, via *Zoom*.

<sup>77</sup> Tiede et al., “Whom Does Campus Reform Target and What Are the Effects?”

<sup>78</sup> Young, interview. We would, of course, disagree with the sentiment that this runs counter to Campus Reform’s “goals” which, after all, is to rack up “victories.”

<sup>79</sup> Tiede et al., “Whom Does Campus Reform Target and What Are the Effects?”



Being the subject of a Campus Reform article often carries adverse consequences, although specifics, severity, and duration vary depending on the topic, the race and gender identity of the author, and whether other outlets pick the story up. Forty percent of faculty reported receiving threats of harm following a Campus Reform story (and an additional 10% reported receiving unwanted and harassing contact but did not consider them threatening). Of the 40% that did receive threats, 89% were by email, 57% by direct message over social media, 45% by phone, and 11% by mail.<sup>80</sup> Five of the six faculty interviewed reported receiving unwanted communications. While not personally receiving unwanted harassment, the sixth faculty member's institution received unwanted emails and the other faculty member featured in the article—and the main subject of the story—was the subject of harassment.<sup>81</sup>

The volume of targeted harassment correlates directly with whether the Campus Reform story is picked up within the right-wing media ecosystem. The majority of survey respondents, 65.3%, reported the article being picked up by at least one other outlet.<sup>82</sup> In addition to news sites, two of the faculty interviewed described the story traveling to online forums, and one faculty was discussed on a right-wing militia site.<sup>83</sup> The more coverage a story gets outside of Campus Reform, the more numerous and vicious unwanted communications are.

Harassment also varies depending on what the faculty member said—or was portrayed to have said—and how they identify. According to the survey, 64.1% of respondents who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or other received threats while only 35.8% who identify as straight did. Faculty with marginalized identities tend to receive hate mail condemning who they are, rather than

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Walker, interview; Thompson, interview.

<sup>82</sup> Tiede et al., “Whom Does Campus Reform Target and What Are the Effects?”

<sup>83</sup> Victoria Lyons, personal interview with Samantha McCarthy, November 4, 2020, via *Zoom*. Speri, “A Billionaire-Funded Website with Ties to the Far Right Is Trying to ‘Cancel’ University Professors.”

what they said. These messages often contain stereotyping and slurs. *[The following five paragraphs contain graphic details of racist, misogynistic, and homophobic hate]*

Campus Reform targeted Professor Emily Mack for one of her tweets that circulated through the media, into online forums, and eventually to *Fox News*. A woman of Asian descent, many of the unwanted communications she received were racist and xenophobic. Mack received one email with an extremely racist slur directed at Asian Americans. The body of the message read: “Thanks to you nasty people we have massive diseases every year. You are dirty and disgusting and live like shit-infested animals. Take your self-righteous yellow ass and go fuck yourself!”<sup>84</sup> Another email stated that the “Article just underscores why Asians are not working out in America. Not sure how foreigners get employed in US universities but it needs to stop.”<sup>85</sup> Comments in the online forum are also riddled with sexist language like “B\*\*\*h probably has ‘A’ cups. Straight ‘no’ from me.”<sup>86</sup> As the article spread through the media, the emails came in “waves.” Mack said it was clear from the communications that some people were “sort of stalking” her and she “got terrified that they were going to find [her] address somehow” especially because “the hate that they have is not for anything you’ve said it’s just for, you know, existing essentially.”<sup>87</sup> Fearing her and her family’s safety in the midst of the harassment, they left home to stay with family.

Similarly, Professor Alan Ronald, a Black man, was targeted over a tweet and was flooded with death threats by email, on his work phone, and at home. Some threats came from white supremacists and frightened his family to the point that they also left their home for a few days.

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<sup>84</sup> Emily Mack, personal interview with Samantha McCarthy, November 2, 2020, via *Zoom*.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> From online messaging board. Citation not provided to preserve anonymity.

<sup>87</sup> Mack, interview.

While Ronald said he felt bad for the stress it caused his family, receiving death threats “is an everyday occurrence” for him.<sup>88</sup>

Mary Walker similarly experiences unwanted communications regularly and across platforms which has caused her to develop a routine for dealing with them, but that does not make the hate and harassment any less severe. Walker recounted a recent email she received at work which read:

Die from Corona. You fat black racist, fat pig. No wonder you're a d\*\*e. No man in his right mind would ever touch your smelly fat, fat communist fat ass. If it wasn't for affirmative action, your fat ugly bucktooth ass would be cleaning toilets instead of brainwashing stupid ass white kids. Damn you are one ugly fat black fat ugly b\*\*\*h. How much do you pay your girlfriend to eat your fat ass out, commit suicide b\*\*\*h, go Trump, kill yourself when he wins.

When there is a slew of messages like this one, Walker will take some space from social media, have friends or her partner go through the messages, and talk with her therapist about it.

In the comments section of the survey, one transgender faculty member recounted messages that dead-named them, called them sick, and told them they should be committed to a mental institutionalized for their transness.<sup>89</sup> Many faculty members said they received death threats, some said messages were anti-Semitic, and one professor said they received emails targeting them for their sexuality and HIV+ status. One faculty member stated that “After their piece was published, their ‘readers’ harassed me without end.” Another called the experience “one of the most awful moments of my professional career.” And another faculty member remembered that the “actions of Campus Reform and other right-wing sites were highly disruptive to my life for a period of time.” One faculty member experienced “incessant attacks, including death threats, and I was not able to go to my office for a month.” Another described being “alarmed and frightened” upon receiving

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<sup>88</sup> Alan Ronald, personal interview with Samantha McCarthy, November 19, 2020, via *Zoom*.

<sup>89</sup> Tiede, Hans-Joerg, Samantha McCarthy, Isaac Kamola, and Alyson K. Spurgas, “Campus Reform Survey Results” [unpublished raw data]. American Association of University Professors, February 22, 2021.

handwritten hate mail at their home address.<sup>90</sup> Some faculty commented that their experience was traumatic, and others said it negatively impacted their mental or physical health.

There are reasons to believe the Campus Reform is—or should be—aware of the kind of hateful and violent response their stories provoke. In addition to media coverage that details the onslaught of hate that these stories invoke,<sup>91</sup> the publications themselves often include hateful comments posted directly beneath the articles. Fairly typical comments include: she “does not look 100% black,” “she has a slave surname,” and “Senior Professor of brown vagina odor.”<sup>92</sup> A comment under an article written about another Black woman faculty member engages in outright threats of violence:

I will not shoot one black ape Thug I will unload my clip and load many others before I stop murdering this anti-American racist scum, these black African Apes that have no business being in this country be careful who you threaten Negroes there's more of us than you, and the white scum that are with you are considered wiggers anyway we will kill them first and leave you for last, watch who you're threatening in response to your BLM white haters I tell you (n\*\*\*\*\*rs beware).<sup>93</sup>

And under one story about multiple faculty members supporting Black Lives Matter:

It's time to start killing the treasonous professors....If they incite cop killing, I'm going to murder those bastards, no joke. Each and every reader of this post ought take stock of the universities closest to you, note the names and addresses of key players in those universities, and get prepared to act with lethal force if those bastards incite the youth to harm Our Police. This is no threat, it's a fucking promise. Look up the addresses where the bastards live. Give them fair warning. If they persist in allowing this Treason and propoganda of hatred against Our Police, fucking kill them if you can.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> For example: Gluckman, “The Outrage Peddlers Are Here to Stay.”

<sup>92</sup> Comments posted to: Caroline Shaver, “Prof Who Said White People ‘Take up Space’ Now Says Whites Can’t Decide What’s Racist.” *Campus Reform*, January 24, 2020. <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=14268> (last accessed April 11, 2021).

<sup>93</sup> Comments posted to: Zeisloft, “Prof’s Outraged Over Trump Being Nice to Female Debate Moderator Kristen Welker.”

<sup>94</sup> Comments posted to: Lacey Kestecher, “Professors Nationwide Offer Assistance, Advice, and Support to Antifa-like Rioters.” *Campus Reform*, June 1, 2020. <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=14959> (last accessed April 11, 2021).

The fact that such comments remain on the site indicates either Campus Reform’s gross negligence in moderation or their tacit support for hateful outrage and violent threats. Whatever the intent, these stories create a climate of fear and intimidation, especially aimed at those faculty who research, teach, and speak publicly about issues of race, gender, and class.

Such comments also help explain why the Leadership Institute has historically been attractive to prominent white supremacists. Matthew Heimbach, leader of the white nationalist Traditionalist Workers Party, told reporters that the Leadership Institute “trained this entire next generation of white nationalists.”<sup>95</sup> And at various times the Leadership Institute employed far-right and white-supremacist activists, including as Keven DeAnna, founder of the Youth for Western Civilization, Martin Christopher Rojas, who wrote more than five hundred publications for white supremacist outlets, and Michael J. Thompson, the Campus Reform employee who “was also a frequent contributor to online white supremacist publications.”<sup>96</sup> Blackwell publicly distanced the Leadership Institute from these former employees, and claimed that the organization was unaware of their racist views at the time. However, the Leadership Institute’s track record of hiring white supremacists and also producing content that encourages racist and violent hate mail is not coincidental.

Many faculty members report that targeted harassment following Campus Reform stories made them fear for the safety of themselves and their family. Many experienced trauma and expressed considerable anxiety about losing their jobs. Overall, less than half of faculty, 45.3 percent, felt supported by their institution, and 12.4 percent said they faced some form of punitive action by their administration. Three faculty in 2020 reported losing their job due to the Campus Reform story.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Luke, O’Brien, “My Journey to the Center of the Alt-Right,” *Huffington Post*, November 3, 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Speri, Alice, “A Billionaire-Funded Website with Ties to the Far Right is Trying to ‘Cancel’ University Professors,” *The Intercept*, April 10, 2021.

<sup>97</sup> Tiede et al., “Whom Does Campus Reform Target and What Are the Effects?”

Walker described her previous institution as one where the administration left her “to the wolves” and she definitely felt like her job was “in limbo.” Walker was made to feel that her public speech was putting her job at risk and colleagues advised her to quiet down until after tenure.<sup>98</sup> At her new institution, however, Walker feels well supported and the administration has been very vocal about protecting her freedom of speech. She makes it clear, however, that she is one of the lucky ones as many institutions care more about their public image than protecting their faculty. Walker has friends at other institutions who “have either lost their jobs or had their jobs threatened or have left institutions because they felt so unsupported as they were being harassed.”<sup>99</sup>

Ronald described his college president publicly condemning his speech as hateful and an incitement to violence—essentially parroting Campus Reform’s mischaracterization of his comments. This lack of public support seemed to inflame the situation further as Ronald explained that he received more incendiary messages as a result.<sup>100</sup> Too often administrations respond by debating the nature of the faculty members speech, which “not only encourage[s] greater self-censorship...but also ignores the broader political strategy at work.”<sup>101</sup>

An actual or feared deluge of hate mail, as well as concern about institutional retaliation, often produce a “chilling effect.” In line with Foucault’s observation that prisoners learn to self-discipline beneath a surveilling warden’s gaze, many faculty report engaging in self-censorship and the self-disciplining of their speech. Of all survey respondents, 24.1 percent reported that they curtailed their social media presence as a result of the story. Among faculty who received threats, this number is 38.6 percent. Smaller percentages—5.9% and 3.0%—of faculty change their teaching and research

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<sup>98</sup> Walker, interview.

<sup>99</sup> Walker, interview.

<sup>100</sup> Ronald, interview.

<sup>101</sup> Kamola, “Dear Administrators,” 15.

as a result of Campus Reform stories but, once again, these number climb dramatically when looking at those who received threats of harm (12.1% and 6% respectively).<sup>102</sup>

Professor Mack, for example, discussed changing her behavior on social media as a result of the story and subsequent backlash. She deleted all of her social media accounts in the midst of the harassment. Over time, she reactivated the accounts but has made her Facebook and Instagram private while also removing her last name, making it harder to find her. On Twitter, Mack is more cautious about what she likes or retweets, avoiding anything that might be “construed in some way or the other as being really political or polarizing.”<sup>103</sup> She recognizes she has a lot on the line, including her family and her job. Because she fears repercussions incited by Campus Reform, Mack engages in self-censoring on social media as she assumes they could be surveilling her at any time.

Even if faculty do not change their behavior, numerous faculty members nonetheless reported feeling surveilled by Campus Reform, with faculty acknowledging that this disproportionately impacts those without tenure or job security. For example, one professor commented that his college president publicly condemned their speech following a Campus Reform story. And while this public admonishment did not affect their speech, “it has had a chilling effect on campus speech, since other faculty—particularly junior faculty—have seen that if you support equality and freedom for Palestinians, the president will denigrate you and your teaching in public.”<sup>104</sup>

This surveillance goes beyond just social media. Wilbur Riley recalled a Campus Reform correspondent who attended classes or campus events as a “political operative under the cover of being a student.”<sup>105</sup> Walker acknowledged that being targeted has made her “meta-aware” that she is

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<sup>102</sup> Tiede et al., “Whom Does Campus Reform Target and What Are the Effects?”

<sup>103</sup> Mack, interview.

<sup>104</sup> Tiede, et al. “Campus Reform Survey Results.”

<sup>105</sup> Wilbur Riley, personal interview with Samantha McCarthy, November 2, 2020, via *Zoom*.

being “watched.”<sup>106</sup> Professor Jacob Anderson referred to the website as a “multimillion dollar surveillance operation” that hopes to “create a chilling effect.”<sup>107</sup> Riley similarly said that “it may be chilling for people who don't have job security” and the real concern is how much it impacts faculty without tenure.<sup>108</sup> Walker reports having colleagues tell her, “you might want to quiet down, like before tenure... not...like, you're going to lose your job, but there was definitely these suggestions...[that] you are putting your job at risk.”<sup>109</sup> As Ronald knows firsthand though, tenure does not guarantee that faculty will not still face consequences like losing tenure or not being granted funding or promotions.<sup>110</sup>

Faculty are aware that, if they continue to speak on social media, Campus Reform could publish an article about them at any time. Walker recalls tweeting something recently and thinking to herself immediately that Campus Reform is “going to have a field day” with it.<sup>111</sup> Anderson acknowledged that, as a contingent faculty member who plans to continue being a public-facing scholar, he is aware that the stakes are high. He noted that just because the first story about him had only mild impacts, that does not mean there will not “be negative consequences...on down the line.”<sup>112</sup>

## Conclusion

The targeted harassment of faculty and the use of institutional sanctions to silence academic speech is, unfortunately, not new. Academic repression has long been a part of the American

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<sup>106</sup> Walker, interview.

<sup>107</sup> Jacob Anderson, personal interview with Samantha McCarthy, November 12, 2020, via *Zoom*.

<sup>108</sup> Riley, interview.

<sup>109</sup> Walker, interview.

<sup>110</sup> Ronald, interview.

<sup>111</sup> Walker, interview.

<sup>112</sup> Anderson, interview.



academy, even as the nature and intensity of such attacks vary over time.<sup>113</sup> During the early twentieth century academics who expressed pacifist, socialist, or communist views were routinely blacklisted and subjected to relentless “investigations, hearings, testimony, and newspaper reports,” in a political strategy Clyde Barrow calls “terror without violence.”<sup>114</sup> During World War I countless academic lost their jobs because they expressed insufficient support for the war.<sup>115</sup> And after World War II, the academy largely “accommodated itself to the demands” of McCarthyism and Cold War anti-communist hysteria, as faculty were fired or silenced for fear of retaliation.<sup>116</sup> In the decades following the social and cultural revolutions of the 1960s, the Right engaged in a protracted culture war against scholars who advocated expanding the humanities and social sciences beyond the traditional Western canon. And after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a wave of hyper-nationalist academic repression took aim at critics of American foreign policy.

The sensationalized surveillance of Campus Reform shares many similarities with previous waves of academic repression. What is new, however, is the creation of a robust partisan surveillance apparatuses, paid for by undisclosed dark money donors. The panopticon has not only been privatized but now operates to score victories for the radical wing of a political party. The result is a distributed feedback loop whereby the surveillance apparatus pumps moralizing outrage into a right-wing media ecosystem, self-deputized vigilantes meet out their version of justice, and administrators

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<sup>113</sup> For a comprehensive overview of academic repression within American higher education, see: Anthony J. Nocella II, Steven Best, and Peter McLaren (eds), *Academic Repression: Reflections from the Academic Industrial Complex*. Oakland: AK Press, 2010.

<sup>114</sup> Barrow, Clyde W., *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, 232; Clyde W. Barrow, Isaac Kamola, and Heather Steffen, “Class, Politics, and Higher Education: Universities and the Capitalist State Thirty Years On,” *Journal of Academic Freedom*, vol. 12, 2021, 7.

<sup>115</sup> Carol S. Gruber, *Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of the Higher Learning in America*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975, 174.

<sup>116</sup> Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*. Oxford University Press, 1986, 340.

are called upon to respond. Creating new stories, protests, and controversy. In this context, faculty are often disciplined for making statements mainstream to their academic discipline, and even for statements they didn't make (but were concocted by college students contracted at \$50 to identify liberal bias). One doesn't need to be a member of the Communist Party, or any political organization to face retaliation. One only needs to make an off-handed comment on social media. However, because the politicization of outrage is the goal, the effects are similar: harassment, "terror without violence," and, in a number of cases, institutional sanctions and retaliation.

Schrecker argues that the political harassment of faculty during McCarthyism and the Red Scare was largely successful in creating a docile academy, "silenc[ing] an entire generation of radical intellectuals and snuff[ing] out all meaningful opposition to the official version of the Cold War."<sup>117</sup> Today, the academy faces similar, if more privatized and distributed, harassment. However, the goal is similar: for outside, partisan groups to determine what is taught, researched, and learned on campus.

How should faculty and institutions respond to organizations like Campus Reform that specialize in the sensationalized surveillance of faculty? At an institutional level, colleges and universities should work to inoculate themselves from the effects of targeted harassment. Working through channels of shared governance, faculty and administrators can develop clear policies and protocols, using AAUP guidelines, to protect faculty from the effects of sensationalized surveillance. Faculty and administrators should also do everything they can to support faculty being targeted and refuse complicity in sanctioning faculty based on allegations made by partisan groups like Campus Reform. As faculty, we must vocally defend academic freedom and provide mutual support to our colleagues who find themselves the targets of harassment. And rather than responding to the

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<sup>117</sup> Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 341.

content of Campus Reform stories—which are commonly ideologically-motivated distortions—we must make sure that our audiences (administrators, students, parents, journalists, alumni, and the broader public) know what Campus Reform is, who funds them, and how their strategy of sensationalized surveillance works. We should develop strong academic unions and professional organizations that are uncompromising in their defense of academic freedom.

But most importantly, we must continue doing the work that Campus Reform finds so threatening. As one faculty commented, “While I believe Campus Reform does have a chilling effect overall, I refuse to be cowed.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Tiede, et al., “Campus Reform Survey Results.”