SITE LICENSE ACCESS
PROVIDED BY
BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVERTISEMENT

President on a Tightrope

Boise State's leader must tread carefully through the culture war. Others may soon walk the same line.

POLITICS ON CAMPUS

By Vimal Patel | JULY 2, 2021

The letter from 28 Republican lawmakers arrived before the president had even moved into her new home.

Typically, when conservative politicians send early demands to public-college presidents, they focus on the rising cost of college. But in this three-page missive, that concern was secondary to another target: programming designed to support the college's underrepresented students.

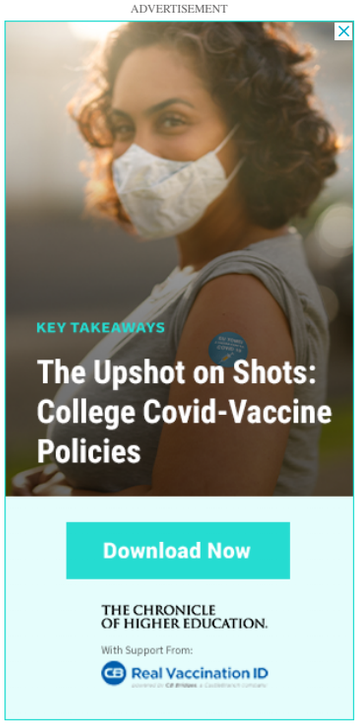
"This drive to create a diversified and inclusive culture," the lawmakers wrote to President Marlene Tromp of Boise State University, not even two weeks into her job in July 2019, "becomes divisive and exclusionary because it separates and segregates students." That is not, they said, "the Idaho way."

The letter proved to be a portent for Tromp, who has been caught between student activists' desires — and her own — for a more inclusive university and the ire of lawmakers who argue that inclusion efforts have gone too far.

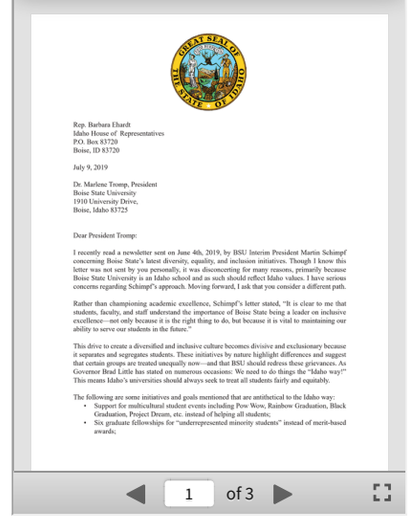
Tromp had arrived at Boise State, after serving as provost of the University of California at Santa

Letter to Marlene Tromp, July 9

ADVERTISEMENT



Cruz, with a plan to focus on student success. She grew up in a working-class family in rural Wyoming, and was sensitive to the needs of underserved students. Instead, she has found her time and energy consumed by the need to navigate partisan battles. How challenging is the political environment? Lawmakers refused to meet with her if she wore a mask, even though she is the sole caretaker for her 93-year-old mother.



Rep. Barbara Ehardt
Idaho House of Representatives
P.O. Box 83720
Boise, ID 83720

July 9, 2019

Dr. Marlene Tromp, President
Boise State University
1910 University Drive,
Boise, Idaho 83725

Dear President Tromp:

I recently read a newsletter sent on June 4th, 2019, by BSU Interim President Martin Schimpf concerning Boise State's latest diversity, equality, and inclusion initiatives. Though I know this letter was not sent by you personally, it was disconcerting for many reasons, primarily because Boise State University is an Idaho school and as such should reflect Idaho values. I have serious concerns regarding Schimpf's approach. Moving forward, I ask that you consider a different path.

Rather than championing academic excellence, Schimpf's letter stated, "It is clear to me that students, faculty, and staff understand the importance of Boise State being a leader on inclusive excellence—not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is vital to maintaining our ability to serve our students in the future."

This drive to create a diversified and inclusive culture becomes divisive and exclusionary because it separates and segregates students. These initiatives by nature highlight differences and suggest that certain groups are treated unequally now—and that BSU should redress these grievances. As Governor Brad Little has stated on numerous occasions: We need to do things the "Idaho way!" This means Idaho's universities should always seek to treat all students fairly and equitably.

The following are some initiatives and goals mentioned that are antithetical to the Idaho way:

- Support for multicultural student events including Pow Wow, Rainbow Graduation, Black Graduation, Project Dream, etc. instead of helping all students;
- Six graduate fellowships for "underrepresented minority students" instead of merit-based awards;

1 of 3

As higher education has again become a punching bag in the national culture wars, lawmakers elsewhere have taken action against equity and inclusion programs and the teaching of critical race theory, or what state bills have vaguely called "divisive" topics. But legislators in Idaho, where Republicans are the supermajority, are especially keen to prove their conservative bona fides. This spring, they set out to wrest millions of dollars from the state's colleges explicitly as punishment for the institutions' social-justice programming.
Their main target? Boise State.

Meanwhile, student activists there were becoming more vocal about perceived injustices on campus. Tromp tried to avoid angering both groups, even as their demands increasingly left little room for compromise.

Tromp is in an especially tight spot, given the mood in Idaho, but the national mood is such that college leaders elsewhere may soon find themselves in a similar bind.

ADVERTISEMENT

Tromp's supporters see a collaborative leader in an increasingly untenable situation, trying to protect the university from the budget ax. Her critics, on both ends of the ideological spectrum, see a president who has put politics above principle. Whichever is true, in making a series of decisions that have looked like acts of appeasement, Tromp's administration may actually have put the university on shakier footing.

Idahoans are wary of changes in their state.

The population has exploded in recent years. New settlers, disproportionately from California, have discovered the Gem State's low cost of living and its soaring central mountains that pump crystalline water through powerful rivers across Idaho. In the decade since the 2010 Census, the population has grown by 17 percent, the second-highest growth rate after Utah's. Even though many Californians come to Idaho precisely for its brand of rugged conservatism, longer-time residents have a deep-seated worry that the state is losing its identity, says Greg Chaney, a moderate Republican lawmaker who has been critical of his party's attack on higher education.

Idahoans look southeast to Colorado, a state they saw turn from red to purple to solid blue, Chaney says. They look west to Portland and Seattle, liberal enclaves that dominate the political cultures of their otherwise relatively moderate states. They're worried Idaho will be next, and that universities are the footholds from which this

ADVERTISEMENT

PAID FOR AND CREATED BY UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

Research Addresses Global Challenges

Learn how University of Denver faculty and students are collaborating with other institutions, community organizations and state agencies to drive positive innovation, leveraging its diverse portfolio of knowledge leaders to create global solutions.

change will spring.

While Idaho's Rocky Mountains aren't in danger of being washed away by a blue wave any time soon, Boise has in fact drifted leftward. Donald J. Trump edged out Joseph R. Biden Jr., 50 to 46 percent in Ada County. Twenty years earlier, George W. Bush almost doubled Al Gore's share of the vote. Boise State poses an easy target; the state's other three public universities are in more conservative areas and harder to pigeonhole as liberal-indoctrination machines.

But while many Republican lawmakers see a campus awash in white shaming and radical activism, the university has struggled to create a culture that is attractive and welcoming to students of color. Only 2 percent of its students are Black. (As low as that is, it is actually double the share of Idaho residents who are Black.)

Administrators in recent years have tried to be more supportive of the university's underrepresented students. This has included offering graduate fellowships geared toward those students and cultural programming like "Black Graduation." But those very efforts — or fun-house-mirror versions of them — have rankled lawmakers.

The Black graduation wasn't a separate graduation ceremony, but rather an added event open to everyone to celebrate the achievements of Black students, a now-common practice at colleges. Still the Idaho Freedom Foundation, a libertarian think tank that has played an outsized role in Idaho politics, elicited outrage about the event, which the foundation called a "segregationist" ceremony, in a fundraising letter asking for $5 to help combat it. (For each $50 donation, the group promised to send a copy of *The Coddling of the American Mind*, a 2018 book about intolerance among college students, to a Boise State or University of Idaho administrator.)

Administrators have been responding, in part, to increased demands from students for more diversity and parity. Tromp pledged to continue the campus's diversity efforts. It's the job of a public university, she told *Idaho Education News* in response to the lawmakers' letter, "to provide both the academic rigor and the support students need" to succeed in their careers and lives. The Black graduation, and similar events for other groups of students, were part of this effort, she explained at the time.

ADVERTISEMENT

The death of George Floyd under the knee of a white police officer in May of 2020 was a turning point. The student government, generally driven by low-octane issues of planning campus events and distributing money to university clubs, was consumed instead by acrimonious debates over racial justice and policing.

If lawmakers were in search of a narrative about the excesses of higher education, the university in the months ahead would give them one, just in time for the legislative session. It all started with a Snapchat post about a local coffee shop.

In healthier times, the Big City Coffee incident might have been a low-stakes business dispute. Instead, it became prime fodder for the Case Against Boise State, enraging many lawmakers sure that the university was infringing on free speech just as they were preparing their most pointed attack on diversity efforts. It was also a flashpoint for student activists, who were convinced the business owner was racist. The truth was far more complicated.

A student on Snapchat in October pointed out that Big City Coffee, which had an on-campus shop and one in downtown Boise, displayed a "thin blue line" emblem. Some who display the symbol, an American flag with one white stripe replaced by a blue one, say it represents solidarity with a much-maligned profession that protects and serves. But to many the emblem has come to represent a retort to the Black Lives Matter movement. The student, like many others, had supported the local business when it replaced the on-campus Starbucks. But that was before learning that the owner supported the police.

The owner, Sarah Jo Fendley, reposted that student's message on Instagram along with an explanation about why she displays the emblem at the off-campus shop: Her fiancé, a member of the Boise Police Department, had been hit with five bullets and paralyzed in a shootout with a fugitive. Fendley, who later described herself a moderate and tending to vote for Democrats, said she deeply valued first responders and service members, noting that she has a brother who is a firefighter and another one in the Air Force. Her post didn't mention Black Lives Matter, but students were outraged.

The student government's vice president wrote an email to student leaders and Tromp the morning after the Instagram post. The message was "extremely harmful," she wrote. "How will Big City be held accountable?" The student government's ethics officer added his view: The university had not sought adequate student opinion before bringing the coffee shop to an on-campus location — an act he described as "oppressive." He called for "a complete and immediate removal of Big City Coffee from campus."

Responding to the growing outrage among student leaders, university officials summoned Fendley to a meeting that very day — without, according to her, describing its purpose. She declined an interview request from *The Chronicle*. Top university administrators, including Alicia Estey, chief of staff and the university's chief legal officer, were present. Tromp was not. The university declined to comment for this story, but has said that it had convened the group to foster dialogue. To Fendley, the presence of legal counsel suggested otherwise.

What was said during the meeting is in dispute. But within a week, the on-campus coffee location was shuttered, and 18 students were out of a job, according to Fendley.

The university says it never asked the coffee shop to leave campus. "At no time did the administration ask Big City Coffee to compromise the owner's First Amendment rights," stated an official Facebook post on October 28. "Boise State was working with the owner to help find a successful resolution to the concerns regarding free speech on campus. Big City Coffee's recent actions signal that the business has chosen to leave."

The outrage flowed easily, in nearly 1,000 comments on the Facebook post.

ADVERTISEMENT

KEY TAKEAWAYS
The Upshot on Shots:
College Covid-Vaccine Policies
Download Now
THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION.
With Support From:
Real Vaccination ID

"Hey Boise, enjoy becoming the next Portland."

"Cancel the cancel culture."

"This is a prime example of the crap being allowed on college campuses around the country."

The Idaho Freedom Foundation joined in, ensuring that right-wing lawmakers concerned with how they rated on the group's Freedom Index would pay attention. Chris Mathias, a Democratic representative and the state's only Black member of the Legislature, was exasperated at how the business dispute became "a right-wing fundraising dream" — and a little in awe at how well the university's opponents created a narrative around the issue.

“Conservatives are really good at issue framing,” said Mathias, a former Boise State student-body president. “Big City Coffee did not get ‘kicked off campus,’ yet even I still find myself using that phrase.” Mathias said the owner wanted the university to clamp down on the speech rights of students calling for the removal of the business, and decided to end the relationship when the university refused to “support” her against the students’ criticisms, as she asked.

The current student-body president was also frustrated, for different reasons.

JOAN WONG FOR THE CHRONICLE, PHOTO BY TANA RUUD

Angel Cantu

Angel Cantu hasn’t been afraid to challenge the dominant culture. He grew up in Southern Idaho, a working-class Hispanic kid in a town with many Mormon and affluent students. When he ran for his high school’s student-body presidency, his opponent’s father was a local businessman who brought in a food truck for his daughter’s campaign. Cantu pieced together a coalition of refugee, Hispanic, and working-class students to win the election.

Now, as student-body president at Boise State University, he watched with unease as the emails came in that morning from fellow student leaders wanting to remove Big City Coffee from campus. For months, Cantu, who describes himself as liberal, believed other student leaders were becoming increasingly intolerant of conservative viewpoints. So he started typing.

“Sympathizing with an injured police officer and supporting first responders should not *in itself* be defined as a harmful act,” he wrote to the group. “Only when individuals use support of police and first responders to undermine the struggles of the BIPOC community should it be considered harmful. However, this is not what the purpose of [Fendley’s] post seemed to be.”

Cantu concluded by noting that he would support student-government legislation calling for an end to the relationship with Big City Coffee if the shop displayed “a pattern of derogatory behavior toward our BIPOC community.”

ADVERTISEMENT

“I will not, however, support any legislation that uses ‘sympathy toward first responders’ as its sole reason for removing Big City Coffee.”

Cantu says he felt obligated to speak up because he sensed that white students, afraid of being seen as on the wrong side of diversity and inclusion, didn’t want to argue with the activists. He thought he would have more leeway to dissent. He miscalculated.

“Yikes,” came the first response. “The white supremacy is spilling out.”

“You silenced my voice and many others by invalidating our experiences and harm," wrote another.

Cantu's position in student government was already precarious. In the months following the killing of George Floyd, fellow student leaders had wanted the university to end its contract with the Boise Police Department immediately. Cantu was the student representative on a public-safety committee asked to make a recommendation to Tromp about the contract. The committee recommended renewing it for another year, citing the lack of time to figure out a replacement for policing services.

Here, too, Cantu tried to make a nuanced argument. He was not necessarily opposed to ending the contract with the police department, but thought a replacement for policing services needed to be figured out first, and the committee was up against a tight deadline.

"In no way do I want to undermine the national movement to protect black lives and defund police departments," he wrote. "However we have to look at this complicated situation through a University scope, not a national one." Activists responded that Cantu wasn't meeting the urgency of the moment.

The day after the Big City Coffee controversy blew up, student leaders filed impeachment charges against him. The charges cover a litany of grievances that center on Cantu's failure to properly represent students. The document states that Cantu "continually perpetuates white supremacist culture, after all [Associated Students of Boise State University] officials pledged to eliminate toxic white supremacy behaviors in our organization."

In the hypercharged period in November after Americans went to the polls but before the news media declared Biden the winner, Cantu was impeached and removed from office.

The experience changed him. A political-science major who envisioned a career in politics, Cantu now has doubts. He's much less willing to "look the other way" at the excesses of activists in his own party. "This just opened my eyes to what politics is like nowadays," he says. "I know I'll have to face more of what I went through in the impeachment. Everyone picks a side, and they just cater to one side. The way I represent people — in a broad and fair sense — it just rubs people the wrong way."

ADVERTISEMENT

Right after the impeachment, Cantu avoided speaking with local and national reporters. One professor offered to get him onto Tucker Carlson's top-rated TV program. Cantu did not want to be used as ammunition in the right-wing attack on universities, even though he believed administrators had caved in to the student activists on the Big City Coffee dispute.

Conservative lawmakers "have had a distaste for higher education and Boise State specifically and were just waiting for this opportunity," Cantu says. The budget cuts probably would have occurred regardless of the campus-culture skirmishes of the fall, he adds, "but they now had a perfect narrative about the university to sell to their constituents."

Ron Nate was furious.

The Republican from eastern Idaho, a member of the powerful Joint Finance-

JOAN WONG FOR THE CHRONICLE

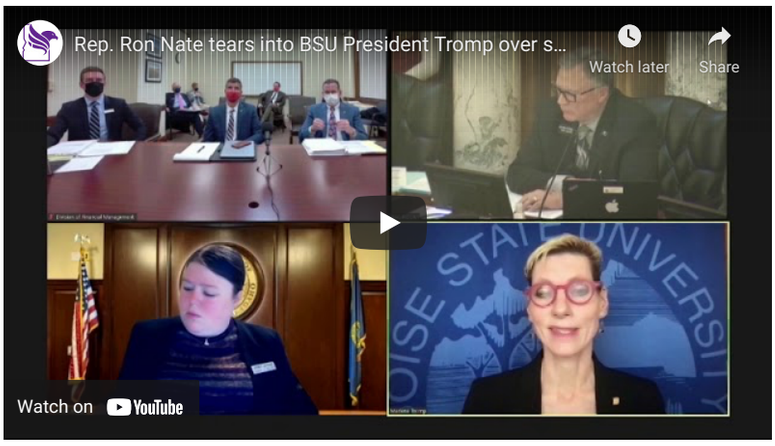
Ron Nate

Appropriations Committee, is not who you'd expect to be leading the charge to trim the higher-education budget: He's an economics professor at Brigham Young University-Idaho. "I love higher education," says Nate. Not all of it, however. "The student-equity office, the gender-equity office — that's actually critical race theory in action," says Nate, who took part in a mask burning in March. "It's dividing students into groups and treating them differently based on either their gender or race."

Much of Nate's critique of higher education sounds indistinguishable from the Idaho Freedom Foundation's talking points — he has a near-perfect Freedom Index score of 99 — filled with second- and thirdhand accounts about indoctrination on college campuses. But he did make a point about Big City Coffee that even supporters of the university found to be reasonable. He said the university ought to have used the Big City Coffee situation as a "teaching moment," forcefully explaining to students that the business owner had a First Amendment right to display a pro-police emblem rather than fearing the wrath of activists.

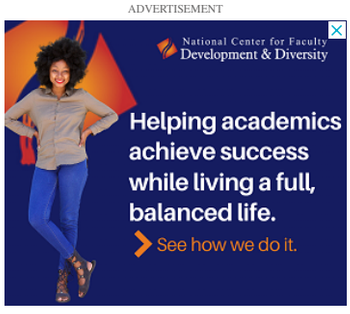
But when Tromp was called before the budget committee in January, Nate's language was more pointed. He lamented that Boise State was "shifting dramatically from being a premier institution of higher education toward becoming an institute of higher indoctrination." The campus-culture skirmishes of the fall were also on his mind. The university, he said, had ended its relationship with the local police department. (It had not.) It had "effectively expelled" the coffee shop from campus, a characterization the university disputes. Boise State had "singled itself out" for legislative scrutiny, he later said in an interview.

Tromp calmly corrected Nate. "There has been a great deal of misinformation that has fueled a sense that the university doesn't care about what Idahoans think," Tromp responded. "That is simply inaccurate." Far from cutting ties with the police department, the university had "renewed our contract at a time when there was a great deal of conflict around this issue."



Tromp tried to put the focus on student success. She cited a first-year retention rate of nearly 80 percent, a 20 percentage-point increase from 15 years before, and a six-year graduation rate nearing 54 percent, up from 30 percent a decade prior, according to *Idaho Education News*.

ADVERTISEMENT



Nate was not satisfied. Neither were many of his colleagues. "Social-justice involvement has got support for BSU in the ditch with the legislature and with constituents," said Carl Crabtree, a Republican, according to the campus newspaper, *The Arbiter*. "We've tried for over a year to have our voices heard by that university and we've been largely unsuccessful."

Crabtree proposed a $409,000 cut from the university to send a message about its social-justice programming.

A Democratic lawmaker on the appropriations committee describes a surreal scene during a working-group meeting. "One of the Republican senators came into the room, and he's just like, 'We need to ban critical race theory,'" says Colin Nash, from Boise. "And the legislative drafter — nonpartisan staff — said, 'OK. If you want to ban critical race theory, you need to define it.' And he says, 'I don't know what critical race theory is.' And he was laughing at himself about it. That's a general sentiment among people who are legislating this, which is, 'I don't know, but someone told me this is real bad.'"

Many Republicans — though not enough to win the day — were frustrated by the emphasis on cultural wedge issues. Chaney, the moderate Republican, believes the attacks are not principled, but tactical. "It's a way to get a portion of the GOP really fired up," he says.

"Most people have a deep tradition of supporting our universities," he says. "They may resent some of the curriculum, but at the end of the day ripping on the universities is not a winning approach."

But that was the approach that dominated this legislative session. And Republicans

But that was the approach that dominated this legislative session. And Republicans weren't done. They didn't think the $409,000 reduction took away *enough* from Boise State to send a message.

Nate had another number in mind: About $18 million, mostly from Boise State. How did he arrive at the number? It was based on the Idaho Freedom Foundation's analysis of what social-justice programming at universities was costing.

Amid this backdrop, when it was unclear just how much of a funding hit the university would take, Tromp made a decision that floored many faculty members and academic-freedom advocates.

Responding to an unverified complaint that "a student or students" had been humiliated in class for "their beliefs and values," the university suspended all 52 sections of a diversity and ethics course, University Foundations 200, affecting some 1,300 students. To many, the decision felt Kafkaesque. It wasn't clear which student or students had complained, what precisely was alleged to have occurred, or what professor was involved. Or whether the alleged incident or incidents had even taken place.

Much as critics from Tromp's right thought she had appeased student activists in the Big City Coffee controversy, academic-freedom advocates now saw her caving in to right-wing lawmakers to ward off potential budget reductions.

ADVERTISEMENT

The suspension was a "wild overreaction" that will have a "chilling effect" on academic freedom, says Adam B. Steinbaugh, an attorney for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. He says that in his five years with the free-speech group he's never seen anything like this. The proper course of action, he said, would have been to "expeditiously undertake an investigation into credible allegations of abuse or harassment," not suspend the course based on a vague allegation.

He added: "It's impossible to divorce this decision from the overall political context in which the legislature was breathing down the neck of the university about these very classes and the university suspended them, on the eve of a critical vote on the university's budget."

University officials say the class was suspended only for a week, and then resumed in an online format for the rest of the semester without any live classroom discussions. In interviews with *The Chronicle* and other news outlets, Tromp has denied that politics played any role in the decision to suspend the courses. She says her only concern was protecting students.

But emails obtained by *The Chronicle* show that her administration forwarded news that the diversity course would be suspended to a Republican lawmaker before informing the faculty. One minute after Tromp's executive assistant sent the release about the suspension to a handful of top administrators, the university's director of government and community relations forwarded it to Crabtree, the lawmaker who had proposed the $409,000 reduction. The Faculty Senate president received it 20 minutes later. Over the course of the day, according to the emails reviewed by *The Chronicle*, the government-relations director forwarded the message to several lawmakers — all of them Republican.

If the suspension bought any goodwill from the university's critics, it was short lived. Less than two weeks later, Big City Coffee filed a tort claim for $10 million against the university, for damages related to the shop's departure, reopening the painful wound from the fall. The claim argues that university "forced" the business from campus "for the sole reason that the owner supports law enforcement and is engaged to a Boise police officer, which conflicts with the Administration's extreme social justice agenda." The claim reads as much as a political document as a legal one, painting the picture of a university that "elevates 'diversity and inclusivity' above all else."

JOAN WONG FOR THE CHRONICLE

Chris Mathias

The Idaho Freedom Foundation urged House lawmakers to read Fendley's complaint before voting on the budget for Idaho's colleges. The group called a $409,000 cut "barely a blip" in Boise State's budget and not enough to punish the university for its "continued institutionalized bigotry."

Citing the pending tort claim, Tromp declined to comment. "I can't tell you the nuanced and complex story right now, but there is one, of course," Tromp says. "One of the things I was fiercely committed to doing was not silencing our students. There were people who were angry that I did not do that."

House lawmakers rejected the budget, and the budget committee proposed another one. Citing Boise State's social-justice programming, it cut $1.5 million from its budget and threw in $500,000 cuts to the University of Idaho and Idaho State University, too.

Mathias, the Democratic lawmaker, voted "yes" on the new budget, not because he thought universities ought to be punished for their diversity and equity programming, but because he feared that each time the House killed the budget and kicked it back to the appropriations committee, the cut to higher education would keep getting closer to Nate's desired $18-million reduction. With the larger cuts to Boise State, and the critical race theory bill signed by the governor, the budget passed, and higher education's tumultuous legislative session was over.

Mathias worries that the university will be in the same spot next year. "Republican leadership in the state is trying to manage a situation that needs to be led," he says, arguing that GOP pushback against the Idaho Freedom Foundation hasn't been forceful enough. "There will be new controversies, and opponents of social justice and critical race theory will offer them up as additional evidence of indoctrination running amok. It's time for leaders in the Republican party to lead."

ADVERTISEMENT

In late May, two weeks after the legislative session ended, the university released its investigation into the UF 200 incident. It found no incident that matched the complaint and concluded that the report, as many faculty members suspected, was unfounded. That didn't matter to the Idaho Freedom Foundation, which called on the governor to conduct “a truly independent investigation of the social-justice rot at Boise State.”

“A university that ran the Boise Police Department off campus,” the group wrote, repeating a debunked lie, “cannot be trusted to objectively evaluate its own political biases.”

Asked whether she plans to cut any of the programming that lawmakers have expressed concern about, Tromp skirts the question. “We will help students in a way that helps them be more successful,” she says. “I will always be open to being in dialogue with our legislators about that.”

JOAN WONG FOR THE CHRONICLE, PHOTOS FROM BOISE STATE U.

Marlene Tromp

Tromp says part of her job is separating the broadsides from the honest criticism, and always acting in good faith even when the university’s critics may not be. “Everyday students and everyday people are truly afraid that their freedom of speech has been suppressed,” Tromp says. “The report, which suggests that it’s not happening in our classrooms in that course, doesn’t mean that we don’t have work to do as an institution.”

She hopes to do some of that work through a new institute at Boise State she announced after the dust settled on the legislative session. The Institute for Advancing American Values would bring liberals and conservatives to campus “to model healthy dialogue,” she says. Andrew S. Finstuen, an associate history professor who would be the institute’s executive director, says it will host talks, panels, and research to explore “competing notions of the future and the past of the American story.”

“We felt like we needed a new vehicle to help spur that conversation at Boise State,” he said.

Finstuen puts the current crisis in historical context. Higher education has in some ways always been under a microscope, he says, because “what we’re actually going to be conveying to our young people is paramount.” Just think back to the Red Scare. Still, he says, this moment represents “a high pitch of concern,” where universities are being accused of imposing their values on students. “We’re maybe not speaking about values as openly as we ought to.”

The new center is “exactly the right idea,” says Keith Allred, the executive director of the National Institute for Civil Discourse, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., created by the University of Arizona.

“You may not be able to communicate effectively and in good faith with the Idaho Freedom Foundation — and you don’t need to,” says Allred, who was the Democratic party’s nominee for Idaho governor in 2010 and a professor of negotiation and conflict resolution at Harvard.

ADVERTISEMENT

The critique of universities is "often expressed by the right in excessive ways," but institutions shouldn't use that as an excuse to not take a close look at how hospitable they are to conservative viewpoints, Allred says. "Even if 90 percent of what they're saying is exaggerated and extreme, is there 10 percent here of a message we ought to hear and respond to?"

Tromp entered her presidency an outsider, warned by lawmakers that she must make sure the university upheld the "Idaho way." Two years later, she has further to go to persuade them it will.

This summer she will travel the state, making the case for her university. Idaho covers more than 83,000 square miles, but its population is tiny, about the size of Phoenix's. That has helped the university's critics tell stories that stick in a way they wouldn't in larger markets. Mathias says the pandemic, by preventing in-person meetings, has made those stories even harder to dispel.

"It's really hard to sit down in a room with someone face to face and tell them they're discriminating against white students because they're teaching critical race theory," Mathias says. "It's a lot easier when you're just posting on Facebook and trying to raise money."

Tromp and other administrators aren't naïve about the challenge. Ideologues may not be interested in the ideals of the new institute, which may even become a lightning rod, depending on who's invited to speak and how "American values" are defined. Her critics would like her to take a stronger stand against the partisans, but Tromp has made the calculation that to defeat the extremists she must expand the center. Whether or not that is possible in today's America is an open question.

A version of this article appeared in the July 9, 2021, issue.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

LEADERSHIP POLITICS

Vimal Patel

Vimal Patel covers student life, social mobility, and other topics. Follow him on Twitter @vimalpatel232, or write to him at vimal.patel@chronicle.com.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

EXPLORE
Newsletters
The Review
Blogs
Virtual Events
Chronicle Store
Find a Job

THE CHRONICLE
About Us
Work at The Chronicle
User Agreement
Privacy Policy
Site Map
Accessibility Statement

CUSTOMER ASSISTANCE
Contact Us
Advertise With Us
Post a Job
Reprints & Permissions

SUBSCRIBE
Individual Subscriptions
Institutional Subscriptions
Subscription & Account FAQ
Manage Newsletters
Manage Your Account

1255 23rd Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037
© 2021 The Chronicle of Higher Education

Twitter Instagram Youtube Facebook Linkedin