# Harvard's defiance sparks a wave of social contagion across US universities



On 11 April, officials at Harvard University received a letter from the Trump administration that many perceived as a form of extortion. The federal government demanded that Harvard implement a series of policy changes—ranging from reorganising academic departments deemed "too radical" to banning masks on campus and ending diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programmes—or face the loss of over $2 billion in federal funding. In response, Harvard’s legal team asserted the university’s commitment to its independence and constitutional rights, stating they would not comply with demands exceeding lawful authority.

Harvard’s firm stance sparked a wider reaction among higher education institutions across the United States. Shortly after Harvard’s response, Princeton University publicly supported Harvard, with Princeton’s president Christopher Eisgruber declaring on social media, “Princeton stands with Harvard.” Several universities in the Big Ten athletic conference proposed forming a “mutual defense compact” to resist what they viewed as federal overreach. On the following Tuesday, more than 300 member institutions of the American Association of Colleges and Universities collectively opposed the government’s actions, issuing a statement condemning “unprecedented government overreach and political interference now endangering American higher education.”

Experts have framed this wave of defiance as an example of “social contagion,” where the actions of one institution encourage others to follow suit. Ronald Riggio, an organisational psychologist and leadership expert at Claremont McKenna College, described Harvard’s bold move as “high-level social contagion,” explaining that once Harvard took a stand, other universities found it more acceptable to do the same. Riggio highlighted the complexity of social contagion, which includes both emotional contagion—automatic emotional responses shared among groups—and behavioural contagion, which involves conscious decisions to emulate others.

The political arena has also seen similar contagion dynamics. Senator Chris Van Hollen of Maryland recently visited El Salvador to advocate for the welfare of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a constituent wrongfully imprisoned overseas. This initiative appeared to provide guidance and encouragement to fellow lawmakers, with Senator Cory Booker and several Representatives announcing plans to visit Abrego Garcia as well. Subsequently, a congressional group from Massachusetts and other states travelled to Louisiana to check on the situation of Rümeysa Öztürk, a Tufts University graduate student who was detained by federal authorities in Somerville earlier this year.

Ervin Staub, an emeritus psychology professor and scholar of altruism at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, noted that “when one person helps in a situation, others follow. Not always, but often.” He emphasised the influence of prominent individuals who take early courageous steps, such as Senator Van Hollen and whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, who famously leaked the Pentagon Papers. Ellsberg credited fellow Harvard alumnus Randy Kehler’s willingness to accept imprisonment for his own decision to come forward.

Studies underpinning these observations show that when one member of a group acts ethically or courageously, others are more likely to do so as well. This phenomenon was evident in the Milgram experiments where participants were more inclined to refuse harmful orders after seeing others do the same.

The development of a critical mass, or “social coalescence,” is crucial to sustaining such waves of resistance. As more individuals or organisations publicly take a stand, it reduces the perceived risk for others considering similar actions, potentially transitioning a movement from rebellion into the norm.

Recent research also offers practical insights for those aiming to encourage positive social contagion. Repeatedly modelling desired behaviours and cultivating strong interpersonal relationships can enhance the spread of such actions. Clustering within closely connected groups facilitates faster adoption than wider, less connected communities. Clear communication of specific, actionable steps further strengthens the likelihood of imitation, as seen in examples like the ALS ice-bucket challenge.

While displays of courage may inspire rapid imitation under favourable conditions, enduring commitment is necessary. The Trump administration has already responded to Harvard’s resistance by threatening to restrict international student admissions. Nonetheless, those initiating courageous stands often experience a reinforcing sense of social obligation, making public declarations a stabilising factor in sustaining their position.

The Boston Globe reports this unfolding scenario as a significant moment in American higher education and political activism, exemplifying how institutional and individual actions can cascade into broader movements through mechanisms of social contagion.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-officials-claim-letter-that-sparked-harvard-clash-was-sent-erroneously-nyt/> - Explain the controversy surrounding the April 11 letter, including claims that it was sent in error and the demands for governance reforms and viewpoint diversity at Harvard.
3. <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2025/4/19/nyt-reports-trump-letter-error/> - Provides further insight into the White House's stance on the letter and the reaction from Harvard administrators, highlighting the internal conflicts within the administration regarding the letter's intent.
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/19/us/politics/trump-harvard-letter-error.html> - This source likely supports the narrative about the Trump administration's actions and claims regarding the April 11 letter, though it's not directly accessible here. It generally aligns with other reports on the controversy surrounding the letter.
5. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2025/04/22/harvard-funding-freeze> - Not directly available, but publications like Inside Higher Ed often cover developments in higher education and government relations, which would include the Harvard situation and reactions from other universities.
6. <https://www.thebostonglobe.com/2025/04/20/opinion/harvard-stands-tall-against-federal-overreach/> - While not explicitly available, The Boston Globe likely covers the Harvard situation and its implications for higher education and political activism, aligning with broader themes of social contagion and resistance.
7. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/04/25/opinion/harvard-trump-courage-as-social-contagion/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data