

# GOP eyes new era of college oversight

## Plans may mean more federal intervention

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WASHINGTON – There’s an irony to how some Republicans are thinking about policing the nation’s colleges.

On one hand, conservatives believe in small government and fewer regulations. An executive order issued by then-President Donald Trump in 2017 directed every federal agency, including the U.S. Department of Education, to “alleviate unnecessary regulatory burdens.” Before he secured a second term this month, Trump called for the Education Department to be dismantled.

On the other hand, Republicans have become increasingly critical of campus “wokeness” and are pitching big ideas about reforming how colleges work. But those proposals would likely require more government intervention, not less.

The president-elect, for instance, wants to create a new tuition-free university funded entirely by taxes on the richest schools. Others in his party have demanded that the federal government intervene to curb diversity, equity and inclusion positions and programs while doing more to address antisemitism on campuses. Several far-reaching GOP bills in Congress – proposing to reshape the student loan system to end “wokeness” on campus – would dramatically change the rules governing colleges and the students they serve.

With the Republican Party set to control all the levers of power in Washington on Jan. 20, the GOP’s plans to overhaul higher education are on a collision course with its efforts to limit the federal government’s authority. Big changes may be difficult given Republicans’ slim margins on Capitol Hill and recent Supreme Court rulings limiting government intervention. But all indications point to a new era of college oversight.

“It’s our job to expose what’s happening” on college campuses, Rep. Virginia Foxx, the outgoing chair of the committee overseeing education in the U.S. House of Representatives, told USA TODAY in an interview this week. “That’s



Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., the outgoing chair of the committee overseeing education in the U.S. House, said federal overreach in education must be curbed.

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what oversight does.”

Still, the North Carolina congresswoman agrees with Trump that federal overreach must be curbed.

“It is going to be difficult to get the federal government out of its role in education,” she said.

Andy Smarick, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, said two different visions could shape how the Republican Party approaches higher education policy.

One of those blueprints would involve “getting the federal government out of education as much as possible,” he said. If Trump chooses that path, he could inhibit the Education Department’s ability to make rules and issue guidance. Or he could try to abolish the agency as he has pledged (though experts say such a proposal would likely face an uphill battle in Congress, even with Republican control).

Another approach, according to Smarick, would be to issue more conservative regulations.

“Traditionally, Republicans have done the former,” he said. “It appears that Donald Trump doesn’t come from that school.”

During Trump’s first term, the Edu-

cation Department rescinded many Obama-era rules and wrote its own versions of them. One that received lots of attention concerned Title IX, a federal statute that prevents sex-based misconduct at schools that receive federal funding. Under Betsy DeVos, Trump’s education secretary, the Education Department raised the bar on how much evidence was necessary for investigations, prompting critics to say she’d bolstered the rights of people accused of sexual assault and harassment.

The agency reversed course under President Joe Biden, eliminating the Trump-era rules and attempting to expand the definition of sex-based misconduct to include discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The Biden administration’s new policies have since been halted in most states amid legal challenges.

Shiwali Patel, who worked as an attorney in the Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights during the Obama administration and resigned during Trump’s first term, said she worries about the plans Republicans have for her former workplace.

“They clearly have an agenda to roll back any sort of progress made under

the Biden administration on Title IX,” she said, “and to go even further and weaponize Title IX to engage in further discrimination against students.”

If Trump rescinds the Biden administration’s guidance, students who identify as LGBTQ+ and those who experience sexual misconduct may feel less safe on some campuses, according to Brendan Cantwell, a higher education professor at Michigan State University.

“It is going to feel like your campus is providing you fewer protections,” he said.

The federal government’s student loan system could also see big changes in Trump’s second term. Although Biden approved billions in student loan relief for millions of Americans, his attempts to launch new repayment programs or fix existing ones have been met with more unfavorable court battles.

It’s likely that the incoming administration will reverse some of those programs or shrink them, said Karen McCarthy, the vice president of public policy and federal relations at the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

“There are lots of ways to kill something,” she said. “You can just not prioritize it.”

Much remains unclear about what the Republican trifecta will do to change the nation’s colleges. In the meantime, some Washington experts are turning for clues to a conservative bill that Foxx, the Republican congresswoman from North Carolina, introduced this past January.

The 224-page College Cost Reduction Act would impose sweeping – and controversial – reforms to the higher education system. The proposals in the bill include stricter caps on student loan borrowing and a program that would effectively force colleges to co-sign loans. While some have argued the bill would prevent certain groups from attending college and leave more Americans saddled with debt, Foxx and her GOP colleagues say it would make the system fairer and unburden taxpayers.

Foxx said she’s consulting with congressional leadership about bringing the bill to the House floor before the end of the year.