

Press Release

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Shifting political culture threatens academic freedom

In recent years, populism, nationalism and new forms of aggressive escalation have been exerting a growing influence on political culture in the West. Fundamental values of liberal democracy such as freedom of expression and tolerance are coming under attack. The consequences of this radicalisation on science in Germany and the USA was the focus of a two-day event held at the Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles.

Prof Dr Peter-André Alt, President of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK): "Democratic societies are based on the free exchange of views, the competition of verifiable arguments and the quest for rational solutions. These foundations are also essential for research and teaching at universities. This means that universities bear a particular responsibility towards examining the current shift in political culture. They need to conduct a scientific analysis of current processes. What is more, they need to contribute to social debates and critically reflect on and further develop their own functional capability as places of open exchange."

DFG Vice-President Prof Dr Julika Griem: "Research funding institutions also need to face up to attacks on academic freedom and strengthen, but also examine their value orientation and processes. On the one hand, this means defending the autonomy of researchers and research institutions. On the other hand, research needs to be established within a social framework. However, it must not give into the temptation of retreating behind the power of facts. Contestation of findings and separation of knowledge from certainty are essential components of pluralistic societies. We need to jointly strive towards creating uniform foundations for our institutions of education and research. Shifting this examination to quantified and automated processes will not suffice."

"Radically politicized and polarized opinion is making constructive public discussion about even the most urgent issues increasingly difficult. There is a huge and essential role for the university to play as both the home for informed inquiry and debate, and as a model for the larger public of the value of this shared search for the answers to difficult questions and concerns. The critical challenge for universities at this time will be how best resist the destructive external forces and the internal pressures that threaten this mission. American universities during the McCarthy era and German universities during the rise of National Socialism demonstrate how easily even the best educational institutions can lose their way." commented Steven Lavine, President Emeritus of CalArts and Chair of the Advisory Board, Thomas Mann House.

"An Appeal to Reason": Academia's Response to Current Shifts in Political Culture is a joint event by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) and the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) in cooperation with the Thomas Mann House. The event is part of the ongoing "Deutschlandjahr USA – Year of German American Friendship".

