



EDITORIAL

Is the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) a curse or a blessing for universities?

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 OPEN ACCESS

PUBLISHED

31 July 2025

CITATION

Ariely, D., 2025. Is the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) a curse or a blessing for universities? Medical Research Archives, [online] 13(7).

<https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v13i7.6827>

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DOI

<https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v13i7.6827>

ISSN

2375-1924

ABSTRACT

As faculty members many of us are experiencing a period of uncertainty and stress about the future of academia. In this short opinion piece, I reflect on my own journey. Similar to the different stages of grief, I have gone through my own stages of dealing with the clash between academia and the Trump administration. My first step was academic curiosity about the proposed changes by the administration. My second step was worry and stress. I then understood some of the ways in which academic institutions have been complicit in creating the current state of affairs. Finally, my current stage is hopefulness that the new rules imposed by DOGE could help universities reinvent themselves in a way that is more useful for institutions of higher education and for society as a whole.

Curiosity

As a behavioral scientist, I am both personally and professionally, captivated by instances where a significant new incentive is introduced into a complex system. These moments are filled with uncertainty and offer numerous opportunities to gain new insights into human nature. As a social scientist, I dedicate much of my time to crafting small-scale experiments to observe how minor nudges can positively influence human behavior. Rarely do I have the chance to implement major changes and observe their effects.

So, when a change comes along that is less of an elegant nudge and more of a sledgehammer to foundations, I can't help but watch with wide-eyed curiosity for what lessons we could glean from the sledgehammer approach. That was my initial reaction when the Trump administration, with the characteristic disruptive flair of Elon Musk, announced the creation of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

I was anticipating that once the dust settled on the changes introduced by the Department of Government Efficiency, we might gain new and meaningful insights into human nature and bureaucratic systems. My hope was that we could discover ways to improve results from both individuals and systems. However, considering the law of unintended consequences, I also expected to learn some less favorable lessons about how things can go wrong. I wasn't too worried about these negative consequences because from a learning standpoint, some of the most crucial insights often emerge from negative, unexpected, and unintended consequences. They offer important warnings about pitfalls we must strive to avoid in the future.

Wait a minute

It wasn't long before my perspective shifted. By a lot. Almost immediately, the focus of DOGE was aimed at a target I know all too well: universities. The initial directives from DOGE aimed at universities were a masterclass in amateur behavioral engineering—or at least, this is how it seemed to me. These weren't simple budget cuts; they were a set of intricate and complex new rules designed to rewire the academic incentive structure from the outside. It started with a dramatic reduction on overhead rates, and increased taxation on the endowment. But this was not the end. One proposed approach, for instance, tied a university's access to federal research grants—the lifeblood of modern science—to a newly invented "administrative efficiency ratio." Suddenly, the number of vice-provosts, special assistants, and senior directors to the number of full-time professors (the ones actually fulfilling the mission of the university by carrying out research and teaching) became a high-stakes variable. The predictable, and immediate, result was chaos. We saw frantic efforts by the people in charge of the changes (the bureaucrats and administration of the university) not to reduce the size of the administration, but instead to come up with creative approaches for how to account for things, maybe even to start reclassifying administrators as having "teaching responsibilities," a textbook example of Goodhart's Law in action: "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure."

Since the universities were expecting budget shrinks, they prepared for it in the way that universities do. They showed no interest in using their endowments to pay for the shortfall, and instead came up with alternative plans. For example, at my university, Duke, the administration created a new rule where any purchase at any amount needs to go through a long chain of approval. This meant that there would be some reduction in spending, but it also meant that there was an increase in the need of administrators to go over all the purchasing requests, approve some, and reject many.

The biases

My initial reaction, and that of nearly every colleague I spoke to, was a deep, visceral objection. This wasn't a detached, intellectual disagreement; it was the raw, emotional response you feel when your identity is attacked. In behavioral terms, it was a perfect storm of reactance, motivated reasoning, and an in-group bias. Reactance is that stubborn, oppositional feeling we get when someone tries to limit our freedom. We don't just disagree, we want to do the opposite, just to prove we can. Tell a child not to touch a shiny red button, and that button becomes the most fascinating object in the universe. Tell a group of professors—people who have built their entire careers on autonomy and intellectual freedom—that they must now justify every computer part to some university bureaucrat, and you trigger that same primal instinct. The second bias, motivated reasoning, was also clearly present. Motivated reasoning is what we all feel when we go to a basketball game between our most beloved team and a team we deeply dislike. It is two minutes to the end of the game, and the referee is making a call against our team. At that moment, we all recognize that we can't possibly view reality in an objective way, and we are limited to view it from the perspective of what we want reality to be. Academics are not different. We wanted DOGE to be wrong and for us to be right.

We became less like impartial judges and more like lawyers building a case for a client we love — and this client was us. Compounding this was a powerful in-group effect, a psychological bias where we instinctively favor our own group and view outsiders with suspicion. Suddenly, "we" (the scholars, the educators, the seekers of truth) were being targeted by "them" (the political operatives, the business tycoons, the efficiency authorities). This framing wasn't accurate, but it allowed us to rally together, reinforce our shared identity through furious emails and indignant Zoom calls, dismissing the criticism as a crude, uninformed assault from outsiders who simply didn't—and couldn't—understand the sacred, nuanced mission of universities. It was a comforting narrative, and for a few days, I fully subscribed to it.

The realization

After the initial wave of indignation subsided, a more nagging and uncomfortable thought began to creep into my thinking. As a researcher, my job is to hold off on quick judgments, to look at the data, and to question my own biases—especially when I know that my emotions are running high. So, I decided to take this as an opportunity for reflection. I tried to step outside my own threatened identity and ask a more difficult question: What is it

about our behavior as universities and faculty that annoyed the Trump administration, and a significant portion of the public, so much?

Looking into it as objectively as I could, gave me a serious pause. I read lots of critiques online, I looked at charts of tuition versus inflation, and I scanned the exploding organizational charts of my own institution. I realized that while I don't like the changes proposed by DOGE, and while it was clear to me that many of their proposed changes were too large, too quick, and too clumsy, I also realized that there was a lot of truth in the reasons for DOGE going after academia.

As a start, it became clear to me, that US taxpayers annually support academic institutions to the tune of billions—through direct funding, research grants, subsidies of student financial aid, not to mention tax exemptions. Why this collective generosity? The logic as far as I can tell is that universities are supposed to provide public good. Universities have the mission to promote important ideas, incubate innovation, architect critical thought, improve social mobility, and in general help society move forward. Now, were the universities living up to their part of the deal?

The events of October 7th and what transpired after, made it clear to me that universities were not living up to their end of the deal. Take Harvard University as an example. Harvard University has some of the smartest faculty in the world and some of the smartest students in the world. What would we expect from a university, with a social mission to do with some of the smartest people in the world after the events of October 7th? If we seriously took the implicit contract between taxpayers, the US government, and universities, we would expect universities to come up with ideas that would promote a better world. We would expect universities to come up with ideas that would demonstrate how people can live peacefully, or at least with less violence and hate. Maybe we could even expect a plan for a new, more peaceful, middle east? After all, universities are a place that has Muslim students, Jewish students, Arab students, Palestinian students, and Israeli students. Shouldn't they, with the help of their university, figure out how to productively move forward? Instead, we saw universities become breeding grounds for overly simplistic ideologies, almost no critical thinking, and what seemed to be uncontrollable hate more than 5,000 miles away from the border between Israel and Gaza.

Of course, not all universities were as bad, but even the ones that were not as bad did not come forward to proactively do something useful. Instead, the best that we saw from almost all the universities was hiding from the public eye and from any scrutiny.

The ways that universities dealt with October 7th and the following months was bad enough by itself, but it wasn't just that. For me, the very visible lack of leadership from universities, the over-simplistic thinking, the clear lack of critical thinking, the lack of education for conflict resolution, coupled with the high level of political correctness, triggered the realization that we, as universities, have been on the wrong path for a long time.

What have we been teaching all this time? What skills have we given our students? Was our research useful to solve any of the really pressing problems facing the world? (Upon further reflection, I concluded that on that one, the answer, to a large degree, is yes.)

With all of this in mind, I could easily see how people looked at universities, feeling that they have been acting in bad faith. Public perception—fair to a large degree—was that universities were no longer acting as the providers of public good, but as incubators for rigid ideologies, enforced by a new class of administrators. This wasn't a failure of politics; it was a failure of our core, unspoken promise, and it eroded the deep reservoir of public trust that has been one of our most valuable, and least acknowledged, asset.

Bureaucracy

Next, I started questioning about how we, as universities, are doing in terms of our research. Specifically, I started thinking about how careful and efficient we are with our research funding. This is where I turned my attention to bureaucracy and the administrative machinery. And once I started seeing the bureaucratic workings of the university, I couldn't unsee it.

Take for example Duke University—a place I deeply care about—the federally negotiated overhead rate for research is over 60%. That means for every dollar a researcher receives to conduct actual research; the university claims an additional charge for support to the tune of more than 60 cents.

And more than 60% is not the end of it. In my lab, for example, the university also requires me to pay for an administrative director, an administrative assistant, and two part-time administrative helpers to deal with accounting and university procedures. Just to be clear, this is on top of the more than 60%. I must admit that I have not calculated my true percentage of overhead, mostly because it is heartbreaking.

And the story gets worse. It should be obvious that when a university hires people to work on the administration side, they find things to do, which means that the impact of this administrative swell isn't just financial—it's also about the time of the researchers. One of my colleagues at Duke, for example, a brilliant researcher got so fed up spending more time on administrative procedures than actual research, that he gave up and closed his lab.

This isn't a structure designed for curiosity, creativity, research, education, and progress. It's a structure designed to keep itself alive. And once you see the bureaucratic part of the university through this lens, you start to understand why so many good ideas wither before they ever have a chance to bloom.

Getting out of the victim mindset

The main narrative at universities these days is one of victimhood. Listen to a group of professors, whether in the lunch line or at a faculty meeting, and you will hear sentiments such as: "DOGE is out to get us." "They've declared war on academic freedom." "The government's crusade is targeting intellectuals." The basic sentiment is

that we, American academia and academics, the stewards of knowledge and progress, are under siege by a coalition of philistine politicians and populist billionaires. To hear the rhetoric, you'd think DOGE was a kind of digital cultural revolution, unleashed to smash the temples of reason and silence the priesthood of the mind.

And yet, when I look at the facts on the ground, with even a modicum of critical examination, it is hard not to find this perspective self-indulgent and, frankly, rather unproductive. The idea that we—the dwellers of the ivory tower, beneficiaries of tenure and endowment—can present ourselves as surprised victims without any recognition for our own part in this, is at best a distortion, and at worst an outright abdication of our true responsibilities. More troubling still, is that this victimhood mentality is itself a sign of institutional decay.

My hope is that we will be able to resist the temptation to see ourselves solely as scapegoats, and instead direct our formidable energies inward, toward a systematic study of our own institutions, our own practices, our own failures as well as our successes. Imagine the self-awareness we preach turned upon ourselves. What would we see? A proliferation of too many overpaid administrators, unbelievably long procedures, waste of taxpayers' money on overhead charges. A system that prides itself on diversity yet perpetuates elite homogeneity. A culture of supposed open inquiry, in which social and ideological conformity are more often rewarded than genuine dissent.

To be clear, none of this is an endorsement of DOGE's exact approach. In my mind, their approach is too quick, too brutal, without enough supervision, and I worry that it will leave the bureaucratic mechanism in charge, which means that it will not have much of the desired effects. But if we are honest, we must admit how much of the ammunition used against us has been provided by our own excesses, our own insularity, our own reluctance to scrutinize the sacred cows we breed in our own backyard. This is not a call for self-flagellation, but for self-respect: to demand of our profession at least as much candor and discipline as we habitually demand of others.

What now?

There's a story about a frog that is placed in a pot of cold water, and the pot is slowly heated. The story goes that the frog doesn't notice the slow changes in

temperature, and boils to death. That story is inaccurate, because the frog will notice the heat and will jump out. Nevertheless, this metaphor is useful to understanding the way academia has changed in terms of our education mission, our research mission, and our bloated bureaucratic engine.

I'm certainly very worried and concerned with the DOGE initiative, its brutality, the speed, and the likely negative consequences on academia and on its long-term health. Nevertheless, I deeply dislike the victim mentality of academia, and I think this is an important opportunity for academics and academic institutions alike to look deeply at what we have become. On the positive side I think that we should use our academic training of examining systems and trying to improve them and do the same on ourselves. We are due for a good midlife crisis and some serious self-improvements. I also don't see that we would have done such self-examination without the brutality of DOGE. When I look at the loss of our academic way, the brutality of DOGE, and the need for improvement, my hope is that when we look at academia 50 years from now, that we will be able to say that it is doing very well in terms of its educational, research, and social mission—thanks in no small part to this painful period of pain, examination, and improvement.

The real strength of academics is not that we are above criticism or exempt from the churn of historical change, but that we possess the analytical tools to self-diagnose. When we are at our best, we are not passive custodians of received wisdom, but active agents of self-correction. If we are to survive—let alone thrive—in this new era, we must marshal the very intellectual virtues we claim to embody: skepticism, empirical rigor, fearless introspection, the humility to admit error, and the audacity to propose radical reform.

And so, with this in mind, I would like to propose to my fellow academics that we should start studying ourselves. We should treat our universities as a complex, adaptive system subject to the same distortions, inefficiencies, and perverse incentives that we so expertly diagnose in other fields. Let us model universities, study them, run simulations. But above all, let us generate our own hypotheses for improvement, rather than waiting for the next sledgehammer to fall from the hands of DOGE, or some other government agency, or the capricious winds of some other national politics. And the sooner, the better.