

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Q. & A.

'It Doesn't Have to Be This Way': One Scholar's Front-Row Seat to Higher-Ed Battles in Wisconsin and Texas

By *Megan Zahneis*

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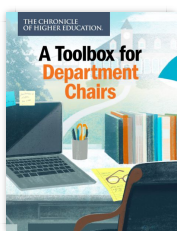
JOAN NEUBERGER

Jeremi Suri, a history professor at the University of Texas at Austin

Jeremi Suri is well positioned to comment on [efforts in Texas, Florida, and other states](#) to curb universities' diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and, in some cases, to reform or eliminate tenure. He's [written about](#) the historical underpinnings of today's diversity-oriented discord, and as a professor in the history department and public-affairs schools at the University of Texas at Austin, he's had a front-row seat to lawmakers' deliberations in the state over bills that seek to prohibit diversity training, ban the instruction of certain topics related to race and gender, and create a posttenure-review system for faculty members.

Suri has also seen much of this happen before. In 2011, he worked in the history department at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, when the state's then-governor, the Republican Scott Walker, [slashed colleges' budgets](#) and weakened tenure protections — revisions that have become models for conservative legislators today. Wisconsin faced a pronounced case of brain drain as Walker's policies took hold; scholars fled for more-welcoming environments, and the university [slid](#) from 10th among recipients of National Science Foundation grants in 2010 to 16th in 2021.

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Among the academics leaving Wisconsin at the time was Suri. Already a prominent historian, he was often sought after by other institutions. But seeing thousands of people occupy Wisconsin's Capitol in protest of Walker's legislation — which would ultimately strip faculty members and other state employees of many of their collective-bargaining rights — [he told *The Chronicle* at the time](#) that he knew he had to leave. The offer from the Texas flagship proved enticing. Now, a dozen years into his stint in Austin, the similarities with the trouble he saw in Wisconsin are hard to ignore. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What parallels do you draw between what happened a decade ago in Wisconsin and what we're seeing in Texas and other states now?

In both cases, you have Republican legislatures that are angry that a lot of the work

that comes out of universities challenges their ideological positions, and challenges the interests of their funders. In the case of Wisconsin in 2011, a lot of the work the university was doing was calling for the state to increase its funding to communities that had been underfunded. Of course, that's exactly what someone like Scott Walker and others felt threatened by. In Texas, it's less about the economics. It's much more about the racial issues, the DEI issues. There's a clear politics to this. That's obvious, but it has to be said: These are not arguments about education.

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It's tempting to use Wisconsin in 2011 as a historical comparison to today. But do you think that does a disservice to what's happening now?

Yeah, I think it does, because the challenge in Wisconsin is that it has very limited resources. It has to make some very difficult decisions about how it uses its money.

In Texas, the choices don't have to be as harsh. You could justify some of the budget-cutting in Wisconsin in 2011, but that's not the case for Texas today at all.

“We've stopped talking about our efforts to increase our diversity.”

In Wisconsin, it really was one party versus another. The Republican Party in Wisconsin in 2011 was a party that really felt alienated from the university, and the university felt completely alienated from the Republican Party. It's very different in Texas now. Texas is obviously a state dominated by Republicans. Most Republican leaders recognize the importance of the university, feel a connection to the university. It's actually just the leaders of the Republican Party who are doing this. So I don't feel there is the same grass-roots opposition or anger at the university in Texas that there was in Wisconsin.

Is that discouraging to you?

Yes and no. It goes both directions, because I do think that there's a way to get beyond this, if we can get beyond the current leaders in the state. But it is frustrating. It doesn't have to be this way.

Do you ever think, “I thought I escaped this 10 years ago, and now it's happening again?”

Well, there is that, yes. But there's a part of me that says that shouldn't surprise me. I'm not happy about that, but that's the world, that's our history. I'm living the history I write. On the one hand, it is frustrating. On the other hand, it also gives me some optimism, because that history shows that we can get through these moments. I don't think it's a history that only goes in one direction.

How has it affected your pedagogy?

For me, it has been part of a larger shift over the last five to six years. I'm giving much more attention to the sources of division in our society, where they come from, how they're so deeply rooted. I teach the U.S.-history survey course to about 250 undergraduates every spring here, and I spend more time now than I did five years ago on the roots of division, going back to the 19th century. That's also affected my interpersonal activities on campus. I find myself trying to explain to people, especially nonhistorians, where these divisions come from, and I also try to assure people that there are things we can do about it.

I'm trying to be informative, and I'm trying to be encouraging. At the same time, I'm trying to speak out. That's just who I am. I'm also trying to support our leadership, because I do think the leadership of our university is trying to do the right thing, while not muzzling myself.

Might that kind of muzzling happen among your colleagues?

People have this mistaken view that faculty are driven by the politics of their time. No, most faculty are driven by a personal commitment to the subject that they study. Someone who studies civil rights is going to study civil rights, regardless. I don't think that's going to change, but there will be a change in the way we promote and talk about the work we do. That matters a lot to people outside the institution who don't really know what's going on inside the institution.

Have you noticed any of that happening yet?

What I've noticed is that we've stopped talking about our efforts to increase our diversity. I see a number of different graduations each year. This year, no one mentioned the word "diversity." I'm not saying that diversity should be the most

important word or the only thing we talk about, but it's striking when you hear all of these graduation-level kinds of speeches, which are usually self-congratulatory and filled with aspirational rhetoric. That's troublesome to me.

I've seen no change in the research my colleagues do, and I've seen no change in the teaching of my colleagues. But I have seen change in our discourse.

So what's happening in Texas today isn't equivalent to Wisconsin a decade ago, where you felt you couldn't stay there?

I don't see it now. I mean, who knows where we are in the future? The university is struggling, but it has a lot of supporters and a lot of resources, so we still have some insulation. I also feel like we have certain elements of momentum on our side. We have a lot of sympathizers who are powerful around the state as well. And at Wisconsin I felt that we didn't.

You're digging your heels in rather than packing up again.

That's true for now.

I think it was hard to see how things would change very much in Wisconsin, one way or the other, for a long time. Whereas Texas, it's just rapidly changing around us. The rapidity of change is scary, but also perhaps a source of optimism. I'm not predicting that that rapid change will be good for what I believe; I'm just saying that it's happening rapidly. I felt in Wisconsin 10 years ago, it was a very stagnant environment. We were kind of stuck. Here, I don't feel like we're stuck. Our politics are divided, but I feel like the world around us is changing incredibly fast.

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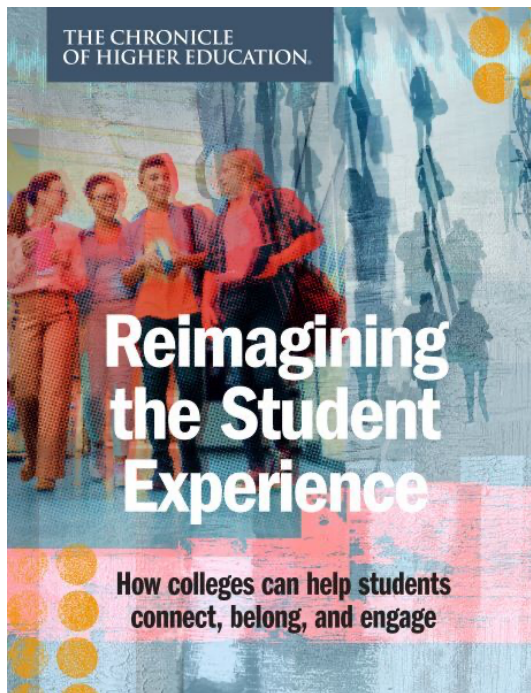
Megan Zahneis

Megan Zahneis, a senior reporter for *The Chronicle*, writes about research universities and workplace issues. Follow her on Twitter [@meganzahneis](https://twitter.com/meganzahneis), or email her at megan.zahneis@chronicle.com.

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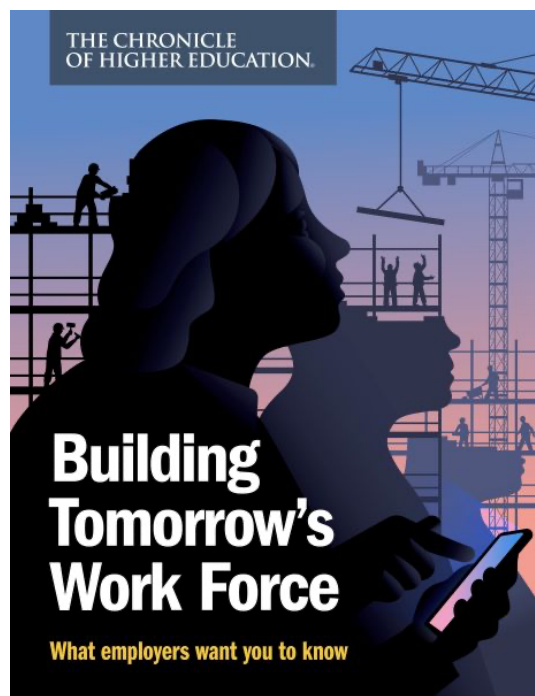
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