

Universities under pressure: Between Authoritarianism and the Market

(Universidades en aprietos: entre autoritarismo y mercado)

English transcript

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Date: 12 de septiembre de 2025, **Duration:** 25:20 min

Gabriel Macaya: Hello Ernesto. Good afternoon to you, good morning to me.

Ernesto Medina: Hello, Gabriel. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Gabriel Macaya: Well, let's begin this conversation, and first we have to introduce ourselves. Go ahead, Ernesto.

Ernesto Medina: Well, Ernesto Medina. I was rector (president) of the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua in León from 1994 to 2006, and then rector of the American University in Managua from 2007 to 2018. Because of the political crisis in Nicaragua, I had to leave the country in 2021, and I currently live in exile in Zaragoza, Spain. Last year, the Nicaraguan government stripped me of my nationality and all my rights, and fortunately the Spanish government granted me Spanish nationality, so I live in Spain as a Spanish citizen, and from here I try to continue contributing, as much as I can, to the search for a democratic and peaceful way out of the crisis in Nicaragua.

Gabriel Macaya: Hello, I'm Gabriel Macaya Trejos. I was rector of the University of Costa Rica from 1996 to 2004, so my term coincided with Ernesto's in León. I was also Vice Rector for Research from 1981 to 1988, and for three and a half years, from 2014 to 2018, I was Costa Rica's ambassador to France. I'm a chemist by training and a university person by way of life.

Well, Ernesto, let's begin by talking a little about this very fundamental characteristic of public universities in many countries around the world, which is their autonomy. Autonomy which, in a certain way, many - including us - consider to be in crisis. What are the current threats to autonomy?
In the Nicaraguan case, there is state intervention, on the one hand, to limit that autonomy and the university's actions. But it is not only the political sector that wants to intervene, but also many interest groups, sometimes difficult to distinguish or identify. There is constant criticism of this autonomy, since autonomy is considered, as we said at the beginning, a bulwark that makes the university institution impermeable.
But we have already clearly said that this is not the case, and that a true conception of autonomy makes the university precisely a space for discussion of the interests of the different sectors of society, from the political and governmental sectors to the different professional associations and influential business and financial groups.

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But from that point of view, how could we systematize these threats somewhat? And how do we see them now in the Latin American region?
And I think we could even talk a little about what is happening in the world, where many consider university autonomy to be under threat. I do think there is a fundamental issue here: that is, how autonomy is exercised and how the exercise of autonomy protects it against external threats.

Ernesto Medina: Well, I would start with the case of Nicaragua because it seems to me to be the extreme case of these threats.
I thought that something like what is happening now could never happen, but it is happening. And I see no reason why the case of Nicaragua, extreme as it is, should be an exception. Looking at what is happening in the world, in many countries around the world, I think that what is happening with the universities of Nicaragua is, let's say, the transformation of institutions created with the fundamental mission of seeking the truth. They are being turned into centers of indoctrination for forming obedient people, loyal to a political project that is considered almost sacred and that therefore needs propagandists for that regime and people who do not question or criticize anything at all. And in Nicaragua, we are getting there.
And we have been able to get there because the previous step was to completely strip the universities of their autonomy.
Therefore, in countries where signs of authoritarian, dictatorial tendencies, etc., can be seen, university communities, first and foremost—and hopefully because they have the support of the population—should defend their autonomy so as not to reach an extreme like the one Nicaragua is reaching.
And the other thing, as we said before, I think the university has to discuss openly and frankly, together with the most important sectors of society: Well, how do they see the university? What do they expect from the university? What should the university do, or what should the university do better? And how can they also do it by interacting with one another in order to avoid the other threat? I think we have that threat now, which is the belief that what the university does is irrelevant, that any institution with chalk and a blackboard can do it, and that there is no need for such a sophisticated institution with such complicated governing bodies to do what some sectors think the university is: simply a factory for technicians and professionals.
So, I think the university has to prepare itself well for that, and I think one of the university's advantages is that it has the capacity to read the signals the world is giving us. In other words, how far is science and technology advancing? What consequences can that have? What can be done in our context, in Central America, that is, in small countries? What role are we condemned to play if we remain on the sidelines of scientific and technological development? How can the university counteract this or help create a model of development that responds to the reality of what we are: small, impoverished countries, perhaps with a relatively unsophisticated level of education in general, and facing enormous challenges?
Another threat that has advanced more in some countries than in others is the attempt to reduce the university's role to simply training technicians and professionals. This can become a very profitable business, and that is why these university consortia have emerged that buy and sell

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universities, giving them a pleasant, successful marketing image, but that are actually far from fulfilling the university's transcendental and principal mission.
So, I think that universities that are aware of this risk, which they already have in front of them, also have to develop the capacity not only to survive this threat, but to demonstrate that what they do—in this case, mainly public universities—has an added value that no business, no matter how well organized or how attractively presented, will ever be able to provide.
But that means that we also have to take seriously the role of the added value that we provide, which is this more comprehensive level of education, an ability to discuss problems freely and propose solutions, to conduct research that really responds to the problems we are facing or will face, because that is something the kind of institutions that have emerged in this latest wave of more commercial institutions, which have nothing to do with the original idea of the university, will never do.

Gabriel Macaya: Before continuing a little with this topic, I would like to make a small reference to the situation in Costa Rica. Ernesto has already spoken very clearly about the situation in Nicaragua.
In Costa Rica, the public university—and one university in particular, the University of Costa Rica—is the target of very direct and permanent attacks by the government and the president of the Republic. There is something, however, very telling about all this. These attacks are understandable: the government sees the university as an expense, as a luxury, and does not understand the function we have been discussing in this conversation.
But what is telling, and what I would like to share, is that the university has a center for political research and studies that has systematically conducted opinion polls for more than 10 years on institutional, political, and other issues. And one of the fundamental issues addressed by this study is citizens' trust in institutions.
And, systematically, throughout the entire period in which this center has conducted the study—which is very solid in terms of statistical representativeness and methodology—the institution that citizens have the greatest confidence in is the University of Costa Rica. And by far. The University of Costa Rica is viewed with greater confidence than public universities as a whole. And far more than the level of trust this same population currently has, for example, in political parties.
And what is interesting is to see how citizens' trust in the University of Costa Rica is not affected by the campaigns of denigration that certain groups in positions of power, beginning with the president of the Republic, wage against the institution. Social media, much of it operated by highly aligned trolls, denigrates the University of Costa Rica. Nevertheless, one does not see that this campaign has had an effect on that perception of trust in the institution.

Gabriel Macaya: So, I think there is something here that we in Costa Rica have the right to evaluate: namely, how and on what that perception is based.
And this brings us to an introduction to a complex issue that Ernesto has already raised, which for me is one of the fundamental threats to the university institution: the commercialization of the university's function, or profitability criteria taken to the extreme. And here, once again, the function of making our autonomy explicit in the face of this becomes central.

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But we have to start from one piece of evidence: private universities have for many years already played a central role in training professionals in our region. In Costa Rica, one could say that almost the majority of university graduates come from private universities.
But there is something in what you called the added value of the public university that is fundamental to me and that greatly differentiates the public university from the private one: its comprehensive character, and above all its ability to—and this is a central issue for me—function in an interdisciplinary way.
We must make our institutions increasingly interdisciplinary, make that education as flexible and dynamic as possible, and, without sacrificing specialized professional education, develop interdisciplinary mechanisms that provide education and contribute to more comprehensive views of national problems.

Ernesto Medina: I completely agree. I continue to be quite concerned about these attacks on the University of Costa Rica and, in general, on public universities.
And I think a powerful argument can be found in the figures I mentioned at the beginning. In Costa Rica, 24,396 papers were published in a serious database such as Scopus over the entire period from 1990 to 2025, of which 19,000 were published by public universities. In other words, in the rest of the institutions, including government ministries, private universities, and international organizations based in Costa Rica, only around 5,000 papers were published, compared with almost 20,000 from the public universities.
If this campaign to destroy and defund Costa Rica's public universities continues, who is going to do this work?
In a world in which we say that Costa Rica's major business leaders and intelligent politicians have to say, whenever they speak, that this is a world determined by scientific and technological development. But, well, who is going to do science and technology in Costa Rica if not the universities that, with great difficulty, great effort, and great vision, have developed this capacity, which is, I would say, the envy of all of Latin America?
In other words, when I see, for example, that Nicaragua's public universities have published only 1,658 papers during this period, compared with Costa Rica's 19,000, it hurts me. And I know the work that was done at UNAN-León so that of those thousand-plus papers, almost 60 percent would be the production of UNAN-León. And I know what it took to reach that output, which is very small. And the effort that was made has now been destroyed; it no longer exists.
And I, who was rector of a private university, argued about this many times, because I naively thought that when they asked me to take the position of rector at that university, it was because of my scientific experience and the work that had been done at UNAN-León to develop research. But whenever I said, "Well, and now what are we going to do about research?", they would tell me: "No, that is an expense. It doesn't bring the university any benefit, so no. There is no budget for that." And that is the reality at many of these private universities. So, I think the struggle ahead of us is obviously a difficult one. Because if we see that there are governments that dare to question Harvard and Columbia University, what are they not going to do to our universities?
But I think that if we think about the future—and that is the real work of education: to build the future, to think about the future and make that future as good as possible—then I think we are

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obliged to defend the work we are doing, the institutions that do this work, but obviously also to guarantee that we will do it, and that we will do it well, and that we will deliver the outcomes that are expected, that contribute to achieving the country that we all dream of.

Gabriel Macaya: Ernesto, I would venture to ask, and to make it a little more explicit, how the defense of autonomy is exercised and which actors should participate in that defense. I would venture to say beyond the institutions themselves.
I think we have shed some light throughout this conversation on where that defense could come from, but perhaps it would be worthwhile to round out some of these ideas a little, starting with—and I think this is fundamental—how the community itself has a fundamental role in defending that autonomy. And as we have already said, that possibility of defense comes from the way that community sees the benefits of that institution and of that autonomy, which means that, first, the university internally, as an institution, has to be convinced of the value of its autonomy.
So we have a kind of layered process there that one should, I hope, lead within the institution so that the issue is made explicit and we can articulate a national defense of that autonomy. In your case, very different from the case of Costa Rica, how would you see that defense of autonomy?

Ernesto Medina: In general, I think that, looking at the dramatic changes taking place in the world, the threats—which are now more than evident—I think we have to make that, that pause along the way to analyze what we have done up to now, how we have done it, and what problems we are really facing, so that we can respond to this dynamic of changes and transformations taking place in the world and in each of our countries specifically, to really see what the situation is.
I think it has to be a process in which all sectors of the university participate. In other words, university leadership is needed that is willing to submit to criticism, to speak frankly, and to listen to what the different sectors have to say; to talk with graduates and alumni as well, those who are also in direct contact with reality, to see how they view us based on their experience.
And with that, I think we have to try to develop a project for the university that we want to present to the country in order to confront this current crisis and prepare ourselves better for the future. And to do it publicly, openly, with all sectors, even those who are the most critical and the gratuitously critical, who are the worst. But also to try to arm ourselves with patience to explain to them why the university wants to do what it wants to do. And with a clear objective as well.
I think that an objective in the case of Costa Rica would clearly be to defend the legal status that the university has, with those constitutional guarantees, and the importance that this has. Because obviously, within the university project that would emerge from this process of analyzing the current situation, the role of university autonomy must be emphasized at all times so that a project of this kind can really be viable and lead to where we want it to go.
And, on the other hand, I think it is important, in addition to clear leadership that generates trust, to approach the political parties themselves frankly as well.
In the end, this type of discussion, if it is a constitutional issue, will end in a constitutional reform. And it is those represented in Parliament who will make the decisions there. So, I think the political class also needs to be informed about what is at stake and about the importance of higher

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education institutions and universities in a national project, which is supposedly what they are also thinking about.
But it is something that I think we need to start preparing soon because time is against us. And I think there are many arguments. And I trust that in Costa Rica, as I say, the conditions exist for people to better understand the risk the country would run if it neglected institutions as important as the University of Costa Rica and the other sister public universities of Costa Rica, which I also believe enjoy the respect and affection of large sectors of the Costa Rican population. To sum up, I think that should also be used to generate this discussion.

Gabriel Macaya: Ernesto, thank you very much for these comments.
I would add a little: I think the university in general, and the University of Costa Rica in particular, should call society together for many debates, including the debate on autonomy, and we should then make use of that—at least in Costa Rica—citizens' trust in the institution so that these calls are as broad and diverse as possible.
And I think we have to be clear that the future of our institutions lies there: in how, in many ways, society will defend us in our essential values, in that way or that possibility that the university institution has to call people together, to call society together, as was said before, to call the social forces together to discuss and jointly propose solutions and look toward the future.

Ernesto Medina: I think the great struggle ahead of us, for those of us who believe in the idea of the university, is to fight for autonomy—real and genuine autonomy—not only from the influence of governments that are more or less hostile toward the university, but also from the new threats that come, as I said before, from an unplanned and dehumanized development, from new technologies, from the idea of the university as just another business.

Gabriel Macaya: Well, Ernesto, I think we have had a very rich conversation, and from San José, Costa Rica, via León, Nicaragua, we send you our warmest regards in Zaragoza.

Ernesto Medina: Thank you very much, Gabriel. A big hug, and I hope everyone is well over there, and that Costa Rica continues to be that inspiration, that example that must be protected. In other words, if there is something Central America must protect, if it is thinking about the future, it is Costa Rican democracy, Costa Rica's freedoms, and the generosity of the Costa Rican people.

Gabriel Macaya: Thank you very much, Ernesto, for this hopeful message, and continue with your struggle, which we understand very well.

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