University Autonomy: More Than Just a Legal Shield

(Autonomía universitaria: más allá de un escudo legal)

English Transcript

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

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

Gabriel Macaya: Let's begin our conversation by introducing ourselves. Please go ahead, Don Ernesto.

Ernesto Medina: My name is Ernesto Medina. I served as Rector of the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua in León from 1994 to 2006, and later as Rector of the American University in Managua from 2007 to 2018. Due to Nicaragua's political crisis, I was forced 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 civil rights. Fortunately, the Spanish government granted me Spanish citizenship, so I now live in Spain as a Spanish citizen. From here, I continue contributing, as much as I can, to the search for a peaceful and democratic solution to Nicaragua's crisis.

Gabriel Macaya: Hello, I am Gabriel Macaya Trejos. I served as Rector of the University of Costa Rica from 1996 to 2004, which means my tenure overlapped with Don Ernesto's in León. I had previously served as Vice Rector for Research from 1981 to 1988, and between 2014 and 2018 I was Costa Rica's ambassador to France for three and a half years. I am a chemist by training and, above all, a lifelong university enthusiast.

Well, Don Ernesto, let us begin by discussing a defining characteristic of public universities in many parts of the world: autonomy. Many of us believe that university autonomy is currently under pressure, perhaps even in crisis. What exactly is autonomy, and why is it important to discuss it? What does it mean, and what role does it play in the development of universities?

Ernesto Medina: Thank you, Gabriel. I would first like to congratulate the University of Costa Rica on its 85th anniversary. I believe this discussion, framed within that celebration, is extremely important because, in many ways, Costa Rica and its great university can serve not only as an example, but also as a guide for understanding what Latin American—and especially Central American—universities have done well, and what we have not done well.

One reason I proposed discussing university autonomy comes from research I am currently conducting in Spain on scientific production in Central America. One particularly striking finding—perhaps not surprising, but powerful when seen in numbers—is that Costa Rica's public universities account for nearly 70 percent of all scientific production generated by Central American public universities between 1990 and 2025, according to Scopus data. The University of Costa Rica alone represents almost 35 percent of the total.

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This immediately raises an important question: why? What makes this possible in Costa Rica, and why have the rest of us struggled so much? Certainly, Costa Rica's historical, political, and social development explains part of it. But I believe university autonomy—and especially the way Costa Rican universities have understood and integrated autonomy into their institutional life—plays a major role behind these numbers.

In Nicaragua, autonomy has always been conditioned by the country's dramatic political history, shaped for much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by authoritarian governments. As a result, autonomy itself was also conditioned. Nicaragua was among the last countries in Latin America to grant autonomy to its national university—in 1958. And even then, autonomy was granted by presidential decree rather than protected by law, which made it extremely vulnerable to the whims of political power.

Because of this, we tended to see autonomy primarily as a shield to defend the university as an institution, while neglecting what I believe is its essential purpose: safeguarding academic freedom and the broader freedoms universities need in order to fulfill their mission. For me, academic freedom is fundamental. Yet in Nicaragua, because of our political circumstances, we focused far more on the political dimension of autonomy than on academic freedom itself.

Gabriel Macaya: Ernesto, thank you very much for your congratulations on the University of Costa Rica's anniversary. Your remarks remind us of two important things. First, the role the University of León played during the nineteenth century in the founding of Costa Rica's first university, the University of Santo Tomás. Many of its first professors had been trained at the University of León. So there is a very deep bond between our institutions—something I will never forget. Other professors also came from the University of San Carlos in Guatemala.

In Costa Rica, as in many countries, university autonomy is enshrined in the Constitution. Yet even constitutional protection has not prevented governments, at different moments in history, from attempting to intervene in, restrict, or attack universities.

At the University of Costa Rica, autonomy first appeared in the university's founding law in 1940. After the 1948 revolution, it was explicitly incorporated into the Constitution. Later—and this is important in relation to what Ernesto mentioned—not only was autonomy guaranteed, but so was university funding. The Constitution specifies how that funding must be provided. In fact, it contains something I believe is unique in the world: university budgets cannot be reduced. They must either remain stable or grow—not only nominally, but in real terms, adjusted annually for inflation. This provision has provided universities with remarkable financial stability and allowed for long-term planning.

I believe these two elements—autonomy and constitutionally protected funding—have enabled the University of Costa Rica to develop in a particularly solid way.

But I think we should now discuss more specifically what autonomy actually means in university life.

Ernesto Medina: Yes, I think that is essential. In Latin America, and particularly in Central America, the concept of autonomy has evolved over time, always shaped by political realities. In societies marked by authoritarianism, universities have often struggled simply to survive.

This helps explain why autonomy in many Latin American countries came to mean primarily a protective barrier against hostile political or economic powers. It became a legal shield. But the deeper meaning of autonomy was often neglected.

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Today, the major unresolved debate in Latin America is whether autonomy should mainly protect universities institutionally, or whether its true purpose is to safeguard academic freedom—the very essence of the university.

If the university's mission is to create and transmit knowledge, then it must guarantee the freedom necessary for scientists, scholars, and intellectuals to pursue truth without external coercion.

Returning to the data on scientific production in Central America, I believe our region's weak academic output stems in part from our failure to place academic freedom, scientific research, and knowledge production at the center of university life.

Autonomy should function as a protective framework for academic freedom. Costa Rica's scientific achievements reflect this reality far more successfully than in countries where academic freedom has not been treated as the university's highest priority.

Gabriel Macaya: What most disturbs certain governments and political groups is the university's critical capacity—its ability to question, analyze, and challenge. That critical function is deeply tied to autonomy.

Universities are able not only to form opinions about public issues, but also to propose solutions. This capacity emerges from the interaction of teaching, research, and extension—or, as we call it in Costa Rica, social action.

Here I follow the ideas of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, who argued that the university should be the place where society finds the space to express its critical conscience. For me, this is fundamental.

That critical role depends on freedom of teaching, freedom of research, and freedom of expression. But it also implies responsibility. Universities have responsibilities that go beyond training professionals, conducting research, and transferring knowledge. They are also responsible for civic formation—for educating citizens.

This is where autonomy becomes essential. First, because autonomy must be exercised responsibly. And second, because we must ask ourselves: where does the legitimacy of that autonomy come from?

Ernesto Medina: I completely agree. Universities must serve as society's critical conscience, especially in societies like ours that are still struggling toward democracy and social justice.

However, we must also ask how universities exercise that role. Sometimes I feel that "critical conscience" becomes more of a slogan than a substantive practice—almost a way of claiming a special status above other institutions.

This perception can create distrust outside the university. Some sectors of society see universities as institutions demanding privileges without clearly demonstrating their social contribution.

Universities therefore need to define more clearly what their mission is today and how that mission translates into concrete responsibilities and accountability.

Too often we remain trapped in political discourse and slogans instead of giving real substance to these important principles. The emphasis on political commentary can sometimes distract universities from what should remain their primary mission: defending academic freedom in all its dimensions.

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Gabriel Macaya: Let me challenge you a little on that point.

I have always thought that the notion of the university as “the critical conscience of society” can sound somewhat arrogant. It risks suggesting a kind of infallibility that universities simply do not possess.

Critical consciousness emerges not from the university alone, but from its interaction with society. This is where things become complicated when people begin to relativize autonomy.

How can universities interact openly with society without losing their autonomy?

This brings us to another essential dimension of autonomy: the university’s ability to govern itself. A truly autonomous university must have a collegial model of governance. It cannot function through rigid vertical authority. Debate, dissent, and diversity of opinion are precisely what give the university its strength.

Society often struggles to understand this because universities are inherently pluralistic institutions. As former University of Costa Rica Rector Fernando Durán once said, it is rare for a university to reach immediate consensus on major national issues. Consensus, when it comes, often emerges only after extensive debate.

My father, who helped lead Costa Rica’s university reform of 1957, used to say that the great secret of the university was “finding unity within diversity.” He believed this search was itself the university’s humanistic mission.

This also explains why universities must preserve all areas of knowledge—including the humanities, arts, and sciences—rather than limiting themselves to narrowly serving immediate market demands.

I am reminded of a provocative idea from Jorge Brovetto, former Rector of the University of the Republic in Uruguay, who said that the university’s main function is “to educate for the unknown.” Or, as I like to say, to educate for the unpredictable.

Without autonomy, there can be no true university.

Ernesto Medina: I fully agree, especially regarding collegial governance.

In Nicaragua, university governance has too often been distorted by national political conflicts. Universities become pieces in broader struggles for power, and it is very difficult for them to avoid being drawn into those conflicts.

This is precisely why autonomy matters: it must protect universities from becoming instruments of political battles.

Only a truly autonomous university can decide freely what kinds of programs and fields of study it should prioritize. Today there is growing pressure for universities to respond primarily to market demands, reducing education to workforce training. This risks marginalizing the humanities, the arts, and literature.

Yet democracy depends not only on laws or political leaders, but on how citizens think about democracy itself. And that way of thinking is shaped by education.

Universities are therefore central to forming the kinds of citizens capable of sustaining healthy democracies. A university guided solely by market forces cannot fully fulfill that role.

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At the same time, universities cannot accomplish this mission alone. They must work closely with broader social forces committed to building just, democratic, and peaceful societies.

As Mariano Fiallos—the father of university autonomy in Nicaragua—once said, “The university cannot remain in its watchtower while society marches toward the abyss.” It must engage and accompany society.

Gabriel Macaya: This brings us to another difficult issue: the responsible exercise of autonomy and the complex forms of accountability it requires.

For some people, autonomy appears as an impenetrable shield that isolates universities from society. How, then, do we exercise autonomy responsibly?

Accountability is essential. Universities must make information available and place knowledge at the service of society. But accountability is not simply about statistics—numbers of students, publications, graduates, or projects.

A university must also be understandable to society. Society must be able to “read” the institution. Yet universities often become opaque, even to their own communities.

How do we help society understand that diversity of opinions within the university is actually a source of richness and strength?

Ernesto Medina: I completely agree. Transparency is important, but what people truly expect from universities is something deeper: they want universities to help create a more just, free, developed, and environmentally responsible society.

Universities must identify the issues that genuinely matter to people and demonstrate their capacity to address them. Too often we fail to fully use the autonomy we possess in order to move decisively in that direction.

Gabriel Macaya: For me, accountability also means that universities must be exemplary institutions.

They should be models of democratic governance, transparency, sustainability, and institutional integrity. Society begins to understand universities better when universities embody the values they defend.

What has always surprised me is how often even members of the university community—students, faculty, administrators—do not fully understand the institution itself.

How do we help universities internalize autonomy not merely as a defensive mechanism, but as part of the university ethos?

Too often autonomy is discussed only in legal terms. But autonomy is much more than a legal framework. It is a living practice, a permanent construction sustained by the university community itself.

Autonomy is not only something to define. It is something to live.

Ernesto Medina: I agree completely.

The university must show society, through its example, what a better society could look like: a place where decisions are made transparently and for the common good rather than for narrow interests.

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If universities want to remain relevant to the future of our countries, they must work closely with society and respond to people's aspirations and hopes.

It is not enough simply to carry out routine academic activities—teaching classes, conducting research, maintaining libraries. Universities must remain conscious that all of these activities serve a larger purpose: contributing to a better society.

Gabriel Macaya: Ernesto, thank you very much for this rich and thoughtful conversation.

Ultimately, the future of our universities depends on whether society itself will defend the core values these institutions represent—their ability to convene people, foster dialogue, and help imagine solutions for the future.

From San José, Costa Rica, to Zaragoza, Spain—by way of León, Nicaragua—we send you our warmest regards.

Ernesto Medina: Thank you very much, Gabriel. A warm embrace to everyone there. Costa Rica must continue to be an inspiration and an example worthy of protection. If there is one thing Central America must safeguard for the future, it is Costa Rican democracy, Costa Rican freedoms, and the generosity of the Costa Rican people.

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