

# Campuses Need Viewpoint Diversity. How Can They Foster It?

*A conversation with*

CAROLINE MEHL



*APIR Associate Publisher Ariella Saperstein sat down with Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) co-founder and executive director Caroline Mehl to learn about the nonprofit's leadership amid evolving campus-speech challenges.*

**Ariella Saperstein:** Hi, Caroline! Tell us what led you to co-found the Constructive Dialogue Institute.

**Caroline Mehl:** I'm the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors. In my mid-20s, I became deeply curious about the psychology that underlies how human beings and societies can get to a point where they are willing to commit acts of genocide. I found a large body of research demonstrating a clear path that people follow, from demonizing others to dehumanizing them to being willing to com-

mit violence against them — and convincing themselves that doing so is morally justified. I was becoming interested in this research around 2014–2015, just as versions of these trends were gaining momentum in the United States and other Western democracies.

After watching the 2016 election, the divisions it revealed about our society, and the threat these divisions posed to our democracy, psychologist Jonathan Haidt and I founded the Constructive Dialogue Institute. We are working to equip Americans with the skills to bridge divides, primarily by helping colleges and universities transform their campus climates into pluralistic learning environments that support dialogue across lines of difference. Since launching in 2017, we've worked with more than 600 campuses in all 50 states, serving university presidents, administrators, staff, faculty, and more than 100,000 students. This fall, approximately 25 campuses are rolling out our programming to all incoming students.

**Saperstein:** A lot of the work in viewpoint diversity seems to focus on encouraging people simply to listen more to others' stories and experiences. And while it's true that there are people who are unwilling to engage in conversations with those who disagree with them, the more widespread problem is that people listen to other views but then demonize those who hold them. How do we address that?

**Mehl:** Listening is indeed important, but it only works if certain preconditions are in place. There are three I'd recommend.

First, you need intellectual humility: the willingness to acknowledge the limits of your knowledge and that you might actually be wrong. You have to be willing to question your assumptions and revise your beliefs in the face of new evidence. Otherwise, it isn't really a conversation. You're not really listening; you're just waiting for the chance to state your own views.

The second is metacognition, in particular, reflecting on how your views have been formed. Our life experiences and the narratives we consume throughout our lives shape our beliefs and our interpretations of the world. These are reinforced by our social communities, which typically share our views. People need to reflect on where their views and values have come from so they can recognize how subjective they are—how much we are all the products of circumstances. This realization then helps people to recognize that having a different set of life experiences can lead others to develop perspectives that differ from their own.

Finally, once you recognize that people with profoundly different views are often shaped by their life experiences, empathy can allow you to place yourself in those circumstances to better understand where these people are coming from.

So yes, we all need to listen more—but with open minds, open hearts, and a willingness to question our own assumptions.

**Saperstein:** How does all of this relate to the way that campuses have erupted since October 7, including the struggles that many university administrators have in being able to distinguish between constructive disagreement and free speech, on one hand, and, on the other, genuinely antisemitic speech and protests that foment hatred of Israel and Jews?

**Mehl:** There are three key factors that contributed to these challenges.

The first is legal ambiguity. Universities must uphold their commitment to free speech while ensuring compliance with Title VI, which requires them to address discrimination based on race, color, or national origin, particularly when such discrimination creates a hostile environment that interferes with students' access to educational opportunities. But from a legal perspective, it can be

challenging to determine the boundaries between free speech and Title VI violations. One person might find certain speech antisemitic, while another person views it as reasonable political speech. For example, there were Jewish students chanting “From the river to the sea.” Different people have very different associations with the term *intifada*. Being able to determine the exact line between anti-discrimination law and free-speech law is tricky.

The second is that the protests themselves were diverse in nature and effect. I’ve heard stories about antisemitic incidents as well as completely peaceful protesters at schools where there were large-scale encampments. It’s difficult to disentangle these different pieces and actors.

Last, a lot of universities didn’t have appropriate policies in place to handle these types of incidents. Many campuses were trying to navigate a complex, dynamic situation in real time.

**Saperstein:** But even if speech might be protected, a university can still criticize it, right?

**Mehl:** Absolutely. You can allow speech and also make clear that you find it reprehensible. The rules are also different at most private universities, since most aren’t legally bound to follow the First Amendment.

**Saperstein:** How can institutions demonstrate a commitment to diverse perspectives, which might even include odious views, while also drawing clear red lines around what kind of behavior reflects their values as institutions, and what doesn’t?

**Mehl:** Schools need to create and enforce policies that affirm their institution’s commitment to free speech and the open exchange of

ideas, while making it clear that a wide range of views, even offensive ones, will be tolerated and protected. They also need to define their anti-discrimination policies and which speech and behavior cross the line. Everyone on campus needs to be aware of these policies, and schools need to enforce them in a content-neutral way. They can't be inconsistent or hypocritical, depending on the topic.

But let's not forget the real purpose of the university, which is education. Protecting the free expression of odious views isn't the real objective of a university. The real objective is creating academic learning environments where people are encouraged to engage in rigorous intellectual debate, where students are able to discuss complex questions and learn from one another. Conversations on campus should be driven by high-quality evidence and argumentation, as opposed to intentionally provocative or hateful speech. Universities can model that type of rigorous debate by bringing in people who have very different views from one another, showing students what it looks like to have serious disagreements while treating one another with respect, and maintaining relationships despite those differences.

**Saperstein:** A growing number of universities have decided to no longer put out statements on political issues. This change can feel simultaneously gratifying and maddening to the Jewish community and to anyone who has watched university statements proliferate over the years. The frustration is that universities have seemed very comfortable making statements—until Israel was involved. Should colleges commit to institutional neutrality, as argued in the University of Chicago's "Kalven Report"?

**Mehl:** While I understand the frustration about the hypocrisy of deciding to now stop making statements, I do think that insti-

tutional neutrality is the best policy, especially for universities. Again: The purpose of the university is to create the conditions and space for intellectual debate, discovery, and exploration. Once a university puts its thumb on the scale on an issue, it stifles debate.

**Saperstein:** How do diversity efforts fit into this? Critics argue that although it may be well-intentioned, the contemporary formulation of DEI actually makes institutions worse by selecting only for certain kinds of diversity and ignoring others, such as political or religious diversity. What can scientific research into diversity tell us about this work?

**Mehl:** First, DEI is a very large and diverse field itself, and it's hard to generalize about it. That being said, a specific strain of DEI that's gained popularity on campuses in recent years tends to go against the research on intergroup conflict. This particular approach to DEI tends to rely on a simplistic set of ideas that divide people into different groups of victims and oppressors, which can reinforce divisiveness rather than resolve it. Human beings are naturally, evolutionarily tribalistic: We are the descendants of ancestors who were able to survive by banding together with our own group to defeat the opposition. But we're not tribalistic all the time. Circumstances matter. Our tribalistic impulses can be triggered when group differences are emphasized, or when there's a sense that different groups are competing for scarce resources. As a result, this kind of work needs to be done very carefully.

Unfortunately, the research shows that many DEI trainings are either ineffective or even backfire, because they trigger tribalism and make people feel they're being coerced into beliefs or behaviors that they resist.

**Saperstein:** This confusion over whether DEI programs help or hinder intergroup relations—whether they actually strengthen inclusion efforts or further divide people—is precisely why Jewish groups are split over whether the solution is simply to add Jews and antisemitism training to DEI programs. Some of these programs are contributing to a climate that is antagonistic toward Jews and Zionism; would adding Jews as a group category just give cover to programs that are, ultimately, destructive?

**Mehl:** The Jewish people defy the simplistic models that show up in a lot of DEI trainings. We're racially and ethnically diverse, and we've been oppressed both when we've been perceived as powerless and when people think we have too much power. These categories just don't make sense with respect to Jews. Including Jews would necessitate asking fundamental questions about the model and assumptions some of these programs rest on. So, in some cases, where DEI programming is stronger, it could fit in naturally. And in other places, integrating antisemitism education into DEI could force institutions to confront the limitations of more simplistic diversity models and cause them to rethink their approach.

**Saperstein:** So what's the alternative? How can we include marginalized voices while avoiding the divisiveness that DEI programs often succumb to?

**Mehl:** Let's begin by acknowledging that this work is really difficult. But the research points us toward some universal principles for how to build pluralistic environments where people with meaningfully different backgrounds, beliefs, and values can live, learn, and work together.

First, focus on what's shared. Help people find what they have

in common. For example: Intentionally housing together first-year students who have very different backgrounds provides them with opportunities to build meaningful relationships by recognizing what they have in common, not just what differentiates them. So does creating an overarching shared identity associated with the university, like learning school songs or cheers, wearing school colors or clothes, feeling connected to alumni — these make other differences feel less salient. Cooperating over a shared purpose — for example, through acts of serving in the local community or on campus — can also build these kinds of connections.

Second, support cross-cutting relationships. There has been a recent emphasis on things like affinity groups, identity-based housing and clubs, even separate graduation ceremonies. It is important to give people space to feel comfortable with others in their own identity group — I wouldn't suggest eliminating Hillels, for example. But universities also need to promote relationships among different identity groups, for students and for faculty. Schools can encourage people from different groups to work together, whether it's through co-teaching courses across departments, convening diverse groups of student leaders to engage in service or travel together — anything that gives people the opportunity to build authentic relationships outside of the issues that divide them.

Finally, offer opportunities to learn about one another, and teach people how to navigate their differences. This includes educational programming about different traditions and cultures to foster respect and understanding. But on top of that, people need to learn the basic practices of how they can navigate their differences and engage in difficult conversations more effectively. This is exactly what we do at the Constructive Dialogue Institute — we provide scalable educational programming to equip students with the skills to engage in dialogue across their differences.



**Saperstein:** What role do you think Jewish funders, leaders, and organizations should be playing on or off campus to elevate new approaches and to model viewpoint diversity and constructive disagreement?

**Mehl:** Jewish organizations are well positioned to lead on these issues. There's a long history of rigorous intellectual debate within Jewish culture. At the same time, the Jewish people have historically been the quintessential other. We're able to understand the intellectual value of viewpoint diversity and open inquiry, while also recognizing the moral importance of treating others with dignity and respect.

**Saperstein:** What has been most surprising to you in your work and your research into diversity?

**Mehl:** Two things have surprised me, and they're somewhat related. The first is that many of us have an impression that the United States is deeply divided and that campuses are in crisis. There is, of course, truth to that—otherwise I wouldn't be dedicating my life to working on these issues. But that narrative also obscures the reality of how many Americans are actually moderate and reasonable, how many want to move past this divisiveness, are willing to compromise, and are willing to work with people across the aisle. In general, people are actually more polarized in terms of what they think the other side believes — on average, our opinions on particular issues are not as far apart as most people think. This offers us a real opportunity to move past the toxic, divisive, political moment.

The second thing I've learned, which is fascinating, is that even extremists can dramatically change their positions on issues. There's a famous example of a black civil rights activist and musi-

cian named Daryl Davis who has single-handedly convinced more than 200 members of the KKK to leave the Klan. He did so by having deep conversations and building personal relationships with them. This highlights that even people who seem the most far gone have the possibility of coming back, if you treat them with dignity and respect. I encourage people to remember that as they navigate this challenging election season.

**Saperstein:** A perfect, hopeful note to end on.

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