

Encouraging Debate, Not Settling It

A conversation with Vanderbilt Chancellor

DANIEL DIERMEIER



ANDERBILT *University Chancellor Daniel Diermeier has been one of few leaders of elite American universities to demonstrate a consistent commitment to the foundational principles of higher education before and since October 7. SAPIR Editor-in-Chief Bret Stephens sat down with Diermeier to learn about his views on how to shape a campus culture based in the spirit of inquiry and a commitment to reason.*

Bret Stephens: Until recently, surveys showed that Americans had high confidence in higher education. It was seen as an essential ticket to success in American life. In the past decade or so, that confidence has plummeted. The last survey I saw, from Gallup, showed a sharp decline, and that came out before October 7 and the protests that followed. What happened in the past 10 years to cause that decline?

Daniel Diermeier: We've seen the same data, and I've been very concerned about the drop in approval and trust in higher education. The decline has been larger among people on the conservative side of the political spectrum, but it's across the board, from the Left and the Right. My sense is that it comes from two concerns. From the progressive side, the concern is that highly selective universities are perpetuating inequality. And the concern from the Right is that we're woke factories.

Stephens: Both of them can be true.

Diermeier: One hundred percent. My own sense is that the concerns about the propagation of inequality are, on closer inspection, much overblown. I think the concerns on the politicization of higher education and the ideological drift are much more valid.

The question of the politicization of higher education has come into stark relief after what we've seen last year: the conflict in the Middle East and the drama on campus. These developments have elevated into the public consciousness concerns that have been present for years. They now are front and center, much more serious, and they require a course correction by many universities.

Stephens: A historian might say, "Go back to the University of Chicago or Yale in the 1950s and you'll find conservative critics railing against higher education as hotbeds of radicalism." Now we look back on that and sort of chuckle. Is the criticism more valid today? If so, why?

Diermeier: Yes, I think the criticism is more valid today. If you look back, there were three pillars of how a university thought about its

role in society. If you look at the University of Chicago, one pillar was this commitment to free speech that goes back to the founding and then through a whole variety of presidents, reaffirmed, most recently, by the 2015 report, often referred to as the Chicago Principles. Universities need to be places for open debate.

Pillar two is what we call institutional neutrality, which means that the university will not get involved, will not take positions, on controversial political and social issues that bear no direct relevance to the university's mission. The University of Chicago's formulation of this policy was the Kalven Report from 1967, which so eloquently articulates that when the university formulates a party line on any issue, it creates a chilling effect for faculty and students to engage in debate and discourse.

And the third pillar, less appreciated but important, is a commitment to reason, to respect, to using arguments and evidence. Discourse and debate at the university shouldn't be about shouting. That's a more cultural aspect. All three have eroded, and they have eroded over the past 10 years in significant fashion. Now we see the consequences of that.

Stephens: One conservative critique is that students are afraid to speak their mind, that there's a chilling effect on free speech. Yet when protests erupted after October 7, some of these same critics were horrified by the free speech that was being exercised by some of the protesters. That came to a head last December with the questioning of the three university presidents by Representative Elise Stefanik. How should a chancellor navigate what seems to be a paradox: On one hand, you want to encourage free speech; on the other, there are certain kinds of speech that either chill the speech of others or create hostile climates at universities?

Diermeier: The right way to think about this is to be crystal clear about what your principles are, and these principles need to be content-neutral. They need to apply to everybody, and you've got to stick to them. There can be some variations on that. A university that has, for example, a particular faith tradition, like Notre Dame, may do something different. Public and private may have some differences.

Let's talk about free speech in the context of outside speakers. Controversial speakers come to campus, some student group is opposed to that, they want to shut them down. On our campus, any faculty member or registered student group can invite any speaker to campus that they see fit. We'll support them organizationally, but we're not going to take a position on the individual speaker or message.

The alternative is no guest speakers on campus. Because, whether inside or outside the classroom, you're always going to have cases where people are controversial. Or the third option is to have a committee that vets each speaker. But you can imagine what that's going to be like — constant lobbying and it takes forever.

The critical thing is, do you want to have a broad variety of voices on campus when it comes to outside speakers? And if so, what's the mechanism to make those decisions? That mechanism needs to be grounded in principles.

Stephens: Let me ask you about the role of university leaders. One thing you sometimes hear from presidents is *I have no power. The faculty rule the institution. There's a limit to what I can do in terms of what happens on my own campus.* Tell us about governance structures. How can university leadership effectively use its position within those structures to set a tone, create a culture, have a set of rules and expectations for how the student and faculty behave? If you were

speaking to first-time university presidents from across the country, what would you advise them?

Diermeier: Universities in the United States have a principle of shared governance, meaning that they have multiple constituencies and a constitutional structure for how decisions are made. Usually, there's the executive, the board, the president, the deans, and so forth. Every one of them has — either by design or by precedent — a certain set of prerogatives.

The analogy here is you're like the United States president. You can be effective or ineffective, and in order to be effective, you have to set the tone and a clear direction. You have to convince people. There's a political economy inside a university, and to throw up your hands and say, "Well, I can't do anything" — that's like saying "I'm the president and I have a Congress, but I don't have a two-thirds majority, so I can't get anything done." You have to think about how to get support. How do you get — maybe not universal consensus — but broad consensus? All of that is hard work, but it needs to be done, because this shared-governance structure is the reality we're operating in.

Stephens: Let me ask about institutional neutrality. It seems to me that neutrality is not just a meta-principle for how the university operates in general, but it should be a micro-principle in terms of how departments and even classrooms operate. And this may be a trickier problem, because you have, at many universities, faculty members who are interested more in ideology than in pedagogy: They're not interested in creating a sense of neutrality within their classrooms. How can institutional neutrality operate in the inner workings of educational life, as opposed to just the larger question of statements or positions that a university does or does not take?

Diermeier: There are two different dimensions to this. First, institutional neutrality is fundamentally a constraint on leadership. What it says is that the president and the leaders of the university, including deans, for example, should not take positions on controversial issues: social issues, foreign policy, Supreme Court decisions, domestic policies, etc. Our goal is to encourage debates, not to settle them fundamentally as an institution. Until months ago, only a few universities were leading the way on this: the University of Chicago, Vanderbilt, and the University of North Carolina. Many other universities were taking positions on a whole variety of issues very often.

Moreover, and this is important, institutional neutrality is not only about talking. The critical question is, for example, what do you do with your endowment? If you're divesting your endowment in order to make a point on various political or social issues—climate, private prisons, foreign policy—you are not consistent with institutional neutrality. We're now seeing a bunch of universities that said they're not going to take positions anymore. But the second thing you need to say is that you're not going to use your endowment for political purposes either.

Lack of institutional neutrality also undermines a university's very commitment to expertise. We have faculty members in the law school who spend their entire life preparing to think through the *Dobbs* decision on abortion. The idea that a university president then comes in and says, *Well, I've figured all this out over the weekend, and it's appalling that the Supreme Court did this* totally contradicts the very point of universities, their commitment to doing the hard work, to making sure that they go deep on various issues.

Institutional neutrality does not constrain faculty or students. It does constrain administrators. So the second concern that you pointed out, which I'm going to call the politicization of the

classroom, is a separate one. That, to me, is a question of professionalism. If you're using your classroom for indoctrination or propaganda, you're fundamentally not doing your job. You're not creating an effective learning environment for your students. So I think these are two separate issues that should not be commingled, because the point of institutional neutrality is to create freedom for faculty and students. If that freedom and responsibility are abused, that's a different conversation.

Stephens: We're hearing a great deal about the importance of viewpoint diversity. Faculty and administrators—there's a lot of survey data on this—lean very much to one side politically across the board at universities. Should universities make a mindful effort to bring additional conservative or libertarian—or at least politically alternative—voices into the faculty itself? I've seen cases in which it's treated almost as an affirmative-action program. In other cases—at Yale, for instance, there's the Buckley Institute that attracts a coterie of students and faculty—it seems to create ghettos for conservatives.

Diermeier: The first thing I would say is that in our university, 80–90 percent of what's happening in the classroom has nothing to do with this issue whatsoever. I couldn't care less whom my math professor votes for.

Stephens: Unless the math professor wears a keffiyeh.

Diermeier: That's the point. If they're using their classroom for political propaganda, it's a different conversation. The right way to think about hiring and promotions is that they should be based on expertise and merit. I've cited a couple of these University of

Chicago reports before, but there's one called the Shils Report that makes that very clear: We do not want to have political litmus tests for whom we hire and promote.

That said, there is an important role for the university, including its curriculum, in a society that investigates and reflects on itself, its values, its history. A lot of that is in humanities, the social sciences, divinity schools, law schools, and so forth. There are multiple perspectives, and to have them in the classroom is vitally important. If you have a class on ethics, you want the students to deal with virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and consequential ethics. You want these perspectives well represented, so that they are challenged, and then students can make up their own mind about what they think. If that does not happen because of the ideological capture of a department or program, we've got a problem.

I'm very doubtful that the solution is affirmative action for conservatives. I'm also not convinced that these movements to create new centers are the solution, either. I think the challenge goes a little deeper than where people are on political orientation—it has to do with how fields of study are structured and how certain fields have evolved. But we cannot have an ideological monoculture in these types of classes. It's a disservice to our students.

Stephens: My final question is about the way forward. American universities have, broadly speaking, been structured in a particular way, a four-year curriculum, occasionally a core curriculum, fields divided into humanities, sciences, and so on. For a variety of reasons, both economic as well as academic, my sense is that this model may not serve us particularly well. I'm not sure why college has to be four years as opposed to three years. Britain has graduated perfectly intelligent people in just three years' time. You're thinking of what a Vanderbilt

education should look like in 15 years. How should its broad structures remain constant, and, maybe, how should they evolve or even completely transform?

Diermeier: I think we're in a period, right now, when there's tremendous criticism of the university. Some of that is warranted, but what people should not forget is how enormously successful these institutions are. They're successful in delivering on the promise of a transformative education that changes lives for the better, especially for students who come from underprivileged or first-generation backgrounds. That is not the case in Europe, where there is much more inequality and much less social mobility.

On the research side, universities are enormous engines of innovation. There's evidence now that for every dollar invested in basic research, society gets at least \$5 back. Every innovation that you can look at, from the iPhone to AI, has origins in the great research universities. So I'm worried that these threats to cut research funding have dramatic consequences for the country. Don't let universities off the hook, but don't go to a point where you're destroying something that is a treasure and the envy of the world.

The question is *How does this need to evolve?* The university system is not necessarily a fast-changer, but it has evolved, and it will do so again. What we have to ask ourselves is more fundamental: How do we think about education—including a liberal arts education—in an age of rapidly advancing technology? Practically speaking, we see tremendous pressure on liberal arts colleges now. The model where you go to a liberal arts college for four years and then train for a professional career is not the majority model anymore. It was a form that made sense when knowledge changed slowly.

Now, for people who work in AI and computer science or biomed-

ical research, the knowledge base turns over in six months. If you don't have faculty who are at the cutting edge of that, how are you going to learn? The trend that we're seeing, this tremendous increase in applications to research universities, is a reflection of that and some of the struggles that we see with our liberal arts colleges.

So how do we make sure that we keep the reflective dimension of universities alive when the pressure, or the trend, is so focused on technology? I don't think we have a great answer to that at this point, but those, to me, are the important questions. It's less about four years or three. I think the core bones of American undergraduate education are really strong. The only other model that is a competitor is the Oxbridge model of tutors, and that's a hyper-resource-intensive approach.

The American model itself is enormously successful, but it needs to adapt so that it stays relevant and engaged with the important questions of our time. The great books are still the great books, and they're super important. But you have to ask yourself: How do you think about this type of knowledge base in an era of artificial intelligence, biomedical engineering, and biotech? *