

BRET STEPHENS

Viewpoint Diversity — Up to a Point

*The central aim of education must always
be the pursuit of veritas*



NOT LONG AGO I WAS invited to share a stage with a well-known Jewish writer whose political views had, over the years, shifted from center-left Zionism to far-left anti-Zionism. The two of us had previously appeared in at least a dozen public events and, notwithstanding our deep political differences, had an amicable offstage relationship. There was also a generous honorarium on offer.

This time, however, something in me revolted at the thought of seeing my name next to his. I told the organizer that I would not share a platform with him. Not after October 7. Not for any amount of money. Never again.

That was a gut call. Was it the right one? I have spent years making the case — in newspaper columns, commencement speeches, and

essays in SAPIR — not just for free speech but also for the importance of dialogue and debate, of listening and keeping an open mind, of encouraging a multiplicity of views and engaging those with whom we profoundly disagree.

“Befriend your intellectual adversaries,” I urged one graduating class of college seniors in 2017. “Assume that they’re smart, that their motives are honorable, and that they are your fellow travelers in a quest to better understand a common set of challenges. Master the civilized art of agreeable disagreement.... Have an argument, then have a drink, together.”

Do I still believe that? Yes, but...



The term *viewpoint diversity* has been gaining traction in recent years, particularly in academia. Since SAPIR’s previous issue on “The University,” I’ve been thinking about the relationship between the two.

It’s easy to see why universities have become the main battle grounds for advancing viewpoint diversity. College and university presidents recognize (or have been made to recognize by angry alumni and alarmed trustees) that many of their schools have become left-wing ideological monocultures. These presidents understand—in theory, at least—that the contestation of ideas is critical to pedagogical and knowledge-seeking enterprises. And they already have a diversity rubric into which they can easily slot the word *viewpoint*, thereby adding it to the list of other diversities they claim to treasure: racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, and so on.

All this is a good start, at least when it’s treated as something more than window dressing. Ideological echo chambers are almost always intellectually deadening. Differing views on fundamental questions can help stimulate important conversations, challenge

unexamined assumptions, sharpen both sides of a debate, and remind people that the truth is rarely simple and that nobody has exclusive claims to it. And if communities and institutions are supposed to be enriched by including people of diverse identities, why not extend the principle to include those with diverse opinions?

Still, there are some shortcomings with this version of “diversity.” Three come to mind:

- First, promoting multiple views within a community hardly guarantees that they’ll come into the sort of fruitful contact that can generate intellectual excitement and new ideas. Other plausible outcomes of viewpoint diversity include provoking conflict or mutual avoidance between antagonistic groups, or the tokenized representation of certain (usually conservative) views.
- Second, the ultimate purpose of intellectual inquiry isn’t diversity. It’s truth. Declaring an interest in “viewpoint diversity,” especially in academic settings, risks mistaking a means for an end.
- Third, virtually every institution—including those with a sincere commitment to free speech—will have defensible reasons not to tolerate certain extreme or damaging views: Where does one draw the line when the principle of diversity itself has no limits? At its worst, viewpoint diversity can become an easy way for institutions to dodge important, if difficult, moral questions.

I had a taste of the first shortcoming a few weeks after October 7, when, at the behest of a concerned alumnus, I was invited to offer a pro-Israel perspective at an elite New England college. I arrived on campus to learn that, at the hour I was scheduled to speak in one auditorium, a pro-Palestinian counter-event had been organized in a separate venue. Both events proceeded without incident, and the college could now claim that it had fostered viewpoint diversity. Holding

the events simultaneously also lessened the chances of heckling, protest, or something else untoward.

But what the school had mainly done was undermine the strongest rationale for the two events: namely, to expose students to views of the conflict that might be different from their own. Instead of creating spaces for robust engagement and challenge, what the college achieved was a convenient form of viewpoint ghettoization.

This is a problem that confronts universities broadly, particularly those that are struggling to bring more ideologically diverse (read: nonprogressive) thinkers to campus as speakers, students, faculty, and administrators. It's always possible to set up an island of political dissent on liberal campuses: Yale has the Buckley Institute, Stanford has the Hoover Institution, law schools have their Federalist Societies, and Princeton has Robert George. Yet all this exists at a remove from the host institutions. Independent or right-of-center thinkers rarely have much of a hand in shaping academic programs, admissions policies, tenure decisions, or any of the other core functions through which left-wing faculty and staff have shaped left-wing institutions.

Could universities do better? Yes, but it would take much more than just inviting a few conservative speakers, hiring some independent-minded scholars, or admitting students with non-progressive inclinations. Above all, it requires a paradigm shift, one that the term *diversity*—in both its original sense and in its linkages to DEI—is ill-suited to accommodate. That shift begins with the recognition that viewpoint diversity, in an academic setting, must mean more than coexistence among different opinions or the presence of a few tokenized contrarian voices. It asks for curiosity, conversation, challenge, contestation—in a word, engagement. It means a set of mental habits and institutional practices that goes beyond the current buffet-table vision of viewpoint diversity. And it depends on academic

leaders who believe that the core task of the university is to promote a culture of civil disagreement, however much resistance that generates on campus. Accomplishing this is the work of decades.



Universities need something else: a rededication to the pursuit of *veritas*.

Truth, at least outside of a few scientific disciplines, is a difficult idea because it's almost always contested. We also know from experience that individuals, institutions, and governments that make absolute claims to the truth tend, when given the opportunity, to exercise those claims both despotically and dishonestly. In democracies, our response to that risk is pluralism and tolerance — allowing different conceptions of the truth to coexist at a safe and happy distance, or to interact only voluntarily.

But even democracies still require truth. And universities aren't democracies.

Indeed, among the roles a university ought to play in a democracy is to act as a *counterweight* to the viewpoint diversity that already exists in society—that is, to provide authoritative sources of information about what *is* true amid a country's diverse (and sometimes dangerous) views about the truth. To take a whimsical example: If Congress were to pass, and the president were to sign, legislation declaring that candy is good for you, or that slavery was a benevolent institution, it would be the essential role of university experts to say: No, it isn't, and no, it wasn't. Or take a real-world example: When a fraudulent private historian, David Irving, insisted the Holocaust never happened, it took a real academic historian, Emory's Deborah Lipstadt, to demonstrate to a British court that it had.

At their best, universities have been able to play this role

because the expertise they offer is well-earned, well-vetted, and well-measured — and therefore widely trusted. Yet too many universities have been failing at this role for years, which is one reason public trust in them has collapsed. The reasons for that failure are many and go beyond the scope of this essay. But part of the explanation is that the place of viewpoint diversity on campuses has undergone a kind of inversion. Whereas universities used to solicit diverse views as a means of pursuing truth, now those same universities suppress diverse views while insisting that there is no ultimate truth, merely different “narratives,” “lived experiences,” or “commitments.”

To mend themselves, universities will need to regain two forms of confidence: the confidence to insist that truth is, in most cases, objective and ascertainable, and that it deserves to be defended against the emotions, opinions, or preferences of those who deny it; and next, the confidence to invite careful examination of a broad variety of opinions and hypotheses about what the truth might be.

This brings me to viewpoint diversity’s third shortcoming.

In his 1983 book, *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, the columnist George Will wrote, “The most important four words in politics are ‘up to a point.’” He elaborated: “Are we in favor of free speech? Of course — up to a point. Are we for liberty, equality, military strength, industrial vigor, environmental protection, traffic safety? Up to a point.”

The same might be said about viewpoint diversity. Should today’s universities have much more of it? Of course, up to a point. There’s a lot to be said for bringing more independent thinkers to campus — people who never sit comfortably in any sort of ideological box, who like arguing with their peers, who treat skepticism as a virtue, who delight in discussing or delivering a provocative idea. But there’s a line between an iconoclast and a crank, a skeptic and a cynic, a gadfly and a hater. That line isn’t always easily drawn. But

it's the responsibility of university presidents, provosts, deans, and department heads to find and enforce it.

Much of the problem with the practice of viewpoint diversity is that faculty and administrators set tight lines when it comes to one side of the political spectrum but not the other. That's how it was possible for MIT to host Dalia Mogahed, a scholar of Muslim studies and proud defender of the October 7 pogrom, while refusing to host a talk by Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross. (The university relented after the rejection became a public embarrassment.) That's also how a trans activist like Alejandra Caraballo is invited to teach at Harvard, despite a record of inciteful ad hominem attacks, while the respected evolutionary biologist Carole Hooven is hounded off the campus because she insists sex differences are real.

These double standards are a serious problem—but they are not the whole problem.

Universities—even those that profess a commitment to free expression and seek to live up to it—are, in fact, entitled to set certain limits about the views (and students) they do or don't admit. They may aim to set wide boundaries on *what* can or cannot be said freely, but they also set narrow boundaries on *who* may or may not speak freely. They do this through rigorous admissions, hiring, promotion, and retention practices: that is, by choosing who gets to belong to a community dedicated to the pursuit of truth. That pursuit requires a combination of virtues: intellectual chops, temperament, experience, humility, ambition—above all, a capacity for reason.

When they are working as they should, universities will not admit Hamas apologists any more than they might admit Holocaust deniers—not because they go beyond acceptable moral or political bounds but because they fall below acceptable intellectual standards. Offensive speech can sometimes have defensible intellectual uses. But praising Hamas as a “liberation” movement is, if not ignorant or stu-

pid, nakedly disingenuous. That Hamas's defenders have gained such a foothold at many universities may say something about the rise of campus radicalism, but it says even more about the decline in academic standards.

That's where the legitimate goal of increasing viewpoint diversity must be tempered by the requirement that diverse views meet basic requirements of rationality, evidence, and the ability to sustain intellectual challenge. Whether our universities retain the capacity to apply those requirements thoughtfully, consistently, evenhandedly, and with the aim of meeting intellectual rather than political tests is an open question.



To sum up: Greater viewpoint diversity on university campuses (and other ideologically monochrome institutions) is a good and important goal—but also, on its simple terms, an inadequate one. Viewpoint diversity should not just mean the presence of differing opinions on a campus or some other setting; those opinions must be made to engage productively with one another. The ultimate justification for this engagement of views isn't that it furthers the cause of representation; it's that it abets the pursuit of truth. And even as it's usually helpful to have a wider diversity of opinions, there's a limit to how wide they should go: Views that fall below basic intellectual standards don't deserve admission in the community of reason, reasonableness, and good faith.

Which brings me back to my original question: Was I right to turn down a debate about the wisdom and morality of Zionism with my erstwhile sparring partner?

The argument that I was wrong comes to this: Like a tumor, a bad idea will metastasize if allowed to grow unchallenged and

uncontradicted. Viewpoint diversity introduces a range of opinions that can shrink, if not destroy, those bad ideas, at least when given the opportunity to engage them. At the same time, an insistence on viewpoint diversity can give good ideas a chance to win wider acceptance, even when initially they are unpopular and held by a tiny few. The role of a university or any other institution that cares about ideas is to widen the space in which various ideas can encounter, learn from, collide, and compete with one another. To narrow that space by decreeing certain ideas beyond the pale does not stop those ideas—if anything, it facilitates their growth. Worse, it creates a basis for others to deem *your* ideas beyond the pale, balkanizing and impoverishing intellectual life as a whole.

But that's not the whole story, at least in this case. In a dim light, it may have been understandable to make the case prior to October 7 that Israeli Jews would be better served living as equal citizens with Palestinians in a binational state. That was at least an argument worth having, because to some American Jews, particularly younger ones, it seemed plausible in theory. But the slaughter of October 7 made vivid, as never before, the misery and murder that would await Jews in Israel if they lost or abandoned their state. And the worldwide rise of raw, proud, and violent antisemitism that erupted after October 7 also made clear that Jews should not expect safety elsewhere. To call now for the end of Israel invites the destruction of the Jews.

That's not a position that deserves a stage, particularly when it isn't even made forthrightly. It fails the test of intellectual seriousness and honesty. And while there's a case to be made for challenging it (if only to expose it), there is an equal case to be made for ignoring it, especially when what it mainly seeks is notoriety. There is no shortage of discomfiting and intelligent debates to be had in good faith regarding Israel and its future. Proposing that Israel should have no future isn't one of them.

So was I right or wrong? I'm still not sure. The purpose of this essay is to see both sides of the argument clearly—a reminder, perhaps, that viewpoint diversity exists not only among us, but sometimes, also, within us. *

December 26, 2024