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Intellectual Diversity and the Mission of Higher Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November 2025, scholars and leaders from colleges, universities, and think tanks across the United States convened at Harvard Radcliffe Institute to discuss academic freedom and intellectual diversity in US universities. This document reflects the views of the signatories listed on page 5. The participants in the workshop represented a wide range of areas of scholarly expertise, institutional affiliations, identities, and political views.¹

When we gathered, some of us were skeptical of contemporary efforts to achieve greater intellectual diversity in universities and saw such efforts emerging from bad-faith political attacks that threaten fundamental principles of academic freedom and free and open inquiry. Others were skeptical of universities' genuine commitment to addressing problems on campus and saw many proposed efforts as cosmetic, aimed at weathering the current storm rather than meaningfully addressing longstanding issues. Moreover, our political affiliations and our views about these issues did not neatly correspond.

While we continue to disagree on many things, we are united in our recognition that genuine problems exist related to open inquiry, diversity of perspectives, and free expression at American colleges and universities, and that these can and must be addressed. Indeed, well before “viewpoint diversity” became a feature of news headlines and national politics, many of us were concerned about the intellectual and pedagogical climate on campus—is-

sues related to intellectual diversity, constructive disagreement, and free and open inquiry. In addition, we realize that these problems have at least in part fueled a precipitous decline in public trust in higher education. Without public trust, American higher education cannot thrive.

Despite our disagreements and range of disciplinary and political perspectives, the conversation revealed a striking degree of convergence on several key points:

- Intellectual diversity is essential to the academic mission, but the concept is inconsistently defined and unevenly pursued.
- Ideological imbalance on campus is closely related to other important issues such as disciplinary siloing, hyper-specialization, inadequate mentorship of graduate students, and institutional cultures and departmental practices that inhibit new areas of inquiry and heterodox thinking.
- Student culture—not only faculty practices—shapes the academic climate and affects openness to heterodox inquiry.
- Universities face a legitimacy crisis due in part to public skepticism of higher education's civic value.
- Efforts to address these challenges should involve faculty, university leadership, curricular experimentation, and student mentoring.

¹ The workshop was led by Tomiko Brown-Nagin, Harvard; Julie Reuben, Harvard; and Keith Whittington, Yale. Participants included: Eric Beerbohm, Harvard; Allan Brandt, Harvard; Brandice Canes-Wrone, Stanford; Samuel Goldman, UF; Neil Gross, Colby College; Edward Hall, Harvard; Eitan Hersh, Tufts; William Howell, Johns Hopkins; Jennifer Morton, Penn; Scott E. Page, Univ. of Michigan; Jon Shields, Claremont McKenna College; Jenna Silber Storey, American Enterprise Institute; and Martin West, Harvard.

- Universities should promote new ideas, broaden methodological perspectives, and promote constructive disagreement, including through hiring and admissions practices, but to pressure faculty members to adhere to specific or static political positions is antithetical to the predominant understanding of academic freedom.
- New institutional structures and norms—such as centers for civic thought, pre-disciplinary structures and curricular offerings, and curriculum-wide attention to debate and reasoning—may help address these challenges, including by helping to produce a pipeline of scholars representing a wider range of scholarly interests and perspectives.²

This white paper distills the main themes of the workshop and identifies actionable recommendations, highlighted throughout.

I. (NOT) DEFINING INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY

The phrase intellectual diversity—like related terms such as political, ideological, or viewpoint diversity—is politically fraught. Commentators today frequently use these terms without bothering to define them, and they often use the same words to mean substantially different things.³ Even among our group, no clear consensus definition emerged.

Instead of using our time together to hone a common definition of intellectual diversity, we gravitated toward something that we believed would be more productive and of significant value to higher education: a focus on the responsibility of educators and scholars to cultivate certain intellectual, social, and scientific virtues—such as humility, curiosity, and courage as well as acquaintance with and respectful engagement of competing political and moral ideas—and to ensure universities support the free and open exchange of ideas. Fulfilling this responsibility, we believe, requires—or is at least aided by—a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and approaches.

II. AREAS OF AGREEMENT

A. Political Orientation of Faculty and Students

For several decades, surveys have consistently demonstrated that faculty members at American universities tend to be

more politically liberal than the general population. Moreover, surveys indicate that this political skew has grown since the 1990s, and that it is especially stark in certain social science and humanities fields. Recent evidence suggests that students are also becoming more ideologically homogenous and more liberal than their noncollege peers.

Although these demographic trends are clear, the causes and consequences are less so. On these important questions, we have an abundance of strong opinions and a paucity of strong evidence. Rigorous surveys, like those fielded by Neil Gross⁴ and others, and analyses of syllabi, like those by Jon A. Shields⁵ and others, provide important insights.

What evidence we do have suggests that this ideological imbalance becomes problematic where it intersects with broader political developments and with other problems in higher education, such as disciplinary siloing, hyper-specialization, inadequate mentorship of graduate students, and cultures and practices that inhibit new areas of inquiry and challenges to established research.

► We urgently need more systematic analysis of topics like course content, student experience, faculty experience, and more. In the absence of rigorous evidence, it is exceedingly difficult to define precisely the problem we face and to make progress toward solving it.

B. What Can We Do?

Universities face a legitimacy crisis due to public skepticism of higher education's civic value. In addition to the pressing need for more systematic analysis of the conditions on campus, we identified specific issues and potential responses in five key areas: campus culture, teaching and learning, research, professional norms, and university hiring, administration, and governance.

1. Campus Culture

Many surveys have found that students and faculty do not feel fully free to express themselves on certain issues because they fear disapproval and public censure. Students and faculty with conservative political views feel pressure to self-censor more intensely than others, but the perceived danger of saying the “wrong” thing on certain issues is widespread. Recent surveys, including one conducted by Harvard’s Open Inquiry and Constructive Dialogue work-

² For discussion of some of these efforts, see, for example: Jenna Silber Storey and Benjamin Storey, “How to Broaden the Academic Tent,” American Enterprise Institute, April 2025, <https://www.aei.org/social-cultural-and-constitutional-studies/how-to-broaden-the-academic-tent/>.

³ For examples of the debate among scholars related to intellectual diversity, see, for example: Jessica Riskin, “AAUP: Academic Freedom on the Line | ‘Viewpoint Diversity’ Isn’t About Viewpoint Diversity,” *The Stanford Daily*, February 2026, <https://stanforddaily.com/2026/02/04/aaup-viewpoint-diversity/>; Jenna Silber Storey and Benjamin Storey, “Five Reasons Viewpoint Diversity Makes Academic Sense,” *The Future of the American University* (American Enterprise Institute), January 2026, <https://cfau.aei.org/five-reasons-viewpoint-diversity-makes-academic-sense/>; Michael W. Clune, “Professors Can Be Ignorant. That’s Why We Need Viewpoint Diversity,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 2025, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/professors-can-be-ignorant-thats-why-we-need-viewpoint-diversity>; Lisa Siraganian, “Seven Theses Against Viewpoint Diversity,” *Academe Magazine*, Fall 2025, <https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/fall-2025/seven-theses-against-viewpoint-diversity>; “The Professoriate’s Politics Problem,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-professoriate-politics-problem>; Steven M. Teles, “Why Are There So Few Conservative Professors?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-are-there-so-few-conservative-professors>.

⁴ See Neil Gross, *Why Are Professors Liberal and Why Do Conservatives Care?* (Harvard University Press, 2013); Neil Gross, *What Happened to College? How Politics Broke Higher Education and What We Can Do to Fix It* (Simon & Schuster, 2026).

⁵ See, for example: Jon A. Shields, Yuval Avnir, and Stephanie Muravchik, “Professors Need to Diversify What They Teach,” *Persuasion*, October 2025, <https://www.persuasion.community/p/we-analyzed-university-syllabi-theres->

ing group, indicate that fear of student judgment, rather than faculty retribution, is the primary motivation for most self-censorship.⁶

This censorious culture is likely related to larger developments in national politics, including:

- increasing centrality of political ideology to identity;
- nationalization of politics and negative polarization, which collapses individual variance in opinion—in other words, as soon as an issue becomes politically coded as left or right, Democrat or Republican, critical engagement and constructive disagreement become very difficult;
- the role of social media and other digital communication in enabling doxxing and other forms of personal attacks; and
- the desire to advance gender and racial equality and to safeguard progress.

There has been a great deal of media attention to activists on the left policing thought and expression on college campuses. This a problem, but it is not limited to the political left; conservative activist organizations now encourage students to report faculty they perceive to be progressive in order to exert social and political pressure. Unfortunately, national political polarization has infected campus life in ways that limit the free exchange of ideas that is central to the mission of higher education.

Colleges and universities have begun to create programs that try to replace this censorious culture with one that is more open to debate and disagreement. These efforts, which range from new first-year course requirements to voluntary extracurricular interventions, are relatively recent and therefore evaluations of their effectiveness have just begun. While we generally support the intent across the range, we suspect that some of these programs may be too superficial to achieve their intended impact. We worry that some extracurricular interventions, such as required online didactic modules or voluntary activities that reach a small percentage of students, may have value for tone setting but could be largely ineffective in the absence of more substantial efforts.

► Universities should institute programs that do more than just “signal” interest in problems of campus culture. Institutions should develop substantive programs aimed at creating more open exchange of ideas and should also adopt plans for evaluating them. In addition, they should pair extracurricular interventions with appropriate changes to the instructional core.

2. Teaching and Learning

The current moment of crisis presents an opportunity to revitalize university teaching and support university teachers—including graduate students and contingent faculty who have taken on an increasing teaching load as well as full-time faculty—to build the skills necessary to cultivate an intellectually vibrant classroom and draw out constructive disagreement. Most university teachers learn how to teach on the job with little formal instruction or guidance.⁷

Moreover, it is not enough to navigate controversy effectively in the classroom; faculty must also be encouraged and supported to teach controversial subjects in a broad and serious manner.

► Universities should invest in skills-based training for all classroom teachers, with a particular focus on less-experienced instructors and those who teach or could teach controversial subjects, including providing opportunities to learn about teaching specific contentious subjects from those who do it well.

► Faculty should apply the same high standards to teaching as they do to research; it is an endeavor in which rigorous peer review and critical feedback are necessary for success. Universities should create incentives and conditions to support this.

► Universities should incentivize inter-, non-, or pre-disciplinary courses, co-taught by faculty from different fields and with different perspectives. These courses could focus on important issues that cross disciplinary lines and would also introduce students to the concept of academic disciplines with their distinct approaches and areas of focus.

► Universities, particularly highly selective research institutions, should explore new ways to make rapid progress in teaching and learning, recognizing that the pool of candidates for elite tenured or tenure-track positions is small. For instance, they might create enticing, well-respected, and well-compensated senior teaching faculty positions.

3. Research

The value of intellectual diversity to the research enterprise has been a focus of fierce debate. We have differing assessments ourselves.

Many of us, however, find research to be less critical to discussions of intellectual diversity than is often assumed. On the one hand, research practices vary widely across fields, and in many disciplines—physics or chemistry, for instance—the relevance of political ideology can be difficult

⁶ Harvard University Office of the Provost, *Report of Harvard University's Open Inquiry and Constructive Dialogue Working Group*, October 2024, https://provost.harvard.edu/file_url/634; Payton Jones, Nate Tenhundfeld, and Alex Arnold, “The Comfortable Extremes and the Reluctant Center: Political Ideology and Discussing Controversial Topics on Campus,” Heterodox Academy, December 2024, <https://heterodoxacademy.org/reports/the-comfortable-extremes-and-the-reluctant-center-political-ideology-and-discussing-controversial-topics-on-campus/>.

⁷ For more on teaching and learning, see, for example: Harvard University Office of the Provost, *Report of Harvard University's Open Inquiry and Constructive Dialogue Working Group*, October 2024, https://provost.harvard.edu/file_url/634.

to articulate. On the other, the culture of critical peer review and vigorous debate, while imperfect and not often visible to the public, is strong in many fields. Indeed, one implication of the study of syllabi noted above is that scholarly perspectives on contentious topics are broader than what is commonly taught in the classroom. Yet research—in particular research funding—is an important piece of the puzzle.

► Research funding is an important tool to cultivate the intellectually vibrant campus climate to which we aspire. Funders—including the federal government—could make grants available to support research on topics likely to appeal to scholars with viewpoints that are underrepresented in but important to specific fields of study. This would be consistent with past efforts to channel resources into understudied but important areas and should be done in a manner that preserves academic freedom and holds researchers to the highest standards of academic rigor. Such a policy would have an immediate incentive effect and also support a pipeline of interested scholars.

4. Professional Norms

The 1915 founding principles of the Association of American University Professors (AAUP), which helped establish academic freedom as we understand it today, articulate important professional norms for universities and their faculty.⁸ For example:

[T]he university cannot perform its ... function without accepting and enforcing to the fullest extent the principle of academic freedom.

The university teacher, in giving instructions upon controversial matters, while he is under no obligation to hide his own opinion ... should, in dealing with such subjects, set forth justly, without suppression or innuendo, the divergent opinions of other investigators; he should cause his students to become familiar with the best published expressions of the great historic types of doctrine upon the questions at issue; and he should, above all, remember that his business is not to provide his students with ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves.

“We can afford to forgive a college professor what we regard as the occasional error of his doctrine, especially as we may be wrong, provided he is a contagious center of intellectual enthusiasm. It is better for students to think about heresies than not to think at all.”⁹

Over time, some of these norms have become contested; others have simply receded from prominence as new generations of scholars have entered the profession.

Moreover, today’s graduate students preparing for academic careers receive little explicit instruction in the nature and structure of the profession they are training to enter. This is a striking contrast with other fields—law, business, medicine—where such training is a longstanding practice.

► University faculty should develop instruction in academic citizenship for graduate students, including a philosophically rich and historically contextualized introduction to the role, rights, and responsibilities of professors. Hiring should similarly emphasize academic citizenship, and instruction should be offered to new faculty members as well.

► Institutions of higher education should refocus on their formative mission to cultivate intellectual virtues such as humility, curiosity, courage, and respectful engagement of competing ideas among undergraduates, graduate students, and junior members of the profession.

5. Hiring, Administration, and Governance

Within the broad area of university hiring, administration, and governance, we identified a number of important observations and recommendations. Perhaps surprisingly, we are largely united in the view that most colleges and universities simply do need more ideas and methodologies often associated with political conservatism in order to achieve their mission.

On the specific question of faculty leadership and governance, the AAUP’s 1915 principles, cited earlier, are again strikingly relevant:

If this profession should prove itself unwilling to purge its ranks of the incompetent and the unworthy, or to prevent the freedom which it claims in the name of science from being used as a shelter for inefficiency, for superficiality, or for uncritical and intemperate partisanship, it is certain that the task will be performed by others—by others who lack certain essential qualifications for performing it, and whose action is sure to breed suspicions and recurrent controversies deeply injurious to the internal order and the public standing of universities.

► Universities should explore cluster hires and new faculty lines in understudied areas, as well as a close examination of trends toward increasing reliance on contingent faculty in specific subfields, which may need to be reversed.

► New institutional structures and norms—such as centers for civic thought, pre-disciplinary structures and curricular offerings, and curriculum-wide attention to debate and reasoning—and new organizational partnerships may help address challenges and replenish the pipeline of scholars.

⁸ American Association of University Professors, “1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure,” December 1915, https://aaup-ui.org/Documents/Principles/Gen_Dec_Princ.pdf

⁹ William T. Foster, “Vicarious Thinking,” *The Nation*, November 1915, quoted in American Association of University Professors, “1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure.”

► Universities should promote new ideas, broaden methodological perspectives, and promote constructive disagreement, including through hiring and admissions practices, but to pressure faculty members to adhere to specific or static political positions is antithetical to the predominant understanding of academic freedom.

► All of these and other efforts to address the challenges facing higher education should be rooted in faculty leadership, curricular experimentation, and student mentoring.

III. AREAS OF DISAGREEMENT

Participants in the workshop also engaged in meaningful, respectful disagreement over key issues. And the way forward will necessarily look different on different campuses; one of the great strengths of American higher education is the diversity of its institutions.

Within our group are meaningful differences of opinion, including some articulated above. Other vital areas of disagreement include:

- whether universities should engage in direct measures to hire for ideological diversity among the faculty;
- whether the recommendations discussed would be sufficiently legible to those outside academia to make any real progress toward addressing the current moment of crisis; and
- whether change is possible—or even desirable—by administrative intervention in the absence of a critical mass of faculty support.

Regardless of these differences of opinion, our group had a vigorous and productive day of discussion. Many members of the group had the opportunity to meet and talk with people who had not previously been in their circle of conversation. The substantial areas of agreement, which were worked out over the course of the day and are represented in this memo, will, we hope, point the way toward the formation of intellectually richer and pedagogically healthier campus cultures. ■

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