

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

How to Combat Tribalism on Campus

Students are quick to condemn those who disagree with them. We must equip them to argue better.



By *Daniel Diermeier*

MARCH 17, 2023

Thinking recently about the state of debate on college campuses, I was reminded of “The Eleventh Voyage,” a story in the science-fiction writer Stanislaw Lem’s 1957 collection *The Star Diaries*. In it, the space adventurer Ijon Tichy is dispatched to a distant planet and charged with infiltrating its colony of human-hating robots. To pass among them, he dons a robot costume. He lives in terror of being found out, but he soon discovers he’s not the only one in disguise; the iron exteriors of some robots he meets are hiding nervous humans too. Eventually, *all* the robots turn out to be humans in robot suits, each a victim of an elaborate ruse pitting “us,” the humans, against “them,” the robots. The story ends with Ijon and his fellow *Homo sapiens* joyfully removing their phony robot heads as it dawns on them that, in reality, there is no “them” — there is only us.

Too many college students, taking cues from the polarized culture around them, are buying into a dichotomy as false as the one in Lem’s tale. Driven by laudable intentions to be on the right side of social and political issues, they are casting certain debates in stark moral terms that pit “us” — those with what they deem as the correct opinion — against “them” — anyone who disagrees. In their zeal, these students rush to judgment, brook no disagreement, and default to moral condemnation in place of argument and persuasion.

This is problematic for two reasons. First, when debate devolves into us-versus-them thinking — what the Harvard psychologist Joshua Greene [calls moral tribalism](#) — productive communication ends, along with the learning and understanding that can follow. Second, it can discourage students who are unwilling to brave the intertribal fray from sharing their own opinions.

THE REVIEW | ESSAY

John Guillory's Nonalignment Pact

THE REVIEW | ESSAY

Citadels of Neoliberalism or Bastions of Wokism?

THE REVIEW | ESSAY

Don't Blame the Pandemic for Worker Discontent

Colleges, of course, *want* students to argue with the fierceness of their convictions. Free expression, open inquiry, and wide-ranging debate are inseparable from our purpose of providing transformative education and conducting pathbreaking research; the creation of knowledge demands challenging conventional wisdom. What's more, practicing thoughtful discourse not only makes for better students and greater innovation — it makes for better citizens.

But first we need to know how to argue constructively. The capacity to entertain different views is vital not only on a college campus but also in a pluralistic and democratic society. With shouting matches replacing thoughtful debate everywhere, from the halls of Congress to school-board meetings, a college campus might be the last, best place where students can learn to converse, cooperate, and coexist with people who see the world differently. But the more our academic communities reflect the tribalism and dysfunction of America writ large, the less able we are to impart these essential lessons.

And so, colleges face a teachable moment. We must better educate graduates who can productively live, work, and engage with people with whom they disagree. We must remind students that, whatever their political positions and however strong their beliefs, they are first members of a community with a shared purpose and guided by common values. To prevent us-and-them thinking and preserve the culture of expression and debate upon which higher education depends, we must help students maintain a broader definition of “us.”

A college campus might be the last, best place where students can learn to converse, cooperate, and coexist with people who see the world differently.

Happily, we don't need robot suits to do it. But we do need to provide more than the scaffolding to support campus speech that we've employed up to now.

Student debate is governed by the policies and culture that set the parameters for acceptable speech on campus. These typically rest on two essential pillars. The first is a commitment to providing an abundance of open forums in which issues can be thoroughly explored and discussed without the threat of censorship. The University of Chicago famously enshrined this principle in a 2014 report by a faculty committee charged with articulating the university's commitment to uninhibited debate. "It is not the proper role of the university," the Chicago Principles [read](#), "to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive."

I saw how effective the principles can be during the four years I was the University of Chicago's provost. And Vanderbilt, the university I oversee now, has a longstanding commitment to free expression and open forums that aligns with the Chicago Principles. In the 1960s, when the campus hosted speakers as diverse and controversial as Allen Ginsberg, Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael), and Strom Thurmond, the chancellor at the time, Alexander Heard, [explained it this way](#): "A university's obligation is not to protect students from ideas, but rather to expose them to ideas, and to help make them capable of handling and, hopefully, having ideas."

The second pillar practiced at Vanderbilt is principled neutrality, in which the college and its leadership refrain from taking positions on controversial issues except when the issue directly relates to the functioning of the institution. This pillar has

threatened to crumble in recent years as more college leaders, in response to extraordinary social and political developments, have taken public stances on issues like international conflicts and abortion rights. But principled neutrality has long been a practice on most campuses, and here, too, the University of Chicago helped set a precedent. Its [Kalven Report](#), published during the social upheaval of the 1960s, stressed the importance of political neutrality by institutions as a precondition of free expression and open inquiry.

Over the decades, open forums and principled neutrality have proved essential. But American colleges are at a moment when these principles don't go far enough. The pillars provide ample space for debate, but they don't provide any mechanism for guiding students in how to constructively debate — or to avoid the us-versus-them dynamic that can lead to a breakdown in discourse. A recent conflict that played out at Vanderbilt and other institutions around the country reveals the pillars' limits.

Some students, in the course of advocating for social justice, [drew parallels](#) between Israel's treatment of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs and the abuse and discrimination that Black residents suffered under the apartheid system in South Africa. These students judged not only Israeli policy but also supporters of Israel to be racist. In reaction, students on the other side of the argument objected to this analogy and deemed singling out Israel to be antisemitic. Each side dismissed the other, using stark moral judgments that left little room for discussion or mutual understanding.

As a result, these students found themselves at an impasse. And they weren't the only ones affected. So loud was their war of words, and so polarized, that some students outside the two groups felt they couldn't voice their own opinions on the issue for fear of censure from one side or the other. The Israel-Palestine question became one more topic that many on campus believed was best avoided.

At our university, the two pillars of commitment to free speech and principled neutrality were firmly in place to avoid this scenario. There were plenty of forums

available for debating the issue, and the university took no position on the Israel-Palestine question. It wasn't enough.

What more, then, can institutions do? The next step is to set explicit expectations for constructive conversations and hold students to a high standard. Just as we ask them to adhere to an honor code, we can ask students to uphold civil discourse as a core value. We can insist that they seek to understand first and judge later. We can oppose name-calling as a substitute for thoughtful argument and call out refusals to engage with the other side as counter to intellectual life. We can remind students that they are members of one community, committed to living and learning together — even when that means doing so alongside people with whom they disagree.

We can also provide them with more tools. The New York University social psychologist and campus free-speech advocate [Jonathan Haidt](#), who has written about how the definition of morality varies among groups, has started the [Constructive Dialogue Institute](#), which aims to provide students with “a shared language and set of tools to effectively navigate differences.” Colleges and universities can employ tools like these, or we can invent our own. Whichever we use, it's incumbent on us to give students the resources and support they need to risk engaging with unlike-minded peers on highly charged issues.

Here's one example of how constructive conversation can be taught: A couple of seasons ago, Vanderbilt's women's basketball team chose to [remain in the locker room](#) during the singing of the national anthem before games, in protest of police killings of unarmed Black Americans. We received a lot of angry calls, emails, and social-media posts from people offended by the team's protest, many of whom viewed it as an insult to the memories of soldiers who had died for their country. There were demands for us to publicly condemn the team's practice and force players to stand for the anthem.

Just as we ask them to adhere to an honor code, we can ask students to uphold civil discourse as a core value.

Instead, we protected the students' right to protest without committing the university to one side of the issue. This was open forums and principled neutrality at work. We could have left it there, but we wanted to seize the moment to set an example for civil discourse at Vanderbilt. And so we invited the team to a discussion with military veterans studying at Vanderbilt. We facilitated a conversation in which individuals on each side of the debate passionately explained their positions, and — invaluable — listened to the other side do the same.

I don't know how many minds were changed that day. I do know that each group left with deeper insight into the people they disagreed with and with greater appreciation of the shades of gray implicit in the issue at hand. And I know that now, before games, the women's basketball team links arms at center court — not only for the national anthem but also for “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the “Black national anthem” that the team chose to play before home games as a way to raise awareness and express their views.

Insisting on constructive conversations on our campuses doesn't require everyone to agree. It merely asks all of us to do the uncomfortable but necessary work of conversing despite our differences, and to remain mindful of the values we have in common. It compels us to at least try to understand where people with opposing viewpoints are coming from, to know why we disagree with them, and to acknowledge that someone with a different or even offensive opinion probably isn't an immoral monster.

Many of us in academe may recall a time when this kind of discourse was automatic. But we're now in an era when rancor, polarization, and the corrosion of dialogue and

free expression threaten our mission and the full and proper education of too many of our students.

The parallels with American civic life are distressingly obvious, and college students, we hope, are future civic leaders. That’s why the most urgent free-speech question on our campuses isn’t just whether someone has the right to say something. It is whether we can teach students to talk with one another in a way that allows understanding and cooperation to follow. This begins by reminding them, again and again, that once we peel away our differences, there is no them, there is only us — blinking and smiling like the emancipated humans in “The Eleventh Voyage,” deciding where we go together from here.

A version of this article appeared in the [March 31, 2023, issue](#).

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

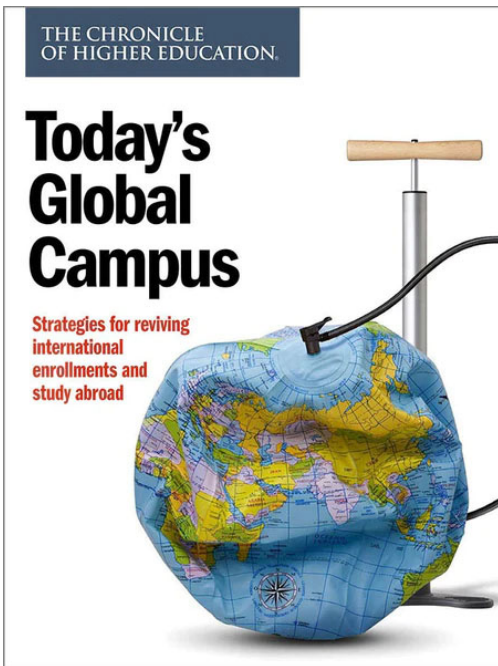
OPINION

FREE SPEECH

[Daniel Diermeier](#)

Daniel Diermeier is chancellor of Vanderbilt University.

IN THE CHRONICLE STORE

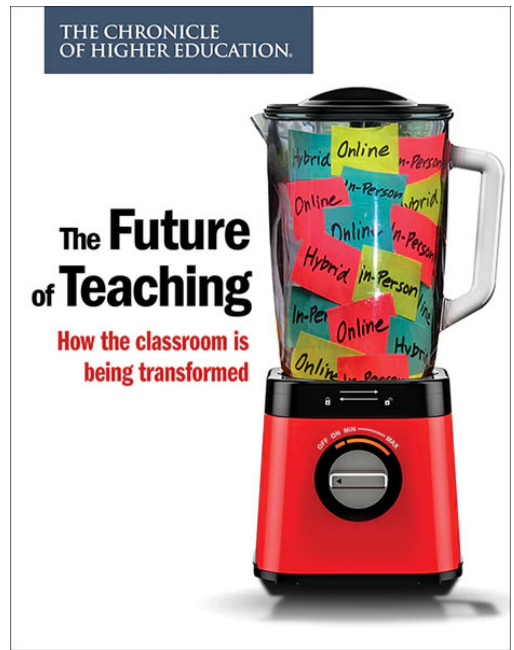


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

Today's Global Campus

Strategies for reviving international enrollments and study abroad

Today's Global Campus

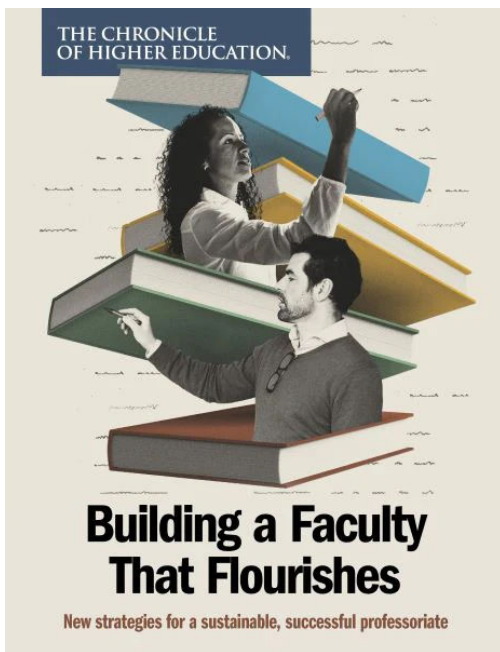


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

The Future of Teaching

How the classroom is being transformed

The Future of Teaching

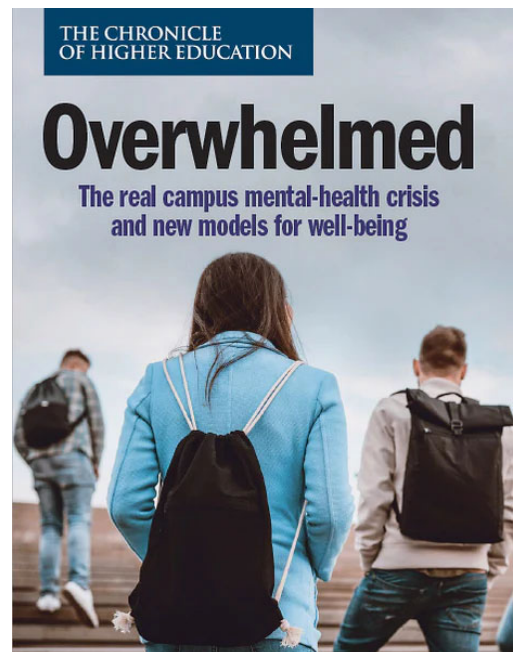


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

Building a Faculty That Flourishes

New strategies for a sustainable, successful professoriate

Building a Faculty That Flourishes



THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

Overwhelmed

The real campus mental-health crisis and new models for well-being

Overwhelmed



1255 23rd Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037

© 2023 The Chronicle of Higher Education