



How Universities Can Counter the Perils of Tribalism and Encourage Civil Disagreement

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The intensification of political divisions in the United States has received a lot of attention in recent years, and rightly so. Much of the conversation centers on the notion of polarization, the increasing gulf between the political identities of different segments of the electorate. However, this is only part of the story. A key factor is also tribalism, the agglomeration of American society into separate blocs, reducing interactions across the aisle and enforcing internal doctrine.

Polarization and Tribalism Are Not the Same

Polarization and tribalism are frequently used as synonyms but are not the same. In simple terms, the former entails ideological distance, while the latter is social separation between groups. When political ideologies become the central point of individuals' sense of goodness, to the detriment of alternatives embodied in other persons, differences of opinion turn into irredeemable conflicts. The expression of particular views comes to be seen as a moral failing. **Adversaries become enemies**, in-group dissent turns into transgression, **and eventually violence is seen as justified**.

The problem is not so much that people are isolated from other ideas, in fact, the communication revolution in recent decades has made access to alternative viewpoints easier than ever. The main challenge is the isolation from the individuals who hold those ideas. When all we see of a dissenting view is a short excerpt, an out-of-context quote, or an interpretation through the lenses of someone we agree with, we lose nuance, empathy, and understanding.

To some extent, tribalism is a natural consequence of our social lives. Humans tend to seek out people they perceive as similar to them and distrust outsiders. We also have a propensity to reject information which conflicts with our **preconceived notions**. The problem is that these tendencies are intensified by a media environment which seeks engagement at any cost, **algorithms which promote groupthink** and **outrage-driven content**.

Higher Education Can Help Bridge Divides Rewarded Elsewhere

Today's media landscape rewards confirmation bias and stereotyping, turning opposite views into archetypical and sometimes even comical caricatures. Regardless of the vocation or service of countless journalists, the incentives of their companies are to drive ratings, views, and clicks. To do that, **negativity** and **self-validation** work much better than acceptance and open-mindedness. Politicians of different persuasions have incentives to jump on this wagon, as catering to the demands of an enraged base can become an efficient way to fundraise, win elections, and raise their profiles.

Therefore, the solution to our divisions is not just exposure to other ideas, but to other people as well. Luckily, higher education can play a crucial role in this regard. We can set up spaces for respectful dissent, with clear rules about civility and openness. There will always be those who try to use these instances to further generate discord, aiming to “own” the other side instead of trying to learn from positions with which they disagree. But most students, faculty, staff, and community members will value spaces to hear from others, rejecting extremism and occasionally finding common ground.

Academia is in a unique position to generate these spaces for many reasons. First, universities are driven by notions of critical thinking and free exchange of ideas. Second, these institutions have the resources to sustain such events, not just in terms of money to hire speakers, but also infrastructure, logistics, and recognition. Third, we have an available population of young minds eager to engage with new notions and challenge established ideas. Finally, American colleges have a long tradition of engaging with their communities and partnering with local organizations of all kinds.

The good news is, there are countless initiatives taking place already that seek to bridge divides. This work is often done quietly, but surely. A good example is my own institution, Washington and Lee University, where traditions of community service and civil discourse are built into experiential courses and interdisciplinary programs. Despite frequent stereotypes, professors across the United States are committed to respectful disagreement, intellectual curiosity, and social engagement.

How Can University Administrators and Policymakers Encourage Civil Discourse?

University administrators can contribute to positive outcomes in many ways. They can incentivize faculty to organize open seminars and talks by including such work in their service evaluations. They can assist with course designs which include public debate. They can create grants to fund special events and finance visiting positions for experts with experience outside of academia. They can encourage student organizations to cooperate with one another in inviting lecturers to campus. This would mean more than bringing flashy names and agents provocateurs with high fees. For the same price, we can also invite numerous scholars, activists, and leaders who have a lower profile and perhaps fewer followers on social media but are eager to share their knowledge and views with others.

Politicians and administrators should not undermine these efforts by over-legislating classroom content, censoring research agendas, or even banning materials and firing teachers. The way to address concerns about higher education should not be the suppression of viewpoints, but the encouragement of alternative ones. Instead, governments can contribute to these efforts in many ways. Legislatures and local councils can appropriate funds to sponsor events. Candidates for office, elected representatives, and public experts can participate themselves, offering their insight and expertise. State officials can work with their university systems to promote symposiums and provide necessary administrative and logistical support.

In the end, this requires a shared commitment to freedom of speech. We are dealing with an environment in which powerful actors claim to care about pluralism, but their work seeks only to silence views they disagree with. Many of those who decry the “cancelling” of discourses they endorse are completely fine with using the same tactics against their opponents. The mission of higher education requires tolerance towards opinions one dislikes (even if strongly so).

The task is difficult, to a great extent because our first instinct will often be to dig in, side with our group no matter what, and conflate dogmatism with virtue. The solution is not uniformity, which would be impossible in a complex society of 340 million people and clash with basic freedoms. Neither should we aim for a stagnant nation which chooses to ignore structural problems and inequalities in the name of a vague sense of unity. Our problem is not the existence of disagreements and conflict, but our decreasing capacity to address them in constructive ways. Universities cannot solve this conundrum by themselves, but they can contribute to putting people in the same room, undermining for a while the influences of partisan media and acrimonious political environment. The benefits for everyone involved are likely to be great.