What Universities Owe Democracy

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Why don’t my professors look like me?

Young. Black. Safe?

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

These were just a few of the phrases displayed on signs held aloft by the dozens of students gathered at Keyser Quad on Johns Hopkins’s Homewood campus in mid-November 2015. Organized by the Johns Hopkins Black Student Union, the protesters that day had convened to demand more support for Black students and greater representation for Black faculty, students, and staff. Similar protests had been organized on campuses across the country after months of uproar at the University of Missouri in Columbia following a series of deplorable racist incidents and escalating tensions on that campus. At Yale University, at Ithaca College, at Claremont McKenna College, and many others, students were rising up to demand change. They were having an
impact, too. In fact, just days before the protest at Hopkins, the president of the University of Missouri system had resigned.

The anger, frustration, and anxiety of the Hopkins protestors was palpable—and entirely understandable. The events of the previous year had made it achingly clear that racial progress in the United States had stalled, a truth underscored by the tragic series of highly public deaths of Black men at the hands of police: Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York City, and 25-year-old Freddie Gray in our hometown of Baltimore. Yet again, it was all too clear that our country had failed to realize the democratic ideals of equity and equality, and young people were calling universities to task as complicit in this failure.

I walked to Keyser Quad on that brisk November day first and foremost to listen. When I arrived, the students outlined a series of demands and enumerated the university’s shortfalls at being a truly inclusive institution, pointing, as one piece of evidence, to the fact that our university’s School of Arts and Sciences at the time counted only 5 Black faculty members out of 295 total faculty. To address these issues, they requested that I attend an open forum that they would hold. I agreed.

In the days preceding the forum, I considered what I wanted to say to our community. I had written a set of talking points highlighting commitments and actions from the university, but I thought it would be important, too, to know how my predecessors at Hopkins had responded in similar moments of reckoning. One trip to the archives later, I had laid out on my desk a history of episodes dating back to the 1960s in which students had called for more racial equity at Johns Hopkins. As my gaze darted back and forth between the words I planned to say at the forum and the responses of previous presidents, I became dismayed—they may as well have been identical. Time and again, university lead-
ership had issued the same promises with too little progress to show for them. I simply couldn’t return to our students repeating the refrains of the past. I threw out my prepared remarks and decided to start fresh.

On the evening of the forum, the auditorium overflowed with students, staff, alumni, and faculty. The ensuing two-hour discussion was at times tense and emotional, but it remained substantive throughout. A faculty moderator, selected by the students, set ground rules for the event and guided the conversation, ensuring that the audience could ask questions and that voices from all sides of the ideological spectrum were heard. When one student voiced concerns that reforms could lead to the institution of quotas, a chorus of boos and hisses started to build, but the students and moderator swiftly quieted the audience. I was able to share initiatives that were in the works to recruit more faculty and students to the university from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, but similar plans had been introduced intermittently in the past without much in the way of sustained progress or momentum. And so, that night, we committed to a process that would help guarantee steady movement on these issues grounded in regular reports detailing faculty, staff, and graduate student diversity numbers. It was a road map toward a more diverse and inclusive institution that would involve faculty, staff, and students in its design. We still have a ways to go, but we are heading in the right direction, and a great deal of credit goes to the Black Student Union for pushing us to make good on our promise to be a more equitable institution.

This episode looms large in my memory because it embodied the best of a pluralistic academic community. From the initial protest on Keyser Quad to the public forum to the enduring and evolving policy changes, students engaged with university
leadership and with one another in a way that represented the highest ideals of dialogue and debate across differences of perspective to enact meaningful change. Yet the experience also reinforced my sense that moments like this were all too rare. At a time when our democracy is ever more diverse and ever more polarized, our universities ought to be the world’s models of how to talk to one another across the divides of identity and ideology. That they aren’t—that universities have instead come to be seen as places of tension and fracturing—is a sign that we have failed to discharge one of our core contributions to liberal democracy.

The Fabric of our Pluralistic Democracy

The genius of liberal democracy lies, in no small part, in its capacity to value and give voice to the great diversity of the human experience. It accepts as a central premise the notion that there is no single overarching truth that should govern all affairs of mankind, and that we should, as much as possible, remit to the individual, not the state, the ability to decide what ends and goods are worthy of pursuit. This is why liberal democracy has historically placed such a high premium on tolerance. We may not agree with the choices that our fellow citizens may make, the values they cherish, or the gods they worship, but we understand that in order to live in a stable, pacific society, we have to muster the requisite respect for others’ views to avoid a descent into endless strife and perpetual gridlock.

Herein lies one of liberal democracy’s core dilemmas: to be sustainable, a democracy must find ways not only to channel the thrumming plurality of viewpoints, experiences, and dogmas in society, but also to fuse these perspectives into some approximation of a shared purpose, a public agenda, and a governable repub-
lic. For teeming multiethnic democracies like the United States, dialogue across difference is even more essential.

In 1848, as Europe was grappling with rapid democratization, the philosopher John Stuart Mill articulated the importance of conversation and debate to democracy. For Mill, experience alone, although essential to the development of one’s attitudes and opinions, was ultimately inadequate to form proper judgments in a democratic society. These had to be molded, shaped, and interpreted in conversation with diverse others: “It is hardly possible to overstate the value . . . of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar.”

The place where such encounters and exchanges occur is the public sphere. As the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas famously chronicled in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, beginning in the seventeenth century, middle-class citizens gathered in salons (in France), table societies (in Germany), and coffeehouses (in England) to discuss ideas, art, and politics. These were spaces of “common humanity” in which, Habermas writes, “the authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy and in the end carry the day.” Such developments—along with the ascendance of print culture—set the stage for the modern public sphere, which has been integral to the health and longevity of liberal democracy as it has expanded to include ever more voices. Democracies require spaces for heterogeneous citizens to encounter one another and converse, argue, joke, and reason. They ensure, in the words of legal scholar Cass Sunstein, that “people will encounter materials on important issues, whether or not they have specifically chosen the encounter. When people see materials that they have not chosen, their interests and their views might change as a result. At the very
least, they will know a bit more about what their fellow citizens are thinking.”

By most measures, such spaces are becoming increasingly scarce. Even as the United States has become a more diverse nation, our opportunities to make meaningful contact with people unlike ourselves, much less talk openly with them, has diminished considerably. Since the 1970s, research shows, Americans have sorted themselves into neighborhoods and social groups with similar cultural values, politics, religious affiliations, and income. This steady process of self-segregation has accelerated the homogenization of the people we talk to, which has diminished the quality of our political life. An extensive study of American voters’ social networks following the 2016 presidential election found, distressingly, that whereas more than a third of voters discussed politics with someone of the opposite party during the 2000 presidential campaign, only a fifth of voters could say the same in 2016. In a separate examination of the discussion habits of citizens from a dozen countries, Americans were the least likely to discuss politics with someone with whom they disagree.

Even more worrisome is the fact that when Americans do engage across difference, those interactions are increasingly defined by mistrust or even outright hostility. Indeed, the number of Americans who believe that “most people can be trusted” is at its lowest point in decades. According to Pew, the share of Americans who hold a highly negative view of the other political party roughly tripled from 1994 to 2016. The number of Americans who regard members of the other party as “selfish” or “close-minded” has also leapt to record highs. In one of the more striking windows into the soul of a deeply riven nation, more than a quarter of Republicans in 2008 reported that they would be “somewhat upset” or “very upset” if one of their children married
a Democrat, and about a fifth of Democrats said the same about their child marrying a Republican.\textsuperscript{10} Five decades prior, those numbers stood at about 5 percent.\textsuperscript{11} Such antipathy is even reinforcing where people live and how they feel about their neighbors. People now feel so negatively about those with competing views that the perceived desirability of a neighborhood can drop by as much as 20 percent when someone is told that members of the opposite political party live there.\textsuperscript{12}

These trends are facilitated and exacerbated, of course, by the inescapable role of the Internet in modern life. Once heralded as the public sphere of the twenty-first century, online spaces have steadily been transformed into marketplaces of indignation and hotbeds of extreme beliefs. A few years ago, Yale University psychologist Molly Crockett analyzed big datasets from social media networks to study expressions of moral outrage on the Internet. Her analysis revealed that the sheer volume of immoral acts people learn about on social media combined with the low social costs to giving voice to heightened emotions has led to a massive increase in the volume and intensity of expressions of moral outrage online. Even though moral outrage sometimes has the potential to reinforce social norms and hold bad actors accountable, its online form all too often, in Crockett’s words, “ricochets within echo chambers.” She concludes, “There is a serious risk that moral outrage in the digital age will deepen social divides.”\textsuperscript{13} In sum, whether in our corporeal or online lives, Americans have drifted into ideological silos—and this has sapped us of the ability to engage with others beyond our bubbles and threatened the pluralist ideal undergirding liberal democracy.

Universities are one of the few remaining places where Americans of different backgrounds are guaranteed to encounter one another. This has long been true of higher education. Indeed, one of
the great contributions of residential colleges and universities to American democracy has been the fact that they so often function as one of the first opportunities many young people have to leave their local communities and navigate their own identities in the presence of others unlike themselves. At first, these differences were limited mostly to geography and religion, but in time they have come to encompass class, race, gender, and even nation. The act of attending college has long been an experience at once discomfiting, developmentally meaningful, and fundamentally pluralist.

Across the centuries, colleges and universities have taken gradual steps to open their doors to groups excluded from other parts of American society. In many cases, they have even been ahead of their times, as with the daring nineteenth-century colleges that sought a path toward racial and gender parity decades before other institutions. As American colleges and universities in the twentieth century broadly embraced the imperative to recruit student bodies that more closely resembled the nation, they also created opportunities for students of diverse backgrounds and experiences to interact on campuses devoted to fierce debate about every issue imaginable. By the 1990s, data showed that college students were developing close relationships with peers across racial, economic, and ideological lines. The psychologist Patricia Gurin, in an expert report filed in the affirmative action case *Gratz v. Bolliinger*, cited evidence that these interactions were leading graduates, on average, to have “more diverse friends, neighbors and work associates” years after graduation. Colleges and universities, she suggested, had shown the potential to “disrupt an insidious cycle of lifetime segregation that threatens the fabric of our pluralistic democracy.”

Then, around the turn of the century, something shifted. Universities continued to make great strides in expanding the racial
and ethnic diversity of incoming classes, but they no longer seemed to succeed in translating this additional diversity into a meaningful pluralism on campus. There were signs that students were drifting, more and more, into enclaves of familiarity. Of course, being with people like oneself is vital for individual and collective flourishing, but it cannot comprise the entirety of social interaction. And universities have actually abetted these trends by removing policies in areas such as housing, dining, and coursework that had once served to draw students together. Worse, when interactions across difference do occur, they feel—for many—fragile and brittle, a consequence of the exclusion or silencing of those from different backgrounds or who hold different views.

This chapter sketches the emergence of the pluralist impulse in colleges and universities: how it came to flourish over the years, why it has flagged, and what can be done in response. Unlike the previous chapters of this book, which have focused on admissions, curricula, and research, this one turns to the less formal social interactions of campus life, to those moments of contact—sometimes spontaneous and serendipitous, sometimes structured and deliberate—across the unfamiliar that have occurred on campuses for two centuries. Such moments are notoriously difficult to tease out from the history of American higher education because they are so transient and fleeting and their impact so hard to measure, but the story is clear.

Over the course of the past two hundred years, universities have demonstrated a willingness and capacity to draw students together to engage others from diverse backgrounds, often for the first time in their lives. Of late, they have been passive in ensuring that those interactions across diversity actually occur once students arrive on campus, or that the ones that do are meaningful and productive.
They have adopted a hands-off approach toward campus interaction, mostly allowing students to sort out for themselves how to manage the complicated and sometimes even painful work of engaging with others who are different. They assume that students will simply chance upon encounters with people unlike themselves and cultivate independently the necessary skills to engage with one another across the gulfs of identity and ideology—an assumption drastically at odds with what we know of social psychology.

These issues are often debated in the context of high-profile controversies involving campus speakers. But those are a symptom, and not the illness. I mostly try to avoid relitigating them here, as such controversies have become so over-politicized that they ultimately tell us little about what universities ought to be doing differently in this moment. Instead, in this chapter, I want to look around and behind those debates to a conversation about where I believe universities actually have been most remiss. With regard to dialogue and speech in particular, we have resigned ourselves mostly to the role of referee, calling fouls on speech clashes when they arise.

But universities were not built to referee; they were built to educate. They should be hard-wiring into campuses spaces and programs that promote encounters, rather than standing to one side, or, worse, constructing barriers that keep people apart. They should be taking steps to model and teach discourse across that difference to students, rather than leaving it to students' own initiative. They should be reimagining their legacy as places of blending and vibrant discourse across all facets of identity and experience. They should be adopting, in other words, a *purposeful pluralism*.

As many have noted over the past several years, the experiment of realizing a truly multiethnic democracy in the United States (aside from the brief but powerful attempt during Reconstruc-
tion) only dates back to the civil rights movement, when the last great expansion of the franchise occurred. There is no blueprint for building and sustaining such a society. Our colleges and universities—once the exclusive province of white men from a narrow geographic region—are today among the most diverse institutions in our society. They ought to be on the vanguard of this grand, historic project, modeling what productive citizenship looks like in a world of difference, and yet they have lapsed in this responsibility.

There is cause for optimism, however. Colleges and universities have extraordinary resources to devote to the mission of cultivating a true pluralism: talented faculty, passionate students, and an ethos committed to dialogue and equality. This is a story of renewal, but it is one that requires us to start, once again, with what pluralism was at college before sketching a vision for what it can still be.

Scholastical Communion

Colleges of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries prized sameness over difference. According to one recent historian of the American college campus, the idea of a diverse student body “never entered the minds of early American college officials.” If anything, “anti-diversity was the norm.”17 This was true at the level of admissions, since most students came from similar regional, racial, and economic backgrounds (with some modest exceptions for poor students, as I discussed in chapter 1). It was equally true of the college campus and the experiences it afforded, where homogeneity was the norm: students took the same classes, slept in the same building, and ate and prayed together. Colleges were not meant to be spaces of exploration or dynamism but of discipline, structure, and uniformity.
And yet, even then, college leaders recognized that there was something potent—special, even—about the way universities drew students together for serendipitous encounters at a formative moment in their lives. One of the earliest statements to this effect was recorded in 1671 by Harvard’s governing board, which wrote of the “advantage to learning [that] accrues by the multitude of persons cohabiting for scholastical communion, whereby to actuate the minds of one another.”

More than a century later, George Washington seized upon the democratic possibilities of this aspect of the residential campus in his idea for a national university in a 1795 letter to a friend. Washington wrote that an institution of higher learning with truly national aspirations must “assemble the youth of every part [of the nation] under such circumstances, as will, by the freedom of intercourse and collision of sentiment, give to their minds the direction of truth, philanthropy and mutual conciliation.” Washington believed that a university with a nationally representative student body could enable students to transcend what might sometimes seem to be irreconcilable differences of thought and background by living alongside one another, sharing honestly their beliefs and presuppositions, and challenging one another’s ideas. In the process, they could begin to forge some shared sense of a democratic purpose out of a young, far-flung republic still in the process of stitching itself together. In this was the seed of a pluralistic college society.

As I discussed in chapter 2, Washington’s national university never materialized, but in the early decades of the nineteenth century colleges did become more geographically diverse. In New England, for instance, the fraction of out-of-state students at institutions other than Harvard and Yale rose from 53 percent to 72 percent between 1800 and 1860. At Harvard and Yale, the
shifts were even more dramatic, with out-of-state students growing from 18 percent to 53 percent at the former and 32 percent to 71 percent at the latter. Yet even as colleges grew more diverse, the realities of student experience in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not always match Washington’s lofty ideal of interaction.

Among the most characteristic features of campus life in the early republic were not expansive fellowship and vigorous debate but fistfights, riots, stabbings, and property destruction. Many of these spasms of violence were directed toward faculty and college leaders, whether it was students at the University of North Carolina who whipped the president in 1799 after a popular student had been expelled or those at the University of Virginia in 1825 who capped off a night of drinking by physically assaulting one professor and tossing a bottle of urine through the window of another. Students fought each other, too. At Harvard, the nineteenth-century scholar George Ticknor described the “rude frolicking among the undergraduates, such as was not very rare when the college officers had left the tables.” Sometimes eruptions were a form of protest against suboptimal living conditions or abusive treatment by faculty; at others they were—to quote the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge—acts of “motiveless malignity,” disturbing expressions of a then-widespread masculine culture of brawling and alcohol (a potent combination) that found fertile soil on isolated campuses.

Not all students resorted to violence. Some forged pathways that came closer to approximating Washington’s vision of the free and open exchange of ideas. These were often the students—chronicled by campus life historian Helen Horowitz—for whom college was a place not for revelry and rebellion but labor, study, and self-improvement. Many found refuge in another defining feature of campus life in this period: the college literary society.
Student born and student run, literary societies first began appearing on campuses in the early 1700s as egalitarian places for students to hone their rhetorical and compositional skills alongside their peers, free from the oversight and strictures of the faculty. These societies proliferated in the first half of the nineteenth century, becoming so prevalent that it was common to quip that no newly founded college was worth its salt if it didn’t have at least two functioning literary societies before it opened its doors.

Called by one historian “little republics,” literary societies—with grand Hellenic names like the Philomathean Society, Lino-

nians, or the Clariosophics—were elaborate organizations. They maintained libraries, developed governance structures independent of the college, elected members to be “professors” who delivered regular lectures on assigned subjects, and staged debates. At bottom, they were a space for students to socialize with one another on the battleground of ideas. As the constitution of one early literary society at Dartmouth stated, its mission was “encouraging free, and unreserved observation and forming a lasting and honorable fellowship.”

This aspect of the societies came into relief in the debates, which provided students a crucial space to cut their argumentative teeth and to test their views on important issues without—crucially—resorting to violence. Students did not take these debates lightly. They were, in the recollections of one participant, “very earnest and called forth talent and research.” Over time, the topics these societies covered grew more contentious. Prior to the Revolutionary War, they tilted toward moral and philosophical conundrums; later, as students became thrilled by the possibilities of independence, they drifted in the direction of more urgent social and political questions. By the onset of the Civil War, many literary societies were consumed by the same questions of slavery,
sovereignty, and the fate of the Union that were rending the nation, straining the limits of decorum and debate.\textsuperscript{30}

Yale is a good example of how the looming war tested the pluralist limits—in geographic and ideological terms—of literary societies. In 1819, sectional rivalry within Yale’s Linonian Society (spurred by the election of a Northerner to the society’s presidency) had precipitated an exodus of Southern students who formed their own literary society, Calliope. Although the societies were divided roughly along geographic lines following the split, the Calliopes still counted a few Northerners among their membership, while the Linonians retained some Southern members. Then, in 1851, this truce frayed entirely. That fall—a year after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law—the remaining Southern members of the Linonians shifted their membership to Calliope.\textsuperscript{31} The \textit{Yale Literary Magazine} reported—ominously—that this act “has drawn more definitely the sectional differences of the students.”\textsuperscript{32}

What ultimately precipitated the decline of literary societies was not the Civil War, however, but the emergence of another kind of student society: the fraternity. Unlike the mostly egalitarian literary societies, fraternities promised secrecy and exclusivity, which made them desirable for students eager to make important social connections in college. Fraternities also solved an administrative headache of housing students, as they bought and maintained permanent residences near campus that colleges didn’t have to pay for. Between 1876 and 1920, the number of fraternities with their own residences shot up from 1 to 774.\textsuperscript{33} The college literary society couldn’t compete.

Nevertheless, throughout their brief hegemony in college life, literary societies were an important venue in which students could freely encounter one another as equals and grapple peacefully with difficult ideas alongside their peers. Their prevalence was an early
demonstration of the potential for colleges to cultivate communities defined by the vigorous exchange of a diversity of ideas. Yet for much of the nineteenth century, the demography of student bodies at most colleges remained more or less homogenous, with few colleges reflecting the composition of the nation, save for growing regional diversity. The tides began to shift, slowly, in the latter half of the nineteenth century toward more representative student bodies.

Collision of Views

Following the Civil War, radical Republicans and newly enfranchised Black citizens were eager to create a truly integrated American nation. They were initially successful, too: as many as two thousand Black citizens held political office during Reconstruction. This desire to create more representative institutions extended to colleges, too, and inspired several noble, if tragically short-lived, efforts to transform college campuses into genuine laboratories for the formation of vibrant pluralistic communities.

In the South, a handful of institutions emerged as models of integrated higher education. One was Berea College in Kentucky, which, following the lead of Oberlin College (the first college in the United States to admit students regardless of race or sex), announced itself as “opposed to Sectarianism, Slaveholding, Caste, and every other wrong institution or practice.” Berea welcomed its first class of 187 collegians in 1866, more than half of whom were Black. Although the school experienced its share of what one white alumnus described as a “friction, and of a most perplexing kind” between Black and white students (though we might wonder if this friction was as perplexing to his Black peers), Berea students attended church
together, played on the same sports teams, took the same classes, and sparred with one another in debates.\textsuperscript{37}

The University of South Carolina (formerly South Carolina College) took similar steps in 1873 when its trustees declared the university to be “the common property of all our citizens without distinction of race.”\textsuperscript{38} In order to accommodate new students (which included white students, formerly enslaved Black students, and Black men and women who had been free before the Civil War but unable to access higher education), the school eliminated all tuition and housing fees. One Black undergraduate marveled at the atmosphere of collegiality and mutual respect that prevailed on campus. Living and studying at the University of South Carolina was, he concluded, “the finest argument in favor of ‘equality before the law.’”\textsuperscript{39}

Ultimately, the waning of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow forced both Berea and the University of South Carolina, among other residential institutions with similar aspirations, to abandon their pluralistic ambitions and become segregated institutions. Nevertheless, these trailblazing experiments in interracial and coeducation stand as vital reminders of the pluralistic and egalitarian societies that colleges, at their most ambitious and visionary, could be.

In the North, another push for a more diverse student body was afoot at Harvard. President Charles W. Eliot, who took office in 1869, was eager to transform Harvard from a historically provincial college whose constituency was mostly affluent young men from New England into a university of “national resort.”\textsuperscript{40} Achieving this status required a student body remade in the image of the nation. Eliot’s blinkered opinions of coeducational and interracial education are well documented, but he strived to make
Harvard a place open to young men from “different nations, States, schools, families, sects, parties, and condition of life.”

Eliot had some success. A year after he took office, 56 percent of the graduating class were born in Massachusetts, only one student was Jewish, there were no reported Catholic students and a single international student (from Bavaria). By 1909 (forty years later and near the end of Eliot’s term), the fraction of graduating students from Massachusetts had dropped to 43 percent—6 percent of the class was Jewish, 8 percent was Catholic, and there were two avowed atheists along with representatives from ten different countries. Political views, admittedly, were less well represented, with 309 Republicans and 40 Democrats (along with a handful of Mugwumps, Independents, and Socialists). Clearly, though, the demography of the nation’s oldest college had shifted.

There was also a pedagogical dimension to Eliot’s vision. Eliot saw a marked benefit in having people of different backgrounds encounter one another on campus. Echoing Washington from almost a century prior, Eliot believed in the potential of a diverse student body to yield a vital “collision of views” that, in his words, “promotes thought on great themes, converts passion into resolution, cultivates forbearance and mutual respect, and teaches young men to admire candor, moral courage, and independence of thought.”

Eliot’s democratic fervor was not always accompanied by actions to transform rhetoric into policy. Reluctant to intervene too directly in the construction of undergraduate social life, Eliot believed that students ought to be “free to do their own social sorting.” What resulted was a steady stratification of social arrangements on campus, with wealthier students migrating to upscale private housing off-campus (the so-called Gold Coast) while poorer students (who were also more likely to be racial, ethnic,
or religious minorities) lived in dormitories. Eliot championed dorms as being “occupied in a completely democratic manner as regards the schools from which the occupants have come and the parts of the country from which they have come,” but he wasn’t able to break up the Gold Coast.46

That task fell to Eliot’s successor, Abbott Lawrence Lowell. At his inauguration, Lowell declared that Harvard had fallen short of “its national mission of throwing together youths of promise of every kind from every part of the country.”47 To achieve this end, he developed the Harvard House Plan. The plan entailed building seven new residence halls (completed in 1930), each of which was a highly structured little society that every year admitted a different cross section of students to avoid homogeneity. This plan did not go far enough in providing a forum for engagement across difference, however, since Lowell’s well-documented bigotry meant that his vision of pluralistic encounter was severely circumscribed. Nevertheless, it was a demonstration of the long path the nation’s oldest college (followed soon thereafter by Yale and Princeton) was taking toward realizing a more diverse and engaged community on their campuses.

The period between the end of the Civil War and the early decades of the twentieth century was one of remarkable transformation not only in the shape and structures of American colleges and universities but also in the composition of student bodies, animated by a growing conviction that pluralistic encounters (along multiple axes of identity and ideology) were a necessary part of the college experience. Yet as new groups of students enrolled in college, they continued to confront virulent prejudice and hostility, tragic obstacles to the “freedom of intercourse” that George Washington had envisioned. To meet these new conditions, students from marginalized groups adapted by reviving social
organizations like the literary society as a means of preserving group identity.

It Alone Can Do This Thing

Many of the new students drawn to American higher education at the end of the nineteenth century were the children of immigrants (often from Catholic or Jewish families) then arriving in waves on America’s shores. Between 1907 and 1920, the number of Catholic students enrolled at non-Catholic institutions grew from more than seven thousand to forty thousand.48 Jewish students represented as much as 20 to 40 percent of the student body at many elite colleges in the 1910s and 20s. Meanwhile, Black Americans continued to press their claims to access universities from which they had been historically excluded. By 1910, institutions that were not historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were admitting more than four times as many African American students as they had three decades prior, although these students still represented less than 1 percent of the total student body at these schools.49

Attending predominantly white, Protestant campuses, these students often encountered communities inherently suspicious of them, if not outright antagonistic and sometimes even violent. How, under such conditions, could they find ways to profit from the “collision of views” with diverse others while still preserving their cultural identity and finding support and kinship as members of deeply marginalized groups on campus and off? Their solution was to forge societies organized around identity that enabled them to create enduring communities on campuses as well as to move more fluidly and confidently between worlds.

Among the earliest of these identity-based groups were the Newman Clubs, formed by Catholic students beginning in the
1880s. The first was formed at the University of Wisconsin in 1883 after a Catholic student complained to a local Catholic family with whom he was having dinner that one of his professors had disparaged the Church during class. What he needed, he argued, was a place where Catholic students could talk freely about the ideas that were important to them and seek support in the face of discrimination. A place, he said, for “self defense.”

The club they founded (originally named the Melvin Club for their dinner hosts that evening) took the form of a literary society with a distinctly Catholic focus: it created a space for Catholic students both to socialize freely with one another as well as to engage with and debate doctrine, theology, and ethics, topics that may not have been entirely welcome within the formal curriculum. In time, these clubs (rechristened as Newman Clubs after the famed British Catholic intellectual John Henry Newman) spread across the country, many—with the support of the Catholic Church—even building their own halls for meetings.

Just over two decades later, a similar movement took root among Jewish collegians. In 1906, the first Menorah Society was founded at Harvard. By 1919, eighty chapters had been established. Like the Newman Clubs, Menorah Societies also patterned themselves after the literary societies of the nineteenth century, encouraging the study of Jewish history and literature, organizing lectures, and even staging plays by Jewish writers. A periodical, the *Menorah Journal*, served as the medium for Menorah Society members and nonmembers to share their views on Jewish topics and to record their experiences of college life. The famed literary critic Lionel Trilling recalled the journal with fondness: “Content and meaning must be given [Judaism] in a form as fine, as dignified, as effective as possible. I think that the only thing in Jewish life that could have done that for me was *The Menorah*.
Journal. There are thousands of young men for whom it can do the same thing, and it alone can do this thing.”

Black students during this period, meanwhile, frequently faced more dire circumstances than their Catholic and Jewish peers. When they arrived on predominantly white campuses, they experienced profound institutional neglect, whether in the form of having direct confrontations with racist students and faculty, being prohibited from living on campus, being denied entry into social circles (for instance, working at white fraternities that would never admit them as members), or being barred from many facilities that white students took for granted. Their numbers were so small at most campuses that fellowship was often hard to come by. As a result, Black students struggled to feel at home on campuses, and attrition was often high.

By 1904, the Black student population at Cornell University had been growing steadily for several years. But when none of the six Black students who arrived on campus that fall returned the following year, it was clear to the Black students who remained that action needed to be taken. In response, a group of Black upperclassmen formed Alpha Phi Alpha, the first Black fraternity in the United States. Although it resembled in some ways the white fraternities that lined the main boulevard of Cornell’s campus, Alpha Phi Alpha owed its identity more to the long history of African American benevolent organizations and secret societies. It was a source of support for Black students coming into the college and of aid to Black high schoolers and community members. Like the eight other African American fraternities and sororities founded in its wake (the “Divine Nine” as they are now called, several of which were first established at HBCUs), Alpha Phi Alpha became an instrumental institution for generations of Black students at Cornell and dedicated itself to the uplift, edu-
cation, and perpetuation of an African American student community on a traditionally white campus.\(^5\)

In each of these cases, college students from marginalized groups formed social and intellectual organizations on campus as a way to reinforce their sense of cultural identity and cohesion in the midst of white, Protestant university campuses. It would be a mistake to see these groups as being antithetical to pluralistic encounters. If anything, they were a necessary precondition to pluralism—a means of ensuring a continuity of presence for underrepresented populations on campuses that enabled diverse communities in higher education to blossom and flourish. As important as the collision of views and encounters with difference were and have continued to be, the growth of Menorah Societies, Newman Clubs, and Black fraternities—among other similar organizations—were evidence of the truth that for students from marginalized populations, such groups were equally necessary for them to thrive on increasingly diverse campuses. They also anticipated the complex group dynamics that would shape post–World War II campuses.

I Don’t Think They Thought It Out

The second half of the twentieth century was a period of unprecedented diversification at colleges and universities, much of it the work of university administrators who, like Eliot and others in the nineteenth century, recognized the urgency and democratic significance of forming representative student bodies. The period was also one of tension and, eventually, conflagration.

Change came slowly at first. Following the passage of the G.I. Bill in 1944, the Veterans Administration was careful to allocate an equal share of readjustment benefits and educational assistance to
Black and white veterans. Yet segregation and unequal access to colleges and universities blunted Black veterans’ ability to reap the full benefits of the bill. Universities bore direct responsibility for this state of affairs. As historian John R. Thelin wrote about this period, “racial integration . . . was an effort almost always dismissed by governing boards as a nuisance to institutional advancement.”

The dam started to break at the nation’s most selective universities alongside the cresting civil rights movement. As education scholars Anthony S. Chen and Lisa M. Stulberg have chronicled, in the early 1960s, ambitious higher education leaders began beating the drum for greater diversity in their admissions, even at the cost of their own livelihoods. They conceived diversity similarly to how Eliot had nearly a century earlier. To quote the president of Amherst in 1961, they were eager to recruit students “of all races, of all faiths, and even no faith.”

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 removed explicit discriminatory admissions practices at colleges and universities that received federal funding, which began the process of desegregation at public universities. University leaders—especially at institutions without explicitly discriminatory policies but that had neglected African American students—were inspired by the movement to enroll students who were more reflective of the nation. This was also a moment when tensions across the country were at a fever pitch, following the high-profile assassinations of civil rights leaders and the swelling opposition to the Vietnam War. How universities navigated these tensions tested their pluralist mettle and profoundly shaped their histories. The experiences of two universities (Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania) offer a stark contrast in approach.

James A. Perkins assumed the presidency of Cornell University in 1963. His tenure began with a virtually unparalleled effort
to recruit African American students and ended in an armed standoff. A progressive liberal from Philadelphia whose resume included a PhD in political science from Princeton and an impressive list of government and philanthropic leadership positions, Perkins came to Cornell committed to putting the resources of the university to work to advance pragmatically the cause of justice. Among his efforts was the Committee on Special Education Projects (COSEP), whose charge was to develop programs that would “make a larger contribution to the education of qualified students who have been disadvantaged by their cultural, economic and educational environments.”

COSEP was remarkably successful by most measures. Its activities took the form of recruiting African American students from inner cities and the rural South, offering them substantial financial aid packages, and helping shepherd them through Cornell. In purely numerical terms, COSEP increased the number of Black students at Cornell from 8 to more than two hundred in just four years. The money allocated to financial aid at the university increased as well, growing from a mere $13,000 in 1964 to a total of more than $1 million by 1970. But while COSEP significantly multiplied the number of Black students at Cornell, the campus was unprepared for the tensions that engulfed the student body. As one Cornell student described the campus atmosphere: “I think [the administration] wanted us to have a multicultural experience, but I don’t think that they thought it out in terms of personalities and people’s backgrounds . . . normal conflicts [were] exacerbated by people’s ignorance about other cultures.”

In 1969, things came to a boil, the end result of years of escalating tensions between groups on campus, the increasingly radical politics of some students, an administration often frustratingly passive in the face of outrage, and a series of unambiguously racist
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acts, including a burning cross in front of the university’s residence for Black women. Together, these factors moved members of Cornell’s Afro-American Society (AAS) to seize control of the university’s student union, Willard Straight Hall, which they successfully did on the morning of April 19. Later, after a group of white students tried to force them out, the occupiers armed themselves with rifles and barricaded themselves in the building until the university acquiesced to a series of sweeping changes on the campus. After a tense twenty-four-hour standoff, the occupation ended peacefully, but the university community was unsettled by the specter of violence. President Perkins resigned shortly thereafter.

Similar clashes occurred at universities across the country, revealing the stark and uncomfortable truth that sometimes even earnest and considered efforts to construct truly representative and inclusive campuses could not inoculate a university from the struggles, prejudices, and violence of an era. Not all campuses experienced such dramatic standoffs, however.

Like Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania in the 1960s was also undergoing rapid diversification. By 1968, the school was enrolling more Black students than any other Ivy League university. (Cornell came in a close second.) As with other campuses, Penn saw its share of post-’68 protests, but without the violence and rupture. What made the difference?

The answer appears to lie in structures that Penn put in place to accommodate student disagreement and conflict. In 1968, the university had formed the Commission on Open Expression and Demonstration on Campus, a faculty-student committee chaired by Penn Law professor Robert Mundheim charged with outlining the parameters of protest and debate on campus: where such actions could occur, what was or was not permissible, and what
sorts of discussions ought to precede protest. Although the *Daily Pennsylvanian* complained that once “stripped of its circumlocutory prolixity the report says very little that is revolutionary and much that is objectionable,” the commission’s recommendations were not only officially adopted as university policy but appear to have been widely embraced by students, faculty, and administrators alike, including activist groups on campus. In response to the report, one student activist applauded the university, saying, “We’re glad the university has dropped the parental approach and has stopped acting like they were faced with either sophisticated revolutionaries or naughty children, instead of a bunch of intelligent adults.”

So, when students staged a sit-in at College Hall in February 1969 to protest the university’s proposed construction of a new Science Center that threatened to displace Philadelphia residents, there was a framework within which to navigate the various sides of the debate. Although the sit-in was the longest in the university’s history (six days), it adhered to the Mundheim report’s call that at a university there existed “the freedom to experiment, to present and to examine alternative data and theories; the freedom to hear, to express, and to debate various views; and the freedom to voice criticism of existing practices and values.”

Over the course of the six days, university trustees talked to protestors, faculty spoke to one another, and students argued with administrators (and one another); statements were read aloud, criticized, and shared; and votes were taken and tallied. In the end, everyone came to an agreement they could abide. In the words of one student, “Nothing was destroyed, but we built a hell of a lot.” The event thus marked, in the words of one historian, a pioneering “liberal-pluralist student/faculty movement” that resulted in “a more peaceful process of change than was the case on
many other campuses.”73 Or, as a Penn faculty member characterized the sit-in, “a strange war in which all sides won.”74

Speculation, Experimentation, Creation

Although still reeling from the violence, turmoil, and transformations of 1968, colleges and universities in the 1970s redoubled their pursuit to recruit a more racially diverse student body. Race-conscious admissions policies became standard practice at colleges and universities across the country during this period. Some institutions merely gave a slight preferential tilt to an applicant’s race, while others established explicit racial quota systems. The effectiveness of these measures was striking. By 1975, the number of Black undergraduates nearly tripled, rising from 370,000 in 1967 to nearly 950,000.75 But affirmative action faced sharp criticism from many corners, and high-profile lawsuits soon followed.

Debate over the merits of affirmative action came to a head a couple of years later when the US Supreme Court heard *University of California Regents v. Bakke*.76 At the heart of the case was Allan Bakke, a white man twice denied admission to the medical school at the University of California, Davis, who blamed his rejection on the school’s racial quota system. In its decision, the court deemed racial quotas unconstitutional but nevertheless affirmed the value of race-conscious admissions.77 Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. wrote that “the atmosphere of ‘speculation, experiment and creation’—so essential to the quality of higher education—is widely believed to be promoted by a diverse student body.”78 In this, the decision allowed for race to continue to be a factor in admissions by affirming—echoing university leaders from across generations—the distinctive educational benefits of diversity (whether racial, religious, geographic, or ideological) on campuses.79
Even without quota systems, colleges and universities continued to make strides throughout the 1980s in creating more diverse campuses as well as in promoting student interaction. A groundbreaking study from William G. Bowen and Derek Bok (former presidents of Princeton and Harvard, respectively) confirmed this empirically. Surveying thousands of students at more than two dozen universities in the United States who first entered college in 1989, Bok and Bowen found that 90 percent reported knowing well at least two peers from different parts of the country, and more than half said they knew well at least two peers from families much poorer than their own, with a similar number saying they knew well students whose politics differed significantly from their own.\(^80\) What’s more, a greater percentage of whites knew well two or more Black students at schools with higher levels of Black enrollment than those with lower levels. A separate study by sociologists Thomas J. Espenshade and Alexandra Walton Radford confirmed these results. Surveying students from the entering cohorts of 1983, 1993, and 1997 at eight selective colleges, they found that just over 60 percent of all students reported socializing often with students of a different race, while half of students said that they counted a student of a different race among their five closest friends.\(^81\) Both studies found definitively that the more diverse a campus, the more likely students of different racial backgrounds were to interact with one another.

This is not to say that the work of inclusion was easy, frictionless, or complete. Take the University of California, Berkeley. Over the course of the 1980s, the share of white undergraduates at California’s flagship public university dropped from 66 percent to 45 percent, making it among the first major research universities with a student body that lacked a single ethnic or racial majority.\(^82\) This did not suddenly result in racial harmony, however, as
students from underrepresented communities still faced prejudice, whether in direct confrontations or in racist messages spray-painted on buildings across campus. And many students acknowledged frankly the difficulty of bridging differences to form new friendships. As one sophomore at the time explained, “It’s kind of awkward to go up to someone who’s not your race, and maybe doesn’t speak your language, and say, ‘Hey, would you like to associate with me on a day-to-day basis?’” Across the country, other colleges followed a similar trajectory.

These changes were painful and halting, but they were also evidence that universities were evolving into sites of pluralist interaction that truly reflected the nation, places where students learned and practiced the difficult art of reaching out and building across difference. The period saw a similar pattern play out with gender, where schools started to admit women in far greater numbers, aided by administrators willing to rebuff hostile alumni afraid that the presence of female students would sap historically male-only institutions of their masculine heritage; by students who coordinated rallies and wrote scathing editorials; and, eventually, by Congress’s passage of Title IX, which in 1972 gave colleges seven years to transition to “being an institution which admits students of both sexes.” Women faced discrimination, tokenism, and an immense pressure to excel, not to mention the unnerving experience of always being “watched.” When Yale announced in 1968 that it would be admitting women for fall 1969, nearly 4,000 women applied, 576 of whom (or 12.5 percent of the student body) enrolled. Their presence helped to transform not only the demography of the campus but also the attitudes and beliefs of its students. A Life Magazine feature on coed dorms at Oberlin included positive reflections from both men and women at the college on the benefits of coed living arrangements. Tellingly, one
male freshman told the magazine he started “taking [his women classmates] more for granted as people, something I’d never done before.” Such a remark is a testament to how important women’s presence on traditionally male campuses was to combating pervasive sexism and also an unambiguous sign of how much work remained.

In countless dorm-room conversations, leisurely walks to class, work-study jobs, seminar room debates, extracurricular activities, late-night study sessions, and sporting events, students of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and genders—and eventually, in increasing numbers, nationalities—were encountering and meaningfully interacting with one another. Whether they were aware of it or not, they were honing the skills to navigate pluralistic societies. This period bore all the markings of pluralism in bloom.

Almost Like a Dating Website

The 1980s and ‘90s had seemed to place colleges and universities on a trajectory to pluralistic flourishing on campus that educators and leaders a century earlier could hardly have anticipated. Yet in the two decades since, there is a sense that something has shifted. The pluralist endeavor on campuses seems to have lost much of its purchase.

This is not to say that universities have given up on diversity. Incoming classes at selective universities are, in most respects, more diverse than ever. Once students arrive on campus, however, engagement across differences of identity and ideology has stalled. Indeed, students seem to be drifting apart, and when they do come together across difference, their interactions can seem brittle and fearful. As diversity experts might put it: structural diversity (numeracy of different groups) is no longer leading to
interactional diversity. We have made our campuses more diverse, but we are not reaping the benefits of pluralism and exchange across this difference.

I would posit several reasons for this. One is that our colleges and universities aren’t immune from the broader trends afflicting discourse in America. The polarization and distrust infecting our society affect our students no less than the rest of the country, and in many cases, much more.

Beyond that, though, is the unavoidable fact that as communities become more diverse, the potential of pluralism grows, but so do its complexities and challenges. For a good portion of the history of the United States, universities were mostly homogenous places. Even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, discourse on campus was challenging, depending on what region students were from or what religion they practiced. Now, in the twenty-first century, we are starting to approximate a level of diversity on campus that truly looks like the world. Achieving a pluralist community across this tapestry of difference is inevitably going to be all the more difficult. This is what we see happening in our own democracy. As we struggle to realize the promises of multi-ethnic democracy, eruptions of anger, resentment, fear, and violence by those who feel they are being displaced ripple throughout our society. As universities continue to walk the path of making our campuses more racially and ethnically diverse, and see increased representation from first-generation students and others, it is imperative that we ensure these voices enter the conversation of the academy. History and science teach us that this task requires purpose and intent. It will not happen on its own.

Universities have not adapted fast enough to the newly diversified campus. If anything, they have actually dismantled structures on campus that had once pulled students together across dif-
ference. And when it comes to speech, they have been generally content to adopt a passive approach, entering the picture when needed to adjudicate disputes, but otherwise allowing students to sort out for themselves how to manage the complicated and sometimes even painful work of engaging with others who are different. Universities should be at the vanguard of designing ways to bring students together across this new diversity—discourse is etched into their mitochondria. Still: universities have gone to great and important lengths to restructure their admissions processes to promote diversity, yet they have done vanishingly little to adapt newly diverse campuses to pluralist ends.

The remainder of this chapter describes what I believe is the scope of the pluralism challenge on campuses and what we can do about it. Let’s start with the question of interaction across difference. In recent years, we have begun to see on our campuses a drift away from the collision of views that Eliot and others championed and more self-segregation of groups. Of course, we need to be careful about sweeping claims of balkanization. The 1990s—a time when interactional diversity on campuses was high—were replete with headlines declaiming the segregation of American universities like “Separate Ethnic Worlds Grow on Campus” and “College Dorms Reflect Trend of Self-Segregation.”90 A raft of similar headlines could easily be culled from major publications over the past several years.

Still, there are signs that something is different now. Experts say the problem has shifted, and worsened, in no small part because universities have become increasingly complicit. Speaking to The Atlantic in 2016, Temple University professor Sara Goldrick-Rab said, “Not only are the poor kids and the rich kids going to different schools, but they’re being segregated in their living spaces . . . and there are institutional policies that contribute to this.”91
Nowhere is this more evident than in housing policy. From the rise of residential fraternities in the nineteenth century to Eliot’s and Lowell’s battles with the “Gold Coast” at Harvard and beyond, housing has been one of the epicenters of campus pluralism. For a time, one of the defining features of the campus experience for newly arriving students was the “assignment”—either random or decided upon by university staff—of a first-year roommate. Considerations of how to assign roommates had been a part of the student personnel literature since the 1930s and dovetailed, at some institutions, with the integration of on-campus residences. Many universities had long assigned students to rooms in residence halls; others came to the practice in the 1980s or later with the express aim of encouraging greater interaction as campuses became more diverse. By the 1990s, meeting their assigned roommate was a rite of passage for newly arriving students at colleges across the United States.

In no small part because of the experimental conditions created by the random assignment of roommates, a deep body of research emerged showing that when a student rooms with someone different than them, it exposes them to new perspectives that shift how they see or approach the world. Students assigned a roommate of a different race show less racial bias, express a greater appreciation for diversity, and interact more often and more comfortably with members of other races. Roommates affect students’ politics, too: first-year students’ political ideology “tends to move toward the ideology of their roommates,” and if their roommates discuss politics and current events, students are more likely to be politically active later in life. And this even holds for wealth, where rooming with a peer from a low-income background increases the likelihood that a student will engage in volunteer activities after they graduate.
seems to hold: students assigned a student from a high-income background are less likely to support higher taxes on the wealthy!) What is clear is that roommates are a surprisingly rich source of pluralist education, expanding students’ horizons in ways that resonate across their schooling and even their lives.

Beginning around the 2010s, however, universities started adopting a hands-off posture toward housing by allowing incoming students to choose their own roommates. These decisions were a consequence of demands from parents and students for more choice in roommate selection as well as the emergence of social media platforms that made it far easier for students to pair off on their own. Students flocked to online communities on Facebook and other platforms in the hopes of locking in a first-year roommate to their liking before they arrived on campus, while universities partnered with new online apps like RoomSync and Roomsurf to streamline the process. (One student described this matchmaking process as “almost like a dating website.”)97 When left to their own devices, students began choosing roommates from backgrounds similar to their own. Administrators found that students from more privileged background, in particular, were pairing off with each other.98 One informal survey showed that approximately 70 percent of universities in 2012 permitted incoming freshmen to select their own roommates.99 At the University of Virginia, about 65 percent of incoming students matched with roommates on their own in 2018. At Duke and Vanderbilt, almost half of the class chose their own roommates before they put an end to the practice in 2018 and 2020, respectively.100

The changes did not end there. Around the same time that they were shifting their roommate policies, universities were also cultivating—with echoes of the elite private housing of Gilded Age campuses—a new generation of sometimes lavish student
housing options that have served to divide rich students from poor students, effectively replicating the homogeneity of the past. Sometimes, universities have built these structures specifically to attract wealthier students. (Public universities have even responded to budget cuts by, ironically, investing in luxury amenities to entice out-of-state students, who are not eligible for discounted in-state tuition.) Other times, out of a desperation to find space for expanding student bodies, universities have partnered with—or ceded the problem entirely to—corporate developers to construct extravagant new residence halls. The result is a modern campus where wealthier students often live and socialize amongst themselves in luxury complexes out of reach for their poorer classmates, many of whom are also from underrepresented populations.101 As one professor put it, “We’re re-creating socially stratified communities on campus instead of giving students opportunities to live among people from different walks of life.”102

I should caution that assigned campus housing affects some groups differently than others. One recent study of interactional diversity among randomly assigned roommates showed, for instance, that “Asian, Black and multiracial students . . . perceived a substantially less welcoming campus environment than their same-race peers who chose their roommates.”103 Hence any move back toward assigned housing must be accompanied by an acute attentiveness to any concerns that may arise, a willingness to move students when problems emerge, and a host of wrap-around programming and services related to student diversity and engagement. That is, the answer is for the university to become *more engaged and purposeful*, not to wash its hands of the problem and leave students to sort it out.

This is also why attacks on affinity groups established for women, LGBTQ students, or racial and ethnic minorities as
drivers of segregation are profoundly misplaced. As has been true for decades, students need not only “bridging” opportunities to forge links with students different from themselves, to use a frame made famous by Robert Putnam, but also “bonding” opportunities to connect with other in-group members.¹⁰⁴ This was true of the Newman Clubs and the Menorah Societies of yesteryear, and it remains true of the array of affinity groups that populate our campuses today, from Hillel to LGBTQ groups to Black student unions and so many more. These spaces provide affirmation and repose alongside peers who share backgrounds and experiences, which then act as trampolines that launch students back into the hurly-burly world of diverse campus life. In-group affiliation is not only inevitable but also fiercely valuable—that is, as long as these spaces don’t become isolated enclaves that limit students’ social experiences in college.

Much of this discussion so far has been about housing, but the trend toward more campus options, and more campus sorting, has not stopped there. The same phenomenon has played out in dining options, in social opportunities (like student clubs), and even in the classroom, where the dilution of core requirements has hastened the retreat of a curriculum that once had thrust students with different interests and perspectives into a single classroom, mixing budding philosophers, economists, historians, and scientists in debate and conversation.¹⁰⁵

This latter phenomenon has been the case at Johns Hopkins. Beginning in 2017, when we revisited our undergraduate curriculum, we discovered that the erosion of distribution requirements across majors, along with the accumulation of disciplinary requirements within majors, meant that many students were now rarely leaving the confines of their own majors. A faculty report pointed out that students majoring in psychology, for example,
could choose to satisfy more than 90 percent of their distribution and writing requirements through courses within their major, while many engineering disciplines had been requiring students to take more than 80 percent of their credit hours within the major just to graduate. Our faculty rightly criticized this drift toward curricular silos and proposed a redesign of the undergraduate curriculum to steer students toward a deeper blend of classroom experiences. They have proposed replacing the errant distribution requirements with a new set of foundational abilities that students would be required to develop. One of those would be the deeply pluralist capacity, by now familiar to readers of this chapter, to “engage effectively as citizens in a diverse world” and “articulate and examine their own beliefs, practices and values while being open to and respectful of the beliefs, practices and values of others.”106 Achieving these goals requires reimagining aspects of campus life that extend from the classroom to the residence hall and beyond.

Without Fear of Restraint or Penalty

There is more to pluralism than just the serendipity of encounters with difference. Just as important is the question of the quality of those encounters. When students do come into contact with new ideas and new people, are they equipped to navigate those interactions productively?

At this point, it is conventional to say that American campuses are in the midst of a speech crisis. While this view is not confined to the Right, it has taken a particular hold in the conservative imagination. Undergirding this is the claim that American university campuses do not merely lean toward the political Left, but are in fact sites of orchestrated liberal indoctrination that silence
ideological dissent. Such skepticism of the academy has been simmering since William F. Buckley Jr. called on readers of *National Review* to send evidence of “classroom indoctrination” in 1956. After Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* became an unexpected bestseller more than three decades ago, this line of attack has become ever more strident, with books like Ben Shapiro’s *Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America’s Youth* in 2004 and David Horowitz’s *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* in 2006—aided by a steady stream of op-eds in prominent news outlets—convincing millions that American universities are hotbeds of dangerous progressivism. According to one recent poll, two-thirds of Republicans say they have only some or very little confidence in higher education. When asked why they hold such diminished views of universities, far and away the two most frequent answers were that universities were “too liberal” and that they were “not allowing students to think for themselves.”

The reality on our campuses is far less sensational, but it raises important questions nevertheless.

First: indoctrination by faculty. Since 1958, when Paul Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens published *The Academic Mind*, their thorough and dispassionate study of the political leanings of social scientists in the wake of the McCarthy trials, there has been a consistent and growing body of empirical evidence showing that the political views of faculty (throughout the humanities and social sciences, at least) tilt consistently left. Over the decades, this ideological gap has grown considerably (despite a brief spike in self-identifying conservative professors in the 1980s). One survey of tens of thousands of professors showed a persistent gap in the ratio of liberal to conservative faculty that has widened over time, from 2 to 1 in 1989 to 6 to 1 in 2014. A separate analysis
of faculty voter registration found that in the fields of history, economics, law, communications, and psychology, there were 11.5 Democrats to every 1 Republican. Sociologist Neil Gross, author of one of the most rigorous academic studies of this phenomenon in the past decade, concluded that the American academy “contains a larger proportion of people who describe themselves as liberal than just about any other major occupation.”

We should approach these data carefully. For one, party affiliation says only so much about actual political beliefs. Moreover, evidence that ideological leanings actually affect classroom behavior is elusive at best. While some data show that conservative students are more likely to avoid speaking up in social sciences and humanities classes out of fear of receiving a bad grade, there are also studies demonstrating that those fears are unjustified: faculty do not award conservative students worse grades than their liberal classmates. And although students on average become slightly more liberal while in college, they do so at the same rates as people the same age who do not attend college. As educators, university faculty and administrators should take seriously any suggestion that student voices are being shut down in the classroom. That being said, evidence of mass liberal indoctrination is grossly overstated, and focus on the topic is somewhat misguided.

We should be asking instead why so many disciplines suffer from a dearth of conservative faculty in the first place and what the consequences of that imbalance are. Throughout my career, I have seen many brilliant conservative scholars flee the academy for think tanks, where they feel their ideas will be more readily welcomed. This brain drain cannot be healthy for the university. If the professoriate continues to congregate on the political Left, it shortchanges conservative and liberal students alike.
Conservative students need to feel that their campus is one that invites their views in the endless refinement of ideas through reason, both outside of the classroom as well as within it. They need to see faculty nourishing the kinds of open debate about a great variety of ideas that either do not or cannot flourish at other institutions across our society. And they need mentors who can model the virtues of intellectual discourse and engagement rather than provocation and confrontation, and support and guide them through college and beyond—including, perhaps, into graduate school in fields not usually populated by right-leaning thinkers. For students whose sympathies lie with the political Left, the presence of conservatives—particularly conservative faculty—is an instruction in how to engage ideas different than one’s own, to test one’s own assumptions accordingly, and perhaps above all to see those who hold different views as participants in a conversation, a shared endeavor, rather than as strangers or, worse, enemies.

Several universities across the country have begun to seek solutions to this disparity. One anecdote at the University of Colorado Boulder is particularly revealing. Since 2013, the university has invited a “visiting scholar in conservative thought” to its campus. On a campus where only about 8 percent of the faculty and 20 percent of the students identified as conservative, these invited scholars were initially viewed with deep skepticism. With time, however, that suspicion seems to have subsided. Several years ago, one student left a note for that term’s visiting scholar, a philosophy professor and evangelical Catholic: “I have come to believe that one of the duties of citizenship is to listen to points of view unlike one’s own. Liberal Democrat that I am, you made the job a pleasure. You also taught me that kindness, courtesy, and humility would at least get an audience to listen to you in a way that criticism never can.” To inspire such sentiments in students
is itself a powerful argument for the need to maintain intellectual diversity on our campuses.

Beyond the matter of faculty is how students themselves approach issues of speech and free expression on campus. Critics on the right now warn regularly of a “free-speech crisis” and a “silencing of dissent” on campuses, citing “student mobbists” who shout down and threaten speakers (and other students) with whom they disagree.120 Stories crowd cable news broadcasts of speakers disinvited or disrupted, of faculty and staff fearing for their jobs, and of a pervasive “cancel culture” that has anyone whose political views are not in lockstep with the Left walking on eggshells. Late in his term, President Donald Trump’s Department of Justice echoed these claims, insisting that the “very core of university life—open debate among scholars and students—is under attack.”121

But if we peer behind the anecdotes and invective, the evidence of student antipathy toward free speech is more nuanced. Facts on the ground suggest that the silencing of conservative students in campus spaces beyond the classroom is less prevalent than often reported, while speaker disinvitations in the United States number in the range of one or two dozen at most per year, a small fraction of the speaking engagements that occur annually without fanfare.122 Some have posited that the recent arrival of Gen Z students on campus may be transforming campus culture in a more restrictive direction. In a 2020 survey by the Knight Foundation, 63 percent of college students reported that “the climate on their campus prevents some people from saying what they believe because others might find them offensive,” ten percentage points more than said the same in 2016.123 The theory goes that this newest generation of students who came of age in the shadow of multiple national crises and in the crucible of social media have
sharply higher rates of anxiety, and they may be exhibiting a particular sensitivity to speech. But persuasive evidence of a major change on campus is elusive. Available data do seem to show an uptick in intolerance for controversial speakers and a decline in support of an open learning environment, although it seems too early to tell if this is a trend or merely a blip. One back-and-forth about the available evidence between leading advocates on both sides of the campus speech debates ultimately led to a grudging détente, with the two acknowledging that “the little data we have [on Gen-Z] may mark the beginning of a trend” in attitudes toward speech but “doesn’t show big shifts.”

As a university leader who has watched these debates unfold over more than three decades, I share this view. Claims of a speech crisis on campus are, in my view, exaggerated, and tend to be the product of isolated and high-profile cases of outside speakers that have been blown out of proportion. Still, an unmistakable pulse of dogmatism has surfaced on campus. Light, though perceptible, it appears in what I see as a growing impatience with opposing views, a reluctance to listen, and a resistance to compromise.

Some of this can likely be attributed to the profound changes underway on our campuses. As student bodies have become more representative, campuses are giving fuller expression to the complexity of human identity. With new voices joining the conversation, dialogue shifts and the rules of the road change, which presents a host of new challenges that we must all learn to navigate. Pluralism among a few different voices can be difficult; pluralism among a great diversity of voices can be all the more complicated and has the potential to fracture. The unrelenting task of the university is to make room for these voices, to bring people into the conversation, and to uphold the liberal values of discourse and exchange in democratic societies. The reality, of course, is often
more fraught. Our communities are constantly negotiating and renegotiating the lines separating permissible speech from impermissible speech. This often plays out in public disputes over who gets to have a platform on campus.

I was confronted with these conflicts almost from the moment I arrived at Johns Hopkins in 2009. Within months of starting the job, a student organization invited to campus Tucker Max, the crude satirist, provocateur, and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*. At the time, Max was a particularly controversial figure, and I was pressured to cancel his speech. Since we did not know what Max intended to say, I worried that withdrawing the invitation would constitute the most draconian form of speech regulation, a restriction on speech before it is made. To my mind, it was preferable to let Max speak than to censor either him or the student group who invited him. The event was protested but went ahead without incident.

In the following months, a series of similar controversies erupted. We resolved each as best we could, but we realized that we couldn’t keep proceeding in an ad hoc manner. In our case, we needed a set of principles to guide decisions about speech on campus. After a campus-wide consultative process led by Joel Grossman, a colleague from our Department of Political Science, the university’s board of trustees adopted a formal statement on academic freedom. The statement focused in part on academic freedom as it applied to scholarship and research, but it also addressed another facet of academic freedom: the freedom of students to learn, affirming the “right to speak and create, to question and dissent, to participate in debate on and off campus, and to invite others to do the same, all without fear of restraint or penalty.”

Our statement was one of several released by universities during this period. As speech-related controversies flared on campuses,
a multitude of other universities undertook their own measures to make their commitments to free speech explicit. They were fortified by the call of University of Chicago President Robert Zimmer, who in a Wall Street Journal op-ed declared unequivocally the imperative for free speech in the modern academy, focusing explicitly on the relationship between these principles and true education. The University of Chicago has traditionally been among the most vocal defenders of free speech, and its statement of principles (the “Chicago Principles”) has either been adopted by or inspired the creation of similar principles at more than seventy-six different universities in the United States. Though the path has been neither straightforward nor easy, American universities have at least sought through these statements to honor their historic commitment to open discourse, which is the ethos of the academy and the lifeblood of liberal democracy. Statements of principle are a beginning, however, and not an end. By themselves, they cannot address the broader work of building a sustainable and engaged pluralistic community.

A Purposeful Pluralism

Democracy is an unfinished project that continues to unfurl and expand around us. On our campuses, greater representation from racial minorities, first-generation students, and low-income students means that new voices and perspectives are continually being brought into the ongoing conversation that has characterized academic life for centuries. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, diversification introduces new frictions and points of conflict in that conversation, and to ensure those new voices are heard demands deliberation and purpose. We have not evolved to match this particular moment. As places defined by discourse
and shared discovery, we should be at the front lines of the experiment to promote contact and dialogue across difference. Instead, I worry we have been passive.

Over the years, colleges have approached their role on the questions of speech and discourse as something akin to a referee officiating a sporting event. Too often, when speech disputes arise on campus, universities step in to resolve the conflict, adjudicating flare-ups after they’ve occurred, only to then step back and largely remove themselves from the fray of student speech on campus, allowing it to play out as it might until another dispute occurs. But this reactive posture, coming in to manage disputes after the fact, is not one for which universities were designed, nor one for which they are especially well equipped. Universities are built first and foremost to educate, not to adjudicate. It shouldn’t be surprising that few inside or outside of the academy have regarded this approach to the tumult of free speech on campus as especially effective in recent years, for it skips precisely the role universities are best suited to assume: the instructive one, in which they focus their energies on modeling for students how to consider and respond to perspectives or statements that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable and, in so doing, how to be responsible citizen-participants in that marketplace of ideas.

“Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance,” writes social commentator Vernā Myers. Universities have been so focused on the invitations that they have allowed themselves to be blinded to the dance. They have devoted far more attention to creating a diverse class of students and minimizing the tensions that inevitably emerge (sometimes at the risk of infantilizing students who are in fact young adults) than promoting substantive exchanges across that diversity once they arrive on campus or modeling how to engage perspectives or statements
that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable. As campuses become more diverse and new voices accumulate, this deficit will be all the more glaring. I want to propose that what we have seen play out on campuses in the past several years is not yet a crisis but rather a steady, unremitting beat of frustration at the state of speech whose remedy will require more than a referee.

What our universities need is a more encompassing, affirmative conception of the university's responsibilities toward pluralism that is built for this moment, one that dares to reach beyond admissions (on the one hand) and academic freedom (on the other) to embrace our capacities as educators and community builders. At a point when so many in our society feel more distant from each other than ever, we should be deliberately designing campuses with an eye to engagement and dialogue. We should be working toward a more purposeful pluralism.

What might this look like in practice? It should start with the space of the campus itself. Denison University has already begun reimagining its own campus along pluralistic lines. Declaring that “college campuses should be design studios where students learn to hear different views,” Denison President Adam Weinberg launched an initiative to assess every aspect of the physical space, from residential facilities to social life to walkways, for its capacity to connect students across difference. Elon University, likewise, several years ago launched a $100 million restructuring of its residential community after concerns were raised that expensive living quarters were driving some of its students away from campus. Its new residences are centered on “global neighborhoods” in which students are connected across different residence halls through shared facilities and common academic and social programming.

Other schools have revived the practice of roommate assignments. Three years ago, Duke University announced that they
would be treating the exposure of students on campus to people of new cultures and interests as an essential part of the educational experience: with few exceptions, incoming first-year students would no longer be allowed to select their roommates. Although the announcement ran into sharp resistance from some students, Duke approached the change with care and rigor, saying they would be sensitive to requests for room changes for reasons of incompatibility, and faculty in the psychology department have participated in an ongoing review of the new policy as it played out. The change appears to have been a success; Duke reports that there was no increase in the number of students requesting room transfers. One Muslim first-year student told Inside Higher Ed that she was worried about being paired with a nonreligious roommate, as she prays several times a day. Eventually, however, she came to see the policy as a “blessing” because it led her to engage someone she otherwise might not have about challenging or sensitive topics, like “money, privilege, politics, and race.”

Then there is instruction. We now know that universities actually can teach the capacity for pluralist exchange. Studies show that courses that create opportunities for dialogue across difference and encourage the sharing of experiences can produce real gains in students’ openness to other people and ideas, which they carry with them long after they graduate. Recently, faculty across the country have been experimenting with new ways to prompt students toward interaction across difference in the classroom. In 2018, two professors in Claremont, California (one a conservative teaching at Claremont McKenna College and another a liberal teaching at Pitzer College) co-taught “The University Blacklist,” a course in which students read and discussed the most provocative and controversial—and frequently reviled—books of the past several years. Perhaps more interesting than the content of the
course, however, is its structure, which puts debate across difference at its center. The professors began the semester by sparring with each other, and one of the requirements to pass was attendance at several group dinners designed to be extensions of the formal discussions in class.\footnote{137} *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that hearing their professors debate led students to realize, “We don’t have different values . . . We just have different ways of looking at the issues and different ways to solve problems.”\footnote{138}

Are there ways in which universities can weave the norms of encounter and interaction more vibrantly into campus life beyond the classroom walls, as well? In 2017, George La Noue, a political science professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, published a study showing that most universities rarely sponsor debates or forums about public policy issues that incorporate different perspectives.\footnote{139} In fact, when one excludes the most elite research universities that house think tanks and policy institutes, it almost never happens: La Noue calculated that there is only about one such debate annually per campus. When La Noue was first reporting these results, he polled attendees at academic conferences about debates at their own institutions: “I asked audiences whether any faculty group or administrative office was responsible to see that there were open campus discussions of a variety of public policies from diverse viewpoints. No hands went up. Next, I asked how faculty or outside stakeholders would go about trying to discover whether such debates or forums had taken place on their campus in recent years. Again there was silence.”\footnote{140}

La Noue’s research speaks to a reality about the nature of idea transmission and discourse on campus. To a striking degree, our campuses have come to be constructed around the isolated speaker rather than debate or exchange. Classes are predominantly taught
by a single teacher or lecturer. Outside speakers brought to campus are usually just that: speakers. Our most storied and celebrated ceremonies, such as commencement, are memorialized with individual speakers who hold forth before a captive audience. And although debate societies still exist, they are no longer the center of academic life in the way vibrant college literary societies were in the nineteenth century. This is significant, I think, because it suggests to our students that the highest ideal of a thinker is proclamation, and that ideas are meant to be developed hermetically and then broadcast to the world rather than cultivated in an ongoing dialogue with others who might disagree or refine them. There are exceptions, of course, including conversations in classrooms and panel discussions on academic papers, but especially on the most complex and divisive issues on campus, our universities too often model speaking to someone, rather than with someone, as the Platonic ideal of discourse. How can university leaders and faculty complain that our students don’t know how to debate or disagree effectively when we don’t even try to reveal to them what it looks like?

Universities can change this situation. There are ways to do this programmatically. Universities could, for instance, begin reshaping the college lecture circuit economy to require that individual speakers show up with someone who disagrees with them, or create new incentives for students planning to extend an invitation to a single speaker on critical social and policy issues if they also invite one or more others with competing viewpoints.

The bottom line is that university leaders and faculty need to be more creative in seeking opportunities to model for our students productive interactions across difference. Sometimes these can be forecast and planned; at other times, they might be spontaneous. In 2019, Middlebury College professor Matthew J.
Dickinson saw an opportunity when Ryszard Legutko, a far-right Polish politician who had incited controversy with his comments about LGBTQ rights, had an invitation to speak at the college rescinded at the last minute after the size of anticipated protests to the event swelled. When Dickinson learned that Legutko was staying in a nearby hotel, he asked his political science seminar students if they would be willing to invite the politician to class to critique his arguments in person. The students unanimously agreed. Dickinson had his students spend the first hour of class researching Legutko’s views and formulating questions. When Legutko arrived, a respectful but probing dialogue ensued; as word spread around campus, scores of other students joined the seminar. Dickinson described the event to a reporter as “one of the best teaching experiences I’ve had.” A student in the class said that after the conversation, “I feel more confident in my ability to defend my views.”

I began this chapter with a story from the Johns Hopkins campus that also, in its own way, contains the promise of a purposeful pluralism. Feeling that they weren’t being heard or treated fairly, Johns Hopkins students organized in 2015 for greater equity for their peers, their professors, and our staff. They held our feet to the fire with reason and facts, and they organized a forum where they ensured views were openly exchanged. The result was a radically transparent university-wide road map for greater diversity and inclusion, which recently celebrated its fifth anniversary and is the foundation upon which we’re building a new iteration to guide the next five years.

Still, it remains a sobering truth that such experiences are all too fleeting and, it seems, increasingly so. The pluralist endeavor is deeply challenging, and not every attempt to engage in dialogue and debate in the collective effort to arrive at mutual understanding
and—where appropriate—compromise will be successful, either on our campuses or off. This is especially true at a moment in our national history when vital calls for racial justice are more ardent and urgent than at any time in decades, even as invidious bigotry and racial resentment fester in—and are even fueled by—what passes for national discourse.

Our universities should be at the forefront of modeling a healthy, multiethnic democracy. They are communities that draw together students from far-reaching locales and diverse backgrounds. They are driven by a deep and abiding fidelity to the notion that learning occurs through dialogue, debate, and reasonable disagreement. And they are home to cutting-edge researchers who can lean into the pluralist ideal, extraordinary instructors who can model that ideal for students, and passionate student affairs professionals who know how best to work alongside students to nurture their development into future democratic citizens. They owe to the democratic experiment an unequivocal commitment both to fulfilling the highest ideals of democratic discourse and to folding all our students into the always unfinished and ever-expanding conversation of democratic life.