DEI initiatives leave out the people who voted for Trump

More than 74 million Americans think differently from the prevailing wisdom found on elite university campuses. Universities could help bridge that divide.

By **Yossi Sheffi** Updated July 5, 2021, 3:00 a.m.

Many institutions of higher education, as well as high schools, media outlets, and businesses are engaged in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. At universities, these efforts have centered on student admission, faculty hiring, and mandatory reeducation of all faculty and staff using actors to play scenarios of racism and exclusion. Those efforts define DEI in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

As commendable as these goals may be, they miss an important aspect of inclusivity by a significant measure. While these internally focused DEI efforts aim to help the 13 percent Black or 4.5 percent LGBTQ Americans, they miss the vast number of people who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election. The election proved that more than 74 million Americans think differently from the prevailing wisdom found on elite university campuses. Yet on many campuses, this near-majority of the American voting public is branded as stupid, racist, misogynistic, or as "[deplorables](#)." An imminent challenge facing this nation is to unify the country after the contentious election, and universities can lead the way.

Universities must acknowledge the gulf between the factions, as I argued in a letter to the [MIT faculty](#). Just as progressives are baffled and worried by the existence of so many Trump-supporting Americans, the woke initiatives in progressive institutions baffle and frighten conservatives. Both the left and the right look more and more like religions: righteous, moralistic, unforgiving, and dismissive of any other belief.

Universities and institutions must step into the breach. They must avoid convenient political stereotypes spawned by the worst-case acts of a few of each group's most violent members. They should acknowledge that just as not all Black Lives Matter protesters were breaking glass and looting stores in Minneapolis, Portland, Ore., and Boston, not all 74 million GOP voters supported the Jan. 6 insurrection. Vilifying an entire group for the acts of a few is a recipe for useless recrimination and hate.

There should be no double standards for disrespecting those with whom we disagree. Currently, conservatives can still be ridiculed, called degrading names, and dismissed from university campuses. Using the same language to humiliate people of color or different genders is a cause for [punishment and cancelation](#), yet no such disapprobation comes from denigrating conservatives.

Importantly, violence on either side must be equally condemned. Progressives tend to condemn violence on the right (rightfully so) [while spinning it as justifiable on the left](#). Violence and its tacit support only serves to perpetuate mutual fear and further entrench divisions.

The first step in any such effort is listening. Universities should invite different voices to their campuses. In the current climate, this may result in demonstrations, but students must be exposed to a variety of voices. Can universities hire people with different points of view regarding immigration, race, religion, health care, guns, etc.? Is there a room on campuses for a civilized debate and discussion on sensitive issues? Can students be exposed to a range of ideas and beliefs rather than tacitly propagating divisiveness by shielding these young adults with trigger warnings from ideas they might not agree with? Can we agree that it is more important to teach young people *how* to think rather than *what* to think?

Of course, there is always the "paradox of inclusion," which means that if everybody needs to be included, there is no right and wrong. For dialogues to be workable, boundaries are required. So while one might argue that the moon landing was a hoax, that widespread fraud beset the 2020 election, or that it's easier to get a Glock than a library book, rules of evidence should apply.

Exposing those beliefs, many of which are based on anecdotes and biased information, in a supportive and respectful environment can start a dialogue in which minds may not change but understanding will grow. Moreover, we can also find more common ground than expected. These include the importance of family, work, equal opportunity, and support for the military.

Perhaps sharing some time with someone of the opposite political persuasion might help reveal our shared humanity.

A core goal of any inclusiveness and diversity training is dampening people's natural fear of the "other" as well as questioning the natural convictions that "what I believe in is right." Let's expand diversity, equity, and inclusiveness efforts to include people with different points of view. Retreating into our own echo chambers will only exacerbate the divisions in the United States.

Yossi Sheffi is a professor of engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and director of the [MIT Center for Transportation and Logistics](#).