

Vanderbilt's Bold Stand for 'Neutrality'

By Lamar Alexander

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When the Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade*, the University of California's president denounced the decision as "antithetical" to UC's values. Vanderbilt University's new chancellor took a different approach. Daniel Diermeier, who was appointed in 2020, reaffirmed Vanderbilt's commitment to "principled neutrality," in which the college and its leadership refrain from taking positions on controversial issues that don't directly relate to the function of the university.

If "principled neutrality" sounds anodyne, you haven't been paying

attention. Mr. Diermeier's stand is boldly reassuring. That his policies are an exception among elite universities isn't.

Even within Vanderbilt, Mr. Diermeier's stance is under attack. "Many of us—faculty, students, staff and alumni—are ready for a divorce from the chancellor's position," Brian L. Heuser, a Vanderbilt professor, argued in an *Inside Higher Ed* column. Mr. Heuser wants the university to take a stand against the Tennessee Legislature's votes on a variety of issues.

Mr. Diermeier's commitment—as well as the university's embrace of free expression on campus—is a legacy from the time when I was a student at Vanderbilt. In the 1960s, the university was being pummeled from the left and right for hosting controversial speakers like Allen Ginsberg, Stokely Carmichael and Strom Thurmond. Chancellor Alexander Heard said at the time: "A university's obligation is not to protect students from ideas, but rather expose them to ideas, to help make them capable of handling and, hopefully, having ideas." Vanderbilt doesn't take positions on abortion, guns or climate change, but it will ensure that on its campus you are free to state your position and hear others' viewpoints.

Principled neutrality isn't enough to prepare students to be good and thoughtful citizens. Too many are "taking cues from the polarized culture around them," Mr. Diermeier says—they're declaring that those with opposing views aren't merely

incorrect but immoral. Such "moral tribalism" and a culture of condemnation has severely impeded the free exchange of ideas that is higher education's lifeblood.

Colleges today, Mr. Diermeier believes, must teach students how to debate constructively and "avoid the us-vs.-them dynamic that can lead to a breakdown in discourse."

To address that problem at Vanderbilt, former Republican Gov. Bill Haslam, historian Jon Meacham and faculty member Samar Ali lead students in the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and Democracy—a new program based in the College of Arts and Science that promotes research and discussion on evidence-based solutions to mediate differences.

There has been an erosion of confidence in and support for American higher education because many campuses aren't providing open forums. They take institutional positions on controversial issues and don't teach students how to talk with one another in a way that allows understanding and cooperation.

Other universities might consider Vanderbilt's example. At the moment, too many students have only two options: Join a perpetual shouting match or withdraw to a safe space. The next generation deserves a better choice.

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