

**Doug Sprei:**

Welcome to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on pivotal issues, trends, and leadership in higher education. I'm Doug Sprei, and today we feature a conversation between my ACTA colleague Jonathan Pidluzny, and John Dana Chisholm, a member of the Free Speech Alliance at Massachusetts Institute of Technology – one of the many Alumni Free Speech Alliances we have been working vigorously with this past year. Mr. Chisholm was previously a member of the MIT Corporation (or board of trustees) and was also president of the worldwide MIT Alumni Association. He has four decades of experience as entrepreneur, CEO, and investor. He founded and served as Chairman/CEO of Decisive Technology (now part of Google), and of CustomerSat (now part of FocusVision), a leading provider of enterprise feedback management systems. These days he heads up John Chisholm Ventures, a San Francisco-based entrepreneurship advisory and investment firm. And he is the author of *Unleash Your Inner Company: 10 Steps to Discover, Launch, and Scale Your Ideal Business*. The conversation you're about to hear between Mr. Chisholm and Dr. Pidluzny centers around the concept of holistic diversity, and its potential to influence higher education policy.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

It's a privilege to have you on Higher Ed Now, John. Welcome. Why don't we start with some biography. Can you tell us about your academic and professional background and your connection to MIT which, in a way, goes all the way back to early childhood?

John Chisholm:

Jonathan, first of all, thanks so much for having me. My mom was a librarian at MIT up until the time I was five years old when we moved from the Boston area to Florida, so I can remember playing in the MIT libraries as a child. I grew up in Southern Florida, Jupiter, Florida, a small outpost of West Palm Beach back in those days, and was accepted to MIT, got a bachelor's and master's in electrical engineering and computer science, was very involved in alumni activities out in Silicon Valley for the last 40 years, and was named president and chair of the alumni association for 2015 and '16 and served on the board of trustees, the corporation from 2015 to 2021.

Jonathan Pidluzny

You've expressed some innovative views about diversity in higher education, what you call "holistic diversity." That discussion is more important than ever today and it's something that we know our trustee audience is wrestling with. Can you tell us more about what you've called "holistic diversity" and how you understand the term?

John Chisholm:

Absolutely. Diversity is a good thing. Diverse lived experiences and viewpoints improve our thinking, sharpen debate. We at MIT know better than just about anyone the extent to which they foster innovation. Properly implemented, diversity and inclusion programs have the potential to mitigate and potentially reverse along health prejudices and harmful growing polarization, so diversity and inclusion are good things. The problem with DEI programs as they're currently practiced is that they focus on a very limited set of attributes, primarily race and gender. These are just a handful of the millions of dimensions that make us unique as individuals.

I group the attributes that make us unique into three categories, physical identity attributes, which are mostly immediately visible, cognitive intellectual attributes, things like abstract versus concrete thinking, risk aversion versus risk neutrality, long-term versus short-term time horizons, and so forth, and related

attributes, things like one's geography, industry, household income, zip code, years of education, and so forth. I call that group our "extended phenotype," using the words of biologists, Richard Dawkins. Other attributes span more than one of these categories, for example, religion and faith and political orientation, even sexual orientation may span two or more of those three groups. I use the term "holistic diversity" to refer to all three of these groups, encompassing the entire individual.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

Why is it that we focus on the physical elements of diversity?

John Chisholm:

Well, it's a matter of thinking fast and slow. To borrow the language of Nobel Prize-winning economist, David Kahneman, our focus on visible attributes is an example of thinking fast. It's an immediate, rapid-fire reaction akin to attacking an enemy or running away from an enemy. Fast thinking is the very behavior whether learned or innate that drives unwanted racial and gender discrimination. If we're going to fight racism and sexism, we must refuse to think fast and superficially about people, and instead think slowly and deliberately about them. As Martin Luther King said, his dream is for his children to be judged, not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. That's hard work. Character is not immediately obvious, so recognizing the attributes in the cognitive intellectual group and the related attributes group requires slow, deliberate thinking. We shouldn't disregard them just because they're not immediately visible.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

What elements of the population do we overlook when we focus exclusively on those physical characteristics when we think about diversity?

John Chisholm:

Well, just one example is geography. If you look at the 50 US states and sort them by lowest to highest enrollment in the MIT undergraduate population adjusted for state population, you see that the bottom 25 states, their enrollment is one-third of the enrollment for the top 25 states. Those bottom 25 states are mostly rural. To understand why they're so underrepresented, you have to look at the admissions pipeline. The admissions pipeline for MIT is similar to that for any university. It consists of outreach, applications, admissions, and enrollments.

There's very little outreach to rural states, and it's for good reason. Most of the country's top high schools are in urban areas rather than rural areas and there's a denser population of high school seniors in urban areas than in rural areas, and so it's more efficient to do outreach to those areas. If you look at applications, they are from rural states due to less outreach, but also other factors, lower SAT or ACT scores in general, less awareness, and word of mouth among students, and to some particular socioeconomic factors that I talk about in the article. One of them is somewhere versus anywhere mindsets. Somewheres are folks who identify more with place and location, hometowns, communities. They tend to value familiarity, security, local civic groups, and so forth, and they are less likely to travel away from their states to go to colleges, universities, some distance away.

In contrast, kids who grow up in cities are more likely to be anywheres. That is they could live comfortably anywhere and their identity is more associated with achievement position and life experiences rather than geography and community and these students are more willing to go to the coasts and travel some distance to go to an elite university rather than to their local state university, so

that's a factor. Urban scalability is another factor. The Santa Fe Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which I have had the privilege of serving on the board of for the last 12 years, has shown that as the population of cities double, average income, average number of graduate degrees and patents predictably increases by about 15% thanks to higher population and density, more interactions, faster flows of knowledge, larger cities enjoy this economic economy of scale. These benefits accrue to the students who come from cities, so that's another factor.

If you look at admissions as a percentage of applications, interestingly, according to our chancellor at MIT, admission rates are higher for rural than urban areas. Since there's no outreach and since outreach generally casts a wide net, which pulls down average applicant quality, the quality of rural applicants, who enjoy little or no outreach, tends to be slightly higher on average, so admissions are slightly higher, and then enrollments as a percentage of those who are admitted is slightly lower. That has to do with some of the factors I talked about previously, somewheres versus anywheres, and also evidence suggests that they feel less welcome and included in campus visits and other interactions, and thus are less likely to enroll, even if they're accepted.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

What's the big deal. Why should we be making effort to bring students from that other half onto campuses like MIT?

John Chisholm:

Well, our mission is to serve the entire nation, first of all. But beyond that, underrepresentation along this single geographical attribute has unexpectedly significant consequences because the disparity is not merely geographical, it's also cultural, economic, intellectual, and political. More than the US population overall, individuals from these states tend to value individual rewards and responsibilities, local civic ties, frugality, a work ethic, nuclear families. They have center-right sensibilities. They tend to be more fiscally and socially conservative. They're lower income overall. They're mostly red states. They're more likely to be somewhere than anywheres. I call them "the other half of the US," because they make up about half of the US, and yet they may well be the most underrepresented segment on top university campuses.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

We have all sorts of outreach mechanisms and we have all sorts of support mechanisms on campus for some kinds of diversity. Are we doing anything to reach students in the other half?

John Chisholm:

These students have no on-campus constituency at all. They are invisible. I saw this firsthand. Last year, I was invited to serve on a committee to select recent alumni for very senior leadership roles at MIT. When I interviewed the candidates, I asked them when the subject of diversity came up, as it invariably did, "Allowing for any segmentation of the US population, which segment do you think is most underrepresented at MIT?" Separately, I asked the same question of our dean of humanities and social sciences. The most common response, including that of the dean, was, "Native Americans." Well, Native Americans represent, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services, 1.7% of the US population. No one mentioned rural, lower income, or center-right sensibility individuals by those labels, or any other labels.

Again, it's a matter of fast versus slow thinking. This is despite the fact that the other half as an underrepresented segment was called out in an institute report as being underrepresented and something that we should do something about a couple of years before. If you sort the 50 US states from red to blue, you'll see that the enrollment from the red states, again adjusted for us population is only 38% of the enrollment for blue states, and the disparities is even greater than that number would suggest because many of the admittees from red states are from blue cities in those states and where we recruit and where we do outreach, and as we've seen, they're more likely to enroll, and yet we never hear or talk about the other half.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

Yeah, that graph in your article is absolutely stunning. It makes me wonder what is there to be gained by bringing more of the other half onto an elite campus, both for the students individually, but for the campus and its intellectual life.

John Chisholm:

Well, there's a great deal to be gained because we value diversity, both for exposing students to different lived experiences, which helps foster tolerance and understanding and for better decision-making and creativity that comes from different cognitive styles. In both ways, the other half's sensibilities are complementary to and counterbalancing of university's primarily blue state perspectives, and so they deserve to be included in on-campus conversations and our DEI initiatives urgently need to include them.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

Earlier, you mentioned that there's some evidence that students from the other half, these predominantly rural students, that they may be stereotyped, or there may be some bias built into the system against them. Can you tell us more about that?

John Chisholm:

Yes. I've seen it firsthand. The more underrepresented a segment is, the easier it is to stereotype them. That stereotyping makes them less likely to enroll or apply and that leads to a negative feedback loop where there are fewer of them on campus, so they're easier to stereotype, so they're less likely to come to campus, and so forth. At a recent visiting committee meeting, a senior administrator said that "The other half, "not using those exact words, but with that idea, "don't share our values," yet another characterizes them as "poor, white, and uneducated." Imagine making the such gross generalizations about women, blacks, or gays. It would be utterly unacceptable and yet these sentiments are common on campus about the other half.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

I understand that there's some good quantitative data to support that, that the campus really does lean in one di ideological direction.

John Chisholm:

Yes, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education does an annual college free speech survey of campuses across the US, and in 2021, they found that 5.5 times as many MIT students, self-declare as very or somewhat liberal as very or somewhat conservative and 4.8 times as many self-declare as

Democrat as a Republican. Many other half students, faculty, and staff have become as deeply closeted on campus as I was growing up gay in South Florida in the 1970s. Growing polarization may be America's number one existential threat. One of the key drivers, if not the key driver, is lack of dialogue among different groups. We are driven by social media and likes to nowadays to just interact with those who already share our views. That's not good. We urgently need to find common ground with those outside of our ingroup to keep our civil society from breaking apart. Some people feel that being left behind in education is one of the key drivers of polarization. Universities, more than any other institutions, could be the ones modeling, open discussion and tolerance to avoid polarization.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

I think that's a really good point and I hope our audience takes notes of it. One of the things I really like about your article is that you underline the importance of a light touch when it comes to holistic diversity. Can you say more about what you mean?

John Chisholm:

I came out late in my late 30s. Before that, if I were chosen or promoted or elected, I knew it was due to what I had contributed or accomplished, not to the fact that I'm gay. Now that I'm out, I can't always be sure. No one should have to deal with that insecurity and indignity. If we're going to avoid undermining the very individuals we intend to serve, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives need to use many dimensions with a light touch rather than a few dimensions with a hammer. We need to make certain that no one has to wonder whether they were accepted, hired, or promoted just because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

What should universities be thinking about? How should we begin to solve these problems?

John Chisholm:

Here are some thoughts. First of all, embrace a broad set of diversity attributes, not just physical identity, but cognitive intellectual, and the related attributes, for which diversity could make universities stronger, better, and more equitable. For all purposes, for outreach, for admissions, hiring, promotion, team-building, University of Michigan and Santa Fe Institute scholar Scott Page shows that its cognitive intellectual diversity that makes boards, committees, and work groups better at decision-making. We absolutely should not be overlooking those. We should resist the temptation to compromise academic standards to admit any group of candidates. We don't need to. We've got the other three stages of the admissions pipeline, outreach applications, enrollments to work with. If we lower standards, that is a recipe for mediocrity, which compromises the university's standing in long-term effectiveness, and it leads to mismatch, which is underqualified students who are admitted to elite universities, and as a result, experience worse life outcomes than those who were not admitted in the first place.

We need to refuse to stereotype the other half or any other underrepresented segment that has no on-campus constituency or advocacy. We have a vast common ground with such segments. We need to recognize it and expand it. It doesn't matter what the issue is, eliminating poverty, preserving the environment, making higher education and healthcare more affordable and accessible, achieving world peace, whatever the issue is, different constituencies generally share similar goals, but differ in their approaches. If we recognize that, that invites a discussion of benefits, costs, unintended consequences of different approaches, and shifts the discussion from ideological to practical. The greater the polarization, the more we should rely on this approach, this approach is harder work and less satisfying

than stereotyping and doubling down, but it is a win-win long-term for our universities, for our nation, and for the world.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

That's a great point and it's something I think we generally overlook today with our more narrow approach to diversity. I really want to get to your recommendations, and I think that there are some great ones for administrators and for board members, but before we do that, you make a point about alumni, and the fact that alumni participation, alumni giving seems to be steadily declining. You think that this might have something to do with what's happening on campus. Can you say more about that?

John Chisholm:

Well, it has been well-established by lots of different sources that over the last couple of decades, alumni or the percentage of alumni who give to their alma maters has been steadily declining. In the article, I provide one example of many sources of data that support that. Here's a hypothesis we owe it to ourselves to test, that at least some of the decline in giving is due to universities straying from their focus on education and research, becoming more ideological, and thus estranging alumni. Even among my close friends with advanced degrees in successful careers, some have stated that they will not support their university because of ideology. For the same reason, many of our alumni have quit reading MIT's Technology Review magazine.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

Yeah, I think that's a big problem on a lot of campuses, the disengagement of alumni, and it's actually a hypothesis that we recently did test. We surveyed the major donors, almost all of whom were alumni to an elite liberal arts college, and your hypothesis is correct. There were incredibly high levels of dissatisfaction and a lot of it was traceable to the perception that the administration wasn't committed to viewpoint diversity and protecting free expression. You gave some great advice in a different report about messaging to alumni and I think it really could resonate with a lot of our audience. Can you tell us more about how universities might make themselves more appealing to the other half?

John Chisholm:

Well, as was mentioned at the outset, I had the great privilege and joy of serving as head of our president and chair of our alumni association back in 2015, 2016. We have about 140,000 alumni around the world. I fondly referred to the position as "MIT's head cheerleader and matchmaker." During that time, I met with over a thousand alumni in 25 MIT clubs in a dozen countries. It was the best year of my life. I got to meet so many of our creative, accomplished, thoughtful alumni.

As a result of that experience, I advised my friend and colleague, Whitney Espich, who is CEO of the MIT Alumni Association, the senior staff, a person to whom the Alumni Association staff reports to closely review all of our large scale alumni communications for content, which is unduly political. We should consider content not just from our own blue state standpoints, but from the viewpoints of those of other states with red-leaning and other half sensibilities, of whom there are relatively few on campus, but who are well-represented among our alumni, especially older alumni, and well-represented among our international alumni whose countries invariably have their own political, economic, and social issues to deal with. Whenever possible, we should lead instead with MIT's universal, inspiring, unifying achievements in the sciences, engineering, and technology rather than politics.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

I think that's great advice. If I could add one thing, it dovetails beautifully with a seminal University of Chicago report called the Calvin Committee Report, which makes the point that a university should never have a position on a controversial social and political issue because for the university to express a position is to discourage those who may not think the same way, so I think that's a wonderful point. This brings us to recommendations. What would you recommend to our audience? What are the first steps they should take if they want to start addressing these issues?

John Chisholm:

Well, Jonathan, your mentioning the University of Chicago reminds me how regrettable it is that MIT has yet to join the 80 or so universities who have adopted the Chicago principles on freedom of expression, and hopefully we will do that at some point soon.

As far as advice for trustees, I think reviewing and critically assessing your current DEI initiatives is vitally important. Make sure that by focusing on a narrow set of attributes, we're not actually further underrepresenting other important dimensions of diversity, as we've seen happen at MIT and elsewhere. Make sure that the other half of the US is not being ignored and all of the intellectual and cognitive diversity that the other half brings as well, as other segments, remember that it's cognitive and intellectual diversity that makes us better decision-makers, and we need to make sure that we're not a philosophical political monoculture on campuses.

This may be difficult. It's not easy. Implementing an holistic approach to diversity and inclusion today and addressing marginalization of other-half students, faculty, and staff may well be as unpopular on your campus today as it would've been to address discrimination against Jews in the 1930s, blacks in the 1950s, and gays in the 1970s, but confronting those instances of exclusion has paid huge dividends for our universities, and our nation, and by doing the same with diversity and inclusion initiatives today, making them holistic, encompassing the entire individual, will similarly help our universities and nation survive and flourish today.

Jonathan Pidluzny:

I think that's an incredibly powerful illustration of the stakes and the opportunity universities have. I really want to thank you, John, for sharing your thoughts today, and I commend to everyone your article. I think it's just a wonderful rethinking about how universities might go about pursuing a holistic approach to diversity.

John Chisholm:

Thanks so much for having me.