

Is higher education finally at a turning point? Is it finally a T.S. Eliot moment, where higher ed has no choice but serious reform? “Unnatural vices are fathered by our heroism. Virtues are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.”

Possibly so. The unnatural vices that too many higher education leaders have aided and abetted are clear. Whether they can do the hard work of embracing virtue is less so. It is our job to see that they do—or that the regimes change.

Since leaving the University of Colorado, where I had the privilege of serving under the leadership of Senator Brown, I have been at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni—ACTA for short. We work with boards of trustees, activist alumni groups, and legislators to strengthen academic standards, intellectual diversity, and the free exchange of ideas on campus. These matters are in fact core concerns as we look at the dysfunction of so many institutions of higher education, and they reflect directly on the moral and intellectual bankruptcy we saw on campus after October 7.

What does it mean that students and faculty on a number of campuses rushed to celebrate on October 8, a day after the worst massacre of Jews since the Nazi Holocaust? These citizens of the academy were not suddenly dropped at college that day by an evil angel.

How did the universities that once could boast that they are the envy of the world get to this point?

Let’s start with malfeasance in leadership. At the now infamous December 5 congressional hearing when the presidents of MIT, Penn, and Harvard could not give a full-throated declaration that calling for the genocide of Jews on campus would violate their policies, mumbling mealy-mouthed words about “context,” it was not an accident. Nor was it an accident that many college leaders were so reluctant to denounce the massacre. There were too few like the University of Florida’s Ben Sasse. What was reflected was a campus habit of ignoring antisemitism; or, perhaps more widely, the devaluing of religion and religious students full stop. I recall when I first came to CU, a Boulder campus climate survey revealed that over a quarter of the students surveyed reported that they saw religious students treated with disrespect. But there was no outrage in the summary of the findings. FBI statistics show that antisemitism has been on the rise in our nation for some time. So where was the campus outrage, the marches, the rallies against this oldest and one of the most dangerous hatreds in human history? Here is a suggestion for legislators, administrators, regents, and trustees: Audit your diversity, equity, and inclusion offices over a 20-year horizon. Did they pay attention to antisemitism? And if they didn’t, take action, stern action.

Spoiler alert: The Heritage Foundation did some of the research for us. Examining the Twitter feeds of 741 DEI personnel at 65 universities, comparing their communications regarding Israel and China, it found that 96% of the Tweets regarding Israel were negative, while 62% regarding China were positive.

Then there is ignorance, stunning ignorance. As a Berkeley professor discovered, less than half the students he found chanting that ugly phrase, “from the river to the sea,” could even name the river.

“Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go.” And here we are. Each year, ACTA surveys over 1,100 colleges and universities and grades them on their core curricula. It isn’t pretty: Only 19% require even a single foundational course on American history and government, much less Western Civilization. Prejudice feeds on such ignorance. Who is to blame for failure to establish a solid core curriculum? Look no further than faculty and administrators. It is sad that it often takes legislators to tell the educators what they fail to see.

Finally, there is the problem of a monoculture, an echo chamber, where fashionable ideas, like “settler colonialism” and “oppressor-oppressed” victimology and intersectionality, meet little if any intellectual challenge. Recall the joke about the department chair questioned if there are any Republicans in his department who responds, “Republicans in our department? We don’t even know any.” This is an educational failure.

What is the way forward? A shakedown of DEI is long overdue. What is it doing for—or to—the campus and what is it costing? Another spoiler alert: It’s in the millions, sometimes tens of millions. The absence of a requirement for American history and Western Civilization is a disgrace: It can only breed ignorance and a contempt for the traditions that have shaped modern America. And finally, if the professoriate cannot achieve intellectual diversity in its hiring and promotion, then leadership needs to intervene. A racial or gender monoculture would properly be seen as intolerable. Lack of intellectual diversity cuts to the heart of what higher education is for.

Finally, a modest request. We are in the second year of our Campus Freedom Initiative™, striving to bring openness and intellectual diversity to campus. We have before us a \$1 million matching challenge that will help us to help many more campuses. According to your means, please help us in this crucial endeavor.

Deeply honored to be on this panel with Rabbi Dollin and Chancellor Sweeting, I hear the words of Nehemiah:

“They said unto me, ‘The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach . . . Then I told them of the hand of my G-d which was good upon me . . . And they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ So they strengthened their hands for this good work.”

Rabbi Tarfon, who lived in the fourth century, admonished us that we are not commanded to bring every task to perfection, but we are commanded never to give up. We cannot and we will not.