

My Perspective on the Controversial Events of 11/13/20-11/15/20  
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**Background:** I and some colleagues who I don't want to name and involve right now have been concerned about certain aspects of the way Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts have been discussed and implemented over the past 3-4 years, especially during 2020. In particular, many of us are concerned about the way that anyone who tries to dissent on certain issues is immediately assumed to have racist or otherwise bigoted motives, which prevents the intellectual exploration of that issue, particularly the implications and consequences of proposed policies. On 11/6/20, a colleague in my department gave an internal seminar that included the quote: "If you are just hiring the best people, you are part of the problem." Many people took this to imply (although that may not have been the intent) that we should not hire the most qualified people, which has traditionally been the way the University of Chicago approaches appointments ([Shils report](#)). After discussions with colleagues, I decided that it was important to reassert our traditional approach on this issue. I asked to speak at the same internal seminar, but was told that I couldn't because I had already spoken this year. Instead I recorded a reading of [these slides](#), posted it to YouTube, and sent it out in the Zoom chat for our internal seminar after the speaker had finished on Friday, 11/13/20. Before sharing the video I showed it to colleagues and they thought it would be a good way to start the discussion. One colleague noted in particular that "one would need to be very cynical to oppose this." I spent a week developing slides that I thought would make the case in a way that would resonate with progressives based on my reading of Jonathan Haidt's book, [The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided on Politics and Religion](#). My basic points are: (1) We need to think through the consequences of DEI efforts to make sure they aren't hurting promising scientists of all demographics, (2) There are major societal problems that we should try to fix as a society as well as by giving our own time and money off campus, but adjusting departmental ratios at elite universities does not really address them, and (3) the current academic climate is making it extremely difficult for people with dissenting viewpoints to voice their opinions.

When I posted the slides I got emails from 15-20% of the members of my department thanking me for speaking out and giving examples of how they have felt unable to discuss anything that disagrees with the "outspoken majority." I got a substantive comment about selection bias in the postdoctoral fellowship example from my slides, so I made another [video](#) giving other examples and showing the results of [this paper](#). I also made a [video](#) explaining the purpose of a modern university and the way we should

approach appointments according to the [Shils report](#). On Saturday, 11/14/20, friends started telling me that there were a large number of people on Twitter misrepresenting what I was arguing, saying untrue things about me, and even demanding that I be fired. One friend noted that there were a number of tweets using the logic: “I don’t feel safe when you object to my premises, therefore you cannot object to my premises on campus.” I found this very upsetting because it confirmed my fear that certain people are exploiting the language of personal trauma to silence anyone with dissenting opinions on these issues. I responded on Sunday, 11/15/20, with a [video](#) explaining the moral reason for my objection to ideologies that emphasize group membership instead of fundamental respect for the dignity of the individual. My argument is that these ideologies tend to lead to dehumanizing the other, as well as antagonistic and violent behavior. I gave the specific example of the Holodomor in Ukraine to illustrate this, although I explicitly noted that we are nowhere near that level here, and it was just an illustration of where this kind of thinking can lead if left unchecked. I then recorded a final video where I explained that I view these videos as an intellectual “freedom of navigation” operation. I do not require anyone else to agree with any of my viewpoints, but I felt the need to put them out in public, especially after a group of people started going after me on Twitter, in order to show that it is possible to stand up to pressure like that and assert your views on a controversial topic.

On Monday, 11/15/20, the University’s Title IX office reached out to me and asked for more information about the hiring and admissions actions I objected to. I can’t discuss the details, but they told me that some of them should not be happening on campus. They agreed to investigate these issues and continue the conversation. I also looked at the comments of the YouTube videos and found that the situation had gotten very hostile, with people on both sides yelling past each other, so that a productive conversation was not occurring. Finally, I felt that I had sufficiently asserted my academic freedom (more on this below). As a result, I took down the videos.

**Analysis:** I believe that this situation was caused by the collision of two different strongly held worldviews. I subscribe to the traditional University of Chicago perspective, as outlined recently in what has become known as the [Chicago Statement](#). In this view academic freedom and the tolerance of dissenting views are given prominence. The reason for this is that it is important for promoting the discovery of new knowledge, which is the main purpose of a modern university. I and many other faculty specifically chose to work at the University of Chicago in part because it has always affirmed this attitude. The alternative viewpoint is that certain groups feel inherently threatened on campus, and need to be protected from anything that might make them feel unsafe or happy to pursue their work. I am sympathetic to this viewpoint and agree in some cases, such as general department and classroom climate, but I feel that it

cannot be applied to intellectual discussions. The reason is that it is associated with the type of logic noted above, in which the position is taken: “I don’t feel safe when you object to my premises, therefore you cannot object to my premises on campus.” This is similar to what philosophers call “begging the question,” or “assuming the answer,” and obviously is not an effective way to resolve an intellectual dispute correctly.

**Support from the University:** I am very lucky to be a tenured professor at the University of Chicago, so I have the rare privilege of being able to make these points and withstand attacks in a way that many others do not. I have been reassured by my department chair that the University has a fundamental commitment to freedom of expression, that my tenured position is not at risk, and that my role in the University will not be restricted in any way. When I say that this is about academic freedom, what I mean is that others who are not in as secure a position as I am should also be able to advocate dissenting views. One way to challenge the current culture of fear is for me to use my position of privilege to assert academic freedom and to aggressively make space for dissenting viewpoints in campus discussions.

**My position on DEI efforts:** I am in favor of many DEI efforts. Around 2010 I learned about the Harvard implicit bias test from a DEI program on campus. I took it and found that I had an implicit bias against women in science. I tried to consciously fight that unconscious bias and purposefully worked with many women in science. Five years later when I retook the test, it no longer revealed an implicit bias. I also strongly support expanding applicant pools as much as possible. I believe that diversity is healthy and good for a university because it tends to lead to more perspectives and debate that fully explores intellectual issues. That said, I would tend to emphasize a larger variety of types of diversity, including political, religious, and viewpoint diversity, than are currently being emphasized in most DEI efforts. What I am against is setting up systems where group membership is a primary aspect of a candidate’s evaluation. I believe we should avoid discriminating against anyone for any reason. After trying to remove our biases and increase the pool of applicants as much as possible, I believe we should *continue* to select the most qualified applicants, as outlined in the [Shils report](#). I don’t demand anyone else agree with me on these issues. The critical point to me is that everyone should feel comfortable advocating any position on them without being attacked, bullied, and delegitimized.

**Support:** If you are afraid to speak out about certain issues on campus and want to discuss this and get support, please reach out to me. Also, here are some resources that may be useful to you: [The Heterodox Academy](#) and [The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#).