The More Challenging DEI –
A Befitting Role for MIT

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I READ WITH INTEREST MIT's new DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) plan circulated by the Provost. It is an impressive document and obviously the product of a lot of thought. Unfortunately, I think that as laudable as this document and the initiative itself are, we are missing a larger part of the problem: a national gap in inclusivity.

Toward a More Inclusive DEI

MIT, of course, is not the only institution engaged in DEI efforts. On most university campuses as well as in many institutions, notably media outlets and some corporations, DEI efforts are focused on internal staff. At universities, these reform efforts have centered on students' admissions, faculty hiring, and a plethora of activities aimed at re-education. Those efforts, as well as MIT's, define DEI in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and related parameters. In particular, universities argue that diversity of race, gender, and sexual orientation is important to generate a vibrant learning and research environment.

As notable and commendable as these goals may be, they miss an important aspect of inclusivity by a significant measure. While "standard" DEI efforts aim to help the 13% Black, or 4.5% LGBTQ in the U.S. population, they miss the vast number of people who voted for Trump in 2020.

As the 2020 elections proved, more than 74 million Americans think differently from the prevailing wisdom found on most American university campuses. Yet on many campuses, this near-majority of voters is branded as stupid, racist,

misogynistic, or other "deplorables." Both the left and the right look more and more like religions: righteous, moralistic, unforgiving, and dismissive of any other belief. An imminent challenge facing this nation is to unify the country after the contentious 2020 elections.

I would like to see the ideas of Diversity and Inclusion broaden beyond the current definition and beyond the institutional four walls. Universities have a special part in this national reunification effort, which MIT can lead. At the same time that MIT continues its internal efforts – including events, proclamations, and re-education aimed at internal, standard DEI – we should think more expansively, and tackle the more critical issue of a divided nation, starting with four principles.

Principles of Expanded DEI

First, we must acknowledge the gulf of understanding between the political factions. Just as progressives are baffled and worried by the existence of so many Trump-supporting Americans, many of the initiatives in progressive institutions, such as at elite universities, baffle and frighten conservatives. Both sides are fearful of each other and just don't understand how they can think the way they do. So, it is incumbent on elite universities such as MIT – which has always looked to "make the world better" and answer the nation's calls – to step into the breach.

Second, we must avoid convenient political stereotypes spawned by the worst-case acts of a few of each group's most violent members. We should acknowledge that just as not all BLM protesters were breaking glass and looting

stores in Minneapolis, Portland, and downtown Boston, not all 74 million GOP voters participated in or supported the January 6 insurrection. Vilifying an entire group for the acts of a few is a recipe for useless recrimination and hate crime.

Third, more generally, we can have 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 racial minorities or different genders is a cause for punishment and cancelation, yet no such disapprobation comes from denigrating conservative voters. I mention this double standard to make the point that purity is rare.

Fourth, violence on either side must be equally condemned. Sadly, it is not only the media and many academics that tended to ignore, or justify, violence on the left. When pictures of broken glass and looted stores in downtown Boston were playing on TV screens, Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey, said: "Yes, America is burning. But that's how forests grow . . . ." Thus, we tend to condemn violence on the right (and rightfully so) while "spinning" it as justifiable on the left (which is too bad). Violence and its tacit support only serves to perpetuate mutual fear and further entrench divisions.

What Would a National DEI Effort Look Like?

Imagine a call by MIT to all universities to join us in this effort comprising two broad

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initiatives: (i) educate ourselves about "the other side" through primary engagements, both by visiting the other side and by inviting their representatives to campus for thoughtful presentations and debate, and (ii) expose many of the people on the "other side" to progressive values and thinking, in a respectful way. (This article's original draft advocated exposing the other side to the scientific method until a friend pointed out the anti-science stand of many progressives on GMOs and nuclear power.)

Can we develop a set of outreach, seminars, expositions, etc., aimed at understanding the "other America"? Can we engage rather than dismiss? Can we, in the elite academic institutions, go deep into "Trump country" to have open dialogue and debate in universities, high schools, churches, diners, meeting halls, and so forth?

One of the first challenges will be to bring different voices into our campus, so people cannot complain that we are not practicing what we preach. Can we ensure that these voices will be heard despite the left-wing pressure groups causing such voices to be canceled? Can we find ways to hire people with divergent points of view about immigration, racial preferences, role of religion, abortion, etc.? Is there a room on the MIT campus for a civilized debate and discussion on sensitive issues? Can we expose our students to a range of ideas and beliefs rather tacitly propagating divisiveness by shielding these young adults with "trigger warnings" from ideas or data they may not agree with?

Of course, there is always the "paradox of inclusion," which means that if everybody needs to be included, there is no right and wrong and the inclusiveness mandate rules. For dialogue and mutual understanding to be workable, there will have to be boundaries for inclusivity, which means that inclusivity is not unbounded. So, while one can argue that the moon landing was a hoax, that the holocaust never happened, that widespread fraud beset the 2020 U.S. elections, that the Republican tax plan increased taxes on most Americans, or that it is easier to get a Glock than a library book, some rules of evidence should apply.

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Many beliefs on both sides, however, are not based on unbiased evidence but on untested hypotheses, selective anecdotes, biased information flows, the need to belong, and so on. Exposing those ideas 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 we thought we had. These may be the importance of family, hard work, equal opportunity, support for the military, and many more, which can start to change the tone in both camps. Perhaps sharing some time with someone of the opposite political persuasion might help reveal our shared humanity.

We should still be able to debate Roe vs. Wade and respect people with a different opinion. Similarly, we should be able to disagree about immigration, national healthcare, police reforms, racial preferences, education platforms, gun laws, voting regulations, or any other policy without dehumanizing people who think differently. A core goal of any inclusiveness and diversity training is on dampening people's natural fear of "other," different people as well as questioning the natural convictions that "what I and my tribe believe in is 'right.'" Let's apply this to MIT and to the nation.

MIT's Civic Duty to Be Non-Partisan
Not finding a way to include "the other side" would be a sad failure of academia. It is also a disservice to our students, who will inevitably be forced to live with these "other Americans" among their co-workers, bosses, customers, family members, and neighbors. Retreating into our ivory towers, comforted by our own echoes that our ideas are correct and true will only exacerbate the divisions in the U.S. and serve the goals of our enemies. Unfortunately, most universities, especially the elite ones, have so far been part of the problem with their elitist, intolerant monoculture. It is high time for universities to recognize the issue and start being part of the solution.

Universities, maybe especially STEM-focused ones such as MIT, have an essential civic duty to be neutral rather than partisan arbiters of evidence. In contrast, if elite universities are perceived as biased, much of the data and knowledge flowing from these institutions will be branded as partisan "fake news."

If the United States does not address this deep political division, many of its national efforts regarding vaccination, climate change, inequality, immigration, and even internal, "standard," DEI efforts will fail. They will fail because we will not be able even to discuss these issues and they will all become political and toxic to one side or the other.

MIT and other progressive institutions cannot remain blue islands in a red sea in which pounding waves of divisiveness erode all that MIT, universities, and the U.S. have fought to build. I hope MIT will lead the way with this new Institute-wide and academia-wide initiative to build a more inclusive America for all. ■

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