

I would like to submit written testimony for the House Education and Workforce Committee hearing entitled, “ Holding Campus Leaders Accountable and Confronting Antisemitism.”

The Dec. 5 hearing, and an earlier one on Nov. 14, were specifically about the relationship between antisemitism and diversity work at universities. It’s a crucial topic that demands direct address, and it’s not surprising that the hearing made headlines across the country.

First, on antisemitism — wherever it exists, it is odious. I had an experience in high school where I did not stand up for a Jewish friend experiencing harassment. A group of students had taken to scrawling antisemitic slurs on classroom desks and shouting them in the hallway. I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend. Instead, I averted my eyes from the bigotry, and I avoided my friend because I couldn’t stand to face him.

A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend reminded me of that experience. He told me he feared going to school those days, and he felt abandoned as he watched his close friends do nothing. Hearing him tell me of his suffering, and reminding me of my silence, is the single most humiliating experience of my life.

My inaction as a teenager was a betrayal of both my Muslim faith and the ideals of America. People of all faiths and identities — Jews, Muslims, African Americans, gay people — should not just be tolerated but should feel safe and welcome. My friend needed more than my silent presence at the lunch table. In the words of the great American poet Gwendolyn Brooks: “We are each other’s business; we are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.” This encapsulates the essence of community and responsibility.

Second, a diverse society needs a place to practice and promote pluralism. Enter universities, which are a treasure of our civilization. Where else do you get a wide range of identities

converging in a small physical space, the intellectual resources to teach about the world's great traditions and the co-curricular opportunities (intramural sports, student clubs, volunteer programs) to apply what you learn?

It is essential that colleges prioritize diversity work, but the model should be a potluck, not a battlefield. Good diversity work is absolutely essential to the American project. The United States is the world's first attempt at a mass-level multiracial, multiethnic, interfaith democracy. For centuries, political philosophers believed that a country as diverse as ours was impossible. After all, we humans are wired to prefer people who look and pray like us and to be suspicious of those who are different. To borrow from the great writer James Baldwin, to "achieve our country," we must advance effective diversity initiatives.

Third, we build a pluralistic America by exercising the muscles of cooperation across difference. This means we have to expand the knowledge base, learn the skill set, and nurture the qualities of bridgebuilding. Bridges of cooperation don't fall from the sky or rise from the ground — people build them.

There is a growing campus-based pluralism movement, with a number of courses on civil discourse and a handful of centers like the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University, the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy, the Difficult Conversations Lab at Columbia University, the Karsh Center for Law and Democracy at the University of Virginia, and the Othering and Belonging Institute and the Greater Good Science Center, both at the University of California, Berkeley.

It's a start, but not nearly enough. Our nation needs every campus not only to house a center for pluralism but to *be* a center for pluralism. Campuses need to be places where people from diverse identities and divergent ideologies learn from one another, not just shout at each other.

In this model, campuses would gather the faculty, advance the research, teach the courses, host the guest lectures and, most importantly, train students to be leaders in pluralism. Furthermore, a campus as a center of pluralism could administer surveys to gauge the pluralism orientation of students, run workshops during first-year orientation to help every incoming freshman have basic skills for constructive conversations across differences, and organize a student fellowship to prepare a small number of people who seek to be expert practitioners of pluralism.

We should remember that we have the wind at our backs. There is an impressive literature, written by both academics and journalists, on pluralism. These include classic works in political philosophy like "Talking to Strangers" by Danielle Allen, "Cosmopolitanism" by Kwame Anthony Appiah, and "Confident Pluralism" by John Inazu. There are books in political science that explore our partisan divide like "Uncivil Agreement" by Lilliana Mason and "Divided We Fall" by David French.

There is a whole tradition in sociology that looks at how groups either come apart or come together, including the studies of Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif in contact theory and virtually everything that Robert Putnam has written. There are important books in moral psychology that look at the role of identity formation in relation to conflict, like Jonathan Haidt's "The Righteous Mind" and Appiah's "The Lies That Bind."

And there is a growing practitioner literature that highlights the skills of strengthening relationships across difference. These include Mónica Guzmán's "I Never Thought of It That

Way,” Amanda Ripley’s “High Conflict,” Peter Coleman’s “The Way Out,” Eric Liu’s “Become America,” David Brooks’ “How to Know a Person” and Arthur Brooks’ “Love Your Enemies.”

Even if a campus is not experiencing conflict regarding the Middle East war, it may well do so around the politics of abortion or gun control, or events related to the upcoming election. Truth be told, a diverse democracy will have no shortage of issues that divide people. We need leaders with the knowledge and skills to make sure that people can disagree on some fundamental things while working together on other fundamental things. We want students to be protesting respectfully on the quad, but we also need them to be working together to find cures for cancer in our laboratories and collaborating on new technologies in our engineering schools.

This has potential outside of higher education, too, as employers from virtually every sector are seeking to hire people with the skills to turn potentially contentious issues — such as which books to include in a school curriculum — into opportunities for collaboration rather than conflict.

Barriers like racism, misogyny, Islamophobia and antisemitism prevent people from making their contribution to a pluralistic society. These things need to be called out and defeated. But the eradication of prejudice is not enough; we must proactively build a diverse democracy and cherish the contributions of all.

In every generation, American campuses have stepped up to help address the urgent needs of the nation. Right now, the great problem we face in the United States is high conflict, and the urgent need is more collaboration and cooperation across differences. In this moment of extreme polarization, to serve the nation and improve themselves, campuses need to become laboratories and launching pads for pluralism, because ultimately “we are each other’s business.”

Eboo Patel is a civic leader who believes that religious diversity is an essential and inspiring dimension of American democracy. Named “one of America’s best leaders” by *U.S. News and World Report*, Eboo is Founder and President of Interfaith America, the leading interfaith organization in the United States. Under his leadership, Interfaith America has worked with governments, universities, private companies, and civic organizations to make faith a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division.

Eboo served on President Obama’s Inaugural Faith Council, has given hundreds of keynote addresses, and has written five books, including *We Need to Build: Field Notes for Diverse Democracy*. He is an Ashoka Fellow and holds a doctorate in the sociology of religion from Oxford University, where he studied on a Rhodes scholarship.