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## Our University- Multiple Perspectives

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## Our University- Multiple Perspectives

Diversity is a strengthening catalyst for almost anything. There is a great deal of discussion at our university, and on other campuses, about diversity and its import to the campus culture. This dialog is usually viewed through the lens of ethnic, racial, and gender diversity. Other manifestations of the human condition have value in providing multiple perspectives to be sure.

Another dimension of diversity is derived solely from intellectual curiosity or stance rather than the legitimate desire for a university to reflect the population it aspires to serve. Diversity of this dimension comes from holding a particular intellectual stance. In contemporary society this is a chosen trait rather than a distinctiveness that we inherit or are born with, although birth and family, or residence in a particular locale, certainly impact thinking.

If any university was populated with people who come from within fifty miles of the campus, there would be a sameness of view and a parochialness that undermines strength. This concept is independent of geographic location. If everyone who taught at Columbia University came from metropolitan New York, it would make Columbia narrow-minded. True for any university in any locale.

Multiple perspectives, absent anything else, create learning opportunity. That is why people travel. Travel from the Middle English word *travailen* ("to toil"), from the Anglo-French word *travailler* ("travail") means work.

Without multiple perspectives intellectual flatness leads to a featureless thought environment.

The purpose of the university is to bring people from many perspectives together to generate new views that have value to a culture. Environments that support intellectual nepotism will not reach their full learning potential. Nepotism usually refers to active pursuit - hiring friend or family - rather than a passive one - hiring those who know a place because they happen to be available. Both are equally noxious to a good university.

Nepotism of the kind that undermines academic excellence and inquisitiveness is not usually active, but passive. Comfort with the challenge of varied perspectives is a mandate of the most basic function of a university. Settling for the comfortable will lead to a false sense of security, but will eventually undercut the purpose of the university and its quality.

As a society, we have come to categorize legitimate and healthy differences of view as narrow-minded in some cases, or so broad as to be boundless in others.

It seems fear and hatred reside at the end of both roads.

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This fear of expression has a chilling effect on diversity of thought and action equal to the chilling effects addressed in a number of Supreme Court cases beginning in the early fifties but given special attention by the late William Joseph Brennan, Jr., Associate Justice of the Court regarding the more general but related concept of free speech.

Many powerful ideas cause awkwardness in expression for fear of offense. While such fear may be legitimate in some settings, it must be avoided at our university. Not an intellectual free-for-all, but the notion that openness and variety of views creates strength, and most assuredly, a narrowness of view will create weakness in the same measure.

Walter Bagehot, the English social scientist, understood the challenge of different views and the true purpose of the university. "One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea."

At our university we should shield no one from the process that births new ideas.