

Conservatives should change DEI, not cut it

Your Turn

David Ramadan

Guest columnist

President Donald Trump's recent move to target universities like the University of Virginia and George Mason University over diversity, equity and inclusion programs is a mistake.

As a lifelong conservative, a former Republican legislator and now a professor at George Mason, I know firsthand the importance of universities – not just to our economy but also to the strength of our society.

I'm also an immigrant who was educated at George Mason. And guess what? George Mason produced a solid conservative, shaped by rigorous debate and education. That's not an exception; it's a testament to the power of public higher education.

Conservatives should not be attacking America's top public universities. We should be engaging with them, improving them and, yes, making them more ideologically inclusive.

Public schools need more leadership, not less support

Virginia's flagship universities are not enemies of the right. They are some of our state's greatest achievements.

University of Virginia, founded by Thomas Jefferson, has long stood for public service and civic education. George Mason University is home to the Antonin Scalia Law School and the Mercatus Center, pillars of conservative and free-market thought.

These institutions are producing the next generation of doctors, teachers, entrepreneurs and public servants.

Yes, many universities lean left. But the answer is not to defund them or discredit them.

The answer is to build them stronger – with conservatives present in the faculty, administration and leadership.

DEI on campus needs change, not to be eliminated

The Trump administration's order to eliminate DEI programs outright is misguided. DEI initiatives shouldn't be the centerpiece of any university's agenda, but they shouldn't be abolished, either.

When done right, diversity programs help ensure broader access to opportunity. That's something conservatives should support.

What's needed is not elimination but change, realigning these programs to include viewpoint diversity, especially ideological diversity. That includes conservatives. It is both possible and necessary to protect free expression and conservative values without dismantling the infrastructure that helps students of all backgrounds succeed.

Just as we ask for racial, geographic and experiential diversity, we should ask: Where are the conservative scholars?

Incentivize civic, ideological diversity in our universities

If conservatives want universities to be more welcoming to our ideas, we need to be in the room.

Rather than just criticize, conservatives should propose solutions, such as a federal 'civic and intellectual diversity grant program.' This initiative would incentivize public universities to recruit and retain faculty and administrators from underrepresented ideological backgrounds, including conservatives.

It could also fund academic centers focused on civic education, public policy and free inquiry.

In addition, universities should be encouraged to bring real-world conservative voices – entrepreneurs, veterans, public servants – into classrooms through fellowships and adjunct appointments. This is not about quotas; it's about balance.

When the government targets public universities, it's not the faculty, who some critics label 'elite,' who suffer. It's the students. Especially veterans, first-generation Americans, working parents and adult learners who rely on these institutions for economic mobility and civic growth. If we want to build a society based on merit, opportunity and upward mobility, public universities are part of the answer – not the problem.

We improve campuses through engagement, not destruction

The conservative path forward is clear, at least to me:

- Defend free speech and academic freedom.
- Promote viewpoint diversity, including conservative representation.
- Support – don't attack – public universities as engines of economic opportunity.
- Change DEI to include conservatives rather than abolish it outright.

Public colleges and universities are not ideological machines. They are engines of research, innovation and workforce development.

At their best, they teach students how to think, not what to think. Conservatives should be among the first to defend that principle.

Rather than tearing down our academic institutions, we should be building them up with more conservative leadership in administration and faculty, and with policies that support true intellectual pluralism.

This is a call for conservatives to lead – not retreat.

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