

For Moral Clarity, Don't Look to Universities

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Zach D Roberts, NurPhoto, Getty Images

White-supremacist marchers encircle counterprotesters at a statue of Thomas Jefferson at the U. of Virginia.

Around 9 p.m. on Friday, I opened my kitchen door to chants and flickering lights. After telling my kids to stay inside, I scrambled over a stone wall and down a brick stairwell to find torch-bearing men and women clad in white polo shirts and khakis, chanting "You will not replace us" and "Anti-Black." They marched in cadence, two by two, as far as I could see.

I watched them walk onto the Lawn, up the steps of the Rotunda, and down the other side, where they assembled around a statue of Thomas Jefferson. Minutes later a group of excited young men ushered someone back up the steps. The white supremacist Richard Spencer, an alumnus, stood confidently atop the steps of this former library, the iconic center of campus. He had just led a neo-Nazi march across the Lawn of the Academical Village of the University of Virginia.

Just last week, my family and I moved to campus — or Grounds, as it is known in Charlottesville — and into Monroe Hill House, where this week I will begin my term as principal of Brown College, one of UVa's residential colleges. White supremacists had marched not just across my yard, but also alongside the dorms where this Saturday I will welcome more than 200 students — and will have to explain to them what happened here.

The Far Right Comes to Campus

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On Saturday my wife, our 11-year-old daughter, and I joined a march to McGuffey Park, just one block from Emancipation Park, where Unite the Right participants were scheduled to rally at noon. As I stood alongside university colleagues and community members and struggled to make sense of what was happening, I received a message from my university president, Teresa A. Sullivan. She wrote that she was "saddened" and "disturbed" by the "hateful behavior" of Friday's protesters. In a second statement, sent later that day, after the Unite the Right rally had spread into sporadic violence across downtown, she said that the "ideologies and beliefs" of Friday's protesters "contradicted our values of diversity, inclusion, and mutual respect." In neither statement did she name the particular ideology — white supremacy — or express the moral outrage so palpable across Charlottesville. She spoke instead of vague values and of disappointment.



The contemporary university, at least in its local form in Charlottesville, seems institutionally incapable of moral clarity. Individual faculty members had spent the days and weeks before Saturday's rally denouncing and organizing against the white supremacists. But as an institution, UVa muddled along through press releases, groping for a voice and a clear statement. By late last night, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Ian Baucom, had written to faculty members to decry "the evil of racism, the evil of violence, the evil of hate." But Sullivan's missives, especially her initial ones, read like press releases from the bowels of a modern bureaucracy, not the thoughts of a human responding to hate.

And that makes a lot of sense. What can the president of a contemporary university say? The University of Virginia is many things — a health center, a federal contractor, a sports franchise, an event venue, and, almost incidentally, a university devoted to education and knowledge. It is most often, as Clark Kerr wrote in 1963, a multiversity, with little common purpose but the perpetuation of itself and its procedures. Why should my colleagues and I look to our chief executive for moral leadership? As a university president, Sullivan is, in the words of Thorstein Veblen, a captain of erudition, not the leader of a community bound to a common moral mission.

Almost a century ago, the German sociologist Max Weber faced similar questions about the moral limitations of the university. He told a group of students gathered in a lecture hall in Munich that they should not turn to the university for ultimate meaning or, as his contemporaries called it, a *Weltanschauung* — a worldview. If they looked to the university for guidance on how to live, they would be disappointed. The values that motivated students and faculty members to commit themselves to a political cause, a religious tradition, or even scholarship itself, came from elsewhere, from outside the university.

Yet even Weber acknowledged that the university is not without its own values and virtues. And whatever Stanley Fish might think, these values are not simply bureaucratic or professional procedures. They are robust epistemic virtues — an openness to debate, a commitment to critical inquiry, attention to detail, a respect for argument — embedded in historical practices particular to the university. They provide those within and outside the university with essential goods.

As the hate on display in Charlottesville made clear, however, these scholarly practices and virtues are also insufficient. The university has moral limitations. Universities cannot impart comprehensive visions of the good. They cannot provide ultimate moral ends. Their goods are proximate. Faculty members, myself included, need to acknowledge that most university leaders lack the language and moral imagination to confront evils such as white

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supremacy. They lack those things not because of who they are, but, as Weber argued, because of what the modern research university has become. Such an acknowledgment is also part of the moral clarity that we can offer to ourselves and to our students. We have goods to offer, but they are not ultimate goods.

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And so universities need to look outside themselves and partner with other moral traditions and civic communities, as my inspiring faculty colleagues here in Charlottesville have done for months in anticipation of this weekend. Universities may not be able to impart comprehensive visions of the good, but they are uniquely positioned to help students engage in open debates and conversations about the values they hold most dear.

Acknowledging the limitations of the academy might help us to reconsider the bromides issued by university press offices in our name — the automatic incantation of "our values" of diversity and inclusion. What kind of goods are these, and why do we defend them?

They are not ends in themselves, but they contribute to the primary purpose of the modern university — to create and care for knowledge and to pass that knowledge on by teaching our students. Diversity is good for learning. The knowledge project of the university is sustained and best served through what the Harvard political theorist Danielle Allen calls "epistemic egalitarianism," the idea that "we can cultivate collective intelligence that is better than what any individual can achieve." Our common pursuit of knowledge is richer and truer when it seeks contributions from the broadest diversity of peoples.

The torch-lit rally on Grounds contradicted this basic commitment by denying not only the human worth but also the epistemic value that all students bring to our classrooms and our scholarship. White supremacy is morally abhorrent and pedagogically and scholarly bankrupt.

When I welcome my students this Saturday, I will discuss white supremacy and the march, but I will use language different than the one my wife and I used with our three children. To them we spoke in the language of our faith tradition — in terms of the image of God, the church, and Christian love. When I speak to my students, I will do so in the language of the university and its traditions — in terms of open debate, critique, and a love of knowledge.

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