The Detroit News

OPINION

DETROITNEWS.COM | AUG. 20, 2026

PUBLISHED COMMENTARY

Universities can help us learn to talk across our differences again

Andy Anuzis | Aug. 20, 2026, 7:52 p.m. ET

We're watching something break in our public life: the basic ability to talk across differences. And our universities are partly to blame.

In the early 1980s, my best friend in college was a democratic socialist. I was a college Republican. We had professors of varying political stripes. We spoke our minds and learned from each other. How do we get back to that, and why does it matter?

As a society, especially in our universities and schools, we need to relearn the ability to solve problems together. When citizens can't talk across differences, communities lose the capacity to govern themselves. A healthy democracy depends on citizens who can listen, argue and disagree without fear. That's not just a campus issue; it's a national strength we're losing.

We want universities that produce critically thinking citizens who have been exposed to a wide and balanced range of ideas and philosophies. As Michigan citizens annually devote $2.84 billion to support our colleges and universities, it is fair to ask how these institutions contribute to the solution or problem. The data is troubling.

Following the 2020 elections, an NBC News report found that second-year students would not choose a roommate who had supported a different presidential candidate. The partisan difference was significant: 62% of Democratic students said they probably or definitely would not room with someone who voted for the other candidate; 28% of Republican students said the same.

Students are reluctant to speak their mind. A Knight Foundation 2024 study on free expression and campus speech found 69% of college students reported self-censoring. The irony: the American university, our institution most capable of advancing open civil discourse, has often produced a climate of intellectual fear rather than intellectual freedom. Surveys indicate conservative students feel the need to self-censor at twice the rate of liberal students.

Higher Education Research Institute data indicates only 10% to 12% of college professors identify as "conservative," and it is widely understood that the imbalance is generally greatest in the humanities and several social-science disciplines. This means it is increasingly rare in subjects like history, political science, philosophy or the arts that students hear opposing views.

Thankfully, some hopeful trends and data have emerged. A Heterodox Academy study revealed that, among college professors, methodological and theoretical diversity was still highly valued, endorsed by 84% of respondents. Importantly, 69% of social science faculty, where political diversity can be especially highly valuable, said that it improves their discipline.

I am running for the Wayne State Board of Governors to support WSU's mission as a first-rate research and educational university, an engine for economic mobility for working and middle-class students and a contributor to Michigan's economy. I am optimistic that, with the support of the WSU board and leadership, Wayne State can also become a national leader in open intellectual inquiry, free speech and viewpoint diversity.

WSU should strengthen its free speech protections by joining more than 100 universities as signatories to the "Chicago Statement," a mission statement for intellectual freedom.

If elected to the board, I would propose the formation of a "WSU Civil Society Institute" to create spaces for intellectual diversity, revitalize humanities and civic learning, and encourage free inquiry and debate.

I would require specific, actionable plans to teach constructive disagreement, promote evidence-based debate, reduce self-censorship and expand structured opportunities for cross-ideological dialogue. WSU's "Bridging Differences" program is a good start. The university should also explore ways to increase intellectual and viewpoint diversity among its faculty and staff.

If we rebuild honest conversation, we rebuild trust - and trust is how communities rise. Universities at their best solve problems. By teaching students to think critically, question freely and listen openly to different ideas, they can restore honest conversation, the foundation for trust in our society.

Andy Anuzis is a Republican candidate for the WSU Board of Governors.