

A Student's Perspective on Principled Neutrality

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INTRODUCTION

We live in an era defined by rapidly evolving societal landscapes and heightened political polarization, and the role of the university as a member of society has come under intense scrutiny. Universities themselves are struggling to understand how they fit into the wider picture. More specifically, debates regarding whether or not universities should take a stand on current politics have become increasingly common in recent years. These debates reached new heights in October of 2023, when Hamas launched an attack on Israel, prompting new waves of often opposing pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian sentiments that landed right on universities' doorsteps. In light of such increased polarization, Vanderbilt University's 9th Chancellor, Daniel Diermeier, further reaffirmed his commitment to the concept of principled neutrality within academic institutions as the gold standard. Principled (or institutional) neutrality is the general theory that university leadership, and the institution itself, should refrain from commenting on political matters unless they directly relate to the core functioning of the university. However, this idea has sparked robust debate and scrutiny from various community members – students, faculty, donors, and alumni alike – who

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question its practicality, ethical implications, and alignment with the evolving roles of universities in society. However, despite its shortcomings, the overarching application of principled neutrality is ultimately best for Vanderbilt, as it ensures students' academic and personal freedoms while simultaneously protecting the university.

WHAT IS PRINCIPLED NEUTRALITY?

To reiterate, principled neutrality is the overarching concept that universities should refrain from commenting on political and social matters that do not directly affect the functioning of the institution. This policy is now the basis for how Vanderbilt issues statements on current events. Simply put, for the most part, the institution will not take a side. Its goal is to protect students' freedom of expression, and ensure that students feel comfortable to express all points of view. This practice is nothing new for Vanderbilt, and can be traced back to the 1960s when then chancellor Alexander Heard invited diverse and controversial speakers like Stokely Carmichael and Strom Thurmond to campus. Heard believed that "A university's obligation is not to protect students from ideas, but rather to expose them to ideas, and to help make them capable of handling, and, hopefully, having ideas" (qtd. in Diermeier).

The practice finds its roots from the University of Chicago, where Diermeier was formerly Provost, in their 1967 "Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action," commonly known as the Kalven report. The report was written amidst intense political turmoil in the nation, against a backdrop of simmering racial tensions, riots, protests, and the increasing death toll of the Vietnam War. The report, written by a faculty committee, declared that the university should largely remain neutral on political and social issues "not from a lack of

courage nor out of indifference and insensitivity ... [but] out of respect for free inquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints” (Kalven Committee).

HOW DO CRITICS RESPOND?

Principled neutrality has not been universally embraced. Far from it. Students, faculty, alumni, and donors have all expressed dissatisfaction with the guidelines. Many believe that the policy of “neutrality” is simply a way for university administrators to retreat to their ivory tower, evading engagement with broader public discourse. This effectively enforces the status quo – and oftentimes benefits those who have held positions of power for most of American history. Critics claim that this principle is not practical today and does not align with the claimed values of universities. Instead, they believe leaders should be actively engaging with the issues around them. Some university administrators join them. Brian Rosenberg, a visiting professor in the Harvard Graduate School of Education and president emeritus of Macalester College, believes that “This notion that colleges can exist behind ivy-covered walls and not have to worry about or directly engage with political and social issues around them has never been right . . . You cannot escape politics” (Lu).

In an opinion piece published to *Inside Higher Education* a year after Diermeier’s statement, Vanderbilt Associate Professor of the Practice of International Education Policy Brian L. Heuser seems to agree. He believes that colleges must be political actors, as such was the original role of the first University in the 11th century. This deeply applies to Vanderbilt, as its home state of Tennessee passed unprecedented legislation on reproductive and transgender

rights, gun laws, and restricted academic freedom. Much to the discontentment of many community members, Vanderbilt has not taken a stance. Critics like Heuser claim that these are the issues directly affecting the Vanderbilt community, and as such, the university has a duty to speak up. He believes the political changes have negatively affected students and put them at risk (Heuser).

THE CASE FOR SUPPORT

Despite these well-intentioned criticisms, I remain convinced that principled neutrality is ultimately the best position for Vanderbilt to maintain. These are four reasons why.

First, the university is here not to form political opinions but rather encourage its students to do so. Places of education should provide the spaces students need to learn, grow, and enter into dialogue without fear of backlash as a result of their statements. They should not reprimand students for taking a stance, but support it. Universities need to give students the tools needed to make positive changes in their community. Moreover, they must safeguard the academic freedoms of students and faculty and provide the resources necessary to accomplish this. Research also shows that students of color believe their speech is less protected, and students as a whole believe their speech rights are less secure now than in years past (“College Student Views”). Colleges must support their students’ pursuit of new ideas and free speech. They must give students the tools they need to form their own opinions without forcing any upon them. Principled neutrality helps empower students in such open forums while simultaneously encouraging civil discourse.

Second, the moment a university takes a stance on a controversial issue, they are instantly alienating a large percentage of their students. If the university adopts a certain view, many students may shy away from sharing their opinions or even become more opinionated against the university – both of which are poor outcomes. This rationale was echoed in part by the Kalven report, where the committee observed, “There is no mechanism by which [the university] can reach a collective position without inhibiting that full freedom of dissent on which it thrives . . . if it takes collective action, therefore, it does so at the price of censoring any minority who do not agree with the view adopted” (Kalven Committee). When university leadership gives an opinion on a certain issue, it becomes a de facto official opinion. Students may feel as if the university is declaring which side is “correct,” risking stopping debate cold or exacerbating already existing divides. The university should serve as a forum for students to debate and discuss ideas – it should not be expressing them itself. Students must feel empowered to share their opinions in a civil manner, especially when these opinions differ from other students. Neutrality on the part of the institution encourages these debates and supports all students equally.

Third, political and social situations are often incredibly divisive and stand risk of tearing the student body apart. If the university takes a stance on a particularly divisive issue, it only stands to enrage and inflame the community. While political rage against injustice is often beneficial, as protest is the cornerstone of a healthy democracy, becoming upset as a result of the university’s position shifts away from the matter at hand to the institution’s response – completely taking away from the original focus of the problem.

This was demonstrated in parallel in May of 2021, when the Vanderbilt Student Government (VSG) posted a pro-Palestinian anti-Israeli government statement on their Instagram. The caption of the now deleted post read, “The Israeli government must be held accountable for the violent and inhumane treatment towards victims of these militarized attacks. We also continue to wholeheartedly advocate for and support the Palestinian community against oppression and capitalism and stand in solidarity with those directly and indirectly affected. There is no place for antisemitism or anti-Jewish sentiment of any kind on Vanderbilt’s campus or beyond when advocating for this liberation.” This statement became incredibly inflammatory, and enraged countless community members who called for its immediate removal and an apology from VSG. Jewish student associations Hillel and Chabad condemned the statement, and thousands signed a petition against it. The campus was torn apart as students began to take sides. Even though not institutional, VSG is supposed to be an umbrella representation of the student body, and many students see it in a similar light as the administration in issues like this. Following these events, the conversation shifted away from the issues of Israel and Palestine and instead towards the role of VSG and its authority in issuing a statement like that (Mauger and Perrotta). The conversation of the original matter was stopped, and, instead, students debated about Vanderbilt specific affairs. Students protested the statement, not the issue. Therein lies the problem. Principled neutrality prevents this and keeps the focus on the original matter at hand.

Fourth, when a University makes one statement regarding a political issue, it is expected to make more. This does not seem like an issue when the first problem may be

political, but the answer seems obvious. The issue arises when the second problem is divisive. Harvard University faced this very issue, in October of 2023. The university experienced backlash when 30 student organizations jointly released a statement pinning blame on Israel for “all of the unfolding violence,” and the university did not immediately put out a statement. Shortly after, former U.S. Treasury secretary and former Harvard president Lawrence Summers publicly admonished the university for its silence, noting that Harvard had issued statements in support of Ukraine after its invasion by Russia and the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police (Hartocollis et al.). While the previous political issues may have seemed more black and white at the time, simply by responding the university opened the expectations for more responses in the future. As a result, such silence became a statement as well. It is important to note that the University of Chicago stayed silent during the aforementioned matters as well, closing the door for any alumni or donor to make claims regarding the university’s silence. Principled neutrality not only protects students, but the school as well.

ACKNOWLEDGING NUANCE

While principled neutrality makes sense on the whole, there is no perfect solution. We live in a tumultuous world, and there are issues too complex to be settled by pure neutrality. Oftentimes, these issues fall into the category of those that are hard to determine if they directly affect the university or not. This issue was brought up by Professor Hueser and serves as the strongest argument against principled neutrality. In Vanderbilt’s case specifically, the university sits on a small blue island in a vast red sea. Nashville and the student body generally lean more liberal, while the majority of the state is

conservative. As a result, many students disagree with the politics of the Tennessee legislature, specifically on the topics of reproductive rights, gender identity, and gun laws. These are all issues that affect students, and possibly their safety, but that the university does not directly remark on because of its neutrality. Pure neutrality in cases like this often upset much of the student body, and the line between what “directly affects” the university becomes incredibly blurred. However, these issues are only a few cherry-picked from the larger political landscape.

This builds off of the policy being inherently vague and open to interpretation. Students often claim that the university must remark on policies that go against its values as well. As an example, Princeton University adopted a policy of “institutional restraint” instead, as absolute neutrality did not align with their values. This more flexible policy allowed them to divest from fossil fuels in 2022 following years of student protests (“Princeton Dissociates”). However, when interviewed by *The Vanderbilt Hustler* on divestment, Diermeier stuck firmly with principled neutrality, stating, “We’re going to adopt a stance of principled neutrality on that, so students and faculty can debate the whole issue on whether providing capital to oil and gas companies is a good idea, or whether it would be better to own shares in oil and gas companies and then use shareholder activism for them to change that behavior” (O’Reilly). Situations like this underline where the interpretation may differ between students, and how it becomes unclear what directly affects a university or not.

CONCLUSION

At the end, university involvement is a tricky subject, and there is no precise and specific blanket policy that will heal all.

Principled neutrality works well the same way the United States Constitution has survived for more than 250 years. Both are intentionally vague and open to interpretation to adjust to the situation at hand, ultimately allowing actors to take actions they best deem necessary. Principled neutrality is practiced restraint in the service of the students. By refraining from an official stance on most issues, universities provide the platform needed for students to go forward and form their own opinions. Despite its shortcomings, it is still the best solution there is. The university's ultimate goal is to enshrine freedom of expression while simultaneously protecting student speech and safety, and principled neutrality is how we accomplish this.

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