

Remarks by Steven Pinker, Johnstone Family professor of psychology

I was opposed to the recommendations of USGSO report, and support the motion by Professor Lewis to rule out such draconian measures in the future. I believe they run afoul of the principles on which liberal education are based.

First, a human institution is not an omnipotent embodiment and enforcer of morality but must be grounded in a social contract with circumscribed responsibilities. A university contracts with its students to provide them with an education. It does not require them to submit to control over their lives, 24/7. Legal activities that students do on their own time and off university premises are none of the university's business.

Second, a university is not a religion with a mandatory creed. One of the essential values in higher education is that people can differ in their values, and that these differences can be constructively discussed. Harvard has a right to value mixed-sex venues everywhere, all the time. If some of its students find value in private, single-sex associations, some of the time, a university administration is free to argue against, discourage, or even ridicule those choices. But it is not a part of the mandate of a university to impose these values on its students over their objections.

Third, universities ought to be places where issues are analyzed, distinctions are made, evidence is evaluated, and policies crafted to attain clearly stated goals. Policies that restrict students' freedoms should not be symbolic statements of values; they should be means to justifiable ends. But punishing

students for belonging to private organizations is a sledgehammer. It doesn't distinguish between single-sex and other private clubs. It doesn't target illegal or objectionable behavior such as drunkenness or public disturbances. Nor by any stretch of the imagination could it be seen as an effective, rationally justified, evidence-based policy for reducing sexual assault. As my colleague Jason Mitchell argued in his minority report, there are plenty of proven ways of altering behavior between the extremes of moral suasion and authoritarian prohibition.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the policy of banning students from private organizations is widely seen outside Harvard as exemplifying some of the worst tendencies of elite universities. It can only contribute to the impression that universities are not dispassionate forums for clarifying values or analyzing problems but institutions determined to impose their ideology on a diverse population by brute force. In an era in which the credibility of reason-based institutions is vital yet endangered, this can have pernicious effects.

Let me be concrete. Those of us who engage in argument with intelligent people on the opposite end of the political spectrum often encounter the objection that the near-consensus among academic scientists (on climate change, for example), cannot be trusted. Everybody knows, they say, that university research is distorted by the political agenda of elites trying to exert control over individual choices. "No, no," we insist; "Universities aren't like that; we open-mindedly identify problems and try to come up with solutions."

A policy that is widely seen by the outside world as repressive virtue-signaling makes our job that much harder.