

**THE FORD FOUNDATION**  
320 East 43<sup>rd</sup> Street  
New York, New York 10017

**Difficult Dialogues:  
Promoting Pluralism and Academic Freedom on Campus**

**A Letter from Higher Education Leaders and Susan V. Berresford  
to College and University Presidents**

March 31, 2005

Dear President:

We are deeply troubled by reports of growing religious intolerance and of increasing restrictions on academic freedom on college and university campuses. In the wake of 9/11 and the continuing conflicts in the Middle East, the tone of academic debate has become increasingly polarized, and, in some cases, we see attempts to silence individuals, faculty and students alike, with controversial views. We believe that these problems are symptoms of the nation's larger and more complex challenge of sustaining informed political and civil discourse. In times like these, we need to be especially vigilant in maintaining and nurturing a free and open campus environment. Unrestrained academic scholarship and the expression of a wide diversity of viewpoints are the hallmarks of the American university system and must be vigorously defended. Through this letter and the attached Request for Proposals, we invite you to consider promising approaches for fostering a free and open campus community.

Colleges and universities bear a special responsibility to protect and respect academic freedom, not only in shaping their own policies, but also in supporting faculty members and students whose freedoms are threatened. Our institutions should be very clear about the role of academic freedom as a guarantor of free inquiry. University professors enjoy, both as teachers and as citizens, substantial latitude in what they say and what they write—free from institutional constraints or sanctions—save in rare situations. If, however, professors seek to exploit students, coerce the views of students, or display a demonstrable lack of competence in their discipline, their academic colleagues may conclude that their expression exceeds the

limits of academic freedom. That is, academic freedom must always be accompanied by academic responsibility. Defending academic freedom also entails sensitivity to those rare cases where it is abused. Indeed, a central mission of academic freedom is to afford students the broadest range of learning opportunities as they prepare to understand and engage in an increasingly heterogeneous and global community.

Today there are new and genuine threats to academic freedom that have contributed to a deterioration of constructive dialogue on campuses. The recent rise in anti-Semitic incidents throughout the world has reverberated on American college and university campuses. There is also a troubling increase in anti-Muslim and anti-Arab incidents. On some campuses, a climate of intolerance has been exacerbated by attempts to target individual scholars with calls for their censure or removal. These problems are heightened by the use of the Internet to misrepresent and exaggerate controversial discourse. In the academy, the best way to deal with controversy and difficult dialogues is to engage with those with whom one disagrees, not to isolate them.

Open and honest dialogue is one of the defining characteristics of a vibrant academic community. Furthermore, it is an essential component of a strong civil society on which democracy depends. We must strive to ensure that all members of the community are treated as full and equal partners in the intellectual and institutional life of colleges and universities, especially those who may hold minority political views or religious beliefs. Campus leaders also must create an atmosphere of mutual respect, in which diversity is examined and seen in the context of a broader set of common values. We need to ensure that our discourse not only remains open but civil.

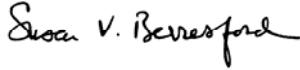
Many colleges and universities face a new, and quite remarkable, level of diversity among their student bodies. Since changing its immigration laws in 1965, the United States has experienced exponential growth in the diversity of faiths practiced by its citizens. Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, and many others have joined, in increasing numbers, the ranks of citizens, along with Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Colleges and universities are on the front line in weaving together this unprecedented diversity of faiths, races/ethnicities, and cultures into a new American social fabric. Precisely because so many of our students belong to organizations with resources provided by outside advocates, it is critical that we develop consistent policies to confront choices that may not have been made at the institutional level. Diversity is simply a fact of our local and global world, but pluralism requires engaging that diversity with study, debate, and dialogue; and this constitutes a new intellectual challenge for colleges and universities.

Promoting new scholarship and teaching about cultural differences and religious pluralism, while supporting academic freedom, requires a significant commitment at every level of the academic community. As leaders, we need to protect faculty, academic centers, and institutes from inappropriate pressures, from on and off campus, to limit the free exchange of ideas. We must ensure that faculty members have institutional support and encouragement to pursue scholarly and pedagogical approaches that address the new reality of the United States. It is no longer adequate for student affairs staff to bear, largely alone, the responsibility for sponsoring and overseeing difficult dialogues. We must develop rigorous academic programs to engage students in constructive dialogue around difficult religious,

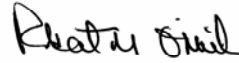
political, racial/ethnic, and cultural issues. Students need this training to take their places as successful leaders in civic life and to participate as members of our democracy.

There is a great need for innovative strategies to promote faculty, staff, and student involvement around these matters. The Ford Foundation invites your proposals to address the profoundly important challenges presented in the attached Request for Proposals.

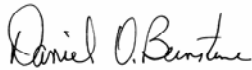
Sincerely,



Susan V. Berresford, *President*  
Ford Foundation




Robert M. O'Neil, *Former President*  
University of Virginia, University of Wisconsin System



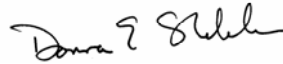
Daniel O. Bernstine, *President*  
Portland State University



Irvin D. Reid, *President*  
Wayne State University



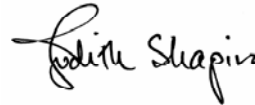
Robert J. Birgeneau, *Chancellor*  
University of California, Berkeley



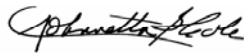
Donna E. Shalala, *President*  
University of Miami



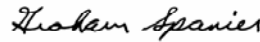
Derek Bok, *President Emeritus*  
Harvard University



Judith Shapiro, *President*  
Barnard College



Johnnetta B. Cole, *President*  
Bennett College for Women



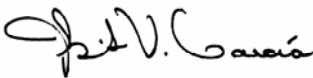
Graham Spanier, *President*  
The Pennsylvania State University



Augustine P. Gallego, *Chancellor Emeritus*  
San Diego Community College District



Shirley M. Tilghman, *President*  
Princeton University



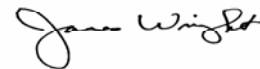
Juliet V. García, *President*  
The University of Texas at Brownsville  
and Texas Southmost College



David Ward, *President*  
American Council on Education



Ronald Mason, Jr., *President*  
Jackson State University



James Wright, *President*  
Dartmouth College