

September 9, 2025

Report on meetings conducted by the Tufts AAUP Steering Committee in relation to the new Center for Expanding Viewpoints in Higher Education

This summer, members of the Tufts chapter of the AAUP raised questions and voiced concerns following the announcement of a new Center for Expanding Viewpoints in Higher Education to be housed in the President's Office, as described in a [2-page document](#).

The AAUP steering committee solicited questions and concerns from chapter members and used these to guide a conversation with Professor Eitan Hersh on August 14, 2025 and with President Sunil Kumar on August 26, 2025. The following report is a summary of our conversations with each, which necessarily includes judgments about which questions were answered, which concerns were assuaged, and which remain.

Meeting with Professor Eitan Hersh

We shared with Prof. Hersh a number of concerns raised by our membership: that the Center's name seems directly tied to coercive efforts to make universities more conservative, that a [2-pager](#) echoes rightwing talking points about Universities as hotbeds of radicalism, that it offers a contradictory description of itself as avowedly conservative yet also "non-ideological," and that its description of Universities as fundamentally left-leaning ignores the wide range of student opinions we encounter in our classrooms, the arguably more conservative bent of University leaders, trustees, and donors, and the complex question of if or how different departments—as diverse as, say, Economics, English, or Engineering—could be said to be uniformly left-leaning. We also shared procedural concerns about how the Center would be funded and what return the donors would expect on their investment, the purview of the Center and its power to bypass faculty governance by affecting admissions and hiring, and whether a Center directed by one faculty member, and focused specifically on cultivating conservative viewpoints, could be properly said to be committed to "expanding viewpoints."

We are grateful that Prof. Hersh engaged with us in a sustained conversation on these questions. He noted that many Centers are founded without broad faculty input, and faculty can choose to engage or not. Regarding the [2-pager](#), he initially expressed that it reflected his inexperience in fundraising, and that he would not have used such language in outreach to the faculty. However, later in our discussion, he defended the document and said that he stands behind every claim it included. He affirmed that the diversity or expansion of viewpoints that the Center would be seeking to undertake would prioritize giving space to conservative, religious worldviews that he argued have not been supported at Tufts. Prof. Hersh did not view the aims of the Center to do work in areas far beyond his own expertise to be threatening to faculty whose careers have been built in those fields.

We are heartened by Prof. Hersh's assurances that he sees participation as fully voluntary, not intentionally echoing fully the worst forms of “viewpoint diversity” projects that have emerged elsewhere. But our committee was not entirely persuaded that one can reasonably invoke this language at this moment without knowing its referents, and were concerned about the differing descriptions of the Center that emphasize its power to “remake” the university. Given AAUP's commitments to faculty governance and academic freedom, we hope to continue engaging university leaders to ensure that the Center does not become a mechanism for stifling, rather than cultivating, teaching and research.

Meeting with President Kumar

In our meeting with President Kumar we also discussed many of our key concerns, which were received thoughtfully. President Kumar began by addressing questions of the institutional location of the Center within his office, and the funding of the Center. His explanation for the Center being anomalously located in the President’s office (a designation that no other center seems to have) is due to his commitment to exercise oversight of the Center’s activities, and is due to the fact that it is a university-wide center, not simply located in A&S. He disclosed that the Center has received funding of \$5 million from eight donors “from across the political spectrum.”

In regard to the broader concerns that faculty have raised about the national project of “viewpoint diversity” President Kumar replied that the goal of the Center is to broaden students’ viewpoints. It is not intended to be code. However, he did not clearly distinguish the Center from the broader national movement, and was not entirely clear about the scope of action of the Center and what if any mechanisms of oversight would be in place, other than an advisory board (with unclear powers) and the president’s own oversight role. President Kumar did state, “I will not allow the Center to be coercive,” and suggested the Center would only work on an opt-in basis. He promised that the Center would not have appointive powers over faculty hiring nor an ability to pressure faculty or departments into changing curricula.

However the steering committee felt that his assurances still left open the possibility of the Center acting in ways that were intrusive upon faculty who are experts in the fields that the Center claims to be working in. When asked why the Center’s structure is organized around one individual who by training does not have any expertise either in pedagogy or in the key fields that the Center has already identified as areas of interest, President Kumar suggested that it would be the role of the advisory board to “to push [Prof. Hersh] in the direction of getting the needed expertise.” He ended by saying that “the broader university community can hold [the Center] accountable. Curricula [developed by the Center] will be open and subject to peer review, which is the academic gold standard for success.”

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Below we summarize main five areas of concern that remain unresolved or unclear after our meetings:

1. **Center name and description.** The Center’s name and description seem directly tied to coercive efforts to make universities [more conservative](#). The center offers a contradictory description of itself as avowedly conservative yet also “non-ideological”. The [2-pager echoes right-wing talking points about universities as hotbeds of radicalism](#).

Both Professor Hersh and President Kumar rejected drawing links to the broader right-wing movement and associated centers and think tanks. Both acknowledged that the Center is primarily focused on giving space to conservative viewpoints. President Kumar linked the Center to the [university's commitment to pluralism](#). However, it remains somewhat unclear to what extent the Center is ultimately beholden to pursuing the agenda of the right-wing viewpoint diversity movement, which in its various forms has consistently served to undermine faculty autonomy and governance. Professor Hersh both expressly affirmed the 2-pager as an accurate reflection of the Center's aims, while also stating that he would not have presented it to faculty in the manner it appears in that document.

- 2. Argument and evidence of the need for the Center.** There is disagreement about the characterization of Universities as fundamentally left-leaning. This characterization ignores the wide range of student opinions we encounter in our classrooms, the largely conservative bent of University leaders, trustees, and donors, and the complex question of if or how different departments—as diverse as, say, Economics, English, or Engineering—could be said to be uniformly left leaning.

Professor Hersh stated that evidence for the need for the Center came primarily from surveys of Tufts students and from polling on voter registrations of faculty (that show that faculty are much more likely to be registered as Democrats than Republicans). These in and of themselves do not constitute evidence of the purported ideological homogeneity of Tufts courses, nor of the failure of faculty to teach topics within their expertise in a manner that is open and inclusive of various viewpoints.

- 3. Center funding and susceptibility to external influence.** Questions about how the Center would be funded and what return the donors would expect on their investment.

President Kumar shared that the Center has received \$5 million dollars in funding from 8 donors. He also stated that the Center would not be open to receiving additional donations from external donors. However the identities of the funders is not presently clear, and it is unclear what the expectations may be of funders who were recruited on the basis of claims made in the 2-pager.

- 4. Scope and power of the Center.** Open concerns remain about the purview of the Center and its power to bypass faculty governance by affecting faculty hiring and undergraduate admissions as well as the ability of the Center to intimidate or coerce faculty teaching particular courses or departments into changing syllabi or programming.

Prof. Hersh clarified that the Center would invite faculty and departments to participate via an “opt-in” model. The Center will not have a direct influence over admissions but will invite students to apply as “fellows” after admission. However, the “Curriculum” project may, depending on how it is implemented, serve to discomfit and even intimidate faculty who are active in the areas the Center has identified.

President Kumar also used the phrase “opt-in” and stated, “I will not allow the Center to be coercive.” He further clarified that the Center will not have appointive powers over faculty nor will it influence undergraduate admissions.

However, President Kumar did describe his perception of alignment between the Center’s activity and presence on campus with an effort to recruit a broader population of students to Tufts which he linked to a predicted “demographic cliff” that some believe will impact university enrollments in the coming years.

5. **Center leadership and expertise.** The Center leadership including director Eitan Hersh and the advisory board do not appear to have a broad range of scholarly expertise which seems necessary to create curricula and cultivate conversations that span viewpoint diversity.

President Kumar stated that the role of the advisory board is not to have this expertise but rather to seek out relevant expertise to support center activities. But so far, there is no evidence of the Center leadership or the advisory board having meaningfully engaged with faculty in the areas that have been identified for the curriculum project. Indeed, even the choice of the two areas seems to have been the sole discretion of the Center’s director, and there is no evidence of prior engagement with faculty whose expertise lies in those areas. There are some indications that the Center’s director is relying on student interns to share information about classes they have taken (or will take), although the scope of this remains very unclear.

Conclusion:

Tufts AAUP Steering Committee views favorably the positive engagement offered by both Professor Hersh and President Kumar, as it has sought to address faculty and membership concerns that were communicated to it via an online survey (n=21). We hope to continue our engagement with both the leadership of the Center, and with the president’s office on these issues. Subsequent to our discussions with both, the Center has been formally launched and introduced to the campus as an integral part of the university’s commitment to pluralism.

We retain deep concerns about certain activities that the Center has identified as part of its mission, and which appear to be among its central aims at this time. First among these is the aim of influencing teaching at Tufts, through “creating model curricula” in areas that appear to be chosen only by virtue of being part of current culture-war political controversies at the center of US politics today. Any project that seeks to proactively “remake” the curriculum may adopt coercive methods and risks limiting academic freedom and faculty autonomy in the classroom. We await further disclosure of how this initiative will be pursued.

Similarly, we view with great concern the stated aim of bringing about “department-level change,” including through “faculty training” and “adjunct faculty lines.” While we have not been able to ascertain how exactly the Center will seek to pursue this aim, the ideas presented so far also run the risk of contravening norms in faculty governance and if not thoughtfully approached may well produce conflicts and divisions within departments.

Tufts AAUP Steering Committee would like to affirm that it would welcome a new center at Tufts that sought to afford opportunities on campus for engagement with conservative ideas and thinkers. Sponsoring events, inviting speakers, funding fellows, and similar activities are all very much in line with the kinds of projects that enhance our university culture and may build bridges and/or offer



underrepresented viewpoints, and should be supported. The Tufts AAUP Steering Committee also affirms its commitment to continuing to represent the interests of the members of Tufts AAUP, and to remain engaged with university administration in meaningful discussions as the Center begins its operations, and to raising concerns about any aspects of its activities that may erode academic freedom, or the norms of faculty governance and autonomy at Tufts.

- Prepared collectively by the Tufts AAUP Steering Committee