

ACTA
Higher Ed Now
Campus Illiberalism with Professor George

You are listening to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on issues and higher education. I'm your host, Christine Ravold. Thank you for tuning in.

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Today we're talking about Academic Freedom, Campus Illiberalism, or intolerance, and our guest today is uniquely suited to discuss viewpoint diversity. Professor Robert George is a McCormick Professor at Jurisprudence at Princeton University and Chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. He had a Presidential Appointment to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, was a Judicial Fellow at the U.S. Supreme Court, and was the very first recipient of ACTA's Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education.

Professor George, thank you so much for being here today. Welcome to High Ed Now.

Professor George: Oh, thank you, Christine. It's a pleasure to be here.

Christine: Professor George, your commitment to intellectual diversity and academic freedom is one of the reasons we awarded you the Merrill Prize, but a lot has changed since 2005.

Professor George: Yes. and it has not been changed for the good. I was very honored to receive the Merrill Prize and I'm just delighted to be associated as a prize winner with ACTA because of the important work ACTA does for academic values, for the values of sincere, objective, dispassionate, honest truth-seeking. And those values are in jeopardy today. So much of the Academy now is occupied with ideology. Propaganda is replacing scholarship. Indoctrination is replacing teaching. And it seems to be only getting worse rather than better. But we have to fight against it with all our might. We need flourishing institutions of

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higher learning in this society. It's crucial to have them. We need to restore liberal arts learning ideals, and that's why I'm so pleased that ACTA exists and is doing such heroic work to fight for those ideals.

Christine: Well, and we're happy to have friends like you taking our work out into the field, as it were. So you founded the James Madison Program in 2000. Can you tell me what was behind founding the program? It's one of our oasis of excellence, one of fifty-nine programs that we designate as being an enriching environment for academic freedom intellectual diversity.

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Professor George: Yes. The James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions is devoted to building on Princeton's longstanding tradition of excellence in constitutional law and political thought. Princeton does not have a law school. It had one very briefly just after the Civil War, just for a few years. It granted a few LLB degrees and then folded up. But despite historically not having a law school except for that brief moment, it has a distinguished record in teaching and scholarship in the area of constitutional law and in the related area of political philosophy. The Madison Program responds to what we all know about but which was formally reported by the Carnegie Endowment, which has that there has been something approaching a collapse of the quality of civic education in American colleges and universities. It's not just that so many students come into college and then leave college without knowing basic facts about American history or basic facts about the American constitution. There's a failure of understanding that goes even deeper than mere factual ignorance. And so our goal, in the Madison Program, is to restore that understanding for our students to not only inform them of how the great experiment in ordered liberty that we call American Constitutionalism came into being as an historical matter, but to help students to understand it, and we hope appreciate, but we don't want to propagandize, at a minimum, understand how the American Constitutional

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order works, how it preserves liberty, how it prevents tyranny. We want the education we provide not only to be intrinsically enriching for our students, but also to enable them to be good citizens.

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Christine: That is kind of obvious at Princeton, if you take a look at what has been happening over the fall protests this year. They made lots of headlines across lots of very important campuses: University of Missouri, Yale, Brown, Amherst, Dartmouth and your own school at Princeton. Lots of, what looks like, civic engagement from protests and people wanting to improve their college campus, but it actually is more of a breakdown in civic engagement on a more fundamental level.

Professor George: In many ways, it was the opposite of civic engagement because, in many cases, efforts were made to shut down speech that dissents from the left liberal orthodoxy that prevails on most of our campuses. Engagement means speaking your mind and listening to people on the other side and truly trying to understand each other. Someone once said that disagreement is a hard thing to reach and that's true because so often we have to clear away the misunderstandings before we can actually find the point of disagreement, which may be very deep. It may be very basic. But we need to make sure that we're not working with mere caricatures of the other guy's view. But so often the efforts on campuses that we have seen were efforts to prevent people who disagreed with the protestors from speaking their minds, or to impose forms of orthodoxy on students and faculty in an institution, to stigmatize, to marginalize, to shame people into going silent or acquiescing in views that, on a fair, dispassionate consideration, they might very well reject as being wrong-headed.

Christine: Such as removing Woodrow Wilson's name from the campus.

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Professor George: Mm-hmm. Sure.

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Christine: But the Board of Trustees at Princeton did instead decide to keep Woodrow Wilson's name and to, instead, have a more engaged dialogue on what his legacy was: good, bad or otherwise.

Professor George: Yeah. I said to my colleagues at Princeton that there's probably no one on the Princeton Campus, including the student protestors who were demanding the removal of Wilson's name, that disagreed more profoundly with Woodrow Wilson than I did because not only do I reject Wilson's racism of which was the object of course of their concern, I reject his support for eugenics. I reject his belief in an expansive administrative state. I certainly oppose what he did to the centers during the First World War and in the aftermath of the First World War, his profound disrespect for civil liberties. So I'm no fan of Wilson. On the other hand, Wilson did build Princeton University into a University, into a serious University looking to what Europe, and especially to Germany, for model institutions.

Christine: He held your chair too, didn't he?

Professor George: Well, we can't hold that against him now, can we? Yes. I hold his chair. I hold the Chair of the McCormick Professorship in Jurisprudence of which Wilson was the first incumbent and then he was followed by some very distinguished people in constitutional law [*"You just improved it."*] such as Alpheus T. Mason and, before him, Edward S. Corwin. And then after Mason, Walter Francis Murphy, my immediate predecessor. That's that tradition of excellence in constitutional law and political thought that I was talking about, or that's part of it. It's broader than that, of course. But my complaint was not that we're airing the dark side of Wilson and his legacy. I'm for that. I'm for truth-

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telling one-hundred-percent, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But the idea that we would remove Wilson's name, that we would fall into the trap that sometimes is called "presentism," that we would refuse to recognize that whatever his delinquencies and deficiencies, which were great, greater from my point of view than even from the student protestors point of view, he did make a profound contribution to the University turning it into a real university as opposed to just a college, a major research institution, an institution devoted to graduate education and not simply undergraduate education. And, of course, he achieved the highest office in the land as President of the United States and not everything that he did, even from my point of view, was bad. He's the son of the University who made a big contribution, whatever his sins and failings. And what I was most concerned about was not Wilson. It was the efforts to impose orthodoxies. It was the effort to create a kind of left liberal governing ideology that would then control the decision making of the university. Everything would have to be done in light of that ideology and worse yet, the effort to stigmatize, to marginalize, to demonize anybody who dissented from the tenants of that left liberal orthodoxy. There were calls, for example, for mandatory cultural sensitivity courses for the faculty. Well, we all knows what that turns into. That just becomes indoctrination. There were calls for mandatory distribution requirements of courses—I forgot what the exact language was—but for marginalized people or oppressed people or something like that. And, once again, you know what happens when those kinds of requirements are imposed. They become excuses, pretexts, for indoctrination for propaganda icing, for trying to shape what students think. I have strong views: political views, moral views, religious views, and I'm open about them. I have a bit of a public profile in expressing my views. But I understand my role as a teacher is not to tell students what to think.

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Christine: But how to think.

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Professor George: Exactly. It's to teach them how to think more deeply, more critically, more carefully and, above all, for themselves. Where they end up is up to them. But what my job is is to teach them to be thoughtful in the process of getting there.

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Christine: That brings me to two questions. Have you ever, with your controversial opinions, had a student request a trigger warning or need a safe space in your class?

Professor George: Christine, they know better [*laughter*] because I am so public in my politically incorrect views across a wide range of issues. I suppose students who are simply intolerant of views that oppose their own, don't take my classes. And yet, my classes are filled not only with conservative students, though I'm glad to have them, but also with liberal students and students further to the left. [*"The other ones are missing out."*] Yeah. I mean, I think we all need to have our views challenged. I mean, as a conservative, I have the very great advantage of having my views challenged all the time by students, by faculty, colleagues. My views are challenged all the time and so I have to sharpen them up. And sometimes I have to change my mind in light of the evidence that has been presented or the arguments that have been given. But so often, people on the left, whether the students are faculty in the contemporary academy, don't have that blessing. Their views are not challenged so they lazily hold them. Not in every case. I'm not painting with too broad of brush here. They're plenty of thoughtful people on the left. But they would be benefitted, even those who do their best to think critically, carefully, would be benefitted by being challenged. I'm certainly benefitted by being challenged.

Christine: Your joint lecture is with Professor Cornell West, a great example of that truth-telling bond that you guys have together.

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Professor George: There is nothing I have done in thirty-one years of teaching at Princeton that has been more fulfilling and enlightening than teaching seminars with Professor West. There's some magic that happens when you get a guy on the conservative side and a guy to the left together with eighteen students.

Unfortunately, we have to turn away many times that number in order to keep it a seminar and to keep that magic. But there is something magical that happens when you get people who disagree, professors who disagree, into a room with a group of students and with some valuable common readings. I mean, we go to the best. We read Socrates. We read Plato. We read St. Augustine and we read modern writers like Mill and Newman, Dewey and C.S. Lewis, Strauss and Martin Luther King. We have Strauss and Martin Luther King. We read a range of really deep thinkers who have given us some of the intellectual treasures of western civilization [*"It's great works."*] and then we explore them. And we explore them with our students and students are hearing different points of view and we're challenging each other and we're challenging them, and often we're playing devils advocate, exploring arguments that we, ourselves, may not accept or agree with but we want to see how far the argument can be defended. It truly is magical. And I commend Professor West so much for his willingness to do this teaching together and for his wonderful spirit in the classroom. People who see him on TV at occupied rallies and things like that don't get to see what he's like in the classroom, the way he works with students, gives himself to students, engages in an entirely civil manner, a thoughtful deep manner with someone like me who disagrees with him. Boy, the Academy would be so much better off if we had more people like him in it.

Christine: I am a big fan of the talks you're doing. I'm so grateful that they're available online in video form because I do think that magic does translate. Well, Professor, let's hold that thought for now and stop here. Everyone, that's this

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week's episode of High Ed Now. When we come back, we're going to continue this conversation with Professor George. Until then, make sure to send your questions or comments to Info@goacta.org. Thanks for tuning in. We'll see you next time.

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