

Doug Sprei:

Adam Weinberg and Adam Davis, I'd like to welcome you to Higher Ed Now. It's kind of corny in a way, but it's like a tale of two Adams for me. This is my third time to the Denison campus. We've done some great work together. It's been really original. A lot of it has just been engendered by the chemistry that we've discovered here at Denison, and I really never knew what to expect. There's something going on here that's a really beautiful chemical formula. I've got a college president and a college professor, and a lot of students that I've gotten to work with here at Denison. And it's been a kind of transformative experience for our program-

Adam Weinberg:

Oh, I'm glad.

Doug Sprei:

... and for the students. A lot of that is coming from both of you, so I kind of want to parse out some of that and begin with a little bit of maybe the background or how did we get to this point here doing what we're doing tomorrow morning at Denison as an orientation for incoming freshmen. It's never been done before. I wanted to just give you free reign to search back into your background and your past or the momentum that's led you here that's brought us to this point.

Adam Weinberg:

Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

How would that feel?

Adam Weinberg:

Well, that's a good question.

Doug Sprei:

Is that a good question?

Adam Weinberg:

Yeah. Look, I'd say a couple things. One is one of the great joys of being a college president is getting to support really innovative and smart faculty who care about undergrads and want to do want to educate them, really want to unlock their potential. So when I got to Denison, I quickly realized that if I just gave Adam some support, he could do some really neat things for our students. So that's one. I think the other is my own background, the way I originally got interested in higher education was I was interested in the civic piece of it and particularly interested in the ways that colleges can connect to their local communities. But as I got more and more interested versus a junior faculty member and then as a young administrator in the civic piece of what we do, I get really interested in this idea of public work, right?

Course elections are important and voting matters, but the essence of democracy at least as practiced in this country is about public work and public work at its core is what happens when people come together in their communities and they work with people, they know they work with people they don't

know they work with people, they work with people they like, and most importantly, they work with people they don't like to do the work it takes to build and sustain healthy communities.

So I've been super interested in that for a long time. When I moved from being a faculty member to the dean of the college at Colgate, which oversaw of campus life, I got really interested in all the places on campus, where we weren't capturing educational moments that we could be and should be. And the first year experience became, I thought, really important for me. So I got fascinated with orientation. I got really interested in first year residential halls, right? When our students move into their residential halls in most of our campuses for 95% or more of our students, it's the first time they've ever lived in a diverse community. Those are laboratories for democracy.

I think I brought that to Denison. Denison is a very civic place from its core. It doesn't always realize it is. I love the fact. One of the things I've loved about being here is our students cut across the political spectrum, totally across the political spectrum. So even a lot of colleges that are super prestigious and hard to get into, are still more regional than they think they are because most of their students come from the Northeast or the West Coast. We're not that. You live into a fresh first year hall at Denison, you're going to have students from every corner of the campus.

And in our best moments, it's when our first year students are learning to live alongside people whose life experiences are totally unlike their own and they learn not just how to tolerate or how to do, but they learn the fun of having robust, interesting intellectual conversations where you can learn from somebody. I don't know. That's kind of how we got here. I'll say one more thing. I think we've also tried to set a tone the last couple years that liberal arts college is at their best moments are super innovative and we should be trying things. And we should be trying things often enough where we have some things that don't work that fail.

So I think this is what we're going to do tomorrow is just another example of trying something new and different that we think comes out of the essence of a liberal arts college, but maybe adapts it for the historical moment that our students are living in.

Doug Sprei:

So the other Adam, Professor Davis here reached out to me and we started working together. What I wanted to ask both of you, and maybe you could start and then pick it up, before I met you, what were the conversations that you guys were having about this kind of work and the potential of civil discourse on campus, and the possibilities that you were seeing, and the work you wanted to do before you ever met Braver Angels? It seemed like we were ready to meet, right? And we just hit the ground running and started working together and it seemed to fit into the whole momentum of what you had established. So tell me a little bit about what you guys were starting to pollinate together before I ever met you.

Adam Weinberg:

You start.

Doug Sprei:

Adam Davis [inaudible].

Adam Davis:

Actually, I mean, I really credit President Weinberg with sending me, I think an email a couple years ago about Braver Angels. And I had read a little bit about Braver Angels myself, but I think you just sort of forwarded something and said, "They're doing really interesting stuff. Maybe we can connect with

them." And I thought, "Well, that's a great idea." So I reached out to Doug when I saw that they had a college debates program. I had been interested in debate myself for a long time going back to high school where I competed in parliamentary debates and grew up in a household where there were constant debates at the dinner table about things that were in the news and different essays we'd been reading and so forth, and it was just a very lively kind of intellectual environment.

Because I was surprised in my time. I've been at Denison almost 20 years to see that there hadn't been really a tradition of a debate team, any kind of competitive debate nor did many of our peer institutions have. In fact, we did searches and saw where are the liberal arts colleges in the Midwest? Where are their debate teams? But of course, what Braver Angels was doing was something quite different and really was innovative and exciting. And at this historical moment, I mean just especially in the last few years with the increasing concerns about polarization in our country and cable news and social media and the effects that those forces have had, and other forces, I just really was excited about what Braver Angels was doing.

I started watching actually some of the national Braver Angels debates and just thought, "Well, gosh, this would be a great thing to have on our campus." So that's when I reached out to you, but it was President Weinberg who had first planted the seed, the idea.

Adam Weinberg:

I think from my perspective, there were two things we were trying to do. It's interesting to hear that piece of how we got here that I'd forgotten about. One was we'd already started a robust conversation about the first year experience and really stepping back and asking who are the students who are coming to Denison today? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses? What are their tendencies? What's different? What do we want them to learn during their first year here? And then let's really take a hard look at everything we do from the moment they matriculate to the end of that first year and figure out if we can do things differently and better. So this idea of trying to find fun ways for students to learn, to exchange political ideas and engage in intellectual debate was something that was on our radar screen.

Second is I'm a firm believer that one of the things we don't do a good enough job in higher ed, but in particular at liberal arts colleges, we don't partner enough with non-traditional organizations. So I spent a good part of my first couple years at Denison just scouring the landscape to try to think about who's out there that's doing innovative, interesting work that might want to partner with us and try some things out and see what works.

I knew Bill Doherty a little bit, knew of him. We shared some common friends. So y'all were on my radar screen. But the stories I was hearing about the work you were doing, especially in Ohio really exciting like counterintuitive, interesting, impactful. And it just seemed to me that, that was the kind of model that would work really well on a college campus.

Doug Sprei:

I also got wind that you had been doing some work at some point with Harry Boyte.

Adam Weinberg:

Yeah. Harry and I go way back.

Doug Sprei:

So tell me a little bit about that, because I've talked to Harry and what's really interesting about this is that I think it's a deep, deep work that you've done together. And what we're doing here at Denison meets that from the ground up, if you will. We're working directly with students. I've had a few conversations with Harry. He just loves all the work that you've done together. I wanted to hear a little bit from your perspective about that.

Adam Weinberg:

Oh, Harry has been such an important mentor over the years to me. And interestingly, Harry's mother went to Denison.

Doug Sprei:

Oh, I didn't know that.

Adam Weinberg:

Yeah. Harry was really the first one, when I was a young assistant professor whose work really shaped my thinking about the civic piece of education and the concept of public work and what that really means. Harry is such a great connector. When I got to Denison I'd been doing some work in and around the Kettering Foundation, but Harry really opened the door to do more work. We'd started convening a group of college presidents to talk about some of these issues. But I think Harry and I both shared a couple views.

One was that college campuses really should be laboratories for helping students develop the skills, the values, the habits of democratic living. The second is that while community service and voting is a piece of that, the most important piece is really helping students learn to be co-creators and co-creators across differences.

We don't do a good enough job of that on our campuses. The other thing I really took away from Harry was that if we were going to really make progress, we're going to have to think of what we do differently, that the models that we have been using weren't going to get us to where we needed to be. So I really credit Harry with, A, kind of helping me think about what the right question is. And B, being kind of open to partnering with organizations like Braver Angels, putting all on our radar screen.

I guess the last is one of the things I always admired about Harry is how intellectually playfully he is. Always willing to play around the concepts, play around the ideas, try new ways of doing things. When I first got to Denison, he actually came and spent a couple days on our campus talking to our faculty, and one of the things Harry said to me at the end of those days is this is a faculty that's really both capable and willing to take on this issue, which has actually turned out to be true. We have a lot of faculty, gotten super excited about the work we're doing.

Doug Sprei:

So the day is very meaningful for me personally, just because it brings me back to 2014 when I took my own daughter to Virginia tech for her freshman orientation. And the experience for a parent with freshman orientation is just one of joy and grief. You're letting go of your child and they're leaving the nest and they're entering a new phase of life that's like a milestone. It's just so full of emotion and meaning. A lot of that is just basically they're entering into a new life. Here are the dorms. Here are the programs. And at Virginia Tech, we're all part of the hokey family now and all this stuff. But you see what we're doing here at Denison is a couple steps in addition to that, which is I interpreted, it's like signaling to students that when you set foot on this campus, you're in a place that is a bastion of civil

discourse that a place where all perspectives are respected and honored and someone who you disagree with is not your enemy.

The kinds of things that we're really trying to teach in our Braver Angels debates and workshops. So to have an opportunity to, well, to be invited to come on campus and to work directly with students who are just setting foot on campus with their parents and families this week is extraordinary to us, and it's on a large scale. We didn't anticipate 660 students, three debates simultaneously, 220 each. It's a big initiative.

Adam Weinberg:

And they should be prepped. I said to them, when they came for June orientation, they come to campus. I mailed them a letter in early August and then they heard me say it again at the induction ceremony a couple nights ago, we've said a couple things. One is that we're super proud of the intellectual and political diversity of our campus and that we expect everybody to come here with their minds wide open. We talk about the essence of a dentist in education being about three things. One of which is intellectual humility. Developing the habit to understand that as you walk around life, you might not be all right about everything.

In fact, you could be all wrong. And so you might want to make it a habit to be constantly seeking out alternative views, facts, and opinions. It kind of made it more grounded for them. I challenged all of our first year students to at some point during their first month on campus to figure out who in their residential halls, life experiences are most different from their own and find a way to form a friendship. And then we asked them if somebody says something in a classroom that you find really uncomfortable, maybe even offensive, take them out for coffee. And don't ask them about their politics, ask them about their life.

We take a page from me. Once you understand somebody's life history, sometimes they're intellectual political views make more sense. Really the last couple years, we've been talking to first year students about this and we've really ramped up that messaging this year.

Adam Davis:

And I think that what we saw last year, Doug, working with you with those two Braver Angels debates, one in the fall, one of the spring really illustrated so beautifully how in the course of two or three hours students... Actually their views evolved in the course of the debate. You had students stand up, give a speech and an hour later, stand up and give another speech and say, "I actually am thinking about this a little differently now that I've heard these other points made and I want to shift a little bit my position." One of the things I love is it's not just two teams. It's not a competition. There's no judging or scores. It's members of the community standing up and speaking from their heart and using their mind, but as an individual and being able to shift as they listen and learn, and think, and ponder.

And then in the debrief session after these debates, we're going to be doing a workshop actually for the first year orientation tomorrow after the debate where all the students in the auditorium break up into little groups or pairs and reflect on a couple questions that we're going to ask them to think about to process what they just witnessed and participated in, and think about how they can apply this civil discourse and elevated tone, but still challenging each other and asking hard questions and challenging orthodoxy in classrooms, in dining halls and residence halls and through all their interactions.

We're really excited that we have faculty participating in these debates as part of first year orientation in addition to students so that our incoming students see it's okay to disagree with a professor. In fact, we encourage that and you're going to see professors take differing views. So that's the kind of campus that

this is, and I think that maybe some of them are used to in their high school. Just whatever the teacher says, that's what's true, but that we're all in this collective quest for truth, which is not an easy thing. We want to start for them to see that already on day one or even before day one.

Doug Sprei:

There's a ton of stuff packed into what you just said to begin with for me when I chair these debates and when my other Braver Angels colleagues chair them. One of the things we're trying to do is flatten the hierarchy in a room. I'm about to sneeze, so I'm sorry. Something allergic. We love having faculty and students together because... And I exhort them. There's no hierarchy here. There's no titles. There's no rank. We're just human beings in the American democracy experiment right now.

We've had a couple debates with Linn-Benton Community College in particular where the faculty and the students were debating a topic around academic dishonesty. Everybody agrees academic dishonesty is bad. And during the pandemic, it really came to the fore because there's a lot of much more online cheating visible than ever was. So the real debate is about what are the solutions, what measures should be taken.

There's a lot of disagreement about that. So it was incredibly galvanizing to listen to faculty, talk about how painful it is for them to see their students cheat on online tests. And it was equally heart-rending to hear students talk about the isolation of learning in their bedroom when they wish to be on class, on campus with their friends and they're just kind of stripped of social experiences during the pandemic and not using that as an excuse to cheat on tests, but just the whole quandary of online learning was brought out in great dimension, multi-dimensionality during the debate.

So the teachers and the students became very, very simple and essential people talking to each other, hearing each other across great differences, and even generations. It all kind of just melted away. It was a very, very moving in the now experience. When I think to a certain extent, we've had that at Denison a little bit with the free speech debate that we did. I also have to tell you that the debate we did this last spring on Greek life was riveting.

Adam Weinberg:

Right?

Doug Sprei:

It was electrifying. And that brings up the fact that we're giving students a lot of ownership of this process. They choose the topics. I work with students from the Denison Debate Society. One of them is coming back. She just graduated, Sadie Webb. You probably met her.

Adam Weinberg:

Oh, yes.

Doug Sprei:

She's working at-

Adam Weinberg:

I know.

Doug Sprei:

She's working in ACTA now.

Adam Weinberg:

Yep.

Doug Sprei:

And she's hitting it out-

Adam Weinberg:

Y'all are smart if you will sign her to a 99-year contract. She's awesome.

Doug Sprei:

She's hitting it out of the park for us.

Adam Weinberg:

Not surprising.

Doug Sprei:

And she might come by at the end of this. But you see that's what really brings it full circle because you've got the deep, deep intellectual discussions and the writing, and the thinking that's going on with people like Harry Boyte. But it's kind of intersecting with the work that we're doing with the students giving them ownership of this process and discovering that we really have this lightning in a bottle in this debate format where they've never had an experience of talking about painfully divisive issues before in this manner. And you've invited us to come on campus and actually give freshmen an experience of that, which is unheard of. So what's my question? Tell me about that.

Adam Weinberg:

So here's my hope. One of my many hopes. I hope all of our first year students will go home for their first break. And at some point they'll be around a dinner table and somebody will make the comment that's being made at a lot of dinner tables right now which is the country is so politically polarized. What are we going to do about it? Or there's nothing we can do about it. And I want our students to say, "No, no, not only is it fixable, it's actually easier to fix than we think and it can be super fun along the way." I think that's what our students learned last year is that it takes getting over your sense of fear, right? One of the students who helped y'all organize the debates last year, I ran into them early in the academic year.

Doug Sprei:

Which one was that?

Adam Weinberg:

I didn't want to say [inaudible]. But they said to me, "What's going to happen if this blows up?" And I said, "We'll celebrate it." And I just kind of let it hang there. It's like, "It may blow up. That's okay." The college campus should blow up from time to time. But then again I said, "That's not really what's going

to happen. What's really going to happen is people are going to be surprised at how fun and interesting it is. They're going to be surprised at how much they learn from each other. They're going to be surprised at how much this becomes a habit for them. And then they're going to be sad that they didn't learn to do it earlier in their college career."

So I'm super excited that we're going to set the tone for our first year students because I think it's... Adam alluded to this a minute ago. I think it's really hard to take full advantage of a liberal arts education if you don't understand that a big piece of it is learning to challenge orthodoxy, starting with your own.

Doug Sprei:

Tell me a little bit about Minds Wide Open because I have a shirt. I have it. And President Weinberg mentioned that a little bit ago. That's kind of setting an atmosphere for us to walk right into and do this work that we're doing together, but it's a broader context. What's some of the thinking underpinnings of Minds Wide Open? Why did you choose that phrase?

Adam Davis:

Yeah. So Minds Wide Open is a series that we've been running now for over a year. We're continuing with Minds Wide Open 2 this coming year, a series of conversations that we're having with public intellectuals, authors on various kinds of topics that we're sharing with members of the Denison community, so with students and faculty and staff and alumni. And it's inspired actually by a book that came out about a year ago called Minds Wide Shut: How the New Fundamentalisms Divide Us by the then president of Northwestern University, President Shapiro and a colleague in Slavic languages and literatures.

It looks at various types of fundamentalisms ranging from... Most people think of religion. There's one chapter in religion, but economics and politics, of course, and other forms of fundamentalisms and is making the argument that we need to have our minds wide opened. And that one of the best ways of doing so actually is to read literature and get inside the shoes of different characters and their points of view. And that novels do a fantastic job of presenting different angles and perspectives and views.

So our center, the Lisska Center at Denison is trying to do this with our community by inviting somewhat provocative speakers and authors just to look at something from a different angle. So to give one example, we had a behavioral geneticist from the University of Texas at Austin last year whose book, *The Genetic Lottery* raised quite a stir when it came out. I mean, it's a taboo subject especially among a lot of academics on the left.

It brings back terrible memories of eugenics. Something she talks about at the very beginning of the book. In fact, she sees this as a reason to write this book and is trying to find ways that the revolution in genetic science could be used for good and to address social inequalities in a constructive way.

So we had a conversation with her and we brought in a Yale political scientist to talk about patriotism. It's an argument kind of reclaiming patriotism, but differentiating patriotism from nationalism and enlightened kind of patriotism where you are self-critical and criticize your own country. That's our sort of theme last year and this year and I do think that the Braver Angels debates fit in with that of just trying to encourage people not to write off someone or a position just because of the team that they're associated with, which I think all of us do far too often. And to just have an open mind and engage with arguments and counter them, but not to silence or just dismiss.

It's something I think we want to model for our students. It's really right at the heart of the whole educational mission that we need to have intellectual humility and approach questions with an open mind. It doesn't mean not being challenging the positions and arguments, but engaging with them.

Adam Weinberg:

I think it's super important for colleges to wade into this space, especially with their first year students because we have a generation arriving on our campus that mostly has grown up in a society where what's been role modeled for them and what they've been taught is choose a side and don't deviate from it. Don't say anything controversial because it will get out on social media and there goes your social life. Right? If somebody says something you disagree with, attack. And we're kind of saying that may be where American politics is moving. I hope it's not. But you can't get a liberal arts education that way. You just can't.

Liberal arts education fundamentally depends upon everybody being a teacher and a learner. It fundamentally depends upon people having their minds wide open, being excited to challenge orthodoxy. When somebody says something that you find deeply offensive to figure out what you can learn from it. So I think if colleges don't find a way to reset the tone in the habits with their incoming students, it's going to be really hard to help them take advantage of the educational opportunities that we've invited on our campuses.

Doug Sprei:

At the college president level, you probably have a lot of visibility out into the whole higher ed space just from where you sit. At ACTA and Braver Angels, I'm lucky to... We get to meet some of the more progressive university presidents, Mitch Daniels or Ron Daniels at Johns Hopkins or Michael Crow at ASU, people like that. But I wanted to get your sense of what the problem is in higher education, because there's a lot of people screaming about it in terms of what's wrong with the campus climate. There are a lot of studies out there, HeteroDocs and others that are showing that students self-censor. They're afraid to express their views on campus and in the classroom, particularly students on the right. There's a lot of being made of that right now.

But what are you seeing out in the higher ed space that points to what the problem is? Because I don't think there's a lot of schools that are actually thinking about having freshmen come in having debates like this right now and you guys are really breaking some ground here.

Adam Weinberg:

The problem is multifaceted, right? But I think a piece of it is not what colleges are doing, it's how students are arriving and the larger culture in which we exist. So we're kind of trying to say at Denison, we're just going to take that on. We're going to say to students, they matriculate by May 1. They come to campus in June for June orientation. I'm the first person they hear June orientation and I start off just by talking about this head on, "You're coming to a college where there's lots of different views. You see this source of strength." All the things I said earlier.

Doing it in first year orientation, again, is saying that we know we need to hit the reset button for a lot of our students. And we know that students want that. What's really exciting is the public narrative seems to suggest that these problems are deeply entrenched and hard to change. We're not finding that actually. We're actually finding that our students are super excited and they want to be in an environment where they can do that. We're finding that our faculty are really open to thinking about

what this means in their classrooms and faculty who are showing up on a Sunday tomorrow to participate in this.

I think that's one. I think the other is I do think on college campuses to take this issue on is to also acknowledge that it's messy. It's blow up from time to time. And my view on that is if college campuses don't blow up from time to time, we're probably not asking hard enough questions. That just part of a college campus and we have to be okay with that. And then we can go on from there. I do think that colleges, some colleges... And we're talking about this at Denison is we need to make sure that our students are being exposed to wide range of views and perspectives. We just do.

That doesn't have to happen in every class. But if students take the totality of their classes, they just should be exposed to a wide range of views and perspectives and given both the space and permission, but also the push to learn to think for themselves.

Doug Sprei:

But part of what's propelled us to where we are now to do this work are the blowups that have happened. What you were talking about a moment ago is reminiscent of the Charles Murray situation in Bennington.

Adam Weinberg:

Middlebury.

Doug Sprei:

Excuse me, the Charles Murray situation in Middlebury College, in which a liberal professor had invited him to campus, a friend of ours, Allison Stanger widely publicized incident where the students reacted so violently that she got a concussion and a neck injury and Murray was practically lynched off campus. And Milo Yiannopoulos coming to Berkeley. You have a good attitude taking risks. And I'd like to ask you a little bit more to open up about that because we get to the edge of sometimes in the Braver Angels debates. We've done some on transgender athletes, women's sports, abortion debates. And in all cases, the format has held true. And all of that incendiary, inflammatory energy has been transmuted into something elevating in the discussion.

It didn't go off the rails. It didn't boil over, but it got really close. Where do you draw the line in controversial speech becoming hate speech? How do you see all of that?

Adam Weinberg:

Yeah. So I'll start with the risk piece. I'm an educator at heart. I actually truly in my heart believe that at Denison, we give our students the kind of education that every person in the world deserves and far few receive. So I believe deeply in the liberal arts and I care deeply about our students. I think it is impossible to give them the kind of education they need, want deserve, and that the world needs them to have without taking a little bit of risk, just have to.

So there's lots of things that I worry about. What I worry most about is that we won't take enough risk to give our students the education they deserve. If things blow up, they blow up. If that has a negative impact on me or my career, it will. Those things, I can live with. What I can't live with is feeling like we're not doing right by our students. That's why I chose to do this for a living.

Doug Sprei:

I wanted to toss it to you too because I think you have something to say about that.

Adam Davis:

Well, I mean, I'm grateful to work at a school where we have a president who's so brave on this issue because I think they're just a lot of schools where the presidents are not particularly brave. With the Minds Wide Open series, I have not been wanting to bring super controversial speakers just for the sake of [inaudible]. Even pushing a little bit, I mean, we're having a panel that I'm really excited about in a few weeks on abortion in America, pre-Roe during Roe, post-Roe. We're not taking the risk that President Weinberg was just talking about. But I do think that we want to bring some different perspectives. So we have a writer, a physician writer who's written just some beautiful essays. She's an abortion provider, but she writes really beautifully about the complexities and the emotional effective aspects of abortion.

I just think that perspective needs to be heard in addition to we have a historian and a legal scholar talking about it. What I'm really excited about is that our student president of Denisonians for planned parenthood came to me over the summer and wanted to put this panel together with us and said, "We don't want your typical speaker that planned parenthood would at all. We really want to hear different perspectives."

So she's going to co-moderate that discussion with the student president for planned parenthood. That's something that's just so affirming to see students, and this, I think goes back to the point that President Weinberg was making about students wanting different perspectives. And this was born out, I think in a study last year that the Knight Foundation did that even though students are concerned about speech being chilled. But they want to hear different perspectives. They want that core principle of liberalism and education going back to the enlightenment of trying out ideas, challenging different ideas and jumping into the fray and not being protected or sheltered, or living in a bubble.

Because that's not American society. We're not preparing them for life in the real world and we're feeding right into one of the critiques, I think too, of higher ed and especially liberal arts colleges that we are a bubble and that we're not willing to engage with other ideas and perspectives.

Adam Weinberg:

It is a generation of college students who care deeply about the world in the future in really wonderful ways. And they also understand that to do that effectively they're going to have to be able to work across their differences. That's, at least, what we're finding. You asked about where the lines are. And the lines are never clear, right? They're blurry, but the principles should be clear. And at least for me, there's a couple principles. One is that universities are about intellectual engagement. So I'm actually not interested in having people on our campus who are all about performance who just want to come for the sake of blowing things up.

If things get contentious, that's okay, but they should get contentious because we're having good intellectual debate conversation discourse. Second is that I think fundamental premise of a university is about the search for truth. And that we do that by trying to separate fact from fiction using reason rationality data. So I'm all for inviting people to our campus who are serious scholars, who want engage in serious intellectual debate by challenging orthodoxy and raising difficult observations or topics.

What I'm not interested in is what we have too much of in society right now, which is just performance for the sake of performance. That's for me the kind of fundamental principle that I think we're using.

Doug Sprei:

You mentioned intellectual humility a few minutes ago and I got to tell you, and I think this is common knowledge and I want to mention the Templeton grant. Is that okay? I mean, our program applied for... It took eight months. We applied for a grant from the John Templeton Foundation and we won it.

Adam Weinberg:

Congratulations.

Doug Sprei:

We were awarded in June and we're going to be starting a two-year research project starting January. We are asking Denison to be a colleague, but a cohort in this project. But that's up to both of you to decide. But intellectual humility is the whole ethos of the Templeton Foundation. And what I want to drill into with both of you is it's a research study to measure the impact of the Braver Angels debates on students in specific ways.

Adam Weinberg:

Oh, that's awesome.

Doug Sprei:

Okay. So just to break the ice, does it encourage their critical thinking? Does it elicit courageous speech? Does it help them come out from a discussion understanding that the person who differs from them is not the enemy? And a whole host of markers and social science measurements that are way beyond my pay grade and experience to explain. But we have a great professor from the University of Delaware who is going to be our lead investigator with a lot of support from a lot of people around that. And it's a deep project where we're going to do debates for three semesters in a row and have a lot of surveys, pre and post surveys, and a lot of social science applied to it to get a real macro view and granular view. What I'm asking both of you is like, "What are some of the things we should be looking for when we are measuring the students?" How do we know we're moving the needle? We want to help them create a culture of free and open exchange on campus. We want them to be influencers, tell other college students about this thing. You look like you're brain-ready to...

Adam Weinberg:

It's fun because he's going to answer as a historian, and I'm going to answer as a sociologist. So you go first.

Doug Sprei:

I already knew you were a sociologist. Okay? So I knew that.

Adam Weinberg:

You start.

Adam Davis:

Oh no, I shouldn't be the one that... I knew nothing about social science.

Doug Sprei:

Is this okay that I asked this?

Adam Weinberg:

Yeah. [inaudible]

Adam Davis:

No, I really... I'm not a-

Adam Weinberg:

You start.

Adam Davis:

Gosh, I feel ill-prepared. I mean, actually I work with somebody who's all about surveys and designing them and interpreting them and it's so true. That's just not what historians generally do. We work with texts and narratives. And so I don't know. I mean, I've seen a survey that Braver Angels currently... Am I too close?

Doug Sprei:

That's okay.

Adam Davis:

Adam, I'm going to let you try and do that.

Adam Weinberg:

So I would say a couple of things. One is I'll talk about the survey. I hope you'll do more than the survey. Right? Because surveys can do some things.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah. We're going to do a lot more.

Adam Weinberg:

Yeah. I hope you measure a couple different things. One is do students first and foremost, get over their fear of embarrassment? That's the sociology, right? It's Kaufmann. And I often say to our incoming students, once you get over your fear of embarrassment, life gets much easier. Once you get over your fear of embarrassment and your fear of failure, life gets remarkably much easier. And so I hope that we can see in the classroom that students get over that and feel much more free to voice views. Sometimes views that may be only half formed. Sometimes view that may be a little controversial. Maybe sometimes views that they don't believe in, but nobody else has said it yet and they think somebody should. That would be one.

Second is that we actually see... Because I think this is the thing that Braver Angels doesn't talk enough about that I've seen in some of our students that actually through the kind of models that you're developing, students learn to form more reasoned, thoughtful, sophisticated-

Doug Sprei:

Arguments.

Adam Weinberg:

Arguments, yeah. That's one of the most valuable parts of having to talk to somebody who sees the world differently than you. They will challenge you. So you have to sharpen your view and you'll learn from them what sharpens your view. So that would be a second. I'd love to know, does the models you're developing, not only are the arguments better, but are they... This is not my strength. Are they more succinct and clear? So both intellectually, but also just in terms of basic communication and delivery. I hope you'll video record some of them, because I'd also love to be able to... And this is not my area of expertise. This is where I think psychologists and others will learn some things. What do we learn about students' body language? Right? Because body language often opens up space for other people in a room.

What do we learn about who speaks more or less differently? And does those dynamics change? I heard some of our students last year who think about themselves as being more introverted, say that the debates that they were doing with y'all really give them more confidence to find their more extroverted self.

The thing that I think is also important is how far do we see students change their minds? Right? And then it'd be fun to do a little bit of not just post, but post, post to figure out does it last, right? Because we know coming out of these debate, students are really excited. But a month later, did this translate to how they talked in their residential hall rooms or did it change how they responded in a class when a contentious issue did change their social media habits? Right? I think there's a lot of interesting stuff to look at.

Doug Sprei:

Okay. You just channeled a lot of what we're after.

Adam Weinberg:

Yeah. I expected as much.

Doug Sprei:

Honestly. Very well actually. And Adam Davis has seen me and when we chair these debates. I'm in front of a room and watching this all unfold and watching some of the behaviors and some of the manifestations of the students. One of the things that ignites my heart is when that first layer of students gets up and they're all prepared to make their speeches. They're from the Denison Debate Society and they're confidence speakers and very outgoing and engaging and they just hit it out of the park. They've actually framed arguments. They've got it boiled down to four minutes. And it's almost too good. It's almost too virtual.

What makes me really happy is in that next layer of students who are more reticent, who are not as confident, who didn't know if they were going to say anything at all. Their minds are open as a result of what they just heard. The pump is primed and they get up and they start asking questions, exploring the contours of the topic, not just the hard left or the hard right of it. And they start to frame it in terms of their own personal stories, why they believe what they believe. We're going deeper into that aspect, by the way, in our curricular debates because we've taken the Braver Angels debates into the classroom.

The teacher can give an assignment and actually ask the student to prepare a couple of claims that they're going to weave into their speech and then cap it off with why they believe what they believe

about the given resolution. So that's one thing that from an anecdotal perspective, absolutely delights us that we see other students who are just... They would never dream of getting up in public and talking about something so controversial like that. The other part you mentioned is the sustainability of it. The lasting effects of it. That's really top of mind for us.

And that's one of the things Templeton wants to know. Is this a fly by night temporary surge of enthusiasm or is there something more lasting about it, something more durable? And we're hoping that's the case. Now, where it's proven itself to be more durable is with the BridgeUSA type of student groups, that students were really all in on this who live it and breathe it. And you have a number of them on campus. They're not BridgeUSA, but they're Denison Debate Society. Well, I'll edit this out, but students like Zoya, people like her. Now, I won't have that in, but you know what I'm talking about. So these are carriers of the mission and we do see them influencing others and we want to know more about that. So I resonate with a lot of what you just said.

Adam Weinberg:

I think those students are what David Brooks call them, weavers.

Doug Sprei:

Weavers?

Adam Weinberg:

That's right. But I also think you just said a bunch of things, two of which I want to kind of pull out because I think they're really important is they challenge narratives that are seeping out in public discourse that I don't think are true. One is that students don't want to do this. Students are desperate to do this. This generation is desperate to find this space, to have these kinds of conversations. Second is that faculty are not open to it. It's also not true. You will find on all your campuses, at least at Denison, you will, there's a lot of faculty. So super excited to figure out how do... If there's torch I can use that's going to ignite more conversation, engagement and debate in the classroom, that's great.

I think the other is going to be... For me, it'll be super interesting to find out. Does it last? I think my sense will be that if students get exposed to this once it becomes a Gestalt moment. And they get exposed to it a couple times, it lasts.

Doug Sprei:

Well, there is an innate hunger out there. That's what I discovered the minute I encountered what was then called Better Angels and it was through Jean Rouch actually coming to visit us. It was not too long after the 2016 election that was really just reverberating for all of us and for me. And when I found out about Better Angels, what it was called at the time, the hunger was so strong in me and I realized that it's out there in everybody. Just the students may not know it. That layer of students were more just gun shy about talking in public.

But this seems to really bring out the best in them. And the other piece that you just mentioned is faculty. Now, after four years of pitching the Braver Angels debates program and getting, we've grown exponentially. But still I encounter a lot of faculty who are afraid to do this because of the climate on their campus.

There's just too much contention sometimes. And there's a number of schools where we just haven't been able to put roots down because a faculty member wants to do it, but there's too many other people who are saying, "Well, I don't like debate. Why should we debate about this or that?" And some

subjects are not debatable. Diversity, equity, inclusion is not debatable or whatever. And there's some kind of local conflict brewing on the campus that's putting out a kind of toxic atmosphere among faculty. It's not all over the country, but it's in a number of places. We haven't been able to make any inroads. So I postulate that faculty need these debates as much as the students, and maybe even more, in some cases. Here we are at Denison where everything is hospitable to what we're doing and welcoming it and you're encouraging it and pouring sunshine on it. But that's not the case across the country in all schools. Any reaction to that? Have you heard anything like that? Or am I just reflecting something?

Adam Davis:

Yeah. There's been a lot written about just the chilling effect of cancel culture and this whole environment at this historical moment? I do think that at Denison, there's just a lot of openness and enthusiasm for ensuring that civil discourse be a central part of our identity and our campus culture. I mean, I think that's the goal of having a debate as a centerpiece of freshman orientation to make sure that the students that see it as normal, as vital, as a healthy part of what college is about and that carry over into the classroom so that they feel comfortable and safe.

Yeah, it can be scary to challenge a professor or challenge a statement that a fellow student makes in class. And there's a lot of fear of screwing up and of saying the wrong thing and getting into trouble for saying the wrong. But gosh, I mean, that's what students need to be able to screw up in college. They're here to learn and that's how you learn.

So I'm just really excited to see the impact that tomorrow's debate has given that every single incoming first year student at Denison will have had that experience before they even walk into a classroom on Monday. We hope there will be of ripple effects for that. And we need to find ways to sustain that and ensure that it carries over into the classroom and is reinforced with what faculty do in the classroom.

Adam Weinberg:

It's an empirical statement made without any data. So my guess would be that the vast majority of faculty nationally want to be on campuses where intellectual right ideas can be discussed, debated where interesting questions can be asked. It may very well be true that on lots of campuses, they feel like that's not the environment for a whole lot of reasons that mirror what's going on nationally, right? Few voices kind of shaping the environment for the rest of us.

I think one of the things that college presidents can do perhaps, and that we've been able to do on this campus is to just say, "We're going to be a place that really doesn't just tolerate, but encourages and actually sees it central to its mission the ability to ask hard questions, to challenge orthodoxy. And at least at Denison, we haven't politicized. This is about our mission.

This is about if you want to be a liberal arts college, you have to be a place where ideas can be expressed or they can clash into each other. I can only speak about the Denison faculty because it's the faculty I spend my time with. It is a faculty that cares deeply about the liberal arts and that cares deeply about its students. With that as a starting place, it's not hard for me as a president to stand up and say, "That's what we believe in." Then the kind of work we're doing with y'all becomes central.

At least what I've been hearing from faculty is they're super excited that if this work we're doing with y'all works, students are going to show up in their classroom next Monday much more excited to talk and to engage and to debate. And that will make the classroom a whole lot more fun and meaningful for our faculty.

Doug Sprei:

That's fantastic.

Adam Davis:

I was just reading the other day about a new book that makes a number of arguments about where our politics are as a country right now, but it apparently uses the word calcification a lot that we're stuck. Nothing is moving. We're more polarized than ever and there is orthodoxy in both parties. You can't be diversity of thought within a party. That's just so boring. Apart from everything else, apart from being dangerous in a democracy, you can imagine a campus being like that, how boring it would be. So we just want to feel like we have a living beating heart here because that's the nature of being human that you're going to have people with very contrasting views and perspectives and perspectives that evolve over time and learning from each other and all the rest.

So I just find it so affirming to work with college students such as the ones we have at Denison who are engaging with each other in debates such as the one tomorrow. I just think it's a hopeful sign for the future of our country when otherwise there is these forces of calcification, which is clearly not healthy.

Doug Sprei:

Well, you all just about answered the thought I was going to put next to you, which I just want to tell you, one of the things I've enjoyed most about working with you is just getting insights into who you are as a teacher. The aliveness and the warmth that you bring and the real life that you bring into your work in the classroom. And you've told me a little bit about it and I just feel it from you.

We're trying to be very mindful that we're just this one Braver Angels program. It really needs to really fit into a much wider landscape and the whole climate, and ethos of a campus. Our relationships with Denison are different from what we have with Duke are different from Arizona State and all these other... They all are very unique unto themselves. And there's a real interesting unique chemistry at each place.

But what's in common is just the joy that you bring to the real deep work of being a teacher. I just wanted to ask you is that kind of shared across the Denison campus. Is there kind of a philosophy that's knitting the teachers and the professors and instructors together? I'd like to hear from you first about that and then maybe you.

Adam Davis:

Yeah. I think so. I think that as a faculty, we love what we do. We care a lot about our students and not only their time here, but post-graduation their future lives. We want the time they spend here to be incredibly meaningful and transformative as they kind of figure out what do they find meaningful? How can they be productive citizens of the world and make an impact? We want to feel that what we're doing in the classroom, but also outside the classroom, mentoring students who are involved with debate or who are applying for graduate school or fellowships or anything else, we are excited to follow them and keep in touch with them after they leave. We're just deeply, deeply, I think committed.

Adam Weinberg:

I'm a sociologist by training. And so one of the things I learned as a sociologist is you ask a big sweeping unanswerable question where people start tells you something about the culture. And so my first year at Denison, I would just ask students, say, "Tell me about your Denison experience?" Almost always, they would start with relationships and a key piece of that would be their relationships with their professors.

So it is. It's part of our culture. It's been here for generations. Each generation of faculties passed it on to the ones that come after in different ways is the college has changed, but it remains really strong here. And it allows us to do things, but I think we have reasonably good data from Gallup and a bunch of others to suggest that one of the most important things can happen in college is developing a sustained relationship with a faculty member. What I would call a mentoring relationship, which may start in a classroom, but goes beyond it. In my 10 years here, I've just been inspired and I'm grateful to work at a place where that's what the faculty do. That's what they care about.

Doug Sprei:

So Sadie called me just before we got... I was sitting on the steps, waiting for this to start. She called me and she flew into Columbus this morning and she actually went to have lunch with a mentor professor, just like you just said. That relationship has endured. She wanted to come out and see that person and just connect. And now she's in professional life. I've seen how Denison was so influential on her and in some of your other students. So that's really what gives us a lot of joy because we hope that we're just helping to add to that necklace of diamonds that you're putting around students.

Adam Weinberg:

Disagree with me if you think I'm wrong, but I think our faculty, when they think about themselves as professors, teachers, and mentors, they realize that some of the most important work comes when you challenge students in the right kinds of ways. You challenge them in ways. They become kind of catalyst moments. And I think that's actually why the Braver Angels model has also... And this whole topic of how do we do a better job setting a tone where students can learn the importance of engaging across differences. I think it's a piece of that. It's not uncommon on this campus for people to have hard conversations.

Adam Davis:

Yeah. No, I totally agree. I think we as faculty take that responsibility very seriously and it's not just responsibility, it's also kind of a natural instinct to challenge students and we want them to get comfortable with that too. That's another important life skill to be challenged in this case intellectually about an idea that just doesn't make sense or where's the evidence for that? Or how can you assume that? I think that's really important. We're not doing anyone favors by coddling them or just agreeing with everything.

Doug Sprei:

Well, my last anecdote before we end is I came here on... It was March 30th. I came from Xavier the night before we did a debate in Cincinnati and Xavier, which was an international topic. Should America send troops abroad to protect democracies in peril?

Adam Weinberg:

Interesting.

Doug Sprei:

The Ukraine situation was really just exploding at that time. And then I drove to Denison the next day and a completely different topic had been chosen by the students, which should Greek life be eliminated from Denison's campus? And I had created a number of a big poster that the Lisska Center had put all

over campus. The posters were being ripped down. Talk about getting to the edge of what might happen and we were wondering if frat boys were going to come and protest the debate.

Well, I mean, they were out there. They were aware of us, but some people had ripped down our posters. They didn't want that debate to happen, but it didn't bother us. We went and had an amazing debate and there was a moment where I was chairing this thing. And when we're doing a Braver Angels debate, you're Mr. Chair. I'm no longer Doug. It's a very formal little light parliamentary process that everybody's volunteered to be part of. And it really does infuse the atmosphere with the purpose and everybody feels it. So a student was sitting in front of me and she said, "Mr. Chair, can I just stop the process here, stop the parliamentary style for a minute. I just want to address you directly."

I looked at her right in the eye and I said, "Yes." And then she began to talk about how the Greek life experience related to her mental health. And it was a very, very heart-rending, incredibly emotional, truthful, honest statement from a student that you could have heard a pin drop. Everyone became totally silent. And she took us out of our format for a little while, a couple minutes and then she thanked us and we went back into the debate. But everything went up and exponentially just to a different level.

There was a moment I'll never forget, a moment of pure honesty that the student had... And it affected everybody else in the room. It took the discourse to a whole nother level. Did I ever tell you that that this happened?

Adam Davis:

I think so.

Doug Sprei:

Did I? Okay.

Adam Weinberg:

But think about how profound that is in a couple different ways. Our students like students on many college campuses are super smart.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah.

Adam Weinberg:

They're living on campus for four years. They come from every corner of the country, 40 countries or beyond. So they bring a wide range of life experiences and worldviews. How sad would it be to live on a campus with that community of people for four years and not have a chance to learn from each other? And yet we can only do that if we're willing to engage and share our stories and our narratives and push on each other in the right kinds of ways.

Doug Sprei:

Well, part of the learning that took place in that moment was like an expansion of compassion.

Adam Weinberg:

Right.

Doug Sprei:

Empathy, deep listening. I mean, time just dropped away for a moment and we were all just there listening to her. That exemplifies some of the moments we have in these debates. It's no longer just we're in a higher education institution. We're doing this as part of our student where it just was a moment of humanity, you might say.

Adam Weinberg:

I would argue what you're doing is you're teaching the liberal arts, right? It's about empathy. It's about compassion. It's about connecting people on ideas. You go back and read the historian, Bill Cronon's classic piece in the liberal arts, Only Connect. That's what you're doing.

Doug Sprei:

Well, look, I look forward to debriefing with you and I know that you'll be around tomorrow. I hope you get to visit one of the debates that are taking place.

Adam Weinberg:

Yeah, me too.

Doug Sprei:

You're certainly invited.

Adam Weinberg:

Thank you.

Doug Sprei:

I know you're busy guy going around the world, but we are very honored and grateful to have the opportunity to explore what's possible here and really test it out. And we're breaking some new ground together. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, but having talked to you, I feel even more confident. And I can even allow for maybe a little bit of explosions to take place.

Adam Weinberg:

We appreciate the partnership. It's fun and it's meaningful, and it's important.

Adam Davis:

Thank you so much, Doug.

Doug Sprei:

Thank you so much.

Adam Weinberg:

Thank you.