

Bryan Paul:

Jenna Robinson, welcome to the Higher Ed Now podcast.

Jenna Robinson:

It's great to be here.

Bryan Paul:

I'm here with the fantastic director of FAR, the Fund for Academic Renewal, Emily Koons Jae. Emily, how are you?

Jenna Robinson:

I'm good. You're too kind. Thanks, Brian.

Bryan Paul:

I, for one, just feel so privileged to be in this area of work with so many amazing people. Jenna, you along with Emily are right up there with them. This is fantastic, a wonderful opportunity for me and for Emily to be able to chat with you, Jenna, specifically about all of the exciting things happening in your State of North Carolina. But let's just go ahead and before we dig into all of that fun stuff, get to know you a little bit more. Please just take a moment, tell us a little bit more about yourself and the work you do.

Jenna Robinson:

Sure. So I'm the president at the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, and I've worked at the Martin Center since 2007, pretty much straight out of grad school. I actually didn't even finish my dissertation until I had already worked here quite some time. I worked and did my dissertation at the same time. Originally like a lot of people who go to grad school, I thought that I wanted to be a professor. Then I realized that you had to work on one subject forever, and that I have the attention span of a gnat and so that wasn't really going to work. And I found myself as I was taking all my policy courses, drifting closer and closer, or sorry, taking my poli sci courses drifting closer and closer to public policy. And so it just was a really natural fit for me to start working in the public policy world and also to work on higher education reform because it was something I was passionate about. I love to learn, I love being on campus, being part of that environment, but I'm just not cut out to be a full-time academic.

Bryan Paul:

It is a lofty position that carries a lot of responsibility, and especially to just dig into a niche area. I completely understand, and kudos to anyone who goes into that line of work. Given your work, it's intriguing to just find out a little bit more about your own higher ed experience. What was your higher ed experience like? What did you like about it, dislike about it?

Jenna Robinson:

My higher ed experience was really good. Like I said, I discovered that my attention span was not suited to academic work. And so the thing I really liked about it least is that every time I did my master's thesis or I did my dissertation, by the time I got done with that topic, I was like, "I never want to see this again." So that was the thing I liked the least. I really liked that I got to learn about a lot of different things. Like I said, I loved being on campus because there are so many different things to do and see and

engage with on a university campus. And of course, I was at Carolina, which has so many opportunities for students with events and cultural events and everything that's going on. So I enjoyed my time as a graduate student, and I think I went to graduate school long... It's been long ago now in terms of how fast everything moves, and so I feel like there was open dialogue on campus. People knew that I was conservative and I didn't self censor, and it was okay. Of course, that's not what we hear from students now, but my own experience was good.

Bryan Paul:

Wonderful. Why dedicate your career to higher education reform? What on earth led you to do that?

Jenna Robinson:

Right. Well, like I said, I love learning and in so many places, the teaching is being done so poorly. As you all know, general education curricula are horrible, and that's like a particular hobbyhorse of mine that there are certain things that students need to know. I'm a big fan of the work of both Daniel Willingham and Eddie Hirsch who tell us over and over again that having foundational knowledge is key to future learning. It's key to understanding, it's key to engaging within your own discipline, and I think that that's really lacking on campuses. Obviously education is kind of the starting point for helping people thrive later in life, and so for me, getting this right isn't just about four years. It's about laying the groundwork for the rest of a person's life and the rest of the person's flourishing. And so that's just really important.

Bryan Paul:

Beautifully put. Tell us a little bit about how the James Martin Center fits into this realm of higher ed reform. What is it and what exactly do you all do?

Jenna Robinson:

Right. So we're a public policy educational nonprofit. We're in Raleigh, North Carolina, and we've been around since 2003 making this our 20th anniversary year, which is really exciting.

Bryan Paul:

Well, happy anniversary.

Jenna Robinson:

Thank you. And we focus mostly on policies that can be implemented by trustees or state legislatures to improve higher education. About 80% of students, a little less than 80% of college students do go to public universities. So using public policy to reform higher education is the way that you can affect the education of most American students, and so that's the approach that we take. And we look at a variety of issues. We look at responsible governance, we look at academic quality. We look at viewpoint diversity, free speech, politicization and polarization on campus. We're also concerned, of course, about spending because that's rolled into everything that's going on. And so really it's a wide-ranging variety of higher education topics that we look at here at the Martin Center.

Bryan Paul:

Well, first of all, the fact that you can actually say politicization without drawing a breath, that makes you an expert in my books right there. Kudos. I botched that word not long ago in another interview. But on top of that, you are doing some remarkable work with the Martin Center, and it's just fun to hear in a

nutshell what it is that all of you care about there. And with the recent successes and exciting things happening in North Carolina, I want to shoot it over to Emily to just help us dive into all that a little bit more.

Emily Jae:

Sure. Yeah, one of the things that we're really excited to talk with you about are the number of policy wins, especially when it comes to free expression on campus. So you had a great piece on the Martin Center's website earlier this week about all of the free expression policy wins and it's a really enviable list, I think, for any state. But just to hit a few of those, in 2017, there was a statewide commitment to the free expressions adopting the Chicago Statement on Free Expression. And then in earlier, let's see, last August, UNC Chapel Hill Board adopted the Calvin Statement on institutional neutrality, making it the first public institution to do so.

Then in January of this year, the board of governors approved a new policy prohibiting employees from requiring a statement of beliefs as part of the application process. So again, part of that skills report, the University of Chicago put forward. And then the big news from this week was that the UNC Chapel Hill Board created a new School of Civic Life and Leadership. So this is a really impressive, I mean, any one of these would be a great win, but to have all of these within one public system, I think is really remarkable. So could you talk a bit about what the primary drivers of change have been in North Carolina? How state legislators, donors, and of course, the Martin Center all been engaged.

Jenna Robinson:

Sure. So I'll start off by doing a tiny correction, and that is, we are not quite there on the compelled speech policy yet. The governance committee has adopted it, and we're waiting for the full board to adopt it at its February meeting. I think that's going to happen. I'm really confident that we will have that on the books by the end of February, but we're not quite there yet.

Emily Jae:

We'll keep our fingers crossed.

Jenna Robinson:

Yes. Yes. But our board has telegraphed that it is very supportive of this policy and so, like I said, I'm confident that it will pass. So I think that there have been a lot of contributors to the policy change that we've seen here in North Carolina. The Martin Center obviously has been working on the issue of free speech for a very long time. And I think that the first time we started working on this was back in 2008, we partnered with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Higher Education to just find out what are the free speech policies or what are the policies restricting speech at every university in North Carolina. Because as we all know, sunlight is both the first step and the best disinfectant. You have to do that first in order to get anything changed, and so we looked then to see what is going on? Where are we now? At that point, we found a lot of red lights, a lot of yellow lights. I think in that year we found... I mean, it was like maybe two or three green lights in the whole state of 50 plus universities because we did both public and private. And so that was the starting point, and then we just shared that as often as we could with anyone who was in a position to create changes. And so over time, people started to understand college students don't have free expression on campus. Their speeches curtailed in many ways and we continued to highlight the times when that really became an issue on campus. When a student was told that they couldn't distribute constitutions or when we found out that one of our universities, their free

speech zone was like next to the bus stop by a busy highway, that was the spot you were allowed to go recruit people for your student club.

So really highlighting those problems that we found led there to be an awareness in North Carolina that this was a problem. So fast-forward to 2017, and the legislature finally took action. We got the campus free speech bill, and that laid out the path for a lot of the reforms that we've seen since then. It directed the UNC system to adopt a statement on free expression, which is comparable to the Chicago Statement. So that now is adopted by the system. It also directed universities to clean up those policies that restrict free speech, and so we're in a position now where we have a lot of green lights statewide. It directed institutions to include First Amendment training in freshman orientation. That's one where we still need a little bit of work because some schools do it really well, and then other schools totally phone it in. So there's still work to be done in this issue.

But that bill really did kind of lay out the path. It also had a little bit to say about institutional neutrality. It said an institution can't take position in such a way that a student had to sign onto it. It didn't go nearly as far as this new compelled speech regulation that we're getting from the Board of Governors, but it did, it planted the seed. And institutional neutrality has been a concept that the Martin Center has been talking about pretty much ever since then. It showed up in that bill, and we kept talking about it to the point that I was sick of hearing the words institutional neutrality. But I think you probably know that when you're in this business, you have to keep pressing on an issue and on education on issues before people finally start to see what's really going on.

Emily Jae:

I know you're sick of talking about what institutional neutrality is, but maybe for our listeners, could you talk a bit about why it is so important to have that policy in place?

Jenna Robinson:

Right, right. Absolutely. So institutional neutrality is the idea that as an institution, colleges and universities won't take positions-

Jenna Robinson:

Institution, colleges and universities won't take positions on controversial issues, so they won't make a statement. Every time some controversy happens around the country, they won't make a statement when the Supreme Court issues a decision on a controversial topic like abortion. The university will just stay silent. And the reason that that's important is because it allows for the freest flow of ideas amongst the people at the university, amongst the students, the faculty, the individuals who make up the university, because the university can be a space for those opinions and ideas to be discussed, but it shouldn't be the originator of the opinions itself.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:12:04]

Bryan Paul:

All this is reminding me of my own alma mater, the University of Missouri, that actually has a Speaker's Circle, which is open to free speech of any kind, and nobody has to have a permit to do that. Setting aside the corporate aspects of that or regulations there, I just can't help but think, I would hope or would've thought that the entire university was a free speech space or an open space for that kind of inquiry. And the type of institutional neutrality you described, Jenna, is what facilitates that. It's what

allows that discourse to take place so that we can, as professors, as students pursue relentlessly after truth wherever it may lead. That's why this matters so much. That was just the thought that came to mind for me from my own experience in graduate school.

Jenna Robinson:

Right. And our bill here in North Carolina does define pretty much the whole campus as a traditional public forum. That's where we are in North Carolina right now, that there is no circle that you have to speak in no set aside space. It's everywhere with reasonable restrictions on time and place. You know, can't get out your bullhorn when people are sleeping or taking tests or whatever. But I think it does have the right definition of how university's welcome speech.

Emily Jae:

So we've talked about how the Martin Center has been engaged on this. Could you talk a little bit about how donors, alumni, I think we've talked about the state legislator a bit, but how those other stakeholders have been involved?

Jenna Robinson:

Yeah, absolutely. So obviously, the Martin Center is privately funded, and so donors and their continued interest in free speech, God bless their patience, has been a boon to getting this done. The fact that donors continue to be interested in an issue where it literally has taken 10 years to get where we are now, that's extremely important. And Emily, you and I have worked together and I know you're passionate about this issue of getting donors to do the right thing. We remind our donors all the time, "If you're not giving to your alma mater, tell them why." And in particular, if free speech is the issue you care about, write to the development office and tell them this is something that needs to change. And just directing donors to put their money where their interests lie, of course, is a huge part of that.

So yes, we're eternally grateful to our donors for their interest in free speech, allowing us to do this work. And for their pushback at their own institutions. And of course, alumni and donors that often overlaps. And so now in North Carolina, we do have a chapter of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance. I'm on the board of the UNC Alumni Free Speech Alliance. It's a new organization, but it is wonderful to have it come alongside the work that we're doing. The way I describe this to people when they're interested is, the Martin Center is a public policy organization, a think tank, and the alumni are the grassroots. And we all know that in order to affect change, you really need both of those pieces. You need the public policy organization to come up with ideas that write the white papers, create the content, and then you need grassroots to carry it forward, to get it in the ears of citizens, to get it to the stakeholders that matter. And so, it is really a cooperative relationship that we've developed here already, despite the fact that AFSA is so new, but I think it's going to yield great results going forward.

Emily Jae:

Absolutely. And it's in recognition of the important role that alumni can play that AFSA has brought on Bryan to be our director of Alumni advocacy. So I don't want to turn it back over to him to talk a bit about the importance of the alumni movement.

Bryan Paul:

Definitely. Jenna, it's a thrill to work with you in the National Alumni Movement, and you are a key figure within AFSA, the Alumni Free Speech Alliance, not only through your role with UNC AFSA, which is

a member group of AFSA, but specifically now that you are a board member and vice chair on the executive committee of AFSA, what led you to want to be involved in this movement? You are already so busy and engaged with your work in the Martin Center, why take on this additional load?

Jenna Robinson:

Well, because for a long time I've realized that alumni need to be engaged. We need grassroots. You saw it in Virginia recently with all of the moms of students, the K-12 students who just created a groundswell of support for change in Virginia. And so, we know what can happen when grassroots actors get involved. Alumni are the natural grassroots for higher education. But in my role at the Martin Center, that has been outside of our particular purview, which focuses on policy. So, we've always wanted that to happen, wanted alumni to get involved, didn't really know how to do it ourselves, weren't in the right position to do it ourselves. But when the announcement came out about the Alumni Free Speech Alliance in the Wall Street Journal, I thought, "Finally, yes, this is what we have always needed. I'm glad somebody else did it. And I'm so excited to be-"

Bryan Paul:

Always good. We're always happy for a great idea as long as somebody else has taken the lead and we can top on, right?

Jenna Robinson:

Yeah, and I'm super excited to be involved now, but I never could figure out how to plant the seed to get it started. And so, it was wonderful to see other people plant that seed and then have the opportunity to come alongside and help the organization grow. And then, to have UNC, not an inaugural chapter, but almost an inaugural chapter has been really nice for me as well, that I get to be involved both at the national level and with one of my alma maters, has just been really gratifying. And I think that I've seen already that alumni get it. The alumni in these organizations, they know what the issues are, they are so familiar with the particular problems that their own alma maters, that it's a wonderful addition to the work that AFSA is doing, the work that the Martin Center is doing and other public policy organizations have been doing. This is just a fantastic outgrowth of all of that.

Bryan Paul:

And one that has definitely struck a chord with so many people. And when Ed Yingling and Stuart Taylor published that op-ed you referenced, there was that tidal wave of response from the public, and it sounds like you are a part of that. What can alumni and donors do to advance higher ed reform? You can talk about the grassroots right movement, the grassroots effort. What does that look like and what should alumni and donors know about that terrain?

Jenna Robinson:

So if possible, I think alumni should form a chapter of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance at their own schools. I think we've seen that having that critical mass really does make a difference to get things going, to shake things loose at schools, to try to create change. But I think alumni who don't have a network, whose schools aren't quite ready to have a chapter can still make a difference. I think, like I said, the first way is if you are giving to your institution, make sure to direct your money wisely, and I'll direct them to Emily to know how to do that and the Fund for Academics.

Bryan Paul:

Oh, appreciate that.

Jenna Robinson:

But I think, for people who are donating, that's the number one thing, is to make sure that you're giving wisely. Don't give to the general fund, make sure that you're putting your money into something that you care about and that you're confident reflects your values and the reasons for which you are giving. If you're not giving, tell them why. Because if you just stop giving and you don't ever let the development office know why you've stopped giving, then it's not going to be on their radar, they're not going to realize that they're doing something that is alienating themselves from their alumni. So I think making that statement is really important.

And also, I think some institutions are in really dark places right now, and I think if that's an alumnus of an organ of a school that you were not excited about giving to or even trying to reform, support other institutions that are doing it right, which there are a lot. The Martin Center just published a report about institutions that have great books programs, which I'm a huge fan of. I know that AFSA follows and has a list of Oasis of Excellence, programs that are doing really remarkable things for students. And so I think that there are ways for donors and dissatisfied alumni to redirect their energies and their giving to programs that are making a difference for students and that do align with their values.

Bryan Paul:

Definitely. And Emily, what would be some quick things for our listeners to know about the Fund for Academic Renewal? Jenna, of course, is talking about how donors can strategically target their donations towards specific things like free speech and such? What should our listeners be aware of on how to best go about that?

Emily Jae:

Well, Jenna covered it really beautifully, and really, that's kind of the exact point that we would make, is that we really encourage people not to walk away from higher education. That it is so important to our nation and it really has so many important things that it's doing for students. We encourage people not to walk away, but to give really thoughtfully. And to give thoughtfully is a challenge, which is why the fund for Academic Renewal exists to help guide donors through that process. We work with a legal fellow at the firm, Arnold & Porter, that can help with gift agreements. We help people from start to finish at whatever point they need support, but really making sure that their gift, they're confident that their gifts reflect their vision and their values.

Bryan Paul:

It is a wonderful initiative, and I have seen other groups strive to do similar things to help alumni, and donors get their money to the universities in a way that it can truly help with academic excellence and academic freedom. Jenna, you alluded to this earlier, and I would love to just get your take on it. Forgive me, Emily, I'm shooting down our list here to a question that we had a little later, but I just wanted to know, Jenna, what most concerns you about higher education in North Carolina? What is it that keeps-

Bryan Paul:

About higher education in North Carolina. What is it that keeps you up at night or worries you about higher education?

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:24:04]

Jenna Robinson:

I think my biggest worry about higher education has always been the falling academic standards. Obviously there are a lot of problems with politicization, with lack of free speech, but what keeps me up at night is that higher education is in many ways no longer following its mission and vision to be academically rigorous and meaningful education for students. And that takes a lot of forms. Sometimes we see it when institutions are so focused on 21st century jobs, 21st century skills, that they forget about general education. They forget about teaching students about the traditions and institutions that surround us, that make us Americans, that make us human. They forget about novels and literature and history because they're so focused on everyone needing to take computer science.

And so I think that's one thing that I'm concerned about that education has become, in Aristotle's words, illiberal. It's entirely focused on something that is a capacity or a skill or something of instrumental value.

And my other concern is that higher education has just been dumbed down. There has been a rush for so many institutions just to abandon any kind of rigor because they're so focused on let's attract as many students as we can, bump up enrollment, bump up tuition, dollars, whatever it is, and have stopped trying to teach things as well and as thoroughly as they can, stopped requiring courses that are challenging. And so both of those things, I think, have worked together to just really diminish what higher education looks like. You both have probably seen the example of Harvard's entrance exam from I think it's from 1869. It floats around on the internet from time to time. And it's got Greek and Latin and trigonometry and history. And it's just really remarkable this is what would the expectations were for entrance to Harvard in 1869 and comparing that to where we are now.

Bryan Paul:

Another reason why I would never get into Harvard. I don't know Greek.

Jenna Robinson:

Well, maybe you would-

Bryan Paul:

One of many reasons why I couldn't get into Harvard.

Jenna Robinson:

Maybe if you had lived in 1869, you would've had such a good high school education that you could have. But just where we were then and where we were now in terms of the expectations of higher education are so different and it is sometimes disheartening. So that's I think the thing like you said that keeps me up at night, that is a more intractable problem, I think, than the free speech issues because we are making progress on free speech. It resonates with a lot of Americans. And as we just talked about, North Carolina is taking the right kind of steps. But on academic rigor and the knowledge that really needs to be imparted in higher education, I feel like we have been spinning our wheels.

Emily Jae:

And one of our colleagues here at ACTA likes to say that college students are the only consumers who seem to want less for their money. So we have this idea that students want easier courses, fewer

courses, and easier course load. And I think that's really selling students a bit short. I think we find that when you challenge students, they really do rise to the occasion. And I love the piece that the Martin Center had from Professor of Clark Ross, who's a Davidson professor. He talked about his ECON 101 class, which I actually took when I was at Davidson. I remember every Tuesday and Thursday, 8:30 AM my first semester. And it was not easy, but I think I was a much better student for having gone through that. It makes me sad to hear though that the courses started to shift and that he's really had to make some changes to accommodate.

Jenna Robinson:

Right. And I think if you ask a lot of people, your experience is not unusual. If you ask people looking back what were the classes that affected you most? They were not the easy classes. They were not the classes where you barely had to do any writing, but you had a lot of fun. People will talk about the hardest professor they ever had. I mean, myself, my favorite teacher to this day was my middle school math teacher. And I had hours of homework and this was doing pre-algebra and algebra, and I learned so much. It created a lifelong appreciation for math to me. And I wouldn't have gotten there if I didn't have this really demanding exacting teacher.

Bryan Paul:

My wife and I to this day talk about the Econ professor we had at Brigham Young University, same Econ professor, notorious for being very difficult. And yes, his class was difficult. I passed. I'll leave it at that. But to this day, to this day, there are lessons I learned in that class that still resonate with me. And while it wasn't the best class for me at the college level, it was certainly one of the more insightful classes that have stuck with me to this day. That's the power of education right there, and the power of challenging students to think outside themselves, to think beyond what they think they already know, like you mentioned to Jenna. And UNC and the UNC system itself are striving to provide it seems models for how other universities and colleges can do that and how we can overcome what has been afflicting higher education to date. Tell us a little more, Jenna, from your vantage point, what is happening in the UNC system at UNC Chapel Hill specifically, that can be a model for other universities and colleges?

Jenna Robinson:

So I'll start with the new school that was just announced at UNC Chapel Hill, because I think that's a really exciting development. And I think the idea behind its creation, it really is marrying the needed skills which we all know that students do need skills, despite my concern that sometimes universities go too far, students do need skills. They need oral communication skills. They need listening skills. They need to be exposed to civil discourse but they also need the ideals that go along with it. So students in this school will be exposed to democratic norms, civic ideals, intellectual humility, the idea that there are things that you don't know and that you can do better. They will be exposed to people who think differently than them on purpose to engender that intellectual humility, to encourage students to want to learn how to talk to people with whom they disagree.

And so I think that this new school really will do a good job of putting those two things together. And it's also, it's intentionally interdisciplinary so that students can get used to doing all of these things in a variety of different disciplines, in a variety of different courses, bringing it all together so it's kind of a holistic education in leadership and how to thrive in civic life. And so like I said, that's just thing happening at UNC Chapel Hill. But I do think that once they've got this up and running, it can be a model for other institutions, specifically public institutions that want to kind of take on the polarization, the echo chambers that so often universities have become.

Emily Jae:

And we know that trustees are an audience that the Martin Center cares about. And of course at ACTA, that's an audience that we are very engaged with. So could you talk a bit about maybe what other trustees can learn from what the trustees at North Carolina are doing?

Jenna Robinson:

Right. So I think that the trustees at North Carolina, I mean the biggest thing that they have done has just been active trustees. I think that so often trustees will show up and they will rubber stamp things. They won't really read their materials. They let the administrators completely run the show and they get their football tickets and they go home. And that needs to change. And I think the trustees both at this UNC system and the UNC Chapel Hill Board of Trustees have shown that when trustees are engaged and active and really take the initiative on things, they can make a difference. As we talked about earlier, UNC Chapel Hill recently adopted the Calvin Report. It was the first public institution to do so. That was an entirely trustee led initiative because that was something that they were passionate about, that they cared about.

And so they reached out to various organizations, what is this Calvin Report? Tell us more, send us resources, so that they could figure out what they wanted to do. But then they got it over the finish line. They were the ones who pushed it forward and decided that this was an idea worth pursuing. And so I think just being active trustees and also reaching out to the people who work on higher ed all the time, reaching out to ACTA, reaching out to us. That's what I want all trustees to do when they have questions about what's going on or what are models that they can use.

Bryan Paul:

And this idea of active trustees seems to rub certain folks in higher ed the wrong way. The Wall Street Journal Editorial Board had published two pieces around this time of these reforms. One, UNC Takes on the University Echo Chamber, and then the next one was The UNC Echo Chamber Fights Back. And who was it here? It was Holden Thorpe who served as UNC's Chancellor from 2008 to 2013, apparently told the student newspaper, "The Board doesn't have any ability to propose a class, to propose a degree, or for God's sake to propose a school." And the rather facetiously, the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal then writes, "You got to love the for God's sake. Don't the trustees know they are supposed to shut up, write big checks for new buildings and let the faculty run the place?" Why is it that this idea of active trustees rubs right burden folks in higher ed the wrong way, and what can we learn from this?

Jenna Robinson:

Well, I think that either there has been a tradition of faculty governance on campus, and the faculty are there full-time. They have taken ownership of the various wings of what's going on campus, their own disciplines. And they don't like what they see as outsiders coming in and telling them how to do their work, which to some extent, I'm very sympathetic to you, right? Trustees are part-time. They're not academics. And so they aren't subject matter experts, but they do have the best interests of a wider-

Jenna Robinson:

... have the best interests of a wider stakeholder group in mind. Trustees, especially in public universities, are responsible to the public, are responsible to the students, are responsible to the taxpayers. And so trustees have a much wider perspective than faculty do. And I think that that's why it's so important that when you think about university governance, that there are different interlocking

pieces of it. It is not faculty make all the decisions and trustees write the checks. That is not the model we should be going for. That does not work.

And I sat through that faculty executive council meeting that got play in the Wall Street Journal and the Daily Tar Heel and elsewhere, and I think there was a lot of hostility from that particular part of the faculty. I don't think that these particular faculty members speak for all UNC faculty. We know that there are faculty members that are supportive, they're excited to see this new school, but these particular faculty members, yeah, they're territorial about academics at Carolina and they don't want the trustees involved. But I think it's also a misconception that this particular school just came out of nowhere. It's something that has been in the works for a while. We've had the program for public discourse at Carolina for a couple of years now, and the intention was always to build around that program into something larger. And so this announcement from the Trustees is really a culmination of some planning that's been in the works for a long time, including university administration, university faculty, and the Trustees.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [00:36:04]

Bryan Paul:

Got it. So what advice would you have for trustees in North Carolina and elsewhere as they are walking the tightrope of their responsibilities? How can they fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities on academic accountability and excellence whilst also respecting the academic freedom and perspectives of faculty members?

Jenna Robinson:

So I think that in terms of creating goodwill on campus, university trustees should reach out to faculty; find out what faculty needs, wants, and ideas are, keep those channels of communication open. And also, in your policies, protect academic freedom. Those are things that can be done through the policy work, through protections for free speech. Stick up for faculty members who say things that are dissenting from campus orthodoxy. So actually in practice, stick up for academic freedom so that when faculty say, "You're overstepping," or whatever else, trustees can pull up their track record and say, "Look, we have a standing respect for academic freedom. This is what we have done." And then in terms of governance, I think that trustees can be active without being micromanaging. I'm not encouraging trustees to micromanage. I'm encouraging them to be active in figuring out the policies and the big picture that allow faculty to do their jobs better.

Bryan Paul:

Definitely. Well said. And I know among these many wonderful things happening in North Carolina, there is some excitement on the horizon that Emily in particular is excited about. Right, Emily?

Emily Jae:

Yes. And we've talked a lot about the policy changes that we've put to foster free expression, but one of the things that we're really looking forward to working with you on this year is the Barnes Family Foundation Campus Debates and Discourse Program for North Carolina. And the reason I'm so excited about this is because it's really targeting that culture question, which I think is a lot harder to shift. I mean, getting the right policies in place is the first step, but to really change the culture is going to require programs like this. So this is an effort that we're bringing student led debates to three campuses this year. The idea is to kind of model civil discourse, have students participate both in a public setting,

and then we'll also have classroom debates as a part of that. So can you describe how efforts like this build on those policy reforms that begin to shift the culture towards free expression?

Jenna Robinson:

Right. I think you nailed it when you said that the policy reforms are necessary, but you have to change the culture in order to really make a difference on campus. And I think that changing the culture, as you said, is a lot harder, but demonstrating every day by interacting with a lot of people on campus, including students, including faculty, and doing it as many times as possible, as often as possible, is the only way that you can change culture. It is slow, but it's ultimately rewarding. And I think programs like this where you put students together and you show them how to interact in a productive disagreement, in a well run, organized debate where you are talking about contentious issues, but showing how it can be done in a civil or even friendly way is a great step forward to, once they've done it once, in this setting, they can take that with them into their classrooms, into their dormitories, to continue having difficult conversations in productive, pleasant ways. And so hopefully these students who engage here, they can go then be ambassadors for these ideas across the campus.

Emily Jae:

That's great. And this is part of a broader program that we do across the country. And one thing students are always surprised, even when I disagree with someone, they're always surprised by how much common ground that there really is. So people can hold two very different views on something, but still agree on a lot of other topics.

Jenna Robinson:

Right. I'm excited to get this started here in North Carolina.

Bryan Paul:

Jenna, this has been a delightful conversation, an invigorating one. It's always invigorating to me to speak with someone who is equally passionate about higher education, about academic freedom, excellence, ensuring that we are doing the best that we can to enlighten the minds of the future leaders and citizens. What is your wishlist for higher ed reform in 2023 and beyond?

Jenna Robinson:

So I think my wishlist is, and the Martin Center is published on this, so I'll try to remember what we said. I want more universities to adopt institutional neutrality provisions. I want more universities to prohibit compelled speech. And I think another really big one is I want universities to be smart as they encounter the enrollment declines that are affecting universities across the country. I think there is a tendency to make compromises that they shouldn't make, and so I think being really intentional and smart in addressing these enrollment declines is going to be a huge thing going forward. It's not something we talked about, but it is high on my list.

Bryan Paul:

Once again, Jenna, thank you so much for being here with us. We share your hopes that higher ed can be reformed for the better in the future. The work of the James G. Martin Center does not go unnoticed by us. We see it as an ally and a friend in this movement. We see you likewise as an ally and friend in this movement, from your work with the James G. Martin Center, to the Alumni Free Speech Alliance, and

your own chapter, the UNC Free Speech Alliance, we wish you all the best. Thank you so much for being here with us today.

Jenna Robinson:

Yeah, thank you both.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [00:44:11]