

Doug Sprei:

Thank you. That was more than enough about me, thank you. So it's the privilege of my life to be here with these wonderful colleagues, some of whom I know very well and have been working with closely for the last four years. Before we start our panel, I'm going to guide you into a little bit of the conventions of a Braver Angels' debate. So to begin with, I'd like you to all practice something that we call banging, it's very easy, it's like this. Ready? What does that mean? It's affirmation, it's applause, it's resonance with what you're hearing in a debate. How do we do it in Zoom, by the way? Does anyone know? Show it.

April Lawson:

There we go, all done.

Doug Sprei:

We call that jazz hands, it's American sign language for applause, and that's how we do it on Zoom. We've had many of our debates in Zoom during the pandemic, when our program exploded during the pandemic, amazingly enough. So I'm going to invite you to be banging and jazz-handing throughout the proceeding here, and we'll probably, we'll start with some introductions from each of our panelists, and then we're going to take on some of the conventions of a Braver Angels' debate.

The resolution before us in this debate, which you will be asking questions to and they will be speaking to, resolved, civil society is in decline and there's not a damn thing colleges and universities can do about it. Our panelists here are going to be speaking in the negative, not that civil society may be in decline or not, but is it true that the colleges and universities can't do a damn thing about it? I think you're going to find out that they can. But to begin with, I'm just going to start with Professor Rose, and I'm going to also adopt the convention of some of our Braver Angels' leader meetings, where David Blankenhorn or April Lawson will invite us all to make a very quick statement, in this case, two to three minutes. What's on your mind about our work today? So Professor Rose.

Deondra Rose:

Thank you so much, Doug, and hello, everyone. I have to say it's a true honor to be here today and I really enjoyed the previous discussion. I want to start by thanking Doug and all of your colleagues for the opportunity to be with you. I am a huge fan of the work that Braver Angels and ACTA are doing here at Duke University, we're beneficiaries of that important work. So this past year, Doug came down to Durham and hosted a Braver Angels' debate, and I have to say, in my nine years at Duke, before that I was on the faculty at Notre Dame for two years as a postdoc, it was one of the most memorable experiences that we had and I'm really excited to talk about this particular resolution today.

A little bit about me, I'm a political scientist, I love some of the remarks that various interlocutors made in their earlier conversation about feeling like there are some spaces where we feel like we fit a little less than others. So to tell you a little bit about my trajectory, I was a beauty queen, I was Miss University of Georgia, not because I was so beautiful, but only because I'm a little bit clever and learned how to fiddle. Have you ever heard the song the Devil Went Down to Georgia? That was my talent. I had one song that I could play. So then fast forward, I ended up becoming a political scientist, because I really love research.

In the course of moving into the position of working as a faculty member, I really started to think seriously about what I could be doing in my work to empower my students to really lean into their roles as citizens, whatever their perspectives are. I have to say, my work has evolved over the last 11 years,

and it's gone a lot from, to be honest, I think if I were to take my classes or to have taken my classes, I might have been a little more bored early on, just being honest. It was really conversations with alums who were working as policy practitioners and I asked them, "What are you looking for? When you're hiring junior associates to your teams, what are some of the knowledge and skills that would be important to you?"

They said, "Okay, Deondra, here's what it is, we're looking for people who can think outside of the box. We're looking for people who can work on teams and connect well with others who have different perspectives. We're looking forward to bringing people on who don't need a whole lot of instruction, like they're not scared to take risks." I'm looking at this list and I'm like, "Well, I'm not doing any of those things in terms of how I'm organizing my class." So I shook everything up and I restructured how I was teaching in hopes of better helping to marshal my students toward those skills and abilities. Very soon in that work, I realized that civil discourse, promoting transformative discussions and conversations was probably the most important thing I could do as an instructor.

That work has evolved, so just very quickly I'll give you the executive summary. One semester, I put a session on civil discourse on the syllabus, I thought I was doing something, I was really proud. I noticed the students, they participated in the conversation, but then I noticed some eye-rolling. So finally, somebody took me aside and said, "Well, Professor Rose, civil discourse is all right, but sometimes you've got to break stuff to get people to pay attention to you." It was interesting, because that wasn't my perception of civil discourse. I didn't think of civil discourse as actually something that couldn't achieve change, but they did. So I realized we were talking past each other, so in thinking about how to actually foster transformative conversations, I decided to connect with the pros and that's how I ended up connecting with Doug and Braver Angels and ACTA. So I'll leave it there, but have to say I'm really excited to be here with you. Thanks so much.

Doug Sprei:

Come on. You'll get the hand of it. Karrin Taylor Robson.

Karrin Taylor Robson:

All right, so what's on my mind? What I'm thinking about is the journey that got me here today and I'm not talking about the red-eye I took last night to get here from Phoenix. But several years ago, and probably six, seven years ago, I was taking my son to school, high school, and out of the blue he says, "Mom, there for diversity of everything that thought." This is my senior in high school, I'm like, "What, where'd that come from?" Then fast forward another year or so and our governor, Governor Doug Ducey appointed me to the Arizona Board of Regents, which is the governing body for our 220,000 students in Arizona.

When I got on that board, one of our universities, Arizona State, largest university in the country, had a green rating from FIRE, our other two universities did not. So I took that upon myself as a bit of a challenge, I wanted to make sure all of our universities got a green rating for starters, and I'm proud to announce that yes, all three of our universities have a green rating, we're the only state in the nation where all of our public universities have a green rating. Then I thought, "Okay, we've got the biggest university, but we have a problem in higher education and that's the whole diversity of thought and free expression."

So I thought, "We have a challenge, but we also have an opportunity, in particular with the largest university." So I conceived of a debate competition that we call the Regents Cup, which our three universities have participated in now for several years, and the goal is to of course engage in vigorous

discussion, but the goal was also every year to have that conversation on the First Amendment and free speech. Rather than a typical debate where you have different topical issues every year or every cycle, this is always going to be focused on free speech and the First Amendment and the importance of that in particular on college campuses.

So we had significant support from the business community, who have funded some pretty significant scholarships, and we've had great, great participation from people all over the country. In fact, one of our judges, Pamela is here with us, I wasn't expecting to see Pamela this morning, and Michael was a judge last year. But we certainly are proud of what we've done and we've learned a lot, but I will also tell you, in the last year I took on an adventure of a lifetime in running for governor in the state of Arizona. I learned a lot. Number one, had I prevailed in August, I wouldn't be here right now, but in my luck, I'm here. But I learned a lot going around the state and talking to people in living rooms and boardrooms and community halls.

The adults, the parents are really down on higher education, really, really down. They truly believe that our higher education institutions are factories of indoctrination. So to Doug's point, is civil discourse just something of the past and are we beyond repair? I'll tell you, we are not beyond repair. It's exactly the kids in these schools that are going to lead the way. It's through programs like Braver Angels and Bridge and your efforts and the Regents Cup, that's what's going to save us. So I'm very optimistic. So thank you, thank you for having me.

Doug Sprei:

I'm going to invite you to talk more about the Regents Cup later on. Now we have a hard act to follow, Manu Meel, a dear friend and just I'm going to give you the floor, sir.

Manu Meel:

Oh, don't do that. No, no, no. I am so grateful to be here, nice to meet you, Deondra and Karrin. It's just a privilege to always share the stage with April and Doug. I'm like that random young people that ACTA just hasn't been able to get rid of. I first got to know about ACTA in 2018 through Michael and Doug, and through our journey, it's just been amazing to see the growth of the organization and to see where it is now. So I'm privileged to be here and it's been amazing to get to know some of the team members and everyone else that does the awesome work.

My name is Manu, I graduated in 2020, I help lead an organization called Bridge USA, which is the largest and fastest growing student movement in the country, changing how we talk politics. We have college chapters on 50 different campuses and work with 24 different high schools, and really what we do is think about how we get young people to show up to these things. They're the experts here on the actual machinations of civic discourse, they're the experts on how do you actually structure a conversation that is interesting. Our job is to organize and activate students around this work, and through that partnership what you'll see is it's a fascinating perspective on how you can both mobilize, but then also provide excellent programming. It's amazing to see.

I want to quickly ask how many current students are in the audience? Recent graduates do not count, I'm a recent graduate, I learned that the hard way, I lost my student card. So how many current students are there in the audience? I just want to know who I'm speaking to.

Doug Sprei:

Jazz hands for them.

Manu Meel:

Amazing, amazing. Awesome. I'll just end with this, I spend most of my time thinking not about why civil discourse is important, because I think that we know that, I spend most of my time thinking about, "Well, if it is so important, then why aren't people jumping out of the woodwork to adopt it?" Why is it that the demand for democracy and discourse and listening and empathy is at an all-time low within my generation? That's what I really want to think about, focus on, and sometimes it means that I'm the contrarian in rooms like this. Michael, please don't invite me to the next conference. Sometimes it means that hopefully we can expand and think through how we can expand our argumentative repertoire to get young people to actually mobilize and activate.

April Lawson:

All right, very good.

Doug Sprei:

Lastly, I just want to introduce someone who I refer to many times as Madam Chair, she trained me to chair the Braver Angels' debates in early 2020, and has trained all of us to chair the debates in the style that she architected for Braver Angels, and it's unique and it's the whole secret to what we're doing here. So go ahead and share what's on your mind about our work together.

April Lawson:

Thank you, Mister Chair. Well, the first thing to know is that this banging thing, you should do it at will. You can show approval at any time when I'm talking, when Manu is talking, when Doug is talking. I would encourage you to, when we lead college debates, we find that at first only a couple people do this, and then there's a little more, and then by the end everybody's like, "Yeah, I totally agree. Oh, that's not right. Okay, okay." So I would just encourage you to be with us in this. This is supposed to be a conversation, not just a quiet staid panel where we opine and then go home.

So yeah, my name is April Lawson, I architected the Braver Angels' debates in keeping with the institution that shaped me, which is called the Yale Political Union at Yale University, and it's a style of debate that was very formative for my life because I did competitive debate in high school, and I love competitive debate, I bet there's some competitive debaters in this room and more power to you, so I feel like competitive debate can help people learn how to make a really good argument from either side of an issue. What I wanted to know though, when I got to Yale, was how do I figure out what I believe? How do I figure out how to be a good person in the world, if I want to try to be some kind of leader or do something worth doing, what is that? How do I know if it's worth doing?

So the Yale Political Union, through weekly debates on topics really ranging the gambit, from the classic political things, immigration, gun control, what have you, all the way through questions like, "What does beauty have to do with a good life? And what does it mean to be a good person?" So I have sought since then to just give other students that opportunity, and I think that one of the ways that students are being robbed on campuses these days is that without spaces where you can ask those questions, it's not only hard to figure out what do you think about politics, it's hard to figure out what do you think about life, what kind of person do you want to be?

So what gets me up in the morning is just believing that we have some ability to help students ask those questions in the rigorous intense way that they need to. I'll offer one other just provocative thought to just put this into the pot and stir it, as we move on this conversation, which is I read a Hannah Arendt essay a couple years ago, which was very affecting for me. It talked about, it was during the time of the

George Floyd riots and everything that was going on in the streets and on campuses and everywhere else in this country, and there was a line in it, so it was about dissent and Hannah Arendt has, the majority of the essay was talking about dissent within a system. That it's best to work within a system to change it.

But there was a line that really stuck out to me, which is she said, "Sometimes in a society, there is a culture of conversation, a culture of logic, that doesn't allow certain truths to come through. At the point that that's true, people have no choice but to go outside the system." So what I think we need to do here, to your point, Manu, about figuring out why aren't people jumping out of the woodwork, why aren't they just saying, "Yeah, civil discourse," I think that in some cases it's because they don't have the spaces they need to enable all the truths to be part of the conversation, including the really uncomfortable ones. So what I would just offer is the question, how do we create conversations that are actually accessible to everybody who needs to be part of them? That's my first speech. Yes, thank you, thank you. I hear a little bit.

Doug Sprei:

All right, just a little bit moment of room gymnastics just to get you all involved again. A few weeks ago, I was at Yale University with three other members of our team, April led us there on a pilgrimage to actually get immersed in the atmosphere of the Yale Political Union. These are students who live and breathe debate, they debate all week long, there's a large group of them, and then they are also divided into progressive liberal and conservative and independent. One of the traditions that they have on top of the banging and the jazz hands, and really world-class verbal jousting, is hissing. So let's practice hissing. Get it out of your system, folks. As much as you want, for the next five seconds.

Now, we're not going to be doing that here. But I want to point out, unless you really feel moved to do so, I think it's fine, but it struck me, the students, just the energy, the collegiality, the friendship, the electric current through them that just coursed through all of them, and knitting themselves together as a community within the Yale community was very striking. We went up to study that, to see if we could learn something about that for the work we're doing, building cohorts in what we call communities of practice on college campuses. So with that, I'm going to, the nucleus of what we're going to talk about will be able to expand in any kind of direction we want, but who remembers the resolution that I gave at the beginning?

April Lawson:

There we go.

Doug Sprei:

Brian Paul?

Brian Paul:

Want me to say it out loud?

Doug Sprei:

Yeah, say it out loud.

Brian Paul:

Basically, we can do anything on campus, change anything.

Doug Sprei:

Yes, resolve, civil society is in decline. Go ahead, sir.

Audience:

Not a damn thing the academy can do about it.

April Lawson:

There you go.

Doug Sprei:

There you go. Well, I think our panelists want to challenge that presumption, and I'm actually going to invite them to make three or four minute speeches from their own point of view and their own experience and the work that they're doing specifically to tackle that. I'm going to invite questions from the get-go, a question each at least from you, and how you do that is you go, "Mister Chair, I have a question for the previous speaker, the previous speaker said such-and-such, I'd like to know if he or she da-da-da." Not going to ask a question directly to the speaker. So follow that little parliamentary protocol. Pardon me?

April Lawson:

They should raise their hands too?

Doug Sprei:

You can raise your hands and I'll call on you. So you've heard the resolution, and I'm going to invite Professor Rose to make the first opening speech. I guess in the negative?

Deondra Rose:

In the negative, okay.

Doug Sprei:

Okay.

Deondra Rose:

So I do think that there's quite a bit that colleges and universities can do to promote democracy and civil society. One example I would say comes straight from Duke University. So I have the privilege of serving as the Director of the Center for Politics at Duke, and we focus on providing on-ramps to politics for our students, helping students to get a sense of the things that they could do to engage in democracy work. This is important, because we notice that so many students view politics as a lost cause. This is something that they don't want any part of, they feel like it's messy, they'd much rather go work in business or in volunteer organizations, they just have no interest in it.

Many students are now eschewing party labels, we see that they're increasingly identifying as unaffiliated, because they've really had it with partisanship. They're coming to campus and as many of the students in the previous conversation noted, they don't feel like they can bring their full authentic self to the classroom. I would argue, based on the students that I see, that really does stretch the continuum of identities on the campuses that I am a part of. So students really feel that politics is a

mess, they don't want to be a part of it, and Polis is committed to helping redeem politics, if that's possible.

We're also working to help elucidate politically relevant research in hopes of bringing evidence to bear in a lot of these conversations that we're having. My sense is sometimes we talk past each other and we have conversations about perceptions that are actually the result of maybe not having as much information as we might about what's going on in different spheres or spaces. So that's the kind of work that we're doing at Duke, and I have to say, students have been electrified by it. I've actually been very struck by the number of students who have reached out to us and they've said, "We're tired of sitting in classrooms and not being able to speak up. I'm tired of actually wanting to explore a point and talking to another person in the group, and my friends, basically they're going to kick me to the curb because I'm talking to the person who was on this side of the debate."

They're tired of it, so they're reaching out and they're actually taking the initiative to start exploring how to have transformative conversations. It was actually a Duke student who connected, at the same time we were working to connect with Braver Angels, one of my students was also independently working to connect and that's how we got, it was interesting, through two different avenues to connect with Doug. I have to say, I think the work that universities are doing, and I know many people are frustrated with the administrative arm of universities, but I will say in my experience, that's created some structure that has actually helped to create avenues and pathways for programs like Braver Angels to come to Duke.

So it's people like me, instead of having to lean on the students as they're supposed to be working to build their academic credentials and to work through degrees, I feel like there's an important role that I can play and that the university can play in helping to bring those resources to bear on campus. So to my mind, I think there's a powerful partnership between students, faculty and staff, and we're all committed to having transformative conversations on campuses.

Doug Sprei:

With that, the speaker is thanked. I'd like to invite a question for the speaker, who is courageous enough to ask a question and address it to the chair? The young lady in the middle of the room.

Audience:

Hi, my name is [Pruda Govill], I'm a senior at American University, and maybe because I go to a university in the Nation's Capitol, my experience is a little different. I don't think the majority of the student population would say that politics is a lost cause, I think in fact most students want to be involved in politics to extreme extents.

Doug Sprei:

So I'd like to invite to frame it as a question.

Audience:

Yes, of course. So I think that one of the reasons why we lack civil discourse on our campuses is because students are too moralistic on both sides. The left believes that what they're doing is correct, and what the right believes they're doing is correct. So I guess my question is how do we navigate that to produce civil discourse, especially on a campus that is more politically engaged than the typical?

Doug Sprei:

Wonderful question, thank you.

Deondra Rose:

So Mister Chair, to respond to that question, I think this is a crucial question, this is the \$50-million dollar question, or however much money we can attach to it. My sense is that many students come to college having their minds made up. My sense is that many of us are actually, we're not actually open to asking questions, we're firm in what we've decided. This is one of the places where my teaching has evolved. I feel like really working to set expectations up front in the classroom and to help students to understand like, "Here's what we're doing." So a number of students come to my classroom and they're like, "I'm an activist, I'm ready to go. If I see something that I don't like, I'm going to shut it down."

I think that's a very different posture from one in which, in an educational setting, our job is to grapple with questions, to unpack things, to take things that we think we know and to pick them apart. But that's different, so it means that we actually take off the gloves for at least a little while. Hopefully, in doing so, in grappling with questions from a variety of perspectives, when we do assume those roles with the gloves back on in whatever career path we may take, then we can better engage in our roles. So one thing I would say is that I've become much more intentional in working to help set the stage for conversations by working to ensure that we're on the same page about what we're doing in this particular space, what our roles are.

I don't know that colleges and universities are that intentional. I've been through, I spent so much time in school, I don't recall ever having a conversation where someone said, "In this space, we're exploring, we're asking questions. You don't have to have the right answer, I'm actually not looking for the right answer right now." I think the last thing I'll say on this is for students to make their way to Duke and any institution of higher education, they've done a lot of amazing things. They've been winners. We've invited them into our intellectual communities because they're great and doing things and they know it, and oftentimes we're asking them to suspend the skills that got them to us, the skills to compete, the skills to be firm, the skills to be bold and try to win a moment over their classmate.

I think again, that's not what that particular venue is for. So I think I love this question, because it really highlights this critical point that if we're not on the same page about what higher educational spaces are for, then we'll never make progress toward promoting democracy. I think, yeah.

Doug Sprei:

With that, the speaker and courageous questioner are thanked, applause for them. I'm now looking for a speech of three to four minutes from Miss Robson, you have the floor.

Karrin Taylor Robson:

Okay. So I think the state of civil discourse in America is like the patient that has been brought into the ER, pretty sick right now, but the prognosis is really, really good. I say that for a number of reasons, I think my limited perspective in Arizona has been broadened greatly by the work of the people on this stage, this diocese and what they're doing, so it gives me even greater hope. But when you look at some of the things that institutions, such as the public sector providing funding, the private sector providing funding, everybody knows the patient's ill, but everybody's jumping in to try and fix and try and cure the patient.

I see patients, the next generation, they get it, the understanding it, or they wouldn't be stepping up to get involved in these debates, in these conversations, in these discussions. So I am very optimistic, but it's going to take a lot of work from you, if we call all of us in this room the medical community in this analogy, we're going to have to tend to the patient, but the patient wants to get better. So I am very, very hopeful for the future, and it starts right here in this room.

Doug Sprei:

All right, I'd like to invite a question for the speaker. The gentleman with his hand raised, and please address the chair.

Audience:

So we've all had this ...

Doug Sprei:

Be sure to frame it as a question.

Audience:

Well, the little setup, this resolve that civil discourse is declining, compared to what? Civil discourse throughout our history has never been all that great, it used to be Catholics couldn't talk to Protestants. So what sense would you say it's declining?

Doug Sprei:

What sense would the speaker say it's declining?

Audience:

Speaker to say it's declining, excuse me.

Karrin Taylor Robson:

To your point, we go through cycles. In my lifetime, and many of us here, it used to be much easier to have a conversation without getting canceled or shut down or fired. Part of the reason why I'm optimistic is because we've recovered before. We have recovered before and we will recover again, because of the work, again, from everybody in this room. We all know the famous Benjamin Franklin line, "What have you given us, a monarchy or a republic?" A republic, if you can keep it. As long as there's an America committed to free expression and civil discourse, we have an America worth fighting for, and that's what everybody in this room is doing, so we'll come back. We will we fix it forever? No, it's something that we have to continue to do and continue to work on, and right now we've just got to make sure the patient can get back on her feet again.

Doug Sprei:

As chair, I actually have the liberty to exercise my right to ask a question of the speaker, which I sometimes do, not often. But I'd like to ask the speaker to just elaborate just a little bit on the genesis of the Regents Cup, because it's distinct, it's unique, it's something that we're looking at partnering with and there's an opportunity here to give just a little bit beyond the elevator speech about that.

Karrin Taylor Robson:

So the Regents Cup is, like I said earlier, a competition amongst our three universities in Arizona, and I came up with this idea based on the comment of my son about the diversity of thought and the lack thereof. So I started, I'm not a debater, I never had any formal training in debate, other than fighting with siblings, that was about it, but so I reached out to a couple folks in Arizona that are very, very well known for their work in this area, and I said, "This is my idea, what do we do?" They just jumped in and

they said, "We're going to design something that is special and unique that really focuses on free expression and the First Amendment."

Then the board staff, when I told them my idea, they're like, "Well, who's helping you on it?" I'm like, "I don't know." So they jumped in. So the staff leaders on the Board of Regents jumped in and took over, and large part, in large measure it's a result of their hard work that it's been such a success. But our students each year, they have to apply to become members of their school's team, they're selected in the summer, they then spend a semester working together and training for the competition, which occurs in the spring, and then each of the universities, they take home the Regents Cup trophy.

Which is interesting story about that, the Territorial Cup in football, it's the longest running rivalry in football, in collegiate football from Arizona, of all places, one of the youngest states in the nation. Anyway, Arizona State University said, "We have this wax cast of the Territorial Cup, would you like to see it?" So I'm like, "Well, sure. We're going to use this as the basis to have this trophy, this Regents Cup trophy." The speaker of our House of Representatives just happens to be an artist, a sculptor, so I called him and I said, "I have an idea." So it was my way of pulling our state legislature into this.

I had the speaker of the House create the Regents Cup, so we have this beautiful bronze trophy that now travels from school to school, to school. So it's turned into a great rivalry, it is a competition, because I believe firmly in competition, and it's been great. I can talk, give stories of the transformation of some of these kids. In fact, our inaugural Regents Cup, we had a young woman at Arizona State University, because they won that first year, and she said she was attracted to the Regents Cup because she was a firm believer that you should be able to shut down the speaker with whom you disagree. She was hellbent to make her case. She ended up winning this competition, and at the end she said, "This process transformed my way of thinking. We don't need less speech, we need more speech." So the goal is just to replicate that over and over again.

Doug Sprei:

With that, the speaker and the questioner are thanked. There are two more speakers on the docket, and I will invite them momentarily to opine toward the resolution, and after that, we will take questions, and after that, I will bring the formal part of this panel debate to a close and we'll be able to talk freely among ourselves and you'll be able to address questions to all the panelists, until we run out of time and have to eat lunch. So our next speaker will be Mr. Meel.

Manu Meel:

Thanks, Doug. The Regents Cup is a fantastic idea, and Deondra, your work at Duke with getting the faculty and the administration involved I think is so important. So thank you for that. I think what's fascinating about this panel is that this needs to be a multi-stakeholder approach to really make a difference. I think we've got a phone up here, or is that just me? Okay, sorry. I have young people ears.

April Lawson:

I don't hear anything.

Manu Meel:

Don't worry, I already know where the young people are, so I only looked at them. I'm going to build a little bit on your analogy, which is that I think the prognosis is good, I think that the patient is very ill, but I don't think we have the right tools currently to get the patient there. Here's what I mean by that, I think we spend a lot of time thinking about what is it that we want students to do, but we don't spend a

lot of time thinking about our actual customer or our consumer. What is their mindset? Why is it, my friend over there that asked the question, sorry, I forgot your name, said that young people are very moralistic. A lot of us have heard, for example, have stories of our children or stories of our friends that are very much on the "extremes" of our politics, so that they're engaging in very extreme ways.

Why is that? Why is it that the natural end state of a young person is to leave two hours of class to protest? Which is a real commitment, why is it that that's the natural response and not, "Let's hash it out with dialog?" So the quickest way that I could explain this, and the people that are closest to me in the room know this about me, is I had no interest in politics, I actually have less than an interest in politics now. I started as a premed student at Berkeley, and in 2017, our second semester, we had these massive free speech protests because a speaker by the name of Milo Yiannopoulos came. That was a watershed moment to really spark a lot of this conversation.

I was this tiny little kid walking past a coffee shop, the glass was broken in, inside the TV, the CNN chyron said, "UC Berkeley students protest free speech." The crazy part about that was not that screen, but the TV crew was standing right next to me filming that segment. For me, it was the breaking of the fourth wall. My parents immigrated to the US in '98, I was born December of '98, for most people that come here, you don't have the time to think about democracy, you don't have time to machinate over free speech or discourse. We've got to make the most of our parental sacrifice, so there's only two career paths that I'm allowed to take, it's either doctor or engineering. If I take a big risk, I can be a lawyer. I said, "Nonprofits?"

The next day after those protests, we got active and we started organizing some students and we said, "Hey, let's just organize a space for us to talk to each other." There's one thing that came out of that learning, and I think a lot of the people in this room could relate to that, I'm 23 years old and our lived political experience as a 23 year old, 22 year old, 21 year old, someone younger, someone going through high school right now, most of us were born with 9/11, we went to middle school during the Great Recession, we graduated high school during the 2016 election, and we graduated college in the year that is 2020, the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter protests, the Capitol riots. That's not a great sample slice of democratic progress and boundless hope and optimism.

Now, I paint that picture not to cast doubt over this work, but to potentially articulate a way that we get young people really passionate about this work. Because what that mindset and that lived political history creates is a lot of anxiety, a lot of uncertainty, and most importantly, a lot of mistrust in every institution in society. We can sit here and think that we've got to trust these institutions, but the fact is that it would actually be I think not intellectually wise of my generation to trust the institutions, given our lived political history. You can be a conservative, you can be a liberal, there's a reason why populism both on the left and the right are rising on college campuses. This is not a progressive mindset, this is a student mindset.

So finally, what we have to do to tackle this problem, to articulate in the context of what young are thinking about, because every decade, every moment in history has its own argument, civil discourse is, as I think someone here said, has always been something that we always flake on in society, and we have to make an argument at that moment. I think the argument at this moment to get young people jumping out of the woodwork, to get them really passionate about this work is that civic discourse, empathy, open-mindedness is the backbone of every movement for change that was successful in the 20th century, every movement for change. From Mahatma Gandhi and the Salt Marches in '45 to MLK and the civil rights protests, to Nelson Mandela in South Africa, civic discourse, listening, empathy, openness is not some squishy kumbaya circle activity that we do so that we can just do it.

It's because it makes you a better person, it helps you open your mind, but most importantly, it is a way and an avenue to exercise your moral courage. That's what young people are looking for. So let's go in

the offense, we're not defending civil discourse, we're articulating it as a tool for the pioneers of tomorrow to build a more hopeful tomorrow. That's what gets young people going, so that's what I would advocate for.

Doug Sprei:

The speaker is thanked and the chair invites a question for the speaker. There's a gentleman that had his hand up? Bring the microphone to him.

Audience:

I wonder if the speaker might agree that another aspect to get young people interested in free discussion is pairing this formal debate and the style of debate that we're articulating here with a social aspect in a social movement as well, that will get people like that together outside of just debates, and also in their personal lives as friends?

Manu Meel:

Yeah, I'll be really short, because I know we're a little ...

Doug Sprei:

Can I answer that?

Manu Meel:

Doug, this is your chance to plug Bridge USA. That's what Bridge USA chapters do, and I'll just be really brief. The way that a lot of us work together is that the program and the activity matters. The doctor can show up with the sharpest and most effective too, but if they're not trained, if you don't have the environment to actually make it, to incentivize and help them be the best doctor they can be, then it's a problem. So what Bridge USA chapters do, and this is I think something that you might have seen on your campus, is that the problem isn't actually that most young people don't want this work.

Actually, they want this work, it's just that they're the quietest, they're silenced by the loudest voices. The reason why those loud voices dominate the marketplace is because our lived political memory is one susceptible to loud voices. It's that simple. If you live in a family and your family's going through a hard time, and then tomorrow someone shows up and says, "Here's all the things you can do and you've got to break the system." You're like, "Done deal, that's it." So we've got to do through our chapters and through our networks, with the amazing work that ACTA, Braver Angels, that folks at the Regents Cup are doing, that Duke is doing, is we have to organize students around this work where it is to your social incentive to participate in a conversation. Because right now, it is to your social disincentive to talk about civic discourse. If you want to make the most friends on a campus, you get out there and break some things. This is about human nature, it's not that complicated.

Doug Sprei:

With that, the speaker and questioner are thanked. I'm looking for our last speech on the docket from Miss Lawson, I yield the floor to you.

April Lawson:

Thank you, Mister Chair. Well, I hate following Manu, because I just feel like ...

Doug Sprei:

Me too.

April Lawson:

Will you just run for president already? You're not old enough yet, I guess.

Manu Meel:

That's not part of the career track, remember doctor or engineer?

April Lawson:

Right, doctor, lawyer. Well, anyway. I love that, and I think that I'm really grateful to be up here today with leaders from all the different ... Universities are an ecosystem, right? It takes faculty, it takes administrators, and trustees and regents and other folks surrounding the system, it takes students, and it has to be a group effort. So I think that you just heard a really compelling articulation of the student perspective, and I personally believe that leadership needs to come from all of these perspectives.

I really enjoyed what you've been doing, Mister Chair, in guiding us through the structure of a Braver Angels' debate, very lightly, as we conduct this panel, because it illustrates one of, in some ways, the most important principle here. So Manu, you spoke of, there's been conversations about activists and the energy that students have and how they want to be part of this work, but instead, to your point, Manu, or to the previous speaker's point, the best way to make friends is to go out and break things. It's to seem like a leader in that way, because that's the style of leadership that current culture elevates.

What that shows us is that students have a lot of moral ambition, and everybody who interacts with young people can see this, it's one of the best things about young people is that they haven't given up yet. They want to make the world better, they want to be part of something good, they want to make something change in a beautiful and positive way. The problem is that the script that they see for how you do that is de-platforming, shutting down, breaking things, yadda-yadda. So the case that we have to make is that the better way to make that change, and to the previous speaker's point, he said it better than I will, we just need to lean to channel that, to help them see a better way.

Now, the reason that Braver Angels' debates are I think part of that, but this principle applies more broadly, is that we need to be able to release passion and help people share personally themselves without that resulting in things that feel like a personal attack. So the structure of Braver Angels' debates is really important, and you've been addressing the chair, rather than addressing each of the questioners, because that means you can say, "I think that's totally wrong. My lived experience goes totally against that." Without saying, "Manu, you're crazy, man."

It's funny, because actually I'm friends with Manu, so I could say that, but if I didn't know him, that could come off as fighting words, that could come off as socially very challenging, damaging. So the trick I think is to give people a way to be personal, to channel that moral ambition to say, "I want, I have experienced pain, my community has experienced trauma, I want to see a different world, a better world, institutions are not cutting it for me." Give them a way to say that, that is within the system, that is within the acceptable discourse that we can all tolerate, that we can all be part of, and in such a way that people can really hash it out without it feeling personal on the receiving end.

So what I would say that colleges and universities can do is, first of all, just know that there's people despair, and it's easy in my line of work with Braver Angels, we're trying to fix the whole partisan divide, not just on college campuses, it's easy to despair because there is, boy, that's a daunting challenge. But here's the reason for hope, and this is the reason that I have no trouble getting up every day, most days,

there are a few hard days, and doing this work, it's because there are leaders in every sector of every campus who want to lead this work. There are professors everywhere, there are students everywhere, there are administrators everywhere, there are trustees everywhere, there are incoming students, media people, there are individuals that you can find everywhere who want to be the leaders that we need them to be, who want to lead their campuses toward something better.

All we have to do is give them the opportunity, the social cover, so the social permission to this, and that's why the gentleman's question about happy hour is really important, actually. People need tools, social cover, community, they need to know they're not alone. So I think this is doable, because we've got all of you in this room and many, many, many people like us. So don't despair.

Doug Sprei:

I'd like to thank the speaker and invite one final courageous question in the Braver Angels' debate format. I'm going to give the floor to Miss Spencer. Let's give her a microphone. You have the floor.

Diana Davis Spencer:

I'm Diana Davis Spencer, and is this on?

Doug Sprei:

Yes.

Diana Davis Spencer:

Do you feel that colleges and universities really open themselves to this kind of debate? Because it makes them a little vulnerable.

April Lawson:

That's an excellent question, excellent question. I will say two things, the first is that actually the students are more courageous than the structures that surround them in a lot of cases. We invite students to pick their topics, and often the surrounding structure, the professors, the administrators, whoever are like, "No, we can't talk about that. We can't talk about gender here." For good reason, they have seen their peers at other universities get in real hot water because of the way that some conversations go.

But the trick is, if you can give people a space that is structured and where the conversation can be guided, it can go really well. But in order to convince people that's possible, and this is the real answer to your question, there has to be a few brave souls who go first. So I'd like to give a shout out, I don't know if Sadie's in the room, but to Denison College for example.

Doug Sprei:

Denison University.

April Lawson:

Denison University, excuse me, and Duke actually, which are the two schools that this year for the first time invited us to do freshman orientations with them. Yes, totally. The reason that's important is that it's risky to invite your students to debate before they're even on campus practically, before they've had any enculturation, indoctrination, but that's also the moment when you can show them this is what it

means to be at this school, this is what it means to be a Denison student, a Duke student is to engage this way.

So already, with Denison as an example, we gave three simultaneous debates to a total of 680 incoming freshman there a few weeks ago in late August, and already we're getting emails from professors and administrators saying, "I haven't been able to get my students to debate in class for 10 years, and these freshman are getting up and just saying their opinions like that's fine." So it's already working, and then our job is to say, "Look, other universities, you can do this. There are others who have gone before you, it has worked out well for them, and it is something that actually can be achieved and can be to your credit." I find that it's also true that they want their universities to be that kind of place, you just have to convince them that it's possible and that it will work. Then they are typically all in.

Doug Sprei:

All right, with that, I'd like to bring the formal part of our debate to a close and thank all the speakers and all the questioners. Let's give them applause. Where are we on time? How are we doing? We've got a little time left, okay. So now I really want, as much as possible, to make this conversational. After a Braver Angels' debate, actually we do something called a debrief, and for me, it's just as sacred and just as transformative as the formal part of the debate. We talk about what we've just experienced together, and the students who haven't spoken and some who have, reflect on their experience, some of them having the first time in their lives an experience of civil discourse and respectful conversation.

So in that spirit, I want to transition to the room reflecting with any of the panelists. You may have questions for Professor Rose or Karrin, I want to leave that open to you, because I ask a lot of questions, but John Rauch is a hard act to follow as a moderator. Lastly, I just want to say, regarding Jonathan Rauch, he came to ACTA in 2018 and told us about Better Angels, and my heart began to dance the minute he started speaking about it, and that's why I'm here today doing that. I just want to thank you, John, here you are with us. Who knew that it would blossom into what it is four years ago? But thank you. So I see a hand, some hands raised, we've got microphones around the room, and all I ask is that you frame it toward a question for one of the speakers or all.

Tom Neale:

Is this on? Yeah. I'm Tom Neale, I'm one of the founders of the UVA Free Speech, and I'm the secretary of AFSA as well.

Doug Sprei:

Welcome.

Tom Neale:

My question comes from my background, not surprisingly I was a history major who wanted to become a lawyer, until I saw what lawyers did, so I switched to an MBA and had 40 years in finance. But I'm a history nerd and one thing that hasn't come up, and I think this is in my humble opinion the problem with a lot of this, when protests occur on campuses today, they seem to be done in a historical vacuum. I blame not the kids, I blame their grade school, high school teachers and professors, specifically the UVA, founded by Thomas Jefferson.

Our student paper literally is saying, has been for years, "Get rid of his name, get rid of his statue. He's a misogynist slave-owning SOB." And that's the kindest word they've used. In comparison to whom? 200-plus years ago, to whom? So I would offer that the lack of historical knowledge really is a reason for a lot

of this, and I heard your point about student passion, I'm 70 in two weeks, I attended UVA on a ROTC scholarship when the Vietnam War was raging. You want pressure? That's pressure. When I ended, it was done and I never served active duty, my brothers did. Every generation has crap going on, you have to judge things as they were and judge people, A, most particularly in the ...

So that being said, is that a valid point? Is the lack of a historical knowledge and perspective a cause of a lot of this? Maybe I'm wrong, but that's my opinion. Thank you.

Deondra Rose:

I feel like that was directed ...

Doug Sprei:

Was that directed at Deondra?

Manu Meel:

Anybody? Okay, go for it.

Doug Sprei:

Who wants it?

Manu Meel:

I can jump in. So I think you directly reference, for example, your student experience, and one thing that I think my generation needs is a little bit of intellectual humility. I articulated the case of our mindset, because regardless of what it is that we would like people to be thinking, that's just what they are thinking. To an extent, what we have to do is work towards that. How do we articulate our work in the context of that? But one thing that I tell young people all the time, it's one of my favorite thing to do is to meet other young people that challenge us very strongly, is in the '60s, you had the most progressive generation the United States had ever seen. You had the civil rights movement, you had Robert F Kennedy, you had the anti-war protests, just because you think that you have certain ideas, doesn't mean that you're going to end up on the right side of history, because a lot of those people in the '60s are now what the young people call the establishment.

My point is that historical knowledge I think in this case is especially important. You mentioned Thomas Jefferson, one of the things that we've been toying around with is how do you articulate the experiment that is American democracy in a way that young people will both revere, but then also have the agency to continue carrying it forward? They've got to feel like they own this thing, they've got to feel like this is something worth fighting for, worth protecting. The word and the phrase that we've started to use, and I want to test this a little bit, so I know we don't have much time, actually I don't know if you'll have the chance to pushback, but afterwards, is we often call American the greatest democracy in the history of the world, and immediately what that runs into, we know as Professor Lowry was saying faculty meetings, "Well, here are all the arguments against it. Here are all the arguments for it."

I think what we have to start doing is we have to articulate the United States as the most ambitious democracy in the history of humanity. Not necessarily the greatest, but the most ambitious, because ambition comes with a lot of opportunity. Ambition also means that sometimes we fall short, and that's all right. But ambition ultimately has a lot of moral courage, and I think that right now we are the most ambitious experiment in the history of human society, given how diverse we are, given how many people speak languages, cultural differences, ideas related around how we relate to each other. There's

a moment right now where young people can feel like they're the pioneers of that experiment. So we have to start thinking about ways to articulate the past, so that it speaks to them, but then they own it.

Doug Sprei:

Anyone else want to pick up on that?

Karrin Taylor Robson:

Yeah. I'll just touch on this in a bigger context, not just American history, but civics, which includes, necessarily includes history. I chaired the Joe Foss Institute many years ago and we, at this dinner, we passed out this paper, it wasn't my idea, I wish I could take credit for it, but across the top it said, "94% of immigrants to this country who take the citizenship test pass it." Guess what percentage of our high school students can pass that same test?

Doug Sprei:

Oh, boy.

Karrin Taylor Robson:

4%, 4%. We knew, when we all arrived at this truth, we said, "We have a problem, we've got to do something." So we did, we did. Arizona was the first to pass the Civics Act, which requires every high school senior to take this same test and pass it in order to graduate from high school. That's now in 33 states. That then led to one of my passions on the Board of Regents, and that was getting American history as a general education requirement. I had taken my son off to school at Texas A&M and they had up on the big screen what their general education requirements were, six hours of American history, American institutions.

I come home to Arizona and I ask our board staff, "What's our requirements?" Zero, zero. So we expect the teachers that we're producing in our universities to go into the K12 system and teach our kids, that's maybe why our kids can't pass this exam. So it is I think a critical foundational element of any American school child's education is history, and understanding our history's not perfect, it's not, we know that. In fact, 100 years from now, people are going to look back at what we're doing today and say, "We were screwed up in many ways." But it's just critical from a foundational perspective to understand where we came from in order to know where we're going. So I think to your point, history is critical, whether we like what we see in the past or not, we have to accept it and use that as a basis for moving forward to try and form a more perfect union.

Doug Sprei:

Okay. Further questions? I see a couple hands. Yes, with the scarf?

Audience:

Thank you. My name is [Maya Novakowski], and I wanted to ask all of you regarding the preparation and the attitudes of students coming into college. Pasteur said, "Chance favors a prepared mind." In order for these minds to be prepared, they have to be taught, as you pointed out, how much attention should we pay to teachers' colleges and how our teachers are educated?

Deondra Rose:

I'll start, yes. I love this question. It's interesting, I can speak to the experience as a faculty member and thinking through my preparation for entering the classroom, and I remember coming out of graduate school, there wasn't a pro seminar on developing new courses or what you ought to emphasize. So I remember going in, and I have a lovely colleague who said, "Okay, you're teaching a course called political analysis for public policy making, one thing we really need you to do is make sure that students exit the class knowing how to write policy memos and knowing how to write them well. Other than that, you can put your own stamp on it."

So there's a lot of latitude that faculty members, for example, have, and I think that's a critical part of academic freedom in higher education and one of the best things about working in this arena is being able to shape courses based on your expertise. So I think in terms of working to help faculty members integrate mechanisms for building civil discourse and helping students to acquire the knowledge and skills to engage in conversations in that way, I think that's a place where having access to resources, so maybe that's something that preparation programs can do, for orientation programs for faculty, to connect with people like Doug here at Braver Angels and ACTA. I think that would be really valuable.

I think more broadly, to go back to the previous question about history, thinking through K-12 and how we prepare teachers, I also think that's a place where, if we want to get democracy right, we have to put a lot of energy I think and level up the things that we've been doing.

Doug Sprei:

We have a second answer.

April Lawson:

Oh, actually, I was going to say you should answer this one.

Doug Sprei:

No, no.

April Lawson:

Okay, as you wish. One of the things that we're seeing is that, as we work with students and faculty and others to set up student debates, the faculty are telling us, "We need this. Have you seen the conversations between us? It's abysmal." So one of the things that we're exploring is how do we take the kinds of debates, the kinds of tools that we are teaching students and in fact offer them to faculty? I think that it's actually, this is an interesting case where it's easier for faculty to walk into that if students are already doing it, but it's clear that the faculty have every bit as much need for that as the students do.

Doug Sprei:

I will add quickly that more and more faculty are coming into the debate room with the students, and they started doing that and we wanted to adjust, I just figured out the way to adjust to that is just establish right up front to flatten the hierarchy. You're all coming into this room together as human beings, not as teachers, students, rank, none of that, just engage each other as human beings. That is remarkable what's happening, because the students and the faculty are commenting on that, what a joy it is to actually engage with each other about divisive issues, without the rank and all the hierarchy attached to it. So it's a beautiful thing we're starting to explore. I did see more hands, there's one over there from our gentleman friend from FIRE.

Audience:

Yes, thank you. Thank you, Mister Chair. My question is for April, when you described the way that you architected the Braver Angels' debates, I thought it was really honestly genius the way you had to maneuver things so people didn't feel like now things are personal. So I would love for you to go into a little more about the little things that you created and put together to make that all come to fruition.

Doug Sprei:

That could be an hour-long answer.

April Lawson:

I was going to say, you're tapping into my inner format nerd.

Doug Sprei:

How are we doing for time? 12 minutes?

April Lawson:

Thank you for that question. The first thing I should say that it's not primarily my genius, it's parliamentary procedure. Like Robert's Rules of Order has been used by democracies everywhere to figure out, do we go to war? Not just have student debates, right? But there are a few things that I have learned that help people have a positive experience and come into the room and again ... My favorite thing in some ways about Braver Angels' debates is watching, there are a few students that walk in ready to go, they're ready to speak, they're ready to show up, they've got stuff to say, but more students, in fact, the majority of most rooms are like, "Okay, I'm going to see. I'm going to see how this is."

There are quite a few of them consistently who are like, "I'm definitely not speaking. Oh, my gosh. No." My favorite thing to watch is that over the course of a debate, first you hear from the folks who are comfortable, but then there are students who will say, "I'm not going to speak. I'm not going to speak. I just have to speak." By the end, the whole room is humming with energy. So my goal is to, and what I watch for in debates as I continue to try to tweak our design, is how do we allow that to happen? How do we enable that transformation?

So some of the things are everyone in the room can speak, and so I actually like hierarchy, I'm a conservative, sorry, but I do think that saying, "Anyone, this is a democracy, a democratic republic actually, and in the same way that everybody in the room, excuse me, in the country, has something to offer our country, everyone in this room has something to offer the conversation." That means that the janitor in the back of the room is invited to speak, we've had our media folks give speeches sometimes, the people who are videographers, whatever.

Doug Sprei:

The college presidents.

April Lawson:

Yep, we've also had college presidents come in and sit in the back and then humbly raise their hands, it's awesome. But so everyone in the room can speak, that's a big thing. Another is that we ask that you say what you actually believe, and by the way, I totally support competition and I love competitive debate,

there are different styles that aim at different particular, they're just two different tools. In our case, we say, "I want you to say what you actually believe, but that's not just tell me your experience, tell me the facts you know, it's also tell me what you're not sure about." Tell me like, "When that person made this argument, and I actually think it's really good and I don't know what to do with that."

So just inviting people to say, "Here's what I'm sure about and also here's what I'm not sure about," creates, first of all, it's incredibly disarming for those people who you think of as your opponents to be like, "Oh, they actually don't, they're working on this too, they don't have all the answers, just like I don't." It's also just, it provides a focused conversation where conflict is permitted and in fact encouraged, it's structured as affirmative, negative, affirmative, negative, but also we allow in the nuance and the like, "I'm not sure about that." So I do think that the key really is how do you enable people to be personal and to be themselves and to bring it all, but do that in such a way that it ...

I like the phrase constructive conflict, people are afraid of conflict in politics and oh, my goodness, it's because all of us have had destructive conflicts. Most people, especially after the 2006 election, have had major relationships end because of politics. So boy, we are gun shy about it. But the truth is that conflict can be constructive and it can build a relationship, and so just figuring out how do you set up a space where people learn to do that, that's what we aim for.

Doug Sprei:

I think we've got time for one more. Is a student in the back of the room? Let's bring a microphone to the student. What's your name?

Audience:

Can you hear me?

Doug Sprei:

Yeah.

Audience:

Very good. First off, thank you so much for introducing us to that style of debate, or at least for me, I had never experienced something like that.

Doug Sprei:

What's your name and where are you from?

Audience:

My name is Harry Hayden, I'm from Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia. Again, thank you for introducing that to us, that was something to behold, at least for me. But to my question, most of this discussion has been surrounding the university, as it rightfully should, because that's what we're here to discuss, but zooming out a little bit, is the lack of civic debate on college campuses not just some microcosm of society at large? And if it is, how do we in higher education or involved with it or interested in it separate ourselves from the media that we consume and come together, despite almost every facet of society encouraging us to do the opposite?

Doug Sprei:

You know what I want to do with that question, it's like a closing chord, and a chord is made of individual notes. Each one of these speakers will be an individual note making a chord and we'll bring that to a conclusion. I'll start with Professor Rose.

Deondra Rose:

Well, I love this question. This is I think the big one. My sense is that in many cases we feel like we know our fellow Americans or fellow citizens better than we actually do. I spend a lot of time, so I'm a political scientist, I'm a political historian, before going into academia I worked in politics, and I should ask, has anybody here ever done phone-banking? Quite a few people. Anybody here love phone-banking? Oh, I hated it. It was difficult. I got cussed out so many times, I'd call people and one time somebody told me off so badly he called me back the next day to apologize.

April Lawson:

Wow.

Deondra Rose:

It was rough. But it was funny because those experiences gave me an opportunity to talk to people I never would have had conversations with, a very broad segment of the population, and to talk to people in a way that, to talk to people who were outside of my personal bubble in a way that is very rare. Most Americans, I venture a guess, I can venture from my students, many would avoid that if at all possible. I think increasingly, our bubbles are enclaves of comfort, that ability to shield ourselves from some of that very uncomfortable disagreement and contention is something that many of us aspire to, but I think the more that we can break down those walls and to venture outside of those bubbles, try some phone-banking or canvassing or anything we can do to actually connect with people who are very different from us, I think that's the way forward.

So to my mind, I think you're hitting on that media influence, and the factors that shape our perceptions of each other that I think are oftentimes incomplete. So I think the way around that is to put away Twitter, to put away the phones, nobody uses Facebook anymore, but whatever people use.

Doug Sprei:

I do.

Deondra Rose:

To talk to other people. So thank you so much for that question.

Doug Sprei:

Great.

Karrin Taylor Robson:

I will just also say that the universities do not have a monopoly on this problem, it is every segment of our society. I just having lived through it myself, you see it in families, communities, even churches, political parties, it's everywhere. Unfortunately, because of that, and the noise that we're subjected to every single day, to break through, as April said, you've got to go smash something. So that's why we see so many people out there smashing things, that's why in our political discourse writ large it's really ugly. 2016 was just the start. I hope we can come back from the abyss, but it is clearly not just a problem for

higher education. But I think the solutions can start and really higher education can lead the way out of this.

Manu Meel:

Well, thank you first of all, Doug, for innovating on this panel last minute. Thank you for the structure. Thank you guys again, and April, always a pleasure. I'm just, again, so grateful to act, I really mean this when I say it, one of the things that I'm very much focused on is how do you get a tap into young people's leadership capacity? Y'all really did that for me, and so tremendously grateful and always learning.

I'll just be really brief on this, I think the problem of social media, college campuses, the current political societal moment is all wrapped into a ball of incentive structures. I think it's very simple for me, there's one sentence to explain this for myself, which is I only recently graduated, I don't think very complex things, and so my simple structure is we in society have the social permission to be divisive, we do not have the social permission to be unifying. That's it, for us. So on social media, what that means is that if you want to gain the most followers, you go out and be an asshole, to put bluntly. On campuses, you want the most friends and relationships, you go be an asshole. In your local society, you want the most engagement and you want to make sure that the mayor's office hears you, you go be an asshole phone-banking. I don't mean that in the sense of phone-banking is a bad thing, I mean who do elected officials listen to?

Deondra Rose:

That's right, the squeaky wheel.

Manu Meel:

I'm being very honest and blunt here. What we have to do is we've got to reverse the social permission structures, and it starts I think with respect to social media, and the analogy here that we've started using is actually nutrition labels and the food diet. In the '60s and '70s, the fact that everything these days has a nutritional label is not a new thing, it is a new thing, in the '60s and '70s with the advent of massive industrial junk food, the FDA was established, and when it became established it started advocating for a notion that we all have to think about what we actually consume.

So we started thinking, "Well, we've got to start developing an information diet." It's a very similar concept. We've got to start creating a pie chart for how we're consuming our information, what are the different avenues, how much of X-type of media should we be consuming that's healthy for us, how much of Y-type of media should we be consuming that's healthy for us, how much of our news should be coming from podcasts, et cetera? So again, these problems I think start with our incentive structures and I think we start solving them by start giving the people the agency in this moment.

April Lawson:

Absolutely, yeah. I love that question. That's the ballgame. I have answers that come from a couple of better thinkers than I. The first thing I would say is just that Braver Angels works on all the aspects of this and this is one of the reasons that we're very tired all the time and it's easy to get daunted, because this is coming at us from so many directions. As you said, Karrin, it's in churches, it's in the grocery store, it's everywhere. I really take your point, Manu, also about incentive structures that it feels like the systems are also pushing in the wrong direction here.

So I would I guess say a couple things, the first is that we have to fight the war on all the fronts, and so at Braver Angels we have people who work on politicians and local and federal and state, and we have people who work on media, we have people who work on grassroots [wasilla]. I think that we do need efforts, and again, the good news is that there are people all over the place who want to take on their particular piece of the puzzle, and so I think that a holistic approach is needed. The two thinkers I want to cite on this subject who are the two people who have most influenced my theory of change, my belief about how we can actually accomplish this.

The first is Amanda Ripley who wrote a book recently called ... Wow, I'm completely forgetting it. Conflict, it's High Conflict, thank you. The concept of the book is basically that there's a subset of divorces, maybe less than a quarter, that are considered high conflict divorces. What those are, are divorces where it's particularly vicious and the conflict takes on a life of its own, where people start ... They have all these characteristics where people start responding really fast and people start doing things that are destructive to them, as long as they hurt the other person more. They go from understanding and disliking the other person to being completely baffled as to how they could possibly be this way.

Amanda Ripley's theory, and I think that she proves it basically in her book, is that high conflict shows up all over the place. You can see it in gang violence, you can see it in international affairs, it's a phenomenon. She wrote that book because she was trying to understand American politics. So this sounds like bad news, but the reason it's good news is that we are in a system of high conflict and we don't have to get everybody to agree. We don't have to get, people don't even like each other all that much. What we have to do is go from high conflict back to regular conflict, to manageable productive conflict where we negotiate things and people end up unhappy on both sides, because nobody got everything they wanted, but it works. So the threshold is not as high as it sounds.

The last idea I'd leave you with is the other thinker who has influenced me on this recently, and it's Johnathan Rauch actually, who in his most recent book writes about how the problems that we're facing today seem unique, to the gentleman over here's point about history, they seem unique, but they're not. We've had other major technological revolutions, there was a similar, and John could speak to this better obviously, but a similar societal upheaval around the invention of the printing press. There are more recent ones too, I heard our decade compared profitably to the 1890s where we had a lot of similar kinds of social dissolution.

The good news is that we've come through this kind of thing before, and what tends to happen, and again, this is what gives me hope, is that there is a holistic approach, but it's not run by any single organization, it's not run by any single program style, intervention, any one thing. What happens is that lots and lots of people in their respective spaces see a problem, and they create their organizations to solve it. You have the people who, I was just learning about people who were focusing on political division in the workplace. This in the 1890s shows up in the Temperance movement, the Boys & Girls Clubs, a series of different social structures and social movements that arose all in the same time period to solve the atomization and fragmenting that was going on then.

What I would say is that we're only partway in, where it took awhile for that to weave society back together. I think that we're seeing something similar, I think we're seeing a civic renaissance that will help us address these problems. So it's not, is it going to be fixed tomorrow? No. Is it going to be fixed by 2024? Nope. But in our lifetime, and I think in the next I would say two or three decades, this is going to get a lot better. We just don't see it yet.

Doug Sprei:

So with your permission, Mister President, I'm going to offer just the fifth quick note in this concluding chord to your wonderful question. It goes back to our freshman orientation at Duke, you heard about that, we did one on August 22nd and it was actually spark-plugged by Professor Rose for 140 students at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy here in DC. A week later, we went to Denison University and did Braver Angels' debates for 680 students, the entire incoming freshman class.

At the Duke workshop, a student stood up and said something, a week later at the Denison debates a student stood up and said something and they were virtually identical. It was basically like this, "I have never had a conversation like this in my life. This is something that I think I need to take beyond the classroom, beyond the lecture hall, into my workplace, into my family and into my life ahead of me." That's what they said, and that's what keeps us motivated to do this work. I think that speaks a little bit to your question in a very personal way. Those were students saying that.

So ladies and gentlemen, the very first thing I said to you when I opened this conversation was it's been the privilege of my life, professionally and personally, to be working with incredible colleagues that you see here on stage, and now you probably have a little bit sense of why I said that. I hope you leave this room inspired, I hope you will visit the Bridge USA website, learn more about the Regents Cup, learn more about the work at Duke Professor Rose is leading, and especially Braver Angels and ACTA together, all of that. This is a conversation that I hope will reverberate for a long time to come, and we have a lot of work to do together to unite the country. So I want to thank you all for a wonderful hour and a half together.

Michael Poliakoff:

May I give my own thanks on behalf of ACTA to Deondra, to Karrin, to Manu, to April and to Doug. To channel the bible, faith, hope and love, and you've given us all of those things. Lunch is available buffet style at the back of the room. Let's get everybody to table, you can continue to eat by 1:00, and we will present the Hero of Intellectual Freedom Award to Professor Eric Smith. Thanks for being such a great audience this morning and look forward to continuing with the Hero of Intellectual Freedom ceremony. Thanks.