

Doug Sprei:

Lindsay Hoffman, Tim Shaffer, I've been wanting to do this for a really long time, and I'm glad I texted you early this morning on a wing and a prayer hoping that we could spontaneously get together. Here we are in Tim Shaffer's office. Thank you for making time.

Tim Shaffer:

It's great to be here. Thanks.

Lindsay Hoffman:

Glad to be here.

Doug Sprei:

So I could easily do a full hour or more with each of you individually. Having you together is its own special dynamic. And so I think I wanted to kind of see if we could drill in together around the space that we inhabit and the need that is out there in terms of the situation on college campuses, how we find the state of affairs with college students today, and the work that we're doing in different veins that all goes together.

And I feel instinctively that the Braver Angels work that Lindsay and I are doing dovetails very well and comports to what you're doing, Tim. And I kind of wanted to open up the conversation by giving each of you a chance to kind of maybe encapsulate a little bit about the essence of your work as an educator, but specifically in the direction, like the tip of the spear into this space of discourse and depolarizing the country and helping us help students become engaged citizens. So ladies first. I'll start with you –

Lindsay Hoffman:

Sure. Well, I think I've been using these kinds of tools in the classroom for a long time, and over the past several years, my goal was really to kind of scale up the classroom experience. I'd seen that a lot of these initiatives that I was using worked like the Perspectives Platform, like reading Jonathan Haidt's Righteous Mind book, like exposing students to their own cognitive biases. I saw that all these things were really working, and my goal was to bring that to a larger audience.

And so, as a result of a couple of grants through Heterodox Academy and through the John Templeton Foundation with Braver Angels, we're actually able to look at, "Okay, what happens when we do bring those kinds of resources to students outside of the classroom? And what kinds of impacts do they have?" So I'm a quantitative social scientist, and so Doug, I think I remember meeting you because I was on, I don't know, a podcast or a webinar, and I said, "Hey, all of you folks out there doing this great work, it's all well-intentioned, but you need to know whether it's working or not and what's working."

So we've had such a fun time over this past year or so designing a study to really examine what happens when students engage in a Braver Angels college debate and discourse event. And so that's kind of where we're at right now. We're in the middle of data collection. We'll be collecting data through the next year and a half. So that's kind of where we're at.

Doug Sprei:

And Tim, you've recently come in leading the charge at the Biden Center. What got you started in this direction?

Tim Shaffer:

So here in the Biden School of Public Policy and Administration, we have a new initiative called the SNF Ithaca Initiative, and, I think, compliments a lot of what was being mentioned a moment ago, right, that how do we think about college-aged students as not just people who need to think about things maybe differently, but also how do they act in certain sorts of ways? And so, SNF Ithaca is really framed around the sense of democratic citizenship. How do we think about being an informed and engaged citizen?

So civil discourse is a huge component to this. Civic engagement. So how do we talk? How we act. And also increasingly thinking about this of the landscape where we exist, of how do we make sense of the information that we're either accepting without looking at the complexities of it or whatever else. And so just a few weeks ago, in fact, we hosted a big event called the National Student Dialogue here at the University of Delaware, and we had about a hundred students from all over the country, all different sorts of institutions, research universities, smaller liberal arts colleges, regional, public, historically Black institutions.

So it's kind of the gamut. And one of the beautiful things about it is one, we kind of introduce them to some of these ideas, but then also truly workshop for a couple of days what is the thing that you're trying to deal with where you are. How do we think about this through [inaudible]? We're the Biden School of Public Policy and Administration, so we have this kind of bias towards the policy process to say, "How do we start to name stakeholders and how do we think about messaging" and all this sort of stuff to where they walk out the door with kind of a cheat sheet.

And what we learned last year was some of the students went back and changed what was going on on their campuses. And so, one of the participants of the campuses reimagined their kind of orientation for new students, right. How do we build in? And I know other efforts kind of align with some of these things. And so I think collectively, SNF Ithaca and others are tapping into, I think, this larger kind of desire and interest on the part of particularly students, right. They recognize that we're not in a good space.

But I think they're also trying to figure out, "So what do we do about it?" And I think what we're trying to do is to give them some resources, some tools, some orientation, a way to be, not simply how to act, but how do I want to be in the world, to where they can feel like they can affect change? Because I think at the end of the day, it is that sense of how do I have some capacity? How do I also recognize my own agency alongside other people?

Doug Sprei:

Why is it called SNF Ithaca?

Tim Shaffer:

Yeah. Yeah. So SNF Ithaca is at the SNF is short for the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.

Doug Sprei:

I gotcha.

Tim Shaffer:

Yeah, so that's our kind of shorthand and just [inaudible] to dovetail. I've been, for a long time, committed to this sort of work. And I was just being reminded of this actually just a few days ago. I went back to my alma mater. They're trying to establish a Center for Civil Discourse or something. And I was being reminded that a mentor of mine and I went to a small school called St. Bonaventure University.

Doug Sprei:

Upstate New York.

Tim Shaffer:

Upstate New York. That's right, south of Buffalo. And we had an event high school senior year called Spring in the Bonas. That was when I decided to go to college there. And my mentor, he is a Franciscan. His name's Dan Riley, and he had this line. He said it to this room full of potential students and their parents and everybody else. He says, "Bonas wants you because the world needs you." And it's always stuck with me, that sense of, "Gosh, what is our purpose, right? What are we doing?" And so since that time, I've been really committed to this like, "How do..." This is my line. But, "How do we live well with one another?"

There's a really important component of this that's very interpersonal, but then it also scales up, right. How do we think about this as institutions and all sorts of things? So the path that I've taken to where I am now has kind of... I don't want to say it's meandered. I'll look at it and think about a stream here a little bit, but it kind of wanders around. But there is some kind of end goal and destination. And part of the naming of our initiative here, the SNF Ithaca Initiative, is about the Odyssey, right. Ithaca was home for Odysseus.

If you know that story, he didn't have an easy time getting home, right. He had a lot of challenges, but it was that sense of being changed by what you're doing, right, the process. And so, for me, that's... there's a beautiful alignment in some way, that sense of journey. And that's what we're trying to do with students is like how do they have their own journeys? How do they come to understand things differently, other people? And then maybe live life a little bit differently.

Doug Sprei:

Well, let's talk about students. Just literally, it was only an hour and a half ago, I was in your classroom in GOR 308, and I walked into the room. 25 students showed up. We put them in a little horseshoe configuration. And who are these students? In the context of what Tim was just saying, "What's their journey?" I walked in, they were looking at us, ready to experience something together, and we really did do a Braver Angels debate very well with them. But this is what really captivates me the most in doing this work. Just who they are. Where they're at in life, and some of them have never even spoken up and voiced their own opinions before in a way that they've thought out much less to share with others in a setting like we just did. And so tell me a little bit about the who they are.

Lindsay Hoffman:

Well, I mean, that really depends. And I think that Tim can probably agree that, for the most part, as professors, we're teaching students in our disciplines. And so public policy students, communication students, political science students, they are typically in classrooms where they're having discussions about difficult topics. But the classroom that you were just in this afternoon because it's a second writing class, which is just a UD thing, means that every student has to take a class that involves additional writing. I have students who span from neuroscience to linguistics to medical diagnostics and computer science. And so many of these students tell me that they've never been asked by the professors to have any sort of discussion in class.

So one of the things that I'm trying to do is, again, kind of scaling up outside the classroom, is reaching out to these students who are in disciplines where they are sort of being told what to think. "Here's the raw material that you need to succeed in this particular field." And rather, give them the tools and the

practice for how to communicate effectively about those ideas. And so, just that debate today, our topic was whether social media is a threat to democracy. This course is all about technology and politics and intersection. And so many new ideas came up just because the students were the voices. The students gave the opening speeches, and the students asked the questions. So it puts more power in their hands.

And I always sort of joke that one of the things I try to do with college students is they come into college needing to prove themselves. "I'm good enough to be here. I've got the right grades. I've got the right GPA." I almost want to kind of strip them down again and say, "Okay, everything you thought you knew, you need to rework it. Let's break your brain a little bit and challenge yourself to think in new ways."

And that's what the college experience is really about. That's what you want coming out of it. Yeah, you want to get a degree. You want to get the minor. You want to get an internship, whatever it is. But really the true purpose of a college education is to create critical thinkers and doers.

And that's what the SNF Initiatives is aligned with what we at the Center for Political Communication do, as well as helping them learn how to vote. Why to vote. What other ways can you engage civically? How can you boycott or buycott a product? There's so many ways to be engaged citizens, and I think at the University of Delaware, I've been here since 2007, and I've seen a cultural change in our students. And I think that's what makes college students in a college campus such an interesting place for these kind of interventions to take place because you've got such high turnover every few years, and you can really change the culture.

When it comes to voting, for example, our voting rate was abysmal at University of Delaware students. When we first started working with Tufts University to measure our voting turnout compared to other college campuses, it was, I think, somewhere in the 30 to 40% in a general presidential election. In 2020, our last general political election... general presidential election, our UD student's voting rate was 75%.

Lindsay Hoffman:

So cultural change is possible on a college campus, and these young adults are at a prime point in their lives to be challenged by new thinking. So a lot of these critiques we see in the media a lot about, "Oh, colleges are making students this or making students think that."

I think they don't realize that, in so many cases, what the college experience is meant to do is to help them step out of being told what to think and to really practice those methods for communicating across difference.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah. So I wanted to ask you, as an educator at your core, what is it that you hope students come away with in encounters that you create with them in any way, shape, or form, all the different work you're doing? I mean, what's the essence of that for you?

Tim Shaffer:

Wonderful timing of having this conversation because just this morning, we are workshopping, so students, we have a foundational course in the SNF Ithaca Initiative, and it's called Citizen, Civility, and Change. And again, students from all over the board, a bunch of policy students, some communication, but also business and nursing and human services, just the mixture that is a 200-level course, which is great. But they were all identifying these kind of policy issues that they wanted to talk about. And so they were self-selecting end of these things. And today, what they were working on was what kind of civil discourse process, if you want to use that language, dialogue process, do you want to use to have

some conversations around this? So for the next few weeks, they're going to be doing these things mostly here on campus.

Doug Sprei:

And you're giving them ownership of kind of the [inaudible]-

Tim Shaffer:

Yeah. Oh, yeah. So literally, what happened a couple of classes ago was like, "We're going to do this thing now." We've been doing these models in class, we've been experiencing it, we are processing it. Actually, we were sitting out on the green one day because it was a beautiful day. So we used story circles out there. We did deliberative forums, sustained dialogue, these sorts of things. And then it was like, "Hey, here's a chance for you to think about what would you want to spend." Not a whole lot of time. This is not a semester project. It's a couple of weeks of your life here. But what's interesting enough to you that you might want to do some things. And so we use, you probably do this, Lindsay, open space technology is something I use, which is a fancy word for basically voting with your feet, right.

So people were like... And we use a Google Doc and we just make this crazy long list of all sorts of stuff. And then you figure out, "Oh, where is their shared interest?" And so some people will kind of flag a topic, and then, all of a sudden, there's a group of people that might move around. And so they were doing this, and you could also be in a conversation and hop back up and move elsewhere or whatever. Then, so today was the second part of this to where they're getting into the weeds of how do we actually want to have a conversation about this thing that we care about? And so they're talking about mental health on campus. They're talking about prison reform. They're talking about reproductive rights and abortion. I mean, you're talking about one group's LGBTQ questions in faith, right.

I mean, all this sort of stuff, but they're into it, which makes a huge difference. It's one thing if I'm just like, I mean, we might've had this experience, all of us in the kind of debate situation in or earlier iterations of, okay, you're for or against the thing, which is fine. But for us, and for me in this environment, as much as possible, I try to create conditions for students to have some sense of ownership of what they're doing to where they can step into it in a way that is not just doing the thing that you're being told, but really being invited to think for yourself. And then they're navigating this of, "Gosh, who do we want to kind of pull into this?"

And so we're right in the middle of it. But what I said to them today was, "At the end..." This literally might be a verbatim quote of myself. So I guess I don't know if this is a self-citation moment or whatever. But I said, "At the end of this course, my goal is that you recognize your kind of agency as a person, and you don't... you're not going to remember all the nitty-gritty details, but as you're stepping out in whatever profession or field you go to that you can kind of take this with you wherever you go."

Lindsay Hoffman:

Absolutely. It's so interesting that you say that because the class that I'm teaching, the students are also tasked with coming up with their own ideas. And because it's a class on technology and politics, this is the class that you were just in, Doug. I signed them to teams, and they have to come up with some... I tell them, "Money's no object. Come up with a piece of technology. It could be a wearable device. It could be an app, could be anything that solves some social or political problem."

And they're, of course, so overwhelmed at the beginning, but it'd be fun if we could get our students together because I actually have... One of my students is creating an app to help women access birth control and reproductive rights resources locally, particularly in states where that might be difficult to

find and it doesn't track their information. I have another group you talked about mental health on campus, creating... so they have to create a marketing proposal and a brand name and everything.

They created what they called the AnxieTee, which is a t-shirt that responds to physiological indicators of anxiety and maybe becomes heavier like a weighted blanket. So are they making these things? No. But just in your class, they're sort of tasked with going through the process of thinking through those problems. And one thing that things that... if I can just talk about another project really quickly. One of the students had the idea of, "What about for people with Alzheimer's? What if we gave them virtual reality goggles where they can live in the '50s?"

Because there's research that demonstrates that, and I think there's a place somewhere in Scandinavia where people with dementia can go, and it's like [inaudible] '50s diner, and they play '50s music. And so the student, very well-meaning neuroscience student, said, "What if we let them do that with virtual reality? Because they don't have to go over to Scandinavia. They don't have to pay the money." And then I had to say, "Ethically, what happens when they take those goggles off? Is that good for that person?"

So what I really try to ask them to struggle with, and I bet you do too, is just some of the ethical implications for the decisions that you make. And particularly when it comes to technology. So much of our technology, as we talked about today, is profit driven. And what happens when we take that motivation out of the equation and we really think about what are the potential positive and negative unforeseen consequences of this technology? And I will just use the example of the mass shooting that occurred just last week.

Tim Shaffer:

Which one?

Lindsay Hoffman:

In Kentucky, where the mass shooting was live-streamed, so these are the kinds of things my students are wrestling with.

Tim Shaffer:

Yeah.

Lindsay Hoffman:

We'll have to talk about it.

Doug Sprei:

So there was something in what you both said that I'm trying to distill. So it was five years ago, a little more than five years ago, I met April Lawson and David Blankenhorn of what was then called Better Angels. And in those five years, our program has just exploded into action. And it's growing. We've gotten funding. And one of the things that you were talking about earlier is there's certain, some kind of operating principles at play here that I didn't invent, kind of stumbled into them. And one of them, you mentioned, giving students ownership and agency over this process.

So in our case, in the debates, we actually enlist the students to choose their own topics and resolutions for debate, not just from a gut level, but actually send out polls and do some research and really see what debates are going to be really going to give that great split of opinions and make a great debate

happen. And in doing that, it activates them into the process. We have a couple of student leaders who rally around a faculty member. So I guess what I'm saying is that there are little principles at play that make this work very much wanting to happen. I don't have to force things. We don't even cold call any schools anymore.

They're calling us now because they're all hungry for us bringing this program to them so that they can give students a transformational experience of discourse. And I think what we do fits into a much wider sphere of all kinds of activities like what you're doing and many other organizations. But have you noticed that this work wants to be done in some way that we don't have to force it or push it too much?

Tim Shaffer:

I mean, it's funny, your line a few years ago, more than a few years ago, in 2017, some colleagues and I we published a book called *Deliberative Pedagogy*, and the kind of definition of that was talking about this kind of approach to teaching and learning that was not only educational but also transformative, right. And so thinking about this in those ways. And the reason I mentioned that is part of that initial project, which kind of spurred a follow-up book a couple of years later, *Creating Space for Democracy*, was this group of faculty around not just the United States, but around the world who were using things like dialogue and deliberation in their teaching, in their work kind of in co-curricular spaces on campus, right.

So thinking about this in residents' life in other kind of spots that we might not immediately think of when we talk about some of this sort of stuff. But there just this kind of energy and that in the Kettering Foundation at that time really was kind of essential to cultivating those discussions. But there was so much going on, right. And I think part of this is, and what's happening at this moment is all those discussions around free speech, around kind of viewpoint diversity, around the kind of thorny issues, and what do we do about it? Maybe it's ebb and flow, but it's definitely at a high point now.

And I think one of the differences is it's not just simply naming it as a dilemma or a problem, but also having, I think, organizations, resources, real energy, and interest to do some things about those things too, or to wrestle with them, right. I think back to the point you were making earlier of this is not about... For all those who kind of lament indoctrination in higher education, we're not. This is about opening up or rethinking or sitting with some degree of tension between what you've thought and that possibility then that that's maybe not so definitive or set, right. It's this intellectual humility recognizing, "Yeah, I know some stuff, but I also..."

Lindsay Hoffman:

There's a lot that I don't know.

Tim Shaffer:

I don't, right? And what do I do about that, right? Well, maybe I'm going to listen to some other people, or I don't have that experience, right. The discussions today were kind of about kind of minoritized experiences around environmental issues, right. And one of those groups that I did name earlier is working on that. And they're all really interested in this perspective of keep pushing. What do we even mean when we talk about that? So that, to me, this kind of mixture of all this, there's just... it's bubbling in some significant ways.

And thankfully, there are some... I'm going to have some bad image. Maybe I won't try to say this. But there are things to hook on to, right. You can say, "Ah, there's an effort. There's a thing out there." And hearing it in popular sorts of ways too, increasingly, I think, helps not just young people, but all of us

because we are in a space where it is deeply polarized. We're operating these kind of enclaves, and we're seeing the effects, unfortunately, of moving in that direction for a long time.

Lindsay Hoffman:

Mm-hmm.

Doug Sprei:

We were just in your classroom and one of the things that absolutely delights me every time-

Lindsay Hoffman:

I was going to mention this. Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

... it's like students walk into the room, a little shy, a little tentative, but then some speak, they open up. Then what happens is some of them in the debrief at the end of the debate start saying, "I walked into the room thinking one thing. I changed my mind when I heard her speak or [inaudible] hear him speak."

Lindsay Hoffman:

And not even necessarily that they've... I was for. Now I'm against. It's kind of like, "I don't really know. There's a lot of nuance to this that I hadn't considered before."

Doug Sprei:

Much more nuance, right.

Lindsay Hoffman:

And that's how everything is. And I think the way that all of us are socialized into politics in this country, as a result of consuming media and watching pundits and politicians yell at each other, is we assume that there's a right and a wrong. There's a yes or a no, a pro or a con.

And I think what we're trying to do here at University of Delaware and what faculty are trying to do all across the country is really help students to realize that sometimes it's not that... most of the time it's simply not that easy to say what is right or what is wrong.

Doug Sprei:

Mm-hmm. You went over your bookshelf just now.

Tim Shaffer:

I...

Doug Sprei:

You snuck away for a minute trying to be quiet-

Lindsay Hoffman:

As he's wont to do...

Doug Sprei:

What do you have there?

Tim Shaffer:

... I love having me meetings in my office to be able to do this. I don't know why I actually pulled it off shelf. I didn't need to. Because it's one of these lines that I love to quote. It's actually just literally writing something with this quote in it. A mentor of mine, Harold Saunders, Hal Saunders, he passed away a few years ago, but he wrote... he worked for the State Department, did a lot of international conflict, Middle East, other places. But he developed this model called Sustained Dialogue.

And he has this beautiful line in there, particularly about dialogue, but I think could be applicable to all of these sorts of processes. And I'll just read this because I think it captures this, right. "Dialogue is a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn."

Tim Shaffer:

And so it's not hitting somebody over the head. And what this is really about is an invitation to consider the possibilities that what I've known to be true might still be, right. You don't have to walk in and be like, "Well, this is what I thought at the beginning. At the end, it's the other thing." It's this sense of possibility of the nuance, the complexity, or at least sitting with something in a way that then becomes troubling.

That you got to figure out why is that stuck in my craw? What is it that makes this feel like, "Huh." What's that arresting question or those sorts of things? And I think when this work, and I know Lindsay does tremendous work here, and trying to figure out this stuff across the country too, which is tremendously helpful because so much of this is either-

Doug Sprei:

It's vital.

Tim Shaffer:

Well, it's either anecdotal or we have the sense of-

Lindsay Hoffman:

Right.

Tim Shaffer:

... like, "Yeah, that's really good." Or it's just totally so values based that it doesn't even matter if it's impactful. It's like, "Well, we believe in it, so we're going to do it."

Lindsay Hoffman:

Exactly.

Tim Shaffer:

And so being able to, I think, understand better these efforts that it's the critical thinking, whatever these kind of categories are. But to me, it's this intellectual humility. It's this recognition that we do better together, right.

Lindsay Hoffman:

Mm-hmm.

Tim Shaffer:

And by that, it's not just acting together, but it's being able to think and talk together. And so that's why I think the civil discourse and the civic engagement have to be so intertwined. There's no... I know I shouldn't say no, but there's limited benefit to only kind of intellectualizing a thing without a sense of... The line I always say is, "So what? We could talk about it till the cows come home, but where do we take this?"

Lindsay Hoffman:

Right.

Tim Shaffer:

And I think that's the other really important piece.

Lindsay Hoffman:

And I think one of the thing that I do that is in line with what you're saying is I always sort of joke with them I want them to leave the class feeling a little more uncomfortable than when they came in because discomfort is... encourages us to wrestle with ideas, to do some more research, to think about things more. And going back to the agency thing.

When you provide these students with that kind of responsibility, like in a Braver Angels debate that they have to stand up and speak for a few minutes, or they have to ask a question and respond to a question, it gives them the freedom and the efficacy to do what they may not have thought they were capable of doing.

And I love the Braver Angels knocking on tables or using jazz hands to support any speaker with anything that they say, whether you agree or not, that they just make an interesting point. Somehow our conversation today on whether social media was a threat to democracy pivoted to discussions on Charles Manson. I can explain that [inaudible]-

Doug Sprei:

But it was germane.

Lindsay Hoffman:

It was.

Doug Sprei:

It actually was-

Lindsay Hoffman:

It really was.

Doug Sprei:

... spot on germane, in my opinion.

Lindsay Hoffman:

It was really-

Doug Sprei:

They were talking about Charles Manson as an influencer before social media ever was on the scene.

Lindsay Hoffman:

Yep. Right.

Doug Sprei:

And by extension, I think he was kind of conflating it erroneously with Jim Jones and the Jonestown massacre....

Lindsay Hoffman:

The Jonestown Massacre. Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

Okay. But still. His point, the student's point, was that people were influenced on mass to do diabolical things and –

Lindsay Hoffman:

Before social media.

Doug Sprei:

So there was a good reflective moment.

Lindsay Hoffman:

It really was. And I talked to that student after class, and he said, "I wasn't... I didn't want to talk. I wasn't going to... I didn't think I was going to talk, but I could see he was just uncomfortable with the silence. And he was like, "All right, I'll do it."

Doug Sprei:

So this speaks to something very important. The three of us believe in words. And also, I don't think we want to use words cavalierly. If we're going to use a special word, it should be invested with meaning. So I said the word "transformative" earlier, and I really mean it because I see something transformative taking place in students. I don't know how to social science codify it, and that's what we're doing with you. But I see it almost every debate that we do.

So that little vignette that you just shared, and I wonder, Tim, if you've seen the same thing. Like, for example, in a podcast interview with president of Denison University, Adam Weinberg, I asked him, "Well, what would you like to see us measure?" This is before I got you involved in the Templeton Project, Lindsay. And, of all things, he surprised me. I didn't expect this. He said, "Well, can we get them to overcome their shyness in expressing themselves?" Just something as basic as that. That in itself is transformative.

And some of the students walked into the room very tentative, but because we had a few who had the courage to speak, others stood up, and you could see them catching fire. And that's what gives me so much energy back making worth leaving the house at 6:00 AM and getting on the train and coming all the way to Delaware to do this. That's why I do this.

Tim Shaffer:

Well, it's interesting you mentioned Denison because they have a chapter in our *Creating Space for Democracy* book.

Doug Sprei:

They're a great partner.

Tim Shaffer:

They are, right. He and others, the university president and others, they are really, I think, championing some of this work in significant and rhetorical ways, but also in really practical ways. And so the chapter in the book is all about kind of rethinking resident's life. And so-

Doug Sprei:

Oh yeah.

Tim Shaffer:

... moving away from, and I was an RA and I spent a lot of time writing people up for doing lots of stupid things in college, right, like lots of drunk situations and all sorts of scenarios that I don't want to recount in a way that gets documented forever on this podcast. But the short version was they rethought what it meant to be somebody responsible for community to rethink the kind of punitive response to the thing that you do when your brain's a little bit squishy and kind of slick when you're in your early 20s.

And there are really significant... They might seem small, but really significant shifts in how we approach not only ourselves but our relationships with people, but also the systems in which we exist, right. So you can approach... Just to stay on that point for a moment. You can approach it from you're doing underage drinking or whatever the thing is. And here's the process you're going to go through, or we can kind of slide into a realm that's a little bit more in this kind of dialogue deliberation world that is... I'll use the restorative justice sort of framework.

But we're thinking about how do we recognize that the thing you've done is not good for X, Y, Z reasons for you and other people. But there is also this moment for learning and change and possibility there. And so there is a groundedness, I think, of a lot of this work that's about basically kind of a hopefulness that people can be different or that... and not to force them to be something, but if what they're doing, how they're acting, how they're talking to each other, all these sorts of things could be improved.

Part of this is not to say the right answer, but to approach it in a more kind of robust and reflective, thoughtful way, I think is a really important thing. And it's not about all being on the same page, right. This is where... I had a student a few years ago who really was frustrated because they were trying to nail down the answer, and they're just like... They had this realization. They're like, "Wait, this... there's not a right answer in the back of the book scenario here." And I was like, "No."

Lindsay Hoffman:

Yeah. And I think that's what makes it difficult for these students in other disciplines, business or the hard sciences and engineering, because there is an answer that they need to find, and it's really difficult for them. I've taught, I've guest taught in some ethics and engineering classes, and they have said to me, "I don't like gray areas. I see black and white." And I think you know what you're describing and what we're all talking about here is, in some ways, we need to help our faculty understand better ways of engaging with students to sort of force them into these kinds of spaces regardless of what the discipline is.

You mentioned the RA thing. One of the other classes I'm teaching this term is a research methods class for undergraduates. And so it's just, what's a survey? What's an experiment? What makes a good question? What makes a bad question? And I had a student who was applying for a job as an RA, and she approached me after class and she said, "I'm applying for this job as an RA. But the adults sort of referred to them just as the adults, and the job keep saying that the people in the dorms aren't showing up to these meetings because they're lazy because they don't care."

And she said, "But I think it's the way that they're asking the question. I think it's the way they're inviting them, like, 'Do you want to come to this meeting?'" And so, in her interview, she said, "What if we asked, why do you want to come to this meeting? What do you want to get out of it?" And so that's an example.

Doug Sprei:

Changes the whole dynamic.

Lindsay Hoffman:

Right. And so she got the job. We all give her a big round of applause. But that's the kind of thinking that doesn't have to happen in a civil discourse class or a public policy class or a technology and politics class. It can happen in all these different kinds of spaces.

And I think one thing that's unique to universities that you can argue whether this is good or bad, but many professors are not trained in any sort of pedagogy. So I think that as I'm listening to you, Tim, just thinking the next step, I think, should really be how do we help faculty in other disciplines engage with these kinds of thinking with students and encouraging them to be okay with these uncomfortable spaces?

Doug Sprei:

Well, I'm going to ask both of you this question because, on May 9th, I have to... May 8th, I have to fly to Orlando, and the morning of May 9th, I have to go to University of Central Florida. And I have to give a workshop to 200 faculty, 200 faculty, and then guide them for an hour about our curricular debates rubric and how we do that, and then actually guide these faculty, or at least breakout of 50 or more of them in an actual Braver Angels debate.

So now I don't know exactly what I'm going to do when I'm there, but I've got two world-class experts with me. What do you think I should take with me to Orlando? And really, by extension, what should we be kind of along the lines of what you're talking about, how can we distill this work more potently toward faculty? And what kind of outcomes are we looking for with faculty? I feel they need the Braver Angels debates more than the students do, but that's just me.

Tim Shaffer:

Well, and it's true for a lot of faculty, right. The way we get educated and trained, you move to this kind of pinnacle as a Ph.D. student that narrows your way of seeing the world, right.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah.

Tim Shaffer:

And I always have to remind undergraduate students, even though they feel like, "Oh, all I'm doing is this one thing." In fact, you're taking this whole kind of suite of basically what it means to be a human, right. You're learning how to read some literature and a poem that you don't know the kind of stanza or whatever, all the way to figuring out how to do some stuff in the lab. But it's true for many faculty members. We are not prepared to do much of any of this sort of thing. And I hear it all the time. Anecdotally, I recognize this is the thing, but this isn't my stuff.

Which is honestly why the books I was mentioning earlier they were really written for faculty as resources to say, "Here are people across the board doing some of this sort of stuff." So faculty and staff, right. And I think one of them, we really say, "We anticipate this to sit on a shelf in a teaching and learning center," that sort of thing. And in fact, the next book out with a colleague at Central Florida is called Teaching Democratic Ideals to Public Affairs Students. And so later this year, that'll be out. And again, it's a bunch of these examples of how do we use things like dialogue and deliberation in our classrooms.

Because I think it's all about this kind of integration, right. These are pedagogical choices and approaches that can be applicable to all sorts of stuff. So in a school of public affairs, we can talk about human resources in these ways. We can talk about kind of bureaucratic theory, all this sort of stuff. And lots of disciplines can do this easier than others. And so it's especially important for some of those others who are like, "I'm in engineering, or I'm in some of other domains that this just doesn't align."

Lindsay Hoffman:

And yeah, Doug, I would build on that by saying that I think for a lot of faculty, there's a real fear of having these kinds of conversations in the classroom. So I think the more resources, exemplars you can provide them to let them know that this is possible. I always tell folks that when that memo about Roe v. Wade came out last spring, the next day, my students were having a conversation about abortion and abortion rights. After one of, we already mentioned, many mass shootings that occur in this country, my students were debating gun control versus Second Amendment rights.

And as you know, Doug, they don't erupt into chaos and fist fighting. And that, I think, that for a lot of faculty, they just need to see it work. They need to see it in practice and have a good sort of like a rubric you've provided and just some good practices. Because I think that the faculty themselves feel like, "What if this gets out of control? What do I do?" And just to talk about the progression of faculty. If you

think about... If I think about this before tenure, would I have had a conversation about abortion in my class? I'm not sure.

Tim Shaffer:

Yeah. Yeah. And just a couple of weeks ago, I had a chance to speak to a reporter at the Chronicle of Higher Ed, and they published an article called Power Shift. It was all about the dynamics between faculty and students, and they were naming this, right. And I had some little line in there that was paraphrasing of, "We have to recognize as faculty. We have a lot of influence on what's going on, even if we were trying to kind of democratize a classroom." And so, for those of us who kind of fall into that camp, we still have to recognize that we have a lot of sway.

But for a number of people, if they're junior faculty, if they're not tenured, or they're contingent, aka, adjunct, whatever, there are all these cases that we can look around and say, "Am I willing to put myself into this?" And so you need to have supportive department heads, maybe deans, the situations that in addition to everything we've already talked about, there's this larger structural piece that has such a huge impact on what we can comfortably do with some consequence.

If we get pushback from students or their parent or somebody figures out all of a sudden like, "Wait, why are you talking about that thing?" Some of us have protections, and others don't, and that's a really important thing for us to think about in all of these kind of dimensions that we're all navigating who's got power, who doesn't? How much am I willing to push this? Where's my vulnerability? Regardless of whether you're a sophomore or a tenured professor for 25 years.

Doug Sprei:

So look, I promised both of you that I would make this a compact conversation because you're both very busy. So here's how I want to wrap this, the final chord of our conversation. And by the way, I wish I could bring both of you in my suitcase to Orlando for this workshop I'm giving. It would be just that much more powerful, but I really appreciate what you're bringing in that respect. But here's what I want to ask you. So how does our work actually intersect with life itself? A couple of weeks ago, we were doing one of our big Braver Angels debates at the University of Tennessee Knoxville.

And I sent one of our program manager, Sadie Webb, down there and to chair it because I was traveling somewhere else. And so this debate was planned for months, and the theme was gun control, assault rifles, banning them Second Amendment issues. The morning of that day was March 27th. The mass shooting in Nashville, Tennessee, occurred, and it was right there in Tennessee. And so there was actually a big reverberation at the school, "Should we cancel the debate?" And we huddled together, and Sadie and the professors at the Baker Center, another think tank on campus –

Tim Shaffer:

Who in fact, were here for our national student dialogue. So there's just such convergence [inaudible].

Doug Sprei:

... synergy and so much... It's a neural network. Isn't it? But they got together and they decided, "No, let's proceed." And so this is where I'm getting at. I want to ask both of you to conclude the conversation. How does our work intersect with life itself?

Not something abstract, not... at the end of the day, not just academic, but transformative. We're influential in the sense of helping people, helping our society come together, helping our country heal. I

don't know how to put it but ponder on that for a moment. Maybe I'll start with... should I start with you and then...

Lindsay Hoffman:

Okay. I think it's about practice, honestly. And just offering students, all of us really take it out of the classroom. Let's take it off the college campus. We just need to sit and practice these kinds of conversations.

I was just telling you earlier that I recently was volunteering with an organization called Engine, where they are connecting... having one-on-one conversations between people, who are Ukrainian, who want to learn English with native English speakers so they can learn conversational English.

Doug Sprei:

I love that.

Tim Shaffer:

And these are the kinds of things that are possible now with the technology that we have. We just zoomed with each other. And we talked about what life was like in Kyiv and what it was like to not have internet access for many hours of the day and having to go to the cafe. And we just need practice engaging with people who are different from us. Yesterday, I stood on the green talking to students as we were celebrating this national week of conversation and was asking students questions of things like if you were... I'm using a great resource called Free Intelligent Conversations and asking them students just walking by like, "Hey, if you could give yourself advice at 10 years old, what would you say to yourself? Or if you had the world's attention for 20 minutes, what would you say?"

And these 32nd-minute long, or some students linger for quite a lot longer. Conversations are really impactful. And the more we practice that, the more we see. And I had a lot of my students volunteer to ask those questions. They were like, "Wow, I can't believe how thoughtful some of these answers are." And I think it reminds us that all of these skin-covered bodies walking around are not just Republicans and Democrats and liberals and conservatives. They're complex, interesting people that you may not even know their name or talk to them, but maybe they said something profound to you just in this tiny little interaction. So I think that's my, where the rubber hits started, just practice.

Tim Shaffer:

Just to build what you said. A colleague, Brad work who works at the Kettering Foundation, he always uses this kind of image of the, we need to exercise our civic muscle. And it is practice, right. It does take some routine, and phrase that I often use is, "How do we think about civil..." I'll use civil discourses, but not in an exclusive way, but as a disposition, right.

How do we just approach that willingness to think and talk and act? And I guess I'd say this as a real short version of this. In all those moments, whether it's in a classroom or it's at the dinner table, or with a neighbor, or workplace, whatever it is, all those moments when our first inclination is to retreat, I think we ought to figure out how do we step in.

Lindsay Hoffman:

Mm-hmm. And how do we make that a patriotic value? How do we make that a uniquely American thing? That this is something that makes us better for who we are? So it's creating it as a practice, but then also creating it, I think... There's one thing that Americans, in general, can rally around, which is

USA. And if we can say that, "Well, okay, this is who we are as Americans. This is what we do." I think that will really change the narrative.

Doug Sprei:

I'm very grateful we could have this conversation. I'm also very, I don't know, inspired that the two of you are here at University of Delaware within doors of each other or steps. And the work that you're doing is so mutually reinforcing in a way and so compatible. It's a real honor to have this conversation with both of you.

Tim Shaffer:

Well, thanks so much for the invitation. It's been wonderful.

Lindsay Hoffman:

Yeah, thank you.