Bryan Paul:

This is Dr. Bryan Paul with the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. I am interviewing some sterling students and their professor here at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology right here in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In my work with the College Debates and Discourse Alliance that consists of Braver Angels, ACTA, and BridgeUSA, I have the opportunity to meet students and faculty from around the country that are striving to foster free expression and viewpoint diversity on their campus through civil discourse programming. And right now we have the opportunity for a few minutes to learn more about such an initiative happening right here at MIT. I want to take a moment and allow our special guests to introduce themselves. We have four of them on the podcast today, and we are just excited to have what should be an enlightening positive conversation about the promise and potential for civil discourse on campus. First, I would like to hand the mic over to Dr. Linda Rabieh, who is with MIT Concourse. Linda, pleasure to have you on the podcast. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Linda Rabieh:

Hi Bryan. Thanks very much. I'm political theorist and I've been with Concourse and teaching in the Concourse Program and in political science and philosophy here at MIT for the past 14 years.

Bryan Paul:

Mariam, please tell us a little bit more about yourself.

Mariam Abdelbarr:

Okay. Hi everyone. I'm Mariam Abdelbarr. I'm a sophomore here at MIT and I'm majoring in brain and cognitive sciences and finance, and I'm from North Carolina. That's where I live right now.

Bryan Paul:

Wonderful. Great to have you here. Isaac.

Isaac Lock:

So I'm Isaac Lock. I'm currently a senior at MIT. I'm double majoring in biological engineering and philosophy, and I'm originally from Abilene, Texas.

Bryan Paul:

Well, welcome to the show. And Siddhu?

Siddhu Pachipala:

Hi, I'm Siddhu Pachipala. I'm a sophomore studying political science and computer science, and I'm from Houston, Texas.

Bryan Paul:

Excellent. Well, this is great. I have heard wonderful things about all of you here at MIT and now I want to take a moment and turn it over first to Linda to tell us more about MIT Concourse and what it is that she specifically does in this program.

Linda Rabieh:

Thanks. Yeah, so just to give you a bit of background on what Concourse is. Concourse is what we call at MIT a freshman learning program. And this means that students after they're accepted at MIT and in turn accept their admission, have the opportunity to apply for a year-long program for their first year. And what this means is that they join a community that has a focus on, I guess, integrating science and humanities, and it does this by trying to bring everyone together into a conversation about fundamental questions that span all the disciplines.

So what this means is that all the students who enter our program, we take around 50 a year. This year we have 55. All those students take a core humanities class. That's the class that I teach. They take at least one, but up to three of their required math and science courses that are required for all MIT students, within Concourse, we have our own science and math faculty and they attend a weekly seminar where we discuss and debate some of these big questions with the entire community and thus have an opportunity to talk to and listen to opinions about these questions from across the disciplines.

Bryan Paul:

That sounds right in line with what we are all about at the College Debates and Discourse Alliance and not to mention ACTA, I commend you for taking this initiative to bring this type of programming to your students and specifically working with the students who are right here with us for today's conversation. Isaac, tell me a little bit more about your experience in MIT Concourse. How has it been for you?

Isaac Lock:

Yeah, so as Professor Rabieh mentioned, Concourse at MIT is a first-year community, so it's made for first years to take their classes. I'm one of the select few that has remained remarkably involved through all four years of my MIT education though. I've stayed here and I've TA'd classes in Concourse. I'm an associate advisor for freshmen and I attend seminars. I go to our weekly reading seminar where we read largely Plato and lots of other interesting books.

Bryan Paul:

The real page turners of our history.

Isaac Lock:

Yeah, for sure. No, no, it's really interesting and I've really loved getting to stay involved and sort of just having this community of people that share this sort of common value of wanting to not only come to MIT and learn about science and technology, but also the humanities as well.

Bryan Paul:

That is so inspiring and fascinating to me that at a school that is renowned for its STEM fields, that there are students who are equally interested in reading the great works and studying and thinking deeply on the historical monographs, treatises and other papers and stories, epics that have really defined Western civilization. Is that why you've stayed involved in Concourse for so long? What has motivated you to stay in the program beyond your first year?

Isaac Lock:

I think that Concourse offers something really, really special to the MIT community. I think, whereas most MIT students don't really care that much about reading something like Plato, I think people in

Concourse do care about stuff like that. They care about the sort of big questions about life and about how we can exist alongside each other and how we can try to make sense of this messy world that we live in. And I think that Concourse is a great place to do that and a great community of people who all care about those things.

Bryan Paul:

Absolutely. Mariam, how about you? What has helped you or why have you been involved in this program as you have?

Mariam Abdelbarr:

So kind of like Isaac, I'm not a freshman anymore or we know that I'm a sophomore, but I haven't had four years with the program. After my freshman year, I'd say that joining Concourse was one of the best decisions I made coming to MIT, particularly Professor Rabieh's class, Becoming Human and having that opportunity to really sit and reflect on questions of what our purpose in life is and what does it mean to be a just person, what does it mean to live a fulfilled life? How can we bring ourselves justice. I think these kind of questions a lot of MIT students would benefit from reflecting on rather than just focusing on STEM. And I think that's one of the reasons I opted to stay involved through my sophomore year as well and TA for that class becoming human. I think it's just really important to stay in touch with your humanity and the side of yourself that wants to feel fulfillment rather than going through monotonously.

Bryan Paul:

So it sounds like to you education is more than just instrumental learning, meaning learning to apply skills or knowledge, say in the workforce or in the creation of something, but there's actually some sort of intrinsic value to it too, meaning the topic of the good life. What does that mean and what does it mean to bring our humanity to bear in our daily interactions? Is that more or less what you're talking about?

Mariam Abdelbarr:

Absolutely, especially because a lot of students here, this is a great school and they will go on to become leaders in a lot of STEM fields. It's really important to understand what the implications of our work will be for other people and the impact of what we're doing. So I think merging those two fields is extremely important to understand what our purpose is and to feel fulfillment in our lives.

Bryan Paul:

Music to my ears and the liberal arts education is in good hands with students like you wanting to be as engaged as you are in both. There's actually great value in doing so. Siddhu, have you felt similarly about your past and present experience with MIT Concourse?

Siddhu Pachipala:

Yeah, I think Isaac and Mariam touch on the fact that you get to approach and kind of learn to develop a taste for arguing and thinking through big questions, but also you find out that it's really fun to work out our differences and to disagree in big ways, but kind of develop some sort of understanding about where those differences lie and get some clarity about yourself and others and that this is not just like a chore or our democratic duty, but that it's a way of life that is the best life.

Bryan Paul:

All of you are, even just in the first few minutes, speaking so eloquently and beautifully about the value of a liberal arts education and the importance of, as you just said, Siddhu being able to argue effectively and productively as citizens. Linda, before we jump into a deeper conversation about the state of higher education and civil discourse today, I would love to hear more from you about why and how, what motivated you to get this program started at MIT and what specifically led you to want to bring the Braver Angels style of debate to MIT students. What was the driving force there?

Linda Rabieh:

Just to be clear, the program that incorporates the Braver Angels debates, that's part of a recent initiative that Concourse has embarked upon with two professors from the philosophy department. We call it civil discourse in the classroom and beyond, and I'll speak just for my own reasons behind wanting to do something like this. This actually started a couple of years ago when I noticed that it was becoming harder and harder to have the kind of open and intense conversations that are really the core of a liberal education that if you're really going to confront the big questions about human existence, you really have to be prepared to be open to radically different possibilities in a way that is sort of what our core humanities class and what our Friday seminar is all about.

And I had been noticing that students were more and more inhibited from having those conversations. And this dovetailed with two events that happened at MIT. One was an invited speaker had his invitation rescinded due to pressure from graduate students who opposed an article that he had written on a completely separate topic and published in a mainstream news organization. That, and then a further incident where a student had postered the university with some very inflammatory posters in opposition to our free expression statement. The response to both of those incidents was we shouldn't talk about it. And I think that was the catalyst I would say to my thinking we needed to do something about it that led to this project with philosophy where we hold a speaker event on a hot button issue, we invite people on opposite sides, and then following that speaker event, we hold a Braver Angels style debate within Concourse among our own students on that topic.

Bryan Paul:

Very good. And remind me again of the professors that are also involved in this work. I believe I've met one of them previously, but remind us who they are.

Linda Rabieh:

So from Concourse, it's Professor Anne McCants from history and myself and from philosophy, it's professors Alex Byrne and Brad Skow.

Bryan Paul:

Terrific. It's great to see that it's multiple professors, faculty working together to help this program happen, to bring these conversations to campus with students to help students learn these skills you are describing and to hopefully help them overcome the trend of self-censorship that we see around the country. For the three of you who are currently students, maybe you are familiar with this, I don't know if you are, but there has been a lot of research done that indicates that more often than not, it's not faculty that are suppressing student voices, but it's self-censorship. Students suppressing themselves due to pressure they feel not necessarily even from faculty, but from their own peers. Perhaps starting with Siddhu here. Maybe you can just speak to the type of self-censorship you may or may not have

seen on campus. Is that what Linda described, what I've just described, does that sound like that's happening at MIT at all?

Siddhu Pachipala:

Yeah, I think at MIT and many universities right now, I think this doesn't come from a bad place. I think it comes from a desire to be polite and tolerant to seek not to offend because disagreements are uncomfortable and in some ways threatening. Instead. I think students feel compelled to avoid discussion of anything that could be controversial, especially when there seems to be a lot of agreement on some of these big political questions already. Most students at MIT are on the left or liberal, so it's easy just to say that these questions are resolved, that we don't need to question our doctrines and dogmas.

Isaac Lock:

Yeah, I think everything that Siddhu said is right. I think that most people self-censor out of this sort of desire to be tolerant or this desire to not accidentally offend anybody or not do any harm to anybody. The end result of that is ultimately that a lot of really important issues just end up not getting discussed like the ones that are big political issues that people think are just sort of resolved in some way because there's sort of a consensus among most MIT students.

But I think that it happens all the time. I mean, I can recall several times that I've maybe been in a dining hall having a heated controversial discussion with someone and then had the thought, maybe I should keep my voice down just to make sure that I'm not going to offend somebody else across the room and stuff like this happens all the time. I don't think that in actuality these people would actually come hurl insults at me if they overheard me. But it is this constant fear of accidentally offending someone or hurting someone in a way that I obviously don't ever want to and that I think most people don't want to, but often leads us astray in avoiding these questions that I think are really important and that maybe are questions that we should be talking about with our friends in the dining halls.

Mariam Abdelbarr:

I completely agree with what both of you guys said. I don't know if this is getting ahead of the conversation, but I do think that what we have learned through Concourse, establishing mutual respect and using certain tools to engage in these conversations is what's really vital to making sure that people don't self-censor and that's something that I really want to see, a more widespread adoption of these tactics. I also will add that sometimes another issue that people feel whenever they self-censor is not having the correct means to articulate themselves or not wanting to sound like uneducated or out of line. So I do think that making sure that people are provided with the resources and the standards to set mutual respect and engage in these conversations is vital to making sure that we all feel comfortable. It's funny that you've had that dining hall incident because I've had the same thing where I've been really getting into a conversation but then reeling myself back because I don't want someone to overhear and misinterpret what I'm saying. I just want to engage in a conversation with my peers.

Linda Rabieh:

Yeah, I'd like to follow up on that by saying this is one of the things I think has been very good about the Braver Angels format, which is that it does two things. It makes debating fun. I think the students really get into it, they enjoy it, and it's low stakes. You don't have to give a long speech where you know all the rules of debate performance. We encourage students to stand up and even give a 30 second speech, and that has really encouraged students to do exactly what Mariam said, which is just to try out an

opinion and without the worry that you're going to be judged either for what you say or for the way you say it. And I think going back to what Siddhu said earlier, and this was one of my greatest hopes with starting this program, is it reinvigorated the desire for argument. It's made it come to life again, and I think made students see that this is what's fun about college is it's when we really get to roll up our sleeves and just get into it.

Bryan Paul:

I see all three of you nodding your heads in agreement with what Linda has just shared. Please, Mariam, starting with you. Why does that resonate with you? What has been your experience participating in a Braver Angels style of debate?

Mariam Abdelbarr:

Yeah, I mean, like Professor Rabieh said, it's just super fun. I've always been the kind of person that wants to talk about either current events or controversial topics, and I really love that we were provided a space to just do that and know that... Something that I really, really liked about it is even if it wasn't something that I personally stood for or agreed with, being able to explore another viewpoint, like stand up and give a speech about something I didn't actually resonate with, but just talk for two minutes about it and start to understand, oh, these are the points that the other side makes. I'm kind of starting to get it. It's something that I really, really appreciated about it. And yeah, overall it was super fun asking my peers questions. It's a great time.

Bryan Paul:

How about you, Isaac? Same as Mariam. Has it been a positive experience for you?

Isaac Lock:

I would just echo everything that Mariam said, but I'd also add that I think, especially on the point of being able to consider opposing views, consider things that you don't actually believe, but the debate format we do is actually very conducive to allowing students to give a speech on the opposing side. My role in the Concourse and the civil discourse at MIT is I'm officially a debate fellow, and I actually just last night was holding office hours to prepare for our debate that we have later today. And I had a student who came to me and said, I could really use some help formulating an argument for this speech. This is entirely the opposite side that I'm personally on. I really want to understand what the arguments are and how to make those.

Bryan Paul:

Very good. I, for one, am excited to be able to come and join all of you for that debate today to see what you are doing here at MIT in action. Linda, did you have a comment you wanted to add as well?

Linda Rabieh:

I just wanted to add briefly that one innovation that we've made in our program, and actually this is true of all three of the students that we're talking to today, is we invite upper class students and all three of these serve as debate fellows. And what that has added to the mix is that they in concert with me and our assistant director, Sasha Rickard, we get together and we come up with the resolution after the speaker event. So we come up with a resolution that we think is going to be one that the students will really benefit from engaging on. And then these guys hold office hours and they help students think

through their arguments on each side. They themselves have arguments on each side so that if during a debate everybody is going in one direction, they're prepared to kind of come in on the other side. And we've noticed that that then seems to encourage students to come in on other sides as well.

Bryan Paul:

Wow, I love that. That is a marvelous learning opportunity, not to mention leadership opportunity for all of you and parallels exactly what we are doing with the College Debates and Discourse Alliance with a number of our grant-funded initiatives with faculty and student fellows who do precisely that. They plan the events in concert with us. We support them in bringing this programming to their campus and in the hopes of creating communities of practice as well as self-sustaining models so that future students can also enjoy the same benefits you all are enjoying. Siddhu, I wanted to give you a chance to comment as well. What has your experience been like with these Braver Angels style of debates?

Siddhu Pachipala:

Sure. I think other than what Mariam and Isaac have said, there's two big things for me. I think we talked about self-censorship earlier, and I think one of the big reasons it hasn't been mentioned is that political beliefs and political identity has become so central to how people understand themselves and other people. So it translates into your social esteem as well. You don't want to be caught saying the wrong thing because that now becomes who you are. You are the person who has this policy view, that person is pro-life, or that person is a Trump supporter. That sort of becomes your identity.

So I think a debate style like this sort of loosens the screws between what you say. You can try out arguments, you can build a case for what your opponents might say without it reflecting so strongly on who you are. I think it does that well. And I think also we sort of lost the art of argumentation and it forces you to think about arguments clearly and to martial evidence and to put them into convincing claims. And that sort of ability and habit is what allows a democratic society to function without it. And if you don't really believe that you can convince your fellow citizens, then I guess you don't believe in the theory of change of democracy.

Bryan Paul:

We live in such polarized times and it seems that practically everything has become politicized and it can make the conversations that we are describing the essential, even difficult conversations, that much more challenging. What advice would you give to someone, a fellow student here at MIT or any student across the country who wants to engage in a political conversation with a family member, a friend, or even a faculty member who has a different political belief? What advice would you give to such students?

Mariam Abdelbarr:

I would say that approaching conversations from a point of empathy is really important. I think that a lot of times if you have an idea, you go into a conversation hoping to persuade the other person or convert them to your viewpoint. And I think a lot of times it's really important to let go of that desire and just listen and try to understand. For me, I know that I wouldn't expect someone to try to understand my point of view unless I've given their thoughts and perspectives enough thought and time and allowed them to speak. So I really think that being understanding and open-minded is super important if you wish to receive the same treatment, and that's not going to work every time. But I think approaching conversations in that manner can lead to a lot more productivity and at least make you feel better about how you approach others with different views.

Isaac Lock:

Sure. I mean, to me, I think the biggest thing in approaching these really difficult conversations with people we disagree with is to give them the full possible credit for what they're saying. So to assume not that they are coming from a place of malice or that they are trying to be offensive or trying to be inflammatory, but actually trying to take what they're saying and maybe even doing some of the intellectual work yourself and make it the best possible argument that it can be and respond to that. And not to simply calling someone a nickname or putting them into a box for what you think their political views are, but actually listening to what they have to say and giving their argument the best possible case you can.

And just sitting down and asking them questions and say, okay, but why do you believe that? And what is the foundational reason that you think that this is true? And you're trying to drill into the heart of what their beliefs are and try to reach them that way. And I don't think that you're ever going to come to a table for one discussion and change someone's mind. I think that the best you can possibly hope for is just talking with them, mutually understanding what each other has to say and maybe sowing the seeds of doubt in their mind to change their mind later.

Siddhu Pachipala:

Sure. I think a lot's been covered already, but I've been there. I've had the conversations with my parents that used to end in me leaving in tears and thinking they were terrible people for what they've said. And I was there. I was there all throughout high school. And I think one important thing to recognize is that having the sort of respectful polite conversations is really unnatural, and our impulse naturally is to defend and to retreat and to be our tribal selves, but that we have to put in effort to be open people and to be understanding people and to recognize that there is this jump you have to make. This uncomfortable unease that comes with trying to be understanding that that is just a part of the game, the kind of trade-off you make when you decide that you want to live in a democracy.

Bryan Paul:

Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said quote, "I do not like that man. I must get to know him better." And I'm inspired by what the three of you have shared, that in spite of whatever disagreements you may or may have with your peers, family members, friends, that you're striving in your own way to build and acquire the skills to have more constructive, meaningful conversations with people. Because I think is what Isaac said, that's at the heart of what makes a democratic society, our democratic republic even, function and run. Linda, I want to give you a chance to comment here as well as we near the end of our time together, what advice would you like to give to students and even your fellow faculty at MIT or elsewhere who have a desire to engage or who feel like they just don't know where to start in engaging on these type of conversations and any other final words you may have for us?

Linda Rabieh:

I had wanted to underscore also something that Siddhu said about openness, which I think is a particularly important part of what I would say are the college debate programs. Because the point of being in a university is you have this unique special time where you can really learn something. And I would say that is just one of the wonderful things about continuing to be part of a university and an academic community, is that the point that we're all aiming at is knowledge. And I think if we keep that in mind that that's what we're doing here, that's what we have this wonderful opportunity to do is learn. I think that provides a kind of shared purpose that helps us all address these kinds of questions.

We're all engaged on this project of trying to learn something. So I would say openness, be curious, really want to understand something because maybe your own position, right? This is a famous argument that Mill makes. Maybe your own position isn't adequate, and maybe it is adequate, but all you know is that you believe it, not why? And you're never going to know why unless it's challenged. And it's only when your views are challenged, can you really figure out whether the grounds of your opinions are solid or not. So it just seems as though that ought to be reestablished as the goal of what we're trying to do here. And we're at MIT trying to do it in all areas, right? It's the pursuit of knowledge in math, in science, in engineering, and I think equally in these big fundamental questions of human life that we address in the humanities.

Bryan Paul:

Well, between the four of you, it sounds like civil discourse at MIT is in very good hands. Linda, thank you so much again for taking time to chat with me.

Linda Rabieh:

Thanks. It's been a pleasure.

Bryan Paul:

Mariam, wonderful to meet you.

Mariam Abdelbarr:

Thank you. Nice to meet you too.

Bryan Paul:

Siddhu, lovely to meet you here as well.

Siddhu Pachipala:

It's been great.

Bryan Paul:

Isaac.

Isaac Lock:

It's been absolutely fantastic.

Bryan Paul:

Wonderful. Thank you all again.

Doug Sprei:

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(Music).