

Audio ([00:00:02](#)):

Radio Free Campus, brought to you by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

Steve McGuire ([00:00:09](#)):

Okay. Welcome, everyone. To the third episode of Radio Free Campus. I'm Steve McGuire, the Paul & Karen Levy Fellow at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

Justin Garrison ([00:00:19](#)):

And I'm Justin Garrison, and this month we're talking about a shakeup at the University of Tulsa's Honors College with our episode guest, Jennifer Frey. We're also going to discuss the latest news developments at Harvard, as well as the security regime for University of Michigan's Regents. Last but not least, we'll do the segment that everyone has come to love and adore, the Apparatchik of the Month and the Hero of the People Awards. So let's get to it.

Steve McGuire ([00:00:45](#)):

Right. Well, most recently, Justin, we were at the meeting of the Heterodox Academy in New York. I believe that was your first time attending a Heterodox Academy Conference. Is that right?

Justin Garrison ([00:00:58](#)):

Yes. Yes, it was. It was great. I had a really good time.

Steve McGuire ([00:01:01](#)):

How did it compare for you to conferences that you've been to in the past? I guess probably most often you've been to meetings of the American Political Science Association, that sort of thing.

Justin Garrison ([00:01:12](#)):

Yeah, I liked it a lot more, to be perfectly honest. Something like APSA is just such a leviathan, you can't really talk to people and I think academic people in general are pretty neurotic, so everyone's like, "Don't steal my research ideas," and it's very elbows out. I thought this was great. I talked to all kinds of people. I talked to academic professionals, professors and so forth, but also people who are doing administrative work or who work in alumni organizations, and I thought it was fantastic in that respect. It was really great to see a real diverse set of people who are united by being interested in what HXA is trying to do.

([00:01:54](#)):

So I thought that was great. I went to a number of panels. I know you did as well. Some of them we went to together. And I thought by far, for me, the highlight on that level was the plenary session with the college and university presidents. To really hear people at some of the most elite institutions in the country debate and disagree about how to respond to federal engagement and Trump's engagement with higher ed these days, and to think more deeply about what higher ed isn't doing well, I thought that was fascinating. So that was wonderful. So thank you ACTA for sending me.

Steve McGuire ([00:02:32](#)):

That's right. Yeah, and Heterodox for putting it on.

Justin Garrison ([00:02:35](#)):

Yes, absolutely.

Steve McGuire ([00:02:37](#)):

Yeah, I agree. The panel with the presidents was definitely a highlight and there definitely was some significant disagreement. Sian Beilock, the president of Dartmouth, who we recognized as our hero of the people last episode was there, and in my view, she gave a great account of how she is responding to things like declining public confidence in higher ed, as well as other concerns coming out of the Trump administration, which of course, again, her university hasn't been targeted by the administration. And then she disagreed quite a bit with Michael Roth, the president of Wesleyan University. I tend personally not to agree with him as much.

([00:03:17](#)):

I will say he did get some applause from the audience after he spoke, so we'll acknowledge that. But at one point, if I understood him correctly, he was basically trying to suggest to the crowd at the Heterodox Academy Conference that they were fiddling while Rome burns, worrying about things like viewpoint diversity and civil discourse while the Trump administration is going after higher education. And like I said, he did get some support for that, but I thought President Beilock and some of the others who were on the stage responded quite effectively to him and got quite a bit of support from the audience as well. But it was great to see that exchange of views live coming from people who are clearly right in the middle of trying to navigate what's going on in higher ed right now.

Justin Garrison ([00:04:06](#)):

Yeah, I thought their exchanges were the best. Yeah, Roth is easy to disagree with. He seems to go out of his way to try and be disagreeable to get some kind of reaction or something like that. But yeah, I mean, I thought... It's not as if he didn't raise any points that had no value or something like that, but he was also really, I think, very much in the, "Well, let's pick our historical analogy. Is it the Rome is burning? Is it Germany in the 1930s?" It's all of this kind of lazy stuff that really prevents people from thinking through what are legitimate and illegitimate concerns at this stage, and I thought that's what the Dartmouth president did so well.

([00:04:45](#)):

It wasn't as if she was saying everything's Trump doing is not only legal, but really good in terms of it's a good idea. She clearly had reservations about things that are happening in higher ed, but I thought much more like you would hope for out of a college president that there was a prudence in her way of thinking that you have to recognize that this didn't happen overnight, that higher ed was doing great, and then Trump, the mean bully, just decided to break it for no reason. She knows as we know that there are things that need to change and that if they had changed earlier, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

Steve McGuire ([00:05:24](#)):

Right. Yeah. Whereas Roth, if I recall correctly, was out there... He dropped the F bomb, fascism, and was sort of saying that sort of thing, and yeah, I just don't-

Justin Garrison ([00:05:33](#)):

Something weird about a milkshake or something like that, like we're making milkshakes. I mean, I don't know if you just watched There Will Be Blood or something like that, or, "Drink your milkshake," that thing.

Steve McGuire ([00:05:44](#)):

Yeah. Well, another plenary panel that was interesting featured our guest today, Jennifer Frey, who until recently was Dean of the Honors College there, and we'll be talking to her about why she no longer is, but that was an interesting panel as well. They were talking about academic responsibility, which is kind of

the other side of the coin when it comes to academic freedom, and I think the panel was really supposed to be addressing this question of whether the academy or academics have failed in terms of the responsibilities that they have to the American people or to students, to fellow faculty members, what have you. But it was kind of a funny panel. It got sidetracked into a philosophical discussion about whether or not there is such a thing as truth in the humanities, and three of the panelists I think would be classified as humanists, and then there was one scientist. So we won't get into that. It was pretty funny.

(00:06:48):

But anyways, I thought Jen was excellent on this panel. As I said, she's until very recently Dean of the Honors College at the University of Tulsa. She's still there as a professor of philosophy. Before that, she was a professor at the University of South Carolina. Her husband is also a philosopher and is at Tulsa too. And she's had a solid online and public presence as well over the years, writing op-eds, writing for the Wall Street Journal, doing book reviews, defending liberal education. She has a long-running podcast, which is very popular, Sacred & Profane Love. So I'm really excited to have this opportunity to talk to Jen today.

Justin Garrison (00:07:36):

Yeah, I am too. I remember fondly listening to that podcast, particularly during the pandemic, when I'd take long lonely walks by myself. It was just a... Yeah, it's a great show, and she's a tremendous scholar and person.

Steve McGuire (00:07:50):

Absolutely. Well, let's get to our interview with Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tulsa, Jennifer Frey.

(00:08:01):

Jen Frey, welcome to Radio Free Campus.

Jennifer Frey (00:08:04):

Thanks for having me. I'm really pleased to be here.

Steve McGuire (00:08:08):

Yeah, it's really great to have you on the show. I think we had you on ACTA's main podcast, Higher Ed Now, a couple of years ago or so. Great to have a chance to interview you again, and of course, just saw you recently at the Heterodox Academy Conference where you were by far the best person on the panel that you were on.

Jennifer Frey (00:08:27):

That panel was very interesting.

Steve McGuire (00:08:32):

That was a fascinating panel. It certainly was. But we're not here, I guess, to talk about that today. Unfortunately, we're here at least in part to talk about some shocking news, shocking for you personally and also for the university that you're at, and I think liberal education in American higher education in general. Correct me if I'm wrong, but about two years ago you were brought on as the inaugural dean of a new Honors College at the University of Tulsa. You left a position at the University of South Carolina to take that, moved your whole family out there and things looked like they were going great, looked like a great place for people to send their kids for a college education, and then the shocking news that you were

suddenly removed as dean, which I just couldn't even believe when I heard it. Could you tell us a little bit about what happened?

Jennifer Frey (00:09:31):

Sure. Well, everything that you said is true, so I don't need to repeat any of that, but I think the story really begins in 2019, so I'll start there. In 2019, the University of Tulsa, which is my current university, undertook a plan called True Commitment, and it was a plan to restructure the university that involved the massive downscaling, and in many cases, elimination of liberal arts. So the idea was to make the University of Tulsa, which was historically very strong in the liberal arts, make it into a trade school. That plan did not go down very well with faculty, alumni or students, and the architects of that plan were given votes of no confidence by the provost and the president, and so they all left their positions and they brought in a new president, Brad Carson, whose main goal was to really try to undo the reputational damage that True Commitment had wrought upon the university and really kind of set it on a steady course for the future.

(00:10:59):

In May of 2021, I met Brad Carson online. It's kind of a funny story, but it's very important in sort of what happened, so I'll go ahead and tell it. So I regularly tweet about higher education. I write about higher education, I talk about higher education, and this was... COVID was still kind of going on in May 2021, and a lot of liberal arts programs were under threat, and most of that threat was a financial kind of downstream of COVID. But one day in May, I just tweeted out about the University of Tulsa in 2019, and I said, "Well, it doesn't actually take a financial threat because look at this example of a university with a \$1.6 billion endowment where the liberal arts were doing fine, and they just murdered it because they could." And I got a reply to that tweet that said, "Hey, Jen. We're not that bad. You should learn more about us," and I clicked on the person, it was Brad Carson, and it said, President of the University of Tulsa, and I thought, "Oh my goodness."

(00:12:30):

And I saw that the president of the University of Tulsa followed me on Twitter. Obviously I had no idea. So I wrote back and I said, "Oh, I didn't realize the president of the University of Tulsa followed me. It's nice to meet you. I didn't say anything false. Show me the lie." And anyway, so this started a conversation and eventually he emailed me and he said, "No, I'm really serious. I'd love for you to come see what..." He was like, "I take on board your criticisms. To a large extent, I agree. I'd love for you to come kind of see what we're doing now," and I said, "Well, this is my speaking fee. If you would like to pay that, sure, I'll come talk to you."

(00:13:22):

So sure enough, in November of 2021, I gave a talk here in Chapman Hall, which is the building I'm currently sitting in about... I think the talk was titled, Why Are We Here: The Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education. And the talk was very well received, but also as promised in advance, the talk was a criticism in part of what the university had done in 2019. Anyway, Brad at that visit told me that he had this idea to start an honors college. I said, "Great. That sounds like a great idea," and he was like, "Well, I want it to be kind of great books focused," and I was like, "Oh. Well, that's really cool. Not a lot of people are doing that. You should definitely do that," and he said, "Well, would you be interested in helping me do it? Would you be interested in running that sort of thing?" And I said, "Absolutely not. This university doesn't have a philosophy department. I'm a philosopher. My husband's a philosopher. There's absolutely no chance we would go to a university without a philosophy department. That would be professional suicide."

(00:14:41):

So we kept in touch. Eventually I started doing some consulting work for the university to try to think about what a great books honors college would look like. I did that for about a year and a half, and he did actually resurrect the philosophy department from the dead and brought it back, and then eventually he offered me a job as dean of the Honors College. That was in December of 2022, I believe. And after a long period of discernment with my family, I decided it was worth the risk. So started my job officially as dean in May of 2023, moved to Tulsa, founded a college. The college was successful by any measure I think you could measure an honors college. Astonishing gains in enrollment, in bringing in money to the college, excitement from foundations and donors, and grants and gifts were in the millions. Just very successful.

(00:16:01):

So yeah, I was extremely shocked when they decided to not just fire me, but eliminate my entire office, so really eliminate the dean's office and every position in the dean's office, eliminate the vast majority of our staff positions. There's really structurally not much left of the Honors College at this point, especially because all the money I brought in left with me. So it's very sad for me personally, for my family, but I think it's very sad for our students who are also shocked and extremely sad. Parents are shocked and angry. It's a bit of a mess, I'm afraid. That's kind of the story and the future of honors. I do hope that something of it will survive, but I will not have any part of it.

Steve McGuire (00:17:21):

So their position is that it will continue in some form, but they have stripped it of most of the staffing and resources that it had?

Jennifer Frey (00:17:29):

Right. Yeah. So I think my understanding, which is somewhat limited, is that they do want to keep the vision that I founded, but they don't want me to be a part of it and that they want to take it in a new direction, however you want to interpret that. It was not spelled out to me. In terms of the curriculum, the books have already been ordered for the fall, so it'd be pretty tough to unwind that. But I think it will be up to whomever they appoint as the new director of honors to decide what it looks like going forward, and all I can tell you is that that won't be me or my assistant dean who resigned from the university and is taking a position in Spain.

Steve McGuire (00:18:31):

Wow. Okay.

Jennifer Frey (00:18:32):

Yeah.

Steve McGuire (00:18:33):

And as far as the decision-making process, were you pretty much just totally blindsided by this, and what sort of reasoning did they give you, if any at all?

Jennifer Frey (00:18:45):

Yes, I was totally blindsided. I thought I was walking into a budget meeting. It's kind of like that scene in Goodfellas where Joe Pesci-

Justin Garrison (00:18:53):

That's never a good comparison to anything that happens to anybody.

Jennifer Frey ([00:18:58](#)):

Yeah, because I had worked so hard on my budget and I had like, "Here's a 20% cut, here's a..." I was very proud of myself walking into this budget meeting. So I was like Joe Pesci, I think I'm getting made, and then I open the door and I realized I'm getting whacked. So I walked in and the vice president of HR was sitting there, and... Yeah. I mean, I knew what that meant. So no, I was totally blindsided, and I was told that it was no reflection of my performance because it obviously could not have been, but that honors needed to go in a new direction and that they, quote, unquote, "Could not afford me." So yeah.

Steve McGuire ([00:19:49](#)):

So they just gave you the sort of economic reason?

Jennifer Frey ([00:19:53](#)):

Right. The sort of we can't afford you, which is higher ed speak for we're not going to keep funding this. And I mean what their funding priorities are, I don't know, but it's certainly not honors.

Steve McGuire ([00:20:13](#)):

And I guess we should say too that Brad Carson left the university as president a few months ago as well, and he was the guy who brought you in.

Jennifer Frey ([00:20:24](#)):

Yes, I should have mentioned that. I'm sorry. That's my fault. Yeah, so Brad resigned and it was effective May 31st, and they appointed a new provost before they appointed an interim president, which is not common, but... And then they appointed an interim president, a new interim president, who was the previous athletic director for the University of Tulsa, and prior to that was the athletic director for Tulane. So he's now interim. And really, I think one of the first acts of the new provost was to eliminate vast portions of honors. I think it's kind of a story about regime change and new priorities, but certainly students were not consulted about this matter.

Steve McGuire ([00:21:39](#)):

With the history of Tulsa in the background, which you were talking about a few minutes ago, it almost seems like it could potentially be some kind of almost regime reversion in a way, that this was a university that had problems with... Even though they called it True Commitment, what they were really doing is gutting their commitment to liberal education, and now they seem to be doing that on some scale again.

Jennifer Frey ([00:22:03](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I think that is a big question hovering over this, is are we going back to 2019? And I have no insight into that, though I can tell you that honors was targeted for elimination in 2019, and in fact, the only thing that saved it was very vociferous pushback from students and alumni in particular. So I think when we think about what's going on in higher ed generally... And that's really the interest in what happened here, it is just part of larger trends. It exemplifies larger things in higher ed that we might be concerned about. I think it is important to recognize that students and parents and alumni really have a powerful voice, and when their institutions are doing things that are out of step with their desires, they should really be encouraged to speak out. We saw that happen here in 2019, and no matter what happens in the future here, I think it's very important for alumni to be very activated around the future of their institutions because I do think that it matters quite a bit.



Steve McGuire ([00:23:49](#)):

Justin, do you want to...

Justin Garrison ([00:23:50](#)):

Jen, I wanted to... Yeah, I wanted to thank you for being here and talking about this, because I think you've got a much more kind of sage-like attitude towards what happened than I think I would have if it had been me. I think I would've been Joe Pesci before that scene, but...

Jennifer Frey ([00:24:12](#)):

Yeah. Well, I mean, it was very important to me. It's been important to me in my role as dean, but my role even as professor before I was a dean. I know that my students look up to me and I take that responsibility very seriously. And of course when this happened, I'm fielding just very tearful phone calls from students, and I have... In the Honors College, we teach... In fact all the time, we teach our students to notice how much in life is out of their control. We teach this when we teach Greek tragedy, we teach this when we teach Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy. We just had a huge international conference for our students on that text.

([00:25:10](#)):

And this is a moment for all of us to recognize that this is one of those cases when everything is out of our control and how do we respond to that? How do you best respond to the things that are out of your control and when bad things happen to you? And so it was very important to me not to be Joe Pesci-like. Gosh. We should remember the name of his character. I can't remember. He's just Joe Pesci.

Justin Garrison ([00:25:43](#)):

He's always Joe Pesci in any Scorsese movie. He just rages out and has a really bad ending.

Jennifer Frey ([00:25:49](#)):

I know, he's always the same guy. But anyway. It's very important to me not to give into anger and bitterness and to really be grateful for the opportunity that I had to come here and to do what we did. I'm enormously proud of what we accomplished here, and I do think that it ought to be a model for people to imitate regardless of whether it goes forward in the future. It was very successful. There's a lot to be learned and gained from looking at what we've done here. And I'm also just very aware that higher ed... How do I put this delicately? There's a lot of just weird stuff going on in higher ed, and I can't inoculate myself from it. So I guess in a way I'm just grateful that we were able to do what we did as long as we could, and I'm just looking for opportunities now to keep doing it. I really loved my job.

Steve McGuire ([00:27:24](#)):

Yeah. I can imagine. I mean, it looked fantastic.

Jennifer Frey ([00:27:24](#)):

Yeah, I really loved my job. It was just so meaningful, and I'll miss it. But I'm hopeful that there will be other opportunities. And I tell our students, this is really an opportunity for you to show the fruits of this education. So I'm like, "The choices that you make right now and the things that you say and the ways that you strategize to hold on to what you love are really going to exemplify the fruits of all this. They're in you, and so it's just kind of time to step up and show people," and I believe that they will. Yeah.

Justin Garrison ([00:28:10](#)):

I wanted to ask a question as well about where you think this might fit in to a bigger picture about higher ed. When I saw the lengthy post that you put on LinkedIn, it seems like the kind of story that ends with success. A lot of administrators are increasingly not people with any kind of academic training, they're professional minders of various sinecures or something. So you would think that the language would be, "Look at these quantitative measures, right? I've brought this many students in, I brought this money in, we're doing this, that, and the other thing," and that would be something that would get across, but I also think there are just weird things going on in higher ed where I don't understand why someone would kill a golden goose.

Jennifer Frey (00:28:59):

Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's a question I cannot answer, but it's a question that should be asked, and I think... I mean, I do think it's sort of shocking. I mean, I try at this point in my life to not be shocked by anything, but I really was kind of shocked at this decision, but I do think that it reflects larger trends, and I think one of those trends is just the fact that the administrative class and also boards can be pretty divorced from what's going on on the ground, and the fact that you might decimate a college without talking to a single student. How is that... Or the fact that these kinds of decisions are made in darkness and there's just not a lot of input from various stakeholders that you'd think it would be obvious to get the input from. And I also sort of feel like it's indicative of a broader phenomenon, which is just the fact that it's so hard to get authentic liberal education in today's academy because even when it wins, it loses. Now how can that be? And I think that's the really hard thing.

(00:30:58):

It's one thing when we keep hearing all of this noise about, "Students don't want it, students can't read, students are a mess. We can't possibly have them read Plato. They don't like it. They don't care." I don't believe that. I don't believe that because it in no way fits decades of experience in my life. But I'll tell you what does fit decades of experience of my life is people making decisions that crowd out and marginalize this kind of education, and it's very intentional. And so I think, again, that's kind of the interesting story here is why is it that the people in power are just so opposed to this kind of education? Because I don't think for a second, I don't believe for a second that it's a response to consumer demands. Students show up to be educated, and we have a duty to educate them, and we have a duty to be very clear about what we believe a higher education is. Certainly higher in costs, both in terms of money and opportunity costs for our students, but is that higher in any other sense?

(00:32:27):

And I think the failure to really call students to something higher is... I think it's pretty damning of today's academy, if I want to be very frank. There's really no excuse for the way things are. And I mean, ultimately I think it's sad. At the same time, however, if you look at all of these hidden gems out there... I mean, weren't the only ones trying to provide an authentic liberal education, and now of course, we have this whole classical civic education movement in higher ed. I'm extremely hopeful about that. There are some legislatures out there who I think get it, but there's just a lot of catching up to do. And I would also say that the enemies of authentic liberal learning are not all of one kind. They take many forms and many beautiful varieties.

Steve McGuire (00:33:43):

A kaleidoscope.

Jennifer Frey (00:33:46):

There's a whole flora and fauna out there to be studied and categorized, but just to be mindful that they're everywhere, and so it's sad, but I would say let's stop blaming the students, which is the easy and feckless thing to do.



Steve McGuire ([00:34:10](#)):

Yeah, I mean, students, clearly they have agency, they make choices, but they're also going to respond to incentives, they're going to respond to the messages that are given to them, and they'll sort of pick up on what people think the right thing to do is, or what good things to do are, and if nobody's telling them about the value of a liberal education, then certainly many fewer of them are going to notice that a liberal education might be something worth doing.

Jennifer Frey ([00:34:40](#)):

Exactly.

Steve McGuire ([00:34:41](#)):

In terms of towards bringing the conversation to a close, so you've talked a little bit about what happened to you is part of a larger trend in higher education. We saw a few years ago at West Virginia University, which is a state flagship, there were a bunch of cuts there. Now in Indiana, there's all these cuts and maybe-

Jennifer Frey ([00:35:01](#)):

My alma mater, yeah.

Steve McGuire ([00:35:03](#)):

Is that right? Okay. Wow.

Jennifer Frey ([00:35:04](#)):

Yeah.

Steve McGuire ([00:35:06](#)):

So maybe some of these programs... There's certainly room, obviously, I think for responsible university governance and looking at programs that are effective and ones that aren't, and maybe ways that things can be moved around to be more, whatever, financially responsible, but at the same time, you see all of these liberal arts programs getting cut, and many of them have a low number of students graduating and that sort of thing, and it raises these questions that you're talking about in terms of what's going on here that nobody sees the value of liberal education. And so I would just like to give you an opportunity to... People who are coming into college and they're going to be taking loans or spending money, and they're worried about getting a job, and they're getting all this pressure to study something that will lead to a career, they're worried about AI now, which is a whole 'nother can of words that we can't even really get into here. But what's your pitch? Why study the liberal arts? Why should a liberal education be part of a university education even today?

Jennifer Frey ([00:36:14](#)):

Yeah, so I think the liberal arts belongs first and foremost in general education. So all of these students are going to have some kind of general education requirement, and I think what students should look for is a general education that is truly an authentically liberal, that is actually inviting them to sort of enter the great conversation that's been happening in the West for millennia now. A conversation that centers around those big existential questions at the heart of human life, those questions that everyone needs to answer for themselves if they're going to construct a meaningful and purposeful life for themselves. A liberal education is really about cultivating a vision of what is true, good, and beautiful so that you can make choices in your life that are reflective and fought for and that are the project of a self. If we're

talking about a liberal education, an education that is supposed to be liberatory, well, we want you to be free in the sense that you can actually have a meaningful, purposeful, flourishing life. That's the sense of freedom that we're after.

(00:37:38):

And that used to be just sort of the classical understanding of the liberal arts. That's what it was for, it was to make a free human being and citizen. We've lost that. We ought to regain it. And I think that students... I mean, I could just tell you again from decades of experience with students, they are totally transformed by this kind of education. What do we hear our students saying? "My parents kind of cajoled me into doing honors," or, "I had no idea what honors was. I had never read any philosophy, and it's like the best thing that's ever happened to me." And so our students don't know what they don't know. They need to be called to something higher, and again, general education is a mess in higher ed. That's a complicated story, but there's no reason why we can't fix this.

(00:38:38):

And I do think that students should be actively looking for those programs, many of which are starting up at our flagship state schools that are calling students to this kind of deeper form of reflection, this kind of formation into what it might be to be a good citizen in a form of government asks for self-government. That is a kind of higher calling for all of us. And with respect to departments closing, I believe classics at IU... I was a classics minor at IU. I think it had five students in it, or something like that. I mean, I've been saying for a while now that the traditional department structure has not served humanities very well, at least for the last 20 years, but arguably longer, and we should be looking for ways to really get those programs to be more interdisciplinary, to focus more on general education, so it's a bit of a reimagining of their role in an R1 space. I think all of that would be really salutary.

(00:40:03):

And we're seeing that with the civic centers. The civic centers are interdisciplinary by design, and I do think we're going to see those spaces flourish, and I think we'll have a lot to learn from them. I also have a hope that people will see honors colleges as a really great way to embed authentic liberal learning into the general education curriculum for at least 10 to 15% of a university's undergraduate population, which is not the whole of it, but it's a very significant chunk of it. And we have to start somewhere. We have to have sort of small experiments in living as Mill would say, that we can sort of see what works and see how we can bring it to scale for the broader community.

Steve McGuire (00:40:55):

Right.

Justin Garrison (00:40:56):

Yeah, I think that's a wonderful vision.

Steve McGuire (00:40:59):

I was just going to say, I guess it's safe to assume that you'd be willing to help another university realize such a vision should the opportunity arise.

Jennifer Frey (00:41:13):

Yes, I would.

Justin Garrison (00:41:13):

We can ask our audience to make suggestions in our comm box on YouTube, we'll forward any appropriate suggestions to Jen and I will only ask for 10%.

Jennifer Frey ([00:41:27](#)):  
They haven't killed me yet.

Justin Garrison ([00:41:30](#)):  
Jen, before we let you go, this has been a marvelous interview and I'm sure people would like to learn more about you and about the kind of research and other academic experiences that you've had. Where can people find you online or in social media?

Jennifer Frey ([00:41:44](#)):  
So you can find me on X. My handle is @JennFrey and I also have a website, [jenniferannfrey.com](http://jenniferannfrey.com), which really needs to be updated. I promise I'll get to that soon. And of course, I also have a podcast, Sacred & Profane Love, and there's an early episode with me and Brad Carson that's pretty interesting to listen to these days. We had decided... It was during my visit that I talked about in 2022, and we have a spicy and lively conversation about Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, which I think is extra delightful to listen to now.

Steve McGuire ([00:42:30](#)):  
Okay. We'll have to check that out.

Jennifer Frey ([00:42:32](#)):  
Yeah.

Justin Garrison ([00:42:34](#)):  
Well, that's wonderful. Thank you so much for being on Radio Free Campus.

Jennifer Frey ([00:42:36](#)):  
Oh, thanks so much for having me. It was a real pleasure.

Justin Garrison ([00:42:43](#)):  
Well, we've just been talking with Jen Frey of the University of Tulsa about the regrettable experience that she's had after setting up a massively successful honors college at the University of Tulsa. Steve, I thought that was just a tremendous interview from a wonderful person. What are your takeaways from the conversation that we just had?

Steve McGuire ([00:43:05](#)):  
Well, the first thing is I just feel so bad for Jen. She and her husband moved themselves out there with their family and it seemed like they were set, they were doing something really great and to just have that rug pulled out from under them like that so suddenly, that just must be devastating on a personal level. And like you said during the interview, it's amazing how she's handling that. The next thought is what an own goal for Tulsa. And again, they've now sinned twice against philosophy, which of course, Aristotle famously left so that Athens wouldn't... But they had something really great going. People from across the country are sending their kids there.

([00:43:49](#)):

I myself have said on Twitter before that it was one of the places that I'd consider for my own kids when they're ready to go to college. In the responses around her announcement on X, there was a number of people who were saying things about how disappointed they were and that they were thinking of sending their kids there or planning to, and now they won't be. So there's going to be ramifications or a ripple effect there that I think is going to be damaging to the university in terms of people who want to go, and certainly it's going to be damaging to the university in terms of the quality of education that it's offering its students.

Justin Garrison ([00:44:28](#)):

She had talked about the previous president, Brad Carson, resurrecting the philosophy department, and so I thought it should have been philosophy and theology because resurrection is a different field, but apparently they brought it back just so they could murder it again. I mean, it's really hard for me to wrap my head around. I thought one of the important things that she said, and I think trustees and administrators need to hear this, the idea that students don't want is, I think, cover for we don't want, and it can be a combination of outright hostility on an intellectual level for what the liberal arts stands for, or it can be incomprehension and kind of a sneering disdain for people who read books instead of build widgets or something like this. But that whole idea that this is just responding to student demand, it's such a bad understanding of even basic economics. I mean, can you imagine raising your kids that way? I just feed them what they want.

([00:45:32](#)):

I mean, give me a break. I mean, part of our job as adults is to model for people what they should want, and I mean, that can go in really controlling directions, but for goodness sakes, that's the early part of... She was talking a lot about Plato. Glaucon is saying, "No one's ever told us these things before and it sounds interesting, but everyone else is saying, 'You're dead wrong.'" Socrates is there to be the kind of person that they could become and to just get rid of something like that is baffling to me. It reminds me of that phrase, I think it was George W. Bush talking about K through 12, and he said something about the soft bigotry of low expectations, and my goodness, that sounds like a pretty common note in higher ed too.

Steve McGuire ([00:46:27](#)):

Yeah, not only to just feed the kids whatever they want, but not even show them other things that are better that they might want if they were to experience it. The other thing I would say is to bring in a new president, bring in a new dean of a new college, and then two years later to shut that down, that just doesn't seem like very good governance. There should be more foresight and planning going into a decision to bring people on board and to create new programs, and then there needs to be a commitment to see those programs through. You're creating something because you want it to be successful, and new things sometimes take time to get going. Although it sounds like in Jen's case, you had all kinds of great things going already. But I think there's clearly some governance issues going on at this university, there have been for a while. The fact that Brad Carson himself left and then this happened shows that there are some issues there, and I think the trustees need to work that out and get a handle on it.

Justin Garrison ([00:47:37](#)):

Yeah, I totally agree. I mean, it just seems like really bad decision making to kind of whipsaw that way. I mean, it's not the same thing in the concrete, but I follow a particular soccer team called Manchester United, and they are now run the way that Tulsa is run. It's like every two years it's a brand new thing and you spend a bunch of money and then you just pull it out and start... It's not a good way to govern anything. And especially higher ed where you not only have serious, legitimate financial concerns and those aren't irrelevant, you have a different kind of duty. You're entrusted with forming the minds and

characters of the next generation, and that's not something to just write off. And yeah, it would be nice to see if they could be a little bit more consistent, even if they want to just consistently turn away from liberal education.

Steve McGuire ([00:48:34](#)):

Right. Yeah, and I'm not sure what hope there is for restoring a true vision of liberal education at the University of Tulsa, but I do want to reiterate something that Jen said near the end of the interview, which is that she'd be happy to help another institution commit itself to and develop its vision of liberal education. And clearly she's a person who's worked on this. She's very thoughtful about these things, and I think she's still tenured in philosophy at the University of Tulsa, but I hope she finds an opportunity to do something even bigger and better than what she was doing at Tulsa somewhere else, and I think another institution would be lucky to have her.

Justin Garrison ([00:49:17](#)):

Yeah, I completely agree. She's one of the few people I've talked to who I've thought, "Wow. I wish I could work for that dean." She's just so competent and has a great vision. Yeah, I suspect she'll land on her feet.

Steve McGuire ([00:49:32](#)):

I did have one other dean in the past who I felt that way about, and he actually ended up leaving academia on his own because he became so fed up with all of the resistance that he encountered.

Justin Garrison ([00:49:48](#)):

I mean, at times it feels like you're stuck in an episode of The Wire. It's just like rampant corruption everywhere.

Steve McGuire ([00:49:55](#)):

Goodfellas, The Wire. These are not good examples or good comparisons.

Justin Garrison ([00:50:02](#)):

Good grief. So speaking about the need to protect yourself against violence, you also wanted to talk about some other stories, you and I both, and you had wanted to mention something about what's going on with the regents, the University of Michigan. So tell us a little bit about that.

Steve McGuire ([00:50:20](#)):

Yeah, that's right. And this is again, as so many of these stories are part of a general trend. I mean, obviously in higher education in the last two academic years, we've seen a ton of disruption, a lot of it caused by protesters who are anti-Israel and they are disrupting classes and in some cases committing vandalism. And we've seen that sometimes this has targeted trustees or regents of universities as well. And I believe it was the University of Wisconsin Regents. Their homes were just recently targeted with vandalism, three or four of them. And this of course happened on several occasions to some of the regents at the University of Michigan in the last several months as well. And there was a story just a week or two ago about how some of the regents at the University of Michigan still need 24-hour security because of course they've had these incidents happen to them and they're still receiving threats. I think one of them even said he'd received a death threat in the month of June.

([00:51:36](#)):

So this is still going on. It's targeting them. It's targeting their homes, their workplaces, their families, of course, especially when it targets their homes. So their children are wondering, "Why are people throwing things through the window of our house?" This kind of behavior is just reprehensible. It's totally unacceptable. And the other thing I want to mention in terms of the anti-Israel crowd. Okay, maybe sometimes there are things that are sort of free speech issues here and people should be allowed to say their peace, but a lot of what they do falls out outside the bounds of what should be viewed as protected speech. Time, place and manner violations, vandalism, threats. None of these things count as free speech, and these movements tend to operate by trying to intimidate people and they want to politicize the institutions. That's why they want to say divest from Israel.

(00:52:39):

And I think people need to speak out against that kind of behavior and say, "This isn't free speech. This isn't civil discourse." And in this article reporting on the security that the regents still have, one of the leaders of the faculty at the University of Michigan was interviewed as was one of the student activists, or I think it was an alum now, but presumably was a student in recent memory, and asked them about this, and basically their attitude was that the regions had failed to engage in dialogue, that they weren't engaging with the campus community enough. I think the faculty member said that some seats had been removed from the periodic meetings that the regents have, and absolutely nothing condemning the threats, nothing condemning the vandalism. In fact, the suggestion was that, well, when you are refusing to divest from genocide and refusing to engage in dialogue, these are the kinds of things that might happen.

(00:53:48):

And so I think that just highlights one of the fundamental problems with this movement is that it's not really actually interested in free speech, it's not really actually interested in dialogue. What it really is doing is making demands and using threats and intimidation and actions that fall outside the bounds of legitimate free expression to try and compel people to do what they want them to do, and that's just really not acceptable, and I think it's particularly troubling to see that coming from a faculty member who's in a leadership position or was until recently in a leadership position at the university.

Justin Garrison (00:54:27):

Yeah, I think that's disgraceful, the total lack of interest. And it seems to be the case in situations like these, when people are calling for dialogue, what they really mean is we want you to capitulate to all of our demands without any kind of discussion or negotiation. That's inclusion, right? That's bringing us into the process. And anyone can find any number of things about which they could disagree in terms of how the University of Michigan regents are handling things. I imagine... I don't imagine. I know that there are faculty who don't like their decisions. That's fair. But it can't deteriorate into the kind of situation that we're talking about because we're not even talking about protected speech. We're just talking about things that in many instances are just illegal. I can't throw a brick into your window, as you said, and say, "I'm just expressing myself."

Steve McGuire (00:55:26):

That's right. And of course, on a national scale, we've seen some pretty ugly acts of violence over the last couple of years, and especially in the last few months targeting Jews and Israelis in this country. And so for Jewish board members at the University of Michigan to be receiving death threats after they themselves have already had their homes and workplaces targeted by vandalism and that sort of thing, I mean, it's just totally unacceptable.

Justin Garrison (00:56:02):

Yeah. You might recall in our last episode, we talked about Harvard and Trump. So today there has been an interesting development in this War and Peace style like soap opera between the two. In the Wall



Street Journal, they broke an exclusive story today titled Harvard Explorers New Center for Conservative Scholarship Amid Trump Attacks, and this is an interesting development. So the Harvard is claiming that they've been thinking about this for a while, but their thinking became accelerated after all of the unrest in the aftermath of October 7th to terms of campus disruption and the problems that we are all pretty aware of at Harvard and other places. The idea is that this might be kind of modeled on something like the Hoover Institution, which has been at Stanford for quite some time. But Harvard, to their credit, they've conducted some internal research and their graduating class, only about a third of their graduating class said they felt comfortable discussing controversial ideas.

(00:57:06):

Then someone else did a survey where approximately 3% of their faculty were identifying as conservative. I know we took suggestions for Jen Frey's next job in the comm box, but if you don't want to do that, here's a math problem. So if Harvey Mansfield is 3% of the faculty at Harvard, how many faculty teach? You can put your answer in the box below and we will check your work. But to their credit, they see that they've got a problem. They're not totally oblivious to what has kind of produced the mess that they're in. And one of the interesting things to me about this idea is that they're making it clear, at least in the Wall Street Journal story, that there's a correlation rather than a causation between being interested in liberal ideas, like classical liberalism and happening to be a conservative. Harvard has said, "We're not hiring conservatives, quack conservatives." And so I think there probably is today a correlation between people who do classical liberal ideas, research things, and happened to end up falling that way politically.

(00:58:21):

But what I liked about this story in part was not just the development itself, but its effort to untangle those things because I think faculty in particular are too motivated to just smear and dismiss stuff like this as deliberately hiring for ideological characteristics, which is kind of rich because that's what higher ed's actually been doing for the last 30 years, and it's all well and good to call shenanigans on things like that, but you need to have a little more street cred to do that.

Steve McGuire (00:58:56):

Yeah. This feeds into something else I wanted to briefly mention, which was this recent op-ed in the New York Times written by a philosophy professor from the University of Pennsylvania. The title of the piece, Why Hiring Professors with Conservative Views Could Backfire on Conservatives, and the money quote from the piece is she says, "By creating incentives for professors and students to have and maintain certain political positions, such a policy would discourage curiosity and reward narrowness of thought." I think every single conservative or classical liberal or libertarian who read this is kind of like Jim or Pam from The Office breaking the fourth wall. Are you kidding me? This just perfectly describes a lot of higher ed as it is.

(00:59:49):

And I think that the author probably meant this piece in good faith, and there is certainly a concern that she brings up about that if you hire people to represent a certain view, they may feel pressured to continue to represent that view. But I mean, that's kind of what happens right now in higher ed is you get hired into a monoculture and you're expected to remain a member of that monoculture. And someone pointed out to me on X that, of course, the example that she uses in the piece is Robert Nozick as someone who came into college as a socialist and then ended up being a libertarian, and the guy pointed out, "Well, he wasn't even a self-identified conservative." I was like, "That's right."

(01:00:38):

I don't know if you remember, there's that old edited volume by Michael Sandel, Liberalism and its Critics, and it's kind of half-and-half. Nozick's in the liberalism part. So he's not even regarded as a

conservative critic of liberalism. So the fact that was example that she would point to was kind of funny as well. But we seriously... I think the most telling thing at the end of the day about this whole article is that she seemed not to see this problem clearly, because she wrote this without recognizing that this is how it would be received.

Justin Garrison ([01:01:15](#)):

I think one of the things that I've come to conclude... Because I read that piece as well, and there's a lot of other discussions about DEI for conservatives. We talked about that last episode. I think there's something on the left where they don't really understand what conservatism is, and so they assume it's an equally abstract comprehensive ideology, and I mean, there are ways in which conservatism can go in that direction. But when I think of conservatism, I think of more of a kind of broader disposition towards life that you might find in someone like Russell Kirk, and that doesn't necessarily have particular policy outputs. And I think in some sense, part of the frustration coming out of an op-ed like this is they don't really quite understand what they're targeting, and so they're in good faith, I'm sure, making drawing conclusions that don't really fit with conservatives as I've met them in many, if not literally every instance or something like that.

([01:02:14](#)):

I mean, yeah, if you hire someone who is supposed to be an embodied set of talking points for a political party, that's just a bad hire. But where we taught or where we went to grad school at Catholic, the entire English department was not conservative in that sense, but in the sense that matters to this author, and I think us as well at ACTA. They taught the right way. They focused on texts and they did that kind of work rather than just the kind of more ideological stuff, which is actually represented really well at the University of Pennsylvania of all places.

Steve McGuire ([01:02:53](#)):

Mm-hmm. Yeah, and I think that's a great point that needs to be mentioned over and over again too, is this isn't just about Republicans and Democrats, or conservatives and liberals, or libertarians and conservatives and liberals. Those are sort of shorthand ways of highlighting the problem, and as I've said before, there might be certain programs like a public policy program or having somebody who can talk intelligently about Republican proposals or something would make sense to target, but we're also talking about questions that aren't being asked about subfields that aren't really being studied or areas of study within a field that aren't really being represented by the faculty. There's all kinds of ways to increase or improve the variety of things that are being done on a campus and that the faculty is open to when it's hiring or that the admissions program is open to when it's admitting students that isn't just about trying to figure out what someone's partisan registration is.

Justin Garrison ([01:04:02](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. All right, boys and girls, it is time for the part of the show that everybody loves. Let's go first. I think last episode I was the apparatchik and you did the hero, so I'm going to start with the hero. So let's go right now to the Hero of the People Award.

([01:04:25](#)):

So I selected the University of Toledo for the hero of the people, and the reason for that is just a couple of weeks ago, their board of trustees announced the way that they were going to comply with Senate Bill 1, which was recently signed into law. Jerry Cirino was the person who introduced that bill and has played a large role in getting it passed through the State House. So the Toledo trustees adopted a statement of commitment and approved a new policy on intellectual diversity and controversial beliefs. So the reason I picked this is even though Toledo is doing this to comply with state law, I think in many ways the policy details are exemplary in the sense that it should serve as an example for other schools who shouldn't wait

for their state government to tell them to do this. The part of the policy itself that I thought was most interesting to me is this section, quote, "Faculty and staff shall allow and encourage students to reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs or policies and shall not seek to indoctrinate any social, political, or religious point of view," unquote.

(01:05:39):

So I think that's really what higher ed should just be doing anyways. It took a state law to get Toledo to make this move, but they seem to have put it together in a way that I think looks serious, and for that they are our hero of the people. So way to go Rockets.

Steve McGuire (01:05:59):

Yeah, that's great. More and more places should be incorporating these kinds of statements into their governing documents. They should be sending the message that these are the kinds of things that they're committed to and they want the people who go there to also be committed to. So that's a great example. All right. Well, turning things in the other direction. This month it falls to me to highlight the apparatchik of the month, and the apparatchik of the month couldn't help but select the University of Tulsa. They have now shut down this honors college that Jen was running that by all accounts was super successful.

(01:06:47):

It was successful in terms of the quality of education that it was offering the students, it was successful in terms of the students that she was attracting, the funding that she was bringing in. I think this was a great thing for the reputation of the university. Clearly, as I mentioned, people from around the country were noticing, wanting to go there or wanting to send their children there and to just so unceremoniously shut it down is just a terrible decision. And the fact that at Tulsa, this is the second time that they've done this kind of thing, is just almost unforgivable. It makes you wonder what the future of this institution really is going to be.

Justin Garrison (01:07:32):

I don't know about if you saw the HBO series on Chernobyl, but in the first episode it explodes. I'm sorry if you weren't around in 1986. I don't want to spoil this for our viewers, but it didn't end well. Side note, that word in Russian literally means wormwood and it's in Revelation. You can't set that up better. In that first episode, the actual apparatchiks that are running that part of Soviet Ukraine really feel like they have accomplished their great goal, because they kept all of the information away from everyone about how they made their decision. So that was the thing, not actually responding to a public health crisis, but just making sure that they were totally insulated from everyone. And I mean, it seems increasingly that higher ed makes decisions with that format in mind, obviously less disastrous in a realistic sense, but it's just shocking. I mean, not just to do it, but to apparently talk to nobody about it. It's just mind-boggling.

Steve McGuire (01:08:36):

Yeah. The fact that she thought she was walking into a budget meeting, I mean the fact that part of the discussion, if there was an issue, which I'm not even sure that there is a legitimate issue... I mean, the other thing I should mention too is if you look at some of the other things that they're continuing to fund, it just makes it even worse. They didn't get rid of their DEI office, they renamed it. If you need to make cuts at a university, you need to look at the various programs that you're running and various positions that you have in place, and think about what your real priorities need to be, and if you've got a high-functioning honors college, that should definitely be pretty high on the priority list.

Justin Garrison (01:09:21):

Yeah, absolutely.

Steve McGuire ([01:09:23](#)):

But yeah, so as far as our episode next time, we actually had what could have been another apparatchik of the month this month. Some of Alex Burns's colleagues at MIT, he's a philosopher there who writes on gender issues, published an open letter, basically condemning him and saying that he had violated his professional ethics. The whole thing is ridiculous and fortunately we're going to have the opportunity to talk to Alex next month, so I'm really looking forward to that. So we'll hold off. We decided to hold off on recognizing them as the apparatchiks of the month, his colleagues. But we'll be able to have an important conversation with Alex about how people in academia should respond to one another when they disagree when we talk to him in our next episode.

Justin Garrison ([01:10:20](#)):

Yes, definitely look forward to that. And with that, thank you very much for listening to Radio Free Campus. Please like and subscribe and hit that bell on YouTube, download this on all podcast formats, because you don't know if the audio is identical until you listen to it on Spotify, Apple, Amazon, and elsewhere. So we'll see you next month, and until then, KBO.

Audio ([01:10:45](#)):

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([01:11:21](#)):

73% of University of Arizona students believe it is sometimes okay to shut down speakers on campus. Discover how ACTA's gold standard can help U of A foster a more free and open campus experience.