

Speaker 1 ([00:00:03](#)):

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

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

Okay, welcome to Radio Free Campus. I'm Steve McGuire.

Justin Garrison ([00:00:13](#)):

And I'm Justin Garrison. In this episode, Steve is going to interview Joshua Dunn, a professor and the executive director of the Institute of American Civics at UT Knoxville, where they're going to talk about diversity of thought and some other interesting topics related to that. Steve and I are going to talk about our thoughts on the interview and use that as a segue to talk about some very hot news in the world of higher ed, which is the ongoing conversation about the recent released compact with higher education that the Trump administration has offered to some universities. We'll get you the latest on that, and of course we're going to do the segment that everybody comes to the show to tune into, the Apparatchik of the Month and the Hero of the People Awards. So, let's get to it.

Steve McGuire ([00:00:52](#)):

Okay, great. Yeah, and as you alluded to, this is a little bit different this time. We had some scheduling conflicts, you were traveling. Josh Dunn is a busy man, so this time around I interview him by myself, and it's a pre-recorded interview, so don't freak out when you notice that my shirt is suddenly different, this was recorded a few days ago. But Josh Dunn, really excited to have him on the program today.

([00:01:18](#)):

As you mentioned, he's the executive director of the relatively new Institute of American Civics in the Baker School at the University of Tennessee. He's also the co-author with Jon Shields of a book, *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University*, which is a really interesting study of how conservatives operate in universities, how they get jobs and go up for tenure and whether they hide their views and that sort of thing. As you mentioned, we have some really great conversation about both the book and also this new center, which is of course one of these civic centers that's popping up in states around the country, often funded by the state legislatures. In the case of Josh's, as we discuss, it was funded on a bipartisan basis to improve civics education in the state. So, that's a really great initiative. Josh has a lot of interesting things to say about viewpoint diversity, intellectual diversity, civics education, so let's get to the interview.

([00:02:26](#)):

Josh, welcome to Radio Free Campus.

Josh Dunn ([00:02:29](#)):

Oh, thanks for having me, Steve. It's great to be with you.

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

Glad you could join us. So, you're directing this new Institute of American Civics that's part of the Baker School of Public Policy at the University of Tennessee. Let's just start by asking to tell us a little bit about the center and how things are going. It was founded two years ago now, is that right?

Josh Dunn ([00:02:50](#)):

Well, officially passed by the legislature in 2022, things really got going though in 2023. I joined the institute as the first director in the summer of 2023, and since then I think we've had a very productive

and busy two years. We've been doing a lot of faculty hiring, we're in the middle of doing some more faculty hiring, and I think after this year we'll probably be somewhere between eight to 12 tenure track faculty members in the institute. We've been offering courses.

(00:03:19):

One of the nice things about the institute is that we are embedded in the Baker School of Public Policy, and so the Baker School, it became a school a couple of years ago. It had been a center prior to becoming a school, and so every student who's a major in the Baker School has to take at least four institute courses. So we have a pipeline of students built into the institute, and then there's also an opportunity to choose a concentration that is all institute courses. We also have a minor and we have certificates, but we also are in the process of proposing a major and we hope to have that approved after this year and to be launching that next year.

(00:04:03):

So, a lot of really good things going on. Also doing a lot of work off-campus with K through 12 education, also programs, just trying to reach the adult population of Tennessee as well to make a difference in improving civic knowledge and civil discourse not just on campus, but off.

Steve McGuire (00:04:19):

That's great, that's great. How would you describe the intellectual and pedagogical goals of the center?

Josh Dunn (00:04:26):

So if you wanted to summarize what we're trying to do, I think that we're trying to provide students with a foundation to understand America's constitutional tradition, and I think that requires understanding some things that happened before the creation of America before 1776 and 1787 and things of course that occurred after. So there's always going to be a significant emphasis on political thought and theory and history in the institute, and I think the broader goal is to prepare engaged citizens. We want students to leave their experience with the institute better equipped to be productive citizens in America.

(00:05:17):

Now also, it's a little difficult though to say exactly what we're trying to do, because we're trying to have both breadth and depth, because we're trying to reach a broad swath of the student population at the University of Tennessee, but then also provide opportunities for students to get a deeper and richer experience as well. So with the breadth part, obviously we're going to have more limited goals, but we think that students need to have some exposure to the basic ideas undergirding the American Constitution, and we do that through courses that are part of the VolCore curriculum, that's the general education curriculum here at the University of Tennessee.

(00:05:57):

So we have students who take our courses as part of the VolCore curriculum who are from engineering, nursing, business, really a range of programs across campus. But then of course with the students who are going to be either majors in the Baker School or majors in the institute, we want them to have a real depth of knowledge, and so the pedagogical goals somewhat change based on where we're meeting the students.

Steve McGuire (00:06:27):

I see, I see. You mentioned that you've been hiring and you're currently hiring. The people that you're looking for, are these predominantly political scientists or are you looking for people with a variety of backgrounds?

Josh Dunn (00:06:40):

Well, most of them are political scientists, but we are looking for those who are not political scientists. There's a difficulty though that some fields where they used to produce PhDs who would be equipped to teach courses in a program like ours, they just aren't doing that as much anymore, and political science tends to be the field that does produce PhD students who have the background that we're looking for. But we have hired a historian, we'd love to hire another historian. I think there are some sociologists out there. They're scarce on the ground, but you can find some sociologists on occasion. Some economists, particularly some economic historians are also well-suited for our work, and also those who have a legal background. So those with a JD, the right kind of legal training could also be a good fit for us.

Steve McGuire ([00:07:47](#)):

Great. So some of the things you've mentioned I think segue into the main topic that I really want to talk with you about today, which is intellectual diversity or viewpoint diversity or pluralism or diversity of thought. There's lots of labels that we can put on it, but the idea that we do want to have a variety of views in the academy. You mentioned first that you're educating students for citizenship, and of course I think you'd probably agree that part of being a good citizen is being able to go out in the world and realize that people disagree with you even very profoundly on important things and you have to find a way to live with them. So I wonder, in terms of your program, how do you address that with the students? How do you prepare them so that when they go out to be citizens they can in fact do that?

Josh Dunn ([00:08:33](#)):

Well, one thing that we tell the students from day one, whether it's one of these introductory courses that's part of the general education curriculum or the higher level courses, the junior and senior level courses, we tell them that disagreement is really just at the core of what we're doing within the institute, and they need to be prepared to discuss controversial issues with their classmates, with their colleagues, and be able to walk out the door as friends with each other. That's a basic expectation.

([00:09:05](#)):

But if you just look at say our two freshman-level courses, IEC 101 and 102, the 101 is really Foundations of American Citizenship course. There we start with actually some of the ancients, some Plato, some Aristotle, look at some social contract theorists, but then spend a good deal of time just looking at the American experience. But I think you can see a few things that we do in that course that prepare students for this kind of intellectual engagement and disagreement.

([00:09:35](#)):

If you just look at Federalist 10 and 51, for instance, I think that if you properly understand Federalist 10 and 51, those two Federalist papers teach you that there has to be some form of reciprocity in American politics. Federalist 10 obviously with faction-checking faction, you have to accept the legitimacy of the right of other groups to exist. When you properly understand that, that goes a long way to thinking, oh, well, yeah, I don't agree with that group, but they're entitled to exist just as the groups that I prefer are entitled to exist.

([00:10:13](#)):

The same thing with Federalist 51. You get to the end of Federalist 51 and Madison talks about how the end goal of this system, of an extended republic, separation of powers, checks and balances and federalism is to force people to deliberate about justice, to think about the general good rather than just their own individual good. Again, that also forces you to reflect on the fact that you aren't the center of the universe, that there are others who legitimately get to participate in the political process.

([00:10:45](#)):

But also, we spend a good deal of time looking at the First Amendment and free speech doctrine as well. You look at free speech doctrine, things like viewpoint neutrality, content neutrality to bedrock doctrines

at the core of contemporary First Amendment jurisprudence, those also teach students that you do not have a right to not be offended, you do not have a right to prevent others from saying things that you disagree with. You have the right to talk back if you would like, that's the right that you have.

(00:11:18):

So you look at that course, we do it, and then our second course, Visions of America, really conflict is the core of that, and the whole point of the course is to show students that America has experienced different competing conceptions of what we can and should be throughout our history. So the conflict that we see today isn't new, in many ways it's not different. The subjects might be different, but it's kind of part of what we are as a country, and so they can recognize this is just part of the American experience that we've worked through significant disagreements in the past and we can work through them today.

Steve McGuire (00:11:53):

Mm-hmm. That's great. So when you're teaching these competing points of views in the classroom, do you think among the faculty it's important to have faculty who represent a diversity of views? I know any faculty member can teach a text whether or not he agrees with it, and a good professor can make a good case for a text or a position that maybe he doesn't even personally hold, right? So there's certainly that possibility, but is there a benefit to having people on the faculty who in fact do hold different views? Does that add something?

Josh Dunn (00:12:28):

Yeah, I follow John Stuart Mill who said that unless you hear the argument from someone who truly believes it, you probably will not be getting the full force of that position. So yes, you can have faculty who do the best job that they can at presenting an opposing viewpoint that they don't agree with, but to really do justice to the arguments you have to have people somewhere on campus who will hold the alternative position, are willing to give its fullest and best presentation. So yeah, I think that that's an essential part of what a university should be, that students should have the opportunity to find faculty across campus who hold a range of viewpoints so that they can get a true and full exposure to these competing perspectives.

Steve McGuire (00:13:18):

Okay, and when we talk about intellectual diversity or viewpoint diversity, I think one of the things that people sort of think of immediately is Republicans and Democrats, at least in the American context or conservatives and liberals or progressives. So do you think it's important to have that kind of political diversity, but also are there other kinds of intellectual diversity that you think are important in an academic context, whether that be different schools of thought or different methodological approaches? Earlier I was asking you about different disciplinary perspectives that the professors might bring. Do you think that both of those categories are important?

Josh Dunn (00:13:59):

Absolutely. Yeah, so, well, think about methodological diversity. I think that some disciplines, I would include my own political science, they've become somewhat narrow methodologically. What that's had the effect of doing is also narrowed the range of questions that can be asked, because it turns out that many questions don't lend themselves to the kind of statistical analysis that has overtaken some fields in the social sciences, including to some extent at least political science, not entirely political science.

(00:14:32):

I think in economics that can happen as well. Yeah, you can actually have a broader range of viewpoints in economics politically if you just look at say ideological positions or even party affiliation, but there is a

narrowness often in economics which circumscribes the range of ideas that are going to be considered, simply because some methods aren't conducive to addressing them. So yes, I think it's essential for students to not only have the kind of ideological or political diversity, but these other kinds of diversity matter as well.

Steve McGuire ([00:15:15](#)):

You were mentioning a few minutes ago that in your own hiring process, if you're looking for historians or sociologists, those were two of the disciplines I think you mentioned, that maybe it's harder to find people who would be a fit for your program. Could you say a little bit more maybe about some of these other disciplines?

Josh Dunn ([00:15:40](#)):

Yes, so you look at sociology, for instance, so I can speak to that I think somewhat authoritatively because of some of the work that I've done on viewpoint diversity in higher education. So Jon Shields and I wrote a book called *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University*, and we looked at six disciplines, three in the social sciences, three in the humanities, so economic, sociology and political science, and then history, philosophy, and literature. What we wanted to do was to get a sense of what the lives of conservative faculty are like in higher education and in particular in those disciplines, because politics is often closer to the core work that they do.

([00:16:36](#)):

So, the problem is finding people in some of those disciplines. It's not difficult in economics. You can find people who self-identify as being conservative or libertarian and economics rather easily if you just use party ID as a proxy for intellectual diversity. Economics, maybe one out of every four to five economics professor is a Republican. In political science you could also find faculty relatively easily. I haven't looked at it recently, but when we were doing the research is maybe one out every nine to 11 political science faculty would be a registered Republican. So obviously there's still a significant minority, but there's a kind of critical mass of them so you could identify them and contact them.

([00:17:30](#)):

In the other disciplines, the problem is that you don't even know how to find them, and so what we had to use was what's called a snowball sample to identify faculty in some of these other disciplines. A snowball sample is a method that you use to find people in difficult-to-locate populations. Quite often, and perhaps the most common use of a snowball sample would be studying the homeless, and so we had to use the same method that used to study the homeless to study conservatives in higher education. With a snowball sample, what you do is you find someone who you know belongs to the population that you're interested in and ask them, where can I find 10 more people like you?

([00:18:23](#)):

So we knew of a couple of sociologists, maybe two or three, I can't remember how many, and we asked them, would you be willing to be interviewed? And then could you identify another 10 or so? Well, depending on how you count them, there are maybe 6,000 sociologists in the United States, give or take 1,000 here or there, something like that, depending on how you count it, but there's several thousand sociologists. We were able to identify 12, 12, so that gives you a sense of the challenge. Sometimes I'll just say that when they were identified, they were deeply, deeply alarmed, terrified even that someone had outed them. We had professors wanting to see our IRB documents, because they thought it could constitute human subject abuse or something like that. It was deeply, deeply alarming for them. So sociology was the most difficult, but then other disciplines, history is very difficult to find people, literature very difficult. Literature, there is still something of a cohort of people who were more likely to identify as being on the right politically, but they tend to be much older, and sometimes their politics ends up being almost driven by the nature of their scholarship. They're just much more traditional scholars.

They kind of rejected the turn to critical theory in the study of literature, but they're a dying breed, there just weren't many of them. So in our sample of literature professors, they tend to be very much skewed towards an older demographic. Philosophy was also difficult, but maybe not quite as difficult as those others that I mentioned.

Steve McGuire ([00:20:24](#)):

Well, that's interesting. I mean, 12 out of 6,000 sociologists, that's just an incredible statistic to hear. I know Jonathan Haidt has talked about this as well I think looking at psychologists or maybe specifically social psychologists, and said it was difficult to find even one in the field.

Josh Dunn ([00:20:44](#)):

Yes, yeah, yeah.

Steve McGuire ([00:20:45](#)):

So in your book, *Passing on the Right*, you also talk about why this might be the case. I know two common explanations are one, maybe there's some self-selection taking place on the part of say conservatives. They don't want to go into the academy for various reasons, and then there's also the possibility of discrimination. I'll say myself, I have certainly seen that, right? I used to be a faculty member, I've been on hiring committees and I've been in committees where people have openly said in the deliberations, "Well, this person's just too conservative for us," and others have agreed. My vote was not strong enough to counteract that, nothing I was going to say would change it, right? It was just they weren't going to consider this person, because there was some element of their application that wasn't going to be considered.

([00:21:37](#)):

I know even among grad students saying ... I'm a political theorist, even picking a dissertation topic, people will say, "Well, if you want to do that, you could, but people might not want to hire you if that's what you're working on." That could be just because it's not trendy, but it could also be because it's a conservative political theorist, and that would signal something to potential future employers or colleagues, right? But I know in your book you have a much more complex and nuanced discussion of what the various reasons might be for what is really a stunning lack of conservatives in some of these fields.

Josh Dunn ([00:22:16](#)):

Yeah, so I mean, the two primary ones are ones that you've mentioned, self-selection and discrimination. I think we have good evidence on both of those. From the early 1900s on the academy was typed as a left-leaning institution, so in the same way that some occupations can be typed by gender, like nursing has been typed by gender, sex as a female occupation, it's just the academy has been typed as a left-leaning institution, so it would be natural for more people who politically are on the left to want to pursue a career as a professor, but we also know that there is significant discrimination. This has been well documented now, particularly you look at George Yancy, his work, Eric-

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:23:04]

Josh Dunn ([00:23:03](#)):

George Yancey, his work, Eric Kaufman, Yoel Inbar. We actually have academics confessing that they're willing to discriminate against those that they perceive as a conservative or a Republican or Libertarian. And they're willing to report it on these surveys, which is kind of interesting because as some of these

scholars who've done this research have pointed out, most of the time you have to be really tricky to get people to confess that they're willing to discriminate, they like to hide it. So actually the number is probably much larger than what's been reported. And so we know, and there are multiple places where the discrimination can occur. As you mentioned, it could occur at the, you're being admitted into graduate programs. It could occur while you're in graduate school with who's willing to work with you, what kind of mentors you might be able to have. It could then occur at the dissertation stage or as you're leaving, which students are going to get priority from a department for getting the full weight of the resources of the department, try to get them placed.

(00:24:15):

And then of course, after the fact with the hiring committees and then in the promotion process. And then of course along the way, if you do manage to land a tenure-track position with a publishing process, because reviewers at journals and university presses, they can, of course censor work that they don't find ideologically agreeable. So there are just many places along the way, but then you also do have some fields that have just... they've moved in such a direction.

(00:24:50):

Sociology would be a good example. Christian Smith has written a very good book on this, how sociology has almost adopted a kind of religious perspective on its mission and purposes, and that's deeply on the left. Everything that they're committed to as a field is something that's very amenable if you're on the left or even far left. But if you even happen to be, I would say even in sociology, if you're just slightly left to center, just slightly left to center even, it's probably going to be a tough road for you. Never mind if you're on the right. And I have sociologist friends who are very much on the left, and they just said, "Yeah, I really wouldn't recommend that a conservative grad student go to grad school in sociology. It'd just be a really difficult environment for them."

Steve McGuire (00:25:41):

Well, at least they're honest about the situation. I think one thing that we see sometimes is people just deny the reality. They deny that this is the case, that there is viewpoint imbalance, or that if they even admit it that it's a problem, they'll say, "Well, there's natural reasons for this, and it just kind of is what it is," if they admit that it's a problem.

Josh Dunn (00:26:04):

Yeah. Well, sometimes they'll just say, "Well, conservatives just aren't made of the right stuff for the life of the mind. They aren't smart enough. They might be suited for other occupations like the military or business or something, but they're too hidebound and closed-minded for the academy." Now there's research on this shows that this is not the case that these whatever psychological or differences or dispositional differences don't explain... they explain almost nothing about the imbalance that we see in the academy. But you think about it, the same people who say, "Well, conservatives just aren't up to the task. They aren't smart enough. They aren't clever enough, they aren't flexible enough," the idea is that conservatives exist in these dark swamps of rigidity and parochialism while those on the left scamper gaily in the sunny uplands of flexibility and rationality and those... tolerance. And of course, it's just not true, and we have evidence showing this, but those same people, there are other groups that are underrepresented in higher education. They would never dream of saying that about any other underrepresented group in higher education, which is, I think, pretty telling.

Steve McGuire (00:27:35):

Well, it's interesting what you mentioned a moment ago about the surveys on discrimination and yeah, I think I've seen some of these surveys where an alarming number of professors admit that they would not be willing to hire someone who say, voted for Trump, I think maybe was one of them or something along

those lines. But you mentioned that normally you have to sort of work to get people to admit this even in the context of a survey or a poll. So does that kind of highlight that there really is this monoculture or this set of norms in academia where people don't think it's problematic to say, "Yeah, I wouldn't hire that person," this, in a way, just even further confirms the level of discrimination that even is maybe implicitly taking place, if not explicitly?

Josh Dunn ([00:28:24](#)):

The fact that yeah, they're so comfortable with it and indicates that they just don't think that it's a problem at all. It has at least started to dawn on some that this is a problem. I think you think about the work that Jonathan Haidt has done. I think he has done... just Heterodox Academy has really highlighted why this is a severe problem for the mission of the university when you think about the two basic functions of pursuing truth, producing research, new knowledge, and then also teaching, it really is... it undermines this kind of homogeneity. It undermines both aspects of that mission of the university, but then also some, at least out of their own self-interest have recognized that it's a political problem for them because you look at just the cratering support for higher education, it's across the board.

([00:29:24](#)):

Of course, it's the significant loss of support from those who are on the right and also moderates. But also on the left, there's been falling support for higher education, and people recognize that a lot of it is driven by this political imbalance. And given what the surveys show right now, you cannot construct a stable coalition to support higher education with public opinion right now.

Steve McGuire ([00:29:56](#)):

I think that's a great point.

Josh Dunn ([00:29:56](#)):

It's just impossible.

Steve McGuire ([00:29:57](#)):

There are this-

Josh Dunn ([00:29:58](#)):

Yeah.

Steve McGuire ([00:29:59](#)):

Yeah, I think it is important to think about it from the perspective that we've mostly been talking about it, which is the actual functioning of the institution and meeting its mission and its goals. But also, yes, universities have a tradition of independence and autonomy, but I think they also need to recognize that they operate within a broader political society towards which they do have responsibilities and from which they do obviously receive benefits of various kinds. The Trump administration's proposed compact looms over this conversation now, and obviously there's, at least in my view, an activist view, some significant problems with that compact.

([00:30:38](#)):

But it does kind of point to issues and to questions that have been made explicit now that I think were more implicit in the past. And universities have allowed these questions to become explicit, or they're partly responsible for it because they've allowed the public perception of what they're doing to sink to the levels of low confidence and low trust that you're mentioning.

Josh Dunn (00:31:04):

So I mean you just look at the left even, and its declining support for higher education. You can go back to, even during the Obama presidency, president Obama would say things about, "Well, you really want to be an art history major," or something like that. I mean, they were starting to raise questions about the value proposition behind higher education. This should have been deeply alarming people in higher education. Instead, it was like, "How dare anyone criticize us? I mean, people should be grateful that they get to pay taxes that go to support us." That was kind of the attitude.

(00:31:46):

Even in now democratic states like Colorado, I mean, you look at Jared Polis, democratic governor, he's not terribly enthusiastic about pouring more money into higher education. It turns out that higher ed is the soft underbelly of public budgeting in states. And in some ways, I think people just view faculty as being kind of coddled museum pieces just out of step with where we are now in 2025. And again, that's not coming from the right, I mean, it's coming from the left. And so there's just no attempt to actually survey the landscape until recently, I think by leaders in higher education, to see what are the challenges that academia is facing and what can be done to restore trust. And I happen to think that higher education is an important institution in America, and I want that trust to be restored. I just wish that people had started paying attention to it a long time ago.

Steve McGuire (00:32:53):

Right. Right. Yeah. And I think if you look at the Gallup data and there's some new data from Pew that just came out the other day when they dig in and ask people questions about, "What are your concerns about higher ed," right? When they say that they lack confidence or it's moving in the wrong direction and they'll point to the cost is out of control, they'll say that preparedness for careers that they don't have the skills or they're not learning what they need. There's a lot of complaints about that. So educational quality maybe generally, but then there are also concerns about political agendas on campus or political bias or lack of exposure to various viewpoints and that sort of thing. So those do come in as significant concerns as well. And depending on which survey you're looking at, they may even be the top concern or a very close second or third.

(00:33:52):

So it does seem like it would behoove institutions of higher education to look at this as a real problem, not just because as we've discussed, it sort of intrinsically affects what they're trying to do, the education that they're trying to offer their students, but also from this more self-interested or prudential standpoint.

(00:34:10):

I guess the question I have is what can higher ed do at this point to start to rectify? I mean, let's just assume for the minute that you're at an institution that is willing to recognize that there's a problem here. And I think there are institutions, I know there's some academic leaders that are recognizing that there are some issues. Someone like Chancellor Diermeier at Vanderbilt comes to mind as someone who's sort of trying to take on a leadership role. President Beilock at Dartmouth has acknowledged the data on confidence and said, "We have some issues here." So even if we were to assume that people agreed, "Yeah, this is a problem that we need to fix," how do you do it? Do you go out and explicitly hire people on the basis of their ideology? Then you start to get complaints about like DEI for conservatives, and maybe you're looking at people for the wrong reasons in terms of are they a fit pedagogically or intellectually for your school or the position you want to fill.

Josh Dunn (00:35:13):

Yeah, so I think that affirmative action for conservatives is never going to work. John and I actually, in passing on the right, we asked everyone we interviewed whether or not they supported affirmative action

for conservatives and none of them did. You couldn't find... And so the population that should be the recipient of this benefit is opposed to it. So that would make it a primary because the conservatives do again, deeply dislike the idea that people should be hired on anything other than intellectual merit. So I think the best approach is to recognize that certain questions that people from a broader range of ideological perspectives are interested in have been excluded from many disciplines. You think about history, it's very difficult to find anyone who studies military history. There's some, it's here and there, but it used to be quite common. And I don't think studying military history is just something that would be a province of conservatives.

(00:36:23):

But as history has moved further to in cultural history, it's also moved further to the left, if you were to just kind of open up space for the study of the military, which after all is kind of an important historical topic, you're much more likely to get people with a different range of perspectives than you would currently get. Sometimes it can be methodological as well. I think there is often a distrust of some of the quantitative approaches in political science from people who are conservative. So that's one way of doing it. I do think that institutes like here at Tennessee and other places, if you're just interested in say, the study of constitutional history, that's something that the pool of applicants is probably going to have a greater range of perspectives, if you want someone who studies American constitutional history or even the traditional study of political institutions, then you might otherwise get in, say, political science. So that's one way of doing it.

(00:37:41):

There are bigger questions I think about just campus climate as well though. And that's something where universities have to be much more assertive on this. Yeah, it's been heartening to see more universities adopt institutional neutrality positions. And institutional neutrality just means that the university shouldn't be taking positions on matters of public dispute unless they directly affect the operations of the university in a very clear way. And so Chancellor Diermeier on the board of the institute here at Tennessee, he has been very good on this. You also cannot, I think, indulge violent and unlawful conduct by students that sends a signal to the public that, oh, these certain perspectives are going to be treated differently than others. And again, I'll give credit to Daniel Diermeier, when they had students occupy his office at Vanderbilt, they were arrested, and then they immediately began disciplinary proceedings. He says, "Look, we believe in free speech at Vanderbilt. You are allowed to have your position, but you cannot occupy spaces in buildings that are necessary for us to perform our work."

(00:39:08):

They make it clear we want you to engage in robust debate. I think Chancellor Plowman here at the University of Tennessee has also done an excellent job on this, telling protesters, for instance, on Palestine that you, "Look, you're free to protest, but you are not free to just violate policies where you have to be treated like everyone else." And I think what people saw, particularly after October 7th, is that many universities did seem to have a clear double standard in what they were going to tolerate. And that I think that for many people outside of higher education, this was an eye-opening period. They just didn't realize how bad it had gotten on many campuses. And so I think you need universities to be very clear on these things. Otherwise, they're just going to see people continue to not support them and vote with their dollars and feet.

Steve McGuire (00:40:06):

Yeah, no, those are great points. And yeah, we're big fans of institutional neutrality at ACTA. We've been encouraging institutions, as you probably know, and we actually had Chancellor Diermeier in DC a while ago to participate in a discussion, and he gave a wonderful speech that we ended up transcribing and putting together as a publication. So definitely recommend that to listeners of the podcast. He's excellent on that topic. But yeah, that's a great point that, I mean, there's certain things you can potentially do in

terms of who you're hiring, who you're bringing onto campus, but it's also about the overall atmosphere and culture on the campus. And of course, people are free to think what they think, and they're free to express their views, but there needs to be rules and some sense of fairness in the way that different groups or different individuals are treated.

(00:40:53):

And institutional neutrality does a great job of setting that expectation that this is really an institution that's a forum for discussion of all the points of view that are out there, not a place that's advancing one particular point of view. It does sort of raise the question though of departments that are ideologically captured, which people often wonder about, and I won't mention any disciplines in particular, but I think we could all think of certain either individual departments or, I mean even whole disciplines. I mean, you were mentioning sociology. I don't know if you'd want to call that ideologically captured or not. But when you look at, say, the ads for some of these departments, it's just very clear when you're reading the job ad, they only want someone who's into critical theory and social justice and all the buzzwords are in there. And I remember back when I was applying for jobs fresh out of grad school in political theory, there were job ads that I looked at and thought, "Well, that's just not for me. It's not even worth my time."

(00:41:56):

And maybe that's fair in some cases. If you're a big department and you've got your Strausian and you've got your Rawlsian and you've got your Marxian and you're looking for a new theorist, you want someone else. And that would make sense perhaps. But in some of these contexts, you look at the people who are already on the faculty and it's like, well, you just want another person who's part of the club, basically. And I mean, what do you do about departments like that? Because obviously there's big concerns about academic freedom, the autonomy of the institutions or units within them. But on the other hand, these are seemingly problematic in terms of the things we've been talking about today.

Josh Dunn (00:42:37):

Yeah. Well, I do think you look at some of these departments that have been captured or disciplines that have been more or less captured, and you've overall seen a decline in enrollments, I think in the social sciences, humanities. But I think some of those captured disciplines have seen a steeper decline. And one of the things that has propped them up has been the inclusion of mandatory courses that they teach. And I'm not certain that universities, they have to do that. But this also goes to something that ACTA is interested in general is that you have these core curricula, they don't really look like core curricula at all. I mean, it's just a sprawling list of courses. And I think it's a reasonable thing to do for university to decide, "Look, we actually have to have a meaningful core curriculum, one that's not just a giant smorgasbord of a 1,000 to 2,000 courses."

(00:43:43):

That's not a core curriculum at all. And then that might impose some discipline on some of these departments to start thinking about what is actually essential and why is it we aren't getting the enrollment that we would like to see. So that would be one thing that could be done. But you're right that there are fundamental questions about institutional autonomy and academic self-governance that have to be considered. I just think that while I think that these are important principles, just as a matter of again, self-interest, that some universities and fields should start to think about whether or not they can defend themselves without some modification because it's clear that that patience has been exhausted in some places. And this is going to be very difficult for them if they don't do something to reassure people that they aren't just an appendage of a very far on one side of the spectrum ideology.

Steve McGuire (00:45:15):

Yeah. So to bring things towards a close, I want to ask you one last question. And there's this debate raging really right now, I think around higher ed, about whether or not the institutions can reform

themselves from within or whether reform is something that's going to come from without. And I think you could point to examples of reform that's taking place from within, but you could probably also point to salutary things that have happened that involved some action from without, whether that be state legislatures or other kinds of third party actors, even within the conception of what does change from within mean? Does that mean the board of trustees.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:46:04]

Steve McGuire ([00:46:03](#)):

What does change from within mean? Does that mean the board of trustees, or does that mean the faculty Senate? And so, there's this sort of broad debate about this. I'm wondering what your thoughts are about that. I guess, in your own case too, your center was created by the legislature on a bipartisan basis, which I think is important to remind people of, and there are these centers like yours or similar to yours, that have been created in other states around the country, and each one, I think, has its own peculiar mission and stance. Some were funded on a bipartisan basis, maybe others less. But yeah, in terms of just this general question of reform from within, versus reform from without, what are your views on that? And then, maybe in terms of your own institution, what kind of a positive impact are you hoping it will have on the institution as a whole going forward?

Josh Dunn ([00:46:59](#)):

Yeah, so universities can reform themselves from within. The question is will they? I think some will, and then others will not. I do think you see some places around the country, for instance, you look at Johns Hopkins and the work that Ron Daniels is doing, trying to build some kind of intellectual pluralism, and I think he's had some success there, but you obviously have some of his faculty who are stridently opposed to him. There was just one faculty member just wrote something for the AUP, and then also the Chronicle of Higher Education, saying that there's no need for viewpoint diversity, that it's a MAGA plot. I don't know. I mean, I think, again, that John Stuart Mill gave the best articulation of this, and when I've read John Stuart Mill's on Liberty, which was written in 1859, I don't picture him wearing a MAGA hat, right?

([00:48:06](#)):

But that gives you a sense of the problems that people like Ron Daniels are going to confront. He thinks that this is necessary. He thinks it's both necessary for the proper functioning of the institution so that you can get good research, so you can overcome confirmation bias, so that you don't have these ossified dogmas setting in disciplines. It's necessary for teaching, for creating good citizens, but he also is obviously acutely aware of the political circumstances. Here he has his own faculty. It's clear that there's at least a significant percentage of it that's just going to oppose him at every turn on this, so it's possible, but it's going to take some forceful leadership. I think that Ron Daniels can do it. I think he has the stature to be able to pull it off. There's a lot of places where you aren't going to have that kind of leadership in place.

([00:48:59](#)):

It will probably come from outside, and again, I think boards of trustees are internal, and in general, I think it's almost better if it does emerge internally to the university, but it has happened here in Tennessee. The institute was created by the legislature, and there were very legitimate reasons for the creation of the institute. If you just look at the civic knowledge, with the general public and with college graduates, it's clear that higher education has not been succeeding on this. We need to try something. That's a legitimate function of a state legislature, to worry about whether or not students are being prepared for citizenship. If you look at the very first justification for public higher education in the United States, was to prepare students to be leaders. That was it.

([00:49:57](#)):

It was a civic mission, so it's at the core of what public, higher education should be, so I do think that it's advisable for legislatures to be careful about this, but there are certain instances where I do think it's appropriate, but I also do wish, I really do wish the universities would get in front of this so that it wouldn't come to that. You could see all of this emerge. John Shields, and we started writing about this in our book, others have been talking about it for a long time, and no one would listen. We're like Cassandra, right? But I do wish that universities would internally start doing it on their own. I think it would be much better for universities to do this on their own, but they should expect that if they don't, that again, those outside, who fund it, are going to be casting an increasingly skeptical gaze toward the university.

Steve McGuire ([00:51:08](#)):

Yeah, and that's a great point you raised about the origins and the idea of producing civic leaders, because a lot of people today will sort of focus on the great partnership between American universities and the federal government, in terms of producing research, especially in STEM fields, technology innovation, but I think one of the American people's chief concerns about universities today is, are they producing great citizens and future leaders for the country?

([00:51:39](#)):

When they see, as you were talking about earlier, the kinds of things that exploded onto their screens in the wake of October 7th, I think we've obviously seen these various shout downs and other kinds of things in the past, and so there was a certain segment of the population that was aware that there were problems in terms of intolerance, a lack of openness, and that sort of thing, but I think that really brought it home for people that, "Wait a second. These are the people who are going to be coming out of our most elite institutions and leading the country?" Right? And there was a study that showed that most of the encampments were at very selective institutions.

Josh Dunn ([00:52:19](#)):

I think that's generally the case, and I will say one other thing, I'll relate to this point, we have some survey data that we'll be publishing here out of the institute, in association with some others, showing that the public, we do know that the public has been much more concerned about job prospects and career preparation with higher education, but also preparation for citizenship doesn't trail much, that question about career readiness for the general public, and so they do view preparing students for a life of citizenship as being a core and important function of the university.

([00:53:14](#)):

Again, I think that this is something that, you see what's happened on college campuses, that doesn't look like the kind of thing that's necessary to have meaningful, productive debate, where we can work through significant differences. It looks more like just minority tyranny, where a small, particularly loud, and often physically aggressive minority just takes over the campus or significant portions of the campus. That's not the kind of thing that's going to prepare students to be able to engage with others who disagree with them for the rest of their lives, which is what has to happen in a society like ours.

Steve McGuire ([00:54:00](#)):

Yeah. Okay, great. Well, that'll be interesting to see that data. Well, I think the people of Tennessee are lucky to have you and your new center. It sounds like you're doing great work, and thanks for being on the podcast today, Josh. It was great talking with you.

Josh Dunn ([00:54:14](#)):

Well, thanks. It's always great to be with you guys, and we appreciate the work that you do.

Steve McGuire ([00:54:18](#)):

Thank you. Well, I really enjoyed talking to Josh. Unfortunately, Justin, you weren't able to join us, so let's start by getting your reaction. You've had a chance to listen to the interview now. What's jumped out at you?

Justin Garrison ([00:54:36](#)):

First, I'd say your shirt was awesome, and I think when we plan our December episode, we should consider Christmas jumpers, but that's a side note. I thought it was outstanding,

Steve McGuire ([00:54:46](#)):

I thought it was the sweaters.

Justin Garrison ([00:54:47](#)):

Yeah, that's right. That's right. My favorite soccer team makes these every year, and they're horrendous, so I'm definitely-

Steve McGuire ([00:54:54](#)):

Well, now you're on the record. You have to do this.

Justin Garrison ([00:54:56](#)):

Yeah, that's right. That's right. I thought the interview was really strong. I thought you asked a number of important questions. This is a really important topic, and it's too important for it to get kind of pigeonholed as MAGA adjuvant or something like that, which you both rightly wrote off as a ridiculous kind of red herring. You never know, right? I mean, these centers are pretty new, and being good at one thing doesn't necessarily mean you're good at some other thing. And so, one of the questions that I've had about, not just centers, but just leadership in higher ed in general is, people who you might expect to be good at it turn out not to be that good at it, and other people you don't know, they turn out to be great. All of that is to say, much like sports, you don't know what you've got until the pressure's on and they're actually doing things. I'm thinking about your Blue Jays from last night. He came off as someone who I would really trust to run one of these places.

([00:55:56](#)):

He was not a partisan bomb thrower, but an articulate person, talking about this from the perspective of liberal learning, citizenship education, and things that really shouldn't be partisan issues. I thought it was a wonderful conversation. That's the kind of person that I would want in charge of a center, whether it's literally that one or others. That's a great leadership profile, in addition to the intellectual background that he has, which is certainly compatible. So, that was great. I thought that the two of you really covered a lot of important ground. You talked a little bit about the formation of this particular center, and I thought it was important that you both noted that it was a creation of the legislature, but it was a bipartisan creation. One of the tags against centers for people who don't like them anyways is, "Well, they're just right-wing conspiracies. They're right-wing agenda items" This is an example at least, where that's clearly not true. That's an important point to make.

([00:57:04](#)):

The idea that this is a conservative takeover is not anything other than propaganda. I liked some of the discussion in particular, that I thought was really helpful, was breaking out or moving beyond what I thought was a good conversation about the political component of diversity, which we can talk about maybe in a moment, but talking about disciplinary and even methodological diversity, right? When I applied for the job I had at Roanoke College, I came in as a political theorist, and the job was like a

hybrid, "Can you do some American politics and some political theory kind of stuff?" I'm talking about my research and my thinking about democracy, and during my job talk, and there are just so many things that I back on and I'm just gobsmacked that I even got the offer, there was maybe a 20-minute exchange between me and the people who would then become my colleagues about the meaning of democracy. I didn't even understand this at the time, the way I would now.

(00:58:07):

You would know this because of us having gone to the grad school and the same program. I didn't really understand the language of empirical social science, and they had no understanding of the language of political theory, and so I keep talking about democracy, and they really were getting annoyed that I wasn't explaining how I quantified. I think at one point, one of my colleagues took pity on me and said, "Imagine you're sorting M&Ms, and the blue M&Ms go in here and the green ones go in there, so how are you sorting out these concepts?" It finally dawned on me like, "Oh. I'm doing this in a philosophical, rather than an empirical sense," and they were like, "Oh, okay." The reason I'm talking about that is, there really is a need for methodological diversity. It's not that empiricism is rubbish, or that philosophy is rubbish, or that there's really only one way to go about asking these questions and investigating them.

(00:59:04):

But particularly in the social sciences, and increasingly even in the humanities, it takes on a pseudoscientific tilt of empirical social science research methods. If I don't have an Excel chart, I have no argument. That's not inappropriate in all circumstances, but I thought Josh and you both did such a good job of talking about how method is a segue into other kinds of diverse topics, both in terms of your line of inquiry, the kind of evidence that you're willing to accept, that's something that more academic programs need to hear. When I was talking, again, with a colleague, it was a course on international relations theory, and it went all the way back to the origins of positivism, and I just smacked my head. I'm like, "Have you not heard of Thucydides?" That's a very different method, but I would argue, one that's had a tremendous influence on how people think about international relations, warfare, and stuff like that.

(01:00:03):

So, I thought that side of the discussion was really strong. I thought it was helpful that Josh was referencing empirical research, here I go contradicting myself, that the idea that there's open and overt discrimination against conservative intellectuals, this is a real thing. It's not just sour grapes. "I didn't get the job. Well, they hate people like me," or something like this. There are studies that seem to confirm this, and what was more shocking to me in the interview you two did is how brazen the discrimination is, in this particular format, that it's open. If you've seen Jordan Peele's movie, *Get Out*, it's really elliptical at first, right? There's these subtle things, but they're not coming out and saying, "We're just overt racists or something like this," and you would never see that kind of statement in a department, thank goodness. "I don't want to hire this person because of their ethnicity, because of their race, because of their gender." It's good that they don't do that.

Steve McGuire (01:01:08):

Or I guess they would say, "I want to hire this person because of their race or their gender."

Justin Garrison (01:01:13):

Yeah. You mentioned your own experience, and I've had the same experience, that those comments are taken as the equivalent of saying, "Two plus two equals four." It's obvious, and I thought that was helpful, because when we were at HXA, a lot of these lazy arguments about the ideological imbalance were trotted out in one of the panels, and I just rolled my eyes and thought, "This is so boringly predictable." Well, they're not here because they're dumb and they don't want to be here.

Steve McGuire ([01:01:45](#)):

Right.

Justin Garrison ([01:01:45](#)):

I've met more than enough people who would contradict both of those things without being counter ideologues, so as I said, I thought it was really, really intriguing. I still have lingering questions about this tension between merit and viewpoint diversity, but I don't want to jump right into that. I mean, now that you've had some time to think about the interview and what you covered with Josh, what are your thoughts on it?

Steve McGuire ([01:02:12](#)):

Well, I have to say, one of the highlights for me was when he was talking about writing his book and the research that they did, and that they had to use a Snowball sample, which is how you apparently do research on homeless populations, and that's the method that they had to use to track down conservative professors. Then, when they tracked some of them down, the fact that people were actually quite upset and felt like they'd been outed, and wondered if there was some kind of ethics violation. I mean, if that doesn't highlight the depth of the problem, right? I don't know what does. I mean, that's a good question. I mean, obviously, we've been thinking about this a lot and working on this topic, and I do think that, at the end of the day, you should be hiring the best people available for the job, without any form of discrimination.

([01:03:03](#)):

At the same time, when you're running a search, you can definitely identify, say, needs that the department has or needs that the school has overall, right? Depending on the size of the place and that sort of thing. You're talking about getting hired as a theorist at Roanoke, and it sounds like this was a place that they had plenty of empirical political scientists, whether qualitative or quantitative, I don't know, but they didn't have a political theorist, and there was a bit of a gap there. In a way, it kind of highlights the need to find a way to communicate and show that, as a political theorist, you were doing something valuable that was different, that would make a contribution to the program. So, maybe they set an ad, like probably they were hiring for someone who did American/theory, I'm guessing, and you had to show them like, "No, no, this is a valuable way of doing it."

([01:03:54](#)):

It reminds me, by the way, I was a candidate for a small, selective, liberal arts college when I first came out of grad school. When I was asking them about the visit and what to present on, they said, "Oh. Just present your dissertation." Well, my dissertation was on Friedrich Schelling and his critique of Kant's idea of autonomy. It was very philosophical. It didn't have a lot to do with political science. This was in a political science department, the job that was available, and it was five or six professors and then a bunch of undergrad students. I was like, "Nobody in this room is going to have any idea what I'm talking about." I prepared a totally different job talk about Eric Vogelin, his political theory, and his sort of critique of modernity, and then said a little bit about how my dissertation sort of fit with that or fit into that.

([01:04:45](#)):

It went well, but it totally confirmed after the fact that, if I had just gone in there and given a job talk, it would've been a disaster. I've seen plenty of disastrous job talks, so I'm glad that wasn't one of them. I think there is potential there for tension. I mean, we've talked about it on the podcast before. There was an article in The Atlantic not so long ago on the idea of DEI for conservatives. I said then, and I'll say again now, that's the kind of thing we want to avoid. We want to be hiring people that are good for the job, but like I was saying, you can sort of look for people. Josh talked about this too, you can look for people who

are taking different approaches, who are studying topics that maybe aren't as popular as they once were or things like that, and you can maybe find people who are bringing a diversity of perspectives.

(01:05:40):

It's not just about bringing in Republicans or conservatives; it's about having a variety of viewpoints that are brought to the table to have a robust conversation. Now, in his case, he's running a school of civics. As we discussed, you're trying to prepare students for good citizenship. If you're a Democrat, you're going to go out in the world and find Republicans. If you're a Republican, you're going to go out in the world and find Democrats. Then, of course, there's independents, there's even some socialists, all kinds of things that you'll find out there, and so it's good to be prepared to be able to engage with those people, politically. You don't have to agree with them. You can want to win and all of that, but you need to recognize that they're there and find a way to negotiate with them and live with them, I think, so those are some of the things that jumped out for me.

Justin Garrison (01:06:35):

Yeah. I think this is where I get hung up on the broader issue. Part of the conversation you had with him was talking about, it's not nothing to have someone who doesn't believe the argument, at least make a good-faith effort to present it on its own terms, so I'm not a Rawlsian, but when I teach Rawls, I'm not just dunking on him the entire time or something like that. Give the honest, but at the same time, it's not going to be as effective as someone who's just like a full-throated, full-fledged Rawlsian. So, I was struggling, at times, to understand maybe, so how do you hire for something that seems to be an intellectual identity characteristic without it being an identity characteristic?

(01:07:24):

Like, "No. I really do believe Edmund Burke is like a profound thinker." Is that another way of saying, "I'm a conservative"? I agree with you. DEI or affirmative action for conservatives is not only a bad policy, maybe from the top down, but as part of his interview indicated, the people who you would think would benefit from that are also not interested in it, so it would be a self-defeating exercise. You're not going to find a lot of people who will sign up for that to begin with, but I really think one of the things that you and Josh both talked about is just the pervasiveness, particularly in the humanities of critical theory and all of its manifestations. I don't have a lot of confidence in people from that background saying, "You know what we need to do, is hire people who don't do critical theory," because it's not one method among many.

(01:08:20):

I think Josh talked about this in the context of sociology. It's more of a spiritual catechesis, right? And if that's how you think of higher ed, that old Latin phrase, error has new rights. I know I just said it in English, but I don't speak Latin because I didn't go to one of those schools. I went to one where the core was all over the place, but I think there's something about this that needs to be ironed out, that viewpoint diversity is about means, and part of the attraction, I think, with the kind of critical theory set is they have a clear end in mind, and I think it's one that'll probably be the end of higher education, but they do have something that they're offering as a-

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Justin Garrison (01:09:03):

The end of higher education, but they do have something that they're offering as an end point, as a purpose, and that is attractive when you're in your late teens and early twenties and you don't really know what you think. And here comes someone who says this is the way to go. It's bad teaching I think at the end of the day, but it's seductive in the short term.

Steve McGuire ([01:09:20](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Well, we talked about that a little bit, right? There are programs that are maybe so far gone. Maybe you have to start conversations at a board level about putting certain programs into receivership or something like that. If they're Overton window of what's acceptable discourse within their department is so narrow, or if it's all so clearly ordered towards particular ideological outcomes or activist goals, then that might be the case where other parts of the university need to step in from a governance perspective and try to right the ship.

Justin Garrison ([01:10:00](#)):

I would think too, with that issue, there's probably a correlation between that kind of environment and low enrollment.

Steve McGuire ([01:10:09](#)):

Quite possibly, quite possibly. Some of those arguments might start to raise questions about programs that we would endorse and like to see continue.

Justin Garrison ([01:10:19](#)):

Yeah, that's fair.

Steve McGuire ([01:10:20](#)):

But those programs might be facing other issues too that sort of don't say if a university, you mentioned the core where, at your alma mater, if the university is not ensuring that every student is getting a proper and robust core education, like we recommend through our What Will They Learn project, then that can have a negative impact on those programs. But yeah, I think if you look at some of these more ideological programs, I mean, it's only going to appeal to a certain narrow group within the population in the first place. And then you look at the return on investment on some of these programs, and they're some of the worst, so they don't have a lot going for them. And if you judge them by their fruits, this might be a pretty good case of that.

Justin Garrison ([01:11:12](#)):

Which is a reference that wouldn't make sense unless you have a real core.

Steve McGuire ([01:11:16](#)):

That's right.

Justin Garrison ([01:11:16](#)):

So learn something.

Steve McGuire ([01:11:18](#)):

Yeah. We might have to get our president, Michael, in here though, to teach us some Latin since he's a classicist.

Justin Garrison ([01:11:24](#)):

Yeah, I was thinking about that. We should segue into a discussion of The Compact, and I know the ACTA released a statement, and when I saw the word honorable in there, I was like, "That comes from a classicist background. This is a Ciceronian middle ground between two extremes." So yeah, let's talk

about The Compact for a minute. Is this a pretty big deal? I've never seen anything quite like this. I know that in our statement, we reference a dear colleague letter from 2011 from the Obama administration that really took a strange reading. I would say I am speaking for myself, not ACTA, of Title IX and what universities and colleges have to do to remain compliant.

(01:12:08):

And so there's continuity here, but this is a pretty big expansion of thinking about maybe how the federal government wants to try and get involved in the management of a variety of parts of the higher education environment. Now, The Compact, as you know, but our audience might not, covers a whole bunch of things, and some of it is just not CFI related, even though it's maybe ACTA adjacent or certainly of interest to us as an organization. So some of the stuff about grade inflation, equality, and admissions and hiring, some of those things fit with us. But the three that jumped out to me was there's a clear call for institutional neutrality. There's a clear call for non-discrimination in faculty hiring, which is also part of our gold standard. And then there's a clear call to cultivate a marketplace of ideas and to facilitate civil discourse. And I know in The Compact, the marketplace of ideas thing goes in a very odd direction after that statement is made. But in a general sense, we're very much interested in civil discourse, non-discrimination, and hiring and neutrality.

(01:13:12):

So as people may know, this was a proposal made to nine universities on the 1st of October. We're recording this part on October 21st, so this is the day after the deadline to submit comments on this. There's a deadline of November 21st for signing this statement. Several universities, and by today's count, I think all but two have just rejected it of the nine.

(01:13:41):

So the offer was made to Dartmouth, UVA MIT, USC, Brown, Penn, UT Austin, University of Arizona, and Vanderbilt. And as of this morning, if I understand the reporting correctly, Vanderbilt has expressed some concerns, but has an outright said, "We reject this." And UT Austin has expressed some potential openness to this without saying they're definitely going to sign, but the other seven have said various things. I think there is a sense in which a lot of these schools recognize that some of this, these aren't bad ideas per se, but that the way in which this particular agreement would come into being and would then be enforced raises some really serious questions about self-governance, about academic freedom, things that it would be really hard for a self-respecting institution to just accept without qualification, without any kind of question or comment.

Steve McGuire (01:14:39):

Not to mention constitutional rights and that sort of thing as well.

Justin Garrison (01:14:43):

Yeah, right. I mean, a number of the schools that were offered this opportunity are public institutions of higher education, University of Arizona, UT Austin, UVA. Certainly, yeah, you can't compact your way out of the First Amendment, right? I mean, that's Marbury versus Madison 101, right? The constitution beats statutes, and these aren't even statutes.

Steve McGuire (01:15:05):

Yeah, right. I mean, even if you take, for instance, institutional neutrality, can the federal government require a private institution to be institutionally neutral? Probably not. Right? To what degree can it insist on viewpoint diversity of marketplace of ideas? And as you alluded to, of course, then it goes into address specifically conservatism. So it's not even maintaining viewpoint neutrality at that point. So these are pretty big issues with the document as it's written. I think your summary of where the university stand is

accurate, based on what I know before we started recording. Yeah, Vanderbilt basically said, "We weren't asked to accept or reject. We were asked to provide feedback. And so that's what we're doing." UT Austin, yeah, there was the sort of initial, I think it was the chair of the system board responded positively, but I don't know if there's been anything else from them since then.

(01:16:04):

And then University of Arizona just said that they wouldn't be signing it. Dartmouth, I know, and UVA, when they basically said they wouldn't be signing The Compact or all, but said it, they did say they're interested in further discussions about how the federal government and the universities could maybe continue to discuss or talk. I don't know what that would entail. There was some reporting in the Wall Street Journal that Arizona State, which has since been brought into the conversation. They've added some other universities. There was a report based on a source that ASU is maybe interested in talking about something other than a legally binding document. So I guess we'll see where the conversation goes.

(01:16:54):

Secretary of Education, Linda McMahon also acknowledged that this meeting had taken place at the end of last week. And so it sounds like it's sort of far from over in terms of the conversations that they're hoping to have. We'll see. But as you mentioned, we released our ACTA statement and that speaks for itself. But I'll say that while we certainly, of course, at ACTA recognize that there's significant need for reform in higher ed and are interested in finding ways to bring about that reform, The Compact just seems to have too many issues in terms of how it's approaching those problems, as you mentioned, and then the constitutional issues and that sort of thing as well. So that just seemed like basically a non-starter at the end of the day.

Justin Garrison (01:17:50):

Yeah, I think something else that annoys me about The Compact, and I don't think this is strictly speaking the fault of the federal government. I've already seen op-eds starting to riff on this. We told you institutional neutrality is a mega plot, so definitely don't do this now. And I'm trying to channel as best I can with my feeble intellect, our boss. But in our interview with him last month, he was talking about trustees and administrators need to take the reins now. So don't give into the temptation that you're going to inevitably be exposed to by probably faculty members and others in higher ed, that hiring for merit is a right-wing conspiracy, institutional neutrality is a right-wing plot. These are reasonable things that we've already seen people with various kind of ideological backgrounds adopt at various schools of different sizes, public, private, and all of that. These are sound policy ideas that The Compact can be wrong about how it's trying to achieve these goals, but these goals can still be good goals even if Donald Trump happens to like them.

(01:19:02):

So I guess don't give into Orange Man bad because there's actually something here that should be a catalyst for internal reform. And the longer that that's put off, I really worry that at some point, something like this Compact is going to look like an appetizer for even more motivation to dismantle higher ed based on justifiable concerns in the broader public and in government. So there couldn't be more urgency than there is now for getting one's own house in order before it's too late.

Steve McGuire (01:19:37):

Yeah, that's right. And I think we lay out pretty well in the statement. Obviously higher ed needs reform, as we've said. A lot of the ideas in The Compact are ones that we like. It's the method that is the problem. And yeah, we call on boards of trustees and academic leaders to start making reforms, and there are some things that the federal government could potentially do to improve higher ed, and there are things that state legislators could do to improve higher ed as well. So there's many things that could be done that don't have some of the issues that we have with this compact.

Justin Garrison ([01:20:16](#)):

Well, all right, boys and girls, it is now time for this month's Hero of the People. Steve, this month I have selected someone that I met in person on Friday. You said that I wasn't able to be there for the interview, and that's because I was at the University of Virginia and I met with Mary-Kate Carey, and she is the executive director of Think Again at the University of Virginia, which does a lot of civil discourse programming. And she's now the assistant vice president and deputy chief of staff for the current interim president at UVA. And so when we were talking with her about the report card, she invited me to come to campus and see some of the civil discourse programming they're doing, and it's outstanding. It's just the kind of thing that I wish I could have experienced as a student and just the kind of thing I wish I had known about when I was still a professor.

([01:21:12](#)):

So UVA role is a very different way from anything I've experienced as a professor. So when they have pizza, it's mellow mushrooms, so those are super expensive. And there's 20 of them. I was like, "Oh man, this is great." But they had this wonderful event, it's called Disagree with a Professor, and she and her staff organized this. So they would find professors from different disciplines and they'd have a sign on the table and it would be some hot takes about politics, about pop culture, about sports, about stuff going on campus or whatever. Students would sit down, have some food, the professor would give a quick pitch and they'd actually have a discussion. And then after 15 minutes or so, you'd have to go to a different table if you wanted to keep talking to people. So you got exposed to a number of different ways of thinking about things.

([01:22:03](#)):

And even some of the kind of post experience polling that they were doing showed that students really seemed to respond to this in the sense of, "Oh, the next time I'm in an actual classroom and a professor says something I don't agree with, I feel more comfortable asking questions or challenging the evidence," or whatever the case might be. So that was spectacular. And there should be an acknowledgement of some of the great work that other people at ACTA have done. I'm thinking about our colleagues at college debates and Discourse Alliance, who have worked a lot with UVA and a lot of other schools to provide this kind of programming to facilitate and support this kind of programming.

([01:22:38](#)):

So the work that Mary-Kate's trying to do specifically with Think Again, but more broadly with the Campus Discourse Project at UVA. This is a concrete example that if anyone's watching this and listened to our last conversation and said, "Okay, I want to do stuff, but how would I do it," check out her materials. We can put links in the show notes below. But she's great. She did a fantastic job. And this is the kind of thing that if more people were doing it on higher ed campuses, we wouldn't be talking about a compact because there wouldn't be a problem. So with that, Mary-Kate, congratulations. You are our month's Hero of the People.

Steve McGuire ([01:23:17](#)):

Awesome. Well, that's great. I'm glad you had such a great experience when you were down at UVA. Unfortunately, it falls to me again this month to focus on the Apparatchik of the Month. And I have to say, I continue to be amazed by the AAUP.

Justin Garrison ([01:23:40](#)):

We could call it the AAUP Award and just cut to the chase.

Steve McGuire ([01:23:46](#)):

Okay. There's so many things in the last year or two where I feel like they've been on the wrong side of the issue, whether it's institutional neutrality, the use of DEI statements in hiring, the endorsement of academic boycotts. Now, it turns out that they also signed onto a statement calling for an arms embargo against Israel back in December. There was some great reporting in the Chronicle about that, and the president of the AAUP wasn't too happy about it. It had some choice, almost Trumpian words, I might say, about it. Oh, they put them on Blue Sky, not on Truth Social, but it's been a remarkable run, and in a lot of ways, just really unfortunate to see from an organization that has this historical legacy of defending academic freedom.

(01:24:46):

And the one I want to highlight today is the president of the chapter at Johns Hopkins University has now written a couple of pieces arguing against Viewpoint Diversity, and she's received some pretty solid replies from others. She doubled down with, first it was an article in AAUP's Journal Academe, and then a second article in the Chronicle. And the title of that article was, I believe, Viewpoint Diversity is a Mega Plot. And Josh and I talked about some of these issues in the interview, and it was another thing we talked about was just the strategic issue here. Obviously we think viewpoint diversity is important for higher ed. We're advocating for that. I'm kind of stunned. I guess I don't know if I'm surprised, stunned, whatever. I don't know what the word to use is anymore, to be honest, but the AAUP is supposed to be an organization for academic freedom. And so many other academic freedom organizations, including our own, are pushing for intellectual diversity, viewpoint diversity, diversity of thought, whatever you want to call it. And here they are sort of planting their flag on the opposite side and making this argument against it, and then politicizing it. And one of the things Josh and I talked about was just strategically what a problem this is. And since I recorded that interview, Megan McArdle has come out with an op-ed in the Washington Post where she responds to these articles and talks about this as well.

(01:26:23):

And I thought it was a great op-ed definitely recommended to people. But Viewpoint Diversity arguably hurts the purpose of universities themselves. It undermines the exchange of ideas and the open and free inquiry and bouncing your ideas off people who have different perspectives and that sort of thing. I think it also hurts university's abilities to govern themselves internally because they don't have that sort of back and forth of different people with different perspectives, people who are paying attention to different things coming together. And maybe somebody points out like, "Hey, we are kind of short on this part of our field," or, "Yeah, we probably really shouldn't put out that statement because here's how people are going to react," or those sorts of things. And then of course, vis-a-vis the rest of American society, first of all, the decline in confidence and trust, that is to some degree across Democrats, independents, and Republicans.

(01:27:27):

But it's also true that it's really bad among Republicans, somewhat bad among independents, and then only a little bit bad, relatively speaking, among Democrats. And they just increasingly have pigeon themselves as a partisan sector or a partisan set of institutions. And so now they find themselves basically increasingly in a political struggle with a large chunk of the country. And Megan McArdle points out, just like I think Josh and I were discussing, just what a strategic disaster it is to respond to that situation by saying no to Viewpoint Diversity and calling in a mega plot. And of course have to point out that there's so many ways in which this is not a good idea and is absurd. But of course, one of them is that lots of people are calling for viewpoint diversity. They're not all mega. They're not all Republicans. They're not all conservatives.

(01:28:26):

You mentioned, we were at the Heterodox Academy Conference a few months ago, and of course that's an organization that is basically thousands of academics who have signed up because they think there's a problem, and they want more openness and more diversity of thought. And we were in the room. A lot of

people in that room were not supportive of what the Trump administration's doing. A lot of people you meet, they're all over the map politically. So it's such an absurd reaction, and it's strategically so damaging. So I wanted to focus on that in particular, that strategy, let's say, as the Apparatchik of the Month.

Justin Garrison ([01:29:07](#)):

Yeah, it hasn't worked out historically, whether you're the last King of France or the last Tsar of Russia. At some point, intransigence creates its own massive unavoidable problem. Yeah, yeah. No, that article was astonishing. But yeah, a lot of people took it to task in a reasonable professional way, and it doesn't seem like the author actually learned anything from that experience, but I think a lot of people who have more of an open mind probably did.

Steve McGuire ([01:29:38](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, I think so. All right, well that's all we've got for this episode of Radio Free Campus. Thanks again for joining us, and we'll look forward to seeing you all next time.

Justin Garrison ([01:29:53](#)):

Until then, KBO.

Speaker 2 ([01:29:56](#)):

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Speaker 1 ([01:30:32](#)):

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.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:30:47]