

Speaker 1 ([00:02](#)):

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

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

Welcome to Radio Free Campus. I'm Steve McGuire.

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

And I'm Justin Garrison, and in this episode, Steve and I talk with Sam Abrams, a professor of politics at Sarah Lawrence College and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, about the plague of antisemitism on campuses and how people can address that while respecting free expression and academic freedom rights. So let's get right to it. Steve, could you introduce our guests for today?

Steve McGuire ([00:33](#)):

Yeah. I'm really excited to talk to Sam. He's a friend. He's a friend of ACTA. And he's done a lot of work over the years on free expression issues on campus, or the lack thereof. As you mentioned, he's a professor of politics at Sarah Lawrence College, and he's also a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He's writing all the time. I mean, he's got op-eds coming out all the time and just really great stuff. He's a really data-driven social scientist. So he's really got his finger on the pulse when it comes to the numbers and what students are saying about free expression on campus and that sort of thing. So I think it's going to be really great to hear from him about, unfortunately, the topic of rising antisemitism on campus, or on campuses. We're going to talk to him about a recent shout down of Ezra Klein at his campus, Ezra Klein, the New York Times columnist, and look to him for some ideas about solutions. So, should be a great interview. Let's get to it.

([01:42](#)):

Sam, welcome to Radio Free Campus.

Sam Abrams ([01:45](#)):

Thank you for having me. It's thrilling to finally have a chat online with you. We've done it for years, and now we'll preserve it for posterity.

Steve McGuire ([01:52](#)):

That's right. That's right. Yeah. I'm really looking forward to this. So, Sam, today we want to talk to you in general about antisemitism on American campuses, as well as issues pertaining to free expression, intolerance, that sort of thing. And of course, just recently, there was an incident at Sarah Lawrence College, where you teach, where Ezra Klein, the New York Times columnist, was disrupted by some student protestors. And so we'd like to talk about that in some detail as well. But before we get to that, I'd like to ask you just to describe for us, in your view, what is the character of the antisemitism and the anti-Israeli sentiment that we've seen on campuses in the last couple of years, especially since Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023?

Sam Abrams ([02:45](#)):

Sure. So, as a political scientist, I like to talk in terms of data. But to answer that question, I have to really go impressionistic. I don't have great data on that. We are trying to get data. We actually have lots of impressionistic data on campus today, but we don't have incredible records prior to October 7th. We've certainly noticed an upswing in general. But if I had to describe it, and this is what I'm dealing with as a faculty member, so I know it's generally much worse among students, and students report this to me all

the time. But since October 7th and the Hamas massacre in Israel, what I've noticed with respect to antisemitism is that it is much stronger, and it's much more focused. And let me explain.

[\(03:32\)](#):

From the day I began as a professor, Sarah Lawrence and many other schools, for that matter, were appreciably antisemitic. I'll never forget a few weeks into the semester of my first year of teaching, the Jewish high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur came up. When I say holy days, that is because these are the most holy days in our calendar. These are not holidays where you party. These are days where you contemplate, you pray, you're in synagogue all day, you wear white, lots of traditions, lots of history around that. And I remember saying to a number of colleagues, I said, "I noticed the school is not off, is not closed for these days."

[\(04:14\)](#):

And just as a reminder to any listeners or viewers, we're in New York, where schools do shut down, businesses shut down. It is not weird for the city to close for the holy day of Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. Sarah Lawrence, nonetheless, was still open. I remember asking a number of my colleagues, again, as I was a new faculty member, "What does the school do? Why don't we close?" And all of them uniformly said to me, "We don't acknowledge that. We don't acknowledge those days. As you are new, you need to be here. We're going to make sure that you're here. And if you're not here, that may be reflected poorly on you when you come up for third-year review."

[\(04:53\)](#):

Now, they could have threatened to send me to HR, but HR doesn't really matter that way when it comes to being a faculty member. What's important to remember is that these faculty colleagues can really support or undermine your promotion and your tenure. They have all of the power. And it was made, again, just very clear, I need to be there, or there could be severe consequences. I showed up. I felt sick to my stomach. I was enraged. I can't even fully describe the feelings I had that day. I'll never do it again. It felt horrible. So, that sort of stuff has been going on among faculty members for a long time. I've been at Sarah Lawrence, amazingly, almost 17 years now. Hard to admit that, but it's true.

[\(05:34\)](#):

Since October 7th, what has changed is that the students have begun to pile on. We have students, some who may be Gen Alpha, some who are Gen Z. Hard to know exactly the cut point yet. We haven't defined that. But these are students who fairly have grown up in a world of COVID. They've grown up isolated. They grow up without friendships. They grow up digitally connected to these things all the time. And for better or for worse, they have a worldview of there are people who harm and there are people who are being harmed. And for a number of reasons, they believe that Israel, and by extension, Zionist Jews and most Jews are Zionists and see Israel as a center part of our faith, our heritage, our ethnicity, and so on, are evil, simple as that. And because they're evil, you can do whatever you need to do to hurt them. You can punch up. It doesn't matter what tactics you use. However, you use it, it's justified because you are righting a wrong that folks like me have committed. I don't know what I've actually done, but that is the worldview.

[\(06:41\)](#):

So, since October 7th, you have the faculty doing this. They've been doing this everywhere. Alan Garber, president of Harvard, recently even lamented that it is a huge disappointment and frustration to him about the activist nature of our faculty. So, that's certainly the case. But the students have now piled on, and they don't see this as just an intellectual exercise. To them, it's not. It's an existential exercise. They see folks like me as being dangerous. They see folks like me as threatening the global order. They see folks like me as being oppressors who support the murder and rape of children and destruction of others. None of that is true. None of it has ever been true. But because they believe that, the tactics are everywhere. They, quite frankly, will take over a building. They have no problem becoming violent.

(07:26):

So that's the world we're in, and that's the big change, which is, antisemitism has been pronounced and problematic in the academy and the higher ed for decades, decades and decades and decades. And if you look back in New York, there were quotas at places like Columbia for years. The change, though, is that you have the faculty now doing this overtly with the students, and the students are piling on. So it's a much more intense, much more concentrated level of antisemitism. And in many cases, the administration is turning a blind eye to it. And by not engaging with it is tacitly and, in many cases, overtly supporting this hostile environment.

Steve McGuire (08:08):

Yeah. It sounds, I mean, obviously, terrible. Justin, you want to jump in?

Justin Garrison (08:12):

Yeah. We're on with Sam Abrams, a professor of politics at Sarah Lawrence College and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Sam, you've written extensively and in a variety of formats about free expression deficits, intellectual diversity deficits on American campuses, widespread intolerance of a variety of perspectives. And you've just illustrated rather vividly, in my words, a pretty shocking account of a particular type of intolerance. I guess you said the data is scarce. So, I guess, in some sense, whatever you say to this question can't be wrong because there's no data or something.

Sam Abrams (08:52):

No, but I want to be clear that I'm always happy. One of the things I teach is that intellectual humility is critical. I am happy to be wrong. I am happy to revise.

Justin Garrison (09:01):

Sure.

Sam Abrams (09:01):

So, I want to be very clear. I'm always happy to give you an impression, but at no point would I say that I'm universally right about everything. And if you show me some data that proves me wrong, let's go there.

Justin Garrison (09:12):

No, no, no. Yeah. So, first of all, for anyone who's watching, you've just seen a true rarity in higher education, which is a professor who has humility.

Sam Abrams (09:22):

Thank you.

Justin Garrison (09:23):

Mark it down in your calendar. This happened on this day. But I guess the question I'm curious about is, do you see... The situation that you've just described. Is it more like October 7th becomes a convenient means to let something that's been festering really just explode, as if it's like, "Finally we're going to have an opportunity to," from their perspective, "do justice to the right cause"? Or is this the latest kind of unconscious catching on to some issue that's out there, and in a year or two it'll be some other thing? I mean, what's driving what here, I guess? In the language of social science, what's cause, what's effect? What are your thoughts on that in the broader scheme of things in terms of-

Sam Abrams ([10:21](#)):

Sure.

Justin Garrison ([10:21](#)):

... intolerance and lack of free expression on campus?

Sam Abrams ([10:24](#)):

Sure. So, I do think that if you spend a lot of time with undergrads, and I do, whether it's at Sarah Lawrence in New York or with students around the country, and I'm very lucky to do that, and I still love to do that. And I meet lots of wonderful students. I also meet lots of horrible students, and I'm sorry to say that, but folks who come to college close-minded, people who come to college to push an agenda. They're not there to learn. They're not there to have themselves questioned. They're not there to be pushed. And if you're not there to do that, why bother? And that's when I say, "What a horrible experience, what a waste of time, what a waste of money. We shouldn't be doing it."

([10:58](#)):

The question of cause and effect or directionality is hard to show in this case. I think that for many students, however, they're looking for a cause. Students come to college because, again, I think there's a lot of emptiness. I just taught a class earlier in the week that really upset me. I was teaching a book by Ray Suarez, who does this wonderful oral history of new immigrants to the country. And they tell these great stories of why they're here. And it's a really inspiring book about why the American dream still matters. Even if we don't think about the American dream as often as we should as Americans, and so many folks aren't excited to be here, America is still a beacon shining around the world to so many, and that book really shows this.

([11:40](#)):

And to really get the conversation going, I wanted to ask the students a little bit about their backgrounds. Where are they from? How do they end up in various parts of the country? I have students from the Midwest, Chicago, Pacific Coast, up and down the East Coast, some from the South. I'm from Philadelphia. I'm not going to bore the listeners about why my story is what it is, but I could explain it, and can explain it, and I'm happy to. Most of my students couldn't tell me why they came from the regions or cities or neighborhoods they came from. They couldn't tell me about their family history. They really didn't know when and why their families moved here. I very rarely am speechless at the end of a class. I walked out and put my head down, because I said, "My God."

([12:22](#)):

These are lovely students in my freshman seminar, so I want to be clear that this is not an attack on them. But the fact that they were so ignorant, unaware, and clearly disinterested in knowing where did they come from, and why are they here, what is their story just left me gobsmacked, for lack of a better word. This is, for better or for worse, and I did some digging. This is, for better or for worse, not that unusual among this younger cohort of unmoored, unrooted, unanchored students, whether they lack faith, community, whatever it may be.

([12:53](#)):

So they're looking for a cause. So October 7th gave them that cause. It was a great moment for a lot of these folks because it became a rallying cry and, quite frankly, a social opportunity for many of them. If you look at Sarah Lawrence and Columbia, there was a sense of joy because they had a shared purpose and a shared understanding. Something that, again, so many students don't have. They don't know why they're from where they are. They, again, don't have faith, and they've been manipulated by algorithms on this horrible cube or black device thing we have here. So I think that's part of it.

(13:24):

And then I think the other part of it, and this is well done by Jon Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, in what I'll call the Oppression Olympics or who can be a bigger victim. And the fact is that the October 7th massacre opened the door to blaming Jews. And in their wonderful work with Haidt and Lukianoff, they talk about those who are oppressors and those who are oppressed. We've talked about this in the zeitgeist for years now. Jews often fall into that category. I would argue they're not. But I would actually reject the whole idea of oppressors and oppressed, to begin with.

(13:58):

But regardless of where Jews fall onto that line, the fact is, is that they manipulated the October 7th massacre into there's a set of oppressed and oppressors, and we can now organize around that. And at some point, it will be something else, but I suspect it will be along the similar lines of, we're going to find those categories, we're going to reduce the complexity of humanity into us versus them, and they're going to jump on it and get very excited, because it provides a sense of meaning, connection, and community.

Justin Garrison (14:29):

If I could ask you to just speculate a little bit more.

Sam Abrams (14:32):

Sure.

Justin Garrison (14:32):

And some of this might've been driven by just being in between semesters. But is the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy that you've just outlined for us, do you think that's a possible reason why there is a relatively muted campus response to protests in Iran, that that really didn't gain any traction because that doesn't fit the oppressor-oppressed paradigm?

Sam Abrams (14:56):

It doesn't. It's confusing for people. It's even less well understood by most students than Israel. And to go back to it, I do think there's intense antisemitism going on here, latent everywhere, which is, if there's a chance to shoot down the Jewish community, why not? And a lot of this is driven by faculty members. And the Jewish Zionist community, I think, is a fairly easy target. I would say the Iranian Persian community, which is wonderful, is a less understood target and a harder to rally for or against, actually, in that regard. So, again, I think it could have been there, but it's a little harder to characterize as neatly or as simply as folks have tried to organize around the Jewish cause.

Steve McGuire (15:44):

Sam, with the oppressor-oppressed dynamic, another thing I wanted to ask you about, and then we'll get to the Ezra Klein incident-

Sam Abrams (15:52):

Of course.

Steve McGuire (15:52):

... is the diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, the ideology, the offices, or the programs, and their role in some of this, and what your thoughts are on that.

(16:06):

I think after October 7th, it seemed like there were some people who were surprised, maybe even shocked, to realize that DEI was not going to be a resource in a lot of places for combating antisemitism. In fact, some of the people in these offices might even be some of the worst offenders on campus in terms of pushing anti-Israeli or antisemitic narratives and that sort of thing. And so, I wonder if you have any thoughts on that.

(16:37):

I think some people might still like to think that a certain kind of approach to diversity, equity, inclusion, could maybe be part of the solution here, whereas there are others who say, "No, no, DEI is part of the problem and should be jettisoned, or certainly at least not looked to as part of the solution when it comes to antisemitism on campus."

Sam Abrams (16:58):

The problem with your question is that is a five-hour discussion and requires deep history.

Steve McGuire (17:03):

You have 60 seconds.

Sam Abrams (17:06):

So, in theory, DEI is hard to object to, because why would anyone be opposed to diversity, inclusion? Equity is a whole nother matter, but diversity and inclusion is a problem. Incidentally, a lot of schools have jettisoned the word equity. A lot of times, we see diversity, equity, belonging, and different versions of it. So, I think that's really important to just remember and remind ourselves. Incidentally, I just got a call, as we're all on this, from the DEI person at Sarah Lawrence, so I wonder what they want. As I'm sitting here, my phone is buzzing, and I'm not entirely sure what they want. We'll try to figure that out.

Justin Garrison (17:41):

They can't be listening in. They're not that [inaudible 00:17:43].

Sam Abrams (17:44):

No, no, no. Sure. So, intellectually, the problem with DEI is that it's establishing who's entitled to certain rights and privileges, and who isn't. That's fundamentally anti-American. I actually have a piece coming out, actually a piece that just came out in the *Algemeiner* about that, why DEI is bad for the Jewish community, and that is that it seeds basic rights. It shouldn't be an office protects one group when it's necessary or not. The fact is, is that we have in this country uniform rights. Everyone's entitled to the same protections. Everyone's entitled to worship or to believe how they see fit, period.

(18:18):

So, I do not care for the overall apparatus of DEI because it presupposes necessarily that there's a group who has power, some groups who have not, and it's up to that group in power to decide who is worthy and in what capacity. That, to me, strikes me as ethically and intellectually dangerous and wrong. And if I were the beneficiary of that, I would not appreciate it. I'm not a token, and I don't think anyone should be tokenized or thought of as different. You're good because you're good. You need help because you need help, not because you're in one category or the other. So, I think that's been an issue.

(18:49):

In terms of the politics of the folks who run the DEI offices, that's where we're in a lot of trouble. I've been looking into this for almost either a decade or more than a decade at this point. And what we are uncovering is that you have some of the most leftist and activist folks in these offices. So, for better or for

worse, they are not conceptualizing the post-October 7th world fairly. They are part of the problem in many cases, where they're supporting the Students for Justice in Palestine, and are right there financially and spatially in terms of giving rooms and all of that to the anti-Israel groups. It's a problem. It's a huge problem because it undermines both their mission and then the idea of equity and equal access and equal opportunity on campus. It's not up to DEI to take those political positions. They need to stop immediately.

Steve McGuire ([19:46](#)):

Great. Well said. I think we can link to that article you mentioned in the show notes afterwards. Okay. So let's get to this Ezra Klein event.

Sam Abrams ([19:55](#)):

Sure.

Steve McGuire ([19:56](#)):

So basically, there's an event in the auditorium. Looks like a very significant audience is there to hear Ezra Klein, New York Times columnist, speak. He's on stage with the president of the college. And Ezra Klein himself, he's been quite critical of Israel's actions in Gaza. I believe he's used words like apartheid and genocide to describe Israeli policies and activities. So he's not an unapologetic, pro-everything that Israel does voice. And nevertheless, some of the students, I think, associated with Students for Justice in Palestine, certainly that was the Instagram account that was posting things on their behalf [inaudible 00:20:48]-

Sam Abrams ([20:48](#)):

They also took full credit for it, if you look at the Instagram situation, too. I mean, I don't know exactly which students, but I don't think there's any question that that group and its allies happily admit to doing it, just to be very clear.

Steve McGuire ([20:59](#)):

Okay, good. Yeah. I mean, I would assume so. Sometimes they like to say anonymous submission, and it's like, "Okay. Well, from who?" But very clearly, I think, in this case, we know who was involved or responsible. But in any event, they disrupt the event. Ezra Klein actually tries to engage with them. I think they're actually stunned by this. It seems like they don't quite know what to do when someone actually wants to enter into dialogue with them.

([21:24](#)):

And all the while, the president of the college just sits there, I think. I don't think she says anything in any of the videos that I've seen, until after the students are escorted out or leave at the end. And then she jokingly turns to Ezra Klein and says, "Welcome to Sarah Lawrence," which is just such a pregnant response, I think, in terms of the character of the place and a lot of the incidents that we've seen there over the last couple of years.

([21:53](#)):

So, Justin, then, was asking you about some of the stuff that, of course, you've been working on for years in terms of free expression on campus, intolerance. You're very familiar with all the data, right?

Sam Abrams ([22:03](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Steve McGuire ([22:04](#)):

We have problems with self-censorship. We have problems with students who say they're willing to shout down speakers, even use violence to stop them, right? So, you're very familiar with that whole dynamic. And I think maybe this Ezra Klein event is an example where those issues and the contemporary antisemitism issues come together in one event.

Sam Abrams ([22:29](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Steve McGuire ([22:29](#)):

Do you see it that way? And how do you explain the dynamic of what's happening there? And what do you think the real problems are that are leading to events like this taking place, not just at Sarah Lawrence, but at colleges around the country? We saw something similar happen at Haverford College shortly afterwards.

Sam Abrams ([22:50](#)):

Yes. And I think mentioning Haverford is a great example, because in one case, Haverford did the right thing. In the other case, Sarah Lawrence did not. So, to be very clear, there was no question that the Ezra Klein event was going to be disrupted. There's no way that they can argue that they had no idea what was happening. It is a small campus. I like to joke that if you sneeze on one end of the campus, they'll offer you a tissue on the other. It's small. It's intimate. People know. There were flyers about protests. There were things online everywhere. Students reported to me that they were fully aware and fully knowledgeable that there were going to be disruptions. Students were invited to participate in those disruptions and to make the signs and to help organize those disruptions.

([23:36](#)):

You can't possibly believe that the president was unaware of this. Again, it is a small college. She is around. This is not a big state school, where the president doesn't know things. If you look at the president's Instagram, she prides herself on showing up to student events. She prides herself on being around campus. She prides herself with taking selfies with students. So, there's just no way she didn't know about this.

([24:00](#)):

If she had known that there were a protest coming, she should have prepared for it. This could have been a great moment for her. This could have been a great moment for the college to finally show that they actually might believe the ideas that they preach about viewpoint diversity, about tolerance, about protecting some groups over others. And what I mean when I say protecting some groups over others is not allowing overt antisemitism or hate to just continue to bubble up and be so extreme. So, she knew.

([24:31](#)):

She had a chance to have security there. She could have had local police on standby. She could have prepped with her comms team to know what to do. People mock this sort of stuff up all the time. When they came in and held up that giant sign that said Nazi, when they came in and climbed up and started shouting, she sat there quietly. She could have stood up and said, "We're not doing this. This isn't what we do. This isn't how we do this. If you'd like to talk about it, we can do it after the program is done, when there is time to speak."

([25:04](#)):

When Ezra tried to engage with the speakers, she could have said, "You've had your say. Now he's going to have his. Have a dialogue." It would have embarrassed the students. It needed to have embarrassed the

students. When the students refused to engage with Klein and talked over him, and when they humiliated themselves because they openly basically conceded they couldn't have a dialogue about this, she should have walked out and said, "I'm going to pause this," and had a conversation with the protestors right then and there. She could have prepared for that.

[\(25:37\)](#):

If she didn't want to engage with the protestors for whatever reason, and I do think there are a whole bunch of reasons, but for whatever reason, she could have done nothing then, but when they left, instead of mocking the legitimacy of my institution, mocking its values, mocking its tradition of having meaningful dialogue, instead of saying, "Welcome to Sarah Lawrence," and eliciting awkward chuckles, she could have had some prepared notes, or roughly an outline of prepared notes, and immediately on the spot condemned the behavior. She could have done that, and today's meeting, you and I would have had to be praising her.

[\(26:14\)](#):

I have problems with her. That's no secret. I am not happy with how she has run the college. I think she is deeply antisemitic, and I've said that before. I think her behavior reflects that. I believe the fact that she works with the Mellon Foundation reflects that. I think she takes a lot of marching orders with those sorts of communities. But that being said, if she had done the right thing, I have to give credit where credit is due. As I said a few minutes ago to Justin, the fact of the matter is, is evidence is evidence, data is data. She could have changed the entire narrative arc of the school had she been willing, strong enough, and open to doing it. The fact that she didn't do it to me, I believe, is proof of what she really believes in.

[\(26:57\)](#):

And in the case of Haverford College, within a day, the security folks had a public statement, the president had a public statement. Sarah Lawrence has no public statement. A statement was sent around to the Sarah Lawrence community, but it wasn't posted online. And the investigation was wrapped up in a few days at Haverford because there's nothing to investigate. It was obvious what happened. It was obvious who did it. It was obvious that rules were broken.

[\(27:25\)](#):

At Sarah Lawrence, all she did was promise an investigation. It's now been two weeks. What needs to be investigated? The very group that did it took responsibility. We know the names of the students who did it. They're on film. We know what they did. There's nothing to investigate. Rules were broken. Punishments need to occur. And the school needs to come down on the fact that we have values, we have ideals, we have rules about speech, about not trampling on speech, about not permitting heckler's vetoes to shut down events. And the fact is, after two weeks, by saying nothing, she's tacitly and more openly, overtly said, "Well, we're not going to do anything about it, and we support this sort of behavior."

[\(28:06\)](#):

Even welcome to Sarah Lawrence was supporting that sort of behavior. That's not free speech. That's not how the First Amendment works. They are welcome to go protest on a public street. They can say whatever vile things they want. The First Amendment protects them from being arrested for saying vile, horrific things. The First Amendment does not protect them from codes of conduct in a private school. The event was public, but it doesn't protect them from punishment. And as a sanctioned group, they signed off to agreeing, or signed on in this case, I guess, to following certain rules and precepts. They failed to do that. There need to be consequences. As of now, there have been none. And that is sending a message to the Jewish Zionists on campus, to the Jewish community at large, to Congress, to the White House, and to the world, that this sort of behavior is acceptable. It isn't, and never should be.

Steve McGuire [\(28:59\)](#):

Yeah. And the students are obviously getting the message, because if you look at their response on Instagram after the fact, they explicitly say that our free expression rights include a right to disrupt this kind of speaker. So, message sent, message received.

Sam Abrams ([29:14](#)):

There are no free expression rights on a private college campus that way. They are contractually governed and they break the rules. The rules are very clear, three or four places in the student handbook and on the website. And the example I use all the time is, I could use racial or insensitive epithets all the time. I may have a First Amendment right to use those in the public square, which protects me from government arrest, seizure, and so on. But I can't use those, God forbid I use them, but I could not use them casually on campus. I wouldn't. But if I did, I would expect there to be a consequence because it's a breach of our rules and our values about what can and can't be said.

([29:56](#)):

It's not a matter of silencing debate or dissent either. The intension, as illustrated by those protestors, was they weren't there to debate. And that's the other thing. They did everything wrong. Had they even tried to debate, they might've even said, "We're here to debate. We need to have this dialogue. We're not going to get it unless we interrupt." That's a little much, but you could even make that claim if they went back and forth with Ezra and had that debate and dialogue. It could have been a revelation. It wasn't. It was very clear their only intention was to disrupt, intimidate, and cause harm.

([30:27](#)):

They were presented with a chance to debate multiple times. The fact that they didn't showcase that, they really only intended to disrupt, and therefore, it's unquestionably clear that they need to be put on leave, expelled, what have you. This sort of behavior disrupts the learning environment, disrupts my ability to work as both a Jewish Zionist and a teacher. And my students are Jewish Zionists as well. This is a horrible environment to be in. I'm sorry to say that, but it's just the truth.

Steve McGuire ([30:54](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Justin?

Justin Garrison ([30:57](#)):

Yeah. So, Sam, I guess the short version of this question is, so what do we do? I mean, it sounds like your institution is not unusual in that the leadership has failed to do what seems to many people, in and outside of, or maybe just more outside of higher ed, to be kind of common sense moves, enforce your policies. And when people break the rules, they have to go through the appropriate disciplinary proceedings to figure out what's going to happen to them. But it seems like a number of elite colleges, in particular, they don't do it that way, or at least they don't do it that way in a viewpoint-neutral manner. So, they will subject some people to punishment, but not others. And it's largely on the basis of whether or not it's what the ideas are.

Steve McGuire ([31:45](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Justin Garrison ([31:45](#)):

So I guess part of what I'm asking you about, at ACTA, I think we prefer schools, colleges, universities, to fix their own problems, but there is a growing exasperation in state houses and in Washington with the lack of just prudent reform. Where do you expect the appropriate balance to be struck, where you're protecting academic freedom and free expression, but you're also not allowing people to just do the kinds

of things we're talking about without consequence? Is that going to come from within, or is this going to be, in different areas of the country, the state house or the federal government coming in and saying, "We're going to put your house in order"?

Sam Abrams ([32:32](#)):

Sure. Yeah. No, this is the most important question that we need to be trying to wrestle with. We now know what the problem is. We've known what the problem is now for a while. It's like what I say with groups like the Heterodox Academy, which I am very proud to be part of. We've defined the problem, but we now need to go further than defining the problem. The question is, what do we do about it? And there's no question. We now know what's going on.

([32:53](#)):

So, a couple of things that I think about all the time, and the first is that we are beginning to head into an enrollment cliff. Demographics are changing rapidly, and we're going to see a lot of schools begin to close. Sarah Lawrence is under extreme financial strain. When it runs a three, \$4 million deficit a year, they can't just call donors and fix that. This is not Harvard or Yale, where that can easily be fixed externally or internally with donations. So, the schools can't handle that. If Sarah Lawrence's reputation continues to diminish, with its rampant antisemitism problems, with the well-known problems with Larry Ray and that whole sex cult garbage, which your listeners are welcome to look up on. I don't want to give it any more attention than it needs to.

Justin Garrison ([33:36](#)):

We won't put any links in our episode.

Sam Abrams ([33:38](#)):

Please don't. It's disgusting and beyond disturbing. But this all happened. And parents and kids and potential students go, "Do I really want to be here? Do I want to have anything to do with this?" So that's a big issue. We're going to see some of that change. This constant growth of higher ed has to stop. So we're going to see more and more colleges go offline because they just can't afford to exist. That should lead to market reforms in a number of cases, which I think is a good thing.

([34:08](#)):

I think that with the AI revolution, the great Wall Street Journal column from the president of Dartmouth just the other day talked about the fact that the colleges need to justify their existence. Colleges that don't and play in the identity politics game and the game of allowing some folks to be harmed while others are protected, it's not a secret. It's known. People are going to not necessarily go to those schools. I don't see Harvard becoming a problem in terms of enrollment, but I definitely see many other schools becoming a problem.

([34:35](#)):

Ideally, I would love the academy and higher ed to be able to fix itself. I'm a free-market guy, and I may keep the government out of things sort of guy. As a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, we believe in private enterprise, not government intervention. However, the government also does exist to do this when things fail, and market failures can occur. So, for better or for worse, we will need to see some of that.

([35:00](#)):

We also see cuts left and right, whether it's at Indiana, or other schools that are cutting programs that are problematic left and right, that are not producing public goods left and right. We see various states creating civic centers to combat these things on various college and university campuses. These are good.

[\(35:19\)](#):

The federal government obviously is trying to step in, but I want to be very blunt about this, that I am underwhelmed about what the federal government has done so far. The hearings in Congress were good. The various statements made by a number of Trump officials have been good. But at the end of the day, seeing the president of Columbia or Harvard be toppled is only the beginning. And it's hard for a lot of us to point to a whole lot of additional examples of where the government has been able to step in and correct these wrongs, and actually see the change that we want to see.

[\(35:50\)](#):

Certainly, at Harvard, there have been attempts, but it's still a huge problem. Columbia is getting ready, potentially, it's been reported in the Free Beacon, to hire a very problematic professor from Harvard to fill the Edward Said spot. And this person has the same activist tendencies as all the folks who were pointed out by Congress in the most recent investigations. This is a huge problem.

[\(36:12\)](#):

So I don't think there's going to be one solution or one path we're going to be able to take. I think it's going to be a mix of state forces, market forces, demographic change, and then federal intervention is necessary. And I apologize because that is not a pretty clean or nice answer. I wish I had a nice answer for you. And if I did, I wouldn't be here talking to you. I'd be out on the road pushing that answer. The real issue is it's going to take many, many different paths to do this.

[\(36:45\)](#):

A lot of folks forget that colleges and universities are very, very heterogeneous. They're very different the way they run. State schools versus private schools versus universities versus big universities versus regional universities versus liberal arts colleges versus elite liberal arts colleges. And we can go into lots of other ways of breaking it down. So, there is no one size fits all. But I will tell you that an aggressive fine to Sarah Lawrence from the federal government would put the college in a bad spot and would compel it to have to reform. A massive fine to Harvard may not dent it, given their endowment and their financial position. Yes, they claim that they get hurt, but they can fundraise out of it.

[\(37:24\)](#):

Another example is they were claiming they had no money for graduate fellowships. Well, the Crimson reported just the other day that they were able to raise \$50 million within days and weeks to fill that hole. Sarah Lawrence and lots of liberal arts colleges can't. So, Sarah Lawrence, if it gets hurt and reforms itself would be a great example, and that then will set precedent. As of now, I'm struggling to find really great precedent. That worries me. And again, I'd love to keep the government out of this, but I don't know if colleges will do it without the government.

Steve McGuire [\(37:58\)](#):

Well, Sam, we know you're going to keep chipping away at it. Of course, we're going to keep doing the same here at ACTA, to the best of our ability. But thanks so much for being on with us today. This has been a really great conversation. And of course, we're just sorry to hear about all of the problems that we're seeing on campuses for Jews and Israelis, Zionists, in the last few years in particular, but even going back years, as you described.

[\(38:28\)](#):

Before we sign off, could you give our listeners a couple of tips on where they can follow you, where they can find your stuff? I know you're a prolific writer. I think you publish an op-ed a day sometimes, too.

Sam Abrams [\(38:40\)](#):

Sometimes.

Steve McGuire ([38:41](#)):

So, where's the best place to go?

Sam Abrams ([38:43](#)):

Sometimes. I will tell you that in many cases, I'm very open about this. So, first of all, I have a long commute. So, it actually is a very nice way of being productive on an almost two-hour commute to and from work. So, that actually is a nice way to do that. And it's a wonderful way, in many respects, to destress. I have things that are frustrating, let's write about them.

([39:08](#)):

Bill Buckley used to say, but it's attributed to a lot of folks, "I don't know what I think until I write about it." And I find that when I put these thoughts down on my iPad, as I'm just sitting on the train, I find it very, very helpful in clarifying things. So yes, for better or for worse, there's a lot that's coming out. And you can basically find pretty much everything at my page at aei.org, at the American Enterprise Institute. It's all posted there.

Steve McGuire ([39:33](#)):

Okay, great. Well, thanks again for coming on the show, Sam, and keep up the good fight.

Sam Abrams ([39:39](#)):

Thank you. And thank you for what you do and for what ACTA does at large. Thanks to the social media work you've been doing. I think you're a go-to source, and I'm very, very grateful for that because it does spread awareness and that leads to change. So I deeply appreciate it.

Steve McGuire ([39:59](#)):

Well, that was a great conversation with Sam Abrams, Justin. And we didn't even really begin to touch on a lot of the antisemitic or anti-Israel actions that we've seen on college campuses across the country in the last few years, including a bunch of things that have happened at Sarah Lawrence College that we didn't mention, but there's been all kinds of things there. A student was walking around campus wearing a T-shirt that says something about how Israel's a garbage country that's only loved by garbage people. Swastikas being drawn. I just wrote an op-ed about this Ezra Klein thing that got published in Minding The Campus. Not to self-promote, but part of it was I went through-

Justin Garrison ([40:42](#)):

Go for it, Steve.

Steve McGuire ([40:42](#)):

Yeah. Part of it was, I went through and went back some of it in my own Twitter account, or X account, and pulled some of the examples of things that have happened there over the last couple of years. A building occupation, where they were handing out literally pro-Hamas propaganda. Even the students saying that they were answering the call of Hamas when they occupied this building. Just crazy, crazy stuff.

([41:10](#)):

And the Students for Justice and Palestine group there, a couple of years ago, won a leadership award on campus. So Sam was making the point about the president really not reacting properly or setting the appropriate tone, and the students getting the message that she's sending by doing that. And to me, this is

just another example. You give them a leadership award? Come on, guys. But anyways, what was your reaction to the interview with Sam?

Justin Garrison ([41:41](#)):

Well, it didn't do anything to boost my enthusiasm for encouraging anyone to go to Sarah Lawrence College. I was reminded of this moment in episode four of Star Wars, where they approach Mos Eisley, and Obi-Wan says, "You'll never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy." And I wouldn't want to apply that literally, but holy cow. I mean, that just sounds like a really toxic place to work, unless you exist within a very narrow set of left-leaning political ideas. And that's not good for anyone. That's not good for the Zionist students and faculty, as Sam was talking about. It's not good for the anti-Israel students either. It's not good for anybody to be in such a hostile, intellectually washed-out, group-think environment. That was really sobering.

[\(42:44\)](#):

And to compound the depressing nature of this, maybe we should think of this as the Dostoevsky episode, or something like that, where it's just like a gut punch every moment. It's not as if Sarah Lawrence is unique. This isn't how it plays out certainly at every school, but there are more than a few schools who have had just as much trouble with reconciling legitimate free expression concerns and academic freedom concerns with some of the most vile, nasty, unprotected, and unthinking content you can find on a college campus. It's really sad to hear how poorly that school seems to conduct itself and to know that they're not unique in this capacity.

[\(43:36\)](#):

I mentioned a moment ago Dostoevsky, and I know you and I have talked about this in other areas, but he has this wonderful novel called The Demons, or The Devils, depending on how it's translated into English. It's still February when we're recording this, so the summer hasn't arrived. You should pick this book up. It'll get you feeling like the weather outside, which is cold and bitter and bleak. But it's a fascinating novel because, in one level, it's about the radicalization of the youth. But one of the things that he does, and this was not common knowledge or a common conclusion to come to in the 1860s and '70s, when he was writing this novel, is he blames the preceding generation for indulging the radical stupidity of the youth.

[\(44:26\)](#):

And for the president of Sarah Lawrence, after this Ezra Klein incident, to just turn around and say, "Welcome to Sarah Lawrence College," I mean, that's the stupidest thing. I mean, how can you say that and have any respect for yourself? I mean, even if you're on the side of the protestors, and I don't know her internal thinking or something like that, even if you support their disruption, that's just such a tacky way to try and pretend to be a leader. I mean, that's the kind of thing that Michael Scott would've done on The Office, not about something as serious as this. But it's just like, where do these people come from, and how do they get these jobs when they are so bad at performing just minimal levels of professional job execution?

[\(45:17\)](#):

I thought that was just astonishing. I mean, in some sense, I don't write off college students as, "Well, they're just kids being kids," because this is pretty vile stuff, but they're not, technically speaking, the adults in the room. But when your leadership is just giving you a pass, I mean, sure, why wouldn't you draw the conclusion that my purpose here is to disrupt and discomfort anyone I don't like with the ugliest language imaginable. I thought the interview was excellent in the way that Sam calmly and rationally explained the landscape, and gave us a broader context, but that was hard for me to hear because I just can't believe that there are schools like that in the United States.

Steve McGuire ([46:07](#)):

Yeah, yeah. I don't know how you just sit there on stage and allow that to happen, unless in some way you're okay with it. And then, after the fact, to just joke about it, to me, it's a failure on a number of levels. I mean, even on the basic level of hospitality for a guest on your campus, respect for everybody who's taken time out of their day to come to this event, because they have an opportunity to hear someone like Ezra Klein, who, of course, is a very well-known public intellectual.

([46:41](#)):

Probably some people were very excited to hear him speak, and others, maybe, they even disagree with him on some stuff, but they had an opportunity to hear him in person, and they went, maybe thinking they would have a chance to ask him a question or at least hear more in detail from him. But to allow that to go on and to treat it in the moment like it's a bit of a joke, I think, is pretty ridiculous and it's certainly no way to run a college.

([47:11](#)):

And we asked Sam at the end about solutions, and I think he, like everybody else at higher ed reform, is wondering how are we going to get this done, because, like he said, a lot of people agree on what we want to see higher ed do to reform itself, but how are we going to get there. And it's frustrating because, like you said, in ACTA, our first preference is for the institutions to reform themselves. And of course, we focus on working with trustees, in particular, who have a lot of power and authority to affect change on their campuses where it's needed.

([47:50](#)):

And with the issue of antisemitism itself, I mean, I think there are clearly deeper issues that go beyond things like free expression policies in terms of education that students aren't receiving, ideologies that they're being exposed to, various other sorts of issues that need to be addressed in substantive ways. But at the same time, I think a lot of the more problematic stuff that we're seeing could be dealt with if college presidents took things like disruptions more seriously.

([48:30](#)):

And so, I think, in this case of Ezra Klein being disrupted, it's a great example. If you just made it clear that this behavior was completely unacceptable and disciplined, maybe even expelled, people who engaged in this kind of conduct, certainly if they did it more than once, you could quite easily put an end to it. And like I said, that might not deal in a fully substantive way with deeper problems of ideology or antisemitism, et cetera, but it would prevent a lot of the negative events that take place on campuses from happening.

([49:10](#)):

And of course, in ACTA, we have all kinds of resources on this, right? We've released a guide on encampments. We've released a guide on divestment. We have our gold standard for freedom of expression, right? If you just create a campus culture that is open to free expression, that is open to intellectual diversity and the free exchange of ideas, and if you have policies in place that are actually meant to protect the rights of everyone on campus, and you actually enforce those policies, I think that does go quite a bit of distance towards solving some of these problems.

Justin Garrison ([49:52](#)):

Yeah. Someone who's near and dear to my heart, Irving Babbitt, wrote in Democracy and Leadership that one of the best things about human nature is that it's sensitive to the right example, and that you can make tremendous changes, provided that the example of good conduct is right enough. And so, whether you're listening and you're a trustee or you're a college administrator or president, change is coming either way. A lot of schools have seen that. And as Sam told us, Harvard can absorb that, but most schools can't. So,

do you want to use your scalpel while you have it, or are you going to wait for the meat cleaver to come from the State House or from DC? It's just, there's no more time to dither and delay. Things need to change, and they're going to change from within, or it's going to be forced from without, and we want from within.

Steve McGuire ([50:41](#)):

Yep, yep, yep. Well said. Well, I'm glad we had the chance to have the conversation with Sam. And of course, he's doing great work as well on all of these issues, and so it was good to hear his perspective on these things.

Justin Garrison ([50:55](#)):

All right. So that's it for this episode of Radio Free Campus. Thank you for listening. Steve, as always, it's been a pleasure to talk with you, as well as our guest. And for those of you out there listening and watching, we'll see you next time. KBO.

Speaker 5 ([51:11](#)):

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Speaker 6 ([51:47](#)):

ACTA surveyed more than 2,300 undergraduate students at six of Virginia's 15 public universities, and discovered a shocking erosion in their understanding and appreciation of free speech and open discourse. Discover more at goacta.org.