Speaker 1 (00:00:00):

Steve McGuire (00:00:09):
Welcome to Radio Free Campus. I'm Steve McGuire.

Justin Garrison (00:00:12):
I'm Justin Garrison. In this episode, Steve and I talk with John Tomasi, the president of the Heterodox Academy, about a new book that he co-edited and contributed a chapter to called Viewpoint Diversity: What It Is, Why We Need It, and How to Get It. We're going to put the link to this fantastic book in our show description, so let's get to it. Steve, can you tell our audience a little bit about who we're going to speak with today?

Steve McGuire (00:00:33):
Yeah. John's been president of Heterodox Academy now for several years. Before that, he was a professor at Brown University. His specialty is in political theory, not unlike you and I, Justin.

Justin Garrison (00:00:45):
Taking over the world.

Steve McGuire (00:00:47):
That's right. One political theorist at a time.

Justin Garrison (00:00:51):
There's like five left.

Steve McGuire (00:00:52):
Yeah. A philosopher king for every organization. But he ran the Brown Political Theory Project for many years while he was at Brown, which was a really great program that would bring in postdocs who would offer a little bit of a different perspective, maybe studying something that wasn't quite as routine in political theory. It was certainly something I'd heard about back when I was in grad school as a place that was very interesting, doing interesting things. He worked with students there. I've heard some fantastic stories about opportunities that he offered students. I'm sure Brown was sad to lose him, but it was definitely Heterodox Academy's gain. We're delighted to have him on the show today.

(00:01:37):
As you mentioned, the occasion is this new book that he's co-edited with Bernard Schweizer, Viewpoint Diversity: What It Is, Why We Need It, and How to Get It. It's a really fantastic volume. We're going to focus in particular on John's contribution, but I do want to note that there's a real amazing list of contributors to this volume. It includes Nadine Strossen, Jonathan Zimmerman, Jesse Singal, Eboo Patel, Mark Bauerlein, Bret Stephens is in here. It's just a really fantastic collection of contributors that he and Bernard have brought together. It's published by Heresy Press. We're going to focus, as I said, on John's chapter, which is in the first section, the larger section, which focuses on higher education. But there's also chapters that look at society and politics more generally, as well as literature and publishing.

(00:02:41):
It talks about viewpoint diversity in the academy quite a bit, but also in these other fields of life. There's been some real blockbuster articles published in the last year or two looking at the publishing field or the

field of writing in general and how conservatives, Jewish people, white men have really struggled in recent years to be included basically in these fields as well. The whole volume is fantastic. Highly recommend it. We'll put a link down in the show notes for anybody who's interested, but really looking forward to talk to John. Of course, we'll talk to John about his contribution, as I said, but also about the work that Heterodox Academy is doing to try and improve viewpoint diversity in the academy. With that, let's get to the interview. John, welcome to Radio Free Campus.

John Tomasi (00:03:41):

Hi, Steve. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm a big fan of ACTA and Radio Free, so it's really a pleasure.

Steve McGuire (00:03:47):

Well, thanks. Really glad we could get you on. Of course, we're big fans of what you're doing at Heterodox Academy and-

John Tomasi (00:03:53):

Thank you.

Steve McGuire (00:03:54):

... really enjoyed looking at this new book that you've co-edited on viewpoint diversity. Let's just get right into it. I want to start by focusing on the chapter that you wrote yourself. In that chapter, you start by looking at two different views or arguments about viewpoint diversity and then offer your own. The first you refer to as the scholarly sanctification view, and the second you call the political representation view. Maybe you could just give us a quick sense of what you mean by those, and then how your third way, the Heterodox view, from your perspective improves on those two?

John Tomasi (00:04:32):

Yeah. I'd be happy to. May I just step back and say something more generally about the question of viewpoint diversity, and then I'll move into that?

Steve McGuire (00:04:38):

Absolutely.

John Tomasi (00:04:39):

I guess I would just say that for the listeners, I think when historians look back on the past 50 years of the American Academy, the big story is going to be viewpoint diversity. What I mean by that is that starting around 50 years ago, our university system attempted a remarkable thing. We attempted to become much more inclusive than any university system in the past has been. Historically, if you look at all the great universities all through history, Bologna, Cambridge, Oxford, early Harvard, if you go through to the great American research universities at the turn of the 20th century, Chicago, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, they all were pursuing knowledge. They're all wonderful schools, much more open-minded and much more diverse than we are... Much more open to different views than we are now currently.

(00:05:30):

However, they all excluded people. They excluded people by class. They excluded people by religion, by gender, by race. We did this thing starting about 50 years ago in the US of trying to include all those excluded voices. By including those voices, we added a whole range of viewpoint diversity to our system, which has never been there before. That's a wonderful thing. I think the big story is we attempted to do this thing, viewpoint diversity, which has never been tried before. However, the downside is that at the

same time as we were bringing in those voices, we started having fewer and fewer voices across a political ideological viewpoint diversity, and it's been a dramatic change. In 1990, the ratio of left-right faculty was about two to one. Our best studies now suggest that the current ratio across the whole academy is about five to one.

(00:06:29):

But if you look closely at the disciplines that matter the most for these... Where moral premises are most at play, like the social sciences or the humanities. In the social sciences, the imbalance now on the ideological dimension is something like 68% on one side, on the left. In humanities, it's more like 83%. In some disciplines, like sociology and anthropology, most infamously, it's more than 90% on one side. If you do cohort cuts and look at the junior faculty compared to the senior faculty, it's even more imbalanced. We see this... I just want to mention this as a background point for the listeners that there's been these huge two currents of viewpoint diversity over the past 50 years. One, a positive one, a potentially positive one, of including these talented people whose viewpoints were not included before. The other countercurrent though is this really unfortunate one where we've lost viewpoint diversity on that important dimension.

(00:07:35):

What we want to do, ideally at HxA, we believe, is move forward into a new space where we have true viewpoint diversity on the ideological dimension as well as the other dimensions, so that we have a... Maybe some of the world's never seen before, which is a truly viewpoint diverse university system, truly inclusive, you might say, that's committed to searching for truth. That's the background from which the book is written. That's the idea that failing on the dimension of ideological viewpoint diversity is an extremely serious failing. We're doing that against the context of the potential to do something really remarkable, to produce a university system which is truly inclusive, but also unashamedly, enthusiastically committed to searching for truth across all the range of viewpoints. That's all the background.

Steve McGuire (00:08:25):

No, that's a great overview, and you put it so well. But yeah, so going back to the first question then. The first view, the scholarly sanctification view, in the chapter you associate this with an author representing a view of the American Association of University Professors, the-

John Tomasi (00:08:43):

Yes.

Steve McGuire (00:08:43):

... AAUP. They have this view that, well, really scholars who are in the academy, they have expertise. They're the ones who decide who comes into the guild and which positions are represented, and-

John Tomasi (00:08:56):

[inaudible 00:08:57]-

Steve McGuire (00:08:57):

... we should really only have as much viewpoint diversity in the academy as that process yields because that's the way that scholarly expertise works. I think that's a fairly fair way of putting that position.

John Tomasi (00:09:11):

That's right.

Steve McGuire (00:09:11):

Then on the other hand, you have people who you characterize more as a external point of view, looking at it from the standpoint of say political representation and saying, "Well, as you were..." Some of these stats that you were quoting, there's so few conservatives or Republicans or libertarians, however you want to put it-

John Tomasi (00:09:27):

[inaudible 00:09:28]-

Steve McGuire (00:09:27):

... in the academy, there's a massive imbalance-

John Tomasi (00:09:30):

Yes.

Steve McGuire (00:09:30):

... and so we need to get people in there representing those views. It seems to me that you think maybe each of these views has a point to a degree, but that you ultimately disagree with these perspectives and offer this third way, the Heterodox view.

John Tomasi (00:09:45):

That's right. That's a great summary. I appreciate you reading it so carefully. Yeah. I describe the situation where we have this growing imbalance ideologically across the professoriate and looking to get even stronger unless something happens. The question is, how do we course correct? How do we make a correction? One group of views one often hears usually from people from outside the academy. They hear those numbers, and they think this is just crazy. How can we possibly have this? It's obviously an injustice for publicly funded universities. They've received tax benefits, even the private ones. How can we have this imbalance in our university system?

(00:10:26):

People on that side, they often say, "Well, what we should have is an equal representation that the professoriate should represent what the range of views is in the society that houses them and supports them." That's a reasonable view. There's a lot of insight in that view, but there's some problems with it too. We don't really know what the natural or free ratio of Republicans to Democrats would be across a professoriate. Being a Republican or Democrat goes to deep views about our views of the world, what we value. It wouldn't be surprising if certain professions tend to get more people from one ideology rather than another. In the 1990s, when it was about two to one, that might not have been an injustice.

(00:11:07):

Maybe people on the left tend to become professors more than people on the right to some degree, so that we don't know what the natural number is, but the idea that we should have an exact proportional representation has deeper problems too because we are searching for truth at universities. We do want to have experts making decisions. We don't know why we'd want to have an equal number of Republicans and Democrats teaching mathematics or engineering. If we insisted on an even ratio across the whole professoriate, we'd probably be hiring some less talented people to teach courses where it didn't really

matter what their political views were. There's something strange about that view. It's attractive initially, the political representation view, but it has some serious problems on the inside.

(00:11:53):

The other view that I mentioned is the dominant view within the academy is the view that there's nothing to see here, people. That we professors... I've been a professor for most of my life. That professors are experts in our disciplines. They run searches using their scholarly tools, using their evaluative mechanisms, checking out publication rates, all those kinds of things, which questions seem important to them, who's doing the hot new work and the hot new topic. They say, "Whatever we choose, whatever individual choices we make," and then you look at the whole pattern that emerges. Since every choice is done by scholarly norms, seeking for truth, choosing the best people by existing scholarly standards, judged by the professors currently in the academy.

(00:12:39):

Since every choice is justified in that way, whatever pattern emerges, whatever... However imbalanced it might be, that's got to be okay too. The scholarly process sanctifies its own outcome. That's the standard view of the AAUP. It's a standard view of many of my colleagues, my colleagues at Brown, for example, and many of the places where I talk to professors that professors get to choose. But that internal view, purely internal view, is deeply problematic too because it assumes that professors somehow... When we get trained to be academics, we somehow leave behind the ordinary human biases that all human beings have. We become these supernatural creatures who can always see what's most important and understand what's most important.

(00:13:28):

That we're not vulnerable to group think, confirmation bias, all these different biases. But in fact, professors are just human beings. Human. All too human. When professors make choices in department meetings, they're vulnerable to having group thinks start to steer the way they do things. You can see this in the academy, I think. I think as we think about that movement, the fact that there was a change from two to one to 20 to one, 30 to one, 40 to one in some disciplines, more in some disciplines, that happens slowly over time. The idea that that's attracting the truth, now we're getting more truth out of it because we're congealing... Sorry. We're all coordinating on a particular ideological viewpoint. We [inaudible 00:14:12] found the truth.

(00:14:13):

I have professor [inaudible 00:14:14] who actually say that. They say, "There's nothing to be learned from Republicans. That professors are tracking the truth and we're getting more and more ideological uniform. That means we're getting more closer to truth." But that's a naive view. It's an unscientific view. It's a hubristic view. It lacks intellectual humility, which should be a feature of the academy. If we're searching for truth humbly, we should be aware of how little we know. We should be eager to look for our biases to understand what our blind spots are like. That scholarly sanctification view, unfortunately, has been set in place and magnified a little bit by the Trump attack on higher education. This external approach where people are saying, "Well, let's make it proportional," that that's the only alternative out there.

(00:15:00):

Professors take solace in that and they think, well, no, just let us choose. We'll do it ourselves. That's the world we're in right now where we have people outside the academy primarily saying, "These ratios are completely unfair. They should be even or proportional." We have people inside who say, "Nothing to see here. We're getting closer to the truth." At HxA and other organizations, including ACTA, obviously, we're trying to find ways that are more thoughtful about this. We're trying to find ways to correct some of the more visible imbalances that we see. There's examples beyond just the ratios of professors that you guys know about. I'll just mention for the listeners, there was a really important study done about a year ago, it was called... From the Open Syllabus Project, where people studied syllabi all across the country.

(00:15:49):

Especially in courses like public policy courses, US history courses, courses where there are political views that are lively at play in the course, not like, say, engineering. They found that there's been an incredible narrowing of the range of readings that students encounter in their classes. What's more, as you guys know, they found that this narrowing has been most extreme on some of the topics that we most need to have open conversations about. The three topics they picked out that are now being taught just by looking at the syllabi, looking at the readings and coding for left or right ideologies, there are three areas, three questions, three social problems on which the range of readings has shrunk to almost nothing. It's just one viewpoint's being assigned to students.

(00:16:38):

Those three topics are Israel-Palestine, race in the criminal justice system and abortion. On those three topics, there's almost no readings. It's very rare to find readings on a syllabus that students are going to read where they would read some sophisticated defense of Zionism or some sophisticated account of our criminal justice system and the way it works the way that it does, or different things about abortion as well. That's really worrying. Whatever you say about the social sanctification of the scholarly sanctification of professors making their academic choices, the fact that the syllabi no longer are enabling our students to think in open-minded ways, to think for...

(00:17:24):

These are young people. They don't know the range of readings. They don't know the range of options on all these different topics. They go to college neuroscience [inaudible 00:17:31] and they think, well, that must be what the scholars think. That must be the best that there is. We're giving them a twisted understanding of what the range of scholarship is like. There are wonderful, important readings on each of those topics from different perspectives. Our classrooms could become more lively. Our students could become more open-minded. The conversations on the campuses could become more intelligent if we could adjust those syllabi. I'll give one more example if you don't mind.

Steve McGuire (00:18:01):

Please do.

John Tomasi (00:18:02):

This is something that also happens, I think, when we have this ideological imbalance on the university faculty. It's not just that the syllabi get drifted, allowed to drift in this increasingly narrow direction. It also means [inaudible 00:18:16] this other university processes become vulnerable to group think. Another example I'll just give is common readings. Many universities have freshmen when they arrive read a book before they arrive on campus. Another study has showed that the range of the ideological presuppositions of those books that students are assigned, they tend to be ideological in the first place rather than choosing some great text, some piece of Hamlet or something. Some incredible reading that you could read and come and discuss and think, wow, now we're going to talk about some deep questions of life.

(00:18:48):

They're often given book... The most assigned book for freshmen reading is Michelle Alexander's, The New Jim Crow, which is a... It's not a great book. From a scholarly perspective, it's a B, B-, but it's a really strong ideologically loaded account of racism in our criminal justice system. My son went to Brown. At Brown, he was assigned The New Jim Crow as his freshman reading. There was no note saying, "Here's one view on this. Here's a short reading to criticize that view." It was just assigned to them as a book to read that's endorsed by the university. All across the country, we're sending these signals to

students, because they don't know what the range of views are, that there's only one way to think about these things among intelligent people or polite conversation and it's this way.

(00:19:35):

So too with Settler Colonialism, which is often assigned. These books are often assigned to incoming freshmen. That also affects the whole culture of the campus as campuses become more political. If there's no one on the campus to push back and say, "Well, wait a minute, I'm an intelligent person. You guys all know me. I don't think that way. I'm not sure that America first is a crazy policy. I think it may be a good policy. Here's why I think that." If you don't have the people on the campus of stature who think differently on these topics, then the twisting that goes on affects the whole university culture. That's why it's just so incredibly important that we take these things on and find some better ways to think about them.

Steve McGuire (00:20:13):

Yeah. Those are great points. The one book, the summer assignment book, your example there points to how even just increasing academic quality could solve potentially some of these problems. Because if you were to sub out that book and put in something like Plato's Republic or whatever it is, it's a rich enough book. It's not an ideological-

John Tomasi (00:20:33):

That's right.

Steve McGuire (00:20:34):

... book. Then you're not even really worrying about this, and you're arguably better serving the students and living up better to the institution's mission.

John Tomasi (00:20:42):

[inaudible 00:20:43]-

Steve McGuire (00:20:43):

But I wanted to ask you, you mentioned in your opening remarks, and you talk about this a little bit in your chapter in the book too, the idea of identity-based diversity. We've discussed in the past on this podcast, what's the relationship between viewpoint diversity and identity-based diversity, and-

John Tomasi (00:21:01):

Yes.

Steve McGuire (00:21:03):

... do you need people who represent in their own lives certain backgrounds or certain perspectives? Do you need them on the faculty in order to represent certain perspectives or viewpoints? For example, with the syllabi, yeah, we've seen and discussed that study as well. It's very interesting. Would it be enough for the professor to simply correct this problem by putting some of these different perspectives that aren't there on the syllabus? I'll point out one thing, by the way, the AAUP's own 1915 declaration, as I'm sure you know, points out that this is one of the responsibilities of a professor is to ensure that students are exposed to the various views in a discipline or in a course that they're teaching. But to get to my question, in your view, what's the relationship between identity and viewpoint? Whether we're talking about race or gender.

John Tomasi (00:22:04):

Sure.

Steve McGuire (00:22:04):

Or, say, getting Republicans on the faculty. Do you need Republicans on the faculty to represent, say, Republican perspectives on, say, political science or public policy? Let's go straight for-

John Tomasi (00:22:17):

Right.

Steve McGuire (00:22:19):

... what I think would be the most credible claim where you'd say like, "No, no, we definitely need some Republicans if we're going to have a-

John Tomasi (00:22:23):

Right.

Steve McGuire (00:22:24):

... public policy program."

John Tomasi (00:22:25):

Yeah. It's a classic [inaudible 00:22:27] and there's a lot in there, as you know, and it's pretty layered. I guess I would just go back to John Stuart Mill. John Stuart Mill talks about how similarly to the AAUP's 1915... The old AAUP, the 1915 statement, that people have an obligation to teach things from different perspectives, to liberate young people to think for themselves, to show the humility that comes with presenting a strongly held belief, but then also considering the weakness of that view, considering alternative views. I think so we do have an obligation as professors that's often not realized, as we see from the syllabus data, to present our students with a range of readings and a range of viewpoints, even if we don't believe them ourselves, so that they can think freely for themselves. John Stuart Mill makes that point in On Liberty brilliantly that we always whole truth in partial ways.

(00:23:21):

We're doing our best here in this world as human beings, but we rarely have the whole of the truth in any topic. But Mill goes on to say... John Haidt in his prologue to the book makes this point, this quotation from John Stuart Mill. Mill goes on to say... Mill's famous line is that, "He who knows only his own side of a case knows little of that." That if we don't know the other people's views, we don't really even know our own view. That's the classic we should think broadly view. But the next sentence, as John Haidt points out, Mill says, "But you know what? Even that's not enough. You also need to have people who sincerely hold these views on the campus. If you don't have that, you're going to have blind spots. You're not going to present it in its strongest form."

(00:24:08):

I just remember myself as a young person just starting graduate school, at the time I was at the University of Arizona, and I was a teaching assistant for a large course on political philosophy. I remember I was on the political right. I remember every time we would do a reading that was something to do with a non-left wing view, the teacher would present the view, the professor would presented the view in a very one-sided way. I don't even think she was aware she was presenting it in that one-sided way. I'll give one example in particular. We taught Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia, which is the view about

markets should be a much more strong part of our society. She said, "These people don't even think you should have... You shouldn't even have roads. You shouldn't have post offices. You shouldn't have anything because they're basically anarchists."

(00:24:54):

In my sections, when I ran my sections for the students, and I said, "Well, that's what the professor said, but let's look a little more carefully. I'm not sure that Robert Nozick is opposed to roads. He thinks that there could be things done through private mechanisms, like many of the things in our society that markets can produce." That's just an example. For me, it was early on I thought to myself, wow, if you don't have someone who really believes the view is in the mix of teaching, you're [inaudible 00:25:19] get people of goodwill. They're not all of goodwill, don't get me wrong, but there are people of goodwill. Many professors are moderates or claimed to be moderates, and they won't teach the views very well.

(00:25:32):

You have to have people doing that. You also asked about identity and identity diversity, which I mentioned also in my opening comments. I think something similar happens here too. I think that the idea that we need to diversify the faculty on an identity perspective simply for the sake of diversity, I find that very uninteresting and not a very compelling idea. But for the purpose of improving teaching and improving scholarship, I think we do have reason to think that would help. Viewpoint diversity is important, not just in and of itself, but as a means to a better university, a means to free thinking, a means towards more serious accounts of excellence. I can give an example, there are many.

(00:26:19):

One of the big tragedies I think on our campuses today is that while we brought in a more diverse group of people in terms of religion and class and so on and race and gender. While we've done that, we've also created more balkanized campuses where we have these people with different viewpoints on campuses, but they tend to be pushed off into little islands of their own. Separate graduations for them. Separate orientation programs for some sometimes for some universities. We have this diversity that's not even being activated. People live in silos on their campus, and that's a terrible thing. But a more specific example about how identity can help, think about American history.

(00:27:01):

American history... Here's a brief history of American history. In the 1970s and '80s, there was a flowering of wonderful work on the American founding. Scholars like Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, my colleague at Brown, were producing these fantastic books, The Empire of Liberty from John Stuart... Sorry. I said John Stuart Mill. From Gordon Wood. [inaudible 00:27:24] magisterial account of the American founding. Around the late '80s and the '90s, people started saying, "Wait a minute, these are incredible research that's broadening our understanding of what happened and what America is in incredibly important ways," but there's basically no discussion at all of enslaved peoples.

(00:27:42):

There's very little discussion of the poor. There's very little discussion of women. There was a counter movement that began, which was healthy in the beginning at least, of starting to bring in these voices. People started in the '90s and into the beginning of the 21st century, history started doing cultural history to add, to supplement the magisterial principle-based account of the American founding with some of these other elements of the American founding that are part of our story too. That made history broader. It made it richer. It gives a better understanding of what was going on in early America and all the different forces at play. Unfortunately, being humans and being biased as we are, the historians went way that direction.

(00:28:30):

If you go to most of the top universities today, Harvard, for example, Chicago. You won't find it at Brown, where I taught. You won't see a single course taught on the American founding, but you'll find

lots and lots of courses on cultural studies. It's an example of how bringing... To the point I made in the very beginning, bringing in new perspectives helped us understand the importance of broadening our perspectives on our world, improving our scholarship, improving our teaching, improving the quality of conversations in the classroom and in the dorms. However, because of human biases and the way group thinks works with us, it led history, in my view, off the rails. Now we have a very narrow conception of what history is, and the students are learning a very narrow account too.

(00:29:20):

They're not reading Gordon Wood anymore. Gordon Wood is... I've had people actually say this to me, that it's some racial history or settler history. That's just a terrible... It's name-calling, but if you've read any Gordon Wood, [inaudible 00:29:32] in the audience you read Gordon Wood, you know what an incredible genius he is about American history. Reading those books can change the way you see our country and deepen your understanding of our principles and what this incredible adventure that America is truly is. If you don't get the other side of the story, then you're missing something too, but you need to have all of this in the mixture.

(00:29:55):

That's an example of identity diversity. I think having more Black people on the campus in the '90s helped people think, "Well, what about this other stories?" That helped things, but we did it the wrong way. We haven't got it right yet. We need to push through still, move our universities forward without losing the identity of diversity, but it's not fetishizing it so much, and moving on to really taking each other seriously as scholars and thinkers, respecting our students. That's where we need to go.

Steve McGuire (00:30:27):

Thanks, John. That's really interesting. Let me hand it off to Justin here to ask a couple of questions.

John Tomasi (00:30:32):

Hey, Justin.

Justin Garrison (00:30:33):

Hey, how are you, John?

John Tomasi (00:30:34):

I'm doing great.

Justin Garrison (00:30:34):

Just to remind everyone, we're talking with John Tomasi, co-editor and contributor to this fantastic book, Viewpoint Diversity: What It Is, Why We Need It, and How to Get It. John, one of the things that we focus on at ACTA, much like Heterodox, is not just thinking these things out clearly, which is important, but also trying to come up with ways to implement the kinds of changes that we'd like to see in the academy.

John Tomasi (00:30:58):

Yes.

Justin Garrison (00:31:00):

Let me throw a couple of things out there and see if you want to respond on this solutions side. Lisa Siraganian was someone you quoted, right? She wrote a piece earlier this year calling viewpoint diversity

a MAGA plot. Now, for those who are watching, that's a very subtle criticism of viewpoint diversity, so you might not have caught it. There's that perspective. Then there's other stuff out there too, people who are really sympathetic to this at the level of ideas might point to something like problems with the PhD pipeline.

(00:31:35):

Yes. It would be amazing if we could hire, but where are these PhDs to do those things? I'm not saying that that's necessarily an argument that's without flaws, but there are a lot of people who are just either totally opposed to this or who are sympathetic, but think it's impractical. If you had an open-minded person who might be a little skeptical, but is not ideologically opposed to this project, what kinds of things would you or would Heterodox Academy recommend as concrete steps to move the needle a bit in the direction you want things to go?

John Tomasi (00:32:07):

Yeah. Thank you. The final part of the subtitle of the book is, and How to Get It. Let's talk a little bit about that. I recently gave it... As you guys all know, I'm the president of Heterodox Academy. We're a membership organization of professors who love our universities and want to make them better. As I like to say, at HxA, our professors love our universities the way Socrates loved Athens. Not uncritically, but sincerely, authentically, doggedly and unrelentingly. We have professors now on over 1,000 campuses across the US. There's about 2,000 campuses total. We're on 1,228, I think, this morning. We're in a lot of places. We approach the question of how to do it on two levels.

(00:33:00):

The first level is working with the existing faculty on the campuses to change the way they behave and the way they teach and the way they approach their scholarship and the way they think about themselves as participants in department meetings just as they currently exist. This is the first level about affecting existing personnel without jumping into... I gave a talk recently to a big group of presidents, and they all want to know, well, how do you get it? They jump right into the question of personnel, how to hire more personnel. That's an important issue, as I mentioned. That's the second part of the John Stuart Mill formulation, but the first part is worth pausing on just for a moment before we do the harder one.

(00:33:40):

It's just important to see that there's a lot that can be done, a lot that's in the power of presidents to do, to encourage existing personnel without yet changing them to teach better. That syllabus data point that I mentioned in the study that you guys mentioned and I mentioned too, that gives presidents information, which they need to have to understand, well, how are we doing at our university? At HxA, we work with university leaders to help them understand the state of play, what the data is about their own campus. Once they see the data, they can start doing things like... We prefer positive approaches to negative ones.

(00:34:20):

There's two ways to change the world. You can build good things or fight bad ones. There are bad things on the university campus that need to be fought. There are dragons out there that need to be confronted, and we do that sometimes. But there's also, if you can go the positive way, that's often more powerful, or at least as a first move. One of the things that I talked with the presidents about was a simple thing. Simply becoming aware of what range of readings are being taught on your own campus now, and then encouraging professors to teach differently and to teach better. Encouraging them to diversify their syllabi. Simple thing, by adding more readings that aren't currently there.

(00:34:59):

Changing the way they teach the class to look for their own hidden biases in the way they grade, in the way they write the assignments, in the way they present their lectures. There are professors on almost every campus in the country who are doing these things in really good ways or teaching in broadminded

ways even if they don't have the views themselves. HxA is nonpartisan. Our professors are pretty evenly divided between left and right, but all our professors across all those campuses are really committed to teaching as best they can in ways that don't just repeat their own biases. You can have awards, university-wide prizes that recognize professors who teach that way, to encourage other professors.

(00:35:41):

Presidents can create small grant opportunities for professors to rewrite their syllabis over the summer. HxA has materials to help them do this, to rewrite these syllabi in public policy and history and other areas to make them more diverse. The first level is just having leadership at universities who have the courage and the authentic concern for the university to take Socrates seriously, and to actually tell the existing professors, "We can do better than we're currently doing. Here are some concrete steps you can take right now this summer for next fall to change the way you're teaching the classes. Change the common readings. Just think about these things with existing personnel in new ways."

(00:36:25):

That is a really important step, and it's a step that has not been taken across our university system. It's starting now. We're working with many university leaders who are doing these kinds of things now for the first time in years. That's one really important thing to point out. The second thing is the harder one, as you guys know. How do you go about doing that? How do you think about now the personnel? Because it's not enough to have syllabi that are taught by people who all think the same thing, but are doing their best to do it in a broad-minded way. You also need to have people on your campus who sincerely believe these things, who take the America first idea seriously and can teach it, who talk about American foreign policy and not always in a liberal, internationalist or cosmopolitan way, but a way that takes nation state seriously.

(00:37:13):

To have people who will teach intellectual history not only talking about greats like Ruth Bader Ginsburg and JFK, but also Antonin Scalia or Calvin Coolidge. People who aren't normally included on the... [inaudible 00:37:29] people who actually believe that, who actually are Republican or right-leaning, so that's... One approach to that, I think it's a mistake to think of it in terms of affirmative action, like trying to hire Republicans for the sake of hiring Republicans. What we want to be doing is having university leaders look for gaps, look for holes, look for places where departments and disciplines have gone wrong. US history is a great example of that. A whole area, the founding, the principal of the founding, are not being taught.

(00:37:59):

Running dedicated searches to look for people in those area, that's a very powerful way of making this happen. There's a big civic center movement, as you guys are aware, and HxA produced a report on civic centers across the country that you might want to look at. It has a really nice account of all the different civic centers in the US, the different way they do things. Civic centers are often sites now for new hiring because from an academic perspective... This is a little bit granular, but from the inside of the academy, departments choose who the... Departments every year tell the administration, "These are the areas we want to hire in next year." The administration approves that, then they do the hiring, and they provide a tenure home for that new professor.

(00:38:43):

But the existing system [inaudible 00:38:44], for reasons we've been discussing, tend to replicate existing premises and assumptions rather than thinking in new ways. Civic centers are sometimes now being given their own faculty lines to do hiring so they can hire people without the block of the departments. We're interested in this at HxA. We're studying different models that have been successful and ones that have been less successful. A model that I'll mention because I work with it myself at Brown. I had a center at Brown. We had our own faculty lines, but we weren't allowed to hire our own faculty ourselves. We had

to always find some partner department who was willing to set up a joint search committee. People from my center, including me as the chair. People from that department, history or philosophy or English or whatever it might be, economics.

(00:39:34):

We'd have a joint committee, half from the center, half from the department, and we would try to find convergence on some scholar who both groups wanted. What that did, it made the searches harder because you have to now work with people. The first year I tried it, I found that there was a lot of opposition. It was really hard to make it work. But over time when people realized, oh, I could grow... Our department could grow if we're willing to work with these people and find new ways to bring some new voices into the department. There'd be people in each of those departments who are hardcore. Basically ideologically people who did not want diverse views, and they become more marginalized in the department now over time. Because you set these structures up, and it starts empowering the people in those departments who are more moderate, who are more sincere about John Stuart Mill, who have the better angels about what we owe our students. We start over time now changing the way the department dynamics work.

(00:40:26):

But if you can get centers that can hire jointly with departments, you avoid that if the centers becoming silos, you avoid people getting hired who now teaches a small group of classes off to the side. You integrate them into the main... You inject the diversity into the bloodstream of the place. Maybe it's a little bit too in the weeds, but that's a structural plan that we are talking about with a number of university leaders, joint hiring. About the pipeline problem, I think Steve mentioned, or maybe... I'm sorry, Justin, maybe you mentioned it. The pipeline problem, it's a serious issue. Universities can't just snap their fingers, boom, and have a whole bunch of great historians of the American founding ready to go. But we should be aware, and the listeners should have confidence in this fact, there was a great range of super talented people all across the university system in America who'd been underplaced or could not find jobs at all because they were working in areas that were not part of the avant-garde as seen by the current wave of professors.

(00:41:32):

There was a tremendous amount of talent out there across the America. People from strong universities with great ideas, who are eager to teach, who are underplaced. They can be moved up. Other people can be brought on board. We saw this with DEI, by the way. When people were pushing for DEI. The first wave of DEI, the first pushback against the DEI hires where people said, "Well, there aren't enough people... There are not enough talented minorities to be hired." But within a year or two of this pushing hiring in that direction, the pipeline starts changing. People in graduate school start thinking, "Well, you know what? I've been working on this dissertation because this was the only thing I could get a job in. Now I say I could actually write a dissertation on something I actually care about, something I love and something that really means something to me."

(00:42:19):

They'll start course correcting too now. The university is a dynamic system. It's constantly moving. It's constantly changing. We're not going to diversify the faculty in a year or two years or three years, but it didn't get as one-sided as it is in that time either. It took 30 years to go from 1990 to now. To go from two to one to this extreme ratio we're seeing. It'll take us 10, 20 years to really fix it, but we could do that. If we can do it, as I said, if we could do it, if we could bring viewpoint diversity on the ideological dimension to our campuses while retaining these other forms of non-exclusion excellence for anybody, then we could have something truly remarkable in America. People are so down on our universities, which I totally understand.

(00:43:08):

The public's lost trust in our universities, which I totally understand. But there's an opportunity in front of us if we're willing to work hard and commit ourselves to it, to create a great university system like the world's never seen, because we're truly diverse in all these dimensions. Not tomorrow. Not next fall, but we take steps now and we move in that direction. In five years, we could do a lot. In 10 years, we could do a heck of a lot. That's how I look at that. Through time. Dynamically. Two phases. Change existing personnel now, which starts to change the soil of the campus in itself and makes it more ready for the second phase where we actually start now more enthusiastically seeking out people with neglected views. Bringing them on board. Bringing them onto our campuses. Giving them positions of authority and power and learning from them. That's where we should be heading.

Justin Garrison (00:44:04):

Well, I can't think of a better note to conclude our conversation on. That was a magisterial exposition of the theory and practice of viewpoint diversity, John. I know that Steve and I are both grateful for your time and for your words. There are a lot of people who, as you said, are understandably down on higher ed, but your words are quite encouraging. I'm glad that we're going to be able to share those words with others when this episode-

John Tomasi (00:44:28):

Thank you.

Justin Garrison (00:44:29):

... is published.

John Tomasi (00:44:29):

Thank you.

Justin Garrison (00:44:30):

Thank you again so much for your time.

John Tomasi (00:44:32):

May I just say that I just want to emphasize that how much I admire ACTA and the work you do. HxA, we have professors, and that's incredibly important. That's our angle, but the work you guys do with trustees and leadership is just so important. I just want to just shout that out to you. I very much see us working together to try to have both sides of this equation going. The people on the ground as it were, the professors who are doing the hiring and making the decisions, but also the leadership is absolutely fundamental, obviously. ACTA does a fabulous job with that. I'm just really, really, really honored to be here speaking with you.

Steve McGuire (00:45:11):

Well, thanks, John. Obviously we're big fans of Heterodox Academy and your work as well. Of course, whatever changes are made at the leadership level, you need the faculty on the ground who are going to implement that and work with it. I have to say that one of the encouraging things is Heterodox Academy's growth. When people do say, "Well, where is this cultural change going to come from?" I think Heterodox Academy is one of the best arguments because here-

John Tomasi (00:45:41):

Thank you.

Steve McGuire (00:45:42):

... is a huge collection of people who are in our universities. Who, like you said, love the universities and just want them to be better versions of themselves. I think that that's just absolutely going to be critical to turning the ship around.

John Tomasi (00:45:58):

Thank you. Let's see what we can do.

Justin Garrison (00:46:02):

Once more unto the breach.

Steve McGuire (00:46:04):

Yeah. All right. Well, thanks, John.

John Tomasi (00:46:07):

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Justin Garrison (00:46:08):

Thank you so much, John. Thank you.

John Tomasi (00:46:08):

Thank you.

Steve McGuire (00:46:13):

Well, that was a really interesting interview that we had with John, Justin. Again, the reason we invited him on... We'd always love to have John on, of course, but he's just co-edited with Bernard Schweitzer, this book, Viewpoint Diversity: What It Is, Why We Need It, and How to Get It. It was really interesting to talk to him about his contribution to the book, as well as some of the work that they're doing at Heterodox Academy. What were your reactions?

Justin Garrison (00:46:39):

Well, I thought the interview was excellent. You could see that he would be a really incredible and engaging person in the classroom because he's got a coherence that... These are these spontaneous questions, right? He's not reading from a script, but unlike me, none of that sounded disorganized. It was very, very thoughtful, well-thought-out. All of that was great. This would be a person that if someone said, "Send me an advocate for viewpoint diversity." He'd be on my list after you, Steve. We got to represent our own first, dammit. But in a serious sense, he makes a compelling case. Just his presence and the way that he talks about this, it undercuts any number of the caricatures about this particular desire for reform, that it's a MAGA plot, that it's equivalent to all lives matter.

(00:47:35):

It's essentially some right-wing crypto racist conspiracy. I'm getting ahead of myself based on something I read last month out of Stanford, but he clearly just makes the case in such a reasonable way. I think the only person that's untouched by that is the hardened ideologue, the person who just categorically refuses to see a problem. Or on the opposite end of the spectrum, someone who just genuinely hates higher ed. That's not HxA's wheelhouse, and that's not our wheelhouse. We want to talk to people who care about this, but also recognize that all is far from well. I think this book does a really nice job laying out what the

problem is, how people have thought about it and what you could do about it. John's chapter in particular, you could read that chapter while you're waiting to board an airplane. I think that's a virtue. It's a clear, concise, easy-to-understand argument for this Heterodox way that he wants to talk about.

(00:48:41):

For academic people, being able to write clearly and concisely is just a tremendous benefit because that's not typically what academic people are known for, right? On the substance, I was intrigued. I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on this. I thought he leaned into something that I wasn't quite expecting. I don't think this is a bad idea per se, but there's that accusation that's out there that this is a MAGA plot. Then there's a real strong resistance to saying, "Well, it's not a MAGA plot, but there is some ideological component at work here." He repeatedly said that in some circumstances, certainly not all. He clearly was against hiring Republicans or libertarians, qua party affiliation. ACTA is also on that page, not just hiring people purely because they have an identity characteristic or something like that. But he did make the argument that there are areas in which, yeah, that's probably a good idea subject to budgetary constraints and all that stuff.

(00:49:49):

I'm certainly sympathetic to that. I think it would be really difficult to go through... You were talking about this in the way that you framed some of your questions to him. It'd be hard to go through a public policy program, it would be hard to go through a political science program and never really hear about these ideas, or only hear them caricatured rather than given the best defense someone could make even if they don't believe in them. I think that is a problem. Something I was curious about, we didn't have time to talk with him about, what would that look like in humanities disciplines where it's not obvious what the conservative approach to Shakespeare would be? I know that there are plenty of bad ways of teaching literature that are often infected by art ideology.

(00:50:42):

But thinking about disciplines like philosophy or theology or lit... History, it's a little easier. He actually tapped into a couple of pretty good examples of good ways and not so good ways to do that. It's not his responsibility to have an answer to every conceivable question, every possible solution. I think he gets a ton of stuff right. I was really excited to hear him talk practically about short-term as well as medium-term and long-term. This isn't going to get fixed overnight, but that's not a reason to just give up. You still have to start because you can make changes that are measurable in the short-term, even if the ultimate goal is not going to come in a five-year plan, to borrow from our good former friends, the Soviets.

Steve McGuire (00:51:34):

Yeah. Yeah. Always good to borrow from the Soviets.

Justin Garrison (00:51:39):

Yeah. Their higher education was so amazing, right?

Steve McGuire (00:51:44):

Yeah. Yeah. It was interesting. His timeline was probably on the more optimistic side, but on the other hand, I think he made really good points and of course looked, again, to the growing membership of Heterodox Academy. As he was saying, these are people who are all over the place in terms of their political beliefs, their ideological beliefs, but they're all attracted obviously because of their membership by Heterodox's mission. I think that really is a classic argument against this idea that it's just a MAGA plot or... Okay. There are some people who look at the academy from a political or partisan standpoint, and they see it as a democratic stronghold, and that's the reason that they want to go after it. But there's

also lots of people who are thinking about it from the perspective of the academy itself and reforming higher ed.

(00:52:43):

Of course, that's what Heterodox is trying to do. That's what we're trying to do at ACTA. I think a lot of the membership at Heterodox Academy shows you that this isn't about partisanship. It isn't about winning a political fight. It's about making the academy a better version of itself. In terms of the argument about identity and bringing these perspectives in, we've talked about this before. Remember, actually Josh Dunn, when we interviewed him. He actually cited the same passage from John Stuart Mill, if I recall correctly, and it's a great point. I think if... I keep going back to a public policy program where you're obviously dealing with partisan politics and differing views on what the best policy solutions would be. I would think if you're hiring scholars or visiting fellows for a place like the Kennedy School of Government or something like that, you know what you're getting in a lot of these cases, probably a Republican or a Democrat.

(00:53:44):

I think it would behoove you to bring people in who represent the different parties that are actively in play in American politics if you're talking about domestic policy issues and that sort of thing. That makes sense. But, yeah, you bring up a good example. If you look at some of the other humanities fields where there's not a direct connection to public policy or to politics more generally, how do you do this? John, he brought up the example of US history. He brought up an approach that I think we would broadly endorse at ACTA as well, which is that, well, look for the gaps in your curriculum. Look for the gaps on your syllabus. Look at your faculty and say, "Well, what are we not teaching? Which areas do we have already? Maybe three or four scholars who are working on some subfield within our discipline or who have similar interests and what are we missing?"

(00:54:41):

Sometimes that might align with ideological points of view, or that may have happened because of certain ideological blind spots or just trends within the discipline too. It doesn't always have to be about ideology or partisanship, but having this periodic review... The truth is, of course, that universities and departments do this kind of thing all the time, right? When they're setting up to hire somebody, they will prioritize certain subfields or certain approaches because it's something that they want to add to their program. I think there are certain perspectives or approaches in various disciplines that have probably fallen out of fashion that maybe they are more popular with people who would generally be seen as more conservative. Although again, it depends. What do you mean by that? Do you mean conservative in terms of American politics, or do you mean conservative in terms of just preferring to teach old books or great books as opposed to new books or something like that?

(00:55:51):

Even the word conservative in this context becomes fairly elastic, I think, and probably focusing on things like what are the gaps? What are traditional areas of study that maybe we're not covering anymore, right? Military history or diplomatic history or other ones that are often brought up. I guess I'm avoiding English. We keep picking on the historians, as John was as well. But yeah, those are the kinds of things I would look at. One last thing I would add, and I think John would agree with this, but in his chapter, he characterizes the representation view or the lack of political or ideological diversity view as more of an external thing. I think there's also, of course, plenty of people within the academy who are more on the conservative side or the libertarian side of things or what have you. They look around, and they're like, "Yeah, there's not very many people who are in my range of thinking on these things within the academy."

(00:56:49):

If you have graduate students that you're trying to place, you're probably worried if they also have more conservative views about trying to place those students, that sort of thing. In fact, there's recently been a few exchanges on X. There was an article in Law & Liberty. I can't name the title or the author off the top of my head, but he was basically arguing it's going to be really difficult to improve viewpoint diversity. Some people have been commenting on that and talking about a few law schools that have tried to make efforts to do this over the last, whatever, 10, 20 years, and they haven't been very successful. These are, of course, isolated cases. It's not clear how hard they tried, but they're pointing out that there's not a lot of people out there if you want to do this. Again, I think Heterodox Academy points in a more hopeful direction because of the size of their membership and their commitment on these issues.

Justin Garrison (00:57:44):

Yeah. I wonder if where they might be most successful is in that first phase where you get existing personnel to think a little bit more with more intellectual honesty about what they're doing and what they're trying to accomplish. One of the things that I've noticed in some of the pieces of legislation that have created centers is that some of them do have the capacity to start granting graduate degrees.

(00:58:14):

That's not probably where people want to start because graduate degrees cost a lot of money, and they don't put a lot of butts in the seats, as they say. I'm not criticizing focusing more on trying to grow enrollment and interest at the undergraduate level, but those could become places where green shoots start to emerge out of the soil sooner than we think if they can build and sustain a critical mass, maybe they get to a place in a few years where they can start thinking about producing people who can take these perspectives into less hospitable environments.

Steve McGuire (00:58:58):

Yeah. Yeah. That should definitely be part of the long-term plan, I would think. All right. Well, great interview with John. He really laid things out well, both, as you said, in terms of the theory, but also the practice. Looking forward to seeing Heterodox continuing to work on these issues. Hopefully, his timeline comes to fruition.

Justin Garrison (00:59:27):

Yeah. If you want to accelerate the timeline, boys and girls, go to the show notes. Click the link. Buy the book. Buy it for yourself. Buy it for someone that you like. Buy it for a professor who probably needs to hear this but doesn't want to. Just buy as many copies as you want because it's a great book. With that, we'll see you next time, [inaudible 00:59:47].

Speaker 1 (00:59:48):

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