

Speaker 1:

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Steve McGuire:

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

Justin Garrison:

And I'm Justin Garrison. And Steve, before we get to this amazing episode that we're about to conduct, I wanted to share with our audience a very important announcement. Steve and I and our wonderful colleague, Emma, we are the Campus Freedom Initiative team at ACTA. And for some time, our team has been working on a trustee guide on promoting intellectual diversity on campus, how you can do that, what intellectual diversity means and so forth.

And as part of this project that we've been working on, we're going to be hosting a webinar on May the 6th. That's a Wednesday at 2:00 PM Eastern. And that webinar is going to be hosted, moderated by Steve himself. And we're going to have three panelists, John Tomasi from the Heterodox Academy, who the audience might remember from a recent interview that we did with him about this very topic. We're also going to be talking with Ramsey White, a trustee at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

And the provost at the University of Texas at Austin, Will Inboden, also formerly of the Hamilton Center at University of Florida. And so these are some really heavy hitters in the higher ed landscape, and they're going to talk to us about what intellectual diversity is, and even more importantly, how people can take steps to grow that on their campuses. So this is definitely something, if you're interested in that topic, if you're an administrator or trustee or just plain curious about it, this is something that you're going to want to pay attention to. So we'll drop some relevant information in the show notes if you want to register for this. But it's going to be a great event, looking forward to it. And I know Steve is as well, but we'll get right into the episodes of Steve tell our audience about our guests today.

Steve McGuire:

Yeah, thanks. Definitely looking forward to that webinar. So today we're going to be interviewing Ben Crocker, who's the university dean at the University of Austin or UATX. And we're going to be talking to him about how things have been going at the university. It's been around for about five years now. They have their second cohort of students that they brought in this year. So they have sophomores and freshmen on campus. And so we just want to get a sense of what it's like to be at UATX as a student, what they're learning, as well as talk about some of the issues in higher education and how UATX is a response to those. So really looking forward to it and let's get to the interview.

Ben, thanks for joining us on Radio Free Campus.

Ben Crocker:

Thanks, Steve. It's great to be with you. Looking forward to having a great chat about all we're doing at UATX.

Steve McGuire:

Absolutely. We're so glad that you're here with us. So UATX was announced in 2021, so here we are about five years later in 2026. The school has now admitted students two years in a row. So the first question I want to ask you, I imagine it's very difficult to start a new university. Since UATEX was first announced, what have been the most surprising challenges that the school has experienced? And conversely, what's maybe something that's worked well that's been surprising to you?

Ben Crocker:

Well, Steve, I would say to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld somewhat with the known knowns, known unknowns, unknown unknowns type set of challenges. I mean, that's going to be the case in any new institution that there are some things you can foresee and some things you can't. I would say, look, honestly, everything that is foreseeably difficult about starting a new university in a sector that has a lot of baked in perverse incentives in the system already, the things that we knew we were going to need to fight against, we've had to fight against. It's been very difficult to step through the legal and regulatory processes of setting up the institution in the first place of making sure that we were allowed to actually operate as a university. That's relatively dull content to dredge through. There's just a lot of paperwork to be done. There's a lot of arguing for very common sense things.

So I guess we've had to, on behalf of anybody who wants to start a new university in the United States today, we've had to blow through a lot of busy work that maybe would be less than ideal for people who want to get on with just great teaching and learning. I would say one of the things that's been quite challenging for the leadership of the university is that when you're starting a project as conspicuous as ours, as I think important as ours has become, and as high profile as the University of Austin is, you will have a lot of people often very, very well-intentioned trying to have a say or trying to suggest what the institution should or shouldn't do. So being judicious in who influences us and why they're influencing us and asking the question of, are we really surrounding ourselves with people who are pointing us or helping us to point the most at our own mission?

That's always something that's going to be an ongoing challenge when there's a lot of debate and a lot of noise around the creation of an institution like this. So I think it always comes back to people, people, people, and making sure that we're... A, we have the best team in the office and on the faculty, but B, the people in our universe are really pulling in the same direction as us. That's what we've had to be the most careful about. I would say one of the more interesting strengths, I guess, that I've certainly personally discovered was that when I first started traveling the country looking for the students that were going to be part of this institution, that I think was the most reassuring part of the building of this university for me was seeing how many families, and I do say families because it's at family level where this conversation happens, how many families had their antenna up for something like this and who were already to that point of mission alignment already just on the same page as us.

So I found that I didn't have to, and I don't think that the institution, once it got to the point of actually recruiting students and starting to run classes, I don't think that we needed to sit down young people and convince them that this was a good idea. Of course, we always have to do that at any university has to sell itself, but mission alignment from the people who would come and be part of our faculty, staff, and student body has never been something that has wanted for lack of good intentions or that there is a huge groundswell of support for what we're doing out there. It's just a matter of tapping it.

Steve McGuire:

Very interesting. That's great to hear that there's students out there. In a way, that doesn't surprise me because I think there is an increasingly loud chorus of people who want something different in their higher ed experience, whether it's parents for their children who are about to go to college or the students themselves.

Ben Crocker:

Yeah. And the question that I always ask parents and students, but I say to them, let's say you're not one of those naturally... You're not somebody who knows exactly what UATX is yet. I ask, what do you really know about what's going on at college? What's the true return on the investment? And these are huge investments, let's be honest about that. What are you really being taught? Who is actually teaching you?

That's a very important question to ask. What's the experience actually like for your child when you send them away for four years to do this?

And often a very cursory investigation of the reality of life in most universities today will lead most people to the conclusion that it is wholly inadequate, wholly inadequate, purely on a financial economic basis, but more deeply inadequate for the formation of a good citizen. Before we even get to what particular kind of business you might want to start or what occupation you might want to have, that's the conclusion that people will reach very, very quickly.

So it stands to reason that there is going to be a growing pool of people who are crying out for something like UATX.

Justin Garrison:

Ben, I think that's really fascinating. And something you mentioned a moment ago is that it's important to stay mission aligned and that sometimes you may have to take with a grain of salt comments or suggestions or things that come from people who support you, who want UATX to succeed, but it's not like every suggestion's necessarily going to be something the university wants to act on. There's a whole other group of people who just want you all to fall on your face. I find that strange. Who is it that wants UATX to fail? You don't have to necessarily name names, but if you'd like to, please feel free. We're a fun show to be on. But I mean, there just seems... I mean, I get the impression, and I'm exaggerating because this is my personality. You could have your first graduating class cure cancer, and there would still be someone saying, "Well, they didn't do it fast enough, or it didn't do enough of this."

I mean, there just seems to be a group out there that no matter what your success ends up looking like, they just want you to fail. So what motivates that or why is that? And how does that kind of shape how UATX sees itself?

Ben Crocker:

Sure. Look, Justin, I might answer that question two ways. I think firstly, well, in my home country, in Australia, we have something we call tall poppy syndrome, which is the sort of instinctive desire to cut down those who rise above the field. And that's not a uniquely Australian thing, that's an everywhere thing. Countless philosophers have recognized this. I remember most memorably, Douglas Murray in his book, *The War on the West*, really channels the thought of Nietzsche in this idea of lived resentment.

And so I think in a general sense, when somebody stands up and does something new, you're just going to attract that kind of will to fail because it's a reflection on the lack of courage of other people, right? So that is, I think, a general setting within any given population that you're always going to have to contend with. I think in a more structural, systemic, perhaps you might say in a more calculated and sinister way, as I mentioned briefly in the opening, there are huge perverse incentives built into the existing university system.

Student debt is more or less an issue that has cartel-like characteristics about the way it plays out in the market. Professorial tenure, the idea of a job for life, no matter what, is a real problem. What we would call the research industrial complex that incentivizes not just good research, but plenty and plenty and plenty of bad research often at the expense of what the university's core focus ought to be, which is great teaching and learning, as I said, the formation of citizens.

In a structural sense, UATX represents an existential threat to that world. If we succeed, and we are succeeding wildly, just from a picture of the students that we currently have enrolled and the volume that they're learning and the intellectual dexterity they have, the employability that they're already proven to have, that is a real problem for the value proposition for existing universities because the existing university's value proposition has been to not have a value proposition other than to be in some vague agreement that this is just a necessary phase of life, that these institutions gatekeep both the economy and what they would like to think as civil society, and UATX basically threatens to take all of that away from

them. So on a bigger stage, the will for us to fail, I think, is driven by the knowledge that we are an existential threat to the status quo.

And that in turn, very fortunately, allows us to see that resentment, that willingness, well, that excitement to think that we might fail, that sees us as evidence that we're doing a good job.

Justin Garrison:

And part of that existential crisis would have to be something like, to the degree that you're successful, other institutions are going to have to model themselves a bit more on your success or suffer those kinds of market consequences, that with choices, people aren't going to feel captured by a very narrow ideological range no matter where they go, because they're going to have a genuine alternative in your school. Is that right?

Ben Crocker:

Yeah, correct. I mean, look, let's just take one of those areas. Okay. Teaching, teaching. I think there is a consensus from the American public, we could say from the publics in the West generally, that universities might have an interest in doing things other than teaching. Research is very important. For many people, the bonds of national fraternity, which are built through athletics, are very important. The socialization of a young person that happens outside of all of those things is very important, but most people would still say, "I'm sending my child to university to learn something." I'm sending them to be taught. There's a very intentional thing. The disposition of people enrolling in a university at its core is about learning, and yet the whole ecosystem of your average university today is not set up to prioritize learning.

The great inflation disincentivizes real learning. The class size disincentivizes real learning, the focus of professors on other things, and then leaving the management of classes, often classes that are far too big to be manageable to teaching assistants, that disincentivizes learning. And that pursuit of learning, that pursuit of great teaching, yes, it might be in retreat, but it's not something that the American public has forgotten about. They're still looking for it. And so when something like UATX comes along and actually prioritizes us, we don't have TAs teaching our classes. We don't have typically more than 15 students in a class. We don't hire people who can't teach. On that metric alone, we are going to force reform in the existing university sector.

Justin Garrison:

That's brilliant. That's brilliant. Steve.

Steve McGuire:

Yeah, I love that. I think you're right. The creation of UATX in a way is an indictment of the system of higher education in the country, whether you're talking about ideologically, economically, these sort of structural things that you're mentioning, I think on all of those scores, that's true. Justin was asking you about people who have been against UATX reactively from the beginning. I think too, more recently, there's been some people who have suggested that UATX is perhaps straying from its original mission, original vision.

Maybe this goes back a little bit to what you were saying earlier too, about being careful about who influences the institution and that sort of thing. But I think some people from the start as well looked at it and said, "Is this an anti-woke university? Is it a free speech university? What's the guiding vision here?" And maybe some of these things ultimately don't completely fit together, right?

I mean, I guess you could say maybe if you're going to be a completely free speech dedicated institution, then that might include allowing woke speech or something like that. And so I was wondering how you

would respond to that. I think there's been some suggestion as well that certain kinds of dissent aren't tolerated or haven't been tolerated. How do you or how does UATX respond to some of those criticisms?

Ben Crocker:

Yeah. I think, Steve, there are two things which people very, very mistakenly think are in conflict and they aren't. One is freedom and the other is ideology. And of course, you could argue that freedom itself is an ideology, which is a very important thing, I think, to understand. But there has been a fallacy propagated, I would say broadly throughout a number of attempts to reform the academy in recent years.

And that fallacy is that you need to have this absolutist view of viewpoint neutrality, that universities should not take positions on things, which I suppose is fair enough in a party political sense, and that universities have to sort of reduce themselves to being, in essence, an open playing field for ideas. Now, the problem with that is that taken to its logical consequence, you pretty quickly come up against, I think as you somewhat alluded to, the paradox of tolerance, where should we tolerate those who are going to come and propagate intolerant ideas?

Now, part of overcoming that is where ideology actually comes in. So yes, a university should have very, very strong and robust markers of intellectual and academic freedom. Those things should not be negotiable in the construction of a worthy university, but academic freedom, free speech is not incompatible with the institution having an ideology, and we are an ideological institution. What is our ideology? Well, for example, we believe that America is good. That would be a simple one to start with, that most universities really struggle to agree with, let alone answer in any compelling way. We believe that certain economic systems deliver happiness, wealth, prosperity, and all of the other commensurate benefits that go along with those things more than others do.

We don't tell people that they have to have a faith to come to our school. In fact, we are, of course, a secular school, but we do believe that the great faith traditions have been indispensable to shaping the modern world and that they ought to be taken very, very seriously. So we have an ideology. We believe in things. We teach from premises. Now, you can argue within the walls of our institution against those premises, but you have to bring evidence to support whatever it is you're arguing. You are welcome to walk into a class and say, "It was a really bad thing, professor, that the Soviets did not win the Cold War, but the professor is going to ask you very quickly to provide your evidence."

Now, what the extreme of viewpoint diversity says to us, rather than viewpoint excellence, which is what UATX is pursuing, what viewpoint diversity says to us is that all of those ideas, at least theoretically, could be worthy and could be equal.

And a university has a responsibility as a place where people have dedicated their lives to reading the best that's been thought and said, where hierarchy matters for a reason, a university has a responsibility to be the adult in the room. That's not incompatible with academic freedom or freedom of speech for that matter, but setting clear markers that say, "We've looked at the world, we're making a decision, we're discriminating about what goes into our curriculum and what stays out of it." We're doing that on behalf firstly of our students to make sure that we can form them in the best way possible, but in a broader sense of the body politic, these are the things that people need to know to be good citizens. These are the things that will actually serve our society well.

Steve McGuire:

Okay. Very interesting. So I wonder, would you draw a distinction too between sort of different people within the institution or guests at the institution and how they can operate within that framework? So for instance, having a faculty member who teaches in a certain way or from within a certain tradition versus having... I think the example you were kind of alluding to sounded like it would be a student coming into the classroom who maybe had a different point of view and you could have that argument in the class. Would UATX maybe bring in a guest speaker or have a debate where somebody who maybe held views

that were maybe somewhat antithetical to that ideology was engaged in conversation with other people? Do you think there's sort of different levels of responsibility to the mission and the values of the school depending on the role that the person's playing at the institution?

Ben Crocker:

For sure. Look, I mean, as I said, an ideology is not incompatible with academic freedom. Our professors have a vast and diverse range of influences intellectually, morally, spiritually, and all of that is going to play out in their teaching practice. We don't screen them in that sense. If you come to faculty meetings, staff meetings, you'll see that play out. It's a live contest for the things that will need to be taught within the school. We seek out and encourage debate. We want people who are going to bring a perspective to the table that perhaps you might struggle to find anywhere else. So again, academic freedom is not incompatible with this idea that we discriminate in the way we select the curriculum. We want to create a set of conditions which point us at some premises.

What I would say is that we would not tolerate an individual that was coming into the academy with a disposition to destroy, rather than to enlighten. And this is a thing that a university administration has to be vigilant against because we know from bitter experience that much of what is accounted for in other institutions under academic freedom or under freedom of speech or under this neutrality doctrine is actually intentionally and perversely not designed to educate students, but to indoctrinate them. In other words, the professor is entering the classroom with the intention of doing damage.

Now, we hold the premise that the Western civilization, broadly speaking, is good, that America is great, and we teach from that premise. So if you want to argue the colors within that, then that's fine. So if we had somebody that came in and was going a step further than, say, critiquing and criticizing the American founding, and we're really seeking from a cynical viewpoint, to tear it down and to tear it down without balance and without evidence, then we would have a problem with that.

Steve McGuire:

Okay. Justin?

Justin Garrison:

Yeah, no. So to remind everyone we're talking with Ben Crocker, the university dean at UATX, and we've been talking a lot about the mission of the institution, what it stands for, but something you said a little earlier, something I wanted to follow up on. You said that families, students, their parents, they kind of had their antenna up. They're looking for something like what UATX has ultimately started to provide. Can you tell us and our audience just a little bit about who these students are? Why are they coming to your school instead of other schools? What's attracting them? Do you notice that they're interested in certain things maybe in a way that wouldn't show up as clearly on a larger campus, like UT, for example, where you've got so many people? People, it's really hard to craft a common community. What do they do when they're not in the classroom?

We see pictures, Steve and I have seen pictures on social media of things that are happening outside of the classroom, but maybe you could tell us a little bit about their lives in and outside of the learning experience.

Ben Crocker:

Yeah. Well, this is the best subject to talk about because this is the real proof of the pudding, is the quality of the students that we have. And I would say their happiness and their success as students. Justin, Steve, something really interesting happened. I'm sure you both remember how the crazy and disgraceful campus became in the aftermath of the October seven attacks. I think that was a moment that really woke

a lot of people up to what was really going on on campus and the strength of the ideological currents running there.

Now, something very interesting happened for us. We were still in a very small office on the outskirts of the city of Austin, setting up the university at that time. We were just in the process of setting up our admissions process. And when that event happened, so by October eight, nine, and 10, we started getting a lot of mail, mostly from friends, saying, "Well, this is going to be a huge recruiting tool for you.

Everybody's now awake. They know what's going on. And very, very clearly you're going to see a huge increase in applications to UATX as a result of this. " We barely saw a spike. And the reason I think that we barely saw a spike was that all of the families and all of the students that we were typically engaged with were already there. They didn't need to see October seven to realize that the American university was broken. Yes, obviously we got more interest. The debate changed, I think, when people saw what happened.

But we were already talking to a subset of the population that for decades, if not decades, then perhaps for generations within their families had been saying, "Well, actually, what really happened in the '60s on campus?" Maybe some even go back to, "Well, what really happened at the end of the 19th century when you had French and German ideology making its way into the American Academy in a way that did not seem to be in the public interest for the United States." So what I'm saying is we start from a base of a very high information kind of person.

And there are plenty of American families out there who've been having this conversation based on their own experiences of the academy over many generations, not just since October 7th. When we started to recruit these students, I always used to say to donors that their first common denominator is actually a sense of patriotism. Your experience in walking the campus of the major university today is to hear a lot from students about wanting to save the world, but you don't often hear that much about wanting to save your country. Now, we believe that the country, that the nation state may be prior to all of humanity, and it's interesting that our students tend to reflect that view. They want to do something so that they can be in service of their country.

I would also say they are students and our great founder, Bari Weiss, put this beautifully in an essay, or what was an essay that's actually a speech that she gave in the summer of 2022, where Bari said, "We're looking for people who are willing to break their addiction to prestige." I was reading something that Peter Thiel had written recently where he had said he probably would still have pursued the same education that he'd had, but he really wishes that he could have refocused on dropping all notions of prestige of what the world sees as the right thing to do to earn credibility and just gone and pursued things where he truly was learning.

And so this idea that you need to go and seek out opportunities that put you into the right bracket or that have the right marketing polish on them, we find that our students are uniquely resistant to going down that path. And that could be for a number of different reasons, but we typically find that they are formed to want the real thing rather than what the marketing says.

Another thing I might say about them, just to get a little more at your question, Justin, is our students were asked to have a founding mentality if they wanted to be part of our institution. 1776 doesn't happen if you get people who are sort of trying to fiddle with the status quo so that things get a little better. We want people that are prepared to take a risk on something new and are prepared to figure it out for themselves. Now, we're not asking them to draft a constitution or fight a war, but we are asking them to have a look at the world as it really is and see if it can be done better. So whilst we're happy to take you, if you want to just, I don't know, be an investment banker from central casting, so long as you play by the rules, we'll give you a very good education so you're very good at doing that.

But really what we want and what we're attracting are students who want to build new products, try new ways of doing things, disrupt industry, and bring that founding energy that's so typical of the American experience and institutionalize it in our university a little bit more.

Justin Garrison:

That's wonderful.

Steve McGuire:

Yeah, that's great. Ben, moving us towards a conclusion, I want to ask two questions. I really had one teed up, but there's a second one that I feel that I need to ask you. You've talked about the greatness of America. You've mentioned patriotism, preparing students for citizenship. And ACTA has done a lot of work on civics education, a lot of advocacy on behalf of civics education over the years. Way too many schools do not require students to take any courses in American government or American history.

The courses that are often offered as part of core requirements offer students a kind of smorgasbord of choices that don't get at the real nuts and bolts. We've done surveys nationally of students showing that maybe it's not shocking anymore. I always find it shocking when I see these results, like maybe I'm still too naive or something, but just an inordinate number of college graduates who don't know how long the term is for a congressperson or a senator. We see a large percentage of students.

One question we've asked a couple of times in recent years is that if the United States were invaded in the way that Russia invaded Ukraine, would you stay and fight or would you flee? And a majority say that they would flee. I mean, it's just unreal, right? So both the spirit of patriotism, but also the civic knowledge seems to really be lacking. And so what I want to ask you, since you've brought up all of these things, is how does the UATX curriculum or the broader experience of being a student at UATX prepare students once they've graduated to become productive citizens who love their country and want to see it do better than it currently is?

Ben Crocker:

I think, Steve, if we approach it from the intellectual standpoint, what we are insisting our students read is in itself, so unmoderated. If you just take the Bible, Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, sweep through the Middle Ages, arrive at the Enlightenment, Hobbes, Locke, Russo, transmit into the American founding, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, the Federalist Papers taken together, close reading of the Constitution and Declaration. Moving forward from there, maybe into some English literature, poetry, surveying the great works that quite rightly have made up what we all agreed was an education for centuries until relatively recently. If you just take those things on their own terms, they themselves are a guide to citizenship, are a guide both for why patriotism might be important and empirically, particularly say if we read the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, for example, why it works.

So the curriculum itself will be a guide and our professors are typically going to be of the ilk where they're trying to read those authors on those authors' terms. Yes, they have an expert insight, but then they're not sort of running them through the lens of critical theory. They're just asking our students, "Well, what do you see in these books? Here's what I see." And guiding them as best they possibly can to find the truths, the civilizational and personal truths within those books. So that is where the intellectual seem that the university lives in itself will do the work.

Any number of the great philosophers will address the question of regimes, which one is the best? What happens in the case of Plato and Aristotle when one regime devolves into the next, into the next, into the next and to the next? So just the reading is going to help you do that. I think in a broader sense then, as an institution, you need to look at our founding influences and you need to look at our founders themselves.

We are a university built in the image of the people who were gathered around that table in the summer of 2021. Neil Ferguson, perhaps the world's greatest living historian, who puts forth the argument for a thorough examination of the past as a way to live better in the present and prepare for the future. Bari Weiss, who I think really captures the idea of founding something in an intellectual sense, in not sitting on your hands when the old institutions are failing, but delivering something in a very, very American

sense, not for the sake of reinventing how you do things in every possible way, but for protecting what's good so that we can continue to have it.

And then Joe Lonsdale, who brought the entrepreneurial spark, maybe even the appetite for risk that's absolutely necessary for a civilization to thrive. So that energy, that ambition is something that percolates socially in the ambition of the university. So if you come here, you're not just drawing from that intellectual tradition, it's in the lived example of the way that the institution's founders go about their business. And that in turn passes down through the administration, into the faculty and into the way that we talk to each other as individuals inside this institution.

So if we have an absence of talk on campus that is concerned with those big civilizational questions, that is concerned with founding, then we would have a problem, but we don't yet. I can tell you, it's only going in the other direction. We have a culture of founding and innovating and striving for civilizational excellence. And I think that's very much derived from our founders and our founding influences.

Steve McGuire:

Very interesting. And that sort of founding nature of the institution and the people behind it and the fact that you guys are in Austin, which is really a hub of startup activity now in this country, especially as more and more people leave California for various reasons. But the last question I wanted to ask you is about artificial intelligence, which a lot of people are obviously very concerned about the impact that this is going to have on higher education. And I think there's a number of concerns, but two major ones are first, the impact it could have on the integrity of higher education. Are students still learning in the classroom, not just academic integrity issues per se, but just the integrity of the educational process and how can a university say with certainty that students are coming in and still learning a bunch of stuff and coming out more knowledgeable and more developed as thinkers and that sort of thing.

But then also, of course, there are real concerns about job prospects for college graduates and there have been some recent statistics suggesting that unemployment among college graduates or certain kinds of college graduates are on the rise and people are of course concerned then about the value proposition because of that. And a lot of people are wondering, "What should I do?" Maybe you've experienced this with some of the families and students you talk to, what should I study? What's it going to look like in four years? Am I going to still be able to be a lawyer if that's what I want to be? Those sorts of questions. And so I think given the people involved in your institution and the attitude of the institution, some of which you've communicated here today, I'm interested to know what does UATX think about these questions and what do you tell prospective students in terms of what they should study and what they should expect in terms of the impact that AI is having on higher education and then the entry level job market as well?

Ben Crocker:

Sure. All right. Steve, the existing universities, broadly speaking, cannot solve this problem. And the reason they cannot solve this problem is they do not know their students. They could put in place any number of systems, safeguards, but you will not get past the problem of AI cheating. Let's just hit that one on the head first. You will not get past the problem of AI cheating unless you have a vested interest in actually teaching. There are always going to be workarounds for students in institutions where the professors are not fully invested in the formation of the mind. Now, when you have the situation where the professor is fully invested in the formation of the mind, the formation of the soul is probably an even better thing to say. That's the real business that we're engaged in.

Then we can pay personal attention to when these things might emerge and why they might be emerging and can very, very effectively A, counsel students against a reliance on AI, but B, manage a small class in a way that allows us to keep the worst effects of AI out. One example is actually handwriting essays

during class time. Another might be relying on oral presentation in a way that allows a professor to really evaluate unmediated, whether a student understands a text or not.

Now, these are things that we can address at the scale that we're at. And there's one of many reasons that we are intentionally staying small because we want to be able to know our students. We want to be able to be invested in them in that way. I don't think that you can really solve the problem without that, because whatever problem, whether it's AI or whether it's some other form of wanting the shortest way around the problem, you can't fix that unless you actually want the mind to be great, unless you actually want the student to be great, and you have incentives to make the individual student great.

I guess the landscape of employability, the value proposition on that kind of thing, there is a reason that we insist that everybody at our school does what we call our intellectual foundations. So this is often called common curriculum in years gone by. There is going to be a tiny minority of computer scientists and software engineers who can make themselves valuable enough that they get behind the creative wall of artificial intelligence. Everybody right now, and then some of the statistics coming out of the Silicon Valley, large Silicon Valley employers now are really, really harrowing, in some cases, 95% of engineers on some teams losing their jobs or about to. We all know this is happening now or it's coming.

If you are part of that 95, maybe up to 99% of people who've essentially been modern process workers, then yes, you were going to be very, very imperiled. If you are a UATX student where yes, you'll learn software engineering, everybody has to on some level, yes, you'll learn some of the historic development of AI and its actual practical use and implementation, but you also have as integral to your experience, the constant return to these civilizational questions and to the exploration of creative answers to those questions, then the odds that you're going to be inside that one to 5% of technologically literate people who remain relevant are going to be significantly increased.

If you are going through the machine and sort of developing a skillset without an attachment to the fundamental questions, that's when you're going to end up going the way of factory workers in decades gone by of perhaps another analog would be the agricultural trade in the early 20th century when you had the implementation of radically efficient technologies.

Now, the question that then flows from that is, well, what are all of these other people supposed to do? That's where I think the leadership and citizenship idea behind our university really comes into play because we are going to need a political class that has better ideas than, "Oh, just give them universal basic income." Or when things get tough, just euthanize a bunch of people, but we need to have better answers stemming from our leadership class. So I think on both the practical and philosophical level, this is where a project like UATX becomes totally indispensable to the future of the country.

Steve McGuire:

Yeah. Well, as someone who originally hails from Canada, I'm definitely somewhat familiar with the euthanasia option, unfortunately, but yeah, no, that's very interesting. Thanks so much for that. Well, it sounds like UATX is really positioning its students to do well, both for themselves in terms of their lives and their careers, but also for our country in terms of the contributions they can make as citizens. So of course, we are very thankful that you're able to join us today, Ben, and it's great to hear from someone at UATX about all the great things that are going on at the school. And we look forward to seeing more of what you guys do down the road.

Ben Crocker:

Yeah, absolutely. It's great to be with you. And as I said at the beginning, whether you're a hater or a supporter, just come and see what's really happening. It's a very special kind of magic that is happening in Alchemy with all of the influencers finding their way into Austin. And as you rightly say, Steve, it is the place maybe in the Western world right now where there is a real civilizational moment happening with

people building things and really trying to build out a better future for the United States and in turn for the world. But let's look after the nation first.

Steve McGuire:

That's great. Well, thanks again for being on the show, Ben.

Ben Crocker:

It's great to be with you. Thanks guys.

Justin Garrison:

Yeah. Thank you, Ben.

Steve McGuire:

All right. Well, very interesting to hear from Ben Crocker, the University Dean at the University of Texas at Austin. We covered a lot of ground. Justin, what are some of your thoughts coming out of the interview?

Justin Garrison:

Yeah. I mean, I thought Ben covered so many topics. It would be really hard to discuss everything that I found of interest without us doing a double live album or something like that. I think Curtis will kill us. So I just want to be brief. I think part of what I liked about the response that Ben gave is that UATX stands for certain things. And just like any other school, it doesn't appeal equally to all comers. I think that's one of the major mistakes that a lot of particularly small liberal arts colleges make is in their kind of desperate hunt for as many bodies as possible. They try to be all things to all people. And that's just never, I think, a good strategy. I mean, if you think about, by way of comparison, Hillsdale College appeals to a certain kind of person and doesn't to a different kind of person.

And Reed College is the same way in the complete opposite direction. And in some sense, I'd rather see that than what happens when my kids get in the kitchen and they put everything they can find into the same thing and they're like making a potion and it's just garbage. It's just nothing. So I thought that was nice to hear.

I think I've gone on record in private meetings in our organization, so to speak, but I'm never going to be convinced that there is any benefit of any kind to artificial intelligence, but I thought Ben came as close to saving a terrible idea, but that's a topic for another day.

Steve McGuire:

Well, I'll take that one up.

Justin Garrison:

I thought it sounded like there's clearly a demand for this. There are students who want this kind of education. They're providing it well. One of the things that we didn't get to talk about with him, but is part of their story is the way that they've been able to minimize costs for the students that are accepted, both in terms of money that they've raised and continuing donor engagement with that, so that you don't graduate with a degree in computer science that can't get you a job and you're like \$75,000 in debt.

So I think they're doing a lot of things right. I appreciated the reference to Nietzsche because I do think most college faculty are like the tarantulas. They just want to drag people down in the name of fairness. Everyone kind of buried in the muck together is somehow a good vision of equality or something like

that. So they stand for something and I think they've got a really promising project, an interesting project. I am rooting for them on the merits. And just because I don't like people who are already super wealthy and established, like picking on smaller organizations that are trying to scale up and offer something that the market really does seem to need. So I could go on, I'm going to be quiet now. What did you think, Steve?

Steve McGuire:

Yeah. Like I said during the interview, and I think most people would agree with this, that UATX is a counter to a lot of the problems in higher ed and they're offering something different. And I think that's good. And there's been debate, of course, about whether the institutions that exist can be reformed or not, and whether they'll reform themselves from within, or they need external pressure in order to see those reforms happen. And then you've got an initiative like UATX where the suggestion is maybe some of these institutions really can't be reformed or it would be such a long and difficult road to reform them that maybe the better thing to do is to, as hard as it is, set up a new institution. And I really admire that they're trying to set out on their own and do something new and offer people an alternative to what's out there.

And there is variety in American higher ed, but there's also a lot of the same over and over and over again. And we look at college and university policies on a daily basis and their mission statements and their values and all these sorts of things. And there's a lot of commonality in what we see across a lot of institutions. And so I think it's really good to see something new that That is trying to address some of the structural problems in higher ed, but also offering a different vision. On the AI, I tend to be a little bit more positive. I wouldn't say I'm an AI doomer or anything like that for sure. Although it is disruptive already and seems like it's going to increasingly be disruptive. But I think in general, our approach to new technologies should be to think about how we're going to harness them and how we're going to live with them.

And his response about other universities not really being able to deal with the problem of academic integrity and the challenge that AI presents to that, I think there's a lot of truth in that. And there may even be professors. And I see this a lot either online or just talking with people in real life. There's a lot of professors who do really care about education and do want to educate their students. And they're extremely frustrated by the way that AI is impacting that and they don't really know what to do. There are, of course, other professors who are more focused on maybe their research or other things, and they're not so worried about what's happening in terms of students completing assignments in a lecture course where there's 200 students and a bunch of TAs and that sort of thing. But even for the professors who would like to do something and ensure that students are getting a true education, they're operating in institutions that aren't taking this issue as seriously as they should be.

They're just racing to announce that they're embracing AI and they're ignoring academic integrity issues or not really dealing with them seriously. And honestly, even before AI, I think in a lot of places that's a longstanding problem where academic integrity issues are not really dealt with that seriously. And there's various reasons for that, I suppose. But I think the main one is probably workload that if you were to actually take, especially now with AI, if you were to take seriously the amount of academic dishonesty issues that are arising because of AI use, you would need an army of people who are dealing with this on a full-time basis, at least based on what I've seen and what I'm hearing, that seems to be the case. So it's nice to know that there's an institution out there, and there are others as well, other small schools like UATX, where I think they're taking the education and the pedagogy much more seriously.

They're teaching in small classrooms, like Ben said, and they probably are better positioned to ensure that their students are actually learning and being educated rather than using AI to say, write their papers or answer their questions for them and that sort of thing.

Justin Garrison:

Yeah. I think one of the last things I would want to say about the interview that I thought was really important, and I hope people watching this, or if you're listening to this on audio, you'll take note. I think it's a spectacular mistake that a lot of, particularly again, smaller schools make. Again, because the enrollment crunch is what it is, there's like an air of desperation in the marketing. Please just pick us and we'll do anything to make this as painless and fun. And it's just, I think it's kind of insulting. And to go back for a moment to, this is a long time ago, I don't know if this is still true, but when I was doing some research in a different job, the first thing I saw when I went to the Reed College website was something like become one of our fierce intellectuals, I think was the phrase.

It's an invitation to be something that you're not, that you could become with us. And I mentioned that because I think one of the things that I really liked about Ben's interview is that he said that they're looking for students with a founder's mindset. In other words, it's not just, "Come here and we'll do anything to make you happy so you keep staying," or something like that, but there's an ask to become in the language of niche, become what you are, become something, grow, be better than what you are today. And I think that kind of mentality, that founder's mindset that he was describing, if there's a way to really inculcate that and nurture that in a four-year undergraduate program, that is going to be a tremendous asset, particularly when it comes to jobs and things like we were talking about in the interview, it's not at all clear what the path dependency is for any of this stuff anymore.

But are you resilient? Are you creative? Can you think through how to leverage the skills that you have? And I mean, those are things that hardly anyone's trying to teach. It's just do this and that job comes down at the end of the road. I think that's fascinating. And I liked hearing that there was a school that treats students, prospective students with some dignity and respect like, "Oh, you're a human being and we'd like to actually get to know you instead of just sit here, take the test and get out and go float down the Lazy River or something like that." I am picking on ULSU. But yeah, so I thought overall this is a really promising project and I hope it continues to grow and succeed.

Steve McGuire:

Yeah. And on the students coming in, that was another interesting point was his discussion of October 7th or post-October 7th and the suggestion that this would be turning a lot of people towards UATX. And it sounds like they already have a bit of a community in terms of the people who are paying attention and interested in the kind of thing that they're offering. So that was pretty interesting to hear as well. And it sounds like, yeah, the people who are coming to UATX know what they're looking for and know what they're getting when they come to UATX. And then it sounds like the school is really preparing them for their futures after college in terms of living a life well live, but also some of the things we talked about, citizenship, career preparation, et cetera. Great. Well, that was a great opportunity to get to talk to Ben from UATX and we'll look forward to seeing, like I said at the end of the interview, how things go for them in the future.

Hopefully they keep growing and bringing in new students. They're only two years in so far of having students on campus, so still very early in the process, but nice to see things moving along there.

Justin Garrison:

Yeah, absolutely. So thank you for watching and listening to this episode of Radio Free Campus. Please like us, subscribe to us, tell your friends, sign them up. We don't care if you get their consent as long as you don't tell us. But seriously, thank you for paying attention to this. It's an important topic, one that I hope we can follow up on. So Steve, a pleasure as always. And until next time, KBO.

Speaker 1:

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