Vincent Munoz:

I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry, will help serve the cause of justice.

Betty Friedan:

The First Amendment, the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience that is the bulwark of our democracy.

Bettina Aptheker:

There was a passion in what was being said, affirming what people considered a sacred constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

Michelle Deutchman:

From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, this is SpeechMatters, a podcast about expression, engagement, and democratic learning in higher education. I'm Michelle Deutchman, the Center's executive director and your host. Welcome to episode eight.

Michelle Deutchman:

Last episode, our guests were both from within the academy and they discussed what the year holds for expression and engagement. Today, we have the opportunity to flip the script and discuss higher ed's relationship with free speech and democratic learning from the perspective of two esteemed journalists. Hailing from the higher education beat, we are thrilled to be joined by Elissa Nadworny from National Public Radio and Michael Powell from the New York Times.

Michelle Deutchman:

But first, Class Notes, a look at what's making headlines. Can listening to your student body put your college at risk? This is one of the questions people are asking in the aftermath of the Oberlin College versus Gibson's Brothers Inc case. This seemingly run of the mill case of arrest due to underage purchase of alcohol and shoplifting became a campus-wide sensation following accusations of the incident being racially motivated. Students protested the bakery and urged the college to drop its contracts with Gibson's. Gibson's responded by suing Oberlin for defamation. Ultimately, the verdict found that Oberlin officials had defamed the bakery by supporting students who accused it of racial profiling. The $36 million payout to Gibson sends a message to administrators everywhere that there's a line between supporting students and supporting a cause.

Michelle Deutchman:

The US Department of Education received 240,000 comments during its 60 day comment period for proposed Title IX regulations. News reports highlighted some common themes such as concern about mandatory reporting rules that could drastically alter student-faculty relationships, distress at the elimination of live hearings and cross examinations, and allegations that the new regs will impinge on free speech protections.

Michelle Deutchman:

We are now less than 50 days away from the midterm election, which means organizers and election officials across the country are working overtime to register new voters, educate eligible voters and

ensure voter turnout rates don't fall prey to the historical midterm slump. Luckily, there are a host of civic holidays during this final stretch that are particularly useful outreach tools for civic coordinators on college campuses. Last week's national voter registration day saw over 4,000 community partners host events and social media campaigns to register voters.

Michelle Deutchman:

National Voter Education Week, coming up the first week of October, coordinates organizers in all 50 states to guide registered voters through the voting process and educate them to make sure they are #BallotReady. With most voters being able to vote prior to election day, Vote Early Day on October 28th, we'll see hundreds of thousands of Americans engaging in the democratic process before election day. Nevertheless, no day is more important than November 8th, election day. So, all listeners, check your voter registration status and make sure you and your friends all have plans to vote.

Michelle Deutchman:

Now it's time to turn to our featured guests. I'm particularly excited about today's experts, since I read a lot of higher education news, and I mean, a lot. Michael and Elissa both have celebrity status in my book. Michael's been at the New York Times since 2007. He's a national reporter covering issues around free speech and expression and stories capturing intellectual and campus debate. He was part of the team that won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for breaking news for coverage of the sex scandal that resulted in the resignation of Governor Eliot Spitzer.

Michelle Deutchman:

Elissa Nadworny is an NPR correspondent, following big stories like unprecedented enrollment declines, college affordability, student debt crisis and workforce training. Her work has won several awards including a 2020 Gracie Award for a story about student parents in college, and a 2018 James Beard Award for a story about the Chinese American population in the Mississippi Delta. She's been at NPR since 2014. Thank you both for joining us.

Elissa Nadworny:

Thanks for having us.

Michelle Deutchman:

All right. So, I always like to start with people's backgrounds because I think people's stories are interesting and I'd love for each of you, maybe Elissa, you can start to tell me a little bit about your journey to this particular beat and maybe what drew you to covering higher ed?

Elissa Nadworny:

Well, I always knew I wanted to cover education. I went to grad school for journalism and we had to pick a beat in school and my beat that I picked was education. I just think that in general it's one of the best beats. I mean, it's baked into everything in life, housing, food, the economy, business, happiness, it just touches everything. So yeah, I'm delighted that this gets to be my main beat.

Elissa Nadworny:

I mean, I'm actually just back from a month in Ukraine covering the war for NPR and there were so many education stories there too. I think covering education just like helps me cover everything. I happened to

be there this time for the first day of school, so it was a very obvious connection. But one of the things that I kept thinking about in my reporting in Ukraine and I think we're going to get to it today in this podcast, was just how much education and information is power.

Elissa Nadworny:

Just as I was leaving the country's northeast, near Kharkiv, Ukrainian forces took back a bunch of Russian controlled land for the last six months. And in those pockets there was just no internet, no information. The only access to what was going on was Russian radio. And so, they didn't know about Mariupol and Irpin, and all of these things that the rest of Ukraine has been able to learn about and grieve, and the rest of the world. It's just this fascinating idea about what's going to happen next? How are they going to learn about that? And anyways, this is a long way to say that it just underscored for me, the power of information and knowledge. And hopefully we're going to get into that today.

Michelle Deutchman:

For sure. Thank you so much. And I also think it's so interesting to have you on to provide a foil to I think what a lot of folks in US education take for granted, in terms of access to information and what we expect when we wake up in the morning. Okay. Michael, how about you?

Michael Powell:

First place, hi. My very first job was at a paper up in Vermont, covering education. So, to a certain extent, I mean this has always been of interest to me. I mean, I grew up in New York, went to public school, as did my sons. And I have a visceral interest in these issues and also just the importance of education to an informed society.

Michael Powell:

I came to my particular beat in a roundabout way. I had covered national politics, economics, I had been a sports columnist for five years. I missed, it felt to me that we're at this urgent point in our politics and our culture right now. Very fraught, very polarized, with so much of this happening in the arena of free speech, higher education. And I talked with a couple of editors about getting back into that. So, just after, as it turns out, COVID hit, I took on this new beat and I mean, it's been a fascinating, sometimes maddening, but fascinating time to look at this. So anyway, that's how I came to be where I am.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, thank you both for sharing your stories and I think, Michael, yours is the perfect setup for where I want to go, which is, the state of play in higher education has changed considerably, especially over the last five years, which is when the Center was founded. A lot of people claim that one of the significant shifts has been the use of higher education as a weapon or a tool in the culture wars. And I was wondering if each of you could respond to that claim, from your perspective?

Michael Powell:

You see this, I think, on both left and right. I mean, you have the college campus as absolutely contested terrain and so it plays out both on the left, in ways in which speakers are, as they say, deplatformed, professors might be attacked for taking positions on certain issues. And on the right, look, I mean you've seen in Florida, you saw some very esteemed political scientists who were asked to give testimony before the Florida legislature, blocked by the governor from talking. So, I mean, I think there is this

sense of the college campus as not just contested terrain but as important symbolic terrain. A place where each side wants to assert power.

Michelle Deutchman:

Oh, thanks. I definitely don't envy administrators at this juncture. I think, unfortunately, a lot of the, at least the speech and expression issues that I encounter is everybody is leaving unsatisfied, which is a really unfortunate situation to be in. So, Elissa, go ahead with your perspective.

Elissa Nadworny:

Well, I just wanted to say, one of my parts of my job is that I talk to administrators and professors a lot and often about not a specific story, I'm just in constant communication to get stories or to get their comment on stories. And one of the things I hear over and over again from administrators and professors, particularly tenured faculty, is just this fear and anxiety about this issue and a real hesitancy, not so much from their own communities, but from the internet and outside their campus bubble. Which I think is just a fascinating thing to think about, where this tension or anxiety or fear is coming from and why, around these issues of free speech.

Michelle Deutchman:

I absolutely agree. I always say that I'm lucky that I didn't go to college while there was social media, because forget about being afraid of what a professor might say if I gave the wrong answer, I think I might be afraid that someone was going to pull out a phone and videotape what I was saying and then put it up on the internet. Which I wonder a lot about, part of college is supposed to be a time to learn and I'm just not sure how much space there is for learning from one's mistakes in our current society.

Elissa Nadworny:

Well, and I think also, if there's a fear of what could be, regardless of if the what could be actually happens, that has an influence on the conversation and what conversations can be had.

Michelle Deutchman:

Do either of you have any thoughts on what you think universities can do to either mitigate or insulate themselves from external pressures, whether that's legislatively or donors or trustees, or just social media?

Michael Powell:

Yeah, I guess I'll jump in. And I want to say this advisedly because I'm aware that it's always easy from the outside to say, "Oh well, they should have more gumption." Or whatever, right? But I do think, I mean, the University of Chicago famously has its approach to speech, which is a quite liberal one and I think with only a very few exceptions, they've been pretty good about hewing to this idea that a university is a place to, as you were talking about, make mistakes, to have really free and as much as one can, unfettered conversation. And I am struck, I guess I'll jump in there, that I think too many university administrators are being a bit feckless and that there is a tendency not to want to stand up for what strike me as traditional, liberal free speech values.

Elissa Nadworny:

The foundations.

Michael Powell:

Yes, exactly. And of course, I'm aware as I say, and I'm aware that no doubt I'm being unfair to many ... I mean, A, it's incredibly complicated. It's incredibly unpleasant to be pilloried on Twitter, on social media, in person. I mean, all of these things are very difficult issues but it does seem to me that this is the place for it to play out. And I mean, I very much in the dusty mists of time, remember when I was an undergrad and I no doubt made a fool of myself with some regularity in a class, but that's part of it, right?

Elissa Nadworny:

That's what it is. Yeah.

Michael Powell:

Yeah.

Elissa Nadworny:

Totally. There is a great resource, PEN America has this guide on, for academics and people who are on campus to think about these issues and what their role is. It echos a lot of the stuff that you're saying, Michael. So, if we're doing a plug for resources, and you can link to them at the bottom, the PEN America package on free speech, campus free speech, is really helpful for people who are listening, who may be on campus. I mean, it goes over First Amendment stuff for people who are speaking on campus. It touches all of the practical things around this issue that happen on a campus. So, I would highly recommend that.

Michelle Deutchman:

Absolutely. And in fact the person who put that together, Jon Friedman, who's still at PEN, did part of that research as a Fellow at the Center.

Elissa Nadworny:

Oh, wow. Oh, that's very cool.

Michelle Deutchman:

So, it all gets tied together and he actually is going to be a guest on our next episode to talk about book banning and state legislation, with a former fellow from ACLU.

Elissa Nadworny:

Oh, that's great.

Michelle Deutchman:

So, that's a perfect tie in. One of the things that I'm imagining you've both encountered, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, is this challenge that universities need to balance institutional values that sometimes can be at odds, right? So, diversity, equity, inclusion, and free expression. And I'm wondering if based on your reporting, you have thoughts on how you think universities are faring with the balancing act or maybe what else they might be doing to either maintain a respectful campus climate or

improve campus climate, while at the same time making sure that we're staying true to robust inquiry and debate and exchange of ideas?

Elissa Nadworny:

So, I have a little, maybe it's just because this is what I've been reporting on lately, but I do have a little trouble with this idea that there's this blanket value system that institutions have. I'm just going to poke holes in that for a second, because we just have a number of examples of kind of quite the opposite, of values of diversity and equity. And I think especially as the Supreme Court is going to hear affirmative action case this fall, for students that I talk to, it's just an interesting balance that you're talking about, where institutions I think have to take that idea of these things that they value, equality, diversity, free speech. I mean, I think that has to permeate everything that they do. And you can tell me if this is a bit of a tangent because I apologize, but my first reaction to that question and what I'm hearing from students is just, do you stand for those values that we're fighting so hard against in this arena, in all of the arenas of an institution?

Elissa Nadworny:

I'm thinking even specifically of the UC system with their Native Student Initiative. They announced over the summer that they're going to offer free tuition for native students. And the Chronicle had this great investigation last week of, I think it's just going to impact such a small amount of students. It's like, are you paying lip service to this idea and not seeing it through on the actual policy side? So, forgive me if that's a tangent, but that's just one thing I was thinking about.

Michelle Deutchman:

No. It's not a tangent at all. I'm glad that you are poking holes in even that assumption. And I think that there's been a lot of discussion about this, especially since the murder of George Floyd, when universities around the country came out with lots of great statements and then six months later people were wondering what actually got done. So, I think it's a really valid point and I think you are answering the question, which is that maybe the universities aren't faring as well as they think they are. What about you, Michael?

Michael Powell:

I think, these are, as Elissa was saying, very complicated issues. I think it was rather easy in the immediate wake of George Floyd for universities to say, "Well, we're going to take a series of steps." And some of those proved to be very thorny. I mean, for instance, I mean California, to use as an example, the university system has embarked on a series of DEI initiatives. They have the Native American Initiative.

Michael Powell:

I mean, the state voters turned down a provision to reinstate affirmative action in the university. I was looking at some of the requirements for new hires, including that they are supposed to essentially give their own DEI statement. And the question has been raised by professors, "Well, what if one, an applicant for a position were to say that he or she is not in favor of affirmative action?" It gives a whole series of things that they want to do to work with diverse students, but say did not do that.

Michael Powell:

There's reason to believe that they might have a great deal of trouble getting hired and yet actually, that's in keeping with what is currently state law in California. It's a difficult...again, I'm not trying to take a side here, it's just, these are very difficult things. I think it's very, easy is not the fair word, it's in the wake of George Floyd there's been an understandable urgency in trying to address some of these questions. And I think the reality of implementing it is quite, quite difficult.

Elissa Nadworny:

I want to pick up on something that you mentioned about the University of California, this ban on affirmative action, because I think it's interesting, your first question, Michelle, was about where we are in this moment, feeling like the last five years like things have really escalated and this politicalization of campus culture wars, maybe, if that's a fair phrasing?

Elissa Nadworny:

I think that it's true of course that it's very, trendy is the wrong word, but it's certainly a hot topic issue of making what's happening on the college campus a popular political point. But I was thinking back to the University of California ban on affirmative action, which Michael just mentioned, which was similar to what we're seeing in terms of state legislature or politics getting involved with what's going on in a campus.

Elissa Nadworny:

This happened back in '94 and it was a Republican governor who made this his issue and he used people who were appointed by Republican governors, many of them by him, who were on the board of the university system that made this decision to get rid of affirmative action. And it was just a historical example of maybe some of the things that we're seeing now. And I think that's important for people to think about, that this isn't a totally new kind of political interfering with public higher ed.

Michelle Deutchman:

No, I'm really happy that you raised that and I'm going to date myself, okay? Because when this was happening I was at Berkeley, writing papers about why this was-

Elissa Nadworny:

Wow.

Michelle Deutchman:

... I thought was a bad idea. And once it passed, it was one of the first elections I had ever voted on, they were stuffing mailboxes at Berkeley Law of students of color.

Elissa Nadworny:

Wow.

Michelle Deutchman:

I mean, you're right, it was very ugly and very contentious. And I think you're right in that probably when we think about the history of whether you want to call it censorship or challenges to speech, that isn't new, and you think about the free speech movement. So, I really appreciate that and perhaps we all need to maybe do a little bit of looking backward in order to help us move forward.

Elissa Nadworny:

I do think there is something going on right now though, and maybe, I don't know if that's just the cost of college. I know there's been a lot of research on people's perceptions of college right now, which we could talk more about, of course. And I wonder also, if there's something being stoked that feels very particular to this moment and average American's perceptions of college and what happens on college campuses and how that plays into identity. So, I think that feels very of the moment.

Michelle Deutchman:

Absolutely. And I don't know the history of how American society values or doesn't value higher education, but obviously, so much of the polling right now talks about whether people think it's of value or not. And again, I don't know enough history to know whether that is something the same or different, but I certainly think that it's-

Elissa Nadworny:

Well no, we're seeing declines. Yeah, that's what the research has shown is that we're seeing this decline of perceptions of if college is good.

Michael Powell:

Yeah. And if I could, I also think history, it's an interesting thing. I mean, when Californians rejected the most recent attempt to reinstate affirmative action at the university level, I mean, a, strong majority, a large majority of Asian Americans voted against that, and as memory serves, Latino votes split about 50/50, maybe even slightly also opposed to that.

Michael Powell:

So all of these questions are, In other words, if one were to look in the, I think the too reductive way of, "Well, how did people of color vote?" Right? Two very large groups of what are seen as people of color, that is Latinos and Asians, did not come down in ways that one might have or that I think proponents originally forecast they might, particularly Latinos. So, all of these questions, they get wrapped up in the larger discontents of our society right now.

Michelle Deutchman:

Absolutely. And we can't have this discussion about education without talking about the pandemic. And so, Elissa, I'm going to turn to you because I know that especially during the 2020/'21 academic year, you traveled to dozens of campuses to document what the reopening was like. And I'm just curious from what you've seen on campuses pre and post-pandemic, what do you think the impact of the pandemic on expression on campus or democratic learning and engagement on campus, and maybe how that's changed? And do you think students have an appetite for democratic engagement now or are there so many other things, basic needs, that are competing with that?

Elissa Nadworny:

I'll say definitely there is more of an appetite for engagement, that's for sure. So, over the 2020/'21 academic year, we went to two dozen campuses. We basically just went on an indefinite road trip to campuses across America. And it was really helpful in getting a sense of what the pandemic was, because most people were just in such a small bubble. We were all, at least at the beginning, very much

in our homes, even as reporters, it's the worst thing is that you're not traveling and talking to people. And that's the best part about reporting and what informs your work.

Elissa Nadworny:

So, I noticed a few themes on this idea. I guess the first is that the pandemic connected students online in a way that I hadn't seen pre-pandemic. There was this shared experience ... I'm not trying to minimize the isolation or the loneliness of having to do college from your parents' house or from an apartment, but so many students I talked to were just finding these communities over social media, text chains, conversations with other students. And so in a lot of ways, they were organizing over social media. And so, that just was something that stuck out to me.

Elissa Nadworny:

The other thing that I think was happening was that the relationship between a student and an institution was changing, especially among freshmen because there's a power dynamic that's baked into that relationship already. Because you've had to apply to the school, especially if you're coming from high school or even if you're an adult going back to college, there's just a power there, that the institution has a lot of power over you as the student. And I think COVID in an interesting way, caused students to question that or at least just to be critical about their relationship with the institution and the handling of COVID. I think Black Lives Matter also is part of this. I mean, when we talk about 2020, it's a mix of the pandemic and also this social movement.

Elissa Nadworny:

But I think for a lot of students it changed the relationship between them and their administration. So, that's all coming into play. And then as campuses this year are the majority, I think most are open on person, we're starting to see like, okay, now what does this look like, this organization and pent up frustration? We're going to see that, I think, this fall and into this winter.

Michelle Deutchman:

I think it's interesting that the issue of power has come up twice now, right? You were talking in the beginning about education is power and now you're talking about flipping the script on the power dynamic between students and institutions. Michael?

Michael Powell:

Yes.

Michelle Deutchman:

Did you want to add anything?

Michael Powell:

No, no, I think I very much defer to Elissa's terrific reporting on this. I mean, I think that one of the things also that it's called up is we all know how tuition has just catapulted upwards, right? And I think to the extent to which parents and students are paying these bills and getting this attenuated certainly campus experience, also I think has had a, I don't know, perhaps a radicalizing effect on some and thinking, "Well, do I really need to spend this amount of money?"

Michael Powell:

So, I think it's played into this larger debate, which you've both alluded to, to what is the value and the purpose of higher ed? Perhaps, particularly private higher ed, which is expensive, though as a parent who has just finished paying state university tuition, I can attest that that's also rather expensive.

Elissa Nadworny:

Wow. I feel like congratulations are in order for getting through that.

Michael Powell:

Yeah. Right.

Michelle Deutchman:

That's what I was going to say, as someone who's spending the next couple years worrying about how I will pay for-

Michael Powell:

There we go.

Michelle Deutchman:

So, I can't have two esteemed journalists as guests and not talk a little bit about journalism. And obviously over the last decade you've both witnessed the rapid decline of print newspapers and the increase in consumption of digital news. And I was wondering if either of you have any thoughts about the state of college journalism? I mean, again, I keep hearkening back to the good old days, but I mean I got so much of my information from the Daily Cow. And have you seen a similar shrinking on campuses and do you have hope for the pipeline for future journalists, anything in that realm?

Elissa Nadworny:

I have hope. Yeah, campus journalists were just so essential to my reporting on the pandemic. Like they were holding their institutions accountable. Even when they weren't on campus, they were publishing regularly. I have so much hope for them. And I mean, we're even starting to see some local and statewide news organizations start to appreciate this talent pool. I feel like I just recently saw, maybe in Colorado, there's this big news collaborative that's partnering with local colleges. Yeah, I'm very hopeful when it comes to student journalists.

Michael Powell:

Yeah, I've seen the same thing. I mean, I'm always struck when I go on a campus, I mean one of the first things I do, right? Is look at what has been the reporting, and it's of high quality. I mean, not uniformly, but then again it isn't either in the professional world, but very often it's of high quality, it's passionate, it's well-informed. And um, I guess the only thing I worry about is that I do see a number, particularly in some of the state universities, I'm not thinking here of California, of the kind of advent of faculty advisors who are a little more than faculty advisors, they're more like another-

Elissa Nadworny:

Yeah.

Michael Powell:

Yeah. And I think that's a bad idea. I mean, I think if we're going to talk about that one of the great privileges of going to a university is the ability to make mistakes, to think, to try things and not have it work. I mean, part of that experience is to try this wonderful thing that we call journalism and make your mistakes and work as peers with each other.

Michael Powell:

But having said that, I do want to return to the hopeful, I mean I see so much talent and frankly, my worry is far more that once they get out of college, do ladders exist for those very talented young people? Because I absolutely don't buy the grouchy, older perspective that, "Oh well, they weren't like we were." No, no, these are really talented young people. It's our job to figure out, how do we help them irrigate and invigorate journalism in the broader world?

Elissa Nadworny:

And also, campus journalists are the ideal local journalism, right? Because they're covering a community in which they live and participate in. And I'm really hoping, and we'll see if this happens, if this idea of these big legacy papers and national news organizations having all their reporters and editors work from home during the pandemic, if that strengthens local news systems throughout the country so that also these people have a place to land in some of those places. Because I feel like that's what makes journalism so great. When I was on the road for the year of the pandemic, my journalism was so much better than if I had just lived in DC.

Michael Powell:

Yes.

Elissa Nadworny:

So, I'm really hoping that leaders in newsrooms see that and make changes accordingly.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, I can't tell you how happy I am to be having a hopeful note. And I don't want to say we're going to end on a high note, because we're not ending, though it still could be on a high note. I know that no one really loves to prognosticate and we don't have a crystal ball, but I would just be curious to hear what you anticipate seeing in higher ed, especially vis-a-vie expression and engagement as we move farther into this fall and the winter?

Elissa Nadworny:

Yeah. What are you watching, Michael?

Michael Powell:

Well, I mean, I'm working on a series of specific stories, though actually one of the areas I am interested in looking at is free speech and the University of California system. I mean, I'm just starting to do some work on that across a number of the universities. But I think one of the things we haven't talked about, that the structural problem I think for universities is the disappearing tenured professor, right? Which has been, I mean there's been a lot of great reporting on. And the growth of adjunct culture or non-tenured culture.

Michael Powell:

And I'm interested also by the effect that has on free speech. So, we know we have this incredibly polarized time in our culture, right? We have people on both right and left who will both shriek on social media but also are scared of and intimidated, for perfectly good reasons, of social media, right? I mean, it's a fearsome force. And to the extent that universities and colleges increasingly rely on a non-tenured, sometimes even non-contracted workforce, it's hard to demand courage, right? Of a literature professor-

Elissa Nadworny:

Yeah.

Michael Powell:

... a history professor who is working on a semester to semester contract. And if a group of students get angry at him or an off campus group, again right or left, chooses to go after him or her, that's a real problem. It's a larger structural problem that is also meeting our just fraught environment.

Elissa Nadworny:

I want to read all those stories.

Michelle Deutchman:

Me too. Okay, Elissa, what are you going to be looking at this year? Are you back on the road?

Elissa Nadworny:

So, this fall, the big thing I'll probably be covering is the affirmative action case and I'm specifically looking at how students and campuses will respond. And these are people who are already on campus, have been through that admissions threshold, they've been through the gate. So, it'll be just interesting for me to see how much they participate in this public conversation around college admissions, the role of race in all that.

Elissa Nadworny:

Often with education reporting, it can be a lot of adults in the room talking about a thing and not the students who are experiencing it. Not to say students aren't adults, I didn't mean that, but I just mean, often we're talking about the policy and not talking about the people that get affected by the policy. So, I'm interested to see what happens with student engagement and expression around affirmative action.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well said. So, we're coming close to the end and I always end my interviews with the same question, because I think it's important to leave our listeners with some ideas for how to make an impact, even on a very small scale, even if they don't have the platform of a newspaper or a radio station. And the question is, what's one thing that people can do today to advance expression and civic engagement? And that can be on campus or it can be in the greater world.

Elissa Nadworny:

Okay. I have two quick answers. I'll try and make them quick. I get this question a lot, especially from friends and family actually, of, "What can I do when I'm getting frustrated?" The first thing I always say is just community. Community is so important. Whether that means just meeting up with the people who live on your block, literally on your street, or the people who are on your campus. I think that especially during the pandemic, we lost so much community, we lost places to have dialogue with other people who are different from us or who have different experiences than us. So, that's the first thing is just find community. Literally, it can be on your block.

Elissa Nadworny:

Second thing is, just appreciate the role of local news in our ecosystem. I was thinking about this actually just yesterday, because I've been consuming and reading a lot about the Brett Farve welfare scandal in Mississippi. Essentially, Farve funneled $5 million in welfare money for building a volleyball stadium for his daughter at the University of Southern Mississippi. And I have been just consuming so much information on this story, mostly on Twitter, actually. And I realized a lot of it was coming from the Mississippi Free Press, which is this nonprofit news organization in Mississippi. I was like, "Oh my gosh, I need to donate to them."

Elissa Nadworny:

So, I don't know, I just feel like local news often feeds maybe what you read in the New York Times or what you hear on NPR, and I think it's really important to be like, "Oh, where am I getting this, where's the official source of this? Oh, this is from journalists who live there, like The Mississippi Free Press." Donate $10 so they can keep doing that.

Michelle Deutchman:

I love those answers. Okay, Michael?

Michael Powell:

I completely agree in terms of supporting your local paper and even if it's driving you crazy at any one moment or another, I mean, it's so important to do that. I mean, I can't tell you how many times I go out on stories, just as Elissa was saying, and it's like, you go to college papers, you go to the local paper. A long time ago, I did a long, when I was in sports, investigative piece down in Baylor. And I mean, so much of that work had been done by a couple of unbelievably overworked reporters at The Waco Tribune. And I subscribed to it. In fact, as my wife pointed out, I had subscribed way past the point ... I was no longer down there, so I was forced to eventually cut it. But I mean, it's so important to keep that up.

Michael Powell:

And then the other thing I think is, if we're to break out of these silos we're in, which are both unfortunately inform so much of campus conversation, but no different than in our everyday life, we need to learn how to talk to each other. I mean, my son works at The Houston Chronicle and when he moved down there, I mean he moved into this wonderful community in Houston. And he was talking about that on his block, he would see Biden and MAGA side by side. That's great. I mean, there's so few places that you see that in this country, right? Where there's actually some attempt to communicate across this.

Michael Powell:

So, to the extent that one, I think can encourage campuses to have ... I mean, fine, go at each other, right? But go at each other, don't feel like you've got to shut down or doing harm to each other. I mean, you want to within reason, right? I'm not talking about scurrilous attacks on one another, but to the extent that we can have this dialogue, it does seem to me that campuses provide this unique resource. Anyway, that would be my hope, is more of that, more disagreement, more discussion, more talk. And support those papers.

Michelle Deutchman:

That's right. You heard it here first, subscribe to your local paper. So, is there anything either of you would like to add before we close?

Elissa Nadworny:

No, we covered so much ground. This was great.

Michael Powell:

Yeah, I agree. I mean, I think it's universities, colleges, community colleges are really a glory of our country and I hope that among other things, that things like tuition don't just put it out of reach. I think it's a good discussion to have as to whether everyone needs X. Does everyone need a four year? Does everyone need a two year? That's a fine discussion, but we don't want to have that discussion settled because, well, it wasn't good for that person because he or she couldn't afford it. So, I just hope we can figure that out.

Michelle Deutchman:

Yeah. Hear, hear to that. I really want to extend my gratitude to both of you for taking your time to share your insights and your expertise. I'm sure it's going to prove to be an interesting year and I'll look forward to following your collective coverage on life in higher education. So, thanks again for joining SpeechMatters.

Elissa Nadworny:

Thanks for having us.

Michelle Deutchman:

We are recording this episode during Banned Books Week, an annual event celebrating the freedom to read. Launched in 1982, this week highlights the value of free and open access to information, which has recently been threatened by a rise in book bans across the states. To learn more about what this dangerous trend means for the future of education and beyond, check out SpeechMatters episode three.

Michelle Deutchman:

Jon Friedman, director of free expression and education programs at PEN America will tell us about how censorship of curricular material, including books, is impacting education when he joins Emerson Sykes, senior attorney at ACLU, to discuss state legislation that undermines academic freedom, on our next episode. Until then, register to vote, and read a banned book.