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 Friendan:

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

Bettina Apthekar:

There was a passion in what was being said, affirming this caused this, what people considered a [inaudible 00:00:29] constitutional right. Freedom of speech and freedom [inaudible 00:00:29].

Michelle Deutchman:

From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement. This is Speech Matters, a podcast about expression, engagement, and democratic learning in higher education.

I'm Michelle Deutchman, the center's Executive Director and your host. It's been 18 months since we hosted representatives from PEN America and ACLU to discuss burgeoning efforts by legislators around the country to control what and how information is being taught in college and university classrooms. Many of these bills focus on limiting or banning what legislators and others term, divisive concepts. Divisive concepts can refer to critical race theory, diversity, equity and inclusion training, or certain vague concepts originally outlined in former President Trump's 2020 executive order on combating race and sex stereotyping, such as one, one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex. Two, the US is fundamentally racist or sexist, or three, an individual by virtue of his or her race or sex is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously. One goal of divisive concept legislation is to restrict history education in ways that it would make it nearly impossible for educators to help students to thoughtfully consider slavery and racism in historical development of the United States.

In order to better understand these laws, we've invited Jim Grossman, the Executive Director of the American Historical Association, to be our guest today. Through its Freedom to Learn initiative, the American Historical Association known as AHA for short, educates historians and others on how to advocate publicly for honest history education, responds directly to the bills themselves, and creates resources to help teachers directly affected by these bills think about how to maintain the integrity of their history courses.

But before we dive into our conversation with Jim, we turn to class notes, a look at what's making headlines. Last week, two bills were pushed forward by Republican lawmakers on the House Education and Workforce Committee, the "Respecting the First Amendment on Campus Act," and the "Accreditation for College Excellence Act of 2023."

The Republican's GOP majority claim that the legislation will bar public higher education officials and accreditation agencies from pressuring students, faculty, and staff to conform to the "correct beliefs of the day." Democrats, however, say the bills are totally unnecessary and are a ham-handed attempt to favor speech that conservative support while eliminating speech they oppose. If enacted, the bills would impose measures aimed at "tackling the plague of the liberalism on college campuses" and withhold federal financial assistance from campuses that did not comply. These bills are another example of Congress inserting itself into climate challenges facing higher education.

The same committee that grilled university leaders this past December, continues its investigation into antisemitism on campuses in the wake of the October 7th attack. The committee subpoenaed Harvard for documentation about how the university has responded to antisemitism. Harvard says it was responsive to the subpoena by turning over 4,900 documents in good faith, but House member Virginia Fox called the

documents useless. The committee will hold its second hearing on April 17th with the president of Columbia University and the co-chairs of its board of trustees testifying.

After tabling a controversial proposal to bar faculty and staff from posting political statements on university websites and other official online forums in January, the UC Regents took up the issue again at this month's meeting. Under the updated proposal, academic departments would be prohibited from posting political statements on their homepages. Any political statement issued by a department in any venue would need to meet more stringent guidelines. There was a healthy debate about the wisdom of such a policy as well as its potential impact on speech and academic freedom. Ultimately, the board unanimously decided to postpone the vote in order to further revise the proposal and seek additional input from the academic senate.

Lastly, add Alabama to the list of states that have passed sweeping legislation barring public schools and universities from maintaining or funding diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. This tidbit is a perfect segue to our discussion with today's guest.

Now, back to today's guest. Jim Grossman is Executive Director of the American Historical Association or AHA. He was previously Vice President for Research and Education at the Newberry Library and has taught at University of Chicago and University of California San Diego. He is the author of Land of Hope, Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration, and a Chance to Make Good, African Americans, 1900 to 1929, as well as co-editor of the Encyclopedia of Chicago. His articles and short essays have focused on various aspects of American urban history, African American history, ethnicity, higher education, and the place of history in public culture. Short pieces of his have appeared in the Chicago Tribune, New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Time, The Hill, New York Daily News, Chronicle of Higher Education inside Higher Education and elsewhere. Jim, we're so grateful to you for joining us today and sharing some of your time and expertise.

Jim Grossman:

Thank you for inviting me and sharing your time.

Michelle Deutchman:

So in preparation for our conversation, I did a little bit more digging about AHA and I learned a few fun facts, including that it was incorporated by Congress way back in 1889, and that is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world with over 11,000 members. I'm hoping though, that you can set the table a bit and tell our listeners a bit more about AHA's mission and goals.

Jim Grossman:

Well, formally when we talk about our mission and goals, we talk about promoting historical work, promoting the importance of historical thinking in public life, because everything has a history and that is in some ways our main message. It doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter what you're interested in, if you're interested in gardening, if you're interested in golf, everything has a history and therefore everybody should be interested in history.

We also are the keepers of professional standards and ethics in many ways in the historical discipline. We promote innovative scholarship and teaching. We do watch out for academic freedom issues. We're involved in international collaboration. Recently, what's been very important to us is to expand the definition of advocacy to include advocating for all of these things, whether at the federal level, the state level, and thinking about also advocating for broader definitions of scholarship among historians. So it's a very wide definition of our mission.

You mentioned our congressional charter. Our congressional charter, we used to say that and a couple bucks got you on the New York subway, but we've realized recently that the congressional charter also

confers legitimacy in certain quarters. When we do work in state legislatures, when we advocate with state legislators relating to legislation that deals with history, education, we invoke our congressional charter, that we are chartered by Congress to promote historical work.

The AHA and the American Political Science Association are the only scholarly associations have congressional charters, I think. This legitimacy is very important to us. The AHA has only three levers. We really don't have power, we don't have money. We can't control people's jobs, we can't get people's jobs. We have the power to legitimate, the power to convene, and the power to inspire, and these are three very useful leavers. We can't ban anything, people constantly ask us to ban things. We can't require anybody to do anything, but we can legitimate, convene, and inspire.

Michelle Deutchman:

Wow, and I would say right now we're all in need of some inspiration. So with that in mind, I want to ask you about your 14 years that you've been at the helm and if you can share a little bit about how things have changed just in that block of time, in terms of the kinds of challenges and issues that historians are facing.

Jim Grossman:

Well, when you think about challenges that you face, often people think of it in a very passive way, which are, what things are coming down the pike that are different from what was there when you got there. But actually, the change in challenges has a lot to do with what you decide you want to challenge. So this goes back to our changing definition of advocacy. When the AHA thought that advocacy was what happened on Capitol Hill, even within the beltway, that's one thing, but now it's very different when you think about what's happening in state legislatures, when you think of advocacy as standing up for historians whose departments are being threatened around the country, this is something the AHA has always done, but we've been putting a little bit more into that. We stand behind our departments when they're being threatened. We ask our department chairs to let us know.

One of the things that we do that we didn't used to do as much is visit campuses. When I visit campuses, I usually meet with deans, as well as the department faculty, as well as with the students. So we have a much greater presence on individual campuses. We also have been a lot more involved in venues where historians work, other than colleges and universities. We've been a lot more involved with high schools, as we'll talk about later with high school curriculum.We've also been a lot more involved in what might be described as public history venues. We basically are concerned with what happens everywhere history takes place, which is everywhere.

I do think one change is that we have had over the last eight years, threats to, in many ways, the very values that we operate under that go back to the enlightenment. The notion of facts, the notion of information. The moment a high federal official said there is such a thing as alternative facts, light bulbs went off over historians heads because we work from evidence, we start from evidence. We don't start from theories, we don't start from opinions, we start from evidence. We ask questions based on theories, but for us the bottom line is the evidence. So the very notion of alternative facts threatens the basis of our discipline.

On the other hand, if you think about opportunities being the flip side of challenges, this has given us an opportunity to have a greater presence in American public culture and education because our argument is, if you want people to be resistant to misinformation, give them a couple of history courses. The more people learn history and they learn the tools of historians, the more people learn historical thinking, the more they will be able to use context, to use critical thinking to know misinformation when they see it. Right now, that is one of the biggest challenges that we face.

Michelle Deutchman:

Absolutely, and when I think of your image of the light bulb over historians heads about alternative facts, I was envisioning more like fireworks because of the intensity and of the challenge we're facing.

One of the things you certainly have done is a lot of collaboration with other groups. So in June of 2021, AHA and the American Association of University Professors, and the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and PEN America, you signed a joint statement that firmly opposed a wave or one of the waves of legislative proposals that was targeting academic lessons, presentations, discussions of racism, and other issues of American history in schools, colleges, and university. In your statement, you declared that the goal of these efforts, those legislative efforts, is to suppress teaching and learning about the role of racism in the history of the US.

I'm curious, I have two different questions. The first is about how effective do you think those efforts have been in the last three years? Then we can turn to, what have been some effective means of responding to those efforts? So let's start with, have they been effective?

Jim Grossman:

Before we do that, I want to go back to your fascination with the images of the light bulb and your reference to fireworks. I think I would argue that what happened between 2016 and 2017 and then in the following few years is, the light bulb exploded. It's not fireworks in the sense that fireworks are meant to explode, light bulbs are not meant to explode. That is what happened during those years, in terms of us thinking about information, facts, the importance of people being able to rely on information that they receive from certain sources.

So, how successful have these people been? They have actually been less successful in actually things like getting teachers fired. That hasn't happened very much. What has been successful is a chilling effect. We've had at conferences where we talk about some of these issues, we've had teachers from certain states raising their hand and saying, and I quote, "I don't know what I'm allowed to say anymore."

These laws are at once vague and specific in odd sorts of ways. For example, and by the way, these laws are often very similar because they come from a template that's created either in Washington or New York in most cases, which is actually an incredible irony because in many of these states there is such hostility to the eastern seaboard, the eastern establishment, but one of the outfits that creates a lot of the text for these laws is actually located on Madison Avenue in New York. So we actually have a letter that we wrote to legislators, I believe it was in Iowa, where we said, do you really want your students to be taking their curriculum from Madison Avenue in New York? But one of the standard ones in this legislation is, you are not permitted to teach that one race is inherently superior to another. Okay, that seems straightforward. Quite frankly, we very much doubt anybody's out there teaching that one race is inherently superior to another. But a good history teacher does help students understand that for a few hundred years in many states, the law said that one race was inherently superior to another. Our textbooks said one race is inherently superior to another.

So I'm a teacher in a state where there's one of these laws in a school district where the school board is on board with these laws. What do I do? Do I not expose the students to the primary sources that say one race is superior to another? If I don't assign those primary sources, I am depriving those students of an important part of an aspect of our history, but if I do assign those sources, how close am I getting to skirting that law?

Another standard clause is that you cannot teach that slavery is anything other than a deviation from the principles of the founding documents. Think about that. Think about how hard it is then to think. I mean, in the 1820s and '30s and '40s, especially '30s and '40s, there are vast debates that go on within the abolitionist movement, Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, about whether or not the constitution is a pro-slavery or anti-slavery document or neither. Well, how do I teach that debate with that sitting in the law? In terms of, again, the primary sources I hand to students. So where it has been

effective is in the kind of chilling debates where teachers have to step back and say, do I really want to do this? How do I do this? So that's been effective.

It has been effective, I think, also in terms of creating a debate that shouldn't exist. The laws are most effective as push polls. As you remember, push polls are where people, opinion pollsters, are asking questions where they really don't care about the answer. They want the questions to have an impact on the thinking of the person they're polling. It's the same thing here. These laws say that teachers cannot do X, Y, and Z, when in fact the teachers probably aren't doing X, Y, and Z. But then it's convincing journalists and the public that there's a problem. If you pass a law that says you cannot drive faster than 90 miles an hour on public highways, that's going to imply to people, wow, there must be a bunch of people out there driving faster than 90 miles an hour or else they wouldn't pass that law.

What's interesting here is that when they first started passing these laws about critical race theory, and we'll get to this later I know, it drove journalists and others to thinking that teachers are teaching critical race theory and an argument ensued over critical race theory. Organizations like the AHA were saying, oh, no, no, no, no, no, nobody teaches critical race theory. Actually, nobody even knew. Nobody had any idea. We now actually did the work, did the research, to find out that that's not what people were teaching. So they were successful at getting into public discourse, a set of questions and threats and fears that were not as clear, not as visible, not as popular as before.

Michelle Deutchman:

No, that makes sense and that's really helpful. Sadly, the moment that we're in, not everybody has the time or the interest to peel back the layers, and so they're willing to look at that quick click-bait headline about how everybody's teaching critical race theory.

Jim Grossman:

I mean, it's not just that. Next time you're speaking to an audience about this issue, ask for a raise of hands and say, how many people here have ever read the legislation? If you don't read this legislation, you're going to misunderstand it. This is not a left and right thing, you're actually going to misunderstand it from all sorts of political directions. There's people out there saying that teachers aren't allowed to do this, that or the other thing that actually isn't in that legislation at all. You have to read the legislation, and who has time?

Michelle Deutchman:

No, that's an important point and that can go on the list of things any listener who actually hasn't pulled up any of these bills, the anti WOKE act, whatever it is, and take an actual real look at them.

I want to just continue to pull on the thread of the chilling effect and ask you what you, AHA, and others think can be done or are trying to do to mitigate that impact of the teacher who says, I'm just not sure and so therefore I'm not going to teach that or add that reading to the curriculum.

Jim Grossman:

What we're trying to do is to do professional development work that clarifies the laws and that offers teachers materials that they can be confident that they can use and probably not be violating any laws. Nobody can say to a teacher, here's some material and it doesn't violate the law. We're not lawyers, we're not about to give that kind of legal advice. We can say, here's some materials that we think are good history, solid history, and we don't think are going to get you in trouble or that shouldn't get you in trouble.

So we're trying to develop materials for our website, we're trying to direct teachers to places that have materials. Many teachers look to the Library of Congress website, they look to the Smithsonian website.

So one of the things is to try to help teachers find things on those kinds of websites that are good history, and there's lots of it, because at least then when someone comes after you, whether it's your principal or a member of the school board or a parent, and you say, I took that from the Library of Congress, I took that from the National Archives, you've got at least a shot at defending yourself.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, and I think it goes back to what you were saying earlier about how do we legitimate, it's unfortunate that that's what we need to do, but I think that helps it, which is about source credibility.

Jim Grossman:

It's very important, and it's one reason the AHA has recently, due to the generosity of the Luce Foundation in New York, which we greatly appreciate, we have a grant to start to work on state standards that are coming up for revision in the next few years. We did a trial run at this with our own resources in Virginia recently, and we were able to make a difference. They didn't adopt the standards we co-authored with some other organizations, but what they did eventually adopt was not nearly as bad as what they started with. The importance of state standards is that in some states, these are state mandated social studies standards, in some states they have tests and obviously teachers are going to teach the test. But even where they don't have tests, if the state standards are decent, a teacher can, again, when a parent calls, when someone starts pounding on their door, they can take the state standards and say, yo, I'm just teaching what's in the state standards. This is why we are working very hard at having input into standards revisions in various states.

Michelle Deutchman:

No, that makes sense. I'm wondering if we could zoom out a little bit and look at the larger political landscape right now and how you think these attempts to, what I would call, I know PEN refers to it as educational gag orders, I would say intruding into the classroom. How does that fit into what's happening in terms of politics polarization in our country? This lever being pulled, is it a new lever that's being pulled or is it something we've seen before?

Jim Grossman:

It's a little bit of each. We try to use vocabulary, terms, questions, that are going to get us as large an audience as we can into as many offices as we can. PEN is right to call these educational gag orders, that is what they are, but we don't call them that because once you do that, you're starting from a position that is going to turn off some people. So we call them, as good historians, we use primary sources, and we use the words that are in the legislation and we refer to it as divisive concepts legislation, because what the legislation nearly always says is you cannot teach divisive concepts.

The other reason we do that is one of what we find is a fairly effective strategy is to use a medical analogy. You cannot heal a patient unless you understand what the disease or the wound is. So that if you say to teachers, to school districts, you cannot teach divisive concepts, you cannot teach about divisions, which is what they really mean. You can't teach about racial conflict, you can't teach about racial division. Well, how do you solve a problem if you're not allowed to learn about it? We find that people who are in the center, even center right, are willing to listen to that. There's a certain rationality to that. You can't solve a problem until you understand it. So what we're trying to do is to help students learn to understand the problems.

One of the things we like to say, for example, and I need to as a good historian do my footnote here, give credit where credit is due. My friend Hassan Jeffries, who has more than once when he's done presentations on this, talked about how good teachers do not tell students that they are responsible for what their grandparents did. They do not tell students that they are responsible even for what their parents

are doing. What they tell students is they are responsible for the future and you cannot shape the future responsibly unless you understand the past. So this whole edifice where these people are saying students are being taught to hate their grandparents and hate America, that's how we're trying to resist that in a very positive way.

The polarization is extreme, that is true. I believe this is the first Congress where there is no Democrat to the right of any Republican and no Republican to the left of any Democrat, that is new in the last few years. There are many ways in which this kind of polarization is new.

Another thing that's new that people do not realize is people who say that state legislatures should not be sticking their nose into secondary school history education, that's wrong, even hypocritical because state legislatures have been sticking their nose into secondary school history education for years. In New York, you have to teach slavery, legislation. The Holocaust, legislation. I believe the Irish Potato Famine, legislation. In many states, they mandate. California has a very extended, sophisticated mandate to teach LGBTQ history. What's different is prohibition rather than mandate, that's what's new. So you cannot, in all consistency say, state legislatures shouldn't be sticking their nose into this. What you can say is that there's a difference between a mandate, especially a mandate of a general topic, as opposed to a prohibition, which is censorship. That's what's new. The best precedent for it is German language during World War I, but there are not a lot of precedence. Even evolution was not prohibited in many places. So that's what's new.

Michelle Deutchman:

That's an exceptional point, and it reminds me of when we talk about expression on campus and people say, well, how is it different than the 1960s? So in that moment, there's a couple differences. One is that the students were trying to expand who could speak and what they could speak about, as opposed to now what we're seeing a lot of is a limiting of the platform and the message.

Jim Grossman:

There was some of that too. In the '60s, I wouldn't want to minimize that. I have a vivid recollection in 1972, of students who did not want to let Strom Thurmond speak. Being in a meeting where we got into a conversation about this, my argument at the time was, why Heckles Strom Thurmond? He heckles himself. You have to go back to Marcuse and his concept of repressive tolerance. This was already on the table in the late '60s and the early '70s. So there is a precedent for that. You're right, the whole thing about Berkeley free speech movement was allowing people, but there also were debates about who should be allowed to speak.

Michelle Deutchman:

No, I appreciate that, thank you. While we're talking about Berkeley, I want to ask you a little bit about colleges and universities, because a lot of what we've been talking about is K through 12. Of course, unfortunately sometimes K through 12 education and post-secondary education are too siloed. So I want to talk about the connection that you've seen, if any, in terms of how what's going on in primary and secondary schools, if we're seeing an impact on what's happening in universities in terms of students' preparedness or what they've learned or how they're going about critically thinking about the information, or perhaps it's too soon to make those kinds of conclusions.

Jim Grossman:

That's a very good question, and I think it might well be a little too soon. There's also a problem of what's your variable, because people who teach college and university, remember, are now teaching COVID students. So preparation, when you're teaching in higher education now, you're teaching students who lost two years of education or at least had two years where it was deeply flawed.

So we have to always ask, what is the problem? Is the problem what's going on with relating to these laws and chilling effect? Is it COVID? Is it something else? We are also now, when you're teaching in higher education, you are increasingly teaching students who are not accustomed to reading substantial texts. So there's many possible variables about why entering students might be different from 20 years ago. There's always the problem of romanticization. There's always the problem of our students aren't as good as they were 20 years ago, and somehow, the number that's used, the AGO, seems to map onto when the person saying it was a high school student. So there's part of that.

There's also, I think we're also seeing differences in students' expectations of higher education. So there are lots of variables here. We need to be aware that in higher education, tenure matters, academic freedom matters. High school teachers don't have the protections that we have in higher education. This is something that we are constantly reminding our higher education members when we talk about these issues, which is, look, everybody, our colleagues in high schools are operating on a different terrain. We have to be more realistic. We sometimes have to be more willing to speak to people who disagree with us in order to protect high school teachers.

Michelle Deutchman:

I think that's a really key point, and it has to be noted. It's not quite analogous, but the same thing when I'm talking with staff versus faculty when we're talking about expression related issues. The reality is, is that staff do not have the same kinds of protections as faculty.

Jim Grossman:

That's right.

Michelle Deutchman:

That does impact what you do and how you think about what the consequences might be.

So a couple weeks ago, you and three researchers from AHA published what I thought was a very interesting op-ed in Time magazine. It'll be in the links in the podcast resources called, Cultural Warriors on Both Sides are Wrong about America's History Classroom. The piece relies on empirical data that AHA has been collecting for the better part of two years. From what I understood it, the take home message is and I'm going to quote you back to you, the typical American history classroom is neither a wash in white supremacy nor a woke with critical race theory. I'm wondering if you want to talk a little bit about that piece and about how we can go about reminding people to be grounded in the realities of what's actually happening day to day in classrooms to help break through some of that media noise that we are bombarded with.

Jim Grossman:

I think it's absolutely crucial for people to realize that we are not setting those two things as equivalents on the right and the left. We're not saying here, over here is white supremacy and over here is critical race theory, and these are the same things in terms of distance from some kind of notion of center, which would make no sense anyway. What we're trying to say is there are many things that people think are being taught that aren't. We chose those only because those are the things that our teachers are most often accused of teaching. That there are many, many people who accuse teachers of teaching white supremacy, who accuse teachers of teaching critical race theory. These are not equivalents, but they are flashpoints. So are other things. Teachers are being accused of teaching all sorts of things relating to sexuality. Teachers are accused of teaching students to hate their grandparents, as I've mentioned earlier.

What we're trying to say here is, please do not accuse teachers of teaching things until you have some data that show that's what they're teaching. Just because your kid's teacher is teaching this or your neighbor's kid tells their parents that their teacher is teaching this, that's a single example, that is not

evidence. At least it's not the kind of evidence that historians and social scientists use when we try to understand what's happening out there in the world or what has happened. So that's all we're trying to do there is say, we're going back to your metaphor about explosions. There's a lot of people who are trying to set off explosions based on words that are hot words, explosive words. Before we say this is a danger, let's go find out what teachers are teaching, and they're not teaching that. We know that.

Michelle Deutchman:

We keep circling back right to the value of facts, evidence, information, and I think that can't be emphasized enough. So it seems like it's impossible for me to get through a podcast episode without talking about the upcoming election or the flip side of that, about democracy. I do want to ask you as a center that focuses not just on expression but on engagement, about the role, whether you want it to be the role of history educators or history itself, playing in students' engagement in our democracy, especially in a year that we're having, what's going to be as far as I can tell, a very fraught election year.

Jim Grossman:

All of the legislation that you've talked about, as well as what you see in certain media, accuse teachers of indoctrinating students. I'm going to now quote or paraphrase, former San Francisco City Councilman Harvey Milk. I don't think this is an apocryphal quote, anybody can check it, but Harvey Milk supposedly once said, if teachers could indoctrinate students, we would have a lot more nuns in this country. Anybody who has raised teenagers, who works with teenagers knows it is really, really hard to indoctrinate students.

That said, it is not very hard to indoctrinate poorly educated grownups. When we talk about threats to democracy, that's really what we're talking about. We're talking about misinformation, indoctrination of people who are either unwilling to or unable to sift information to think critically about it. So instead of accusing history and social studies, teachers of indoctrinating, of hating their grandparents or teaching things that we don't want them to teach, let's instead remember that history education is what can prepare a citizenry to be democratic citizens. There are very few things better than history education to prepare adults for being able to be intelligent, thoughtful voters.

One of the things that makes history different from, and we're partly a social science, partly humanities discipline, one of the things that sets us apart in some ways is an emphasis on agency. We tend to think of human agency rather than looking at big social forces that oppress people, which they do, rather than thinking about the izations as our models of change, democratization, urbanization, and whatever, we tend to look at human agency. People who are educated in a discipline that emphasizes human agency knows what the capacity of democracy is, that that's how you maintain a democracy by refusing to be passive, by refusing to be acted upon.

Michelle Deutchman:

I think you better be careful, I'm feeling very inspired and I'm actually feeling hopeful, and I'm feeling a little bit regretful that I wasn't a history major. It's never too late, but-

Jim Grossman:

That's right.

Michelle Deutchman:

... This is making me wish that I had foregone political science.

Jim Grossman:

How many history courses did you take?

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, I was an undergraduate.

Jim Grossman:

Yes.

Michelle Deutchman:

Honestly, I don't remember.

Jim Grossman:

Well, the reason I ask, and this goes back to some of your earlier questions about challenges, is a lot of people think that the American Historical Association is just out there advocating for more history majors, and that does matter, but what we have also realized especially lately, and this goes back again to the change that you asked about 14 years. We are not going to and we don't want to try to convince students not to major in STEM disciplines, in whatever they think is going to be the most fun, and quite frankly, in many cases, whatever is going to allow them to be the most comfortable in life. What we want them to do is take two or three history classes so that they will be better at what they do.

Michelle Deutchman:

Fair enough, I got that. I will tell you before I ask our last question, that one of the most inspirational classes I ever took and I should really try to find my AP US history professor who taught us out of Howard Zinn's book, and it was really a life-changing experience.

So with that, we always want to end our episodes by trying to leave our listeners with a concrete action they take, a small step they can implement in their day-to-day life. I'm going to ask you, I don't even think it has to be about legislation, but I think about history, generally. What is something other than going and reading some of the legislation that they need to inform themselves about, what are some other things that our listeners who are largely administrators and faculty in higher education might consider doing?

Jim Grossman:

That's a very good question. I think that what they might consider doing is thinking about ways in which they can create environments in which people who disagree interact with one another. That the polarization that you've described takes place in so many different contexts. There are very good data that show that people now are living near people who agree with them politically, that even our resident... It used to be that one of our big problems as a society was residential segregation by race and ethnicity. According to some data, it looks like now we're getting residential segregation based on ideas and politics.

I think that social media creates environments in which people just get more and more and more and more and more excited and outraged. Each time they read something, it's someone else who agrees with them who says this something is outrageous. So I think that one thing that administrators of any institution can do is think hard about, how do we expose people to ideas that are different from their own in ways that emphasize the quality of questions, and in ways that help people to realize that other people can be decent people and disagree with them.

I think also, administrators and teachers can step back and try to help people to think more about intent. There is currently a focus on only on outcomes in some places. It matters what people intend to do

because even if you say, which is reasonable, that what matters is an outcome, if you don't understand intent, you can't respect people.

One of the things that we benefit, and when I talk about why we benefit from studying history and historical thinking, is there's a concept that we call historical empathy, which is very different from sympathy. Sympathy is a good thing, you feel for somebody, you feel sorry for them or you feel happy for them. Empathy is very different. Empathy is trying to figure out what is on in someone else's head, trying to understand why they do what they do, why they say what they say, and that's what historians do. I can't write about the past if I don't try to understand people who I don't like, because otherwise then I'm only writing about people I like and that's going to be a pretty poverty-stricken story. So what we teach students is to learn how to understand people. Also, I would encourage people to think about that concept of empathy and the advantage of historical study is it's easier. It's easier to try to understand people from the 16th century because there's less at stake than there is in trying to understand someone you don't like who lives around the corner right now.

Michelle Deutchman:

All essential things that I agree that we need to work on, not just in higher education, but in society at large. With that, I am sad to have to close because I've so enjoyed talking with you and learning from you. Again, want to just express the Center's gratitude for your sharing your expertise and time.

Jim Grossman:

Thank you for asking excellent questions.

Michelle Deutchman:

That's a wrap. Thank you again to our guest, Jim Grossman for joining us. As we head toward April, if you haven't already registered for the center's Annual Speech Matters Conference on April 18th, we encourage you to do so. Join us virtually for a half day focused on politics, polarization, and perils on campus. Talk to you next month.