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 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. During SpeechMatters four seasons, we've touched on various aspects of diversity for controversy over whether using diversity statements and faculty hiring is constitutional, as well as discussion about the sweeping number of legislative acts passed with the goal of eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in university classrooms and in extracurricular realms.

This month, we're going to look at diversity through a different lens. The kaleidoscope of viewpoint diversity in higher education. This phrase has been popping up everywhere, news headlines, legislation, and the formation of centers, proposed settlements between the federal government and universities. The work of accreditors, the list goes on and on. Wherever this topic arises, emotional and deeply polarized views are typically not far behind, but the current administration raising concerns about educational echo chambers, potential liberal indoctrination of students, ideological homogeneity on the part of professors and threatening to withhold federal funds if more perspectives are not represented.

Many in academia are reflecting on how did we get here? What does it mean to lack ideological diversity? How does it impact learning? And of course, how do we fix it? Luckily, today's guest political scientist, Jon Shields, has been thinking and writing about this topic for over a decade and is joining us to share his thoughts on how to answer these weighty questions, but before we dive in, let's turn to class notes, a look at what's making headlines.

Since last month's class notes, a lot has happened. Right after we dropped episode seven, Columbia University became the first of several private universities to settle with the Trump administration. In a decision, met with fury, defeat, and disillusionment on the part of stakeholders inside and outside of the New York campus, Columbia agreed to pay over 220 million in fines and penalties to resolve investigations into alleged violations of federal anti-discrimination laws related to handling of antisemitism on campus.

While the settlement restored the vast majority of the federal funds frozen by the administration in March, Columbia is paying a price far beyond the fines. According to scholars at the Knight First Amendment Institute, the settlement narrow's Columbia's autonomy with respect to admissions, the hiring and promotion of faculty and curriculum, all aspects of what the Supreme Court has called the essential freedoms of the university. The settlement also requires new rules

relating to protest on campus and student discipline, realms that generally are and should be left to the discretion of the university rather than to the government.

University of Pennsylvania and Brown University both followed suit soon after Columbia and news outlets report that Harvard and the administration are also nearing a settlement. Emboldened by university's acquiescence, the Trump administration turned its attention to the University of California system and UCLA in particular. Earlier this month, the administration froze over $500 million in research funds and then demanded that UCLA pay $1 billion to restore the frozen funding, as well as contribute 172 million to a claims fund that would compensate victims of civil rights violations.

On Monday, August 25th, the Los Angeles Times reported the top UC leaders including UC Regents Board Chair, Janet Reilly and UC President James B. Milliken, are beginning talks with the Justice Department. The clock is ticking given that the department announced that it is ready to sue if there is not reasonable certainty that the sides can reach an agreement by September 2nd. In other funding news at the end of last week, the Supreme Court issued a 5-4 ruling allowing the Trump administration to cut off health research grants. It alleges advanced diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, or promote gender ideology extremism.

Justice Roberts joined the three liberal justices in dissent. While this ruling is not a final determination on whether terminating the grants is legal, it does mean that the administration can continue to withhold funds. While the legal arguments continue. To close out this month's class notes, I want to highlight the concerning education department Dear Colleague letter that went to the field last week. This guidance made an about-face concerning the use of federal work-study funds for voter outreach-related efforts by rescinding Biden-errant guidance.

Under the Biden administration's interpretation of federal statutes, federal work-study funds could be used for nonpartisan voter registration, voter assistance at a polling place or through a voter hotline or serving as a poll worker. According to the Department of Education's latest interpretation. However, these activities can no longer be funded by federal work-study. Now back to today's guest, Jon A. Shields is a professor of American politics in the government department at Claremont McKenna College where he has received the G. David Huntoon Senior Teaching Award, as well as the Distinguished Service Award.

Shields is the author or co-author of four books on the American Right, The Republican Civil War: What Liz Cheney's Wyoming Tells Us About a Divided American Right, which is forthcoming. Trump's Democrats from 2020, Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University from 2016 and The Democratic Virtues of the Christian Right from 2009. Jon's work has also been published in a number of academic journals, including the Journal of Policy History, Political Science Quarterly, Critical Review, Contemporary Sociology, and the Journal of Church and State.

In addition, his opinions have appeared in the pages of the Atlantic, Bulwark, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Los Angeles Times, New Republic, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and New York Times. This interview is aptly timed given the recent release of a paper by Jon and others on college syllabi on contentious issues, which has been getting attention. I look forward to discussing that and many more issues. Welcome Dr. Shields. We're so pleased that you could join us.

Jon Shields:

I'm delighted to be here. Thanks for having me.

Michelle Deutchman:

And is it okay if I call you Jon?

Jon Shields:

Please.

Michelle Deutchman:

Okay, so Jon, I think it would be good to do some table setting. I think let's go to the basics, which is let's start with your conception of whether you call it ideological diversity or viewpoint diversity, and what does that term mean to you and what makes it so critical for a liberal education? And I'll just clarify, liberal meaning an approach to learning, not a reference to politics.

Jon Shields:

Yeah, great. Good question. Thanks again for having me. I would say that there are lots of intellectual currents that have profoundly shaped our intellectual world, and they include Marxist Currents and Burkean ones, feminism, libertarian, liberal communitarian traditions, just to give a few examples, and I think it's important to teach authors and thinkers who've been shaped by these various traditions, it's important to have people in our university community who are aligned with these various traditions, partly just because they've had an outsized influence on our intellectual life, and so they matter.

And I would also argue that they matter because there's wisdom in them. I think it's partly why they endure and continue to attract different partisans, and I suspect most academics would agree with the proposition that we wouldn't want the university to be dominated by just one of these traditions. So as an ideal, it seems to me that the university should encompass the whole, right? It should be intellectually diverse. We want the university to be the university and not a sectarian institution.

Michelle Deutchman:

I think that's a great place to start and I'm just going to dive in and go into what a lot of people seem to have been writing and saying particularly in this moment that this term viewpoint diversity some people feel like has in many ways become code for political diversity or not enough conservative faculty basically. And I think it's worthwhile to just share with the listeners the numerous studies that have illustrated the significant imbalance that we do see in the academy between faculty that identify themselves as liberal and those that identify as conservative, right?

You talked about this in a 2018 piece, The Disappearing Conservative Professor when you cite the Carnegie Foundation, that it had its survey in 1969, and at that point, 27% of faculty identified as conservative. And in that same survey, 30 years later, the percentage had dropped to 12%. And just last year, AEI referenced some work by Samuel Abrams at Sarah Lawrence, which illustrated this continuing move by faculty to the left, but with the ratio of Democrats to Republicans among students and citizens changing a little over the same time period, I think it

would be worthwhile for our listeners if you could share a little bit of the history of how do we get here? What forces have been at play to result in this imbalance? It just didn't occur.

Jon Shields:

Yeah, it's a great question. And first I'd say, to your first point, I think it's true that viewpoint diversity has become code for this idea that there's just too many lefty professors in the university and there's not enough conservatives or center-right academics. And in some ways, I think that's unfortunate. I do think we need more intellectual pluralism and not always more conservative voices, although I think we need those too.

I'll just give an example. Middle East studies is a field that has really been dominated for quite a few years by those who are pretty strongly anti-Zion. And so what that field badly needs, it seems to me or scholars who are skeptical of the field's, dominant narratives and who engage them in thoughtful ways. And these thinkers need not necessarily be conservatives, they just need to be intention with, again, the anti-Israel left, or to give another example, many English departments are dominated by critical theory people.

It would be good, it seems to me, if they were more pluralistic, if they hired more scholars who took different approaches to text. Again, I don't think they have to be conservative per se, even if they're going to be in many cases to the right of those who tend to dominate English departments. That said, I do think conservatives matter. I think there's a rich, conservative intellectual tradition that gets attenuated and weakened when we lose, when conservatives start to disappear from the professoriat and you ask why they're declining.

There is some evidence that there's just old-fashioned discrimination against conservatives. There's quite a few surveys that show that at least a sizable minority of professors will just say that they wouldn't hire a conservative or they'd be much less inclined to hire a conservative. So that's a real thing. That said, I've often said this and I think it's worth stressing. I don't think those prejudices which are real really explain the scarcity of conservatives in the professoriat, and that's because the truth is that there just aren't that many in the PhD pipeline.

Most search committees don't, in many cases, they don't have an opportunity to even express their prejudices should they have them because there just aren't, again, that many conservatives getting PhDs these days, particularly in the social sciences, in humanities. And then the question is why? What's happening? Why aren't more conservatives getting PhDs? Why are liberals and progressives and lefties much more drawn to the academy? And partly there's a social class story, which we may get to later a little bit. Conservatives are disappearing from the professional class just more broadly.

We have a diploma divide in this country after all. And conservatives tend to be concentrated among Americans who are not highly educated. And that's a change from the 1960s and '70s certainly. But it's also the case that of those conservatives who go to college, they often discover that they don't like their courses in the humanities and social sciences nearly as much as their liberal peers do. When progressive students take their as freshmen, they go to college and they take a survey course in sociology or history, they often discover that they want to take more of them.

They like those experiences partly because I think those courses tend to be framed around progressive concerns and interpretations, and so that appeals to just the interest and sensibilities I think of young progressives. Conservatives I think have a different reaction and to those same

courses, and I think as the curriculum has become more politicized in a leftward direction, I think it's not surprising that conservatives decide they just don't want to take a lot of those courses that want to major in the social sciences in humanities.

It's a really interesting study of an elite liberal art college, and it was interested in predicting why some students picked one major over another. It was trying to assess what led students to major in the social sciences versus say, a STEM field. And it found that the political beliefs of students was the best predictor. It found that conservative students really tracked overwhelmingly into STEM fields and liberal students were much more likely to select into the humanities and the social sciences.

And lo and behold, of course, we find more conservative professors in STEM fields than we do in the natural sciences. And I think this sorting process really starts very early. And then the last thing I'll say, I think the other big structural factor that's driving this is that it's not really things the left is doing. It's things that the right is doing.

There's a lot of, I think movement conservatives are pushing young conservatives away from the university, partly because they just see them as so unfriendly to conservatives that I think they perhaps unintentionally alienate young conservatives from the university. And my favorite example here is Charlie Kirk, who is the director of Turning Point USA, which is a big MAGA-aligned organization that has lots of student chapters.

And one thing Charlie Kirk is not doing is telling young conservatives to become professors. He's contemptuous of the university. He encourages them to be alienated and cynical. I think that's another force that is driving these trends as well. And in conclusion, I'd say it's almost as if academics and Charlie Kirk are conspiring to keep the university the way it is and the way it's trending.

Michelle Deutchman:

That was really helpful. I appreciated that you looked at a plurality of things that are happening because I think at least my experience has been that usually people are, like you said, I'm finding they're picking one of those things as sort of the explanation. And so therefore, if there's only one cause, then therefore there might be only one solution, and I think we are ultimately going to get two solutions.

But I did want to spend just a little bit more time talking about, again, this movement from how we ended up here because you and Joshua Dunn wrote this groundbreaking book, which is now almost a decade ago, where you interviewed 153 professors and you talked about the experience of conservative professors in higher education. And I thought it would be interesting if you think it's valuable to highlight some of the findings and then maybe contrast that with what is still the same and what has changed and so therefore that can help us lead to here are some things that got us to the current moment and now what is it that we plan to do?

Jon Shields:

Sure. Yeah, it's a good question. The book. Yeah, the book has aged a bit. Also, I'll say first a little bit about what we found at the time. One interesting finding is that conservative professors in the main feel relatively at home in the university, despite their scarcity and low numbers, despite the leftward tilt of the university. And indeed when we interviewed professors, we were struck that many said that they felt more at home in the university than the Republican Party,

largely because of the growing influence of the populist right, and they didn't like right wing populism and felt alienated from it.

And one of the things that I think is just worth reminding listeners about conservative professors is that they tend to be anti-populist, and they tend to see the dark side to democracy and feel some real sense of alienation from the Trumpist right, from the MAGA right. And they felt mostly they seem to be thriving and doing well in the university. That said, that may be true for a couple of reasons. We also found that many of the professors we interviewed tended to conceal their politics certainly before tenure. They kept their head down.

It's also the case that they generally found their way into the safest spaces for conservatives in the university, which is to say that most of the conservatives we interviewed avoided the most politicized disciplines in subfields. There's lots of no-go zones for conservatives, or at least that's how they understood it. They found their way into places where they felt relatively welcome. So we found, for example, that there are a lot of conservative economists, of course, and there's pretty good number of conservative political scientist, but there are very few conservative sociologists or historians or literature professors.

We really struggled even to identify and find those folks. This resonates with my own story as well. I love sociology, which is why much of my work has a sociology cast to it, but I didn't become a sociologist because the discipline from top to bottom just seemed too politicized. I just avoided it. And instead I got a PhD in political science, not because I wanted to study the kinds of things that political scientists normally study.

I didn't want to study the Congress or the presidency or congressional log rolling seems terribly boring and depressing, but political science did create a kind of space, it did feel like a more tolerant space where I could do the kinds of things I was interested in doing, but in a different universe, in a world in which sociology was less politicized and I think less hostile to conservatives, I think I would've become a sociologist.

You also asked what's changed, and we did the interviews way back during Obama's second term. I think we started doing them as far back as 2012. And a lot has changed since those years. This was before the surge of left-wing identity politics. Actually, when we talked to conservative professors at the time, I don't think a single one expressed concern that their students couldn't speak up because of social anxiety or social repression.

They weren't thinking about those things. They weren't thinking about cancel culture or talking about it. And we did these interviews also, of course before Trump rose to power. I think one of the things that surprised me since the book came out is that there were more professors, conservative professors who were willing to defend Trump, or at least more than I would've predicted. I thought maybe there'd be just a few, but it turns out that more conservative professors ended up coming around to Trump than I would've guessed.

There's been some interesting work done by a sociologist by the name of David Schwartz at Boston University, and he just wrote a book on Academic Trumpists, and he identified and found more of those folks than I would've guessed. They do tend to be concentrated in a few places like Hillsdale and the University of Dallas, and generally speaking, they're less professionalized than anti-Trump conservative professors. They publish less and they're less integrated into their disciplines, but they're definitely more of those types than I would've predicted.

But I guess the biggest thing that happened is, and this is much more recently, is that suddenly universities are more interested in hiring conservatives than they were certainly when we did our

interviews back in more than 10 years ago. This is thanks in part to the new civic schools in red states, which are hiring conservatives. Partly it's because some of the other prestigious universities are talking about the need to hire some conservatives. So that's a big change. Suddenly it seems like maybe it's a good time to be a conservative professor, and my guess is that gives some of my conservatives, some of the conservatives we interviewed, a sense of professional vertigo.

Michelle Deutchman:

It's very interesting because it's the culmination of all kinds of different things, and I have two I want to ask, I think, and I don't want to forget the second one. I think I want to pull a little bit on what you've been talking about, this sort of movement to hire more conservative minded professors, whether that's through legislation, state legislation that's mandating viewpoint diversity or like you said, the establishment of certain centers of civic thought. But I think one of the things that's I think come to light is this increased attention and attempts to undermine certain other kinds of diversity, diversity, equity, inclusion in higher ed.

And we have some liberals largely that are arguing that despite the rights opposition to affirmative action and other related policies that are they now borrowing from that playbook in order to recruit rightly mean faculty. And I'm wondering if you'd be able to respond what your thoughts are about that because I think some people are sort of saying, "Hey, we're looking on a little bit of hypocrisy here."

Jon Shields:

Right. Yeah, it's a great question. I think there may be a sort of irony for both the left and the right here. One longstanding progressive argument for affirmative action says that education requires diversity of thought. That after all was the Supreme Court's original justification for affirmative action. In the Bakke case back in 1977, it didn't rest the constitutional justification for affirmative action on remedial justice.

It justified affirmative action by this notion that universities need a diversity of voices. So if those liberal justices were right all along, if the primary purpose of affirmative action is to increase the variety of perspectives and voices, then it seems to me there's no good ground to exclude conservative ones. It seems like conservatives would fit naturally into that liberal justification for affirmative action.

Meanwhile, though, the right never liked that ruling. They were critics of Bakke, they argued for merit over social engineering, but now as you suggest, some seem to be saying, "Well, maybe those liberal justices in Bakke were right all along. Maybe universities need to intentionally make themselves more diverse so that they can fulfill their mission."

In a way, they seem to be coming around at least to the rationale that Bakke provided. I think there's always been hypocrisy around the question of diversity in higher ed. And so I think it's been a bipartisan. If there's hypocrisy, I think it's bipartisan personally, if you're asking me, I think various forms of diversity are important in higher education. We don't want campuses that don't have gender or racial or ethnic diversity. And I would also say that we don't want them to be without conservative thinkers either, but I do think it's worth reminding ourselves that these trends are going in somewhat different directions.

That is since the '60s, there's been a dramatic increase in gender and racial diversity in higher ed. Thanks in part to the success of affirmative action. But over that same course of time, there are many fewer conservatives than there used to be in the 1960s. At many top research universities, I think we would struggle to find a single conservative professor. I'd say in closing that, personally I think that all these forms of pluralism matter and are important, but there's also the pivot to this concern about conservatives makes some sense given these divergent trends.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, and maybe it's naive or idealistic of me to think why does it need to be? It feels in this moment very either or sort of this binary as opposed to, but and that somehow just because there has been an increase in certain kinds of diversity since the '60s, since the relationship seems to have been inverse, why does that mean that one needs to be stopped while we further the other?

Jon Shields:

I guess I would just distinguish, I agree with that basically. I think it's good to separate some of these things. I would agree that these things shouldn't be either or and that universities have an interest in having a range of diversity, and there's not a reason one can't pull things simultaneously. I think the campaign against DEI is a little different in the sense that it's much less clear to me that the DEI is necessarily good for the university, or at least some of the things that fall under the umbrella of DEI, which seem different from, to me at least, than just the goal of diversifying the faculty or diversifying the student body.

Michelle Deutchman:

No, I think that's absolutely fair because what is part of DEI is also a lot of hiring and programming and co-curricular and extracurricular. So I have a question, and I'm almost a little bit embarrassed to ask it, but I'm going to ask it anyway because thinking if I have it, then maybe someone else has it, which is this idea of talking about almost as if someone needs to be conservative minded in order to teach conservative thinking and ideas. And I'm wondering if that's because people who let's say are more liberal-minded and in some of these disciplines you've talked about are just not interested and therefore they're not teaching it, or if it really is that you can, yeah, you know what I'm saying?

Jon Shields:

No, it's a great question, and it's a smart question, and I'm sympathetic actually. I do think that there's no good reason that non-conservatives can't teach conservative ideas. And in fact, I would say that given the scarcity of conservatives in the university, I think it's important that liberals do teach conservative ideas because there aren't conservatives around to teach them. So if our students are going to learn what's best and worthy of considering in the conservative intellectual tradition, it seems to me that we need non-conservative professors to take an interest in that tradition and do it.

And indeed, I just helped organize a workshop for faculty this last spring that was done through the American Enterprise Institute in Washington DC and it was a program for faculty who were interested in teaching conservative political thought, but didn't really know very much about the tradition. And one of the very gratifying things actually, is that we got a number of faculty, we

got quite a few faculty who were not conservatives at all, but just thought it was a problem that there weren't many courses that taught conservative ideas in their college curriculum.

I agree with you. I do think, however, that traditionally conservative professors were the custodians of this tradition. They were more interested in it, and taught it more frequently, but also contributed to it. I think on the teaching side, you're right. Lots of non-conservative should and can teach conservative ideas, but I also think we need conservative thinkers who are part of the university in contributing to the campus level conversations and also contributing conservative thought and ideas, infusing that into research and scholarship as well.

Michelle Deutchman:

No, I think that is a really helpful point, because again, we all draw on our own experiences. I was an adjunct professor at UCLA law teaching this class on contemporary free exercise. I felt like it was my responsibility, especially because most of the students in the seminar were left leaning to absolutely represent the conservative aspects of the judiciary. But that is, I think, different than me writing about why I think those decisions were the right ones or why that tradition is important.

I think that's an important distinction, and I think this is a good opportunity to talk about the paper. I have to say, I feel like no one will believe me, but I'm like, "I invited Jon onto the podcast before he dropped his paper." And I got all this press, but I think it's really interesting, and I would love to pull on this thread and then maybe we can go from here into what you've touched on before, which is the diploma divide because I think that all of these things have in common that, at least from my perspective, higher education is one of the key pillars of democracy. And democracy necessitates being able to think through complex and hard issues as people and citizens.

So you have this working paper that you and Yuval Avnur and Stephanie Muravchik released about a month ago. It's called Closed Classrooms, An Analysis of College Syllabi on Contentious Issues. And the paper really leads by establishing that one of the main reasons we have universities is that they're integral to forming citizens. And then it examines critical texts that were assigned when discussing three different types of contentious issues. One was racial bias in American criminal justice, one was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and one was the ethics of abortion. So I'm wondering if you could share how you evaluated the syllabi and what are some of the things you learned from doing so?

Jon Shields:

Sure. Yeah. No, thanks for asking about it. It was a really fascinating project for us. We didn't really know what we'd find when we dug into this database of, it has over 20 million syllabi. So it's an enormous database, and as you said, we were interested in how contentious issues are being taught and to varying degrees, we found that the norm is to shield students from scholarly disagreement around these topics.

I'll give an example. We looked at Michelle Alexander's book, The New Jim Crow. It's an important book obviously. It shows up thousands of times in the syllabus. It's one of the most assigned texts in the United States as it should be I would say given its significance, given its influence on Black Lives Matter. It's a book I've taught, it's a book many of my colleagues have

taught. Students should read it and reckon with its arguments, but there's also been a lot of criticism of this book.

And when I say criticism, I don't mean criticism from the movement. Obviously, that's the case, but it's been criticized as well by scholars and academics who are actually not in fact conservatives, but just disagree with some of the major claims she makes in the book. And some are really heavy hitters. One critic is James Forman Jr., he's author of Locking Up Our Own. Locking Up Our Own is a book that won the Pulitzer, and he doesn't disagree with the whole, all of Alexander's book.

He agrees that our criminal justice system is Draconian, but he doesn't think we're living under a new Jim Crow. And in part he doesn't think that because he argues that black citizens and politicians push themselves for a tough-on-crime policy policies in the seventies and the 1980s. We looked at the extent to which critics like this, critics like Forman, we looked at the extent to which they're paired with and taught with Michelle's book. And what we found is that there's a very small group of professors who teach these controversies, but they're the exception to the rule.

In the vast majority of cases, academics assign the new Jim Crow, but they don't assign any of the critics. Instead, they assign a lot of books that tend to reinforce the arguments in the new Jim Crow. We argue that this is just really a missed opportunity and really unfortunate because college should help young people understand the problems and the controversies that shape our public life.

They should help young people understand the complexity of our political challenges and social issues so that they can become informed citizens so that they can become better activists so that they can become responsible leaders, but it seems to be not happening for the most part. And so that in short is what we found. We found it in the other issues as well. We found it in the case of Israel and Palestine, and we found it to a large extent too in the ethics of abortion. In any case, I'm happy to say more about the paper if you want to dig into it, but that's a kind of general overview of what we found.

Michelle Deutchman:

Okay. No, I have a couple. One was in all three cases, did you find the same in that the left-leaning books were assigned regularly without the critiques? Not that the critiques are right-leaning, or was there any mix of, there might've been the opposite?

Jon Shields:

Very little. We really looked for this because it's a really good question that you're asking here, right? You're asking, was there some group of conservative professors just teaching some other orthodoxy?

Michelle Deutchman:

Yeah, or even a group of a class that's about abortion ethics that could focus. There's so many things you could focus on ethically that one would consider anti-abortion, right? From a religious perspective, from a medical perspective.

Jon Shields:

Yeah, generally what we found is that for those who assigned the critics. For example, for professors who assigned James Forman's Locking Up Our Own, they almost invariably assigned Michelle Alexander. They don't have to do that. They could have just stacked it with lots of critiques of Alexander's thesis or that people in that space. So that suggests to me that there is this minority of professors who really do teach the controversy. Now, in the case of abortion, we did find one pro-life book that is by Francis Beckwith. He's a serious philosopher.

He engages in a thoughtful way, a lot of the pro-choice philosophers. It turns out that those who assigned Beckwith's book though tend not to include pro-choice voices, but it's a very small number of cases. We're talking a couple handful of syllabi mostly in really conservative Christian institutions. I do think that this is happening on the right in very sectarian kinds of institutions. I think what's troubling though is we don't want our great universities to mirror what the sectarian education that's happening in our most religious and conservative institutions, that seems just troubling to me.

Michelle Deutchman:

I would agree with that. I think now I'm going to get to, not that it's the million-dollar question, but of course this question of why, and I want to bring up one of the words that comes up whenever anyone talks about viewpoint diversity, which is this idea of indoctrination. There are many people who posit that this is all about left-leaning professors being more interested in indoctrinating students to specific ideologies and teaching them.

And my personal view is I have a hard time imagining that's really what's necessarily at work across the board. But you're the one that has done the actual study, and I'm curious if you have any, by going through what you've gone through, you were able to shed light on the why of it because of course, then the next piece becomes the, "All right, so how do we make changes so that syllabi and the way classroom discussions and contentious issues are structured differently?"

Jon Shields:

Yeah, the why is hard for us to discern. We can't shed much empirical light on that question based on the research we've done thus far. We can speculate a little. I do think in some cases it may be that professors just are teaching topics outside of their expertise. They don't always know what the literature and debates look like in those areas. For example, we found a good number of professors who were teaching The New Jim Crow who were in literature, you're doing it through literature courses.

And it's possible that a lot of these professors just don't know very much about the broader debates, scholarly debates about the criminal justice system because it's sort of outside their expertise. So that may be happening for some folks, but I also think that there's probably some slice of this world too that just has a different understanding of the relationship between education and liberal democracy.

And maybe we even just have different understanding. Maybe what's a tension here, actually, Michelle, is we just have different understandings of what good civic education is. There may be professors, for example, who just think, they may think that good professors should inspire their students to be change agents, and that requires them to expose them to the world's injustices.

And they're drawn to books that do that and aren't particularly interested in the critiques of those perspectives. And I don't know, and maybe the debate we just need to have in the university is

what is our role as professors and what is the relationship between the university and liberal democracy? And maybe we just have fundamentally different or really different understandings of what that relationship should look like.

Michelle Deutchman:

I literally had just written down this question, what is the goal of liberal education? So maybe the conversation isn't about which viewpoints and how diverse they are, but what are these viewpoints in service of? And one more thing I'd want to ask before I then ultimately get again to, I do want to get back to the diploma divide because I think part of what's happening now is we have the things that are going on internally in the university, and then we have the things that are going on externally, and then we have how are those things interacting with each other?

But I did want to spend a moment just talking about this question or issue of contentious conversations in the classroom and different people feel differently about the word safe space or welcoming space. But I hope you understand what I'm trying to get at, which is this idea that when we're going to expose students to viewpoints that may make them feel uncomfortable, which by the way is a really important part of education.

How does one go about doing that? And I was really taken with this piece you wrote in 2022 about you said, "I'm a conservative professor who opposed safe spaces. I was wrong." And you spend a lot of time talking about this framework for establishing classroom norms when preparing to engage in contentious conversations. And I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that, because I do think this issue is so layered.

The layering is like, "Are there enough diversity of viewpoints?" Yes, no, maybe then it's like, "Okay, how do we get more viewpoint diversity in the classroom?" But then there's the actual, "Okay, once we have the syllabus that actually potentially looks right, how do we actually have that take place in a robust, engaging way where people can come away feeling, I don't know if you want to say if it's good or if it's just yeah."

Jon Shields:

Sure. I'll talk just generally about that piece a little bit. I would place myself on the center-right, which generally means I'm broadly speaking in the free speech camp. That means I didn't particularly like the censorious culture, which has grown on college campuses over the past decade or so. I do think it was harmful to liberal education.

On the other hand, sometimes alienated by the free speech camp as well, partly because it has a tendency to think a lot about our rights and freedoms and not much at all about the culture that makes the pursuit of truth possible. And much less about the possibility that free speech culture might include norms of restraint and not just norms of free expression. So for example, if my colleague says something that I suspect is racist or anti-Semitic or bigoted in some way, I could tell them that.

I might be saying something that's true. Maybe they really are a bigot. I'd be exercising my freedom of speech, but if I did, they might retreat from the discussion that were happening and they might repress their sincere beliefs when whatever topic we're talking about comes up again. In those cases, I think restraint is important. I think it's better just to, in those kinds of cases, to push back against the claims that they're making and hope the conversation moves forward.

There's an example where the suppression of speech advances truth-seeking. In that New York Times piece, I make a distinction between self-censorship and self-restraint and self-censorship I think is something that happens under the shadow of coercion. It happens when we don't express our genuine thoughts because we fear someone might punish us or harm us in some way. Self-restraint though is different I think.

It's something that happens more or less through the free agreement of a community, essentially through collective norms that helps civilize and domesticate our conversations. So to your question about the classroom, I encourage my students to engage ideas without assuming bad faith. I encourage them to embrace a norm of charity in the classroom and also be restrained by that norm when they leave the classroom.

I don't want them to go out and call their classmates something vile on social media, for example. And I think these norms of restraint help students speak up in ways that help us collectively pursue the truth. I guess in short, I think advocates for free speech need to think more deeply about the kind of culture that facilitates true seeking, particularly in college classrooms.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, I could not agree more with that. I think it's not just something that you want to inculcate in college students, but as I think about raising my own children, this is a skill that we teach people, which is that we don't always say everything that is on our mind for many different reasons.

Jon Shields:

Right. And there's a culture of transgression that's always been powerful in the culture. I think it moved from left to in recent decades. You see it, the culture of transgression was always, I think, powerful on certain parts of the left, but I think it's really moved to the right. Trump is a great example of this. Trump doesn't respect any speech norms, and I think on the whole, that's been bad for democracy.

Michelle Deutchman:

I would concur. And I think that's a good lead in to zoom a little bit out of the classroom and the university and to think a little bit about what the interplay between our higher education system is and democracy. And certainly a phenomenon that people have been making note of in the last bunch of years is what you and I both refer to as the diploma divide. And I just for the purposes of our listeners, I want to make sure people know really what we're talking about, which is that Pew Research did a study of voting habits from last year's presidential election, and that showed that voters were sharply divided by whether they have a college degree.

Voters with a four-year degree or more who constitute about 40% of all voters favored Harris by double digits, 16 percentage points, while those with a college degree favored Trump by nearly as much, so 14 points. And then voters with postgraduate degrees showed an even stronger democratic preference favoring democratic candidates by roughly two to one. And I guess one of my questions is, is there a relationship between voting habits among college-educated voters and the dearth of conservative professors in academia?

Jon Shields:

Well, I think if it's not, the diploma divide is relatively new. And I do think it doesn't explain the gradual erosion of conservative professors since the 1990s, but I do think, I very much do think it doesn't portend well for the future. It's just another development that it'll certainly affect the pipeline down the road, and I'd say it's a democratic challenge.

The professional class as a whole I'd say has become much more progressive. And indeed, I'd even say that liberalism has become a badge of class membership. It's a way of signaling one's belonging to a social class, that's a powerful force. We all want to belong to our social class, but there might be another implication to this that circles back to an earlier conversation we had about affirmative action.

If we want to find more conservatives in PhD programs down the road, maybe we better practice class-based affirmative action because that's where the conservative students are going to come from. So yeah, I think the diploma divides troubling development for a lot of reasons, but it certainly doesn't help, certainly won't improve political diversity among the professoriate down the road, that's for sure.

Michelle Deutchman:

And I think talking about the future is sort of, I think where the best place for us to sort of end, even though it could be the beginning of a totally separate conversation, which is that I would be remiss if I didn't know the unprecedented assault on higher education right now, especially from the executive branch and sort of taking the things that we've spoken about and then adding that into consideration. It seems that there are very many obstacles, and so obviously you don't have all the answers, but if you were going to highlight a couple of things that people might be doing in this moment or in the short-term to address what we've talked about, what might those things be?

Jon Shields:

Yeah, what can we do?

Michelle Deutchman:

Yes, what can we do?

Jon Shields:

Yeah. Well, I think one great virtue of American universities and colleges is that they're the best in the world and we continue to remake them. They continue to experiment. Despite all the challenges in front of us, I think there is cause to be optimistic. A lot could be done here. I guess I would agree with my colleague Jon Zimmerman, who teaches education history at the University of Pennsylvania, and Jon always stresses that we need to somehow incentivize better teaching, and I do think he's right about that, and that might include offering generous course development grants for professors who want to teach scholarly controversies on contentious topics and remedy some of the problems that we identify in our paper.

We might modify the way we evaluate departments and attend more to teaching than we do in those evaluations. I do think there's also opportunities to build more institutions within universities that might diversify the professoriate and the curriculum. I think there's different

models for doing this, and I'm very encouraged to see the experimentation that's happening at Johns Hopkins University, for example, started the Agora Institute, which is concerned about civics and pluralism and viewpoint diversity. Then there's older institutions which are being reformed in interesting ways.

Hoover Institution at Stanford is now, I think some of its scholars are teaching undergraduates at Stanford. So that think tank has been integrated into the life of the undergraduate college more. I think despite the difficulty of our moment, which is admittedly bad. You mentioned the current White House, that's a serious problem, obviously. At the same time, again, it just seems to me that there's a lot of new initiatives at foot, and this is cliche, but it feels like the best and the worst of times. The Trump administration is raining hellfire on universities. At the same time, there's a lot of reform initiatives afoot, and I'm optimistic about those.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, I think that's a great note to end on. I feel like a lot of people just say it's the worst of times. If you think it's both the best and the worst, then that's great. And it's true that Johns Hopkins also started that partnership with AEI, that Civic Thought conference, and I feel like we've covered a lot. There's more to talk about, but is there anything else that you would like to say that perhaps we missed or that you feel like you would like to add?

Jon Shields:

No, just to thank you. It's been a delight to be on the program, and I appreciate it.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, I appreciate willingness, and I am really hopeful that this will give some people who might not have been as open to the different perspectives on this particular issue and opportunity to think about it from some different vantage points. And I sort of think of learning as a kaleidoscope, and so it looks different when we look through different lenses. Thanks for bringing your academic and intellectual lens to SpeechMatters.

Jon Shields:

Thanks.

Michelle Deutchman:

That's a wrap. Thanks again to Dr. Jon Shields for joining us. Next month, we are honored to be joined by the former United States National Archivist Dr. Colleen Shogan. Dr. Shogan will talk with us about civic education to mark Constitution Day, which is celebrated September 17th. We'll talk to you then.