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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.

00:21.94

Bettina Apthekar

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

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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.

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Over the last decade, there has been a proliferation of schools of civic thought on campuses across the United States. The first was the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University at Tempe, which was established in 2016 via a mandate by the Republican-controlled legislature.

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Since then, similar schools have popped up at private and public institutions alike, including University of North Carolina's School of Civic Life and Leadership, University of Tennessee's Institute of American Civics,

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James Madison's Center for Civic Engagement, and Ohio State's Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society. According to a recent report by Heterodox Academy, there are now 45 civic centers at private and public universities in the U.S.

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The growth of these schools and centers has not been without controversy, however. Critics argue that they are part of a partisan playbook to infuse conservative ideology and funding into college and university curriculum.

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To help us better understand what these developments mean for higher education and for democracy, we're privileged to be joined by Dr. Christopher Tollefsen, who is currently serving as Interim Executive Director of the Center for American Civic Leadership and Public Discourse at the University of South Carolina.

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But before we dive into our conversation with Dr. Tollefsen, let's turn to Class Notes, a look at what's making headlines. The Trump administration continues its efforts to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion and accessibility programs for all federal funding recipients. A new proposal from the General Services Administration would require recipients of federal funds to certify that they do not operate such initiatives.

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The administration defined some programs, including race-based scholarships, as discriminatory practices that would violate the certification requirement. The move comes in spite of courts blocking similar policies from the U.S. Department of Education.

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This week, federal officials sent warning letters to some accreditation organizations reminding them of the need to abolish diversity, equity, and inclusion standards as the administration weighs broader changes to the accreditation system.

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In its continued targeting of universities across the country, the Trump administration sued the University of California, accusing its Los Angeles campus of not doing enough to respond to anti-Semitism in the workplace and for violating the civil rights of Jewish employees.

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The administration filed the lawsuit nearly seven months after the Justice Department sought more than \$1 billion dollars from the university. Late last month, Gallup and Lumina Foundation published an interesting report showing that just 2% of college students say their political views make them feel as if they do not belong on campus.

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Two-thirds of students said most of their professors encouraged them to share their views, and 71% said their professors create classroom environments that support both students who express unpopular opinions and those who may feel upset by those views.

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These findings are in stark contrast to the public's declining confidence in higher education, which partly reflects a growing belief that colleges promote political indoctrination.

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Now back to today's guest, Dr. Christopher Tollefsen. Christopher is a philosophy professor who received his PhD at Emory University and has been teaching at University of South Carolina, USC, for almost 30 years. He's had visiting fellowships at the James Madison program at Princeton University, the Eudaimonia Institute at Wake Forest University, as well as at the DeNicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame.

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His research interests focus on ethics, specifically in an area of natural law philosophy, popularly known as new natural law theory. His work includes practical ethics such as medical ethics, the ethics of lying and truth telling and beginning and ending of life ethics. He's published over 125 articles in journals and edited collections and a similar number of popular essays in venues such as Public Discourse, First Things, and National Review.

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He is the author of three books, including one that will be out later this year with Cambridge University Press, Killing, and Christian Ethics. Chris, thanks so much for joining us. It's an honor to have you on Speech Matters.

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Dr. Christopher Tollefsen

Michelle, it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for the invitation. So I could easily become distracted by your fascinating areas of study and my curiosity about the new natural law theory, but I will stay the course and focus on civic thought.

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As I mentioned at the top of the episode, universities across the country are establishing schools, centers, programs, and partnerships with the goals of promoting civic engagement, intellectual diversity, and civic discourse on campus.

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You are currently serving as the interim director of one such center at USC, the Center for American Civic Leadership and Public Discourse. I always like to start the episode by asking our guests a little about their journey. So can you share with us what led you to philosophy and then ultimately to becoming the executive director for this center?

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Sure. I think it's it's an interesting career history for me just to look back on. My father was a philosophy professor at the college that i went to as an undergraduate. And initially for me, that meant that i was ready to do anything other than philosophy. I started off as an English major.

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I just didn't want to do exactly what what my father was up to. But in the end, it turned out that that was really the thing that I was best at. And so with my wife, we both went on to to graduate school. In the end, this is just a side note, but maybe worth mentioning, my father passed away my first week of graduate school. He was very young. He was 45.

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And being in philosophy professionally has been very meaningful for me because I keep meeting people who had some sort of connection to him professionally, people who were students or people who were colleagues. And so being a part of The philosophy profession has been a way to keep connected with him these past almost 40 years.

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But even from very early on in philosophy, it seemed to me that I did my best work. I did my best thinking when it was in some kind of conversation with somebody with whom I disagreed, when there was a little bit of friction.

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And I think that's that's something that probably stands me in good stead in the job that I have now. So it's one part of the the picture. And I think the other important part of how I ended up in this particular position right here are the two times that I spent, the two years that I spent, psychological years at Princeton University with the James Madison program in American ideals and institutions.

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And prior to the first time that I went there 2004, 2005, I was basically just doing straight philosophy. and And that's what I love. And that's what i I think I have the most natural talent for. But being at the James Madison program surrounded me with people who are working in politics and political theory and law in history.

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People whose acquaintance with the past of the American founding and its legal history and its theoretical underpinnings were just vastly, vastly greater than mine. and I just found all of that to be really enriching.

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It's made it possible for me to sort of broaden the philosophical world in which I live. And so the opportunity to lead the center for its first year amazing. ah kind of natural opportunity for me to pursue as an extension, especially in those couple of years that I had spent at Princeton.

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Thank you. Well, first of all, I appreciate your sharing that about your dad. I know he, I'm sure he would be extremely proud of all the things that you're, you're doing. And also whenever I talk with guests, I do think to myself, why is it that I didn't take this coursework when I was an undergrad, right? How did I get away with not taking more philosophy and political theory as a political scientist? Yeah. So let's start with like a little bit of table setting. You know, from your vantage point, can you talk about what civic thought is and what role you think it should be playing at today's colleges and universities?

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So I think of civic thought, and I think you could probably ask 10 or 15 different people who are involved in this space and they would give you slightly different answers. But i think of I think of civic thought as essentially devoted to two questions. What is the nature of goods? What does it mean to be a good citizen?

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And what are the responsibilities or the tasks of good citizenship? And so civic thought is the attempt to think systematically about that, both philosophically, but also within the context of a particular tradition for us, the tradition of American political thought, by looking at history to see what history offers us in terms of models and modes of thinking. but always with a view to answering that question. What does it mean to be a good citizen? What are the responsibilities and tasks of of good citizenship?

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And I think the founders of the American Republic were in general agreement, and it seems to me correct, in thinking that education is a necessary condition. Whatever the answer to your So the question about good citizenship is education is going to be necessary in order for people to be able to reflect well about what it means to be a good citizen and then to be able to carry out the tasks of good citizenship.

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And so it seems to me that right from the start, if universities are doing what they're supposed to be doing and they're, I think, in the business of providing education, among other things, for their students, then there's already a natural fit between being a university and the project of civic thought.

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But i think it's also helpful for that project, for the project of civic thought, for it to be explicitly thematized. but you You could just go to a university and become well-educated on your own, think about the question of citizenship and engage in civic thought. But i think it makes sense. It's a natural fit also, not just for universities to be in the business of educating, but for them to explicitly thematize this question. And for a long time, universities, I think, in the United States did that. And for various reasons, there are various people who've written about this. Universities moved away from that to a certain extent. but i think part of what's happening in the movement to establish centers for civic education and civic thought is an attempt to renew that natural connection between not just education and civic thought, but between what a university is doing overall and the explicit thematization of the questions of civic thought so that now universities can can say, we're not just preparing students for citizenship by educating them, but we're we're preparing them by encouraging them to ask these important questions and think explicitly about the answers.

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No, that's that's very helpful. I always think it's good to sort of define what we're talking about. We're going to get to more of this later, but just kind of going off of what you were saying, this idea of sort of renewing it and thematizing it. And again, I am curious why you think it is effective to do it in a sort of separate program or college as opposed to trying to like infuse it or inculcate it into like already existing disciplines, for instance. and And is there any duplication of efforts that might be happening where somebody who's you know studying to be a political scientist or historian also hopefully is getting a chance to think about and answer these questions.

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That's a good question. i think that there is partly just an aspect of the contingency of history that makes makes it make sense now to have centers springing up again. i think after World War ii universities kind of moved shifted their focus so that they were looking more at the sciences, looking more at national security, looking more especially at the health sciences, technology, and they let lapse.

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their interest in civic thought as such. And so to that extent, if you want to reinvigorate the university along those lines, it makes sense to introduce something something new. I'll just say as an aside, I'll probably come back to this at various points. And our approach to the center has been to think that it always adds to the university. It never takes away.

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And so we're not trying to take anybody else's space. And if people are working on projects similar to what we're doing, that's great. We want to work with them. But there's a way in which also, and this goes back to the earlier answer, the project of engaging in civic thought and asking those questions of citizenship is one that in a certain way kind of hovers above the entire university.

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And so it can make a certain sense, even if the university is already engaged in civic thought, to have a kind of place where those questions are being explicitly asked and where the mission is in part to spread the questioning and answering of that question out across all the different disciplines, ultimately within the university, so that everybody senses themselves as part of the same project and to have have that project coordinated from a particular location, such as the Center for Civic Education. You could do it in a different way, but I think it makes sense. It's kind of a natural way to do it in this way as well.

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This is a perfect segue to asking more specifically about the center that you lead and its mission and why it was created. and You've touched on this a little bit. Was it to amplify already existing work? Was it to fill a gap? Was it to do additional things?

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Yeah, we gave a lot of thought to the name of the center. And although it's a long name and it doesn't lend itself very easily to a nice acronym, it would be nice if it did. Nevertheless, I think it captures a lot of what was going on in the initial motivation about why we thought that it was important to set this up. Center for American Civic Leadership and Public Discourse. i think the public discourse side of this reflects a general sense, not just ours, but widespread across the country, that public discourse has broken down, that it's beset by intense polarization, that there's been a degradation of our ability to communicate with one another as citizens and to disagree productively.

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We don't think, certainly, that the problem is disagreement as such. That's always been a part of the American experiment. But as one of our speakers earlier this year said, and I think this was quite well put, the problem isn't that we disagree, but that we've learned, we've forgotten how to disagree productively.

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And so part of what we're responding to is that polarization and part of how we want to respond to that is by reinvigorating the skills of of public discourse. And then the other side is the side that we've just been talking about, a sense that civic education, which is the essential condition for civic leadership, I think, right, that civic education has been something that universities have moved away from over the last 80 years. And so we, again, want to somewhat more explicitly thematize what it means to ask those questions of citizenship and to provide education.

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the intellectual resources that are necessary in order to be able to give the answers to those questions a little bit more body, a little bit more robustness. And so we want to encourage people to investigate the founding documents, right, to think of themselves as engaged in inquiry into the core precepts of what we could call the American tradition of political thought in order to be able to to give their disagreements sort of a more robust underpinning.

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And so those are the two sides, right? The public discourse side and the civic education side. We saw deficits in both those areas. I think the center was was founded in an effort to do what we can here at University of South Carolina to to begin to rectify those deficits.

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That's really helpful background. And again, you know, we're sort of headed in the same direction, picking up on this idea of very deep social and political polarization. You know, one of the antidotes is exactly what your center is doing, which is a focus on bipartisan dialogue and engagement with political ideas.

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Let's talk a little bit about the critics of some of these centers. One of the things that they argue is that they're going to become extensions of particular ideological agendas, even when their stated mission might be nonpartisan engagement.

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And I'm wondering how USC's center, your center, approaches the balance between promoting core civic knowledge and values and avoiding the perception or reality of ideological preferences. And we can get into more this sort of narrative that a lot of these centers have been set up by Republican legislatures with the idea of pushing back against sort of how left the university has become. And I noticed that's something you did not mention, that you talked more about the movement to sciences and

technology, which I think is interesting and and not always what is shared as sort of the rationale for the proliferation of these centers.

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Yeah, I think that's fair. I think of what we're doing not as, this is not to to correct anything that you said, but just sort of frame frame where it is that I'm coming from, not as as bipartisan or nonpartisan, because in a way those already situate us in a kind of political space that I want to avoid, but as pre-partisan. That we're we're really concerned with, we are concerned with political ideas, right? We're concerned with moral ideas, with legal ideas, with ideas of citizenship.

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and And that's part of what I described earlier is attempting to provide both our students and our colleagues and ourselves, right? Always, because this is An inquiry that I'm engaged in as much as anybody else. I don't come from a background in which I was encouraged to think much about these things. right We're engaged in the project of of inquiry into the way in which ideas make a difference for our political engagement in the world. So we're not trying to shape...

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people's political engagement as such. We're not trying to say you should think this way or that way, or you should move out into the political sphere with this agenda or with that agenda. But we are trying to provide resources that we think would be helpful for people of any political persuasion to be able to make their case better, to hear the case of their political opponents better, to be able to think of them not just as political opponents, but also fellow citizens that are engaged in a common project.

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together and are pursuing a common good together. We're engaged in in the project of building community between people who who disagree with with one another are about very important and fundamental things while still seeing themselves as engaged in a common project. And I don't think of those as as political and to the extent I think that we are successful in resisting the politicization of those kinds of projects, then that's our best bulwark against being seen as ah kind of ideological front for something. That's not how I want to be seen. I would, again, want to be seen as someone who is bringing something to the university rather than taking away or changing anything in the university. And what I would like is, you know, 20 years from now for people of of all ideological, political, moral, religious, whatever persuasions across the university to think of what we're doing as

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the right and natural thing that should be done in the university, right? whether they Whether they disagree with me or anybody else who's in the center on some particular matter to think that nevertheless, what we're doing is good for the university and it's good for our students and for our colleagues. And I think to me, that's the, that's again, that's just the best way to prevent the idea that what we are is promoting a particular ideological agenda.

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i Appreciate your addressing it and framing it in sort of a different way, because I do think that so much of how things are framed then leads to how they are perceived. And, you know, I'm going to just kind of ask ah again about this idea and how you respond to it that, you These centers are in part a correction to you know, ideology of the professorate and these ideas that perhaps professors are, you know, or have been indoctrinating students. I'm not saying I agree with that assessment, but I think there is a lot that says, oh, this is a way to correct an ideological imbalance. And I'm wondering how you respond to that. I mean, one of the reasons I selected you as a guest is because it's clear that

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Your center has gone to pains to try to disrupt that, but I don't know that that's the case across the board. And certainly I anticipate that we'll have some listeners who are thinking to themselves, well, this is just a way to get more conservative ideologues into the classroom.

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Look, I think there's probably truth on all sides of this particular argument, right? I mean, I think that there that is, it is just a natural human tendency for people when they have power to want to exercise that power in a way that insulates their own views from from criticism, that makes it more easy to realize their particular goals in whatever environment they're in. And so if that's a university environment, then that's going to happen in a university environment. And it's going to happen If the people in charge are on the left and it's also going to happen if the people in charge are on the right. And so it seems to me that there's I don't want to get into the details, but it seems to me there's ample room for people on both sides to criticize people on the other side. And that doesn't seem to be the most productive way to think about it. The better better way to think about it is to think about.

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what it is that we all are trying to do or should be trying to do in common. What's the goal here? And then try and build structures that are going to be able to help us to to realize that goal while constantly sort of engaging in the form of self-criticism that's necessary to make sure that you're not falling into the traps of the the people that you were just criticizing five minutes ago.

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You know, people who say of the people who start such centers or people who share my political views or my particular moral views or religious views or what have you, Well, five minutes ago you were saying X and now you're doing Y. If that's what's actually going on, then that's a legitimate criticism. And I think that's it's a tough criticism to to avoid because, of again, this natural tendency that I think human beings have. But one thing that we can do is to establish in speech, as it were, very clearly the parameters within which we're going to be judged. And so that is part of the job that it seems to me that I've tried to do over

the past year is to set out a plan and a vision for this center by which it can be judged in this in the future.

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That makes it clear that we are not going to be engaged in anything that's contrary to the the mission and the ideals that we're trying to set forward, both internally to the center and more broadly with regard to the nature of the university.

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Absolutely. And you mentioned, you know, the ability to like do self critique and also i think humility, right, is a big piece of what we all need to learn more of, which is just to to be able to rethink not only what other people think, but but what we think. And I want to talk to you a little bit about sort of you've had 30 years of teaching and you've had a a long time to think about and develop how you make sure that there is like robust discussion and inquiry in your classrooms. And You know, you have written about a pedagogical approach where professors acknowledge their own views while still encouraging students challenge them, as opposed to some professors who feel like they really can never or should never admit sort of where they stand, which, I mean, as an adjunct professor teaching law, it always seemed impossible to do that. But I'm wondering how your kind of methodology helps foster kind of productive disagreement in the classroom, which is something that, as I forgot who you were quoting, was saying that we we remember how to disagree, just not productively.

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Right, yeah, so that was Yuval Levin who came and gave a lecture here in November, and it was just a fantastic lecture. I mean, really, was a highlight for my my children. ah Some of them, last night at dinner, we were sitting around actually talking about, well, what was your favorite event of the year? And Yuval Levin came in listed very high among among their their preferences.

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First, ah let me say I'm i'm a kind of pluralist about teaching. I think there's lots of different ways to teach well. And a lot of teaching is a matter of sort of personal style and personal character and also of how you've been formed yourself. And I model my teaching after the best teachers that I had both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student. And um i still remember very vividly who those were. Won't name them here, but they they're constantly with me when I think about how it is in them teaching. I think for me, there are some dangers in the neutrality approach where you want students maximally to not know who you are or what you think when you get out. And the and the the prime danger there is the danger that they will think that it doesn't really matter what you think, right? That you're only trying to create a neutral space within which people can hash out ideas and bat them back and forth as if it was a kind of a game.

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I think it's very important, among other things, to let students know and to initiate them into the idea of that inquiry is inquiry into what's true.

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And it really matters to take truth seriously. If you're you're not taking truth seriously, then it's unclear that you could call what you're doing inquiry. It's unclear why what you would do should be called debate or conversation or discussion.

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It could just be about power if there's no such thing as truth and you're not interested in pursuing it. And one way to make it clear that you know that you think that there is a truth and that it's important to try and achieve it is to make it clear what you think is the truth.

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But one way to encourage the idea that you're in a university setting, and the university setting is one of inquiry, and it's one of argument, and it's one of presentation of reasons and arguments, and a back and forth and a dialectic between those who disagree, is to say, well, here's what I think is true, right? And it matters to me. That's why I'm telling you that it's true. Have at it. like Go for it.

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Give me what you got. And among other things, I think that does, that conduces to a certain kind of humility, and it is the case, It's not always the case, but it is the case more often than I would have expected that the students will come up with new new objections that you haven't really thought of.

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And I remember teaching a class on the morality of lying and truth-telling, and one student who had been sort of butting heads with me all through the semester saying, well, what about this? And laying out the sort of whole thing. And I said, ah that's just it's really a good objection, and I don't have a good answer now, and I'm going to have to continue to think about that. And I think that's good for students. It's good for students to see that even if you think that you have the truth, there's always more that you need to think about it.

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And as that instance, I think, gave some evidence for, but other instances do as well, it's important for students to think or to see so see their professors sort of thinking in live time.

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um How is it that I'm going to address this question here and now? Maybe I haven't thought about it. Maybe I've thought about it, but in a different way. And now I need to respond to it in a way that's going to be appropriate to the student.

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And then just one final thing that I think is an important part of this piece is that you then also are put in a position where you have to be able to face student disagreement. Students disagree with lots of what I say. I mean, I have crazy views on a lot of different things.

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Lots of people disagree with me. And I can say to students, you know and and try and make it true. Nothing that you can say to me is going to offend me. Any form of disagreement is is perfectly fair game.

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Let's just get the disagreement out there and then we can talk about it. And that, it seems to me, is valuable in terms of promoting the model of public discourse. That's really what a lot of us need to be in a position to be able to do. It's very hard. I find it very difficult.

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But it is something that I think we need to both model and then discipline ourselves with regard to so that when somebody says, I think you're wrong for these reasons and here's why it's a significant mistake. Even if you think that they're making a mistake, you're not going to get your back up. You're going to be able to respond in a way that's charitable and that manifests your common commitment to getting things right.

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So for me, you know, that particular model of pedagogy, not always. not for every possible issue, not in every possible class, but for a lot of things has worked reasonably well at accomplishing some of what I want to accomplish in the classroom.

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That makes me want to go back to school and take one of your classes. Well, I think you should take more philosophy classes. I think everybody should take more philosophy classes. can discuss that afterwards. Well, and I think one of the things you're also sort of kind of touching on is this idea of also going into these conversations with best intentions in terms of hearing people's ideas. One thing you've really honed in on is sort of the professor-student role relationship in terms of dialogue. And I'd also like to talk a little bit on student to student, because that's something that I see as very different than i know, you know, I'm a dinosaur. But when I went to college, which was just like, I was, yeah, if I said something that another student really disagreed with, and I felt embarrassed, it was like, yeah, my face got hot, and I felt a little uncomfortable. And then it was over, right? I didn't worry that someone was gonna post about it or surreptitiously video me or socially shame me. And so I'm wondering, you know,

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What are you doing? What's the center doing? What can we all be doing to think about translating that to practical tools, student on student? Yeah, that's that's really hard. I mean, we are, it's a different context than the context that I went to school in.

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I will say i remember a class very fondly in which a student threw a shoe at me um in the context of the disagreement. You know, at that age, these things will happen. And and as I said, I remember it fondly. I don't want to advocate that. But it was a more benign form than socially shaming on the Internet. Let's let's let's say that at least.

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Did they hit you? No, it was just a casually tossed shoe. But I think, I mean, didn't Khrushchev throw a shoe at something at once Politburo meeting? I don't know. It had historical resonances, let's just say that. I think if we go back to this idea of of citizenship, citizen is a word that has its paradigm application, obviously, in the political context, right? But I think it has an analogous meaning in any context.

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any world in which there are different people who are working together for some common purpose, right? And so we can talk about what it means to be a good citizen of the family, what it means to be a good citizen of a business, what it means to be a good citizen of your your local neighborhood, and what it means to be a good citizen of the university. And one of the things that good citizens have in common, as I i said earlier, is a commitment to the the common good, to the shared pursuit that they're engaged in. But that shared pursuit definitely has to be nourished by things like face-to-face personal engagement with one another and a sense that that you just like this person, even if you disagree with this person. And so it's it's a kind of low-level thing, but I think it's a very important thing that we are trying to

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make happen with regard to the relationships between students that we have that we're building within the center. and We always feed them, for instance. we We have constantly sending out invitations for students to join for for lunch so that we can discuss this or we can discuss that. We have reading groups. There's always food at the reading groups. i think it's really hard to hate people that you break bread with.

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And so it's important for us to be providing just literal physical bread to people to to be able to eat. And so that you know that's, like I said, that's a very low-level thing, but I think it's something that's easily lost track of and easily forgotten. And i think if we are sort of building that model where we're creating spaces in which people can engage face-to-face and in which they can eat together and also just laugh and share a joke together from time to time, that's going to start to create the kinds of trust that I think you, your question is indicating has started to break down as a result of social media. I have sometimes said to people, and not everybody has even understood what I'm saying, that I would like our unofficial brand to be, the motto of the center should be, our brand is analog.

31:20.44

Meaning, right, it's it's not digital, it's not digital engagement, it's person-to-person engagement, it's the real thing, we're reading real

books, we're talking to real people. How we scale that up from you know what right now is a relatively small 20 to 30 undergraduates who are sort of affiliated with the center and in one way or another to a larger cadre of people who are only you know bound together by us by a set of shared concerns that they're then going to take out into the rest of the university. I think that's the challenge that we're going to be facing over the next few years is trying to build build this thing up so that more and more students are engaged in this face-to-face work and then taking that out into their classrooms. right, and building up forms of social trust in their classrooms that have been degraded through time because of the presence of social media.

32:03.06

I don't have all the answers to that, but I see that as, you know, that's one of the main challenges. How is it that we're going to reconstitute the form of social trust that can make these kinds of disagreements actually possible? You know, a lot of contexts, smaller classes are going to help having faculty that are available to students outside the classroom so that they can get to know them in a better way and not feel that they're judging or you know, in a position of of exclusively power over them. There's a lot of different small things that we can do. We're going to eventually have a shared space. And I think that's going to be big for us as well, where we have a common space where students and and faculty, graduates and undergraduates can come and spend time together.

32:40.70

for us, that's going to be really important to sort of pursuing the long-range goals that we have. Well, first of all, I really get the analog branding as someone who only could i only read hard copy books. I still go to the bookstore. I buy the books.

32:54.55

I print out the legal cases and highlight them. Okay. I mean, my kids think fantastic I'm nuts, right? A dinosaur, right? I am. I am a dinosaur that way. um But I actually just want to say that, like, i think it's, I think it's inspiring that you're starting with, you you refer to it as low level, but I actually don't even know that that's the case, because there's so many studies that talk about bringing people together about something other than the issue about which they may agree or disagree is what creates community, right? That it's like something delicious. It's a funny show. It's a discussion about you know, a movie or people in common. So I think that's important. I think sometimes in academia, people forget to sort of go with those those easy things that connect people, especially people when they're not like in the digital world.

33:42.46

I want to shift gears a little and just ask about there's you know also been a huge movement to inculcate sort of civic engagement into colleges and universities, both in classrooms and co-curricular programming. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you see is the difference between civic thought and civic engagement and how the two are, you know, are they compatible with one another?

34:05.78

Yeah, I mean, I think of civic engagement. And again, maybe you'd probably just get different answers from different people on this. But and there's a set of practices that are associated with being a citizen of anything. And where we're talking about political citizenship, those practices include things like voting and public discussion, public argument, protest, obviously an important part historically of the practices of of citizenship.

34:27.42

And I think not just compatible but necessary for that, again, is the the civic thought and the civic resources that can make it possible for those forms of civic engagement to just have a deeper underpinning for them than they would have if you just go out and you know say the first thing that comes to mind or join the cause that everybody else is joining. Even if you end up in the same cause that you would have joined.

34:51.73

I think it's better if you do that in a context that is more thoughtful and if you've got more intellectual resources drawn from the tradition that you're a part of and you know because you're part of a university drawn from other traditions as well to be able to make your case more more fully. And so in a couple of contexts, people have asked me about free speech at this university and our university went from having in the fire ranking, ah very low ranking of free free speech to a much higher ranking of free speech.

35:22.74

I think that's great, right? I'd rather there be more free speech than than less speech less free speech, but I'd i'd rather that that free speech be engaged in thoughtfully and responsibly than unthoughtfully and irresponsibly. And we're probably we're trying to provide the resources to make that possible. And I feel the same way about civic engagement. Civic engagement is great. I'd rather that we live in a world in which students and other people are civically engaged than in which they stay home and don't vote. But it would certainly be better if they were doing that from a posture of intellectual inquiry and intellectual formation and the resources of attrition that they can draw from so that they're understanding what it is that they're they're doing, what it is that they're saying, how what they do and what they say impacts into the broader political context And how what they're doing and saying mirrors and parallels things that have been done in the past. I think we've come to understand ourselves better if we have a better understanding of the past that we're that we're drawing on when we when we act in the the public sphere, as it were.

36:18.42

Well, you're certainly singing my song about expression. you know Just because you have the right to say something doesn't mean that you should. right How do we want to say it as a part of a community of you know learners and and others?

36:31.38

So, you know, I know that you you're not even, i don't even know are you even halfway through your first year? i think it must be more than that.

So he started, the center the center came into existence on July 1st. Okay. so So about three quarters of the way, I think.

36:44.38

And, you know, the Center for American Civic Leadership and Public Discourse is obviously, it's just, it's at its start. And I'm just curious, you know, what are you hoping for five years, 10 years, not just at, you know, USC, but maybe its impact in know in a larger way?

37:01.34

Well, one way that i I think about this is that, i mean, for most of the time that I've been here, and as you said, I've been here for a while, people have talked about this university as being a kind of economic resource for the state. So people talk about the university's ability to generate jobs and to to generate wealth and to generate entrepreneurship and innovation and creativity out in the in the state more broadly.

37:24.06

and don't know that I've ever heard it described as a civic resource for the state. And i I would like people to start thinking of it in that way. I would like it to be the case that 20 years from now, people are entering the statehouse. They're working in the legislature or they're working in some other way in the political or legal context of the state, having gained something from this center, then bring into public life in a way that manifests their increased thoughtfulness, their increased willingness to work with people that they disagree with. their increased ability to be self-critical and to have a certain kind of intellectual humility, and their increased understanding of, as were the big questions, right? The big questions that ultimately motivate are our attempt to live together in in a polity. And I think if we do that, then, you know,

38:10.78

That would be one metric, not the only one, of success at the statewide level. I think the other sort of, again, lower scale thing that I would like, again, with this idea that citizenship is an analogous word and that we're citizens of lots of different things, is that citizens who have no real interest in entering the political world as such, but nevertheless come to recognize that being a good part of whatever community they're a part of means working together for the common good, means doing good work.

38:42.10

And I think this is one of the things that to me is most frightening about AI and its incorporation into students' lives is that it means offloading a lot of work onto something else and not doing the work yourself and hence not doing good work. I think work is a fundamental part of human well-being and doing good work is a form of excellence that we can't live without. And I would like students to emerge from their time in the center and the university more broadly committed to the idea that good work is centrally important for a well-lived human life. And so if students go out into their smaller communities and they're good citizens of those communities in part because they're doing good work, good analog work,

39:17.08

then that also, it seems to me, is going to be a metric of of our success. and And I don't know yet, we talk about this, how does one measure that in the future so as to be able to say things are going well or not. and you know I'm not a big measuring guy, um but philosopher, but I would like us to be thinking about some way that we can track whether we're whether we're actually making progress in those two ways.

39:39.42

I really like the way that you have extrapolated sort of the fundamentals of what the center is thinking and doing to larger places, you know, outside of academia. And, you know, even this idea of doing good work and not offloading it to me also feels analog. I mean, i have an amazingly smart kid. who recently told me he wants to make a bunch of money and do as little work as possible, which feels like a sort of not, you know, analog thing to say. and he's not really mad if he listens to this podcast, but, but I think it speaks to a lot of the things that you're talking about. And i think is also a a nice segue to my final question, which we always end by asking our guests to leave our listeners with something a little bit more tangible. that they might take that connects to this episode. You know, in the case of civic thought and leadership, it could be something to read. It could be something to do. It could be something just to reflect on. And I just wanted to open it up to see what you might want to share.

40:41.94

Yeah, that's an interesting question for me. When I took this job, I decided, and then for reasons that I'll say, it became even more clear that this was a good idea, to read in two areas that are not my primary focus as a philosophy professor. And one is to read more about higher education and to sort of get a better grasp on what its challenges are today.

41:03.00

But the other is as a center you know devoted to civic education, but also as a center that on July 1st had America 250s six months ahead in its sights, to spend more time reading about the American founding and the thoughts of the American founders than I'm usually accustomed to doing. it's Again, it's you know as as enlivening as those two years at Princeton were.

41:26.13

it's still not my primary area. And so I've enjoyed over the last six or eight months, I made it all the way through David McCullough's big biography of John Adams. I found that absolutely fascinating. I've been reading Richard Brookhiser's work on on George Washington.

41:41.91

i think it's really helpful in the context of the semi-quincentennial to read about the people who were building this country from the beginning To be able to recognize, obviously, and we've, I think, spent important time and effort over the last 30 or 40 or 50 years, especially recognizing the failings that they were subject to, but also recognizing

the ways in which some of the insights that they had were precisely the insights that made it possible for us to overcome those failings. And then also, and I think this is a really important thing to recognize in the project of the American founding, just how much contingency there is. just how many different times there are that things could have gone badly and they didn't. How many battles could have gone the other way? How many disagreements over how the Constitution should be framed or what should what the Bill of Rights should say could have broken down into disagreement that couldn't be repaired?

42:37.37

And as a result, to recognize that the experiment in self-governance and Republican forms of democracy that that we've been engaged in for the last 250 years are are fragile.

42:48.28

I think you can get a real valuable sense of that fragility and contingency from spending more time on the history than I've spent in my past, but that I've been sort of privileged to spend some time for the last eight months getting getting to be involved in a little bit more. And so that's what I would encourage people.

43:04.72

It's the 250th birthday. Read some birthday literature, which would be good history about the founding and about the founders. Try to read it with a sympathetic eye, not an uncritical eye, but an eye that is sympathetic to their achievements as well as to their failures.

43:18.63

That's a great idea and also something that is doable for everyone. Not everybody's going to read, you know, the 750 pages, but it's easy to access something and so many different people have written about it, both the, you know, original documents, but also people reflecting during different points in history on those documents. so Right.

43:36.47

I am very excited to kind of watch the growth of the center and I will confess that the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement also needs an acronym so I really feel for you in terms of the long names that is both very important and was picked for very specific reasons but it doesn't really roll off your tongue. But I'm really grateful for your time and I just want to say thank you.

43:59.19

I really enjoyed this conversation. I thought your questions were really, really great. It's helpful for me just to be constantly rethinking what the project is and to do that in conversation with somebody.

44:09.85

I find always it just puts me back on track and and I feel this conversation has done that for me. So thank you. Well, it was my privilege. Thanks so much. Well, that's a wrap. Thanks again to Chris Tollefsen for joining us this month and sharing his expertise. If you have not already done so, please be sure to register for our 8th annual

Virtual Speech Matters Conference, Preserving the Pillars of Free Expression, which is taking place on Wednesday, April 8th. All the information is on our website. Talk to you next time.