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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.

00:00:21.94
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.

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I'm Michelle Deutchman, the Center's Executive Director and your host. What comes to mind when you hear the term viewpoint diversity? Is it the basic principle that engaging with different perspectives is key to student learning and the mission of higher ed?

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Is it a necessary movement to rebalance the partisan bias of faculty and increase representation of conservative thought at colleges and universities? Or is it being used to justify government overreach and undermine academic freedom?

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The term viewpoint diversity has come to mean all of these things and more. Scholars, students, pundits, and legislators have been litigating this issue in long-form articles in the higher ed press and amongst each other.

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In today's episode, we are not settling the definition of viewpoint diversity. Instead, we're going to dig into a deeper issue. What is the polarization surrounding the idea of viewpoint diversity mean for higher education?

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To help us make sense of this complicated question, today I'll be joined by former Center Fellow Milad Mohebali and John Tomasi, President of Heterodox Academy. We will discuss the relationship between viewpoint diversity and the broader diversity movement in higher education,

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the ways that both viewpoint diversity and diversity, equity, and inclusion have come to be defined in politically divisive ways, and whether we can find common ground in underlying principles while avoiding political co-optation.

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But before we dive in, let's turn to Class Notes, a look at what's making headlines. While much of this week's higher education news has focused on the rape allegations and the fallout from those at Cornell University, several other developments related to free speech and academic freedom have also made headlines.

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A newly published paper in the Review of Higher Education found that colleges were significantly more likely to report terminations of international students' legal status if they experienced campus protests over the Israel-Hamas war.

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The researchers found that the odds of status revocations were four to eight times greater at campuses that had hosted protests, suggesting that international students may have faced increased scrutiny because of their institution's political activity.

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Many terminations involved minor legal infractions such as traffic or parking violations, and the government later reinstated most affected students' legal status following legal challenges.

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Separately, the Trump administration is investigating nine universities for alleged fraud involving J-1 visas, which allow non-citizens to teach and conduct research. In a related development, the Trump administration appealed an August court ruling that found its efforts to deport international students based on protected speech to be unconstitutional.

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The case, now before the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, raises further questions about the administration's immigration enforcement and its applications for expression on college campuses.

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A new study released by the Knight Foundation and Ipsos found that just 37% of college students believe their right to free speech is secure, down from 73% in 2016. The survey of more than 1,000 college students also found declining confidence in other freedoms, with only 40% believing their right to a free press is secure, compared with 81% a decade ago.

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Despite these concerns, young people continue to place a high value on free expression. 84% of college students say free speech is either extremely or very important to them.

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The findings come as ongoing debates about free expression and academic freedom on campus remain a hot-button issue nationwide. Now back to today's guests.

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Milad Mohebali is assistant professor of educational administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His interdisciplinary research focuses on the relationship between higher education and society and questions of knowledge and power.

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Milad was a twenty twenty five twenty twenty six fellow at the Center, where he studied the discourses around viewpoint diversity in higher education. The results of his fellowship work are available in a

report titled Mapping Viewpoint Diversity Discourse Around Higher Education from Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern, available on the UC Center website and will include a link to his report in the show resources.

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John Tomasi serves as the inaugural president of Heterodox Academy, HXA, its abbreviation. Heterodox is dedicated to advancing open inquiry on college and university campuses.

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Prior to joining Heterodox, John was a member of the faculty at Brown University, teaching and writing about political theory and public policy. At Brown, he founded and directed the Political Theory Project to support scholarship and encourage political dialogue on campus,

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He is co-editor of and contributor to the 2026 book, Viewpoint Diversity, What It Is, Why We Need It, and How to Get It. You will have a link to that book in the resources as well. Welcome, Milad and John.

John Tomasi
Thank you, Michelle.

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So I like to start by asking guests about their journeys. So John, I'm going to let you lead on this one. How long have you been at Heterodox Academy and what inspired you to leave academia to take on this role?

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John Tomasi
So I've been at Heterodox Academy as one of the first members. So it's been 10 years since HXA was founded. And I joined one morning when I returned to my office after lecturing, and I found an email from John Haidt, my old friend, who sent an email to me, Steve Pinker and Amy Wax, saying, I'm starting this new organization of professors who love our universities and want to make them better, especially on the dimension of viewpoint diversity. Will you join?

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And one of the three of us wrote back a one-word answer, yes. And the other two of us both answered yes, too. So I joined HXA at the beginning 10-plus years ago. John Haidt somehow convinced me to leave my comfortable and jow chair at Brown five years ago to become the first president of Heterodox Academy. And so I've been at HXA now as a president for five years. Did you ask why I'm interested in these issues? What did you, I'm sorry, what was first? No, I mean that, no, and I didn't, but you can tell me why you're interested in these issues.

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Well, so I will. I mean, so my background's in philosophy and I worked initially in the theory of knowledge and then and then in political philosophy. but when I was at Brown, early in my time at Brown, I found that so many students felt that they weren't their education wasn't the exciting adventure that it might be.

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They loved Brown. They loved their classes. They were happy with their lives and the world on campus. But they all had this longing for something more than what we're delivering. And they taught me by just talking with them that we could do so much more than we do at our current at our universities.

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We do so many things well in our teaching. We don't do anything as well as we might do. And especially on the dimension of giving students a chance to think for themselves about hard issues, encouraging them to encounter viewpoints that are unlike their own, that are intelligently argued, to invite them onto the adventure of learning, the activation of curiosity.

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So I learned from my students, especially my students at Brown, that there's more work to be done by us faculty insiders and people who care about the university to make it better on the viewpoint diversity dimension.

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No, thank you for sharing that. I mean, clearly, John Haidt is very persuasive. And I think I love that idea of the adventure of learning. So, Milad, you have been on your own adventure of learning. And I would love to ask you the same thing. What inspired you to study viewpoint diversity?

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And how and why did you decide to map the discourse about this term?

Milad Mohebali
Yeah, lots of journeys. So I was born and most of my formative years, I lived in Iran. And I think I had grown up to have a knack for understanding language, how language defines people and how people define themselves, even though they may not always have or be in a position of power.

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so I think a lot of my background really shapes how I understand and think about the world and study it in my own work. And then, interestingly, my background actually was in engineering. I came to the U.S. also to study in engineering.

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And part of my shift from engineering to education was the fact that, you know, both in the U.S. and in Iran, I was in institutions that were doing really this advanced work and this advanced projects that was about pursuing projects that mattered.

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And at the same time, universities were in communities that were really poor, had really very suffering from basic stuff. And I always question, you know, the distance between the ivory tower and the community. So really why came to higher ed was around these questions of whose knowledge matters, whose knowledge comes to bear on reality, and why higher ed is kind of so detached from communities.

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Since I was really interested in these questions of how, you know, people with academic degrees and advanced degrees could work with committees, I was also naturally interested in questions of dialogue and dialogue across difference.

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So I got to learn a lot more once I started my degree program in higher education to think about questions of dialogue, how people can have difficult dialogues across differences.

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I got to learn a lot more about multicultural education tradition, which has been asking these questions for a really long time. And I think it was around 2020 and I was in my PhD program and I got, I came across Heterodox Academy and I was like, this is such really good conversations that are happening here.

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so I started to kind of get to observe it, but it was more like in the margins of my work. I was kind of reading it once in a while. And then I remember by between 2020, 2024, there were like a whole series of legislation happening around the open diversity, starting in Florida, but going in other places.

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And as a person, I again really think about how these things shape up. I was kind of getting really interested how Viewpoint diversity is becoming these important concepts that's kind of redefining a lot of the questions that I was interested in. And that was kind of the start of the project. I wanted to know who is talking about these questions of viewpoint diversity.

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Thank you both so much. I always find that in some ways, that's one of the richest parts of, you know, doing this podcast is the reality that not most people end up where they thought they were going, you know, where they ended up isn't where they thought they started. And I think that is, you know, certainly highlighted by both of you.

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So Milad, I want to continue learning a little more about your project. You know, what did you find, especially about how people are framing viewpoint diversity?

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And then, you know, why does it matter? Yeah, yeah. So as I mentioned, I was kind of curious who is speaking of viewpoint diversity. So my biggest question was more on the infrastructure. Who is talking about it? Who are the people speaking around that idea? And I started to collect artifacts largely around four socialist spheres that to me are important.

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One is academia. It has its own sources of legitimacy because processes of knowledge, that you know, legitimation. Media, of course, because it has so much power in shaping public perception.

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Legislature, which defines and really put things into the policy and action and shifts agendas. And finally, the most important part, of course, intermediary organizations.

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The intermediary organizations are generally the type of policy organizations. There are different types of organizations within that category. But broadly, they are the type of organizations that connect academia policy discourse. They try to translate research for actionable outcomes.

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So that was the fourth and one of the most important ones that I was looking at. I had some perception of what I would find, and I was really surprised by some of the findings. I kind of expected that there would be more right-leaning discourse and conversation that's being produced by right-leaning intermediary organizations. And surprising, I found a lot of it.

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To the extent that at some point I stopped collecting more data on the right, and I started to really saturate on the left. And I was like, is there... comparable conversation happening here and there wasn't much. So that was one of the surprising findings in the amount of the discourse.

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Then I thought that I would find a lot of it in the right-leaning media and I was surprised that there is a lot more left-leaning media talking about viewpoint diversity.

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Given some of those shifts, I started to map over time. How are these projections shifting over time across all of these four different spheres? Kind of started early on in 2014, really is starting to see it pick up, even though there are like some earlier as early as 2003.

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But really starting 2014, picking up and really explodes by 2025 when, you know, we have the presidential elections. given the importance of intermediary organizations in shaping policy.

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Also looked at basically who are the people talking. So I get a little bit more nuance in that category. Try to basically code all the people who were listed as offers, their disciplinary background when it was mentioned.

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One of the findings was that the biggest category was not actually named offers. part of the organization, the legitimacy of policy organization is that they speak by some expertise because they're translating expertise to policy.

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so it was surprising to see that a large volume of conversation did not have an offer. So it was basically the organization that's speaking. And among the discipline disciplines presented, the two largest categories were political science and psychology, which I imagine a lot of people in those disciplines are having lots of questions about viewpoint diversity. I didn't get really much into the details of it.

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I was trying to paint a picture of what is happening writ large. And I kind of go with that and call it a conservative as assemblage in the sense that by 2025, viewpoint diversity had come to become a defining future on policy that the federal government was using, state governments were using in some states.

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to really affect higher education. and I try to be careful in making sure that I'm not trying to convey that it means everybody within that collective is right-leaning.

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I think there's lots of particular different actors, but together they are kind of giving legitimacy and advancing a larger cause that's now taken by federal government and a state legislature to advance policy.

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Okay, there's a lot there. So I just want to say that I love the word assemblage. I'm going to start using that. So, right, we have media kind of seems left. Academia seems more right.

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You know, this conservative assemblage that's now impacting what's happening in public policy. John, I'm just going to let you kind of take it from there. I think would be great if you wanted to ground it a little bit in Heterodox's vision of Viewpoint diversity and then, you know, to go ahead and respond to some of the things that Milad found. And again, you know, why it matters.

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Sure. I think I think I'll start just by saying um to the to the listeners just how important I think Milad's paper is. um I think this idea of mapping the viewpoint diversity discourse it is an incredibly important and understudied issue.

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And he does it with enormous skill. I have to, I'll just tell you Milad, if we haven't met, I think, before this conversation. But when I first picked up your paper and started reading it a yesterday morning, And I read about was going to a mapping discourse. I thought to myself, oh, no, this is going to another, this is going to be like a politicized approach to this issue.

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But what was really striking about your, because so often the political viewpoint diversity literature is politicized, and the politicization usually takes a direction where people say, well,

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who's saying these things and what's their motive? And they use that as an ad hominem argument to attack the person's proposal rather than asking the more idealistic question, what kind of university are we trying to create?

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how does having a variety of viewpoints matter? Those are the, at HXA, we see viewpoint diversity as a core academic value, not a political value. But it is out there in the wider society thought of as a political value.

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And in your paper, you just do a marvelous job about mapping that discourse and across those four categories you described. I wrote them, I think of them at your four categories as academic,

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um media, political, and then something like think tanks. You use different labels, I'm aware, but I use those four categories I was reading yours. But your paper is just a wonderful mapping of all those forms of discourse with a really subtle and sophisticated analysis.

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I guess I'll just add to one thing you said, one thing you said just a few moments ago and in your opening remarks. you know the the area of viewpoint diversity, when you start looking at the discourse, as you do, is full of surprises.

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And I'll just mention a couple of them. So we at HXA, we're a membership organization of professors who love our universities and want to make them better. I often say we love our universities the way

Socrates loved Athens, not uncritically, but relentlessly, doggedly, sincerely, hopefully not until the death, but, you know, pretty much up to the edge of that.

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But we did it we did a survey of our of our members in terms of their own political affiliations. And interestingly, viewpoint diversity is one of the main things that we care about, as you know, Milad.

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Only 11% of HXA members identify as being right or conservative. Eleven percent 15% identify as being left or progressive. Now, we also identify other categories that give them options for, including 27% centrist or moderate, self-described always,

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eighteen percent libertarian And 11%, my favorite percentage group, other. Now, you know, what's in the other category. But it just shows that people who care about viewpoint diversity, the people who talk about viewpoint diversity, often come from different perspectives. And I'll just mention one more statistic that, Milad, I don't think you're aware of yet. We're just sort of publicizing it recently at HXA.

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We did a big faculty poll recently about people's attitudes toward viewpoint diversity. And we found two very striking two very striking of data points that I think you'll find of interest. One is that there's a gap. Well, the main thing is that there's a gap between these two data points.

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One's a point about what faculty personally value regarding viewpoint diversity. And the other is a point about what they think their peers value. They think their colleagues value regarding viewpoint diversity.

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On the first point, we found that when think about viewpoint diversity on the dimension of politics and religion, which is the most controversial aspect of viewpoint diversity, on that most controversial aspect of viewpoint diversity, religion and politics, 57% of professors that we polled think it's a very important value.

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But on the second question, I'm like, what do you think your, how many of your peers do you think value of viewpoint diversity on that controversial dimension? Only about 38 or 40% thought their peers valued it that much.

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So there's a disconnect between those data points, as you can see. Many more people and across the faculty value viewport diversity then people think about you beyond diversity. Once you get past the politicization of the of the topic and get into the question of what professors actually think about these problems and what role viewpoint diversity plays in making our universities better, more active, more creative places, places that are capable of producing citizens who can speak to people with a wide range of views, who are citizens who are capable of thinking in new ways because they build bridges between inherited ideologies,

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Once you get into that world, which you do so well in your paper, you find that things are much more interesting than the simple left-right battle lines that are often drawn. Milad, I want to give you a chance to respond before I jump in, or I can go ahead.

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Yeah, I appreciated your notes, John. And I think I genuinely hate us versus them situations. I feel like we're all constantly trapped in our cultural milieu, especially in media, in these, you know, losers versus winners, the this or that side. And I think at least in my own, as a personal value, I really try to think what are ways to move.

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past these, you know, us versus them situations. And I think the report really tried to hold to that value that they want to break from it rather than further strengthen this side versus that side.

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And, you know, I hear you on that contradicting results that partially it's also like, you know, shows that part of it, it's like every side thinks the other side or the others are just like, they're not like them.

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And in some ways, there's not that much difference. And at the same time, you know, we have these perceptions of like, oh gosh, those other people, you know.

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so I think that's part of these larger conversations that limit a lot of, you know, what I find most valuable, both in my work and multicultural education that sits with these questions and also viewpoint diversity as heterodox, you know, spouses in that sense of like, how can we hold to these principles?

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that matter to education, to creating good citizens, to educating good citizens, to having a good research enterprise. So on most notes, I absolutely agree. And I think those are really important.

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So we're going to go a little farther down the path of some shared and common principles. But before we do that, I do want to address the sort of partisan politics, you know, this concern of politicization and, you know, this idea that Milad does sort of discuss about it being viewpoint diversity being utilized as sort of a political movement in some ways and I'd be interested in, John, how you address that, right? There's a lot of people who say, oh, this isn't about how many conservatives there are.

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And yet, Milad's paper does show that the discourse does have to do with a certain type of politics. And Milad, reframe the question if I didn't do as good of a job.

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Right, and I think the big question that always come across is that how can we continue to do the good work that matters even when we are getting defined by these external forces?

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I don't know if that's the same question, but that's generally how I hear that question. And so I think it's helpful to think about the politicized aspect of the question if we take an historical perspective on how we got to where we are.

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And so the way I think of it, think about the academy historically, you think about the great universities of the past, Bologna, Oxford, Cambridge, early Harvard, the great research universities, the Germanic

universities at the turn of the 20th century that were founded in the U.S., s Chicago, Stanford, Johns Hopkins, all these universities pursued truth.

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They were eager to find the truth, to have rigorous conversations. And yet all those universities, every single one of them, excluded people from the conversation. They excluded them based on race, based on gender, most trauma most obviously, but also based on social class and other characteristics too.

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So about 50 years ago or so, our U.S. system embarked upon a kind of an experiment, an ambitious experiment that the world has never seen before to try to actually do inclusion at our top research universities and across our university systems.

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So 50 years ago, we made a concerted effort to start bringing in women. For example, the last Ivy League school to start graduating women only started graduating them in 1987. That's the year I graduated from college, which probably seems like a long time ago to all of you. But I graduated from college like yesterday.

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That was not long ago. that not all Ivy League schools would react would graduate women as undergraduates. Never mind having women on the professoriate. Never mind having African Americans, people of color on the faculties.

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Speaker
um Arabic students, Jewish students were distributed against historically. Arabic students only started arriving on our, our Muslim students only started arriving on our campuses any number very recently.

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so there's a big movement starting about 50 years ago to make our university system not only truth-seeking, but truth-seeking in a more inclusive way. At HXA, we think that's a wonderful thing, a wonderful ambition.

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Unfortunately, being humans, we didn't do inclusion. We haven't done inclusion very well so far. We've overreached in various ways. We've kind of messed up the truth-seeking part. We let one be become competitive to the other.

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So we sort of like didn't just like bring in people and search for truth together. We brought in people on a chart and started getting involved with all these kind of campus conflicts and wars and various silencing of voices, for example.

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So one big trend in the last 50 years is this incredibly important increase in viewpoint diversity on the identity dimension. That's good. Unfortunately, over that same 50-year time period, we've seen a dramatic and accelerating decrease in the viewpoint diversity among faculty in particular on the political dimension.

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political or our ideological dimension. Now, maybe those two things are connected. That's a complicated, interesting question. Maybe, Milad, next paper will be about that question. I would love to see what you're comfortable on and on that one.

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But we have seen this dramatic decrease in the range of viewpoint diversity on the ideological dimension within our universities over the past 40, 50 years.

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So and in the 1990s, left-right ratio nationally was about two to one in the professoriate in the U.S. Now it's about, by our studies, it's about six to one across the disciplines.

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But if you zero in on some so some specific disciplines and fields, anthropology is kind of a famous example, sociology, some others, their ratio is much, much higher. It's extremely wide.

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So on the one hand, we've gotten better about viewpoint diversity and inclusion on the identity side, but we've gotten much worse on the political diversity side, the ideas and politics side.

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At HXA, we think we need to push through with both of those forms of diversity. need to correct the mistake we've been making about ideological diversity because we're aiming for something the world's never seen, which is a fully inclusive university system where people learn from the differences, where they encounter one another and have conversations together about these different worlds they've come from on the identity dimension and on the ideology dimension.

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We're not there yet. We're struggling to give birth to this thing the world's never seen. I just want to make that point that it is the case as a matter of fact, and that's partly why Milad's, work like Milad’s is so important.

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It gives us the facts to work with. It is a fact that the range of ideological diversity among the faculty has dramatically shrunk. over the past 30 years. And if you do, you know, there's been some studies by Daniel Klein and some others who do some more so more splicing and cutting within that broad statistic about ideology.

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if you look at junior faculty versus senior faculty or senior faculty versus graduate students, the range of ideological imbalance gets even worse the more junior we get. which suggests that that without some kind of course correction, I hope from the inside, from the academy itself, without some kind of course correction, we're going to have even greater imbalance in ideological diversity.

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That's an unsustainable situation that leads to bad scholarship. It leads to bad teaching. It leads to universities finding themselves within the culture wars rather than being outside of them and above them.

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And that's the world that I'm unfortunately we're working through now. I really appreciate that, John. And I'll start by noting that I'm personally empathetic to the idea that we need defenses of all sorts in higher education. That conservative faculty should be part of that means it is a defense that matters to the enterprise of teaching and learning in higher education.

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For the most part, I think I would add two contexts to that. One, I was trained in a higher education, you know, field. So I should be, you know, living true to some of the training that I received from a dear faculty member who was a historian of education, which I think really ties to some of this conversation that you're right that the elite higher education was really resistant to getting a lot of minoritized groups into higher ed. Yale was like, they were like no women in Yale up to 65 when the bond passed and they were like, okay.

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since you are pushing us to, we'll take it. Otherwise, we are really not interested. So I think that exists. And the other part that I would add to that conversation is that maybe at least 100 years before that, normal schools that ended up becoming some of the regional comprehensive institutions were actually taking a lot of people from, you know, lower socioeconomic background, people of color, women were in teacher education.

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So I would just hold to the fact that you know, there is a part of higher ed that has always been doing to me the work that most people care about. And those are community colleges. Those are broad access institutions.

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They tend to have lots of different conversations and work that matters across all layers of difference. From my perspective, I don't know about that on that, but like, for example, presentation or conversations on conservative, you know, ideas in community colleges.

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I haven't come across research on that. There might be some out there. But for broadly, they've been doing a lot of good job. Elite higher education, though, which also maps into questions of power pitch because they are the institutions that not only train as students, they train as students who usually come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, lots of cultural capital, and they end up usually taking higher positions in the society.

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So I think it's, to me, an important context to hold to some of this conversation that so much of this conversation is concentrated in that area. But that is also an area of power.

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It's not just a portion of higher ed that trains everybody. It's not the majority of higher ed. It's just such a tiny portion. But, you know, I came across, I haven't still read the whole book, but I came parts of it, Neil Gross's new book. And it's basically elite higher education, most of the study, but the title is kind of like this broad generalization to higher ed. And I'm like, why do we do that? Like, there's just so much of higher ed that's not captured in elite higher ed.

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But that's one of the traps that we continue to have to navigate to say, these are not institutions that represent higher education in the United States broadly. The second context that to me really matters is that viewpoint diversity, no matter how we define it, is not contained in higher education.

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For the most part, I don't have a historical analysis of it, but my understanding is that broadly came and was focused on media. So it didn't really originate for the most part around higher education and has for the most part been around media, media representation of different ideas.

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Even, John, I read your work. You point out to early 2000s and to basically take up of the world and the Google Ngram, which was one of the first things I did when I was studying this research, kind of looking at the Ngram part in Google. And a lot of that is also media. It's both I read, but it was also media.

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And then you kind of move forward in 2010. Again, it is also media that gets heightened around the 2016 presidential election. That was one of the biggest conversation around media presentation of, you know, different viewpoints.

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And then, so you have media. The conversation has gotten up and got a lot more in higher education. And now it's not just in this two, you know, I don't know if you have seen, but I think Alliance for Defense of Freedom also maps and indexes viewpoint diversity for businesses.

So you see that it's not just one area. And being a discourse person, I'm generally interested how these different meanings map into each other. We might say whatever we want to say. But the meaning is also getting shaped in these larger discourses. I remember the day that people were doing all kinds of really good work on multicultural education that we later was kind of, in a lot of ways, came to be put into the category of DEI.

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And at the same time, Target was, you know, adding, I don't know, dolls of different skin colors. And that was becoming the defining feature of DEI, and then later that was kind of the popular discourse.

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So I think part of the really difficult work of any of this work is that we are also working in context that these meanings are highly getting reshaped constantly.

And I'm always worried about those, you know, even for viewpoint diversity. Like at this point, I don't know how this is going to move on as we got into this more complicated context of like, do businesses have enough conservatives in them?

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I actually saw the index. Amazon was really low on it. And I'm like, you know, somebody needs to make sense of it. Most liberals would probably say Amazon is rather conservative organization and then the AFD

00:35:01.11

ranking. They have donated to human rights organizations, so they were really low on viewpoint diversity, which I don't imagine heterodox would be ranking higher education based on donation to human rights.

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But they again, it doesn't, you know, it's like these meanings are getting shifted constantly in a broader picture, which has a lot to do with also circulation of money, capital, representation. And I think just that is so much of the crux of the work and what makes the work difficult in the sense of you have to navigate it when it is constantly becoming politicized.

00:35:36.15
And that politicization is also moving. It's not a fixed thing. It's shifting as we speak. So I want to bring what each of you is saying sort of together, right? Because in some ways, the irony of all of this is that you agree, and probably most people agree, that diversity of perspectives is a common good, right? And it's a common ground that people can agree on. And so I think one of the questions I have is, what can we do to find that common, to do a better job of finding that common thread of this like general idea that universities benefit from a diversity of all different kinds of perspectives. And I will add on, how do we do that, especially in a moment where

00:36:21.94
And again, there's so many contextual reasons we are seeing really like an ending of so much of one kind of diversity, you know, in terms of the diversity, equity, inclusion, and a lot of focus right on the rise of a different kind of diversity. or is so ah so that's how it's being framed. So I guess...

00:36:43.29
Yeah, that's kind of how do we move away from the facts and the framing of those facts and try to find more commonality? And either of you can start. I'll start that, Milad, then come in whatever you like, of course.

00:36:56.95
I guess I would say that I think that's a really good way to set the problem up. And I'll just say the same thing in a slightly different way. we're operating in an environment, especially within the universities, where the discourse about um identity diversity is often framed as discourse about social justice.

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And that's often put in opposition to a discourse about truth-seeking, which is often claimed by the people who advocate viewpoint different views, viewpoint diversity in the sense of politics and religion, for example.

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At HXA, we think that's really unfortunate framing, that if you really care about knowledge-seeking, then you then pluralism is that is something you should be looking for and try to harness for the purposes of knowledge seeking.

00:37:41.24
You want to have a wide range of views because of some things, as Michelle, you mentioned earlier. You didn't say it this way, but I'll I'll say it a little stronger than you put it, perhaps. um you know, we're tribal animals. We're tribal mammals.

00:37:55.19

It's normal for us to find people who think like us, to hear evidence that ah coheres with what we already believe and remember that evidence and to not see or hear the evidence that we hear that that that we come across it doesn't cohere with our views.

00:38:07.90
We have all these biases that have been built into us through evolutionary time that make us the kind of tribal creatures that we are. It's easy to say I'm a free thinker. I think for myself, I want open conversations.

00:38:20.50
But that's an unnatural practice for most of us human beings. It's not actually what we most feel most comfortable doing. We're doing most naturally. But once you see that, once you come to recognize that we do have these biases built within our brains, to hear the people who agree with us and not hear the people who don't agree with us, once you start becoming aware of about some of those things, then you realize that searching for knowledge is a harder thing than you thought it was.

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And it makes, for me at least, it makes me a little more forgiving or more a little more gracious towards the failings of our universities so far to actually do inclusion well. Instead of doing it well, we've done it, we've approached inclusion in a balkanized way. It's separating campuses into different communities and different groups. They don't really talk to one another. They feel respect and they get self-esteem perhaps through their exclusion from one another.

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But the world we should be moving toward is a world that's opposed to echo chambers, a world that is aware of echo chambers and tries to break them down, not for the sake of insulting anyone, but for the sake of learning from each other and finding a ways to take advantage of this pluralism that we've heard that we've won through such hard battles and making it the positive contribution towards a vibrant intellectual environment that university should be like.

00:39:33.64
That's what our students want. That's what most faculty want, even though they don't know the other faculty want that. And that's the world we need to be working toward. So it's, I think the real important thing to think about is not just viewpoint diversity, but what's the alternative?

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It's something like echo chambers. It's something like a world in which falsifiability doesn't really do its work. It's something like almost a non-scientific worldview where certain premises aren't allowed to be questioned or challenged at all.

00:40:02.74
It's not merely a political proposal to get more of one party than the other party. That's a proxy for the underlying issues. The underlying issues of the are the important ones. We want people who have different premises about value, different premises about causation in the world.

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I do different ideology, we might say, to be in active conversation with each other so that they can learn from each other. That's the goal. I would add to that in a did a couple of different notes. One, I'm a big believer that we need to say, we need to name and own the good, the bad, and the ugly. And I think on both sides of that, people want to do the good and the bad, but they don't want to name the ugly.

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And the ugly is that for any of us in the universities, at the end of the road, what matters is money and prestige. We've been around. We know that's the case. We know that when you're hiring, when you're going around, when you're evaluating people, that the administration care, my own situation is a really good example of that.

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They want money. They want to be in the ranking spheres. They want to be hired. They want to have some indicators to boast their status. That's just the reality of higher education as a market-oriented enterprise.

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It's always funny because I always say higher education is conservative, which is so different from what I hear in heterodox. But again, it's just like for me, the conservative part is just, it's about money. At the end of the road, that's what it speaks. That's some of the research says how some of these practices are shaped.

00:41:35.35
That's just the reality of the fact that so much of the faculty has really shrunk. There is fewer tenure positions. There is much more contingent faculty laborer. And I think to me, the part that the work starts with staying in the gray area and owning the fact that we have to do the good work while we have to live in the ugly reality that public funding for money for higher education has been declining over the years.

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I mean, I say that with a note that I think it's more nuanced. It's not this conversation about finances. It's not just the amount, it's the amount per cost. It's a much more nuanced conversation.

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But at which large, higher education has not been kept funded with public money to do the work that matters for the public while it is tasked with so much of work. And of course, you see that really in faculty work.

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I start by that because it matters, you know, most of the times and most of the people I know don't even have time to think enough about their teaching practices, don't have time to reflect about what they're going to put into the materials.

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It's not that they don't care. They do a lot with limited resources and all the asks that they have. And personally, I think we have to be able to name the ugly we want to move into the good direction and less of the bad part.

00:42:55.70
And personally, I think there is all sorts of different perspectives. I personally know people who do social justice work. That is about truth. I would think about some of my own work. I do part of my study, John, is about my research is about precarity in higher education. Literally, students who don't have enough money for food or housing to stay in college.

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It is social justice work. I do want to believe that I do rigorous work to really raise that issue and advance a cause that I don't see social justice as opposed to the question of truth-seeking.

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But I think related to that, I think we really need to also ask definitions when it's easy to put people into the categories that might not be defining them.

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I do teach dialogue and dialogue practices, and one of them is like, ask people, why do they care they do what they do? How do they define it? What does that matter to them? And I think we need to stay in the green, that gray area.

00:43:53.37
We need to the messy work of trying to not put each other into different categories. And we need to stay the likely part of academia, which is money and prestige, just owning it. There is no other way to... Michelle, can I just jump in this just briefly? Yeah, jump in and then I'll give you a warning of where we're going, which is I'm going to kind of pull us down from kind of more abstract and really ask both of you about some ideas of actually how to do some of the including and the inclusion and the pluralism. What are steps that listeners and others can actually take? But John, first your comment.

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Yeah, I guess I just want to I want to just push back a little bit on the way you were describing the social justice aspect. This may be a pushback or it may just be an alternative way of saying what you're what you mean. So I'll let you just I'll let you tell me which one it is.

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I sort of think of it in two levels. The question is social justice and truth-seeking. There's a level of, we might call sufficiency or a level of a baseline. where people have to have a certain amount of opportunities to have an education, let's say, where they're not starving as they're trying to study. They actually have time to go to school. They can afford to go to school.

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Those are issues of social justice and access that I think are social justice issues that are deeply entwined with the university project. There's another element, though, and that that worries me about once that advocacy level has been crossed,

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And we see this remarkably, I think, mostly at the at the elite schools. Sam Abrams has a really important set of studies showing that this problem of ideological viewpoint diversity is worse in the most elite, wealthiest schools on the East Coast in particular.

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And that second level, though, is where social justice worries me in the academy. That's at the level of methodology. So when we think about how we argue, what we take as evidence, who we cite, who we don't cite, why we cite the people we cite,

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That's the problematic element for me is where the scholarly standards themselves become politicized or they become put in service of a certain conception of social justice.

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Not the baseline thing I was talking about a minute ago, but a more robust conception about the way certain social problems should come out. Israel-Palestine, for example, or socialism versus capitalism itself.

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And there's the report from the Vanderbilt Wash U Committee that you probably were all, we were all talking about a few months ago about the humanities and the humanities and social sciences. They talk about that in a pretty sophisticated way, I think, in terms of, well, to what degree of scholarly or scholarly standards truth-seeking standards being supplanted by politicized standards, that is, standards that are meant to reproduce a set a certain set of premises and conclusions to sort of operate as though they're both premises and conclusions at the same time.

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And that's where social justice worries me. So it's a little bit complicated but the basic point is that I agree with you that there are some basic fundamental issues of social justice regarding access to education in a free and democratic society that have to be addressed.

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Affordability is an important one of them. But there's also a really important question about how we search for knowledge using scholarly standards and scholarly metrics like scientific methods um rather than letting politics and identity determine who gets published, who gets cited.

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You've heard of citation justice, for example. These are things that, in my view, corrode the truth-seeking purpose of the university and lead us in the wrong direction. Milad, go ahead, and then we'll come back to my question.

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if you want If you want to have a kind of a quote-unquote rebuttal, as they will say at the Supreme Court. I don't follow that much of the Supreme Court or the legal sphere. ah so no So I hold to what you're saying.

00:47:37.56
I think to me, and that's maybe my own background, that you know both coming from a different national context to the U.S., I read, And also having been in engineering, which, you know, we tend to think of as the hard sciences, right? The ones that no way can have biases or because they are rule-based, they high consensus fields. They're not like your sociology where everybody's fighting with everybody all the time.

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So I think like having had that background and having had a chance to think about also you know people who do study scientific endeavors, I think I'm comfortable to say there is no way that higher education cannot be political.

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Truth has always been political. Coming from Iran, I know personally that matters to me in the sense that I know that higher education itself can be against the state. And it's hard to pursue truth when it's not that that pursuit of truth can also complicate all these relations of power from the state, from the market.

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So I think, you know, as controversial as it I would hold to the fact that truth-seeking is always political. All the sciences have always been political. There's examples of that. And of course, it's like kind of long conversation and it's an important conversation. And frankly, I think there are some people who might be better suited to have that than me.

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I think to me, the difference becomes if that politicization is about partisan goals. I don't like partisan goals and I don't think it's a good way to frame anything around pursuit of truth.

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So I think I feel comfortable to say I don't think we should be in any ways in the connected to partisan goals. It's ugly. It's never going to work. And I don't know if I do that and how much.

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As far as politics, I would also the fact, come forward about that. I don't know if there is any work that's not political. And I think we should be comfortable to own the fact that, again, and just think about how does that politics work.

00:49:36.82
And if that politics is becoming hegemony, which is part of what I'm hearing you say, elite schools, John, I've never been in an elite school. I just own it that, I don't know, how it works over in Harvard or Brown.

00:49:48.89
You know, I'm just have comfortably been in UNL and it's not elite. So I understand that. Yeah. When an engineer tells me that his own field is politicized, it gives me pause. So I'm not going to criticize that. I'll let that be.

00:50:05.43
Well, I was going to say, I think we have like four more podcast episodes here. I literally wrote down what is the mission of the university? Because I think that's one of the things that comes emanates out of some of the things you've been saying is truth seeking political.

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It makes me think of this whole idea of institutional neutrality. And we're not going to jump down that rabbit hole. But like some people would argue, you know, can an institution and can a university actually be neutral?

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And I wish we had, you know, two more hours, but we don't. And so I think I do, before we end, I want to make sure that I give you the opportunity to address outside of politics, outside of funding, if you had a wish list for how higher ed can do a better job of inclusion and pluralism, what would some of those things be?

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I can start by saying a few things. Should I do that? Yeah, please. I think it's important for universities to think about what they're trying to achieve. not just be stuck on patterns and pathways of that are of dependency on the past.

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They're really thinking to themselves, where are they trying where are they're trying to go? I think broadly speaking, the university the U.S. university system is trying to do this incredible thing, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, of trying to be fully inclusive, trying to be a more fully inclusive university system.

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It'll never be perfectly inclusive, but being more fully inclusive than any system in the past has ever tried to be. And to do that in a way that is not just picking and choosing one partisan side's view about pluralism might mean, but rather a wider a wider view of what pluralism is. It includes viewpoint pluralism on religious dimensions, on social class dimensions, on political ideology dimensions, too.

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So looking at looking at the goal, I think it's incredibly important. Some of the reports, the reports that came out from Yale last year, I think did a pretty good job with that. though the Cornell report, which has been swallowed up by other things in the news from coming out of Cornell, the Cornell report itself is actually a really important report I'm talking about a futuristic, a future leaning view of the university built on the conception of sound judgment.

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with pluralism at the base of the whole concept. That's a wonderful idea. So things the university can do immediately, it seems to me, there are things like thinking about admissions and thinking about the kinds of implicit biases and existing admissions questions, especially at the elite schools.

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So often in the past, in the recent past and some universities currently, the questions and things that are advocated and looked for by admissions officers are tilted ideologically in one direction.

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Now there's been a movement, and Cornell again is leading on this with their report at least. They're advocating and looking at um not just narrow scores and things that people do, but trying to ask a broader question about, are they curious?

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Can they describe a time they changed their mind about something? What did it mean to change their mind? Are they coming to the university with a kind of attitude and a kind of hopes that could actually be radically radically disruptive of the way they've currently previously seen the world?

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Are they people like are there we should be looking for people like that in the undergraduate classes, for example, to create an undergraduate population on campuses that want to seek out conversations with each other um So that's one big step.

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I think you can also do a lot, we can also do a lot with the existing faculty to encourage professors to teach their courses in a more broad-minded way. I've taught a number of three universities in the U.S., um all of them elite research schools.

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And my professors and my colleagues in those schools, they weren't like trying to be ideological in the way they taught their classes. Some were, but most of them weren't. They just didn't know stuff about good readings on the other sides of issues that they happened to be abiding by themselves.

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With a little education, I think professors could be encouraged to broaden the range of readings on their syllabi and improve the viewpoint experience of students immediately, like within a semester or two.

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In the longer range, though, third and finally, We have to really think about the ideological diversity of our faculty. Are there implicit barriers in the way we're doing searches now?

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Are we screening out people for ideological reasons without even being aware that we're doing it? Maybe by the way we define the important topics in certain fields and how we define things that less important in certain fields.

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There's lots of ways in which our biases have led us to be reproducing the same set of paradigms, to the same set of questions within the various disciplines. If you want to make the disciplines lively, and have universities earn the respect of our fellow citizens again, we need to be critical, self-critical about our own biases and find ways to hire a faculty who are exploring new questions, new topics, issues that are lively across the society.

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Truth-seeking always, they can't just be because some group happens to think something, therefore we're going to teach it. It's got to pass the threshold of actual truth-seeking and evidence. But trying to diversify the faculty is going to be an important part of this at some point.

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Thanks. Okay. Milad, what's your wishlist? Oh, gosh. So many. to choose that if You can pick three, too. good Right. I think we are at a point in the nation to really think about what does public mean?

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I think we have to think about the question of what is the purpose of public higher ed. And as a society, we support that if you are willing to actually support the public institutions to do those public goals.

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ah yeah We have been in a time that largely higher education has been reduced to private good, you know, students' goals so that they can have better lives. And I think we really have to redefine higher ed and come back to that questions of, is there one of the goals of higher education to you know, pursue that public good?

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And are we willing to support that as a society, both in the state, federal government and state governments? And then related to that, I think it maps into a lot of the ones that John was mentioning.

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How do we, you know, basically create the structure or create the environments for that so that we can create that environment so that we can reach that goal? Which one goes to the all kinds of things that I think John was mentioned around faculty to training, you know, professionalization.

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you know, there is lots of research on faculty bias in hiring. And again, really using research to inform these practices. I think academic freedom at this point matters in that, you know, broader picture of how higher ed is becoming questioned in the sense of, you know, specifically faculty work and their capacity to pursue and define their own agenda.

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It has always been really one of the most important features of U.S. higher education. And I think we really have to focus on that at this point specifically. And then so much of my work is around difficult dialogue. So I tend to agree with John on that.

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I really think it's important to give a students and faculty, not that all faculty have also those are skills. Most of them are not trained in it. I'm in the Midwest where people are generally really conflict divers.

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So I don't know about the East Coast or West Coast, but generally, you know, giving people the skills so that they can engage in difficult dialogues. They can engage, you know, sit with some of the uncomfortable truths or the part that we might not want to think can be true.

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and I think that really matters if you want to create a more transformative change rather than, you know, just put something in an institutional sites. And the next government comes and take it down and put the other one up.

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And I'm just like, not a good approach. It's not a good approach to anybody. It's just changing the storefronts without actually moving anything on the backside. And I think we have work to do on that more bigger cultural transformation and giving people the skills.

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I just need both of you in some university president's offices and together you can, you know, can work on this to-do list.

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I am so grateful for both of your time. And it's always hard when we come to the end, but here we are. And I think what I'd like to do to close is it always ends sort of the same way, which is to ask our guests to think about something tangible that our listeners can either reflect on or do ah vis-a-vis what we've been talking about. And I realize this is a little harder. It's not like, you know, make sure you vote or you know, subscribe to your local newspaper. But, you know, I can think of some things. And so, but I'm interested to hear what you would say to a listener who wants to either learn more about viewpoint diversity or engage in it or in, in you know, what yeah, what do you suggest?

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Milad. I think one thing that stands out from my own research for the center is that we really have to stay close to definitions and pay attention to what is the definition, how are people defining it, and how do those definitions matter for the work that we do and refusing and actively avoiding the easiest versus them frame of these people versus that people.

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I kind of can read this person and their motives And just really wanting to sit with uncomfortable truths that might not be what any of us might want to hear. So I think that to me is always a good practice and the practice of, again, really asking, how is it defined?

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How does this person define this thing? and how does it align with my values? And can I have conversations with those people around why we might be in different you know perspectives on some of those ideas? Yeah.

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Well, I mean, as someone who's dedicated the greater part of their career to expression-related issues, you know, words matter. And that's what you're saying is to think intentionally and maybe a little bit more deeply about what words you're using and what they and what impact they have.

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John? And I guess I'd say that I think there are two great forces, um two teams arrayed against each other when we think about university reform currently.

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One team, mainly from the inside of the university, um at its worst, is something like a very self-satisfied, status quo-protecting view that says, you know we're doing just fine. Stop attacking us, you crazy people in Washington.

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The other side, typically from outside the academy, thinks the university is hopelessly lost. They say, burn them down. Let's get rid of them. And there's temptations, I'm aware, to follow either of those teams. I feel some of those pulls both on myself sometimes.

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I think the really important thing for our fellow citizens who have lost faith in our universities, and for the universities too, is the third way of thinking about these things. And this is a way that's really fundamental to the Western idea of a free society and about a free instance that is a free set of institutions.

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That's the idea that no set of institutions is ever set in stone that being a certain way. They're always in a process of becoming. Lincoln talked about the American product as being unfinished. That was the word he used.

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And that word of institutions, the universities, for example, being unfinished, I think is a really important one. It doesn't mean that it's fine. It's not self-satisfied with the way things are. It's not giving up, throw up your hands, burn it down. They're bunch of Marxists. Let's get rid of them.

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It's rather saying more something more realistic that there's hard work to be done by every generation to make our universities and all our democratic institutions worthy of the society that they're part of.

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And so what we need from the public and from the universities themselves, more of that third way, more of that way of recognizing with all humility and determination that our institutions are always in a

process of becoming, we the people living right now, are playing a role in saying what they're going to be,

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Whichever way we approach it ourselves actually defines what we contributed to the situation. And the positive builders approach is neither self-satisfied nor completely complacent about throwing up your hands and say, burning it down and saying, let's look at some facts.

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Let's talk about it seriously. Let's try to build a better university system than the one we have. And that's the attitude I think we need from our fellow citizens who have lost faith in our faith in our universities.

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And we need it most of all from universities themselves. I think you said this towards the beginning, John, relentless but not uncritical love. So... I am grateful to both of you. I feel so happy that the selection committee picked Milad and grateful for this paper and John as someone who's really, you know, or the leader about heterodoxy in universities for you to join us. and You know, I don't want to sound self-satisfied, but like to have this conversation that was like really interesting and nuanced and have it be lovely and fun.

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I feel good about role modeling that because I think this is like what it's supposed to be about. And I'm happy that I had a chance to, you know, facilitate it.

01:02:59.26
Thank you, Michelle. Milad, thank you so much. yeah Thank you for having us. Well, that's a wrap. Thank you so much to Milad Mohebali and John Tomasi. Tune in next month when we talk to the Chronicle of Higher Education's international reporter, Karin Fischer, about how recent developments are impacting the ability of international students to participate in expression and engagement on campus.

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Talk to you next time.