

Encouraging Civil Discourse on Campus

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, politics, and education.

Today's topic is Encouraging Civil Discourse on Campus.

Our speaker is Steve Lewis who is the former President of Carleton College and former Provost at Williams.

I want to learn from Steve what are the constructive steps that a university president should make to facilitate a healthy conversation on campus on provocative and highly charged topics. How can a college develop a social contract among students and faculty that fosters free speech?

Why have the tenured faculty not taken the lead on this issue? And what is proper role of university trustees, and should they be the ones pursuing university speech neutrality by defining the rules of the road?

Buckle up!

Steve, can you please begin with your opening six-minute remarks.

Steve Lewis:

Recently there has been controversy about free speech, academic freedom, prohibited speech on university campuses. The Ivy presidents got roasted before Congress. Some are being called back again to talk about anti-Semitism on campus.

There are two quite separate issues. One is the things we have seen recently with the Hamas-Israel war public controversy and the George Floyd murder.

Two, there are issues that cannot be discussed in classes. And is there a language that cannot be used by students or faculty. I'll come back to this.

One of my standard lines, both when I was working in colleges in the United States and when I was working for governments in Africa, is you get out of trouble by staying out of trouble. If you are in the soup, it is already too late to do anything except mitigate damage, so you must prepare ahead of time.

It's important to start with the purpose of colleges and universities. It is students are there to learn and faculty and students are there together to inquire, to challenge each other, and to advance knowledge. And this requires the freedom to think, ask questions, and to explore. Discussion is critical.

We are not selling a revealed truth. We leave that to the churches. We are there to explore what is true and what is good and what is beautiful, and to address contested or controversial issues.

We have got an age of siloed news, of social media, and the question then is, how do we enable and encourage conversation about controversial issues? Because there is nowhere where incoming students get any coaching, experience, or exposure to how to model conversations about serious issues. We need to teach listening as a skill in colleges.

The years that I was at Carleton, from '87 to '02, we remade New Student Week to say this is what it means to be here at Carleton. We ask tough questions; we have difficult conversations; we do it in a civil manner and established the social contract between the institution, faculty, and students to allow students to ask questions and be curious.

There will be controversies. How are we as an institution going to handle something that comes up out of the blue? The way we did it at Carleton was we say tomorrow there's going to be a meeting in the chapel, a non-religious space to talk about important things. And there would be a few chosen speakers, then there would be open mic, and then if needed breakout sessions, led by volunteer faculty and staff. The day after George H.W. Bush launched the first Gulf War, we knew that was going to be controversial, and a lot of students were going to be upset. The morning of 9-11, we had a meeting at the chapel and arranged for breakout sessions.

In the 90s, the question of forbidding hate speech came up. We said let's create a committee to talk about what speech is permitted and not permitted. And after a year-long set of discussions among students, faculty and staff, they came up with a proposal that basically said, you must be civil, you have to be respectful, but the only speech that we're going to prohibit is anonymous speech because it's the flip side of academic honesty.

Larry Bernstein:

Let me give an example, the Federalist Society invited a Trump appointed judge to Stanford Law School. There was a demonstration and then they browbeat the judge. He was unable to continue. There were personal insults. And then a member of the staff, the DEI person for Stanford Law School, got up and gave a five-minute prepared speech in which she said that he did not have the right to speak at the event. The staff doubled down on the student's bad behavior. What is the appropriate response to bad behavior?

Steve Lewis:

The institution has to be pretty clear about what behavior is permitted. Most institutions have a code of conduct of students. But particularly you can't interfere with an ordinary academic process, whether it's a visiting speaker or a professor teaching a class.

I do not like the practice of having one-off speakers, particularly if they are going to be controversial, have them make a speech and leave. They ought to be there for a couple of days. They ought to be there to go to classes, be questioned and to have students and faculty have a chance to have real conversations with them. That is what good educational institutions do.

Larry Bernstein:

To push back on that, the university did not invite the judge. The Federalist Society did. And the question arises, can clubs invite someone to speak and have a discussion that won't be interfered with by other students or not?

Steve Lewis:

One of the things that I tried to do at Carleton was make sure that the president, senior faculty and deans, were paying attention to groups of students on campus who felt embattled.

Sometimes that was gay and lesbian students, sometimes that was students of color. Particularly in the last five or six years of my time, it was it was students who were conservative, whether it was politically or religiously. I made it a made it a practice that I would get a dean to go with me to a thoroughly distasteful presentation from my point of view of a conservative speaker, some of whom were outrageous. But it was important to make sure that the people who felt like they were at the margins had recognition from the front office.

And I think it worked. At Carleton the senior class, would pick two or three students to speak at commencement. One year a religiously conservative Asian American football player spoke. He was terrific. And his title of his talk was "Strength for the Road" about how important it was to have his ideas and beliefs respectfully tested by his teachers and his fellow students because it strengthened his beliefs but made him more sympathetic to other points of view.

Back to your point, I know you cannot have everybody for three days, but when we had Richard Helms, the former CIA director on campus, he did an evening talk. He went to several classes. He met informally with a bunch of students. He did a public talk. All of them had questions, but if you want to get these things done, Larry, you got to choreograph them.

Larry Bernstein:

In one of your papers, you mentioned that at the beginning of the school year, you assign a book over the summer. And then on the first day, you would have conversations about the book. How successful was it?

Steve Lewis:

I think it was one of the more successful things that we did. I never picked the book. One of my deans put together a group of faculty and staff, and they would kick around things. I said, "I have three requirements. One, it must deal with some aspect of race or serious difference among people because those are tough to talk about. Two, it must be a good read." It is not a didactic book. Almost all of them were novels and two of them that were not novels read like novels. "And three, it had to be short enough so that when you got to campus and found out that your roommate read the book that you could read it overnight" because that was the second night that they were on campus that we did this.

There was a ritual to it. Everybody showed up, they got herded there by new student week leaders. I kicked off a few remarks about why we were doing this and talked about how important it was to learn, how to talk about difficult issues seriously, and then we had three speakers talk about the book. They disagreed with each other what the lessons were and what the issues were and so on.

You are 18 years old, you are away from home for the first time, you are in a new situation, and you have got three professors who are all disagreeing about the book that you just read and you're not quite sure what you make of it yourself. Then we broke up into small groups of about 14 or so, and we had volunteer student, faculty and staff who led these discussions. Everybody got cider and some cookies and these huge, profound discovery experiences. I took a group and sat on the back porch of the president's house and talked about the book. And it was sometimes like pulling teeth, but were there profound insights? No, but the process of hearing people disagree about what they thought this meant and how to address the issues in it. It was successful because what we said was, "this is how we behave here. We talk about tough things. We talk about contested issues. We talk about it respectfully."

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned the concept of neutrality on campus. And that is at the heart of the recent free speech brouhaha in the Congress where they seem to have two different types. If you attack gender or race, we are going to have a low threshold.

But if you mention genocide of the Jews, it depends on its context. And it was the hypocrisy or the double standard that was problematic. And if you asked Jewish trustees at Penn, they prefer neutrality. You could say whatever you want about the Jews, but you cannot have it two ways.

You can't be neutral on the Jews and then not neutral on anything else. Talk to me about what neutrality means and how it should be properly implemented so you do not get called out as a hypocrite.

Steve Lewis:

Consistency is important. And holding people accountable for what they do and say is important. And both on whether you are talking about gender, race, nationality, undocumented immigrants, Jewish people.

You can't say, we're going to prohibit people from saying nasty things about race but we're not going to prohibit people from saying nasty things about Jews. It's ridiculous.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned in your experience one of the issues was divestment in South Africa. Using your political neutrality, the answer is not taking a position on South Africa. The school has an investment portfolio mandate to maximize returns.

Steve Lewis:

No, it was a little more complex than that. Like many institutions, we did selective divestment.

Larry Bernstein:

I do not understand why you engaged at all. Let me try a different one. There is currently a war between Ukraine and Russia. Shouldn't the university be neutral?

Steve Lewis:

Colleges should not have foreign policies.

Larry Bernstein:

Why does the university have to have a South African divestment policy? When you said we can be selective, you've opened the door. Once you open the door you could say that I find tobacco companies are killing children. We cannot own tobacco. I do not support pollution. Social media is evil. I cannot own Meta. I do not know where it ends. Why can't the university say, we are neutral, we've given policies to the investment committee to do as it sees best?

Steve Lewis:

I agree with the slippery slope argument. What I try to do both at Williams and at Carleton was say, "Let's limit this. We are not going to take a position on specific things. However, in the South African case was special in a variety of ways.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, you also mentioned US foreign policy actions and trying to be neutral, but when the US bombs Cambodia, we can no longer be neutral. That does not feel right to me either. We are bombing Yemen today. We will be bombing somewhere else tomorrow.

Steve Lewis:

Back to Vietnam, what Nixon was doing was not only tearing the country apart, but he was also making it almost impossible to run a good educational institution.

There was a big movement at Williams the faculty should take a position on the war. And fortunately the stalwarts on the faculty said, "bad idea." And what happened was there was a statement.

I would rather have done different things on the South African divestment; we took a lot of heat for not just dumping everything. A lot of colleges ended up divesting everything just to make the issue go away, which I thought was a really bad thing to do.

Larry Bernstein:

Recently at Columbia, the organization Students for Social Justice in Palestine made a declaration blaming Israel for the Hamas attacks after October 7th. It was signed by specific students.

And then a third-party, non-student-run organization put out a doxing truck driving around campus. It said, meet your anti-Semites on campus who signed the Students for Palestine. And it showed a picture and the name of the students. And they were horrified that they were being labeled as an anti-Semite.

A couple of weeks ago, Gary Saul Morrison, I asked him about this, and he said there are consequences to signing a public letter. And one of those consequences is that you will be called out for making a statement. And if you do not want to be called out for making a public statement, don't make a public statement. The students want to have the freedom to make a public statement without the consequences.

They don't want to be called out as anti-Semites on campus, and they don't want their future employers to be aware of their political stances in school. We live in a greater community and in a society, and what does it mean to speak out on campus in a public way?

Steve Lewis:

That is back to my point about no anonymous speech. If you make a statement, you take responsibility for that statement. And that means that it is yours. Your name is on it. And you have got to think about what the consequences are.

Young people today think they can post something on Instagram, and it does not have any consequences. The career counseling offices try to make sure that the students understand that what you got posted on Facebook is with you forever. And you cannot post pictures of yourself acting like a jackass and not expect there to be consequences of that. That is an important life lesson that their pen got out ahead of their brain.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to go to the purpose of the trustees and how they are supposed to behave and direct an institution. Members of the board of many charitable institutions were selected not because we agree to provide money to the institution. The deal is that the creative directors of these charitable institutions are given free license to do what they think is right. The board is trying to do is make sure that you stay away from stupid stuff.

In a theater, you do not select the play. In the art museum, you do not select the artist. You do not select the curator of that specific art exhibit. Instead, they will ask you, we'd like to do this play or do this exhibit. Would you give extra money for that? And we will put your name on the program.

In the Penn example, when I spoke to my friends who were on the board, they said, things have been going adrift for a long time and no one spoke up. And it was not till now where we realized how horrible it has become. In this example it was a failure of the Penn Board to make sure that they had a social contract that there was not going to be hypocrisy on campus, that anti-Semitism would not infect the university from top to bottom. Civil discourse and free speech have been left out to dry and now they must do something dramatic.

What makes a good trustee pursue neutrality in the social contract and achieve the objectives it wants?

Steve Lewis:

Colleges and universities are different from other nonprofits because they have a simple purpose: to help students learn and for faculty and staff together to advance knowledge. At the same time, they are very complicated organizations because you've got the faculty that have long traditions about their internal governance, who gets to make decisions about who gets hired, who gets promoted, and so on.

My view on boards is that putting a board together is like putting together a symphony orchestra. You cannot have all bassoons and you cannot have all flutes.

You cannot have all rich people and you cannot have all poor people. You want people who bring different things to the table, who have different points of view, who have different roles in society, and who will help the president and the president's staff and the other trustees have a broader, more complete view of what the institution is and should be doing.

Larry Bernstein:

Going back to Penn, Mark Rowan the CEO of Apollo used to oversee the Wharton Advisory Board, enormous benefactor hundreds of millions of dollars to the school, was outraged at the Penn President. I saw an interview on the Today Show where he called out the President not for being an anti-Semite, but for being in over her head and that she and the Chairman of the Board had to move on. After the catastrophic congressional hearings, Liz Magill resigned as did the Chairman of the Board of the trustees. And Rowan announced that the board should adopt new rules as it related to speech on campus, rules of neutrality, what civil discourse is acceptable and not. And normally you would be saying, wait a minute, you are entering into the world of management here.

Rowan is saying this is exactly what trustees should do. You started, Steve, with this concept. What is the objective of this institution? I think that is clearly in the purview of the trustees. And then second is what should the rules of the road be? And that feels to be the role of the trustees because those rules of the road will outlive the president.

Steve Lewis:

I think that's right. But it's also the unique thing about college and universities is the role of the faculty, which has this long tradition of internal governance going back at the time of the first Gilded Age. And out of that era came the AAUP, the Association of American Universities, the first statement on academic freedom and tenure. And the beginning of the rules that now govern.

Larry Bernstein:

To push back on that, we had Gary Saul Morson on the podcast a couple weeks ago, and he said that the tenured faculty were spineless and do not stand up for these ideals. Students on social media, the fear, we're not going to say boo.

Steve Lewis:

I agree. That is right.

Larry Bernstein:

You may have said that we needed tenure to make the tough decisions. The reality on the ground is if a faculty member takes a politically provocative view in his research, he can get fired. If he makes politically provocative or controversial statements related to his teachings, he will be ostracized.

This whole tenure concept that was originally its purpose is now thin gruel.

Steve Lewis:

I don't disagree with that. In my view, what is required is that presidents and deans must work with faculty to get some spine back and help get them to stand up for each other. That's what is missing. It is hard for an individual faculty to withstand the social media attacks.

Larry Bernstein:

It is not just the individual professor. Saul suggested that even the president of the university, if he went out and made a stand, that he too would be destroyed.

Steve Lewis:

When I went to Carleton, I was an at-will employee as president. My job was on the line all the time. And you can be sure that I made sure that my board chair and other key trustees knew what I was doing and going to say.

I was retiring and there were a couple of faculty members who said "what we need is a new president who will stand up on controversial issues." I thought, that'll make for a short presidency.

Larry Bernstein:

On our recent podcast, we had Brian Rosenberg, who was president at Macalester which is a neighboring college to Carleton. And he mentioned that he faced a real challenge to closing departments, allocating resources across departments. The faculty had demands and made it impossible for him to make decisions to change the focus of the university. Do you agree with him?

Steve Lewis:

Process is important in colleges and universities and there's good reason for that. You got to be patient, you got to be political. You got to pay attention to people, you got to pay attention to the issues.

My last year at Carleton, I had a call from a guy who I'd worked with on a board, very prominent Washington lawyer, very ambitious, mid-50s, and he said, I've been approached by a university. They want me to consider being president. What should I be thinking about?

I said, "how long do you think you'll be there?" And he said, "I don't know, they say if you can't get it done in five years, you can't get it done."

I said, "I've been working on a piece of legislation with the faculty since before I took office 14 years ago. I think with luck, I'm going to get it done this spring." Long pause at the other end of the line. This guy did not go on.

You got to be patient. You must respect faculty traditions and you can change them. But you do not change them by fiat. You change them by persuasion and by evidence and by working with people and working within institutions.

Larry Bernstein:

It is one thing if a university has billions of dollars and lots of benefactors. We have had podcasts on this where one of the speakers says he expects a substantial number of American colleges will go bankrupt and will be dissolved.

It is one thing to say, let us think this thing through over a 10-to-15-year period, maybe get rid of a department. That may not fly in the context of fast changing economics on the ground. What you are describing is if an institution has sufficient cash and can be making bad judgments for an extended period that is fine. We'll just have to grow out of it.

Steve Lewis:

No, I do not accept that. What I am saying is that you can change things, but you got to be patient. One of the things that I learned with working with new presidents is that there are these boards who they would pick a president and then within six months, they are saying, let's do an evaluation of her. Are you kidding me? She does not even know the right people at this point. There's no silver bullet on these things. These are complicated organizations. They need to change; they are not going to change fast.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to change topics to culture. You mentioned that as one of the core aspects of the university is the culture that you create. When I worked at Salomon Brothers, I had a chance to work internationally. I lived in Tokyo, I lived in London. I co-headed an emerging markets department and spent time in Russia, in Morocco.

It's a big world out there and culture varies dramatically. You were stationed in Botswana. Botswana is not Minnesota, it just isn't. And you led your university to greatly expand the number of international students. Foreign students pay full freight and that drives the economics. Today we have an enormous number of Chinese, Indian students, students from Iran and other places. And these people bring with them their own culture. You cannot help it.

I am American. When I lived in Japan, I behaved like an American and not like a Japanese. And the Japanese looked at me funny when I crossed the street, even though there was a "don't walk" sign. When I got to Tokyo airport, there was an enormous sign. It said, "Welcome to Japan, please follow all the rules." And I turned to my wife and said, "you'll never see that sign at O'Hare."

There's pros and cons to having a substantial foreign student body on campus. Namely, it will be challenging to create an American style culture with non-American student bodies. How do you think about the role of the foreign student with trying to create an American idyllic culture on campus?

Steve Lewis:

Towards the end of my time, we started to push on international students, particularly from Asia, because we had gotten some serious money to help us do that. It was in conjunction with a new academic program called Cross-Cultural Studies. What our admissions folks were looking for are these Carleton kids? Are they curious? Are they willing to experiment? Are they going to be participants in things? There are different motivations for foreign students, particularly from Asia. But part of it is selection. Why are these kids interested in being here? And once they're here, how does the college help them settle in and participate in the things that other students participate in?

We're finding that the international students are active as alumni. They stay in touch. Most of them go back home but not all of them. They contribute to the rich mix of people on campus and that's important. It's a lot easier to do if you're a small college than if you're a big university.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to civil discourse on campus?

Steve Lewis:

I see around different colleges that there are individuals and faculty that are trying to make this happen. Dartmouth's initiative is a good one. People are realizing this is how bad things can get. And that will self-correct, I hope.

Seeing the toxic effect of social media on serious thought is going to drive some people to pay attention to this more. I'm by nature optimistic.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Steve, for joining us today.

If you missed our previous podcast the topic was Fighting to Win in American Foreign Policy. Our speaker was John Bolton who served as the US Ambassador to the UN under George W. Bush and as US National Security Advisor for Donald Trump. John published his memoir The Room Where It Happened about his time working in the Trump Administration.

John encouraged Israel to remain focused on its war in Gaza to destroy Hamas. John thinks that Zelensky needs to keep its chin up while the US debates an additional aid package and thinks that the Biden Administration needs to stop preventing Ukraine from escalating the conflict. And that Taiwan needs to step up its armaments purchases and prepare for a Chinese blockade.

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Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.