**Bryan Paul:**

Well here we are coming to you live from Cambridge Massachusetts. This is Dr. Bryan Paul, director of Alumni Advocacy with the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. I'm sitting right now with Wayne Stargardt, president of the MIT Free Speech Alliance, and Peter Bonilla, executive director of the MIT Free Speech Alliance. Gentlemen, welcome. Mr. President, good to have you here.

**Wayne Stargardt:**

It's great to be talking to you, Bryan.

**Bryan Paul:**

Peter, always a pleasure to be speaking with you too.

**Peter Bonilla:**

Always a pleasure, Bryan.

**Bryan Paul:**

Well, gentlemen, of all the places we could be talking right now, we are in the heart of American higher ed. So much history here in the Cambridge, Boston area. What brings us here today?

**Wayne Stargardt:**

Well, Bryan, today was the second annual conference of the MIT Free Speech Alliance. It's a conference that we run to help further our mission to improve support for freedom of expression, viewpoint diversity, and academic freedom at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Our audience that we aim the conference at are not only our members who are alumni, but also members of the MIT community who are faculty and students and some administrators.

**Bryan Paul:**

All right. What were some of the highlights for you as part of this conference today? This is the third or second conference you have held as the MFSA, right?

**Wayne Stargardt:**

Right. So it's the second one and we have five sessions. They're different from last year. We had a session today on the... That had representatives of the MIT Committee on Academic Freedom and Campus Expression, which is called CAFCE.

**Wayne Stargardt:**

This was a committee set up by the president of MIT about a year ago to try and help MIT implement some of the recommendations of the previous ad hoc committee that had developed the statement on freedom of expression, which is MIT's version of the Chicago Principles. That session was interesting because the committee came together and then the incident in Gaza happened and they've been fighting fires ever since.

**Bryan Paul:**

My word. I know that has kept many administrators very busy addressing all kinds of student concerns, not to mention encampments, protests. What has stood out to you from this conference regarding the feedback or the insight offered by administrators?

Wayne Stargardt:

Well, so this committee is mainly formed by faculty. Our second session was a administrator who was hired just in the spring of this year. Part of his charter is to work on ways to improve MIT's support for open discourse. In a typical MIT fashion, there's a lot of initiatives that are going on and he showcased four of them. They are very different, but all recognize that there is a problem with open discourse at MIT and they're all trying different ways to close the gap to what MIT needs to be.

Bryan Paul:

How about you, Peter? You have been a key organizer of this event and you helped organize the first annual conference, the inaugural conference last year. As far as the panelists and what was put together for today, what stands out to you?

Peter Bonilla:

I'm going to keep my assessment to a sort of 30,000 foot view of things. Despite being the organizer, or actually probably because I was the organizer, I saw the least of the conference of anyone here. I was always doing back of house stuff, thinking ahead to the next thing.

Peter Bonilla:

What I take away is that we established our credibility as an organization with the ability to bring together a lot of difference makers in the space for free expression at MIT. That we got the extent of buy-in from key figures on the MIT faculty, from the MIT senior administration, from the president's office, from President Sally Kornbluth, who took time from her day to come and watch Steven Pinker deliver his keynote speech. I think it was a very important day for us in terms of establishing our credibility as a pillar of the MIT community, particularly where free expression is concerned.

Wayne Stargardt:

While we didn't necessarily rehearse all the speakers, they reinforced several of the initiatives we're trying to propose, which would be to have MIT embrace institutional neutrality, which it has not done yet. As well as implement a program to educate incoming first year students on MIT's free speech policies. Panelist after panelist reinforce both those initiatives as being so important.

Bryan Paul:

I, for one, have always stood in awe or have long stood in awe of the MIT Free Speech alliance, your credibility in my eyes is through the roof given how well you have been organized as a group, how you have mobilized alumni to foster or go for free expression on campuses. I'm going to be starting over... As a note to the producer, the editor that I'm going to be starting over right after Wayne's comments there.

Bryan Paul:

Well, I got to say that I have long stood in awe of the MIT Free Speech Alliance. The way you all have conducted yourselves, assembled alumni, mobilized an effort to defend free speech, academic freedom,

and viewpoint diversity at MIT is nothing short of admirable. I have to find out, and I'm sure our listeners would love to know what it takes to organize and run a large successful outfit like this.

Bryan Paul:

Please, as we talk about that, I want to start from the very beginning. What is the origin story of the MIT Free Speech Alliance that has led to where we work today, seeing a robust program of administrators, trustees, faculty, students come together in such a setting? Wayne, where did this all get started?

Wayne Stargardt:

Well, unfortunately, the origin of all of this originated when MIT canceled the Carlson lecture that Dr. Dorian Abbot of the University of Chicago was scheduled to deliver in October of 2021. I think up until that time, I and a number of other alumni had felt that some of the cancel culture behavior that was occurring at other college campuses would not happen in STEM. It was a shock to us when it happened. It was also the catalyst for us, many of us as alumni to come together and say, okay, this was a mistake and we need to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Wayne Stargardt:

Now at that point, we then had to make some significant strategic decisions, which have brought us to where we are today. Part of the decision was we were just going to focus on the three pillars of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance, which was we're pushing for freedom of expression, viewpoint diversity, and academic freedom to be restored on campus.

Wayne Stargardt:

We discussed going with a broader agenda, going after some of the DEI root causes of cancel culture. We decided to step back from that. What we felt was our long-term goal was to engage with MIT at multiple levels in a constructive dialogue to help either convince them or find allies and assist them to make the cultural change, to restore MIT to what it had been when we as alumni had been there.

Wayne Stargardt:

That's how things got started. That was our basic starting strategy. We have slowly over time established ourselves as a credible, reasonable proponent for the three pillars to MIT at all levels. We haven't been strident, we haven't been combative, we haven't been insulting, we've been constructive and have provided input as much as possible. MIT has come around to understanding that these are important things.

Wayne Stargardt:

Now, the good part of MIT is that a large portion of the STEM faculty was already on our side, but they had been over the years suppressed into passivity by speech suppression and cancel culture from some other parts of MIT. The faculty is actually very important and we've been able to turn a number of them into proponents and allies for what we're trying to accomplish.

Bryan Paul:

Peter, you come from a very special powerful background in this space, not an MIT alumnus, but one certainly who cares deeply about free speech on campus, not to mention in the nation at large. Tell us a little more about your beginnings with the MFSA.

Peter Bonilla:

Sure. I guess to get to my beginnings, I have to go way far back to my beginnings in the free speech space generally, which is to say that for almost 15 years before I came to MFSA, I was on the staff at FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, going back to when it was called the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. Which I still sometimes catch myself getting wrong these days.

Peter Bonilla:

I have been working to defend free speech and higher education in one form or another for more than 16 years at this point. A lot of that was at FIRE where I started at in 2008. So I had a number of hats in my time at FIRE. The meat of my time when I was there was doing FIRE's bread and butter work, taking cases from students and student organizations and faculty who were dealing with censorship or retaliation on the basis of their expression.

Peter Bonilla:

So I spent a lot of time marinating in the issues of free speech in higher education, acquiring no small degree of expertise despite not having a law degree, as a lot of my other colleagues doing the kind of work do. This came along about a little more than two years ago at this point. When I was living in Cambridge, I'd relocated here from Philadelphia when my wife took new work up here in biotech and the opportunity to reorient myself from a large national organization, I say large, it was pretty large by the time I left. It was from when I started in 2008 it had less than 20 staff, now more than a hundred.

Peter Bonilla:

It was a chance to really reorient my work in a true grassroot startup, taking what I knew from my time at FIRE and applying it in a very different and a much more local setting. I have to say that even though I didn't know very much about MIT, a big part of the appeal was that it was an MIT focused organization. It has such a peculiar, such a famous culture and a very well-known roguish streak.

Bryan Paul:

That roguish streak certainly manifests itself in the visionary, proactive leadership of the organization from individuals like you, Wayne, to others as part of the organization. What is the driving force for you, Wayne? Why are you involved? Why are you leading this effort? Why do you care so much?

Wayne Stargardt:

Well, that's a good question because at MIT you're really only focused on learning about the natural sciences and getting your degree. It's a lot of work and it's hard. I will say a lot of the issues that free speech revolves around and even the fundamental understanding of the philosophical foundation of the scientific method and everything that we base so much of our practice on was not really taught at MIT. That's all stuff I picked up afterwards.

Wayne Stargardt:

Over time, I developed an appreciation for what most of us on the executive committee would call enlightenment values. That's true for most of my counterparts in the leadership. We came to understand that the kind of technology that MIT has applied to make the world a better place, all sprang out of the enlightenment and the values of the enlightenment. One of those is free speech.

Wayne Stargardt:

The importance of free speech is very near and dear to scientists. There is a long, rich history in science of people being either suppressed or canceled or worse, when they are trying to be heretics and advancing science and ultimately being proven right in the end. So we knew you have to be able to have open discourse in order for science to advance.

Wayne Stargardt:

It is a core value. If it's a core value for science, it has to be a core value for the leading STEM university in the world. That's what we're trying to preserve.

Bryan Paul:

Why is free speech a core value for you, Peter? What is it that drives you in this work?

Peter Bonilla:

Good question. For someone who has done this work for more than 15 years, every once in a while it's nice to have to remind yourself of why you do it. For me, I came from a more creative background. Before I got into the work that I'm doing now, first with FIRE and now here I worked in professional theater, not in anything in an onstage capacity, strictly behind the stage stuff.

Peter Bonilla:

I worked for a company for a time that produced a lot of new work, a lot of daring work, a lot of socially and politically cutting edge work where a strong foundation and free expression just kind of had to be taken for granted to be able to do the kinds of things that you do. Often getting flack, whether from critics, whether from your audiences.

Peter Bonilla:

If I came up in free expression, probably that's where a lot of its roots are and just its bare necessity to be in any kind of a creative work. I guess from there, my civil libertarian bedrock was formed, but it was not a difficult transition to go from working in the arts to working in free speech movement because a lot of those same values are really the same.

Bryan Paul:

When you said that, mentioning your experience in the arts, I couldn't help but think of what John Adams is purported to have written to Abigail Adams, if I recall correctly. How, quote, "I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history," et cetera, et cetera in order to give their children a right to study, painting, poetry, music. To see that those fields intertwined in how they really feed on each other and how you at that time, even if you didn't realize it had an appreciation or at least took for granted this freedom of expression through the arts.

Bryan Paul:

Something that not everyone has the luxury of always witnessing, not least of which those roguish scientists, shall we say, who are consistently pushing boundaries and seeing what is possible. No less are we seeing that in the realm of robust debate and discussion, sadly being stifled on campus. Now,

regarding MIT Free Speech Alliance, Wayne, what would you say are in line with these core values, your mission and vision?

Wayne Stargardt:

Well, our mission is to restore because MIT has historically had a robust, open, passionate, but respectful discourse atmosphere and collaboration atmosphere. It's part of the things that make MIT great. Many of us as alumni remember that and we're trying to restore that. So we're trying to restore that culture where some of the quirky professors and students at MIT, and we have our share, can engage with each other openly, brainstorm like they have always done and come up with groundbreaking new insights into the natural sciences.

Bryan Paul:

Now there are so many who are in this space doing precisely that. Many of them faculty, some of them administrators, even trustees who have historically at times given a rubber stamp to certain policies have striven to be more active and engaged in their fiduciary role. Why are alumni equally vital to the support of free speech on campus, Wayne?

Wayne Stargardt:

Well, our view was when we took up this crusade is that it had to be us because of all the people in the MIT community, we cannot be canceled. So we had to be the people holding up the mirror to MIT and saying, "Hey, look, there's a problem," and start looking for people inside the community who will equally then feel more comfortable also agreeing that there's a problem and helping us in trying to fix it. Because we can't fix the problem, that has to be done from the people currently engaged in MIT, but we can be the change agents and that's our mission.

Peter Bonilla:

We can put the wind at the back of the people fixing the problem.

Wayne Stargardt:

Right.

Bryan Paul:

I imagine as you do so, as you hold up that mirror to the face of the administration, they probably don't always like what they see or what they try not to see. Has that been your experience, that there is some pushback from admin?

Wayne Stargardt:

Yes, but it's changing and it's lessening. We have been always polite but firm about stating what the problem at MIT is. Originally we got a lot more resistance, hostility, but we also were reasonable. In a true MIT fashion, we tried to argue logically and show evidence and propose solutions.

Wayne Stargardt:

Over time people have come to respect that. Now they're still hostile resistors, don't get me wrong, but people who were maybe not as fully aware of what damage was being done have come around to understanding that and are starting to agree that a change needs to be made.

Bryan Paul:

As you go about doing that, what have been some positive experiences or even yet, what's one example of a positive development whereby conducting yourself as you have described by being firm and resolute yet polite and civil, what has been a positive outcome from that?

Wayne Stargardt:

Our big victory this year has been that in the spring, one of the things we've been pushing on for a long time is that on DEI statement requirements for faculty hiring. This spring, the MIT president and every member of her executive team endorsed that MIT would no longer allow or require DEI statements to be required for faculty hiring. That was a big victory. MIT was the first elite private university who had been using DEI statements, who stopped doing it.

Bryan Paul:

Well, just like the MIT Free Speech Alliance has emerged as a real model for other alumni in this space, it seems like MIT is starting to emerge as an institution that can be emulated by others.

Wayne Stargardt:

Bryan, I appreciate the complimentary words, but MIT is the leading STEM university in the country. Maybe the world. Didn't get that way by accident. Our goal is to make sure all the positive forces that made that happen are restored, and that's going to be a benefit for the country because we're an example for every other STEM program.

Peter Bonilla:

Just to follow on a little bit what Wayne was saying in terms of positive developments to come for us through the last year. I think the last year, especially everything that happened since October 7, was very important in crystallizing our sense of purpose and really identifying where we come from to the MIT administration. We weren't the stridently pro-Israel alumni group or the stridently pro-Palestine alumni group.

Peter Bonilla:

We were the pro-free speech group. Which meant urging MIT to stick to its principles on free expression. Backing them up when they did good, when they made good on their promises, urging them to stick to their policies on time, place and manner, and generally understanding and being respectful of the difficult position that Sally Kornbluth and other people in her administration were in when they were trying to navigate the tricky climate of that last year on campus.

Peter Bonilla:

I think it wasn't always easy for us. Sticking to our principles through that difficult time in the world was good ultimately for our relationship with MIT, in terms of them getting to understand really who we are and where we come from and really what our principles are and that we're a group that can be worked with.

Bryan Paul:

Go ahead, Wayne.

Wayne Stargardt:

Yeah, I want to follow up on what Peter was talking about because the position we took during all the demonstrations last year, all the offensive commentary caused us some problem with our members who are Jewish, of which MIT has a number of Jewish alumni. There were a number of Jewish alumni who had difficulties sticking to their principles in supporting free speech because it was now personal and direct. It was still just speech.

Wayne Stargardt:

Our position continued to be, as long as they're not disrupting the university operation, as long as they're not harassing other students, they should be able to protest and say whatever they want, however heinous it is. A number of our Jewish members had problems with that, so we had some difficult discussions last year.

Bryan Paul:

How have you been able to navigate those conversations? How have you been able to effectively walk that line of being stalwart defenders of free speech and viewpoint diversity whilst also trying to not take a strong side one way or another?

Wayne Stargardt:

We haven't taken sides. All we've done is continue to remind our members that if we make an exception for you and we allow speech you don't like to be suppressed, then where do we stand in trying to support free speech of all other positions? I will say we weren't successful with every member, but most members came around to grudgingly accepting that that was probably the right thing for this organization to be doing.

Peter Bonilla:

I would say also that a big part of that work is calling the double standards where you see them. We saw them sometimes at MIT last year and definitely at other campuses, the double standard set for anti-Zionist, anti-Israel speech versus just about any other kind of speech in terms of the leeway and dispensation it can get from college administrations, if not sometimes the soft endorsement of its value.

Peter Bonilla:

So alumni who are worried about that, they are right to be worried and they bring the receipts and the receipts are ample. So part of the work there to prove ourselves, both to MIT but also to our supporters, is to urge the university to actually apply its principles evenly without regard for the viewpoint or background of the person expressing them.

Wayne Stargardt:

To continue that, since we did that, I think in the end we've ended up with improved respect by both MIT and our members.

Bryan Paul:

So Peter, you have been in this space as I mentioned for a while now. How have you observed or what have you seen on the higher ed landscape from the time you were at FIRE to your time now with MFSA? How would you describe the higher education landscape?

Peter Bonilla:

Boy, it's funny because in the time that I started at FIRE to now, which is a period of more than 16 years, you've seen so many micro trends within the space come and go. I remember, to think it's going on a decade ago at this point is shocking, but when discussions of things like trigger warnings and safe spaces were absolutely all the rage in higher education to the point where they were being parodied by the Onion. To now seeing how the terminology has shifted so much to, it's hard to think outside the frame of just the last year with just how with everything after October 7th, the whole settler, colonial debate has been really rocketed to the forefront.

Peter Bonilla:

I think in that time you have unfortunately seen a lot more students becoming a lot more open to very illiberal trends, whether you call them cancel culture, whether you call them to talk of FIRE's new college free speech rankings, where in the MIT population and in higher education at large, this was a survey of about 58,000 students that FIRE and College Pulse interviewed. Where you had a startlingly high amount of support for disrupting or shouting down controversial speakers for physically preventing other people from attending events or speakers whose views you disagreed with. Or even in certain cases using violence to put an end to this kind of expression.

Peter Bonilla:

This is something that has gone in the wrong direction in the last several years. I think it has been much more a problem for the student populations than the faculty. I think the faculty have been a lot more steady and I think the faculty are a lot more worried about where their students' opinions are trending.

Bryan Paul:

I know that this is a huge concern to alumni. There have been moments over the past decade where that concern has really shown itself, not least of which in the inflection point of the 2021 Wall Street Journal op-ed penned by Stewart Taylor Jr. and Ed Yingling, who then went on from, well as part of that op-ed announcing the formation of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance. To then go on to formally bring more groups to it, not at least which or including the MIT Free Speech Alliance. From your time at FIRE, Peter, where there other moments when alumni were as concerned? How new of a phenomenon is this to see engaged alumni on this issue of free speech on campus?

Peter Bonilla:

Good question. I'm not sure how many other moments there were when we saw that kind of investment from alumni. To think back to that Wall Street Journal editorial that you mentioned in higher education years, it feels like decades ago, but it was really, I mean it's three years ago.

Bryan Paul:

It really does, my word.

Peter Bonilla:

If I recall correctly, that was at the time where after the killing of George Floyd in 2020 and the spade of police killings, the riots you had in a number of cities, which is what prompted a lot of universities to double or triple down on certain DEI initiatives, which really took things to excess in a number of ways. Not always ways I should say, that are directly of concern to organizations like the MIT Free Speech

Alliance, but which proved in the long run to be, A, corrosive to the overall culture of the institution, and not ultimately very effective in remedying the injustices and inequalities that they were trying to address.

Peter Bonilla:

From where I was at FIRE, I can tell you I was very glad to have been out of the position of doing case intake and case management. In the summer of 2020 at FIRE, the number of cases that came into the organization over speech related in one way or another to race and racial injustice and people mouthing the wrong sentiment about this or that, absolutely skyrocketed.

Peter Bonilla:

This is a kind of trend that we'd seen come and go at FIRE before, but to a markedly different, just way higher extent, the amount of censorship and retaliation on topics of race, anything that went against the familiar orthodoxy of racial injustice in higher education. The number of suspensions and expulsions and unconstitutional investigations and tenure revocations. I think that was a real catalyzing incident. My memory of this isn't perfect, but I think that plays pretty closely into what motivated some of the founding organizations of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance to get together.

Bryan Paul:

They have since gotten together, they have since mobilized and combined forces to affect change or pursue change at their alma maters. What specifically has MFSA done to pursue this type of change on campus? What kind of programming and initiatives are you all engaged in right now?

Wayne Stargardt:

Well, good question. Our first thing that we really tried to do, and it took us a while to get it organized, was to have a debate on the MIT campus over exactly the issue over which Dr. Abbott had been canceled in 2021. We finally pulled that first debate off in the spring of 2022.

Wayne Stargardt:

So it took us about a year and a half to get that organized. Since then we've tried to run a debate every semester on a edgy topic that was tied to issues at MIT that we could titillate the MIT community with to say, okay, that sounds like a hot topic. Let me go see what people are saying.

Bryan Paul:

Hot topics are right. I do remember attending the first two great debates. It was an inspiring moment to be there both times to see different speakers from different sides of the issue be able to engage each other respectively or respectfully. I come from now my new position, in addition to being director of Alumni Advocacy, also the Curricular Fellow for the College Debates and Discourse Alliance, which includes ACTA, Braver Angels, and Bridge USA. To see this type of event held by an alumni group really just makes me... It thrills me to see you all trying to set an example of what this type of engagement, this type of debate could look like on a campus.

Wayne Stargardt:

Yeah. Now there are easily three, four, five different organizations at MIT sponsoring debates along the same model to try and provide examples to the students of how to have respectful discussions over difficult topics.

Bryan Paul:

As a little teaser to our audience, we'll actually be holding another podcast interview with Linda Rabieh, who is a senior lecturer with MIT Concourse. She was actually a panelist here at the conference, the MFSA conference, talking about the civil discourse in the classroom initiative and other programming she has, along with others who are also invested in civil discourse on campus.

Bryan Paul:

I look forward to that conversation tremendously because we'll be able to dig deeper into that particular aspect of what's happening here at MIT. What else have you all been involved in recently? Or what other initiatives are you pursuing right now?

Peter Bonilla:

Well, I'm happy to talk more about our conferences, our debates. When I spoke at ACTA's Alumni Summit earlier in the year, a term that I wanted to use but neglected to is what I call public displays of competence. Which is to say putting on a conference, putting on a debate, showing the community that you can put on an event of substance worth attending, worth your time coming out for. These are crucial in terms of establishing our presence, establishing our credibility, but a lot of the most important work that gets done is the kind that doesn't go on our YouTube channel, the kind that doesn't get our social media posts, the kind we don't write about.

Peter Bonilla:

That's the backdoor diplomacy and networking among the MIT faculty, the MIT students, the MIT leadership, building those relations, building that little bit of trust bit by bit. If there's anything that I would want to tell our fellow AFSA chapters, there's a lot to be said for the kind of big and flashy events that look great in an annual report. I'm very proud coming off the conference that we put on today. It's that unglamorous, shoe leather relationship building that really makes it possible for us to be able to put on an event like this where we get the kind of buy-in from various levels of the university.

Bryan Paul:

That is a brilliant moment or a segue into what I want to ultimately ask you two to comment on. So many alumni are concerned about what they see happening at their alma maters. Some of them want to be engaged, they want to get involved, they want to help make a difference, but they have no idea where to start.

Bryan Paul:

There are even newer, more nascent groups out there both affiliated with the Alumni Free Speech Alliance and not, who are just trying to get their feet under them and make some sort of movement. What would be your pro tips, given your experience, your lessons learned and positive outcomes to date, to those alumni who desire to make a difference, to seek change and just need a little help to get started? What would be your pro tips to them?

Wayne Stargardt:

I'm not sure I have a good answer to that question. The way the MIT Free Speech Alliance started grew out of a crisis, which was the cancellation of Dr. Abbot's lecture. I wouldn't wish that crisis on any campus because it's embarrassing. It smeared MIT's reputation, but it did wake up a number of alumni at MIT.

Wayne Stargardt:

That was a catalyst that then got us organized. Also, because it was MIT, it got a lot of press. We were able to trade on that press to publicize ourselves a little bit and give alumni an opportunity using the internet to find us and become members. That's really how we got started. It was an event beyond our control that started things, but we leveraged it to the hilt once it happened.

Bryan Paul:

How about you, Peter? What have you seen that has really worked operationally, strategically as an alumni group?

Peter Bonilla:

Well, like Wayne said, you can't manufacture the circumstances that gave rise to the MIT Free Speech Alliance, and I definitely wouldn't want to go and try to artificially create them. It is difficult even at an organization with a proper origin story like ours to bring more people into that fold. Once you get over that initial hump, once you get through that kind of initial outrage cycle, it is just tough. There's no way around that.

Peter Bonilla:

Especially I think at a place like MIT where I think your average student comes for different reasons than they go to a lot of other universities. They come because they want to work hard, they keep their head down, they spend it in the lab, they spend it coding. They spend it on various entrepreneurial pursuits removed from a lot of what takes your more typical liberal arts undergraduate to college.

Peter Bonilla:

What I think works are the basic things, things that build that degree of community and human connection. I think if you're going to be a cause-oriented group, I think one of the most important things for you to do up front is create that kind of community space where you can get to know each other as people and not as types.

Wayne Stargardt:

I will add to that, there are a few blocking and tackling things. One of the first things we did at MIT Free Speech Alliance is we stood up a website. Wasn't all that great, but it was a place that MIT alumni graduates could search us out, find us, get some information and hit a join button. That helped. We continue to make our website a rich medium for us to communicate not just with the world, but with MIT graduates as well as our members.

Wayne Stargardt:

The other thing blocking and tackling that is important, and we haven't necessarily solved that problem, is finding a way to reach the alumni generally who are not members and frankly, often are not quite as

engaged with the university and not as aware. So building that email list, that outreach plan is a challenge. It's been a challenge for us, and I think it's been a challenge for most of the AFSA chapters, but it's one that you have to try and overcome.

Bryan Paul:

Yeah, and it seems like from what I have heard from others and what I'm hearing from you now, there is a lot of trial and error. You explore possibilities. You try something new, it may or may not work. You reach out to some people, you reach out to administrators. May or may not work, but you just keep at it. That has been a defining aspect that I think I have seen set you apart from other groups out there, that you're tenacious all the way through and through. You don't give up.

Wayne Stargardt:

Well, in all immodesty, I will say this is a reflection of the kind of people who go to MIT. We are overachievers, we work hard, we learn from our mistakes, and we'll try anything. If it works, we'll double down on it. If it doesn't, we'll try something else.

Bryan Paul:

Well, both of you have been very kind at the end of a long, successful, insightful day to sit with me here even just for a few minutes to talk about the work you are doing with the MIT Free Speech Alliance. Any parting words of encouragement to our alumni, to those listening now for those who wish to be engaged in this work somehow?

Wayne Stargardt:

The only thing I would conclude with for all campuses, this is a fight that needs to be fought. It's worth spending the effort and the time on it. It's important not just for your institutions of higher learning, for your particular universities, it's important for the country. We have to get these universities backfiring on all cylinders to help drive advancements in knowledge and growth in the country.

Peter Bonilla:

I would just say to that, however few of you, you think there are, there are more of you than you think. There are more of you than you realize are deeply concerned about these issues of free speech and censorship in higher education in your alumni community. They may not be easy to find, especially if you don't have a kind of catalyzing incident like we did to bring a lot of them together, but they are out there and they are worth seeking out.

Bryan Paul:

Peter, Wayne, such a pleasure as always. Thank you both for joining me on Higher Ed Now.

Wayne Stargardt:

Bryan, it was a pleasure.

Peter Bonilla:

A pleasure, Bryan. Thank you.