

Michael Poliako...: Welcome to Higher Ed Now. I'm Michael Poliakoff, the president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. And today, I am delighted to be speaking with both an old friend and a very distinguished scholar and education leader. Joshua Dunn took the helm of the New Institute of American Civics at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in June of 2023. So we're coming up on 18 months of his work building this exciting new center, which Governor Lee called for in his state of the state address some time ago as a place of informed patriotism. And we'll be talking a little bit about what it means to be an informed patriot, the ability to see both the as the late Bruce Cole said, peaks and the valleys, the center and the margins, and to understand the American story.

Professor Dunn had a distinguished career before coming to his post at the University of Tennessee. He was the executive director of the Center for the Study of Government and the Individual, that's a very meaningful title by the way, at the University of Colorado Springs, where he was also professor and chair of the Department of Political Science. He's the author of several very, very important books. He has a particular scholarly expertise in the interaction of the judiciary and the world of education. His University of North Carolina Press book, the case of Missouri versus Jenkins, From Schoolhouse to Courthouse: The Judiciary's Role in American Education, offers a very, very important view of the complex relationship between courts and education. And then a real landmark study called Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University, a topic that has become obviously one of greatest importance as we try to understand better how we can have intellectual diversity in higher education. Well, with that welcome, Joshua Dunn.

Joshua Dunn: Well, it's great to be with you.

Michael Poliako...: I thought we might actually start with yet another contribution that you're making to the world of education and to civic understanding, namely your role on ACTA's new National Commission for American History and Civic Education. And I will just express my great gratitude that you have accepted a position as a commissioner, and as the co-editor of a forthcoming volume of essays called What Every College Student Should Know About American History and Government. We are at a very important place now when we must address a real ongoing and deepening crisis of understanding of our history and government.

I'm going to start with something that the late President John F. Kennedy said in 1962, "There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone, but draws a strength far greater than our own from the experience of the past and a cumulative vision of the future." And you are now at the helm of this very exciting new institute of American Civics. So I'd very much like to get your

thoughts on the remedies that you see that you are going to be able to affect and the model that that will be we hope, setting for the rest of the country.

Joshua Dunn:

Certainly. I think that if you look at the legislation that created the institute, you see three goals emerging, three areas that we have a mandate to try and address. So I'll mention those and then we can talk about some of the ways that we'll be trying to do that through the institute. The first is of course, improving civic knowledge. We have all sorts of evidence that Americans knowledge of how our government is supposed to work, is supposed to function. Just the basic institutions of it is very low. Some polls survey show as low as 25% of Americans can identify the three branches of government. Sometimes it increases up to around 50%. Regardless, those are dreadful numbers and colleges and universities certainly have not been doing what they are supposed to do to try to address this.

A grim book but nevertheless, a very good book by President Ron Daniels of Johns Hopkins, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, just highlights and documents in a way that I don't think anyone can really disagree with, that universities have failed in this core mission to try to improve civic knowledge and understanding. And given the important role of universities and colleges in producing future generations of leaders, this is something that we simply have to address. There's some evidence that civic knowledge even degrades over college for some students. So I think that's the first problem that we have to address.

A second would be improving civil discourse. Again, you don't have to look very far to see that the quality of discourse in America is declining. If you have access to social media, you can see it. If you have access to cable television, you can see it, but you can also see it on college campuses where all too often people view the open exchange of ideas as something to be rejected. And where people need to be driven off campus if they hold opinions that are considered controversial by some elements of the community.

I think this also relates to a broader problem that we see in American society, which is the rise of negative partisanship and negative partisanship. Sometimes also called effective polarization is when people vote for a party or candidate, not because they really support the agenda of that particular party or candidate, but because they really hate the other party or candidate. This is damaging at least for one primary reason, which is that we have evidence that negative partisans are willing to compromise and sacrifice constitutional principles in order to see their person elected, which makes sense if you think that the other side is so uniquely evil that almost anything could be used to justify keeping them from power.

The other thing that I find disturbing about this is I at least hear some echoes of the Nazi legal theorist, Carl Schmitt, in this rise of negative partisanship, and he tried to distill politics to what he called the friend-enemy distinction. And a

liberal society such as ours, a classically liberal society, holds out the hope that it doesn't have to be driven just by a friend-enemy distinction. That we can agree on certain core principles, respect for the rule of law, individual rights, those things, and we can disagree about some other policy issues. This rise of negative partisanship seems to be show us drifting into this, I think very dangerous territory of the friend-enemy distinction.

And then a third and related issue that you see reflected in the legislation would be the goal of promoting what you call intellectual pluralism or viewpoint diversity. And I think that's related to the others because all too often, particularly on college campuses, students emerge unscathed from hearing an opinion that they regard as unpleasant. That leaves them incapable of functioning out in the broader world where, guess what? People aren't so concerned about shielding you from ideas that you don't like. To be a functioning citizen in a pluralistic society like ours, you simply have to be equipped to grapple with the ideas that other people hold. And you need to hear those ideas from people who actually believe them because that's what you're going to encounter in the real world. And when people aren't exposed to controversial ideas or ideas they regard as controversial, it makes them also less equipped to engage in a civil way with those that they disagree with. So I think those are three things that we're trying to address through the institute. And again, I think that you can see them emerging from the legislation that created the institute.

Michael Poliako...: Absolutely. And there's something very, very heartening, apropos of the way you described it so well. That the vote in the legislature to establish this institute was so overwhelmingly bipartisan. I can't remember the exact numbers, but in the Senate, I think it was 98 to 2, and it just speaks so well for the state and its legislature that there was this common sense that we have to do better in preparing the citizens of the coming generation. That's something that I'm hoping will catch on all around the country that you're going to be part of that vanguard with the Arizona State University School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership and now the new University of North Carolina Chapel Hill on School for Civic Life and Leadership, the Hamilton Center. Do you feel yourself part of a movement, Josh?

Joshua Dunn: I do. And that's one of the exciting things about coming here. You feel like you're not only building something new at the University of Tennessee that's going to make a difference for students in higher education, the University of Tennessee, and then the broader public in the state of Tennessee, but also something that's going to have an influence nationwide. I think you're correct that we are going to see more and more states recognizing that higher education has an important role to play in trying to cultivate thoughtful citizenship, reflective citizenship, as you said, and it has not been doing so, and so they're going to need to try to do something to nurture it in their institutions of higher education.

So you're right, we had bipartisan support, we had bipartisan opposition, we had... Three Republicans and three Democrats voted against the creation of the institute. So there was overwhelming support from both sides. And I think you will see, again, around the country, others recognizing that there's something seriously amiss in how we're cultivating citizenship in these next generations of American leaders. So we need to do something significant to try to improve it.

Michael Poliako...: You have already, I understand, expanded that mission to the preparation of school teachers. Absolutely crucial element because we know that there are remarkably few teachers in secondary education, teachers of history who actually have majored or even minored in history. So they're going out into the field often with very little more than some cliches in their minds or some very partisan secondary views of American history rather than really being steeped in the documents. Could you talk a little bit more about what the institute is now doing?

Joshua Dunn: Yeah. So we view K-12 outreach as an important part of our mission. I think really as important as what we're doing on campus. So we are holding every summer a civics academy for teachers from around the state of Tennessee. The first year in 2023, we had around 50 teachers. This last year, we had 80 and we're going to continue to do that. We expect it to grow. At the Civics Academy, they heard lectures on things like Freedom of Religion in the First Amendments, the Due Process rights under the Fifth Amendments, economic policy and economic policy making, lectures on the Tennessee Constitution and the important role that it plays in shaping our state politics.

And then we also had teachers interact with each other on important questions about how to deal with controversial issues during an election season in class. And teachers just have universally found that Civics Academy to be deeply rewarding, and that it helps them in their own teaching. That they come away equipped to be better teachers, to be better able to impart important knowledge about America's constitutional and political history to their students. We're going to be expanding on that where we will have professional development seminars throughout the year and across the state and we're partnering with other organizations to do this.

So here in East Tennessee, there are federal judges who are very concerned about this, and so they hold a teacher's law school. I had the privilege of lecturing at this teacher's law school just a few weeks ago out in Greenville, Tennessee brought together I think around 50 or so teachers. So we're going to be doing those kinds of things as well. Throughout the year, we'll be developing curriculum and lesson plans for teachers where they can take lessons and plug them into their classes relatively quickly and easily so they have access to excellent content that they can have confidence in. I can tell you one of the things that the teachers most appreciate is that there is this sense, and if you just look at the time allocated to studying civics in K-12 education, it's very minimal. They feel appreciative that people are actually recognizing the same

thing that they recognize, which its students need more and better civics instruction.

Michael Poliako...: Very nicely said, and I want to move from that to the related issue of patriotism. The reason I say it's related is that last I heard the American history book that is most often read in college is Howard Zinn's, *People's History*, a work that anyone except an ideologue recognizes as being tendentious. It has an agenda. The agenda is certainly not one of any appreciation for the American story. And of course the American story has got warts. We are not unique. The history of civilization is a history of both moments of glory and moments of real terrible misbehavior and often the worst kinds of crimes.

But this nation's story has been an inspiration for most of the world. It seems very sad to think that especially school teachers would be leaving for their careers with no real engagement with the founding era, the extraordinary thoughts that went into trying to create that more perfect union, trying to do something that hadn't really been done before, a democratic republic on this scale. And I certainly attribute personally much of the difficulty that we're having today with just appalling ignorance of what we have been through as a nation, what we have achieved and therefore, what lies in front of us. And I wanted to invite you to talk a little bit about that. What is it to educate a patriotic citizen, to prepare somebody for engaged and meaningful interaction in our society?

Joshua Dunn: So I think you're exactly right. Education in America's history and civic and political traditions requires looking at the peaks and the valleys. But I also think there should be no shame in saying that America is a remarkable country that has inspired people around the world to improve the conditions in their own countries, but then also to come here. You think about the fact that every year people are willing to risk everything they have, including their own lives to make it to our shores. That tells you something about this place. It's like winning the lottery to be able to make it to America. There has to be something extraordinary about this place and worth taking seriously and appreciating. And of course you have to understand the founding and the principles established at the American founding to understand why people would want to come here today.

You look at the American founding, one of the remarkable things about it is that they established a moral standard in the principles of the Declaration of Independence. They knew that they were not living up to, but as you said in the preamble to the Constitution, they want to create a more perfect union. So we constantly strive to improve and get better, recognizing that perhaps we will never achieve this perfection. But establishing a standard that you can then use as your reference point, your North Star is something rather extraordinary in human history. It's a moral principle or you would say moral principles that guide this country. So I think you have to have an understanding of those principles, where they came from, why they articulated them the way they do,

and then how those principles have been used throughout American history to make us a more perfect union.

Michael Poliako...: I've been very, very heartened by some of the books that have appeared recently, Richard Haass, The Bill of Obligations, recognizing that we have an extraordinary government structure, but that we also have obligations as citizens to uphold those core principles. I remember Stephen Smith talking about his new book on patriotism and the sad thing is he said, "When I told my colleagues at Yale that I was writing this book, their responses ranged from incredulity to disgust." I thought to myself, "My alma mater, what have you done to create a faculty in which the response to the word patriotism would've been what? 40 years ago the response to a raw obscenity would've been [inaudible 00:18:05]." Yeah. How did we get here? And of course, I realize this is one of the things that you as director of the New Institute will be working very hard to address. We have such great opportunities.

I actually want to jump back now to the National Commission. As you know, my partner in this as the co-editor of the volume, we have a very modest goal, which is that every college student will leave with at least one foundational course on the American story. And we want to be not overly prescriptive, but we do want to give guidelines for what should be in that course and on the commission, we're very pleased that we've got some distinguished college presidents, Steve Trachtenberg and Larry Summers to help us in particular think about how we can make this happen. I should not neglect Hank Brown as well who led the University of Chicago while we were both there. We have a great combination of historians and thought leaders to help us to this seemingly modest but great goal. I wanted to collect some of your thoughts very early on. The commission hasn't met, the white paper hasn't been drafted, but what are your hopes, what perhaps are some of your caveats guidance for how we move forward?

Joshua Dunn: I certainly hope that the commission will lead to or create momentum and an enthusiasm and pressure for universities either on their own or absent that, perhaps some nudging from elected bodies to restore a core course in American history and civics and government. Recognizing that we are at perhaps a dangerous moment in our history where we do have increasing polarization and division, declining knowledge of our institutions, all of those things. We're coming up on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. So this is the opportune moment to try to encourage universities to start performing this important goal.

Universities do many wonderful things in the United States. The fact that we have the best system of higher education in the world, I think is obvious. That's again why everyone wants to come here. But those things that allow our university system to be so extraordinary are built on I think a constitutional and political foundation. So unless universities are doing their part to build the knowledge necessary for sustaining this constitutional and political foundation,

they will have failed and perhaps their most important duty and then eroded the basis for this broader success of higher education in the United States. So I'm hoping that this will be something that people will start to recognize on their own through the work of the commission, but absent that, others perhaps outside the university can then use as leverage to try to generate reforms within universities.

Michael Poliako...: I think you're quite right that the initial momentum may well come from state legislatures, South Carolina legislature and the REACH Act, the Arizona Board of Regents that has now prescribed a rather good course. Similarly, we see this in Florida. Texas has done it for some time. And of course, from ACTA's point of view, we always have a little tiny feeling of regret that it needed government to tell institutions what they ought to have been doing, and so be it. This is what we have elected officials for when a course correction is necessary, they take their duty to the public to see that it happens. But my hope is, as you put it so well, that this is going to make more institutions, whether public or private, recognize that they are doing not just a disservice, but really that they've been guilty of a malfeasance to let students leave college so abysmally unprepared to understand what it means to be an engaged citizen.

We just did a survey of 3,000 college students, and we found among other things that more than half of them could not correctly identify the term lengths of members of the House of Representatives in the Senate. And that was not on some flunkeroo where they actually had to come up with numbers themselves two and six, but it was multiple choice. It is really rather terrifying. They couldn't say who the chief justice of the Supreme Court is, who the Senate majority leader is. You wonder what's gone on. Some terrible perfect storm of social media, of educational malfeasance. All of that, of course, has the dangerous tendency to compound into a cynicism about democracy versus socialism about the important role that America has in the world. So yes, we've got to put ourselves into very, very determined modes of work and advocacy to make sure this happens.

Joshua Dunn: Yeah. So I think you're right that the fact that universities don't impart this foundational knowledge of how our system works has these broader public consequences, one of which you said is a cynicism. I think you see that just in how people misunderstand the nature of how our constitutional government is supposed to function. People think if they want something, there should be an immediate satisfaction of that desire, and you don't have to spend a lot of time reading the Federalist Papers to recognize that the people who wrote the Constitution actually wanted to slow down or frustrate the ability of majorities to immediately get what they want.

So there could be the cool and deliberate sense of the community that would prevail over time. So you would end up getting better policy, better legislation through a more deliberative process. Again, because people don't understand this, you end up getting this frustration cynicism. People think that, "Well,



politicians will just say anything to get elected," and maybe that's true, but you still have a process that prevents people from just going and dictating exactly what they want. And I think if more Americans just simply understood that, that the Constitution creates a system for resolving disagreement and conflict that is necessarily slower, there would be less frustration and cynicism.

Michael Poliako...: You had raised the specter of Carl Schmitt, and of course, I've been deeply disturbed to see the recrudescence of that awful thought so beautifully attacked in Johann Heinzika's humanistic work, *Homo Ludens*, and one just has to step back in some horror at the embrace of somebody who was so integral to Hitler's judicial system. But that disease of mindset has been around for a while. As you were talking, I thought back to Thucydides: Book III 82, the Revolution at Corcyra, where the prudent man is now called a coward, where words change their meaning and things that we would find appalling are suddenly embraced as signs of virtue. We always have to be on our guard against that, and the founders knew that. Absolutely. We can and always will be engaging in that dialogue of the centuries. Well, were they right about the mix of democracy and the Republican institutions? To what extent, and these are very, very healthy discussions.

Joshua Dunn: Yes.

Michael Poliako...: That actually brings me to a somewhat wider question. I'm not just trying to flatter you, but you've been a person of deep erudition and wide vision. So although you've devoted your career to political science, let's now discuss more widely the question, what is an educated person? And particularly from the point of view of higher education, but even more widely than that, we could start with the question, when we watch a student walk across the stage and pick up that diploma, that very expensive piece of paper, what is it that should or should not make us feel that we've done our jobs well?

Joshua Dunn: So I'm an advocate of liberal education and by liberal education, traditionally that's defined as a education befitting a free person. So I think that's the education that liberates you from your prejudices, allows you to engage in reflection, to choose different courses of action, that allows you to know where you have come from so that you might better know where you can go. In other words, it's not simply a job training. So I think that that needs to be at the core of what universities do. Now, of course, recognize that there are going to be many say, technical areas where you are going to have to master some specialized knowledge, but I think that every university owes it to its students to at a minimum, provide a core curriculum that provides that latitude and freedom for the individual so that when they walk across the stage, you can say that they're a truly educated person rather than someone who has just been prepared for some particular job.

Michael Poliako...: And that is actually one of those places where we have a real exposure in this nation if we don't do it correctly. I've always stressed that every college student



should have the experience of a natural science course, preferably one with a laboratory to learn the method. What is data? What is evidence? How do you test a hypothesis? What is your obligation to try to falsify your hypothesis if you're a good scientist? And the absence of that leaves us so vulnerable to charlatans. To whom do we listen? When do we believe? Can we read a reasonable journal account of a scientific or medical issue with some insight and understanding?

That's not going to happen in a narrow education. Of course, that is part of the liberal arts part of being a free citizen. So also with mathematics, we have a tendency to simply say, "Well, that's for somebody else to do, so I don't really need to know how to read graphs and charts or to know when I'm being befused by some badly constructed statistics." When universities fail to do that, when they are simply gratifying the instincts of students as if they were going down a cafeteria line, "That course on hip hop jazz sounds really interesting, and I can get three credits for it, so why should I take that course instead of statistics? Why should I take that course instead of reading the founding documents?" That's where the adults have to say, "We respect your emerging intelligence and your emerging talents, but we do know a little more than you do about what lies ahead."

Joshua Dunn: Yes. For the rest of their lives college students or once they leave the university, they'll be bombarded with historical, empirical, and scientific claims. They'll show up on social media, they'll see it in newspapers, they'll see it on the news. In order to be able to make sense of those claims, and then to be able to critique them or to decide whether or not they should give them credence, they have to have exactly that kind of educational experience that you've described. Otherwise, they'll just be victims to whatever is presented before them and be unable to reflect on the value or legitimacy of the claims that have been presented to them.

Michael Poliako...: Well, in the time remaining, and I've got to remind myself, you probably have papers to grade and administrative tasks, I just wanted to capture your vision. The institute has up and running, it's been hiring some really distinguished faculty. It's been serving the needs of K-12 school teachers. What are you seeing in the years ahead? What's your vision, your hope, and your ambition?

Joshua Dunn: So I want to see us provide breadth and depth for students at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. So by breadth, I want us to offer courses that will engage a significant percentage of University of Tennessee undergraduates so that they will have exposure to the core ideas that animate the American constitutional tradition. So I want to see engineering students, business students, nursing students come through our classes, but I also want to provide depth. So we already have a minor in American Civics. Also, our classes are woven within the new public affairs major at the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs. But we will be developing our own major or potentially multiple majors. So we want to see students who have a deeper interest have the opportunity to

engage in a more thoughtful and longer way these important questions lying behind the American constitutional tradition.

So I see that on what we're doing on campus. We're of course providing programming that reaches both the university community and the broader community as well with you lectures. And we'll continue to do that. We try to model civil discourse and disagreement through debates, inviting people with different perspectives. Of course, we're going to continue our outreach to K-12 education. And then we also want to, for the broader Tennessee community, again, model the virtues that we think are necessary for a constitutional republic democracy to survive and flourish. So we want to really hopefully in some way reach all of Tennessee by one way or another, through either the students that we educate on campus, through the teachers that we reach K-12 education, but our broader public programming for this, for the general citizens to improve those three things, civic knowledge, civil discourse, and intellectual pluralism for the entire state.

Michael Poliako...: That is so inspiring. I mean, we can go one step further and my vision, my ambition is that states will very soon, if not already be looking at the Institute of American Civics with envy. And not too long after, it will be feeling shame if they haven't done these sorts of things because they owe it to their state, they owe it to their country. And of course, I again want to thank you for being part of the National Commission. We're going to be working very hard to get that message out. It'll be our contribution for the 250th anniversary of the declaration that no student will ever be leaving college without a real understanding of the things that are at the very core of the American experience.

So I thank you for leading the institute. I thank you for so graciously agreeing to be my co-editor on the anthology and to be a commissioner. I am feeling a certain amount of optimism despite some of the bumps that we've had in the road, that we are going to be mending our flaws and doing things better.

Joshua Dunn: I agree with you, and I want to thank you for the leadership that you've provided through the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. It's an honor to be part of the commission. It's an honor to be able to co-edit this volume with you. And I think that you're right. That even though there have been obstacles, there seems to be an opening now where people are recognizing the necessity of the work that we're doing. And frankly, I don't think that opening would be occurring had it not been for you and the rest of the folks at ACTA. So thank you for your leadership in this area.

Michael Poliako...: Well, thank you my friend, and God bless you for everything you're doing for Tennessee and for the country.

Joshua Dunn: Thank you.