

Michael Poliakoff:

Welcome to Higher Ed. Now I'm Michael Poliakoff, the president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and we are privileged today to have with us Mitch Daniels, past governor of Indiana, 49th Governor of Indiana, serving from 2005 to 2013, and the former president of Purdue University where he served from 2013 to 2022. He's a longtime friend of the American Council. He was our 14th Merrill Award winner in 2018, and we've been grateful for the number of times that he's spoken at our programs.

But I also want to continue talking about some of the things that Governor Daniels has done in his long career. He was the advisor and liaison to President Reagan. He was the president of Hudson Institute. He was the director of the Office of Management and Budget in the administration of George W. Bush and president of Lilly Pharmaceutical's North America Division. His achievements are really quite extraordinary, and I know I'm going to be embarrassing you, Mitch, by accounting all of these things, but they really have been a paradigm for the rest of the nation, both in politics and in higher education, which is our topic today as governor, getting vouchers in K-twelve charter schools, merit pay, introducing Western Governors University to Indiana and as president of Purdue, some prodigious things, a tuition freeze during the whole of your tenure, a reduction in the cost of attendance, student borrowing down by one-third, and all of that accompanied by extraordinary breakthroughs.

Purdue Polytech, which has brought far more students to Purdue than the Indianapolis School District has giving opportunities to students who otherwise would not have them. And at the same time also increasing some wonderful academic programs. Purdue moves with more faculty in STEM as if Purdue was short on faculty in STEM but you brought even more. And now I am particularly grateful to you for agreeing to be part of ACTA's National Commission on American History and Civic Education, a topic that is very close to both of our hearts. And I'm hoping that you, as one of the 24 members of this commission, will bring that same success as we try to do one small but absolutely crucial thing, which is to restore in as many places as possible a solid prescriptive requirement for American history and government.

So I guess where I'd like to start is to ask you to give us your thoughts on the role of higher education in preparing young Americans for citizenship. A topic that's even more urgent after October 7, and certainly confirmed by the polls that are showing such a drop-off in attitudes towards patriotism and towards America. So over to you, Mitch, with great thanks for being here with us.

Mitch Daniels:

Well, the thanks work the other direction, Michael. I thought I'd sworn off involvements like the commission, but I couldn't turn down either ACTA, an organization I admire so deeply, or this particular topic, which has been a matter of urgency to many of us for a very long time. So I appreciate the chance to participate. And obviously this conversation this morning, higher ed, it's conventionally said, has two basic assignments. One is to prepare people for productive life in a free economy, and one is to prepare them for constructive citizenship. At least those things are obvious to some of us. But first of all, there's been a, I think, declining attention to the second of those assignments. Too many people look at higher education now, college as vocational preparation, and it needs to be that. But if it neglects the other mission, it really is not serving its proper societal role. And that mission has never been more important than now.

You talk about October 7th and really shocking findings in the aftermath that significant percentages of young people don't see anything wrong with what happened or even applaud it when a person was assassinated on the streets of New York recently, unbelievably high percentages of young people are recorded having said that that was acceptable in some way. So there's serious work to be done. I must

say, whether it's part of this conversation or not, it needs to be in the mix that colleges, even if they completely reformed tomorrow and began teaching accurate, factually faithful history, and the rudiments of civics probably couldn't solve this problem. First of all, that's not where all the young people are. But secondly, many of them are arriving at college, not only ignorant, but miseducated about these subjects. And I talked to veteran faculty at Purdue who said once they worried that some of their colleagues would turn students against our traditions, now they show up with that attitude out of high school. So it's a very real problem and probably deeper than it's ever been.

Michael Poliakoff:

I was looking at a relatively recent Newsweek article that only 56% of young people are proud to be an American, and what gets worse is that 57% said that college changed, and 70% of those who said college changed them, said it changed them in a more negative direction towards this country. I was thinking back to a podcast that I heard that Stephen Smith gave after he'd written his book on patriotism. He's a distinguished professor at Yale, and he said when he told his colleagues that he was writing a book about patriotism, their responses ranged from incredulity to disgust. And I thought therein lies a big part of the problem that we simply have created within the, as it were, a higher education bubble a completely erroneous and degrading attitude towards America.

As the song goes, God mend thine every flaw. This is not a call for some kind of unthinking glorification, but when the thrust is all so negative that the very word patriotism causes disgust or incredulity, we've got some grave problem in front of us. And of course, where we saw that most vividly was the poll after the Russian invasion of Ukraine when only 45% of the young people 18 to 34 said they'd stay and fight rather than flee the country.

Mitch Daniels:

On the one hand, it's not particularly new that intellectuals see only the downside of their societies. I remember Churchill writing in the thirties about the self-abasement to which intellectuals were subjecting British society. They think they're smarter than everybody else, so why don't we let them tell everyone else exactly how to live and what to do? And then I think their frustration that the society doesn't turn over all the levers of power to them accounts for a lot of this. But it's been much worse in over recent years we had the explosion of attendance at colleges coming through as the baby boom worked its way through in the baby boomlet that followed.

And so, there was this mass expansion, lots of money. And Michael, you and I both know that you had two or three generations of people who were picking their own colleagues. You said in the question, I believe, that we created this situation. Well, not exactly. We allowed it to be created, or rather, those who ran our universities did. And by delegating or in some cases I think defaulting to faculties to choose their own, and they chose people like themselves and three generations later where we are. So you said that ACTA is working on a small but crucial reform. It is crucial, but it's not small.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well that's, again, one of the reasons why I'm just so grateful that you're part of the commission. I see the commission's work as three pillars. The first is the public facing one. Why is this urgent? And you and I and the people that we work with on higher education reform understand how deep the problem is. I think the public needs to know more about where we are. I've often thought mischievously of writing some piece to parents of students who are attending college. Do you know where your children are? Do you know what they are being fed in college or university? Why they're out in the street on October 8,

not only praising Hamas, but lumping in with Israel all of Western civilization and America as entities that need to be destroyed? Do you know where your children are? So that's the first part.

And the second is the what. In other words, what are the guidelines for a required course in American history? The documents, the key moments, and obviously I understand academic freedom, but at times I think Janis Joplin was right. Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. That we've lost the moral compass of it and indeed even its freedom. And finally, the one that you actually solved at Purdue, the how do you get these requirements in place?

Mitch Daniels:

Yeah, I would first say that we shouldn't be surprised that young people today have these perverted, warped, and factually groundless views about our society, about western civilization. That's what they've been fed growing up. One of the most depressing figures I have ever seen and continue I guess to see is the percentage of places of schools. I'm talking high schools and even middle elementary schools where the books of Howard Zinn are used. He was an intellectual fraud. He hated America. He admitted he wasn't writing true history, he was trying to change it somewhere out there. The school boards have permitted this toxin really to be used. And so, as I said earlier these days, a lot of young people don't arrive on campus naive and vulnerable to indoctrination. They've already been indoctrinated. So the effort that is underway is a remedial one now, but it needs to be followed by a parallel effort to root this stuff out elsewhere.

It's an asymmetrical argument. Your previous comment, I think pointed this out. On the one hand, you have people, the defenders of freedom and free institutions who always admit as we do that we have flaws that need mending. On the other hand, have people who see nothing but evil in free institutions and swing freely at every opportunity to disparage them. So defenders of freedom have to get a lot more aggressive here. I hope we're starting to see that there is evidence that the pendulum may have started back, that some balance may be coming in. One thing we know, Michael, is that in very large numbers, Americans don't buy this. By this, I mean racism masquerading as a genuine history, the 1619 rot, don't have a better word and the like.

Every time Americans are asked whether they would like to approve and sanction what amounts to state-sponsored discrimination, they say, "No." California votes no when the question is presented. So I think to some extent what has needed to happen and what we may be seeing is that some folks have said, "No, no, no. Enough." And become not purely defensive, but prepared to push back the other direction more aggressively. And when they do, I think many of our fellow citizens are emboldened because that's what they thought all along.

Michael Poliakoff:

I agree that we're seeing a pushback against the discriminatory DEI policies that really have been a blight in higher education. Now, of course, many schools are circling the wagons and finding ways to evade the Supreme Court decision, but I don't think that in the long run is going to be very successful. There'll be holdouts at elite private institutions, but the public never approved of this. And thank heavens we had finally some judicial guidance that can begin to turn this back. I was particularly impressed that Chapel Hill's board of trustees said, "Okay, we got the black eye we deserved. Now we're not only going to make sure that there's no evasion of this decision, but we're going to expand it to contracting and to hiring." And that's the ethic we need. And again, it might've been one of the benefits of the pandemic that parents began to see the intrusion of things like the 1619 project and the works of Ibram Kendi.

But you're right, we have a long way to go. One of the things I'm hoping is that through this project and another that's aligned with it will really have some impact on teacher professional development because those poor people who come out of a education program on a rich diet of Ibram Kendi and Howard Zinn, they've never had a chance. They've never had a chance squarely and fairly to read The Declaration, the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, some of the things that legislatures like South Carolina are now prescribing that this will be part of the syllabus. And North Carolina has been trying to get a bill through that would make it actually a testable part of the curriculum.

So I agree. Our elected lawmakers in many states have recognized that in this case, vox populi really is vox dei. The voice of the people is the voice of God. But what I wanted to come back to, Mitch, you, and with a really supportive and excellent board, got a civic education requirement through in Purdue, despite the fact that you had faculty saying, and I did the interview, but the person didn't want to be on the record, but said, it's a solution looking for a problem that it's just sentimental and you had to stare that down.

Mitch Daniels:

Well, it's not hard to find the problem you just illustrated. You have to be willfully blind to deny it. Let me say that I'm encouraged as you are by the action of a number of public officials now, state legislatures specifically, to act decisively on this. It shouldn't have been their problem. It shouldn't have been something they had to do. It should have been they seen and dealt with by boards of trustees, all of whom have the full authority. I've never seen a college bylaw that didn't give the board the full authority over policy, personnel, everything. But too many of them either overlooked the problem or simply didn't want to wrestle with it as it grew in their institutions. And love of [inaudible 00:16:35] alma mater in some cases just too ran too deep.

So in the case of Purdue, we tried in two cases, you just asked about the civics requirement, which came toward the end of my tenure. But at the very beginning of the tenure, and here ACTA was a great source of counsel and support. We dealt with the question of free speech, free inquiry, free expression. I wanted ours to be seen correctly as a bastion of these fundamental values, which yes, have a lot to do with citizenship in the broader society, but they have everything to do with the advance of knowledge on college campuses where everybody thinks the same thing, where dissent is stamped out, where dissenters are ostracized or worse knowledge quits advancing. And so, it's at the heart of the academic enterprise that you ought to have diversity of viewpoint. You ought to have a completely unfettered ability for people to say what they think, write books about patriotism to take that extreme example. And so we acted early on. Our skirts were pretty clean, but we had a few policies that I thought ought to be made even more emphatic. And we did that.

Yes, I asked the faculty for some help and advice. They were slow about it, some maybe a little bit divided about it. So we bypassed them and just had the board pass what I labeled, and I think a lot of people now also call the Chicago principles. Then later on, same thing with civics. I asked the faculty, they're one elected body, which this is part of the problem, you'll understand this, but the next university senate I encounter anywhere that really reflects the attitudes and the best of the campus, that'll be the first one. They tend not to be very representative. But that's who we had to consult. We consulted them. They were not helpful. So we just did it. The board just acted and imposed what I think is a very modest and reasonable requirement for graduation that is now in place at Purdue.

It simply requires that the student demonstrate even the most basic understanding of our system, how it operates. Why do we have three branches of government? What's separation of powers for? What's the purpose of the federal system? Not just the what, but the why. And that's all. And I think that experience reflects not only the need that you've convened this podcast to talk about, but the fact that

the remedy's always been lying there in plain sight for those boards that were willing to employ it. And again, in some cases where boards didn't, others in public office have stepped in to do it for them.

Michael Poliakoff:

I think you expressed that so very, very well. And it's going to be a key issue as we work with private institutions that don't have the direction of state legislatures, because I'd like to see this become something quite widespread. Your chief of staff was really quite wonderful when I was putting together that little article in Forbes about how schools were managing to make some inroads into getting civic education or American history as a requirement. And she just said, "Shared governance doesn't mean no governance." Unfortunately, too many boards have abdicated that responsibility to govern.

Mitch Daniels:

Yeah, there may have been a legitimate definition at the outset of time for this term, but I think it's a shibboleth today. The idea that you can govern anything by what amounts to a massive committee is belied by the facts, and particularly when you have the difference of the widest estrangement of that group. And I'm talking about the typical university faculty today, from the surrounding society.

Michael Poliakoff:

And we get onto that issue of academic freedom, which is often invoked as a terrible excuse for doing things that are so far outside the pale of what the academy's supposed to represent. I was rereading the 1915 Declaration of Principles of the American Association of University Professors when it had the likes of John Dewey and Arthur Lovejoy on it. And in two places really admonishes that it is a breach of the professor's duties to inflict his opinion. Back then they didn't have a his or her, but to inflict his opinion on students before they've had a chance to study the subject and fairly come to their own conclusions. And AAUP never got the committee B, which was supposed to be on responsibilities going. I find it an interesting contrast that American Psychological Association throws people out all the time for violating their code of ethics. And AAUP simply said, "Well, it's the institution's prerogative to do that." No sense of what it means to be a citizen of the academy, a principled citizen of the academy.

And so here we are with these monocultures that have an ever increasing stranglehold, I think I can use that word, stranglehold on the very dialogue that ought to be going on on the campus. And that actually brings me to another part of the ACTA initiative. We've been working hard with state legislatures to get them to fund new independent institutes for the study of American history and government. The Chapel Hill, the trustees themselves, set up a brilliant one. Of course, the accretor tried to strangle it in its cradle, but they stared the accretor down. And in Ohio, Senator Cirino has gotten funding, \$23 million, to start five of these, and they'll have their own hiring authority. So they might just be able to bring in some of the voices that don't see the American experiment in self-government as some hideous recidivist oppression. It's not part of the oppressor-oppressed paradigm.

Mitch Daniels:

I wish them well. Again, it's too bad it has to be done that way just as it's too bad that legislatures had to step in where trustees might've, but it's too urgent not to have action of some kind. And well, one can hope that these new institutes, and I've not looked closely at them, but I think I know, certainly know what motivated their foundation, and I think I know how they'll conduct themselves. I hope that they take off quickly and become a model for others. It shouldn't be necessary, again, but it has been, to set these things up in parallel. But the universities, or at least those who have been allowed to determine their personnel and their policies, if you wait for them to do it, it will be in the next century.

Michael Poliakoff:

Back in my days at Hillsdale College where I founded the Classics department, it was at the table with some other members of the faculty, all good people. And the topic was, "Do we hire liberals?" And I said, "Well, I just did." A brilliant young woman on who was an old-style ferocious grammarian, and the students loved her. The fact that she voted differently from me was totally immaterial. And I actually noticed that a lot of these very conservative colleagues of mine had been over the years hiring people who were not part of their own paradigm. And that used to be the ethic. You look for the best biologist, the best mathematician, the best Greek and Latin professor you can find.

Mitch Daniels:

Yeah. Well, I mean, this is another respect in which this is asymmetrical combat, to use that term again. Folks of a classical liberal persuasion that thinks a fair description of you and your former colleagues welcome a variety of viewpoints, think that's part of the educational process, part of the public civics process of a pluralistic society. Folks who see a different world don't want that at all. They want only one viewpoint and are very aggressive about blocking or stamping out dissent from it.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well, Mitch, you've been extremely kind and you had mentioned that you're actually doing some writing. That's something I don't want to stand in the way of having read some of it, but I just wanted to ask you for some thoughts. I don't want to prejudice the conversation, but some optimistic thoughts about what we're going to be able to do. And I've tried to cling to optimism even at times when it seemed like a task of Sisyphus to roll that boulder up the hill. So here we are.

Mitch Daniels:

I am more optimistic, and I tried to say so a little bit ago. I do think there's been a very strong but latent viewpoint in society that these things were wrong, we're a bad for the nation, but people have been bullied into silence, not just on university campuses, but in society generally. And I think some people have now become emboldened in a way that I speculated they might to say what they thought all along. By the way, even in the most monolithic university, you'll find all sorts of sub rows of faculty. They used to come to see me all the time, and ours was not a particularly Stalinist environment, but I had people come to me all the time to say things they really didn't want to say in the next departmental meeting.

So I hope that taking the lid off this can and as it is happening in the various ways we've just discussed, will reveal what I know is there and what surveys show us is there, which is a much more positive view of this country, of its institutions, and a rejection really of the sort of tendentious and slanted view of America that has prevailed on too many campuses, but elsewhere in the world of popular entertainment and so forth. So we'll see. But I think there's certainly reason to see some green sprouts out there, and thank you for what act is doing to cultivate them.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well, thank you. And the words of President Reagan, whose administration you served, we'll look towards informed patriotism, the mindset that helps us mend what's been wrong, but never abandons the sense of what America is about and what its future is thinking.

Mitch Daniels:

Well, if our education system will do simply, top to bottom, will simply do its job of informing the next generation of young people, they'll come overwhelmingly to patriotic conclusions.

Michael Poliakoff:

We are all working for that. Thank you so much for being with us, Mitch.

Mitch Daniels:

Enjoyed it.