

MARCH
20
26

inquisitive

A quarterly periodical
of Heterodox Academy

limits

PUSHING PAST LIMITS

HxA was founded to fight against limits to open inquiry and viewpoint diversity

BY DAVID MASCI, MANAGING EDITOR

Limits touch nearly every aspect of our lives, from the number of miles we can drive on a tank of gas to the number of years remaining to us before we die. More abstractly, the idea of limits is integral to virtually all thought and knowledge. To put it simply, we live in a world of limits.

But while some limits are a matter of circumstance, others come about as the result of choice. In higher education, for instance, many debates revolve around what some would argue are self-imposed limits. Indeed, Heterodox Academy was founded to push back against limits on open inquiry and viewpoint diversity on many college campuses.

Several of the pieces in this new issue of *inquisitive* examine these limits to heterodoxy, including an essay by Tony Banout fittingly titled “The Paradoxical Limits to Heterodoxy.” In this thought-provoking piece, Banout argues that even though heterodoxy, with its commitment to truth-seeking, is inherently challenging to orthodoxy, it also “believes its own orthodoxy.” Hence the paradoxical limit.

In another essay, Abhishek Saha asks whether there should be limitations on academic freedom. Perhaps most pertinently, he wonders whether scholars should be shielded from censure or worse when they speak outside their academic discipline, ultimately concluding that they should be protected because the enterprise of scholarship often requires engaging in broad latitudes of inquiry and that breakthroughs often come from looking in unexpected places.

A number of pieces in this issue also look at the modern limits of institutional trust, albeit from different angles. Jason Steffens examines the general public’s loss of trust in higher education thanks in part to some scholars’ tendency to oversell or even lie about their research, often in the service of political advocacy. Likewise, Thomas S. Huddle reviews a new book, *The Weaponization of Expertise*, in which the authors contend that the expert class (many of whom are academics) has lost the public’s trust by often disguising “nakedly political judgments as expertise.”

We also take a detour into the personal with a new essay by Krystal Stark that explores the challenges of living between her old life as a disadvantaged youth and her new one as a privileged academic. “I was present but never fully accepted: too poor in background to be welcome in elite circles, too educated to be at ease in the communities I left behind,” she writes.

Finally, Nicole Barbaro Simovski looks at the limits of instructional privacy in light of the growing number of states that now require faculty to make their course syllabi public. While Simovski questions some of the political motives that underlie these state requirements, she argues that transparency in course syllabi as well as all other aspects of teaching will ultimately improve the quality of instruction.

If you enjoy this issue and haven’t already done so, please subscribe to *inquisitive*. And consider pitching us an idea for our fall issue, which will be focused on the theme of “trust.”



04

The Paradoxical Limits of Heterodoxy

TONY BANOUT

08

The Limits of Academic Freedom

ABHISHEK SAHA



12

The Case for Transparency in Teaching

NICOLE BARBARO SIMOVSKI

14

Bad Reads

BERNARD SCHWEIZER



20

Living Between Limits

KRYSTAL STARK

18

A Delicate Balance

ALEX ARNOLD

24

The Limits to Classroom Psychology

MIRIAM THOMPSON

27

Teaching Past a Constitutional Crisis

NOAH C. CHAUVIN



30

The Self-Imposed Limits on Social Work

ARNOLD CANTÚ



33

The Origins of Institutional Neutrality

JOHN K. WILSON

36

Just the Facts

THOMAS S. HUDDLE

“Escaping Criticism” by Pere Borrell del Caso, 1875. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

The Paradoxical Limits of Heterodoxy

Heterodoxy believes in its own orthodoxy

BY TONY BANOUT

What does it mean for heterodoxy to have limits? The process of defining anything ultimately involves delineating, an exercise in setting something apart from what it is not. That is, to define is to limit.

Ontologically, heterodoxy's limits are clear. All that it consists of are claims that contradict or challenge assertions held to be true. Without orthodoxy, there is no heterodoxy. And as orthodoxy simply means correct belief, heterodoxy is that which either is or is deemed to be incorrect.

To state the obvious, who would want to believe falsehoods, assenting incorrectly against that which is true? This may seem so basic as to be superfluous. The pursuit of heterodoxy for its own sake is ridiculous, even contradictory. The founders of this movement we now know as Heterodox Academy would agree. What is Jonathan Haidt's well-known exhortation to restore truth as the proper telos of the university other than a plea to pursue orthodoxy?

The holder of the heterodox view *believes* it to be true and believes that the orthodoxy it challenges, despite having the advantage of wide acceptance, is false. Anyone genuinely involved in the work of open inquiry—providing reasons for supporting truth claims, evidence for conclusions, constructive engagement in a community of

discursive exchange—is seeking orthodoxy. We humans are interested in believing correctly.

Ontological definitions are useful, but only go so far. In the actual life of our institutions, in practice, when we speak of orthodoxy we often do not mean truth. What we mean is the dominant view taken to be true within a given community or by the holders of institutional authority. And more importantly, all too often that dominant view, whether circulated culturally or institutionally enforced, is immunized from inquiry.

Anyone genuinely involved in the work of open inquiry—providing reasons for supporting truth claims, evidence for conclusions, constructive engagement in a community of discursive exchange—is seeking orthodoxy. We humans are interested in believing correctly.

Heterodoxy is a challenge to that view, out of the belief that what is deemed to be orthodox is mistaken. The orthodox, heterodoxy asserts, is at the very least not entirely accurate and sometimes entirely wrong. Heterodoxy always contains an element of dissent. Heterodoxy,

paradoxically, believes in its own truth. In this sense, it is orthodox.

What does it then mean in practice for heterodoxy to have limits? Another way of posing this question is to ask about the purpose and role of dissent. How heterodoxy is treated in a community of truth seekers reveals practical limitations in a particular context. For a community of truth seekers, of imperfect learners as we often put it, heterodoxy—understood as a good-faith challenge to dominant truth claims—



Illustration by Andrei Nicolescu (used with permission).

deserves engagement. Why? Because no truth claim should be immunized from good-faith inquiry.

Rather than raise the cost of dissent and skepticism, institutional culture and policy should create conditions in which they are optimized, flowing freely. Heterodoxy will always be an essential element in the ceaseless process of inquiry and should interrogate as it wishes. The functional limits of heterodoxy should solely and simply be the strength of its claims and the soundness of its methods.

Such a commitment to open inquiry is rooted in the scientific method and enlightenment thought. Can we submit the soundness of empiricism and rational argument to interrogation? Surely. They can stand on their own. The very existence of our modern universities and their practices of knowledge-seeking rely on their soundness. If there is any proper orthodoxy, it is one that affirms the discursive process of exchanging truth claims in pursuit of knowledge. This works precisely because any challenge to the scientific method and reasoned argument relies on those very methods for substantiation and defense. Lose that and you lose the university system and, with it, the quintessence of the constitution of knowledge.

If there is a foundational orthodoxy, it is merely the orthodoxy of reason. And the orthodoxy of reason, so long as it remains methodologically sound, affirms the ongoing examination of its own claims. In precisely this way, it welcomes heterodoxy. The verb used in the University of Chicago's Kalven Report is apt here: For a university ultimately devoted to "the discovery, improvement, and dissemination of knowledge," there is an obligation to *cherish* a diversity of viewpoints.

Bring it. Or, as Thomas Jefferson put it when arguing for the Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom prior to the Constitutional Convention,

"Truth is great, and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error."

We might also reverse the question, asking: What if any are the limits of orthodoxy? Simply, it should assert and defend its claims—even its foundational claim of the orthodoxy of reason—in an atmosphere of inquiry, never concretizing into ideology. In other words, established truth should be open to questioning because what we have believed to be true has often turned out to be false. Universities are no place for dogmatic imposition. Inquiry is the sphere in which orthodoxy and heterodoxy operate in productive exchange.

Ideology is the sphere in which orthodoxy refuses to be questioned. This is illiberalism, leading to indoctrination where there should be curiosity and searching. Politically, it threatens to slide into authoritarianism. John Dewey, in his 1902 essay "Academic Freedom," distinguishes academic inquiry from the teaching methods of ecclesiastical and political institutions that hew to their particular tenets. While the latter seek to create *disciples*, the university seeks to teach students how to think. We are inquisitive, not ideological.

As the language of orthodoxy and heterodoxy have strong religious undertones, the terms are prone to misunderstanding. Perhaps, as Michael Regnier has suggested, the name "Heterodox Academy" is best understood as something of a religious metaphor. With that view in mind, I take the point of Heterodox Academy all along was that our universities should never harden into the kind of religious dogmatism that would banish and excommunicate threatening ideas.

Universities should not function as the sectarian institutions Dewey contrasts them with, creating unthinking disciples. But the sad reality is that there is plenty of evidence to show that the academy indeed has hardened into dogmatism. Ultimately, what matters most is not that there is a set of established truths within any discipline or for the university system overall, but the posture

If there is any proper orthodoxy, it is one that affirms the discursive process of exchanging truth claims in pursuit of knowledge.

that those who assent to those truths take toward challenge.

Religious undertones resonate with me personally. My first taste of heterodoxy was set within the high church liturgy of Holy Week in the Coptic Orthodox Church. A bored boy of 13 amidst billowing frankincense and ancient incantations, I sat at the rear pew reading through Gospel accounts of Christ's Passion. I had a lot of time on my hands. Coptic services are a feat of endurance, elite spiritual athleticism. It struck me that the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had variations within them. They sometimes placed the order of events differently, included aspects absent in the others, or related irreconcilably different details. I couldn't escape the conclusion that the Bible was not concerned with perfect historical accuracy. What then did the orthodox idea of scriptural infallibility mean?

When I pressed questions of scriptural truth with my parents, it didn't go very well. And so I became heterodox within a professedly orthodox environment. My elders most reliably gave me what I came to think of as the standard response to my questions: Go talk to the proper authority—in this case, learned clerics—and then defer to them. That would purportedly set me straight. Unquestioning credence to authority based on the mere fact that it holds power did not convince me then, nor does it now.

Arguing for the inclusion and constructive engagement of heterodox ideas is another way of arguing for viewpoint diversity. Neither are ends in and of themselves but fundamental elements in the pursuit of truth, however contingent and iterative that truth may be. John Tomasi and Jonathan Haidt's recent Inside Higher Ed essay on the importance of viewpoint diversity can virtually be re-read, without losing any of its

explanatory power, substituting heterodoxy for viewpoint diversity.

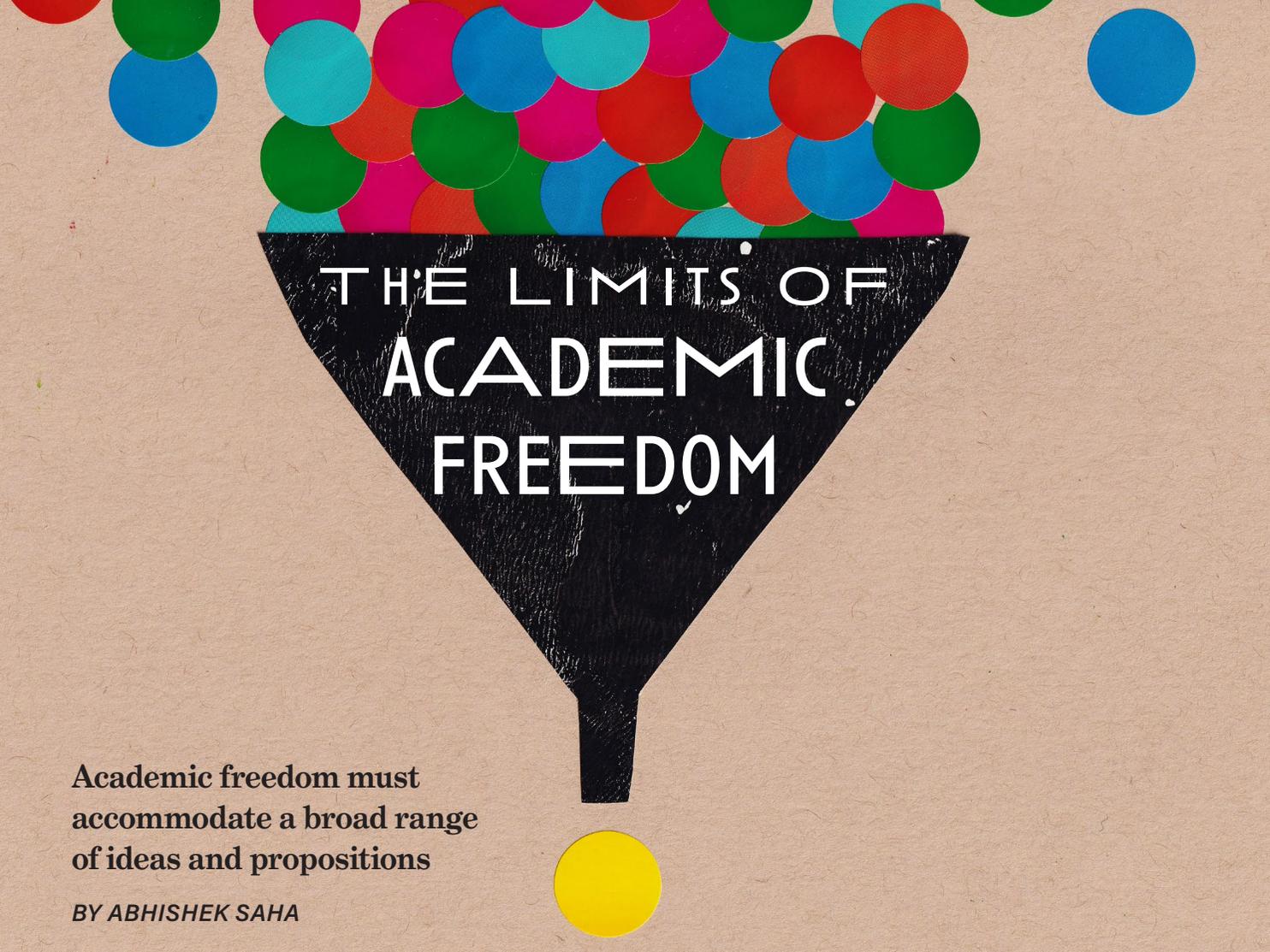
Heterodox Academy is a young movement. When HxA began in 2015, it was inherently dissident, pushing back against an intellectual monoculture. Naturally the emphasis was on heterodoxy. This parallels how dissidents assert free expression when it aligns with their agenda, yet sometimes fail to uphold it as a broader principle. Superficially, dissidence is itself a free expressive act. But, to believe in freely expressed dissent on principle is to affirm and believe in the free expression of those views and claims one considers false, even loathsome. If you don't believe in free speech for the views you detest, you don't believe in free speech, said Noam Chomsky.

What then happens when the heterodox becomes established as accepted truth? That is, when the heterodox becomes orthodox, when the revolutionaries take power and the punk becomes The Man. Wasn't this always the point? Therein lies the test for HxA and our university system. Clarity that we all are seeking the orthodox, we all are seeking truth, is essential for how we address that challenge.

The limits of heterodoxy are its inherent paradox. Heterodoxy believes its truth. It believes in its own orthodoxy.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Tony Banout, Ph.D., is a member of the Board of Directors at the Heterodox Academy.



THE LIMITS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Academic freedom must accommodate a broad range of ideas and propositions

BY ABHISHEK SAHA

What, precisely, are we defending when we invoke “academic freedom”? A cousin of free speech but not its twin, it promises to shield scholars from unwarranted interference. But should its protections be limited to work within one’s area of expertise, or should it extend more broadly? And is it an individual right belonging to scholars, or does it also encompass the autonomy of universities and departments?

Efforts to answer these questions have often produced proposals that either are too limited or too broadly construed, in both cases obscuring the essential purpose of academic freedom, which is to create the best conditions for the pursuit of knowledge.

The history of academic freedom has long been marked by these tensions. Its foundations date back to medieval European universities, which carved out enclaves of intellectual autonomy. In 19th-century Germany, the Humboldtian model gave academic freedom clearer form, enshrining

the twin principles of *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom to teach) and *Lernfreiheit* (freedom to learn) under the rubric of *Akademische Freiheit*.

In the United States, the forced resignation in 1900 of Stanford economist Edward Ross helped bring the issue to the fore, prompting the creation of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and its 1915 *Declaration of Principles*, a landmark document that set out three pillars of academic freedom: freedom to pursue inquiry and research, freedom to teach, and freedom to speak publicly as a citizen. This document has been updated several times—most notably in AAUP’s 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, which is still widely cited.

The U.S. Supreme Court began giving academic freedom constitutional shape in the 1950s, recognizing in *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* (1957) that it is a distinctive First Amendment right. In *Keyishian v. Board of Regents* (1967), the

Should the special prerogatives granted to academics—privileges that go beyond the general free-speech rights granted to most non-academics in their workplaces—be limited to their credentialed areas of academic expertise, or should they apply more broadly?

court described academic freedom as “a special concern of the First Amendment.” Like the AAUP Declaration, these opinions framed academic freedom as belonging to the individual professor. Justice Felix Frankfurter’s concurrence in *Sweezy*, however, attempted to broaden the concept, quoting a South African statement identifying four freedoms of a university: “to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it should be taught, and who may be admitted to study.” Beginning in the late 1970s, the court drew upon this to extend academic freedom rights to universities as institutions.

Recently, however, these protections have at least indirectly been called into question by the high court. For example, the constitutional right to freedom of speech for U.S. public employees has been constrained by an employer’s interest in an efficient, disruption-free workplace, with the court’s decision in *Connick v. Myers* (1983) limiting protection to speech on matters of public concern. This was further whittled down in *Garcetti v. Ceballos* (2006) to exclude speech made pursuant to an employee’s official duties—though the court left open whether “speech related to scholarship or teaching” might warrant a more protective standard, an exception that some circuits have since recognized.

Outside the constitutional context, definitions of academic freedom differ on the balance between individual and institutional rights. The University of Chicago’s 1972 *Shils Report* defines it as “the freedom of the individual to investigate, publish, and teach in accordance with his intellectual convictions.” The 1997 *UNESCO Recommendation* on the issue adopts a wider frame, encompassing both individual freedoms for faculty and institutional autonomy.

Beyond the individual-collective tension, a second fault line runs between professionally grounded speech and broader expression. Should the special prerogatives granted to academics—privileges that go beyond the general free-speech rights granted

to most non-academics in their workplaces—be limited to their credentialed areas of academic expertise, or should they apply more broadly? European Court of Human Rights case law conditions enhanced protection on whether the expression flows from professional expertise and meets scholarly standards. However, Britain’s Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, by contrast, does not confine free speech protection to one’s area of expertise. Such a caveat was included in an earlier version of the bill, but was explicitly removed by Parliament during its passage in 2023.

A third fault line concerns the responsibilities that, according to many statements of academic freedom, accompany the rights. The 1940 AAUP Statement counsels “appropriate restraint” when academics speak or write as private citizens. And UNESCO’s 1997 Recommendation includes an obligation of “due respect for evidence, impartial reasoning and honesty in reporting.” Are these responsibilities mandatory or merely hortatory? Is academic freedom forfeited if they are not met?

Keeping the Funnel Open

To make sense of these fault lines, let’s revisit an earlier question: What is academic freedom for? The strongest justification, I believe, is epistemic: Academic freedom is essential to the university’s mission of “truth-seeking and the advancement and dissemination of human knowledge.” Jonathan Rauch introduced the concept of an epistemic funnel to explain the collective process of knowledge creation. At its big end, the funnel must admit a broad range of ideas and propositions. Only those that withstand scrutiny by the “reality-based community”—a social network governed by key rules, norms, and institutions—emerge from the smaller opening at the other end.

The funnel’s ends operate by antithetical principles. The big end must be as open as possible: Excluding ideas because they offend

Illustration by Janelle Della (used with permission).

preconceptions violates the *fallibilist rule*, which acknowledges the provisional nature of knowledge. Yet once ideas enter the funnel, they are subject to the *empirical rule*, which rejects personal authority and demands evidence-based validation of propositions. The institutional filters of “organized skepticism”—critical exchange, peer review, rule-based social checking—winnow relentlessly, aiming to ensure that what emerges is guided by merit.

Collapsing the funnel’s zones into a single rubric invites conceptual drift and dilutes protection. If academic freedom exists to create the conditions for truth-seeking, its task is precise: Protect the big end of the funnel. Historically, academic freedom developed to shield universities from church and state; scholars’ intellectual freedom traveled alongside institutional autonomy. But in liberal democracies today, many attempts to censor originate *within* academia. Autonomy was once a bulwark against infringements of academic freedom; today, it too often enables them.

Former University of Virginia law professor Frederick Schauer has argued that the “ability to explore unpopular ideas and challenge the unchallengeable” that we associate with the university’s mission is best served by protecting the academic institution—not individual scholars—from political or bureaucratic interference. That may shield broadly mainstream academic views from external pressure, but it does little for dissenters who challenge internal orthodoxy—the very voices most in need of protection.

The better approach, then, is to understand academic freedom as an *individual* right, securing scholars’ ability to contribute to the funnel against interference from inside or outside the academy. Institutional autonomy is best seen not as a limb of academic freedom but as a separate instrumental good. Autonomous universities are generally better positioned to resist external political pressures on scholarship. Yet when

universities come to prize consumer-oriented competition for students, risk-management, and ideological conformity over truth-seeking, autonomy can corrode the epistemic funnel.

How Far Is Far Enough?

But if academic freedom is only an individual right, how far should it reach? If the right’s primary rationale is epistemic, why protect speech that does not draw on expert knowledge? After all, academics seem no likelier than anyone else to be reliable outside their fields. Equally tempting is to deny protection to work that fails academic standards, on grounds that it does not aid knowledge production.

Yet *who decides* what counts as “within expertise”? Alfred Wegener’s theory of continental drift was ignored for decades because he was not a geologist. Indeed, it is often cross-disciplinary contributions that prove most consequential (and perhaps also most prone to suppression). The work of the sociologist Michael Biggs on puberty blockers—initially dismissed by the medical establishment—was later cited in the influential Cass Review, demonstrating how scholars coming “from outside” can challenge a discipline’s orthodoxy.

And how do we distinguish “academic standards” from dominant paradigms that need shaking up? Collective judgments of standards shift over time. Economists David Card and Alan Krueger’s contrarian 1995 work on the minimum wage received an excoriating reception from their fellow economists, who likened it to “repealing the law of gravity.” Twenty-six years later, Card won a Nobel Prize for the very same work. Aristotelian professors accused Galileo of trespassing on disciplinary boundaries, while expert theologians declared his heliocentric view “foolish and absurd in philosophy.” We all know how that turned out. Unfortunately, radical challenges to orthodoxy on highly sensitive topics often draw similar treatment from mainstream experts today.

Academic freedom of investigation and dissemination should not be limited by perceived expertise or made contingent on satisfying current scholarly standards.

To keep the funnel’s intake genuinely open, academic freedom of investigation and dissemination should not be limited by perceived expertise or made contingent on satisfying current scholarly standards—save for egregious breaches such as falsification, fabrication, or gross plagiarism. The responsibilities commonly linked with academic freedom must be understood as hortatory, not mandatory. This will protect much work that won’t survive the narrowing; it is precisely the safeguard today’s Galileos need. As Biggs remarks:

"Academic freedom comes at a price, of course. It enables scholars to pursue research which might seem frivolous. It protects weird cranks as well as truth seekers. Only in retrospect, however, can they be distinguished."

A common claim is that academic freedom excludes pseudoscience or denial of settled knowledge. Yet apart from the fact that “settled” facts are sometimes overturned, ideological pressure and self-censorship can make contested issues look settled when they are anything but. An important recent study surveyed 470 leading psychology professors on 10 “taboo conclusions” about gender, race, and group differences; contrary to the prevailing narrative, it found no scientific consensus against those claims. There was, however, a strong correlation between holding a taboo view and self-censorship. This can lead to a “spiral of silence”: Those who perceive their position to be unsupported will fall silent, reinforcing the illusion of consensus for the opposing view.

University of Texas law professor David Rabban argues that academic freedom protections should not extend to speech outside of the professional realm. But if academic freedom is not confined to supposed expertise, there is no principled boundary excluding such extramural speech. Leaving such speech unprotected, moreover, gives universities a readily exploitable pretext to punish scholars for controversial academic work. The production of knowledge relies on expertise; the rules that best protect that production do not. AAUP co-founder Arthur Lovejoy understood this: “to protect the investigator within his special province, you must protect him outside of it also.”

At the same time, academic freedom does not entitle a scholar to a speaking invitation, a journal acceptance, or grant funding; these are matters of merit to be judged by the reality-based community. Accordingly, academic freedom does not shield professors from the *indirect* employment consequences of adverse merit assessment—such as missing out on prizes or promotion—so long as those consequences are not a pretext for viewpoint discrimination.

Finding the Right Balance

We can now see the defect in many frameworks of academic freedom: They are at once over-inclusive and under-inclusive. They overreach when they fold collective rights, institutional autonomy, or peer review into academic freedom. They underreach when they confine protection to speech within expertise, focus on meeting professional standards, and exclude extramural speech.

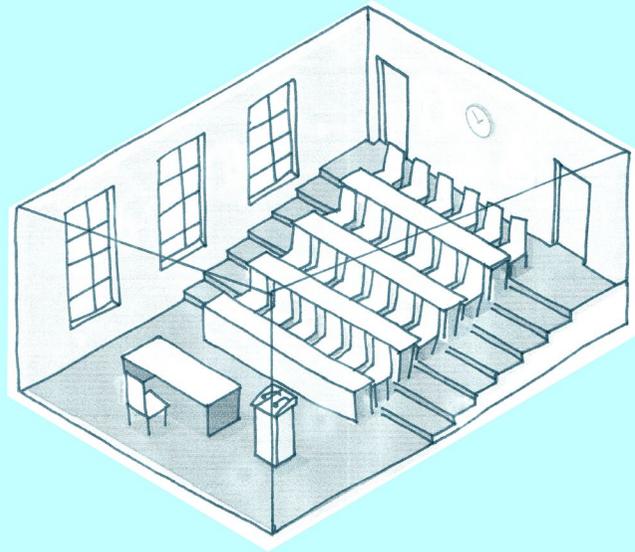
Properly understood, academic freedom is a broad individual right vested in scholars. It grants them the prerogative to set their research agendas and to express their opinions on any topic. A university may regulate the time, place, and manner of that expression where necessary to protect its essential functions, but it must do so in a viewpoint-neutral way.

Academic freedom also applies to teaching, with some limits. Universities may require coverage of the specified syllabus, disciplinary competence, and basic classroom civility. Beyond that, academics should have wide latitude over teaching methods and course content, and should not be pressured to endorse or reject particular value judgments.

Academic freedom is a necessary (though not the only) condition for the creation of knowledge—humanity’s greatest achievement. The touchstone for the academy is whether it keeps the funnel’s entrance open while letting merit—not ideology—determine what endures.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Abhishek Saha, Ph.D., is a professor of mathematics at Queen Mary University in London. Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Alan Sokal for helpful comments on a draft of this article.



THE CASE FOR

TRANSPARENCY

IN TEACHING

Illustration by Janelle Delia (used with permission).

We need to rethink the limits of institutional privacy

BY NICOLE BARBARO SIMOVSKI

Many states including Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Texas, and Utah now require instructors to make their course syllabi publicly available. The reasons are clear, advocates argue: The public has a right to know what is being taught in public university classrooms, and students should have clarity on the course content and objectives before spending their tuition dollars to enroll.

These are defensible arguments for more transparency, but there also appear to be underlying political motivations to the sudden surge of policy proposals by state legislatures and institutions. People and organizations on the right and center-right are eager to assess syllabi for left-wing bias and lack of viewpoint diversity. Professors and others also appear worried by the potential for online harassment of faculty that can ensue when their syllabi are openly shared.

But even if the political motivations behind these proposals and the potential risks to faculty as a result of them are real, it doesn't follow that the core concept of course transparency is inherently bad. Classrooms are not sacred spaces. Just as we've come to expect transparency in scientific and other kinds of research, the knowledge work that occurs in classrooms should also be transparent, not just for the sake of the students or the public, but for the good of the profession

and discipline. We academics need to leave behind the limits of "self-evident" instructional privacy and make our courses radically transparent, not via political pressure and legislation, but through internally led reform of our teaching practices.

U.S. universities are in the midst of a crisis of confidence. Public trust in higher education has dramatically declined in the past decade, especially among those who are politically in the center and right-of-center. The value of a college degree is in question as prices soar and many recent graduates struggle to find work. Partly as a result, the very notion of academic freedom that allows academics to teach how they want and to inquire freely is being threatened.

A common thread among all of this is that people have little idea of what is actually happening in the college classroom. Where opacity reigns, narratives are easily spun—and external actors will step in to take control of them. The solution to this problem is not to bolt shut the classroom doors and pull down the shades. Instead we need to own our teaching, share our materials, and work collectively to improve our methods, practices, and content in the classroom. We need to treat our teaching as a discipline unto itself, a profession deserving of critical (expert) review, feedback, and improvement—not as a private act that is beyond accountability and questioning.

This should not be controversial. The very goal of academic work is to seek knowledge and truth in our disciplines, but we've become averse to the idea that classrooms should also be approached in the same way that we approach our disciplinary scholarship. There are entire fields dedicated to learning science and pedagogy. The problem is that we turn our heads when it comes to the application of this work as instructors in our classrooms. Teaching is an applied discipline. Imagine if it was the norm that medical research didn't translate to medical practice. So why are we treating teaching as an exception?

University teaching has hardly changed since the lecture model we're familiar with today arose in the late 19th century.

University teaching has hardly changed since the lecture model we're familiar with today arose in the late 19th century. In *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America*, historian Jonathan Zimmerman explains how college teaching has "languished for too long under the dead hand of tradition." Part of that tradition is that what happens in a classroom is no one else's business. But it should be, not for political "gotcha" games, but because teaching should be treated as a profession. Evidence should be translated to practice, practices should be subject to

rigorous evaluation and peer review as normative procedure, and standards for excellence should be defined and maintained.

For those who question this very idea, consider the other critical role of universities: academic research. Imagine a world in which a researcher toils away in their lab, makes a discovery, shares only the summary, refuses to share any

methodological details or materials used, and doesn't share a full report or show any of their work to their peers or the public. No academic would believe their results.

Their work would not be considered a legitimate part of scholarly literature. Yet, this is the current state of affairs in university teaching.

Research at one point in the not so distant past, however, did look quite similar to the state of teaching now. *Nature*, one of the premier science journals, was primarily filled with high-level summaries of research, with details sometimes shared elsewhere or in closed academic societies; peer review wasn't standard until the late 1970s; and open sharing of materials was not relatively normalized until the last decade. Teaching today looks a lot like research did a century ago: private,

vague, and buoyed up by trust—trust that is now gone.

The history of academic research also provides a template for reform in the instructional realm. In the early 21st century, it was becoming increasingly clear that academic research was in trouble. As the publication standards of research required increasing levels of details about data and methods, meta-science researchers were able to begin analyzing how research was being done. This work showed the impact that different choices during the study design and data analytic processes had in influencing the results and producing false-positive findings. A scientific enterprise increasingly built on false foundations was bound to crumble.

And in 2015 it did, with psychology research becoming the poster child for a wider academic research crisis. The crisis was sparked after the Open Science Collaboration published a massive research report in *Science* showing that the majority of psychology’s “foundational” studies failed to replicate. What matters most is what happened next: the burgeoning of an academic-led reform movement.

The Center for Open Science, which led the large-scale replication effort in psychology cited above, set out to make research radically transparent to improve replication and the foundation of knowledge across science. Their results have been quite remarkable, including more than 100,000 users of their research templates and online infrastructure, widespread journal policy changes, and incentive structures built into research. But most of all, transparent, “open” science practices are now normative expectations in academic research. Transparency is now the default way that high-credibility labs operate at universities.

We need a similar reform movement for teaching, a movement not dictated by legislators and political pundits, but an “open teaching” movement, led by academics themselves, that encourages transparency of courses as the default. Making public course syllabi is a good start. Sharing materials, pedagogical approaches, citing our sources for methods is even better.

The “open science” movement did not start fully formed, and neither will an open teaching

movement. But we need to start. We must take teaching seriously—bring it out of the 19th century and into the 21st—and we need to be transparent about it. We must fight back against political attacks on academic freedom in the classroom, but also work collectively to demonstrate that we can take control of professionalizing our teaching. In the end, students *and* knowledge transmission win.

But to improve anything, we must know what we’re starting with. And it is almost certainly not going to be great news out of the gate. Based on available data, we already know that there is political bias in course syllabi. As a result of the replication crisis, social science (and medical research especially) took huge PR hits in the 2010s. But thanks to the transparency that followed and the many researchers who took accountability for their professions and led the reform effort themselves, by the 2020s these disciplines ultimately became much stronger.

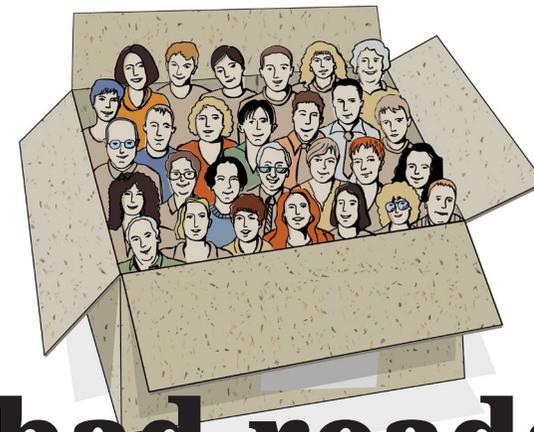
Better teaching is instrumental to any philosophy of higher education, including the two currently dominant ones—offering students return-on-investment professional training and providing a classically liberal education. Both of these philosophies want students to effectively learn what they are being taught. But without meta-research on teaching, transparency of syllabi, assignments, and pedagogical practices, we cannot change teaching in any meaningful way. Instead, we’ll be stuck in the endless 19th-century cycle of lecture, test, repeat while trying to seal our classroom doors ever tighter to avoid scrutiny.

“Open teaching” will lead to better teaching practices, more up-to-date scholarship being taught, and more effective learning than what the current standard (internal and private) review practices of teaching—namely irregular “peer reviews” of teaching and student evaluations—currently afford. So, yes, syllabi should be public—as should the rest of our teaching materials and methods. It’s time for us to radically open up our classrooms and professionalize the critical role of teaching in the academy.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Nicole Barbaro Simovski, Ph.D., is Director of Communications, Marketing and Events at Heterodox Academy.

Chief Crow Daria / Shutterstock.com



bad reads

How the publishing industry came to embrace an ethos of limitations

BY BERNARD SCHWEIZER

Large swaths of the publishing industry have been captured by an ideological paradigm that prioritizes limitations and restrictions over quality. Instead of approaching manuscripts with a mindset that asks, “Does it have literary and intellectual merit?”—in other words, is it innovative, brilliant, daring, fresh, and beautiful?—the publishing gatekeepers, including agents, editors, and publishers, tend to pass new works through a filter of limiting rules.

One of those rules requires that the identity of fictional characters match their authors’ identity—otherwise the author is guilty of “cultural appropriation.” Another rule mandates that stories take an approved (read progressive) stance on issues involving minorities, diversity, transgenderism, racism, guns, immigration, etc., with little room for ambiguity and irony. Most importantly, perhaps, any words, phrases, topics, or ideas that are considered “problematic” have to be removed, and “sensitivity readers” are on hand to enforce this norm.

A recently published study by Adam Szetela, titled *That Book Is Dangerous!: How Moral Panic, Social Media, and the Culture Wars Are Remaking Publishing*, documents in exhaustive detail the censorious and creativity-suppressing effects when literary texts are passed through the prescriptive filter of sensitivity readers. None of the restrictions mentioned here are openly spelled out in a manual or checklist, but they have become a silent industry standard, which has shifted the focus away from the artistic merit and aesthetic value of texts toward a

predominant concern with matters of theme and content.

How We Got Here

Things have not always been like this, and a look at the recent history of literary criticism can be instructive to understand how we ended up here. The 20th century has seen a succession of schools or movements of literary criticism, each one with its own strengths and limitations. Victorian and early-20th-century approaches to literature were often centered on the author’s life and private world of ideas. According to this method, a work of literature was assumed to be a direct expression of the mind, personality, or experiences of its author. Therefore, studying the author’s life was a reliable and telling way of unlocking the meaning of the text. The reaction to this biographical approach came in the form of New Criticism, an Anglo-American school of literary analysis that flourished between the two world wars. This method focused on the aesthetic and formal properties of literary texts, i.e. their internal order and formal artistry, to the exclusion of biographical or historical considerations.

After WWII, a new paradigm took hold—structuralism—which modified New Critical formalism by looking for the mental, societal, and cultural patterns and motifs embedded deeply in subtexts of narratives and myths (e.g. the father-son conflict, the hero’s journey, the role of the trickster figure, etc.). Both the New Critical and structuralist approaches have in common that they treated texts as the ultimate repositories of authority and the fulcrum of meaning, with the critic serving merely as an intermediary, revealing a work’s internal consistency and thematic universality.

The advent of Critical Theory in the early 1980s changed all that. Thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School and with French poststructuralism shifted the dominant perspective from a model that focused on aesthetic order and deep structure to one that prioritized the content and especially the content’s ideological implications. The Marxist outlook of philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School (thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas) propagated the view that all human relations, as well as their cultural and artistic manifestations, were rooted in unequal power relations. This materialistic approach filtered down into the way literature was treated

as a privileged cultural site where the drama of dominance and unequal social relations was being played out. And it dovetailed nicely with the work of French poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault and Jean François Lyotard, who argued that “discourses”—i.e. unexamined verbal conventions to talk about matters of race, colonialism, sexuality, class status, disability, etc.—were not just passive linguistic habits but rather means of actively making these very categories.

According to this view, the discourse of Orientalism “constructs” the thing called the Orient, the discourse around homosexuality constructs what is a gay or a lesbian person, the discourse of race constructs what a black, brown or white person is, and so on. And since language socially constructs whole swaths of reality, language is also the lever by which those aspects of reality can allegedly be modified. Hence, if you can change the way people speak or write about something, then you change the very thing itself. Make certain “harmful” words disappear (or replace them with euphemisms), and the attitude linked to those words will disappear along with them. This logic, which has given us the entire politically correct lexicon, entails both verbal vigilance and self-censorship.

This paradigm acted as a catalyst for the growth of activist and prosecutorial approaches in literary and cultural studies, designed to reveal an author’s unenlightened, elitist, socially backward, patriarchal, colonialist—and occasionally also adequately progressive—views. In 1965, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur coined the term “the hermeneutics of suspicion” to describe this tendency. As programs dedicated to the study of race, class, and gender sprang up on campuses across the nation, a consensus took hold that the literary critic’s principal task was to identify oppressive ideological agendas and show how novels, short stories, plays, and poems were engaged in perpetuating harmful discourses and cementing iniquitous social relations. The spirit of this type of criticism is expressed in articles such as Chinua Achebe’s “An Image of Africa: Racism in

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” and Anna Juhnke’s “Remnants of Misogyny in *Paradise Lost*.”

Such concerns would have been bewilderingly irrelevant to an earlier generation of formalist critics, who were beholden to a different paradigm, i.e. what structuralist critic Jonathan Culler called the “hyperprotected cooperative principle.” This concept denotes a kind of contract between reader and author, a bond of trust, where the reader approached a work of literature reverently, in the conviction that things were arranged the way they were for artistic, stylistic, poetic, and irreducibly aesthetic reasons, and the critical reader’s job was to figure out how to make sense of the seeming contradictions, tensions, and challenges.

Sins of Omission or Commission

But under the aegis of the poststructuralist hermeneutics of suspicion, generations of undergraduate and graduate students, i.e. the future professional class of literary critics, agents, editors, and commentators, not to mention general readers, were taught that to be a discerning judge of literary works meant to be able to sniff out what identity was unfavorably represented in a given text, what insensitivities pervaded a story, or how texts socially constructed, and thus made possible the status quo around race, class, and gender.

It hardly surprises that literary agents and editors in all echelons of the publishing industry are now willing to crucify works of literature, no matter how brilliantly written, on the basis of perceived sins of omission or commission. No wonder, too, that scores of readers—especially on Twitter and Goodreads—are loudly condemning certain “dangerous” works of literature (often without having read them) and that they seem unable to separate an author’s own moral (or immoral) stances from the characters and events contained in their fictional creations.

In 2023, PEN America issued a lengthy report of these limiting and censorious trends titled

Literary agents and editors in all echelons of the publishing industry are now willing to crucify works of literature, no matter how brilliantly written, on the basis of perceived sins of omission or commission.

“Booklash: Literary Freedom, Online Outrage, and the Language of Harm.” In it, we read that:

Since 2017, these trends in online literary behavior have extended from the YA space to publishing more broadly. Three recent examples, Elizabeth Gilbert’s *The Snow Forest*, Cecilia Rabess’ 2023 debut novel *Everything’s Fine*, and Gretchen Felker-Martin’s 2022 sci-fi horror book *Manhunt* were all targeted by review-bombing. In all three cases, one-star reviews began pouring in before the books were published, with critics objecting to the books’ premises—a story set in Russia, a story about a Black woman who falls in love with a conservative white coworker, and a story about a virus that targets trans people, respectively. In each case, critics objected to the presumed content rather than provide insights gleaned from reading the books themselves. Such an inquisitorial view of literary works gave rise to what Kazuo Ishiguro has called “a climate of fear” among authors and creatives. This trend has undermined academia’s and publishing’s ability to deal with the craft of literature as an artistic endeavor and a human striving for profound aesthetic experiences.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with having a distinct critical perspective when reading and discussing literature, and no theme should be considered off-limits for analysis, but we also need to keep in mind the integrity of verbal artifacts and their superior aesthetic value. To me, the time is ripe for a new paradigm that departs from the binary model of interpretation that either prioritizes content at the expense of form, or conversely, one that only concerns itself with aesthetic matters to the exclusion of personal, socio-historical, or philosophical contexts. The academic study of literature should not be self-limiting but should consider all the different approaches that have historically played out in the various movements and schools across time. In my own teaching and research practice, I have realized that every literary text is asking for a different kind of approach. Some poems scream out for a formalist treatment; some novels respond well to a biographical approach; others benefit from a structuralist analysis; and certain plays are best read through the lens of social class or race.

Whatever the case, we should avoid the blind application of fault-finding, bias-hunting, harm-locating approaches across the spectrum of

literary texts and genres. Likewise, turning all serious readers—let alone literary agents and publishers—into ombudsmen for certain disenfranchised or victimized groups, and using a scolding tone to hold authors and books accountable for all kinds of sins, whether real or imagined, is extremely counterproductive. That’s because the best fiction often challenges our preconceptions, opens our world to new ideas and perspectives, and doesn’t chime with our moral certainties. Let us learn to embrace uncertainty, difference, and real wonder by truly listening to the works of literature we deal with, and respecting their artistic integrity while not closing our eyes to their implied messages. We must not crush these works of art under the weight of our own limited, righteous, and presentist agendas.

Some years ago, after realizing what a regressive, self-limiting state the world of publishing had become, I decided to do something about it: After retiring from my faculty position, I founded a publishing house by the name of Heresy Press—*nomen est omen!* Since its inception in 2023, Heresy Press has issued boundary-pushing, provocative works of fiction chosen for their literary and intellectual merit. We’ve recently branched out into nonfiction, and the first book in that category, *The War On Words: 10 Arguments Against Free Speech—And Why They Fail* by Greg Lukianoff and Nadine Strossen, makes an eloquent case against speech limitations and censorship.

Heresy Press’ second nonfiction project, forthcoming later this year in partnership with Heterodox Academy, is a book titled *Viewpoint Diversity: What It Is, Why We Need It, and How to Get It*. That volume—the first on its subject—offers discerning readers a wealth of diverse opinions and practical guidance on how to leverage and respect the critically important and yet often misunderstood concept of viewpoint diversity. In both intention and execution, this project is an object lesson in how to counter the self-limiting tunnel vision of viewpoint homogeneity and to embrace instead real diversity of ideas and constructive dialogue.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Bernard Schweizer, Ph.D., is a professor emeritus of English at Long Island University, Brooklyn and the author of a number of books on literature and religion.

Promoting free inquiry requires maintaining a constant tension between openness and discipline

BY ALEX ARNOLD

The university's chief mission is the pursuit, refinement, and dissemination of knowledge and understanding about the world and humanity's place in it. To best accomplish this mission, the university must nourish a culture of free inquiry—a culture where ideas are freely and vigorously exchanged, where thinkers from all walks of life can subject their perspectives to searching discussion, and where disagreement is a key means to test and advance the frontiers of knowledge.

There is, however, an inescapable tension at the heart of free inquiry. One way to see the tension is simply by reflecting on the phrase “free inquiry” itself. The two words in the term pull against one another.

On one side is “free.” When something is free, it is unconstrained—*wild* even. Staunch defense of free speech on campus, from the McCarthy era in the 1950s to the free speech movement at Berkeley in the 1960s, through to our present time and the efforts of organizations like Heterodox Academy, is all a manifestation of the desire to lean into the “free” side of free inquiry. To lean this way is to place great importance on the open exchange of ideas, even by thinkers we find distasteful or immoral, as essential to the pursuit of knowledge

and understanding. As John Stuart Mill put it in *On Liberty*, “There ought to exist the fullest liberty of professing and discussing, as a matter of ethical conviction, any doctrine, however immoral it may be considered.”

Mill's picture is one where the forwarding of every opinion, even those that we take to be wrong, offensive, irrational, or immoral, is of great value to our growth in knowledge and understanding. Consider the history of anatomy, which relies on systematic dissection of human corpses. Progress in anatomy was severely impeded by authorities who viewed dissection itself as sacrilegious. It wasn't until such views faded that we learned more about the marvels of the human body. The moral here: Let a great tide of opinion flow—even with all its mud and detritus—so that the tree of knowledge might be nourished.

But on the other side of “free” is “inquiry.” Far from the turbulence of converging currents of opinion, inquiry requires *discipline*. The very term “inquiry” conjures images of scholars hunched over stacks of books in hushed libraries, or scientists meticulously calibrating instruments to eliminate the slightest error. Inquirers follow well-worn methodological paths, subjecting themselves to rigorous standards of evidence, logic, and argument. They laboriously sift through mountains of information, weighing each piece, discarding much.

They humble themselves before the collective wisdom of their disciplines, accepting criticism that may feel like personal rebuke—or even

personal attack. And perhaps most difficult, they hold their most treasured findings with open hands, knowing that what seems to be the most solid of truths may sublimate into vaporous ignorance in the face of new evidence.

In sum, inquiry demands constraint—the antithesis of unbounded freedom. The unfettered expression of opinion, so central to the “free” side of free inquiry, is just one actor of many on the stage of inquiry. The rushing river of free expression must be channeled through stone aqueducts and cast iron piping of disciplined investigation.

Thus, the tension at the heart of free inquiry: Freedom demands openness to all opinions, while effective inquiry demands constraints and discipline. And because our universities must be homes to free inquiry, this tension is *inescapable*. More importantly, it's a *good thing*. Consider a guitar's strings: They can make their dulcet tones only if they are tuned to a certain tension. Remove it and the string buzzes discordantly or flops about lifelessly.

Those who lead and inhabit our institutions of higher education must manage this tension daily. Freedom without constraint leads to a buzzing cacophony, where ignorance can blot out knowledge, where understanding is confounded by confusion. But too much constraint dams the wellsprings of discovery, choking off the streams through which new ideas might surge.

The challenge for those who wish to foster a culture of free inquiry is to strike the right balance—cultivating gardens where wild ideas may bloom, yet tilled and pruned enough to bear the good fruits of disciplined, rigorous inquiry. This tension cannot be resolved once and for all, but must be constantly negotiated through institutional practices and cultural norms.

Yet maintaining productive tension requires deliberate effort, particularly in communities where ideological homogeneity threatens to slacken the strings. When too many share the same assumptions, the instrument of inquiry produces only monotone droning rather than beautiful music. Universities must therefore cultivate what we might call “intellectual cross-training.” The progressive scholar learns to articulate conservative arguments in their strongest form; the methodologist practices wild speculation; the theorist submits to rigorous empirical discipline. These are not exercises in bad faith or false balance, but essential practices for maintaining the tension that makes real inquiry possible.

For our institutions' leaders, the temptation to minimize controversy often means dampening precisely that friction that generates sparks of insight. But a university that celebrates only comfortable discoveries is like a bridge with all its cables pulling in the same direction—structurally unsound and awaiting collapse. Better to understand that productive disagreement is not a failure of a community but evidence of its health.

This means seeking out people to join that community that unsettle departmental orthodoxies, funding research that tests rather than assumes foundational premises, creating structured encounters with those whose intellectual commitments pull in different directions. The goal is not chaos but a carefully maintained tension—taut enough to do real work and flexible enough to absorb the shocks of genuine discovery.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Alex Arnold, Ph.D., is director of research at The Center for Christianity & Public Life.

A Delicate Balance

LIVING

BETWEEN

LIMITS

Boundaries are not neutral
and are often tools of exclusion

BY KRYSTAL STARK

I have lived my life in the in-between, pressed against limits both visible and invisible. I grew up poor in a single-parent household, with aspects of identity that marked me as “less than” in the cultural scripts of class, gender, and sexuality. I have faced the “fell clutch of circumstance,” and as a result of that hardship, I now carry with me the steady conviction of William Ernest Henley’s oft-quoted poem *Invictus*—that “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.” In spite of—or perhaps because of—“the bludgeonings of chance,” I grew determined to overcome the crushing weight of childhood poverty, ultimately rising to earn a doctorate.

Yet when I entered the world of higher education, seemingly having found a way through past challenges, new artificial boundaries lay before me—not a dead end but a maze of obscured obstacles. I was present but never fully accepted: too poor in background to be welcome in elite circles, too educated to be at ease in the communities I left behind, too outspoken for polite company, too cautious for activist spaces. Always straddling, never belonging.

This in-betweenness has become my vantage point. To live permanently at the margins of belonging is to see the walls when others see the whole world. We talk often about “limits” as barriers to opportunity or ceilings on advancement, but we rarely examine the experience of living on the border itself—where identity risks being shaped by constraint and survival requires constant negotiation. The liminal perspective, unwanted as it often is, makes visible what others cannot or will not see. What I notice is not unique, and it is not clairvoyance; it is simply the accumulation of 15 years of teaching, observing, and seeing patterns emerge that research has been documenting for decades.

In education, these ceilings are everywhere. My research with gifted and twice-exceptional learners reveals how these limits are constructed and enforced: Potential is capped not by ability but by institutional design. Tall poppies are told to duck, or they are trimmed until they wither. Supports blunt rather than sharpen, disciplining students into “acceptable” versions of themselves. The message is clear: Thrive, but not too much; question, but not too forcefully; succeed, but only within the box we have drawn for you.

Teachers are not immune. At times it feels as though we are asked to meet every need, heal every wound, and solve every social ill—even though we know we cannot. Expectations multiply as class sizes grow, stretching depth into breadth until structural caps dictate who receives attention and who is sidelined. Some boundaries are necessary for safety and structure. But when exclusionary barriers disguise themselves as neutral—or worse, as helpful—they become obstacles to growth and ultimately erode the foundation that makes collective flourishing possible.

The same is true of social emotional learning. At its best, SEL equips students with language and strategies to move forward through challenges. At its worst, it demands performance: Express your feelings in approved ways, and risk sanction if you do not. Students quickly learn the lesson beneath the lesson—that authentic expression is dangerous, and silence is safer. The Overton window constricts.

To survive, many educators adopt the stance of “see and don’t say”—bearing witness to hypocrisy, while knowing that speaking plainly would be treated as disloyalty. What’s more, constraint shapes more than behavior; it shapes reality. Systems that once existed to expand possibility increasingly function as calibration devices, producing predictable outcomes and calling it virtue. When students and teachers learn to mask curiosity, intensity, frustration, or dissent, the system mistakes the silence for consensus.

At times I find myself pressured into the role of spectator—watching without interacting, choosing a seat at the edge that allows me to see both sides of the divide. This vantage point does not resolve contradictions, but it does bring them into view, revealing the fear that builds the barriers, the realities the barriers conceal, and the possibilities they obscure. Visibility is the first crack in the surface—not sufficient to solve the problems, but enough to make them impossible to ignore for those willing to look.

The more I teach, the deeper I apply what I’ve learned, the clearer this becomes: Boundaries are not neutral. They are too often tools of exclusion disguised as necessities, walls erected in the name of safety or order. The insistence that we suppress emotion in the name of stability, that we cap

We talk often about “limits” as barriers to opportunity or ceilings on advancement, but we rarely examine the experience of living on the border itself—where identity risks being shaped by constraint and survival requires constant negotiation.

brilliance in the name of equity, that we narrow discourse in the name of civility—these are all ways of manufacturing conformity.

But naming the cracks, while important, does not in itself repair them. The big question is what we do once we finally see the architecture for what it is. Over the last several months, in the classroom and in my writing, I’ve watched a pattern repeat itself: Educational systems—governed by boards and administered through K-12 districts and universities alike—create limits they refuse to name, and then demand that teachers create stability to hide the instability. We pretend the house isn’t on fire so no one has to take responsibility for the smoke in our lungs. This is how limits reproduce themselves—not through grand decrees, but through daily rituals of compliance.

Grading works the same way. In theory, grades are feedback. In practice, they have become instruments of regulation—sometimes punitive, used to restrain deviation; sometimes affirmative, used to disguise failure. A grade can function as a ceiling or a floor long before it reflects learning, capping some students while inflating others who conform to expectations. That is a limit—not of ability, but of sanctioned expression.

Classrooms themselves operate under an increasingly captured logic. The appearance of equity matters more than the experience of learning. We flatten differences because acknowledging real variation is politically inconvenient. We narrow discourse because honest disagreement feels unsafe. We script participation so tightly that students learn silence is safer than thought.

These are not dramatic limits. They are quiet limits—the kind that accumulate imperceptibly at first until eventually the range of permissible thought has narrowed so far that most people no longer notice the walls. These are the limits that

concern me most because they shape not just what students—and teachers—learn but what they believe they are allowed to think. And yet, I do not write entirely from a place of despair. The vantage point of the in-between comes with its own tools to begin repairing those cracks.

The first is *unfiltered observation*: refusing to pretend the house is not burning when you can feel the heat. Simply telling the truth about conditions is an act of repair because systems that depend on illusion cannot survive accurate description—and anyone who has worked within the education pipeline, from K-12 classrooms to university campuses and district offices, learns how necessary and how difficult honest observation can be. The second is *restoring meaning to evaluation*: refusing to let grading become punitive theater or hollow affirmation. When feedback becomes a conversation rather than a weapon or a reward, ceilings lift. Students re-enter the learning process instead of performing obedience to it.

The third is *making the invisible limits visible*. When teachers, parents, and students name the subtle constraints—what can be said, what must be said, what will be punished—the spell begins to break. Limits lose their inevitability once they are recognized and acknowledged as constructed rather than natural. And the final tool is the vantage point itself. The in-between teaches a simple truth: Limits are real, but many are choices. Some boundaries protect; others simply pacify.

Limits will never disappear. But the invisible ones—the manufactured ones, the dishonest ones—are where systems quietly calcify. Repair begins by refusing to confuse walls for horizons, and by reclaiming the agency to decide which limits must be challenged and overcome, which must be kept, and which were illusions all along.

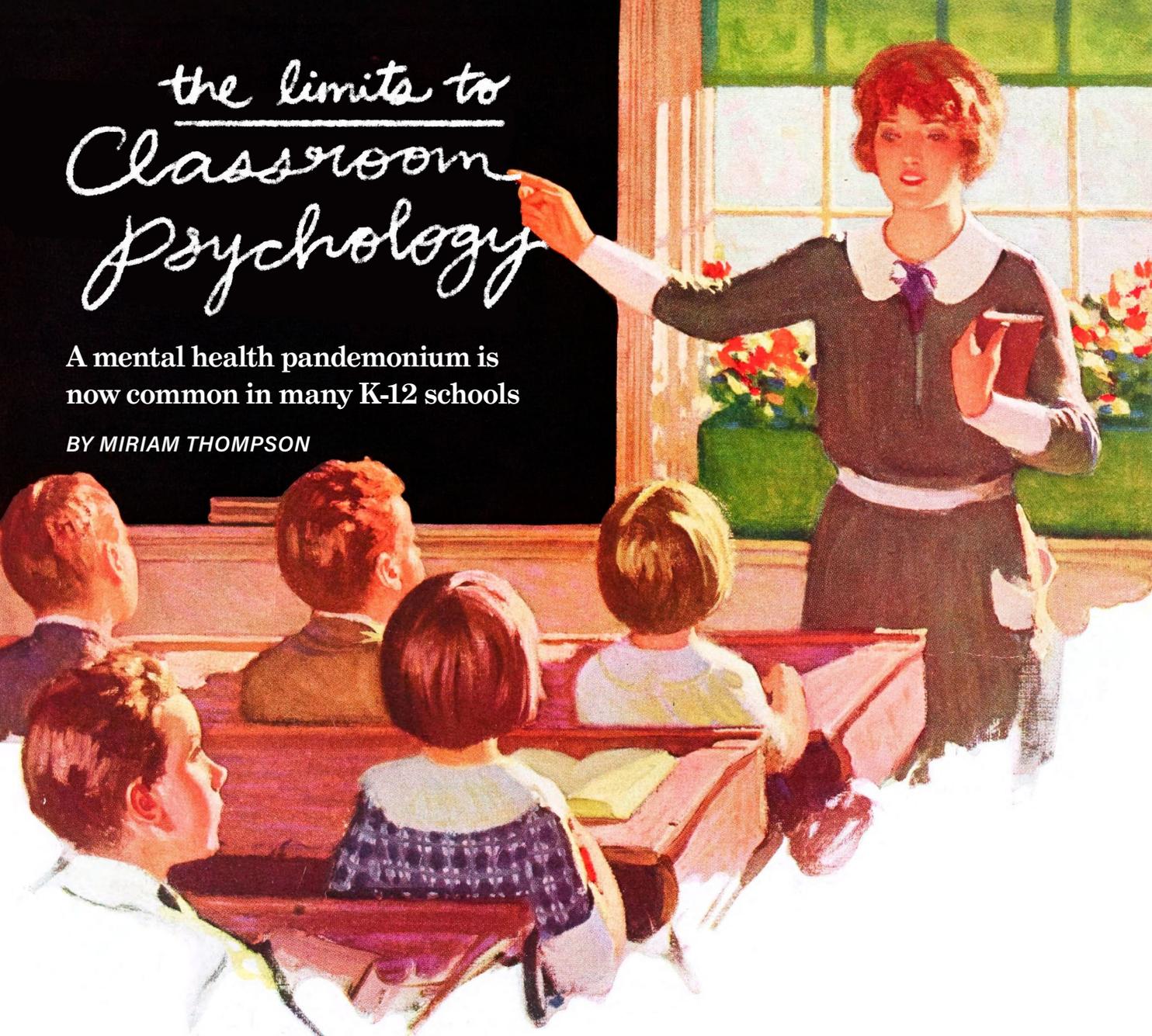
References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Krystal Stark, Ed.D., is a vocal music teacher in public schools in Arlington County, Virginia.

the limits to **Classroom** *Psychology*

A mental health pandemonium is now common in many K-12 schools

BY MIRIAM THOMPSON



Advertisement for Postum in The Delineator, 1924. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Ppsychology is the scientific study of the mind and behavior, which is inextricably linked to how people think, learn, feel, and act. Indeed, psychology touches every aspect of a person's life. But while there are virtually no *limits* to psychology as a field of study, there are *limitations* to psychological practice.

This contrast between study and practice has become especially important in the digital age, when ordinary people have access to enormous amounts of information about psychology. Of course, learning more about psychology can help equip ordinary people with greater self-awareness, self-understanding, and perhaps enough of a self-diagnosis to know when they need professional help. But this wealth of information can also have unintended consequences, including a distorted

sense of the challenges people face. That is, some people can develop the belief that they are more disordered than they really are.

I am not dismissing or trivializing the importance of mental health; as a psychologist, I would be remiss to do so. Mental health concerns and disorders are real and certainly require intervention. But I also believe it is important to draw attention to an overlooked aspect of what I call mental health pandemonium, which is the tendency to underestimate the resilience of ordinary people and to misdiagnose and attempt to treat the typical, and even healthy, responses to the range of events that happen in their lives. For example, experiencing an adverse event such as getting into a small car accident or even losing a loved one, followed by an unpleasant, but

understandable reaction such as crying or grief, doesn't necessarily mean that one should get therapy, nor does it mean that one is on track to developing a mental disorder.

Perhaps one of the best examples of this overreach or pandemonium is the social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum so common today in K-12 education in the United States. Social emotional learning is a curriculum that teaches students self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills in the classroom. In the United States, 27 states have adopted the K-12 SEL curriculum in conjunction with the standard

academic curriculum. One of the big aims of SEL is to help students identify and become more aware of their emotions (such as doing a "feelings check-in" at the beginning of class); identify past situations that evoked certain emotions (for example, asking questions like: "When was the last time you were disappointed?"); and engage in perspective-taking (by prompting students to ask questions such as: "How would Sam feel if you took her cupcake without asking?").

Considering the rapid cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social changes that students are going through, proponents of SEL argue that the classroom is the appropriate place to help students develop these sorts of skills, which they will need to succeed after they leave school and begin to build their adult lives. In theory, integrating the SEL curriculum with the standard academic curriculum sounds great. In practice, however, SEL may distract from more important school goals and may even be harmful to students. There are several reasons for this.

First, the classroom may not be the appropriate setting for psychological interventions to take place. Some of these interventions can trigger upsetting emotional reactions, particularly when certain activities are completed (such as tasks like, "Write about the last time someone betrayed your

trust") or when certain questions are asked (for example, "When was the last time you felt sad and why?"). When students arrive at school to embark on a 6-7 hour day of learning and academic enrichment, care should be taken to consider the intensity of these interventions, so as not to trigger strong emotional reactions in children that could make learning hard or even impossible.

Second, teachers may not be qualified and trained to deliver the SEL curriculum in classrooms. Teachers are already dealing with a substantial

The classroom may not be the appropriate setting for psychological interventions to take place.

number of tasks and pressures, such as teaching a curriculum that prepares students to pass standardized state exams; managing

disruptive and disrespectful behaviors that interfere with classroom learning; dealing with rising class enrollment; and ensuring quality instruction with limited resources, among other issues. What's more, many teacher-education programs do not explicitly train teacher candidates to deliver the SEL curriculum; therefore when teachers are tasked with using this content, they may feel unprepared.

Finally, prioritizing SEL may not be wise when K-12 students' test scores are mixed or even poor in reading, math, and science. While it's not impossible to teach SEL programming while ensuring that students meet benchmarks in these subjects, in districts struggling with basic learning, any available instructional time should probably be dedicated to helping students master basic reading, math and other skills. While emotional regulation skills and reading, for example, are both important, reading is far more practical and fundamental than learning how to regulate one's emotions.

In her recent bestselling book, *Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren't Growing Up*, author Abigail Shrier identifies the shortcomings of SEL and mental health education in general in classrooms, arguing that if the goal is to help students regulate their emotions, the "unceasing attention to feelings" is

likely to undermine any opportunity for a student to achieve emotional stability. Shrier also quotes Leif Kennair, a Norwegian psychologist and an expert in the treatment of anxiety disorders:

"You can't learn emotional regulation from a lecture.... You learn how to handle the disappointment of not making the basketball team by not making the basketball team. Not from classroom instruction. Social emotional learning exercises often assume that by discussing a hypothetical disappointment, kids can skip the painful experience and arrive straight at maturity and social competence. But there is no way to gain friendship skills except by attempting to make a friend. There is no real way to learn to overcome failure except by struggling and, eventually, managing to do it."

As with anything, people should be aware that there are limits and even serious risks to patients using mental health services. For example, the rush to provide crisis counseling following a major natural disaster or mass casualty event (e.g., mass shooting) can cause more harm than good. Psychological interventions that take place right after these tragic events often provide minimal help for patients and can even promote "histrionics," which impedes recovery and elongates the sense of crisis.

Therapy is also not necessarily the answer for those who are mourning the loss of a loved one. Crying, withdrawal, sadness, inattention, appetite changes, and more are typical and sometimes even healthy reactions in response to grief and loss. Offering grief therapy to those who are going through typical grieving could make things worse by tamping down these responses and not letting the person work through their natural and understandable sadness.

The ability to see the nuance here is important. It could be the case that individuals who survived a mass casualty event may need therapeutic services should they be suffering from unwanted symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, persistent guilt, reliving the event, panic attacks, etc. Or for those who have lost a loved one, if their grief response is much longer than would be expected and they are still experiencing lingering feelings such as emotional numbness, intense loneliness or identity disruption, then certainly a psychotherapeutic intervention would be appropriate.

But an important takeaway here is also that resilience, not maladaptive responses, is the norm for people. Although the magnitude of the adverse event varies, all of us have experienced things that have negatively affected our well-being, from losing a job or getting divorced to having a miscarriage or dealing with a difficult medical condition. These are common, yet stressful experiences, and many of us are able to surmount these challenges without therapy or other mental health services.

Of course, as I've already said, mental health services provide invaluable help to many individuals in genuine need. But in K-12 schools, redirecting students' attention to their strengths and skillsets will better prepare them for the unrelenting changes and unpredictability of life. Although they may be vulnerable, dependent, and undeveloped, students will be better served by envisioning themselves as capable, self-empowered individuals. This is what is needed to promote students' growth, learning, and resilience in a world where so many aspects of their lives may be out of their control.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Miriam Thompson, Ph.D., is an assistant teaching professor in the Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Illustration by Elijah Brinley, age 5 (used with permission).



"Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States" by Howard Chandler Christy, 1942. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.



Teaching Past a Constitutional Crisis

A less limited approach to teaching indeterminate law

BY NOAH C. CHAUVIN

Students come to law school eager to learn what the law is. They quickly discover that in our federated common law system, there often are no easy answers. Instead, they must read prior judicial decisions and attempt to glean from those cases legal rules that can be applied by analogy to new disputes. Still, as their first semester goes on, they come to realize that law has a rhythm, and even if there are fewer hard-and-fast rules than they anticipated, there are at least general principles, developed over centuries, that they can apply to the facts of a given case. And then they get to constitutional law.

As one might imagine, courses on constitutional law introduce students to the various modes of interpreting the Constitution. Issues such as the relative powers of the three branches of the

federal government, the powers of federal vs. state governments, and the rights of individuals to due process and equal protection are all subjected to diverse, nuanced and often conflicting analyses. Indeed, more than the law of torts or property or contracts, constitutional doctrine is a morass of different rules, standards, and modes of interpretation that has shifted dramatically over time and frequently lacks an internal logic.

The Constitution is arcane, and while it is not infinitely malleable, there are often a range of reasonable interpretations of almost any constitutional provision. Supreme Court cases interpreting the Constitution regularly conflict with one another, and the court has often been only too willing to discard past precedent where it

would lead to a result undesirable to a majority of the justices.

All of this is compounded by the fact that the work of the federal courts comprises only a fraction of constitutional law: Congress, the executive branch, state and local governments, and the people are all constitutional actors, too. The result is a course that is singularly frustrating to students who have painstakingly learned to apply common law reasoning, because values and historical circumstances do much more to dictate the outcome of constitutional disputes than any discernable legal principle.

This uncertainty makes constitutional law challenging to teach even

at a good time; and as many constitutional law professors will tell you, now is not a good time. Under the stewardship of Chief Justice John Roberts, the Supreme Court has evinced a willingness to overturn or disregard longstanding precedents on issues such as abortion rights, affirmative action, and gun rights, to name just a few.

One professor told *The New York Times* that she started crying while preparing her syllabus because she “couldn’t figure out how any of [the court’s recent doctrine] makes sense.”

Claims that the Supreme Court has created a “crisis” in teaching constitutional law have inspired a wave of scholarship from constitutional law professors. As many of these scholars have noted, the crisis in constitutional law is hardly a new phenomenon: The criticisms liberal law professors make of the court today—that it is lawless, policy-driven, and out of step with public opinion—could have been (and were) made by abolitionists in the mid-19th century, progressives in the *Lochner* era during the early 20th century, and conservatives during the Warren Court in 1950s and ‘60s. For this reason, Marquette University political science professor Patrick Sobkowski refers to the challenge of conveying

clear doctrinal rules as “the enduring crisis in teaching constitutional law.”

Constitutional law teachers have proposed a range of solutions to this problem, from “teach[ing] constitutional law as a historical narrative” that has developed over time, to training students to make legal arguments applying various modes of constitutional interpretation “so well that they are indistinguishable from the arguments that would be made by those who actually subscribe to that methodology,” and even encouraging students to assess “the ultimate questions of power” and “what futures” a decision creates. While the specific approaches vary, all agree that the proper role of a constitutional law professor is

not to impose a particular set of values on students, but rather to equip them with the tools necessary to make solid constitutional arguments.

All of this is fine as far as it goes. Effectively teaching students this subject requires introducing them to the reality that legal doctrine can only explain so much constitutional reasoning.

I worry, however, that

we do our students a disservice if we introduce them to the limits of constitutional “law” as such without helping them develop the tools to reframe those limits in a more optimistic light. That is why in my classes, I encourage my students to view the doctrinal uncertainty that creates viable arguments on all sides of an issue not as a hindrance to effective lawyering, but as an opportunity.

As I explain to them, doctrinal uncertainty is good for legal employment. Partially, of course, this is a flip remark about job security, but it also hints at something more fundamental. As the University of Chicago Law School’s William Baude suggests, “What really drives constitutional argument at the highest level of our system is not three-part tests, but more fundamental principles.” If Baude is correct—if constitutional law is ultimately a reflection of values—then students should embrace

More than the law of torts or property or contracts, constitutional doctrine is a morass of different rules, standards, and modes of interpretation that has shifted dramatically over time and frequently lacks an internal logic.

doctrinal uncertainty as an opportunity to make the law reflect their values.

There are at least four distinct advantages to this approach. First, it is fundamentally hopeful, in the sense that it encourages students to view themselves as constitutional actors who have a meaningful opportunity to effect change, rather than as passive participants subject to the whims of a capricious and dogmatic Supreme Court. Moreover, a hopeful message about values encourages students to consider themselves as part of the broader constitutional project, allowing them to develop more common ground with each other, their professors, and the broader legal community.

Second, emphasizing the opportunity that values-driven constitutional decision-making creates could help increase the legitimacy of the Supreme Court. As the late Harvard University Law School professor Richard Fallon explained, two different but important aspects of the court’s legitimacy are moral legitimacy (*should* people treat the court’s decisions with respect and obedience?) and sociological legitimacy (*do* people treat the court’s decisions with respect and obedience?). If students are trained to view the court’s values-driven decision-making as part of the iterative process through which we seek to structure a better and more just society, that could help bolster the court’s moral legitimacy.

This is particularly true where professors emphasize that on many contested constitutional issues there are often a range of values that could be legitimately pursued. Moreover, to the extent constitutional law professors have the power to shape their students’ attitudes about the court, as some argue, framing values-driven decision-making in a positive light could help lend the court more sociological legitimacy.

Third, this approach encourages students to develop the practical skills they will need to be

effective constitutional lawyers. Just because constitutional law is often values-driven does not mean there is no doctrine. Training students on how values intersect with constitutional principles arms them to effectively advocate for clients—including in circumstances in which effective advocacy requires arguing for changes in constitutional law.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, encouraging students to consider how their own values can be reflected in constitutional decision-making helps ensure that constitutional law professors will not—wittingly or otherwise—impose their own views about what the law ought to be on their students. Because there is only so much time in the semester, professors must necessarily curate their course materials and topics. And in doing so, it is impossible for them to avoid making value-laden judgments about what to include—and more importantly, what to leave out. Centering students’ values—and the meaningful possibility that those values could come to dominate constitutional thinking—helps to de-emphasize the professor’s biases, encouraging more robust classroom discussions and increasing the perception of fairness.

The “crisis” in teaching constitutional law is unlikely to abate while our republic endures. Indeed, the reality is that “constitutional law” is a verb, not a noun; and constitutional law professors will become happier, more effective, and more inspiring teachers if they learn to embrace that fact—and all the opportunity it contains.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Noah C. Chauvin is an associate professor of law at the University of Oklahoma College of Law.

The Self-Imposed Limits on Social Work



"A Shepherd with a Flock of Sheep" by Charles Emile Jacques, 1880. Meisterdrucke, Public Domain.

Lack of viewpoint diversity is crippling the study and practice of social work

BY ARNOLD CANTÚ

"When all think alike, no one thinks very much."
—Walter Lippman

My field of social work finds itself at an interesting juncture. To the general public, it is typically seen as a profession geared toward helping people from all walks of life. Recently, however, it has been all in on endorsing and conveying a particular flavor of truth and social justice born out of one side of the United States political two-party system.

Take, for example, the standards promulgated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which are the foundation of all accredited undergraduate and graduate social work programs. Even a cursory perusal of this document reveals that it is infused with "critical social justice" rhetoric and terminology. What's more, the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics, used to guide all social work practitioners

in the field working with clients, has not remained untouched by the influence of critical social justice ideology, as evidenced by its emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion. Indeed, NASW's "Standards for Clinical Social Work in Social Work Practice," used to guide social workers within the mental health profession in particular, was recently revised to reflect a similar political leaning.

Social workers are being trained in an academic ethos that remains ideologically tilted to the left, both among social work faculty and the professoriate at large. And yet, these same people are serving a politically diverse country.

The NASW standards evidently emboldened a pair of researchers at my former university to conduct a study in which white and male undergraduate students were purposefully made to feel unsafe, resulting in a Department of Education

Office of Civil Rights complaint. This is indicative of larger trends, given that a highly ranked social work journal had accepted for publication this research that documents what can only be described as "re-education" and "struggle session" pedagogical practices in teaching university students.

All of this matters because the role the social work profession plays is both large and societally important. For instance, according to the CSWE's Directory of Accredited Programs, there are nearly 1,000 social work programs in the United States educating at least 150,000 students. Meanwhile, the U.S. Bureau of Labor estimates that there are more than 800,000 practicing social workers. Social workers provide assistance in areas ranging from child welfare and geriatrics to health care and support for people with developmental disabilities. Moreover, social workers comprise over 500,000 of the behavioral health workforce—meaning that if you step into the office of a psychotherapist, there's a good chance that you're meeting with a social worker.

Social workers are being trained in an academic ethos that remains ideologically tilted to the left, both among social work faculty and the professoriate at large. And yet, these same people are serving a politically diverse country. For example, a July 2025 Pew Research poll suggests 46% and 45% of Americans lean Republican and Democratic, respectively. And in the 2024 presidential election, the Republican candidate received 49.8% of the popular vote, compared to 48.3% for the Democratic candidate.

In his 2021 book *Why It's OK To Speak Your Mind*, the philosopher Hrishikesh Joshi introduces the idea of the epistemic commons. Described

as the shared "stock of evidence, ideas, and perspectives that are alive for a given community," Joshi argues that the epistemic commons is a vital resource to ensure groups of people can more effectively pursue truth while addressing biases and blind spots. It necessitates viewpoint diversity, encouragement of dissenting and alternative views, challenges on consensus, and a group-wide commitment to protecting the commons. Crucially, Joshi contends there is an ethical responsibility for shielding the commons to safeguard against social pressures to conform.

For social work, I believe that the ethical imperative in maintaining our epistemic commons is doubly important—both for the health of the field as a discipline of study as well as to better equip budding practitioners for working with clients from all walks of life. And yet, thanks to critical social justice ideology, the overall tenor of contemporary social work education strikes me as severely limited in scope. It is focused more and more on engaging in proselytizing practices, such as continued efforts to "purge" the social work field of what many perceive as the presence of ableism, neoliberalism, and white supremacy. This academic ethos is antithetical to how I was trained in my master's program just a decade ago when the emphasis was on respecting differences and empowering clients while employing a strengths-based approach—ideals that still remain in the NASW's Code of Ethics and that, until very recently, social work textbooks have written about.

Instead, elites within the profession employ social justice talking points as a form of status signaling. Some of those talking points promote beliefs that benefit the upper class and inadvertently inflict harm on lower classes while maintaining distorted socio-political narratives in moralizing and conformist ways. This tends to occur in an academic environment in which emotional safety is prioritized over real learning and other higher education values, and group identities and divisiveness are accentuated over universalism, cohesion, and genuine inclusion. This is a culture arguably bolstered by professional organizations' (e.g., CSWE, NASW) standards and policies providing permission for people in the academy to tailor their meanings to push a particular socio-political and ideological hegemonic agenda.

If this doesn't change, social work will remain an über-biased encapsulated bubble of oil floating amidst a sea of diverse socio-political beliefs and values. Indeed, if the status quo remains in place, I am especially worried about the long-term risk of producing more and more ideologically intolerant practitioners in an academic ethos defined by group polarization, likely in the name of conformity, obedience, or by virtue of being gaslit. Unfortunately, however, instead of calling for a rethinking or reassessment of these recent trends, many scholars in the field are advocating for the social work profession to double down on ideas like dismantling capitalistic and ableist "collective structures of oppression" in order to counter perceived conservative existential threats.

Collectively, this begs the question of what will be the likely impact if the stark discrepancy is not reconciled to ensure that the profession is more sensitive to and inclusive of the beliefs, values, politics, and experiences of people from *all* walks of life? Social work can't be choosy about what *kinds* of diversity and inclusivity the profession tolerates and advocates for—or, for that matter, what kind of ideas, questions, and perspectives are worth exploring and seriously considering in a university setting, even if they go against the grain. If this incongruity is not addressed, the likely long-term impact cannot be understated: Social work risks being considered an undisciplined discipline with increasingly limited influence and, most importantly, negligible social utility.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Arnold Cantú is a clinical social worker and psychotherapist residing in northern Colorado with experience in school social work, private practice, community mental health, and primary care behavioral health.

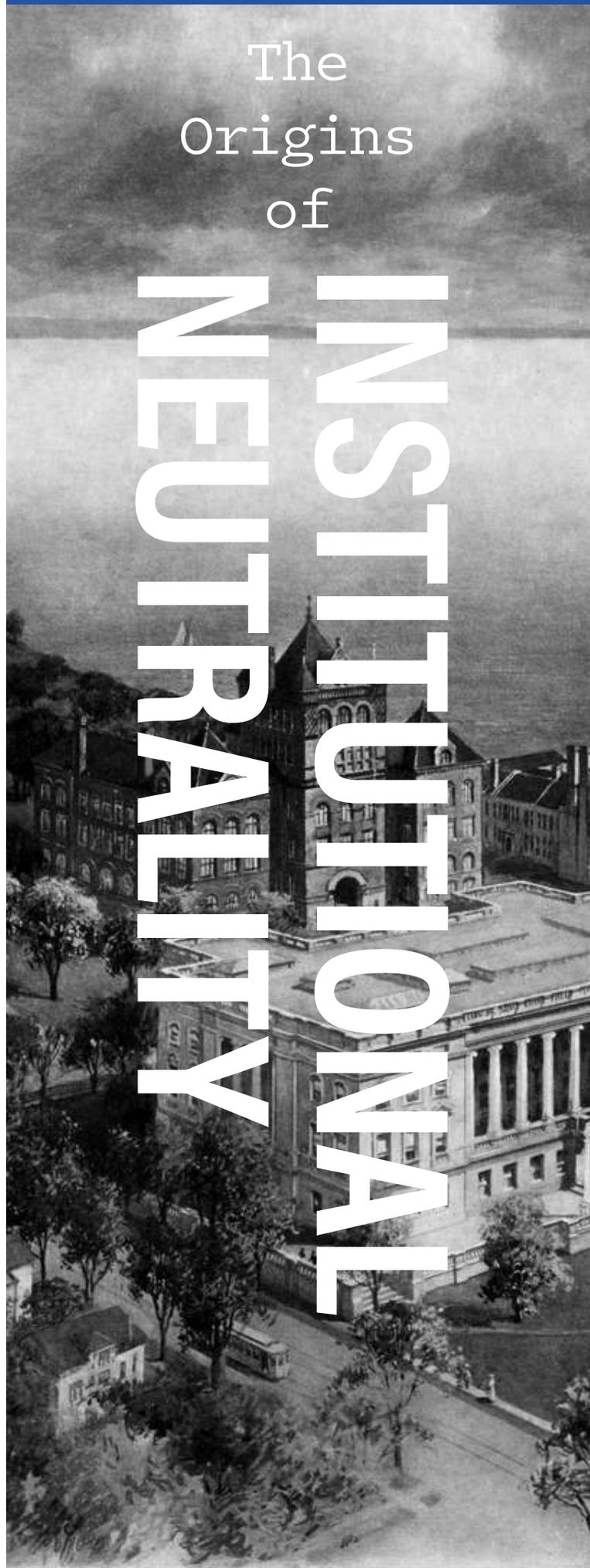


Photo of UW-Madison by Nichols Harley DeWitt, 1907. UW Archives, Public Domain.

The University of Wisconsin's 1894 declaration on academic freedom is just as relevant today as it was when it was first issued

BY JOHN K. WILSON

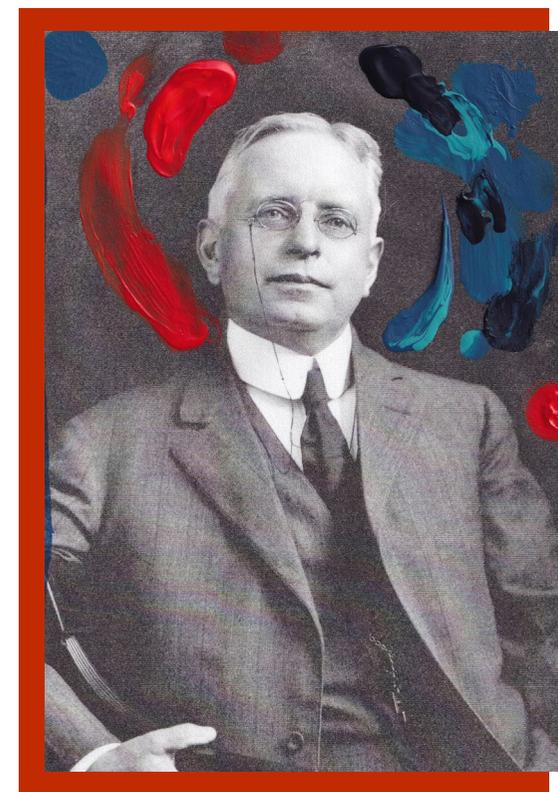
On Sept. 18, 1894, the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents issued the greatest declaration in defense of academic freedom ever made by a university—an achievement even more remarkable because it was the first statement espousing academic freedom ever made by an American college, and one that introduced the concept of institutional neutrality.

The declaration arose out of a controversy involving liberal economics professor Richard Ely, a highly esteemed scholar and co-founder of the American Economic Association. Oliver Wells, the state superintendent of public instruction, denounced Ely in a letter to *The Nation* magazine, accusing him of “justifying and encouraging” strikes and “practicing” boycotts. Wells also accused Ely of being a secret socialist, writing: “Only the careful student will discover their utopian, impracticable and pernicious doctrines, but their general acceptance would furnish a seeming moral justification of attack on life and property....”

Because Wells was also an ex-officio member of the Board of Regents, and his attacks drew nationwide attention, the Board of Regents felt obliged to create a subcommittee to investigate Ely. Ely was a scholar who studied socialism with a critical eye, and many of the specific accusations made by Wells turned out to be untrue. Ultimately the regents refused Wells' demand for them to investigate everything Ely had ever written. So it would have been easy for the Board of Regents to simply exonerate Ely against these unproven accusations and quietly dismiss the controversy.

Instead, the Board of Regents issued a report on the case (secretly written by the university's president, Charles Kendall Adams) that defended free thought in the strongest possible terms:

“As Regents of a university with over a hundred instructors supported by nearly two millions of people who hold a vast diversity of views regarding the great questions which at present agitate the human mind, we could not for a moment think of recommending the dismissal or even the criticism of a teacher even if some of his opinions should, in some quarters, be regarded as visionary.”



Richard T. Ely circa 1910, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

It was an extraordinary declaration, one that made “diversity of views” the foundation for a university's neutrality and linked that neutrality to absolute academic freedom. As a neutral institution, the university could not punish a professor or even engage in “criticism” of his “visionary” opinions because to do so would require taking a side on political matters. Academic freedom was not just an individual right—it was a fundamental obligation for an educational institution that had to permit controversial

views in order to serve the diverse people who supported it.

The notion that universities served all the people, and therefore could not silence any voice, represented the strongest ideal of institutional neutrality ever put forth in academia—a goal so essential that even institutional criticism of

The notion that universities served all the people, and therefore could not silence any voice, represented the strongest ideal of institutional neutrality ever put forth in academia.

teachers could never be considered. The regents rejected any limits on academic freedom: “In all lines of academic investigation, it is of the utmost importance that the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead.”

What’s more, the report refuted censorship of controversial views as antithetical to teaching: “Such a course would be equivalent to saying that no professor should teach anything which is not accepted by everybody as true. This would cut our curriculum down to very small proportions.”

Wisconsin’s stand on institutional neutrality also was politically useful—by disclaiming any power to dismiss or denounce controversial professors, the regents sought to protect themselves from political intrusion and further demands for investigations. While most debates about institutional neutrality today focus on the minor question of statement neutrality, the Wisconsin declaration recognized the core meaning of academic neutrality, that universities must not punish or denounce anyone for their beliefs.

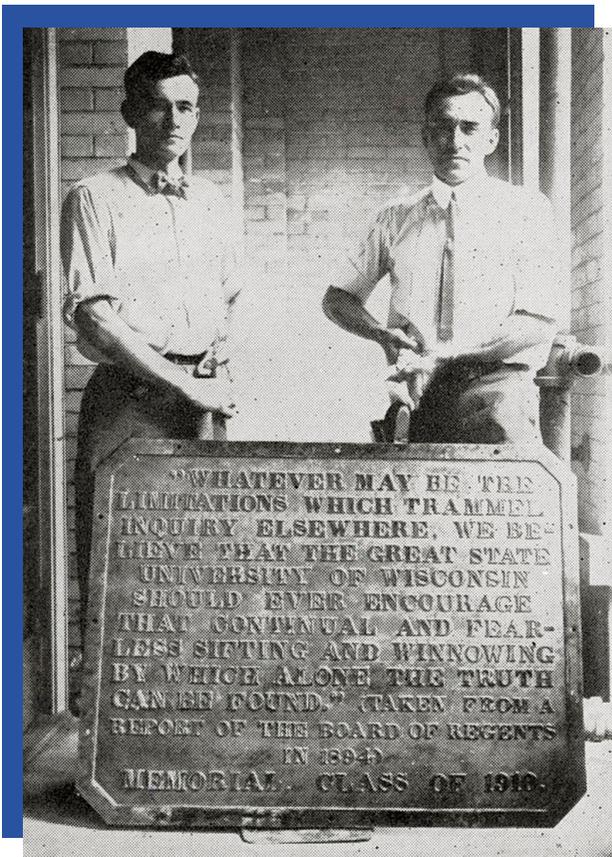
The Wisconsin declaration is remembered today in part because of another academic freedom controversy. Edward Ross’ dismissal from Stanford in 1900 stands as one of the legendary moments in the history of academic freedom. Ironically, after his firing, Ross ended up at the University of Wisconsin. But in

1910, anarchist Emma Goldman visited Madison and was invited by students in the Socialist Club to speak. After Ross saw a woman tearing down posters for Goldman’s speech, he told his class about the talk: “I take no stock in philosophical anarchism, but I do believe in the principle of free speech.”

Once again, critics demanded Ross’ firing, and though the regents did not punish him, they did not publicly defend him as they had with Ely. The students of the Class of 1910 decided to remind the regents of their prior noble words by presenting them with an inscribed plaque quoting their 1894 statement. The board preferred their words to be historic rather than metallic, and declined the gift. But the students were not easily deterred and launched a campaign with ads on Madison cable cars and with the support of newspapers across the state, demanding to be heard. The board finally agreed to accept the plaque, and today it

remains a literal part of the foundations of the University of Wisconsin, mounted outside Bascom Hall on campus.

The students chose the evocative phrase that concluded the Wisconsin declaration for their plaque: “Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.” It was a noble statement for freedom, and a nice way to trash talk other colleges.



The plaque honoring the 1894 declaration. 1910. UW Archives. Public Domain.

While some might misinterpret “sifting and winnowing” as an argument for censorship, the true message of the phrase is that professors and students must do the sifting of ideas and discover the correct theories without political intrusion or prohibitions. The concept of “sifting and winnowing” requires allowing bad ideas as an essential part of the intellectual process—you don’t sift something that’s already pure.

The 1894 declaration inspired resistance when academic freedom was threatened at the University of Wisconsin. A century later in 1996, UW-Madison professors invoked it when they created the Committee for Academic Freedom and Rights and overturned a faculty speech code. In 2015, the Wisconsin Board of Regents responded to concerns about growing censorship of offensive speech by issuing a statement that quoted the 1894 declaration’s “sifting and winnowing” clause, and reiterated its support for academic freedom and free expression, albeit with some exceptions made to “restrict expression.”

Ely wrote in 1938 about “that famous pronouncement of academic freedom which has been a beacon light in higher education in this country, not only for Wisconsin, but for all similar institutions, from that day to this.” Unfortunately, the words of the declaration that weren’t emblazoned on a plaque have been largely forgotten. “Sifting and winnowing” rather than “diversity of views” and “absolutely free” became the legacy of the 1894 declaration. The Wisconsin arguments for institutional neutrality as the basis for academic freedom have disappeared over time.

Reexamining the 1894 Wisconsin declaration can help clarify academia’s core values of academic freedom, truth, institutional neutrality, and intellectual diversity. Absolute freedom for academic inquiry is not a naive ideal, but an

essential part of a free university. Truth is not a fixed object decreed by authorities, but an elusive goal that requires the full freedom to consider and express ideas that can be sifted and winnowed. Institutional neutrality means that universities must refuse to punish or condemn controversial ideas. And “diversity of views” justifies not political intrusion and administrative compulsion, but the liberty to explore any views without repression.

While most debates about institutional neutrality today focus on the minor question of statement neutrality, the Wisconsin declaration recognized the core meaning of academic neutrality, that universities must not punish or denounce anyone for their beliefs.

In the 131 years since the Wisconsin regents defended the freedom of a controversial professor, we have witnessed growth in legal rights, policy protections, and organizations devoted to defending academic freedom. But our concept of academic freedom has narrowed in some ways, with a growing number of exceptions and caveats now accompanying every ideal. The 1894 declaration by the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents provides

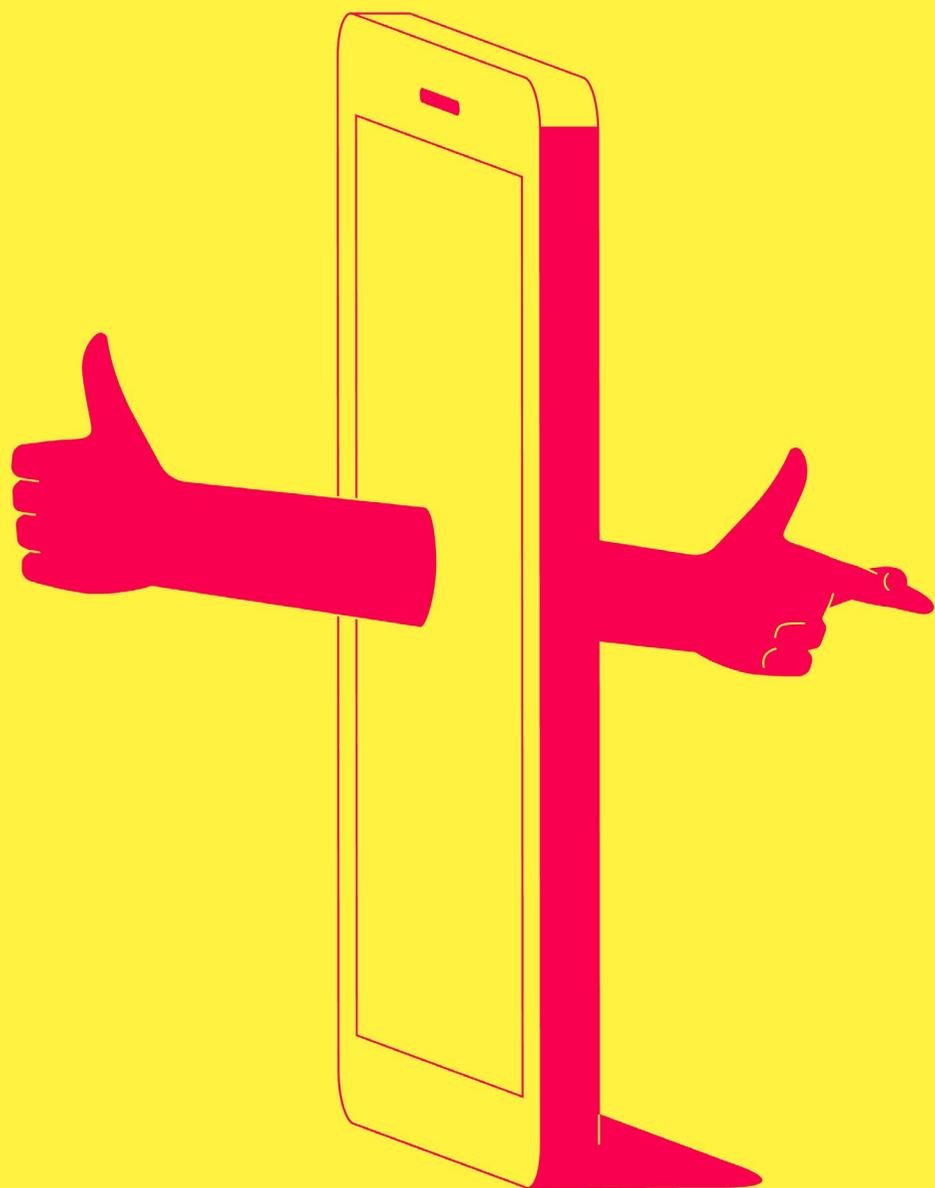
not just a look back at the early history of academic freedom, but also offers a reminder that powerful and courageous institutional defenses of free expression can be found in academia’s distant past.

While a more recent academic freedom movement has pressured colleges to adopt the University of Chicago’s Kalven Report and Chicago Principles, no similar movement has arisen calling for universities to embrace the eloquent and powerful Wisconsin declaration. The 1894 Wisconsin report is such a clear and concise statement of uncompromising academic freedom in the name of neutrality that it seems unlikely that any university would have the courage to adopt its principles today.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

John K Wilson, Ph.D., is a writer at AcademeBlog.org and the author of eight books, including “President Trump Unveiled: Exposing the Bigoted Billionaire.”

Just the Facts



Zhitkov Boris / Shutterstock.com

A new book argues that the “weaponization of expertise” by elites has fueled widespread distrust among ordinary Americans

BY THOMAS S. HUDDLE

Mike Coughlin, tavern owner in Carol Stream, Illinois, defied Gov. JB Pritzker’s order to close his restaurant in November of 2020. If he closed again, he said, the restaurant would go out of business. Pritzker had closed down Illinois restaurants at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, had re-opened them in the summer, and was now closing them again. In the face of widespread protest like Coughlin’s, the governor defended his actions by going on TV with a University of Chicago infectious disease specialist, who claimed that “there was no way around” the shutdown order. According to this expert, a restaurant could be safe one moment and a “superspreader event” the next, if someone infected with COVID were to walk in.

The closing order would remain in force through early February 2021—a triumph of science over politics, one might suppose. Only it wasn’t—as Jacob Russell and Dennis Patterson argue in *The Weaponization of Expertise: How Elites Fuel Populism*. In fact, it was one more example of politicians and experts behaving badly, dismissing very reasonable lay skepticism of expert opinion—expert opinion that extended well beyond what the state of knowledge about the effects of quarantine on COVID could possibly warrant and wielded by politicians to selectively shut down some forms of association while leaving others alone.

Russell and Patterson, who are both professors at Rutgers University Law School, taught a course entitled “Populism and the Law” for three years, out of which the ideas in this book emerged. As they and their students learned about populist opposition to political and cultural establishments, it became clear to them that populists often get a bad rap. Popular skepticism of establishment orthodoxy and expert opinion, far from being a sign of ignorance or anti-intellectualism, is often warranted and sometimes closer to reality than

what is being put forth by the experts. And the experts, rather than carefully and impartially bringing their expertise to policymaking, often disguise nakedly political judgments as expertise.

The book draws most of its examples from American policy responses to the COVID epidemic, but its analysis extends back 40 years to British nuclear scientists overplaying their hand in predicting levels of radioactive contamination after the Chernobyl disaster. In case after case, we see elites and experts overreaching, populists resisting, and elites doubling down on their error. It should be no surprise, the authors suggest, that

there has been a breakdown in trust between establishment elites and the broader population in Europe and North America in the past 10-15 years. And the fault lies squarely with the elites.

This is, of course, a contrarian position, and the authors take considerable trouble to rebut many of the most vocal critics of populism and science “denialism.” Skepticism of establishment consensus on climate change, vaccines, Brexit, the origin of

COVID, and other hot button issues, these critics suggest, amounts to a rejection of “facts” and truth in favor of conspiracy. Public intellectuals such as Jonathan Rauch, Naomi Oreskes, and Cass Sunstein each come in for sustained criticism for their overconfidence in expert impartiality and for presuming the possibility of technocratic solutions to political disputes. The elite error, the authors contend, is in supposing that facts are obvious and readily ascertainable by experts; that they, the elites, have succeeded in ascertaining them; and that the resulting policy prescriptions should therefore simply be accepted by the rest of us.

On the contrary, say Russell and Patterson: Far from being immune from values, facts are *born* in value frameworks, as we seek and find the facts we need to support our values. And our “facts,”

THE WEAPONIZATION OF EXPERTISE

HOW ELITES FUEL POPULISM

JACOB HALE RUSSELL | DENNIS PATTERSON

whether factual or not, are far more resistant to empirical disconfirmation than our theories. To drive home this point, the authors quote Stanford University legal scholar Mark Kelman:

“People lose faith in their theories because they’re incredibly intellectually incoherent. They fall back on beliefs about the empirical world that are fairly badly grounded, but they can’t be shaken out of them regardless of the level of proof. I think this is a fairly general tendency of people with strong political beliefs.”

Russell and Patterson seek to complicate a common view of how knowledge informs policy: Knowledge, it is presumed, is built up from facts grounded in experience out of which issue valid prescriptions when combined with values. If we start by getting our facts right, values held in common will lead to the right policies—hence the vogue of elite fact-checking and of labeling opponents as purveyors of “misinformation.” They argue that our actual modes of proceeding are far removed from this common view.

Far from simply emerging from experience, facts are constructed from experience as shaped by values and ideology. We see the world not as “some kind of prepolitical neutral playing ground consisting of bare-bones facts, nothing more,” but instead through the lens of our prior understanding of how the world works and what in that world is important. What are or are not “facts,” that is, assertions that are true by virtue of the way the world is, is context-dependent and often reflective of the reaction of authoritative members of a community to a data point, as philosopher Richard Rorty would argue. Furthermore, it is important to remember that

in science, facts are always provisional—open to revision as our scientific knowledge evolves.

Rather than seeking to shut down debates purportedly over facts but actually over facts “embedded in cultural values about which there are genuine, good faith disagreements,” the authors argue that elites would do better to exhibit a little humility. Unpacking disagreements about the benefits or harms of school closures during COVID or the genuineness of Hunter Biden’s laptop might actually generate light rather than heat, as the contending politics and values implicit in opposing judgments of fact are laid bare. What’s more, lay “common sense” may sometimes have something to offer to experts. The authors are not optimistic that elites will take their advice, prone to “intellectual tyranny” as they are—the

presumption that doubt and dissent reveal error at best and, likely, bad faith in those with the temerity to question expertise.

Russell and Patterson are sharp observers and their targets are vulnerable. Unsurprisingly, however, they are not themselves infallible. In explaining the rise of populism, they give too much credence to doomsayers about increasing inequality in the American economy. While the problem is real, urban affairs writer Joel Kotkin’s argument that a “new class of serfs” is being created in the American economy, cited approvingly by the authors, is hyperbole. Economic growth of the last 40 years has been shared much more widely than is now commonly supposed, as economist Russ Roberts recently pointed out in an essay in Medium. Still, their broader indictment of elites for supposing that expertise can settle what are actually political disputes is persuasive—even though there are many who will not be persuaded.

Experts, rather than carefully and impartially bringing their expertise to policymaking, often disguise nakedly political judgments as expertise.

This book is a salvo in an ongoing battle. It joins other notable exposés of recent expert folly, such as David Zweig’s *An Abundance of Caution: American Schools, the Virus, and a Story of Bad Decisions* and Stephen Macedo and Frances Lee’s *In COVID’s Wake: How our Politics Failed Us*, both from 2025. The experts, however, are not backing down. To many in the public health community and to stalwart defenders of expertise, such as Atlantic Monthly staff writer Tom Nichols, it may be that some mistakes were made by experts in authority during COVID, but overall the expert record was good and the “facts” were the facts.

Rather than seeking to shut down debates purportedly over facts but actually over facts “embedded in cultural values about which there are genuine, good faith disagreements,” the authors argue that elites would do better to exhibit a little humility.

As the COVID Crisis Group noted in 2023, a key predictor of deaths in each state was “the share of people that voted for President Trump in the 2020 election.” All we need to do better next time is to give deference to “reality-based understandings” rather than to Trumpian “comorbidity,” as Nichols recently wrote. With attitudes like these still the norm rather than the exception among elites, Russell, Patterson, and their allies have quite an uphill fight ahead of them.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Thomas S. Huddle is a professor emeritus at the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s Heersink School of Medicine.

Support Open Inquiry with a Gift to HxA

Heterodox Academy is leading the way in campus reform and ensuring that open inquiry and viewpoint diversity are at the heart of higher education and campus culture.



Please consider making a gift to support our work!

inquisitive is made possible by the Mike & Sofia Segal Foundation

inquisitive Core Staff

David Masci, J.D. – *Managing Editor*
Elizabeth Miles, D.Phil & Amy Stern – *Copy Editors*
Janelle Delia – *Graphic Designer*
Nicole Barbaro, Ph.D. – *Director of Communications*

Supporting HxA Staff

John Tomasi, D.Phil – *President*
Michael Regnier – *Executive Director*
Malik Peacock – *Development Manager*

Printed by

BRD Printing (*Lansing, Michigan*)

Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND
The text of this issue is licensed under Creative Commons. All images used with permission.

Cover Illustration

“The Monk by the Sea” by Caspar David Friedrich, 1808. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Call for Proposals

inquisitive welcomes proposals for submissions on the theme of “trust.” The deadline is May 12, 2026. For details, see inquisitivemag.org.



Become a member of Heterodox Academy



The Limits of Trust

The academic community has itself to blame for some of the loss of public trust

BY JASON STEFFEN

Admiral Andrew Cunningham once said of the British Royal Navy, “It takes the Navy three years to build a ship. It will take 300 years to build a new tradition.” Gaining trust is harder than breaking it, and public trust, in particular, should not be trifled with. Over the last decade, trust in science, and academia more generally, has eroded substantially, partly if not largely due to internal problems.

Take, for example, recent revelations about Oliver Sacks, the famous neurologist who, over his career, wrote many bestselling books for both expert and general audiences alike. Hospitals and medical schools used Sacks’ highly cited works for treating patients with various mental health issues. Unfortunately, many of the cases he outlined in his books included material fabrications—putting words in people’s mouths, giving them skills they didn’t have, and assigning them feelings and intentions they didn’t share. I say “unfortunately” here as a euphemism for “in gross violation of scientific and personal ethics.”

Sacks justified his actions as being “for a higher purpose,” rather than for shallow reasons like fame or attention. No, his exaggerations came from an impulse that was, in his words, “purer” and “deeper.”

While Sacks clearly struggled with internal demons throughout his life, he should have, from the beginning, been held to account for his practices.

Today, as a growing body of cases indicates, there are many examples of academics overselling their findings, misstating or hiding facts, exaggerating consequences, using their professional positions to push partisanship, and falsely attributing beliefs and motives to their allies and their enemies—all for the “greater good.”

American academics may not suffer many serious consequences from our periodic foolish vainglory—at least not yet. But we can certainly erode the public trust by advocating for, or providing cover for, such practices to the point that our institutional, financial, and political support collapses. The current loss of trust didn’t come from nowhere, and much of the responsibility to rebuild it lies with us.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Jason Steffen, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of astronomy and physics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and a member of the science team for NASA’s Kepler mission.