

Doug Sprei:

Welcome to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on pivotal issues, trends, and leadership in higher education. I'm Doug Sprei, and today we'll serve up an interview I conducted recently with Deondra Rose – Associate Professor of Public Policy, Political Science, and History at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Professor Rose is also the Director of Polis: Center for Politics at Duke University, and her research and teaching interests include higher education policy, American Political Development, political behavior, identity politics, and inequality. She's a brilliant scholar, thinker and leader who commands the respect and admiration of students, faculty and staff leadership across Duke University and beyond into American higher ed.

My first conversations with Professor Rose took place early in the spring semester of 2022, as we worked together to organize a Braver Angels student debate that she wanted to launch on campus for Duke University students. On April 6, I flew down to Raleigh Durham and chaired the debate that night. What you're about to hear is a conversation we had in Professor Rose's office, just a half hour before we went downstairs in the Sanford School building to launch the Braver Angels debate.

Doug Sprei:

I'm really honored to be here at Duke University with you and really want to thank you for having us come down here to do a Braver Angels Debate tonight, and I wanted to ask you to unpack the thinking that went into having us come down here, how that fits into the vision that you have for Polis, the work you're trying to do, and the kinds of experiences you're trying to enable your students to have before they graduate, you know? I mean, we feel our program is hopefully supporting the vision and the ongoing work of faculty members like yourself, and I want to learn more about how that might play into your world at Duke, in terms of your own professional views on this stuff.

Deondra Rose:

Well, Doug, thank you so much for joining us, and many things for the opportunity to chat before we launch the program this evening. As you mentioned, I am a faculty here at the Sanford School. I'm the Director of Polis, the Center for Politics. I'm a political scientist, and as a political scientist, I'm a political historian, so I spend a lot of time thinking about how policy makers have used programs to basically enhance democracy and to create greater equity for people who are historically minoritized and marginalized in our society. One of the things I spend a lot of time thinking about as a political scientist who focuses on higher education policy and questions, big questions that we encounter as people in the higher educational arena is, "What are we doing with this tremendous opportunity to engage with people who are at formative moments in their personal development, in their social development, in their political development, and relatedly, in their development as citizens?"

I think to my mind, civic education is critical education, and it's more than just helping people understand the nuts and bolts of government and how to vote and how to register, it's also really helping to make a case for why engaging in public life is worthwhile. I spend a lot of time thinking through questions like that in my own research, in the work that we do at Polis, and in my teaching. For

Polis, our theme this year is discourse for democracy, and we've been thinking very seriously about how we, as a Center for Politics can help equip all Duke students, whether they love politics, whether they hate politics or whether they haven't really given it much thought, to help them acquire the knowledge and the tools and the opportunities to engage in exercises where they can really develop citizenship skills, opportunities to learn what I describe as exploring and finding the on-ramps to politics, so figuring out how to vote, figuring out if you want to run for office, what are some things to think about? Maybe get some campaign training, but also how to engage in authentic, transformative, generative discussion about political topics and to engage in speech that includes you and all of us as your full and authentic self, and that also leaves those of us who engage feeling like we're up for engaging more, not that we've been so traumatized that we need to go and retreat from that type of discourse. That's what we've been really trying to figure out how to do.

The work that you are doing at Braver Angels and ACTA and BridgeUSA has been ... You all are renowned in our academic community and beyond, and we've heard about you for many years and people have always said, "See if you can connect and get them to come to Duke," so we are honored and so grateful to have you here with us today, Doug, and really excited about the program and grateful for the work that you and your team are doing.

Doug Sprei:

I appreciate that. I want to learn a little bit more about you, so take me back in time to your kind of formative years. You just recently became a tenured professor. Congratulations. That's incredible.

Deondra Rose:

Thank you.

Doug Sprei:

But what got you here? How did you navigate your way to doing the work you're doing today? What was the map like for you that you followed?

Deondra Rose:

Education was always very important to me, so when I was a kid, my grandmother actually went back to school as an adult and she got an associate's degree in nursing and became a registered nurse in her 40's, so my earliest memories are sitting with my grandmother and doing homework and studying, so for me, education was always very, very important and valued, and it was in my family. As I started to move through grade school, I found a real interest in politics, and some of it started off in a very juvenile way. Like I was the elected representative for my class in student council and I started at first grade and progressed all the way up through high school, and I loved it. I loved just the idea of being able to connect with your peers and to get a sense of what people have an interest in and to find ways to make that happen. The older I got, the more I started to appreciate not just the politics side of kind of persuading people to join your team and to join you and pursuing some goals, but I think really seriously about those goals and how you can use institutional resources when given the opportunity to make change, to make a difference, to address some of the problems that you might see as ripe for consideration or solving, and so for me, policy emerged as something that I was really keen to learn more about and to understand.

It was especially when I was in high school, like in the early aughts, paying a lot of attention to who had a seat at the table in terms of the political landscape and who didn't, whose voices were amplified and whose presence was magnified, and whose participation was more muted and whose representation was more frequently not seen or absent, so I started really thinking about like, "How can we address these challenges of unequal political representation and engagement, and what can we do in terms of mobilizing people or in terms of creating spaces and institutions, or creating policies that provide opportunity or access to opportunities?" I think all of those things put together have led me to a wonderful career where I can think seriously about how institutions like Duke University can think seriously about addressing some of the major problems in our political landscape. One of those major problems you know, Doug, is just the lack of generative political discourse, the fact that our political environment is so acrimonious. For so many people, it's just not appealing. It's actually something that leaves people feeling a bit traumatized and in retreat, and so like so many of us, we're concerned because being able to participate in real political dialogue, authentic political dialogue where you can show up as your full self, that's part and parcel of democracy.

You can't have democracy without that, so I think for me and in my work with Polis, this amazing Polis team, we're really serious about trying to be a part of the solution that you're working so hard to provide.

Doug Sprei:

Well, one of the things that really attracted me about Polis and the work you're doing is like, and you've admitted to me to being a kind of wonkish; I don't know what the word is, but the theory really does hold a lot of interest for you and you really do work at that, but I love how that kind of conjoins with on-the-ground reality of politics as we live them today, and so some of the events that you've orchestrated here at Polis brought in civic officials, local public policy people and politicians, which really portends wonderful stuff ahead, that's kind of like what we want to get to with Braver Angels Debates, and we're doing very well with the college students. I think the politicians are telling us they really need this too, but tell me a little bit about how the theory and the ground game kind of mingle into an experience for the students here.

Deondra Rose:

Yeah. Thank you so much for noticing that too, Doug. I mean, honestly, and I think this facet of our work is really part and parcel of our residing in a School of Public Policy. The Sanford School's mission is really to take knowledge in the service of society, and you think through ... I mean, we're named for Terry Sanford who was this legendary North Carolina Governor, U.S. Senator. He ran for President. He was an FBI agent.

He had this amazing background and career, but was someone who really straddled the worlds of the academy and public life. I mean, did so with aplomb. He wasn't apologetic about it, didn't hesitate, and to my mind, for higher education to remain relevant in the 21st century, there's so much that we can be doing to address a lot of that acrimony, a lot of the misinformation, a lot of the places where there are gaps between the conversations we're having and the evidence that we're bringing to bear in those conversations. I mean, that's a zone where higher education institutions and actors can be valuable players and contributors, and so I think for us to see that territory to people who are very comfortable, being talking heads without bringing a lot of expertise or even good faith to some of those conversations is something that, I think at Sanford, at Polis, we're not comfortable just seating that territory. We really want to be engaged in those conversations.

We want to connect with policymakers. We want to be a resource to policymakers who are doing their best to pass "Good public policies", policies that are the result of deliberation, broad deliberation with a wide variety of people and lived experiences and perspectives. Maybe I'll back up a little bit and say that this approach is rooted in what I hope is a level of self-awareness personally that has really developed over time, and it's really being humble about the things that maybe, I guess my comparative advantages and places where there's value in reaching out to others and inviting others to be a part of the team because they bring skills and knowledge and experiences that I don't, that are not part of the work that I do. For example, I can teach my students from a very sort of theoretically rich place.

Doug Sprei:

Sure.

Deondra Rose:

I can invite them and introduce them to frameworks and concepts from political science that can help them make sense of the policy issues that they're addressing or what they're seeing on the ground, but there's nothing like matching that with the work of a policy practitioner or an elected official who can come in and give real-world examples like, "Here's the bill that I worked on last session, and here are the barriers that we faced, and here's how we worked it out." I mean, that to my mind is just Cadillac learning, gold star, brass ring, the kind of learning experience that I strive to engage in and to offer the students here at Sanford and Polis. I think also, it's the kind of engagement that really can, where those of us in higher ed can make valuable contributions to the political and policy landscape.

Doug Sprei:

Following up on that, I have to imagine that the political people, the legislators and the public policy people that you bring in really enjoy hanging with the students and kind of mingling with them and sharing their knowledge, but also learning from students, and conversely, how is it for the students in these environments that you've set up when it's no longer just a theoretical academic environment, but also like something lived and practiced and really palpable to us as citizens all around, looking at the process that we're dealing with today in public discourse? It must be a really satisfying experience sometimes, I hope, that you bring these twain together. How does that play for you?

Deondra Rose:

To my mind, some of the most exciting work that transpires in my classrooms and in what I do, my sense is that the students and the policymakers and the other issue advocates and change agents feel the same way, and so some of that, I think is related to the fact that for many of these leaders who have reached a stage of their career and engagement in society where they're really at a place of making these bold contributions engaging with students is, it seems to me a reminder of why they're doing what they're doing. I think many of them recognize their former selves in these students who are working to acquire the knowledge and tools necessary to do what they're doing at a later stage of their own careers. I think for the students, it helps to demystify what leadership in public service means, and I think to also humanize a lot of the people who they see as like, "Oh, that's a member of Congress. Oh, that's a State Senator," but this is someone who's willing to come and spend an entire class session and tell stories about their own journey and how they got to where they are and to give advice, to share insights, to answer tough questions, and to be authentic. Again, that dialogue, having the opportunity to actually get some insight into that other person's lived experience is, to use a phrase that you mentioned earlier, Doug, it expands their horizons in really valuable and important ways.

For me, one of my favorite public servants is Durham's recent Mayor, Steve Schewel. He's one of our colleagues here. He's actually done work on the faculty, just an amazing, legendary public servant. Steve has done work with Policy Lab, this program that I operate in my class, where we invite policymakers to ask questions and the students develop memos in response to those questions.

Doug Sprei:

Wow.

Deondra Rose:

It's really, really fun stuff. We've been doing that for a few years now, and so Mayor Schewel has sent in questions over a few cycles. I remember at one point, he sends in this really fabulous question, and he also sends his cell number and he says, "Have the team give me a call because I have some additional context that I can offer," so I remember the team wrote me and they're like, "Professor Rose, can you tell us more about this context?" I'm like, "Oh, yeah. Mayor Schewel invited you to give him a call. Just give him a call, and he'll probably ... Maybe he's busy, so leave a message," and they were like, "We can't call the Mayor." Like, I mean, they were so nervous.

Doug Sprei:

Yes you can.

Deondra Rose:

Literally, that's Steve Schewel for you. He's so accessible, but again, to bridge that distance, to decrease the distance between the students and public service, to make Steve real and help them to engage with him as a person who's just like them who cares about making a difference and is using every resource that he can to do that is such ... I mean, that's education for me. That is such a powerful learning experience, so ...

Doug Sprei:

Wow, that's incredible.

Deondra Rose:

I love that so much.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah. Taking a step back to look at higher ed at large, what are you seeing out there in terms of the state of higher ed right now, where we're going with free speech? There's just so many campuses that we're being invited to at Braver Angels and ACTA with our program that are actually sparked by some kind of explosive conflict that took place where free speech was shut down or some kind of backlash happened and a toxic, polarized situation took place on campus. It may have been with students, it may have been with faculty or the administration. We get a call, say, "Can you come into our campus and actually show our students a different way of having a dialogue, and a different way of debating issues without the rancor and all the tribalism?" This is happening all over the country for us. How do you see that? What are your colleagues saying? What concerns you today?

Deondra Rose:

Yeah. I spend so much time thinking of this because, again, as a scholar of higher education, I think very seriously about how we spend our time, how we use our resources, including the resource of figuring out what kinds of programs to offer and what kinds of experiences to invite our students into, and how to deal with an academy that is becoming increasingly diverse, so I think that a lot of what we're seeing not only in higher educational communities, but just in the broader political landscape is tension that results from becoming increasingly inclusive and diverse, and with society and institutions changing, and so institutional change, social change means that there are shifts in the power dynamics of our institutions and various areas of society. In many cases, those who have long, enjoyed privilege aren't going to sit by and just happily allow those kinds of shifts to take place. Even if those of us who have various privileges don't recognize those privileges as such, there is this response that we have to systems that we're comfortable in and benefits that we've come to expect being disrupted and being interrupted. As a political scientist, I don't know if it's a benefit or a burden of having this knowledge, but there's some frameworks that help me to understand what I'm seeing and to make some sense of it.

I'm a scholar of what we call Policy Feedback, and it's this line of political science that basically argues that public policies have the capacity to change politics. As we change how we do things, we can actually create new types of politics in response to those policy shifts, so when you think about higher educational institutions that over the past 60 years have expanded to create new spaces for traditionally excluded or minoritized or marginalized groups. In my research, I do a lot of work on women's increasing participation in higher educational spaces, and that has been really pushed by policy changes like Title IV and a lot of the financial aid programs from the mid-20th century, but in creating this increasingly inclusive higher educational space, that's meant that there are some historical relationships or expectation that have had to shift and change. For Policy Feedback scholars, that's totally expected. We recognize the different types of policies and different avenues of getting things done, typically emanate different styles of politics in different responses from members of society, so to my mind, when we're talking about questions of free speech on campus, questions of, "What can you say in a classroom space or in a residence hall or in some sort of discussion with your classmates or your peers?"

What can you say and how can you expect what you bring to bear to be considered or to expect others to engage with it?" I think there are some people who really do feel that they're not permitted to exist or to operate the same level of freedom and the same ability to engage without having to ... I've heard it described as self-censor, but perhaps without needing to take an extra level of care in engaging. I often say for others, there's always this expectation that when you exist in and operate in certain spaces, you never feel completely free to just say whatever's on your mind without first reviewing it because again, when you're historically marginalized or minoritized, you recognize that your ability to exist in that way is different. I think there's an interesting tension here and I'm fascinated by the point at which these conversations about free speech have taken a really heightened pitch, but I also think that it's responsive, what I would describe as redistribution of institutional resources and access to institutional spaces, so as we've seen higher education become a lot more diverse.

Now, we have college campuses where perhaps some conversations that we might have had 60 years ago and not blinked an eye are now raising some question marks because the students who live and learn and work on campuses, they look different. The composition is different, and so as a faculty member, I might say I really want to push the envelope a little bit and invite whoever this person is to campus. For me, as someone who operates programs, that's how I started. When I was thinking, I was

like, "Okay, let's shake things up," and then students actually started to share that, "Okay, Professor Rose, we hear you. We see where you're coming from, but also, let's recognize that we live here.

When the day is over, you go home to wherever that is, but we live on campus," and so to my mind, it just actually pushed me to really think differently about, again, how we engage in speech on campus and discussions and what we're taking into account. Maybe it doesn't mean that we're not inviting certain guests to campus, but maybe it means that it's incumbent on us to provide additional resources to support that increasingly diverse student population or broader university community to make sure that that conversation can happen and leave everyone feeling respected and safe, and as though they want to come back for more after the session and not that they were disrespected or dismissed or anything like that.

Doug Sprei:

Well, you just kind of distilled the whole Braver Angels formula into its essence there. That's kind of what we're trying to do tonight and that would lead me to my last question because I know we got to head off to the debate downstairs in a few minutes. You've been shepherding this event with me as the faculty lead, which is half of our formula, the other half being the students themselves, so we had that wonderful student, Chloe Wynn, who called while we were doing this podcast interview. She really led the charge with pollinating the idea around campus and really honing in on a topic, and so the resolution before us, it's so unique that it was chosen for tonight's event.

It is Resolved: College campuses should disinvite speakers whose ideas can be construed as cancelable, or the headline on the publicity is more phrased as a question should college campuses disinvite speakers whose ideas can be construed as cancelable. What's your observation about how we arrived at that topic with the students, how they chose it and took ownership of it—because that's what we're going to be debating tonight.

Deondra Rose:

Oh, yes. I have to say every semester, I'm extremely proud of my students, and every semester I say, "I don't know that I'll ever have students who are this sharp again." I don't see how we can top this.

Doug Sprei:

Of course, you will.

Deondra Rose:

Every year, right? Every year, I'm astonished, and Chloe and the people who've worked with her to organize tonight's event are truly spectacular. I mean, so this really came about when Chloe dreamed this up, I want to say maybe nearly a year ago.

Doug Sprei:

True.

Deondra Rose:

It's been quite a while. Chloe had a connection with you, Doug, before Polis had connected with you, and really has taken the lead in building this up and even doing the research to find a resolution that would really invite a true discourse here at Duke.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah.

Deondra Rose:

And so Chloe and her colleagues actually created a poll, and they used social media to vet a number of different potential resolutions. I mean, they took it very seriously, this opportunity for dialogue and discussion and reaching out broadly to classmates and to people at all corners of campus to invite a really diverse group to join us tonight. I couldn't be more excited about that work. Also, I don't know that I could be any more optimistic about our prospects for generating generative discourse or helping to support the kind of discourse that your team and our team at Polis are really committed to fostering, and it's really because of the leadership of students like Chloe.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah, thank you for that. Our hope is that a lot of these students who are leading in that direction are encouraging others to just become more engaged citizens, you know? I mean, there's a lot of colleges that don't even require students to know anything about how the U.S. government works. We really tip our hats to you at Duke and at Polis, the work you're doing to really create aware, engaged students who will become tomorrow's leaders in many cases.

Deondra Rose:

Thank you so much.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah.

Deondra Rose:

Again, we're so honored to be teaming up with you and to have you here. I mean, Doug, you've got celebrity status at Duke, and our welcome to our campus at anytime. We're really grateful and there's so much excitement here on campus about tonight's event, so please, to you and everyone out there who supports Braver Angels, ACTA, and BridgeUSA, thank you so much for that. All right, showtime.

Doug Sprei:

Okay.

Deondra Rose:

Thank you so much, Doug.

Doug Sprei:

Thank you.

PROMO CLIPS (For social media)

“Institutions like Duke University can think seriously about addressing some of the major problems in our political landscape. One of those major problems, you know, is just the lack of generative political discourse, the fact that our political environment is so acrimonious. And for so many people, it's just not appealing. It's actually something that leaves people feeling a bit traumatized and in retreat, and so like so many of us, we're concerned because being able to participate in real political dialogue, authentic political dialogue where you can show up as your full self, that's part and parcel of democracy. You can't have democracy without that.”

“I can teach my students from a very sort of theoretically rich place. I can invite them and introduce them to frameworks and concepts from political science that can help them make sense of the policy issues that they're addressing or what they're seeing on the ground, but there's nothing like matching that with the work of a policy practitioner or an elected official who can come in and give real-world examples like, "Here's the bill that I worked on last session, and here are the barriers that we faced, and here's how we worked it out." I mean, that to my mind is just Cadillac learning, gold star, brass ring, the kind of learning experience that I strive to engage in and to offer the students here at Sanford and Polis. I think also, it's the kind of engagement where those of us in higher ed can make valuable contributions to the political and policy landscape.”

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