

Bradley Jackson:

Al, welcome to Higher Ed Now. Thank you so much for being here.

Amna Khalid:

Well, thank you for having me. It's always a pleasure to talk to you, Bradley.

Bradley Jackson:

I wanted to introduce you to our listeners because you have been doing such excellent work over the past few years on free speech on campus, academic freedom, the meaning of civic discourse, and how to really stand up and champion the values of higher education. But before we get to all of that, we should talk about your work in history and the history of medicine in particular, and how you got interested in this campus activism. A lot of people think that folks doing campus activism must have started that way, but in reality, it's a bunch of academics doing other things who got interested in it through their own paths. So could you talk a little bit about your background and your journey to doing this work on academic freedom?

Amna Khalid:

Absolutely. So my area of specialty is South Asian history and history of medicine, and my work has really been on pandemics. Interestingly, in the 19th century on cholera in India, in British India. And I look at how the colonial state tried to manage the spread of cholera from what we see as Hindu pilgrimage sites today along the banks of the Ganges. So that's broadly speaking the work that I was doing and was in the thick of it when I moved to the US to take up this position at Carlton as assistant professor in South Asian history.

And I moved here in 2011. So I should say a little bit about my background in that I am originally from Pakistan, which is where I grew up, and I did my undergraduate work there. And then I went to England where I spent a long time. I did my MPhil and my DPhil in England, and then I was there teaching for a while, and I did a postdoc there. And after that, I went to South Africa for two years. So it's been a long and winding route to Northfield, Minnesota, but I am glad to be here. And I came here in 2011.

Coming from abroad and especially not having gone to grad school in the US, there's a lot to learn about the American higher ed landscape. It works very, very differently. And it's also a much bigger industry, if you will, because even in Britain we have these old crusty educational institutions, but it's not quite like what we have in the US. And I should say one of the key reasons that I moved away from Pakistan, and I guess I ended up in the US, but the US had always been on the map in some way, was precisely because I wanted to be in a place where I had the freedom to think right and speak. That's incredibly important to me, and it's the reason that I have moved halfway across the world. So that's just the backdrop of what are the kinds of values or things I hold dear.

Then here in 2011, I started doing my teaching, and I was very much a South Asian history creature doing, teaching, and writing about that stuff until it was about 2016, I believe, when we had a town hall on campus, which was about a bias response team. I'd never heard the word before. It was a bizarre kind of... And a colleague of mine pulled me. She's like, "Well, let's go attend this." And I said I had a class to prep, and she said, "No, come on, just come with me," and I obliged. And I'm quite glad I did because when I went there, and I sat there, and I heard there were a number of students and some people from student life who had come up with this proposal that Carlton needs a bias response team.

And the idea behind a bias response team was that there's speech on campus that can be hurtful to students, and it was very much under this framework of harm, which has become so dominant in college

campuses today. And the idea was that if people feel insulted or someone says something to them that they see as biased, they could report it, and that report would then lead to a student life bureaucracy intervening in some way, shape, or form. Now, that could take various forms. You could have an educational conversation about it, or it could be punitive, and there was conversation about what that would look like. And I just sat there, and I remember the hairs on the back of my neck standing and me just thinking... It was this moment of just, I don't know what to call it, cognitive dissonance of sorts, and being transported to my school days in Pakistan where there was this notion that there are things that you can and can't say, and there are questions that you can and can't ask.

And I found it horrifying. I found it really troubling. And that is when I partnered with my colleague Jeff Snyder, who's also a historian at Carlton College. And we decided we were very troubled by it. We were both incensed by it is the way to put it. And I remember us having a cup of coffee and just sharing our anger. And he said, "Why don't we write something about this?" Now, I had not written for a public audience ever in my life, and I didn't quite appreciate what it meant to write for one. He had. And so we started drafting something together, and I was quite surprised by the pace at which this kind of publication moves compared to academic publications would move at a glacial rate.

So it was interesting because we just both sat down, and once we started looking into bias response teams, I was doubly horrified to see that this wasn't something that was just particular to Carlton because that's how I had made sense of it. I thought, "Oh, it's just our students are upset about something and they want this as a measure." I realized this is a trend across higher education and these teams are proliferating.

And what surprised me was how unconcerned the professoriate was with these kinds of initiatives. And it was really troubling me because I could, perhaps because of my background of having grown up in Pakistan which has been under authoritarian rule for most of my life, I had an appreciation for where this goes, how this actually can stop people from asking questions. And that is the antithesis of what we try and do in higher education. When you stop people from questioning, that's the end of what we do. And that is what led me to write that first piece in 2016 with Jeff Snyder about what was happening in higher education with respect to bias response teams.

Now, since then, I think I feel both of us feel quite vindicated because a number of these teams were considered unconstitutional. People took them to court for limitations and freedom of expression, and they've been taken down. They have, as I expected, emerged in other forms. And this is the insidious thing about bureaucracies and administrations, that they find other less overt ways of doing these things. So that's how I got into looking at what is happening in the higher ed landscape, which is very different from my work on South Asia.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed. And that story was so rich and so full of all of the different manifold issues that we face today in higher education. I myself have been working in campus free speech since around the same time, 2015, 2016. And it really was a watershed moment where a lot of things started to happen all at once, both in terms of violations of free speech taking on a new tenor and almost animosity sometimes on campus, as well as a new era of pro-free speech and pro-civil discourse activism beginning. And you have seen so many of these things as they have played out. So the bias response teams are an interesting early example of this. They were proliferating all over the place in 2015, 2016, creating university bureaucracies to, as you say, police emotional harm on campus and to punish students who had inflicted it.

Now, let's pause there for just a moment and talk a little bit more about this model of harm that's being referred to here because this is going to come up again and again in our conversation today. So could

you help our listeners understand the mental model that's being employed by campus bureaucrats in order to oversee interactions between students and between faculty and students?

Amna Khalid:

Yeah, this is a good question. And what's interesting is that it started off as concept creep, which administrators in higher ed, particularly people in student life I think embraced very closely and then started coming up with frameworks that were informed by this notion of harm. So this notion of harm that words can cause harm, that they are violence, is something that undergirds this sensitivity framework if you will.

The first time I was exposed to it was when students started asking for trigger warnings. That was when I was like, "What is a trigger warning? I had never ever heard of that word. And to my mind, the first thing that came to my mind was a gun, unsurprisingly. And as someone who comes from outside of the US, I thought, "Oh, this must be something to do with the gun culture here." And when students started talking about the harm that happens and how I needed to give them trigger warning things, I just remember thinking again, one of those moments where I'm like, "Am I hearing this right?" Harm and then violence, these are the two words that I remember thinking about. And it was interesting.

I remember having these conversations with students in my classes where they would say... I was like, "So what do you think merits a trigger warning?" And they'd say, "If you're going to talk about sexual assault or rape, that merit it." And I said, "Right. So what about things like colonial violence. And what about things like racial violence? What about..." I'd go down the list, and by the time we were done, I was like, "Well, literally everything that you would discuss in a history course requires a trigger warning." So this is, again, one of those ways in which there is this notion that our students cannot handle it, and this troubles me.

Now, the idea that we need trigger warnings is also drawing on the idea of people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Now, I haven't looked at the numbers of late, but what I remember the last time I looked at this was there something like 3.5% of the population in the US that has PTSD, but it's one of those words, again, concept creep that has become so pervasive in these conversations about education that it caused me trauma or something can traumatize. Now, we even have trauma-informed pedagogy or something to that effect.

And no, this is not trauma. Let's just be very clear about a few things. I am not in any way denigrating the fact that there are people who suffer from PTSD, and they may genuinely be triggered. And yes, of course, we have an obligation as institutions and educators to make accommodations for those students, but they are a minority and the onus is on them to come and tell us what the triggers are. You really can't anticipate a trigger. This pen that I'm holding in my hand could be a trigger for someone who has some association of something terrible happening in a setting where that pen was used.

My point is, this is not... But the way in which it was being used and leveraged was really, I felt like students were either trying to get out of reading stuff that was difficult or there was a virtue signaling going on. Many of them would be like, "Oh, listen, I have no problems with it, but I'm just concerned about my peers who might be triggered by it." And that again, was an interesting moment because that's the first moment when I started seeing this kind of virtue signaling, which again has become part of the fabric of campus life these days.

Bradley Jackson:

Indeed, indeed. And these trigger warnings that you're talking about, of course, everyone who's listening to this podcast has heard of them and has seen their proliferation. And when this conversation began in 2016, 2017, again, we didn't really know much about whether it was really helping. And I

remember talking to a lot of people saying, "Well, if students need this, if it's helpful to them, why not?" I heard that quite a bit. And so luckily, people have done research about the effectiveness of it. And you've written very interestingly with Jeff Snyder about this research. What does research tell us about whether trigger warnings have the intended effect that they're meant to have?

Amna Khalid:

Yeah, it's interesting. There's a lot of research out now, and there's more coming. So most of the research tends to show that they are not beneficial. They do not seem to prevent the... They don't help people with PTSD in any way, shape, or form. It also shows, which I didn't expect, but nonetheless is a finding, that students don't usually use the idea or the excuse of trigger warnings to opt out of material. Which is something that I had experienced in my own setting, but of course, mine is not representative of the broader experience. So I take that, and I stand corrected on it, on the broader implications of trigger warnings or how they play out.

But what it does show is that to the contrary, trigger warnings prime people to be... They put them in that mental frame where they're looking for the thing that's going to trigger them or offend them, and it makes them more anxious. It heightens their sensitivity to things. And to my mind, that fundamentally goes against what the educational experience is about. You don't, what do you say? Raise someone's shackles? Is that the word or-

Bradley Jackson:

Hackles?

Amna Khalid:

Hackles, yeah. I was like, "That's not the right one." Raise someone's hackles, and then expect them to engage meaningfully with a text or with any material that you're assigning. And to that end, if the research is showing us, there's several studies out now, that this is diminishing the educational experience of students then frankly, as educational institutions that stress the importance of research and following the research, we should not be issuing trigger warnings. I will state at this moment for clarification that I don't believe in springing things on students. So there's a difference between a trigger warning and between what I called contextualizing material. Along with our academic freedom, which I cherish, comes academic responsibility, which means that you introduce material in a responsible fashion; you couch it, you frame it, you curate it for those students in a way that they have the best educational experience. So trigger warnings to my mind is something quite distinct and separate, and those have been shown to not be beneficial. If anything, they can be seen as negatively impacting the educational experience.

Bradley Jackson:

So we have recently seen in the news a landmark example of a case involving trigger warnings in which a professor at Hamline University provided a trigger warning to her students in art history about an image that they would see containing a medieval depiction of the prophet Muhammad, drawn by a pious artist who intended to do a scene of Muhammad receiving the first verses of the Koran from the angel of Gabriel. Meant to be a devotional painting, but in contemporary conservative theology, many hold that you cannot show the prophet. A trigger warning was given. The students remained in the class, but then complained afterwards of having been, and this is not a quote, but within the frame of the conversation we're having, traumatized, harmed by viewing this, which led to the instructor losing their contract and not being invited back to teach. Now, you have written on this topic and quite a lot more about it than I

do. So can you, one correct anything I got wrong about that? And two, dive into this case with us and help us explain what's the issue.

Amna Khalid:

Sure, I'll do it with pleasure. I've written on it and I actually just recently organized a panel at Carlton where we invited the professor who was dismissed, who was teaching this particular image. We also invited the chair of the religion department at Hamline who supported this professor. And I had two Islam specialists, one from Macalester College and one from the University of Minnesota. And we had a very robust discussion about this case. But why this case is so important is that it has implications for how we teach. Not just how we teach Islam or Islamic art or even art history, it has implications for how we teach, period. Because it is in many ways, it's not a nice way to put it, but it's a gift for us to be able to see how academic freedom is under threat. So let me tell you a little bit about the case.

You were quite right. This is a case where the professor was showing a depiction, a 14th-century painting, which is part of a manuscript that was commissioned by Russia, the statesman. And this particular painting, like you said, is of the first revelation, and I believe she was going to compare this. And she showed another painting from the 16th century, and in this painting in the 14th century, the prophet is depicted, his full body and face are depicted. In the one in the 16th century, his face is covered by a veil. And I think part of the questions that she was posing is that what happens between the 14th and the 16th centuries that it becomes less common to depict the prophet's face.

Now, this is very much happening in the context of an art history class. I just want to say that the name of the professor, it's Erica Lopez Preta, and she's now gone public with this. And she set this up in the most immaculate fashion possible. So she not only gave a... I mean, I think what she did was more than give a trigger warning, it's what I would call good contextualization. In her syllabus, she had already said that as part of this course, they're going to be looking at visual depictions of holy personages, including the Buddha, and Jesus, and Muhammad, and if students had a problem, they could come and talk to her, and they would work out a way to make this work.

Then she... And this was... She distributed the syllabus on the 30th of August. Now, the class session in question was on October 6th where she showed this, and this was an online class, and prior to showing the image, she once again, she spent about over two minutes contextualizing, saying that there is this common belief that depictions of Muhammad are not allowed in Islam. And she said, "Well, it's precisely for that reason that I'm showing these images to contest that, and to show the richness and diversity within the Islamic tradition." And she said this was an optional exercise. So students, she recognized, that students might be sensitive. Those who did not wish to see the image could blank their screens now, and she would tell them when the image was over, and they could come back and join the classroom.

One student who is Muslim, and also I believe the president of the Muslim Students Association at Hamline was in the class. She did not blank her screen. She chose to see the image. I do not know why, but nonetheless, and then subsequently approached the professor and said that she found that very offensive and hurtful. And the professor explained to her that she had given ample warning and said, "I'm really sorry you felt offended, but it was not my intention. My intention is to educate. And besides this was an optional activity." Explanation notwithstanding, the DEI bureaucracy gets triggered on campus and the VP for Inclusive Excellence, his name is David Everett, if I'm remembering correctly, said this was an undeniably insensitive act and called it Islamophobic.

Now, this was all done without any conversation with the professor. The president got involved. The professor was subsequently fired or as they like to say, wasn't fired but wasn't rehired. The technicality of it seems to be pretty important to Hamline. Whereas the understanding was that you would be

rehired for the subsequent semester and that was the end of that. But this professor who is the chair of the religion department, Mark Berkson, he wrote in support of the professor in the student newspaper. First, they posted it, then they took it off. Then, when this became a national issue, they put that letter back on. And in the interim, what Hamline did was they organized a community conversation on campus where they invited the executive director of the Council for American and Islamic Relations, the Minnesota chapter. In that community conversation, he made some very, very problematic statements and frankly, wrong statements, where he said that this was Islamophobic and said that the depictions of the prophet under no circumstances are allowed and are offensive to Muslims.

Now, the problem with this entire narrative is that the institution stepped in and took that position, and in doing that, and what upset me the most when I first read about this, was that they totally flattened any kind of diversity and richness within the Islamic tradition. And an institution has no business doing that. And to do that in the name of diversity is doubly sacrilegious if you will. So when I read this, I was very offended, and I was very disturbed. And most of all, I was disturbed as a Muslim. There is a very rich tradition, and yes, I will grant that many Muslims believe that depictions of the prophet are not allowed. But whether they say it's Islamophobic or not is a separate question.

Now, these images are very different from, let's say the Danish cartoons, which were meant to be satirical, and they were hence done in a particular way that that was offensive; I get that. But these are qualitatively different images. But the more important question over here is that there is the fact that there are so many Muslims who depicted the prophet and continue to do so. In Iran, you can find pictures of the prophet, paintings of the prophets, visual depictions everywhere; on postcards in shops, people have them.

Now, to think that there is a... What are we trying to deny a huge chunk of history and contemporary Islamic culture? There is a problem. That's anti-intellectual, not an educational position for an institution to take. Plus, it has grave implications because what does this say? This is an adjunct professor who, in theory, has academic freedom, but in practice clearly does not, and we see this in this case. The implications of this case are that people will stop teaching things that are controversial, and that is deadly because that means essentially, our students will not develop the skills to have a difficult conversation.

So what we're invested in now, are we trying to create a stupid generation? No, clearly not. That's not what our job is, but that is the implication of actions like these. In part, because I think 75% of the professoriate now is adjunct faculty. Their positions are precarious. They're unlikely, very understandably to pick up things that are going to land them into trouble. And not everybody has the wherewithal, the inclination, nor should they, to take on a lawsuit all the time. So consider that. These are people who are trying to cobble together a living by teaching several courses on likely several campuses, and it's a lot of work. They don't want to create problems for themselves.

Bradley Jackson:

So when talking through this issue, we have been inching toward the ways in which the bias response team bureaucracy has changed over the last seven years and morphed into a much more well-funded and well-resourced DEI bureaucracy on campus, which has taken over many aspects of what bias response teams had been doing, but with much broader sets of initiatives, usually. So can we talk a little bit about diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus? Both what it means in the context of these new bureaucracies being created, what it could mean and perhaps should mean in the context of higher education, and in particular, you've written some great stuff with Jeff Snyder recently about the difference between DEI training and DEI education. So if you could, help us understand what's going on and what could be happening instead.

Amna Khalid:

Great. So let me start out by saying because the conversation has become so polarized about this topic, I want to be very clear that I am pro-diversity, pro equity, and pro-inclusion. So let me just get that out of the way. Now, the problem with the DEI bureaucracy is that it is working under the framework of harm. That's the first thing. The second thing is how are diversity, inclusion, and equity defined? So let's look at diversity inclusion because these are the ones that become most contested. Diversity is all people, all points of view. Everyone is welcome on campus and should feel welcomed, and heard, and seen, and acknowledged. That's a basic outline of it. Diversity is that regardless of your identity characteristics, you are treated in the same fashion, and your point of view is welcome, and inclusion is that you should feel welcomed, and you should feel a sense of belonging, and you should feel safe. This is again, like I said, within the framework of harm.

Now, the problem with this is that if we are really honest, this is not compatible with academic freedom. Not all views are welcome on campus, plus they're not all equal. This is not a Jerry Springer show where we are trying to give everyone an equal opportunity to express their grievances and comment. This is not a debate of that sort. This is an academic experience. Certain views are not welcome on campus. I can't imagine us talking about teaching flat earth theory in a geology class. That's not accepted. That is not welcome. Also with inclusion, I mean inclusion, yes, but are we including everyone? Do we want to be welcoming to white supremacists, and people who are homophobic, or do we want to welcome QAnon conspiracy theorists and give them equal airtime? I don't think so.

And I think one of the problems is that what Jeff and I call DEI Inc because it differentiates it from the values themselves and talks about them in the ways in which these bureaucracies have framed them, is that they're throwing around these ideas and concepts and saying these are compatible or they have a space on campus in a way that runs counter to the mission of what we're trying to do. The mission of what we do is education, and that requires academic freedom, not for us. We are not trying to stand there and mouth off and abuse the fact that we have the freedom to talk. Academic freedom has restrictions, i.e., you have to talk about stuff that is germane, that is relevant within a classroom, but it also comes with academic responsibility. This is the piece that people forget, which is that you have the responsibility to introduce these things in a proper contextualized fashion.

Now, with DEI bureaucracies growing on campus, what we are finding is that I feel like we have a parallel curriculum being taught on campus. There's what we are teaching in our classrooms, and then there's what student life and DEI officers are teaching. And they traffic in harm, offense, and words of violence. Whereas my understanding of what we do in a classroom is to empower our students. Now, if you think about what's the archetype of student that these two models think about, I think for us or for me, education is about empowerment. It is about making you resilient and making you strong to be able to contend with different points of view in your life. I feel like the DEI framework is very much about life adjusting to what you need. It's narcissistic, it's naval gazing, and it promotes this idea of students being fragile. It's very condescending. Students should be really offended by this actually because it means that they are being treated... They're being mollycoddled, and they're being treated in a particular way, which is not flattering. I would not want to be treated in that fashion. So there's that piece.

Then put this in the context of the corporatization of higher education, which, of course, we are seeing it's pervasive, and the fact that senior administrative positions, particularly around student life and diversity are just mushrooming all over the place. Meanwhile, faculty lines are being cut, and this is a serious crisis. In fact, this is the economic logic which is informing the adjunctification of faculty at the rate that we see. The point of an education is that you come; it's the intellectual engagement you get in your classrooms from your professors. That's the pull or should be the main thing that you're focusing

on. Instead, I find that a lot of resources are being spent on that parallel curriculum about residential life, about bias response teams, about trigger warnings, about trainings.

One of the things that we've seen post-George Floyd is the proliferation of anti-racism trainings on campus. And this to me is just... It's unconscionable because training is fundamentally about telling you what to think, not how to think. It's a list of... It's an etiquette manual. Don't say this. Don't say that. Always trust what a BIPOC person says. Be an ally. Just you should always support that person. I'm like, "Well, being a BIPOC person, whatever that means, I don't want everyone to trust what I say. There are times when I say things which are willfully wrong. I'm trying to get away with something. We're not made of gold. Let's just be clear that we are human," and in a way, I find this bifurcation of the world into BIPOC and non-BIPOC people again, very condescending and essentialist.

And in a moment when we're talking about, "Oh, we need to decolonize the curriculum. And we want to be exposed to other forms of knowledge," Yet the main thing on campus in terms of these trainings is precisely about essentializing groups, and putting them in these categories, and seeing everyone within that group as having a singular point of view is highly imperialist. It's exactly what colonialism was all about; boxing people into categories and essentializing them. I don't know. I feel like we have two things going on in campus. DEI is pushing in a different direction; DIE Inc is pushing in a different direction. And what professors, the majority of whom I think are still doing a very good job on campus, are trying to train their students in thinking whereas these DEI and anti-racism trainings are training students in terms of the right and wrong of doing without any questioning. The point is to get our students to think critically not to learn how to follow an etiquette manual. I don't know if that answered your question.

Bradley Jackson:

Oh, it did indeed. And there's so much to dive into there. It's such a rich vein of discussion because as you were speaking, you were adumbrating both the failure of administrators to adequately conceptualize their mission as educating rather than training students, which is a problem with how they view the mission of the university and how they understand pedagogy. I think that the corporatization you speak of has an effect on that to the extent that we see fewer and fewer educators holding those administrative positions. And some might argue that educational experience is a good thing in an administrator of an educational institution.

But the other thing that you spoke to, which is related to that in an interesting and complicated way, is the ways in which so much money and resources is being spent by these colleges on topics that are not directly affecting the educational mission of the university, and in fact, might be undermining those, that mission by, for example, training students to have emotional reactions to material rather than in educating them how to engage with that material in a productive and straightforward way. So there's so much going on here, and it might give outsiders the perspective that, "Hey, these campuses don't know what they're doing anymore. Someone needs to step in and do something about it, and in the case of the public universities, why shouldn't that be the legislature? Why shouldn't that be the governor? Why shouldn't the governors step in and tell the university what to do?"

Now, how do you, as a denizen of campus, granted, not a public campus, but still a campus, how do you respond to both that temptation that people feel to take power away from the universities and smack some sense into them? And then also, how do you react to some of the things that governments are doing on the state level to challenge the way that the universities are running?

Amna Khalid:

Yeah, that's a really good question Bradley, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about this. Let me start by saying that I've been very critical of what's happening in higher education. Most of

it driven from what we would call the extreme left. But that does not in any way in my mind, justify state intervention. State intervention in what is taught and what and can and can't be taught in curricula, particularly at the higher ed level, it never ends well; trust me as someone who comes from a system where we've had that.

The problem with state intervention is that that's when political interests begin to come into the classroom, and that is a recipe for disaster. Once you lay that precedent, and this is one of the things that attracted me to the US is the idea of the first amendment, the ways in which even though it's different from academic freedom, it's there to help bolster academic freedom or it does inadvertently help bolster academic freedom and students have the right to question and query. And then the fact that the AAUP has this very strong statement of what academic freedom means, which is both within the classroom in your research, and [inaudible] speech.

These are guardrails that are put there precisely to keep that crass political influence from coming into how we are educating our next generation and how we are producing knowledge. I grant that there are ways in which DEI might... DEI Inc is on steroids on certain campuses. And here is a distinction: A, I still think the professoriate, on the whole, is doing a fairly good job. This is not to say yes, there are a certain small minority I think who might be teaching in ways which are questionable. That will always be the case. We have a huge higher ed industry. You will always have good professors and you will always have not-so-good professors, but on the whole, the system works.

But what's happened now is that the right has weaponized, and by the right, I mean the extreme right. So let's just be very clear, has weaponized this idea of indoctrination and the solution to it is indoctrination. I mean, that is not how you counter indoctrination. So censorship is another form of indoctrination because it's trying to tell you what you can and can't think. And these are issues. Higher education will always have issues, there will always be problems, but those are problems that we work out on our own within this system. State legislature is not should never meddle in this business. And I get the people who are like, "Well, this is public money, and where is this public money going?"

I think DeSantis was rather disappointed when he asked for a list of courses and the expenditure that is going into what he sees as DEI in Florida. I think it was less than 1% of the budget. It's still a substantial chunk, but it's not what he is trying to present it to be. And for him, this is very much political tool, and it's not just him. I think this is a political tool for those who have similar political inclinations.

So my point is state censorship is not the solution, and once you lay down, if this happens and goes through, then it's only a matter of time that it'll be weaponized by the left as well. And then we go down this spiral of whichever side is in power, determining what someone will learn. And that is never good for democracy. It is not good for the education of the next generation. And that really will be... We will see the undoing of the American fabric.

Bradley Jackson:

Well, let's linger at this point for a minute because you said something there I think really bears underlining and maybe clarifying a bit, which is the difference between let's say, the politics of the professoriate, the politics that individual professors hold, and that might even be part of their lecturing, and the politics of politicians in the political system. So I can really easily imagine someone saying, "What do you mean bring politics onto campus, as though campus isn't already completely political?" But you have in mind, I think, a different meaning of the word politics when you say that, which is to relate it to the political system. So could you talk about the difference in principle between professors having their own personal politics and the political system having an effect on the curriculum?

Amna Khalid:

Yeah, that's a good question. So both teaching and learning are political acts. You can't say that they're not political, but they're political in that they're not the kind of party politics that we're talking about. It's not about grabbing power for one party to be in a position of controlling versus the other party. It's political in that it helps you form your political sensibilities. Now, how that is formed in the context of a campus is that you have professors. They may have their own politics, but also, let me just say, we are not indoctrinating our students. The vast majority of the professoriate teachers with integrity, and I adhere to that strongly. And what teaching with integrity means, it doesn't mean that you hide your own politics from your students, but it's that you expose your students to various points of views; that you show them what the debates within the field are that you expose them to.

And this is not just political points of view. Again, this is not this Jerry Springer idea, but the idea how are historians, in my case, it's history, differing on a particular historical moment, what are the different interpretations? Where are the points of contention? And you do that so that they learn. You don't have to hide your politics from them necessarily, but students learn, "Oh, this is how this professor is making sense of it in light of this material, which has a whole host of different points of view." The other thing is, I mean, if only professors had the power to be able to indoctrinate our students, don't you think that would be a very different world? The thing is, they're not exposed to just one point of view on campus. They're going to several professors. They're getting different things from different professors, and I think that is the richness of the educational experience, which we need to be emphasizing.

They're not just coming to Amna, and I'm not creating little prototype Amnas in my classroom. Much as my megalomania might want that, that's not what's going on. And they're, in fact, going to other professors' classes and coming into my class and saying, "Hey, you said this, but in this other class we learned this." And we'll have a conversation about how different disciplines approach different things. There's the politics of disciplines as well. So of course, there is a politics on campus in terms of how we teach, but it's not the same as party politics and this binary way of looking at the world. Whereas what is happening with state legislation interfering is using the legislative tools that are available and tools of governance to decide that anything that that particular party doesn't like should not be on the curriculum. The problem with that is when the other party comes into power, they'll do the same thing.

And so that is not true education. That is brainwashing or attempts at brainwashing. People resist it beautifully in many societies. In fact, what you'll see is the history of authoritarian rule is that it gives room for the best kind of creativity, and art, and discourse, and academic exploration, in fact, precisely because there is an urgency to resist that sense of control. So I might be going off topic a little bit, but sometimes coming from the background I come from, I think the US is going nuts because it's been a little too free. It's the consequence of too much freedom perhaps; that people don't know what to resist anymore, and so they create their own resistances, and you get into these echo chambers. Maybe conversation for another time, but it is a thought that I find myself pondering several times in a day.

Bradley Jackson:

So we've spent a lot of time here, Amna, talking about some of the problems of higher education. They're of course myriad, and there's a lot for folks like us to do who want to improve it. However, we also both know that there are a lot of bright spots, a lot of wonderful things happening. So in the spirit of closing on more of an up note, can you talk about some of the things that you see in higher education that are giving you hope today that make you think it is possible to really make a difference and turn these things around?

Amna Khalid:

Yeah, actually, this is an interesting question. Just within the last couple of weeks, I have, even as I'm watching these cases come to light, I have found myself being hopeful, and I'm wondering if maybe we might be at a turning point, in the instance of Hamline. Then there's the Harvard Kennedy School, which extended a position to Kenneth Roth, and then the dean turned it down for political reasons and Kenneth Roth's views in Israel. And then most recently, Utica University where the faculty have spoken up against administrative overreach where the trustees have by fiat decided to shut down, I don't know whether it's 12 or 18 majors, and cut departments. And in all three instances, I have been overjoyed by the response of the faculty in all three places. They have risen up and they have contested this overreach. And I think this might be a moment where this administrative bloat, which is very distinctively and certainly undermining faculty co-governance on college campuses, might be checked.

And I think the Hamline case is a good one because it's been instructive, or I hope it will be, to other administrations about where you need to draw the line. So I'm hopeful for academic freedom because I feel faculty are rising up. And I'm also hopeful. I find my students, I talk about these things very openly in my classroom, and I don't get much pushback. They want to learn, and they're very happy to talk about it, and they're not easily swayed by whatever the fad is. So that gives me hope.

I remember a while ago, there was a case at Reid where there were certain students who were trying to shut down the Western Civ course, and it became quite contentious. They were standing in classrooms. They were disrupting classrooms and holding signs. And eventually, it was the first-year students who stood up and asked the older students to leave. And they said, "We're here for an education. We want to learn." And I say kudos to them. I do feel that perhaps the time of this nonsense is passing, and students are more invested in actually learning than playing these kinds of games on campus. So I think both faculty and students are showing a lot of promise.

Bradley Jackson:

Amna, thank you so, so much for joining us today on the podcast, and we hope that you can come back sometime.

Amna Khalid:

Well, it's been a pleasure, and I love having a conversation like this, so thank you for the opportunity.