

Steve McGuire:

Jennifer Frey, thanks for joining us on the podcast today.

Jen Frey:

Thanks for having me. I'm really thrilled to be here.

Steve McGuire:

It's great you could join us. Congratulations on your new appointment as dean of a new Honors College at the University of Tulsa.

Jen Frey:

Thank you. I've joined the ranks of the enemy now.

Steve McGuire:

I guess so. Hopefully it doesn't change the way you think too much.

Jen Frey:

No, it's absolutely not. I'm going to insist that it doesn't.

Steve McGuire:

Well I think if you were going to be a dean of anything, this kind of honors college would be the least likely to change the way you think. I wanted to have you on the podcast today in light of this new appointment to ask you about your vision for the college and more generally your thoughts on liberal education and how that fits into the contemporary American university. The first question I'll ask you is simply in your view, what is liberal education specifically in Aristotelian fashion? Which I'm sure you'll appreciate. What is its purpose?

Jen Frey:

That's a great question. So for me, a general liberal arts education should be focused on classical texts, right? Texts that are aimed at helping us gain the requisite self-knowledge to live well. So for me, the goal of higher education where that's understood as general liberal education really is just human flourishing, no more and no less. And so I think liberal education invites students to reflect on fundamental questions that address their own humanity, and they reflect on them together by studying those texts that have raised these questions within our intellectual tradition and have put forward the most substantive influential answers. So it's not that a liberal education teaches the truth as if that's something that's fixed for all time, nor does it teach students to be experts about the authors or texts and question, right?

It's not a specialized education, rather I would simply say that it teaches students to search for wisdom together as a common end. And so the conceit of that kind of education is that it is a search for truth and wisdom as common goods. And common goods aren't competitive. They're pursued cooperatively by members of a community. And I think that has really become lost in our understanding of liberal education. I think we here liberal and we just think open inquiry, which is good, right? Open inquiry is good and should be valued by any model of liberal education. But open inquiry for what? For what end? It's not a liberty of indifference. It's a freedom to search for what is true in the deep sense of searching

for a truth that isn't narrow or a form of expertise, but that tries to see how it all fits together from different perspectives.

So that's my view of liberal education. It comes right out of the tradition. It comes right out of Aristotle in the metaphysics and the politics where he talks about the kind of education that befits a free man, someone who needs to lead the polis, someone who needs to develop practical wisdom. And when Aristotle spoke of freedom in that sense, he meant interior freedom. He meant formation. He's a Greek, he understands education as formation. And so that's the model for me. Because I think the reality is that education is formation and the only question is whether the formation is good or bad. I think that people who want to try to deny that it's formation in any sense, I think a famous example of that would be Weber, and his really famous lecturer scholar is vocation, which he says, no, we're just experts.

We don't value anything. That's not true. And I think that higher education, if it's genuinely higher, it's called to something more than expertise. And of course leaders need something more than expertise as well.

Steve McGuire:

That's great. Lots to unpack there. Let me start with a second question. You talked about the idea of formation. You mentioned human flourishing. You mentioned some virtues like prudence and that sort of thing. In Aristotle there's also the idea of education is ultimately being aimed at contemplation, right? And ultimately the idea of thought thinking itself and that sort of thing. And so one might think that there's a bit of a tension between the idea of a liberal education as providing some moral formation versus liberal education as some just pure contemplation. And maybe even thinking of someone there like, say Michael Oakeshott, who would say, really, we're just participating in a conversation here. It's something that we're doing for its own sake, that might not necessarily lead to some moral formation.

So I'm wondering in your mind, how would you piece together liberal education as a contemplative pursuit of truth for its own sake or reflection on truth for its own sake, and then liberal education as moral formation ordered towards self-knowledge and human flourishing and cultivation and virtue, including moral virtue, which I think you are saying is something that you think liberal education will also lead students to work?

Jen Frey:

They're the same thing. That's what I would say. Let's talk about the idea of the great conversation, which is a fine way of thinking about it. I'm not opposed to that. I'm not saying, we tried that and it failed, so let's try something else. Of course engaging with the liberal arts tradition is entering in this great conversation. I've been in that great conversation my entire adult life. I love it. But let's think about conversation. Conversation, in fact, if it's going to go anywhere, requires more than just skill. A conversation if it's genuine requires a give and take between its participants, that depends on certain virtues of character. It's a fact. And we all know from experience people that frankly aren't worth talking to. And the reason they're not worth talking to is that they argue in bad faith. They don't listen. They are just in the conversation to dominate you and to win.

And so they'll do any cheap little move to win the conversation. And those are people I avoid talking to, because you're not going to get anywhere with them. You're not going to learn anything from them. And that will to dominate, what St. Augustine called the 'libido dominandi'. That is absolutely opposed to the search for wisdom. And so again, I just think we need to get real about what a community of learners, what dialectic, serious dialectic takes. And Aristotle saw quite plainly, as Plato did as well, as did most of what I would call the perennial philosophy, saw that dialectic wisdom requires virtue. And people get

freaked out when you start to talk about virtues. But it's really sort of, this is just common sense stuff, you have to be patient and generous in a classroom.

You have to be respectful of other people and their views in a classroom. You have to be willing to concede to others. You have to take yourself out of it. You have to develop certain habits, not just skills. You have to develop certain habits of mind and character if you are really going to grow in the intellectual life. And I'm not afraid or ashamed to say that.

Steve McGuire:

That's great. That's great. The idea of the freedom to search for the truth. That raises a couple of different questions for me. One, you have a background at the University of Chicago. You're familiar with their famous Chicago principles, the Kalven Report, and the idea of institutional neutrality and that sort of thing. I wonder there, you mentioned this word freedom and you're going to form an honors college, and obviously you have a particular vision of what liberal education ought to be, but you're going to be hiring a faculty probably or putting together a faculty. I wonder how do you balance putting together a program that you think serves the purposes that it ought to serve, but then also maybe being open, the academic freedom of other faculty members as well as possibly looking to cultivate intellectual diversity among your faculty members?

Jen Frey:

Well, I have been on the side of the academic freedom. Before it was this super hot button issue than it is now, but I've never changed my position. I fully support academic freedom. I'm a member of the AFA and I support Fire and all the work that they do, and I support Chicago's vision. And none of that is opposed to what I want to do in the honors college. All faculty should have academic freedom. But in the honors college we're teaching, at least a huge part of the curriculum will be set, right? Because it's important that our students be reading the same text even if they're not in class together. Because it's a living learning community and we want the conversation to be outside the classroom as well.

And again, we are committed to the idea that certain texts really are critical, they're critical to a liberal arts education, and we can have interesting conversations about what those texts are and the faculty will be involved in that conversation. Academic freedom is set in many ways, but certainly in terms of their other teaching and their own research, of course they have complete freedom and I'm not opposed to that at all.

Steve McGuire:

Great. So when you're looking to find faculty, the curriculum set, hire somebody who operates in the Aristotelian tradition, I guess you could argue virtually every philosopher in some way operates in the Aristotelian tradition, someone more like yourself. On the other hand you could hire somebody who is say more a follower of someone like Derrida or something like that. And Derrida is someone who he read classic texts, he analyzed them, but he probably, I'm assuming a fairly different take than you would on what one takes away from these texts. I wonder, in terms of putting together a faculty, do you see value in having people there who will approach these texts in a variety of ways from different perspectives within the tradition?

Jen Frey:

I would say that generally, yes, I put a very high value on real intellectual diversity. And one of the things that I think is unfortunate in some parts of higher ed is all the ways in which that's not so subtly

discouraged. I taught in the Great Books Core at the University of Chicago, and it was, to use an overused word, it really truly was transformative for me and set me down the current path that I'm on. And if you teach in the Core, we have these meetings every Monday where everyone teaching in the Core gets together and a different faculty member will lead the meeting. And it was incredible. It was incredible intellectual experience. We were all quite different, both in terms of our disciplines and our perspectives and approaches to these texts. We had incredibly lively discussions. It was a very Chicago kind of thing. It was beautiful. I loved it.

And it wasn't because I necessarily agreed with what anyone was saying, but I always came out of those meetings with a sense of just renewed excitement and just realizing just how rich these texts are. So yeah, that's exactly the kind of thing that I want to recreate, because I think it's rare and I think it shouldn't be rare. And I think that for me it reconnected me with the sorts of experiences that drew me to the academy in the first place. And I was like, this is why I'm doing this. This is great.

Steve McGuire:

That's great. It sounds like whatever perspectives people bring with them, whatever conclusions they draw, in a way that's not necessarily the point. It's a commitment to being a part of the conversation and to seeking the truth through the conversation that is the unifying factor.

Jen Frey:

I think in terms of hiring, there are lots of different aspects to that, but somebody would need to be committed to the idea that reading these texts is important and that liberal education is important. And the actual mission of the honors college, because obviously we don't want people teaching in the college that think this is all stupid, not worth doing. That would be self undermining.

Steve McGuire:

That could be one of your preferred qualifications. Doesn't think this is stupid.

Jen Frey:

That's right. That's right. It's pretty minimal. No, but the thing is, I'm a philosopher and I don't like being around people who disagree with me. It's neither interesting nor exciting. That space of dialectic actually requires disagreement. And maybe it's just worth saying what I mean by dialectic. A lot of questions aren't dialectical, they just have an answer. Like, what time is it? That just has an answer. People are going to be right or wrong about what that answer is. But a question like whether, is time linear? That doesn't just have an answer. And in fact there are cases for different answers. And a dialectical question is like that. A dialectical question allows for opposing responses. I'm a philosopher, those are the kinds of questions that I love. Those are my whole life. And those are the kinds of questions that we're going to be asking in the Honors College curriculum, which is a general curriculum.

We expect our students to have some major, statistically speaking I think the majority of those majors will be something pre-professional, but we want to give them a real general liberal arts education as a foundation for going into whatever specialized research they're going to do. And we think that this is incredibly important. And we also think you can have both. You can walk and chew gum. I've been at other institutions that do that well, and I think that R1 and R2 universities can and should do that well. But it takes a lot of thought and reflection about what that really looks like. And I think what's happened at a lot of R1 institutions is that the general education has become a very watered down and coherent mess. And I would like to suggest that that's not good.

Steve McGuire:

Right. Yeah, not good. Let's switch gears and talk about curriculum a little bit. You have mentioned reading classic texts. I see that you recently had an exchange with Roosevelt Montas and others in Liberty Matters. And Roosevelt Montas of course was the director of the famous program at Columbia University, and he's engaged in a lot of dialogue about how do you determine what the canon is and how do you set a curriculum in Great Books program? And of course there's quite a bit of argument about that today and has been for quite some time, especially with regard to questions about, say including female authors or including minority authors or maybe authors who haven't been historically included in what has been regarding as the canon. I think I'd like to ask you two questions. The first is just generally, what do you think the value or the importance is of reading old books?

Why should we go back and read Aristotle? Or even if there is some wisdom in Aristotle, why not just read a textbook summary? We can just glean what's still valuable, or maybe we should read someone who's more modern, which I've found for my students increasingly means someone who wrote something in the last 10 years. For them modern doesn't mean since Thomas Hobbes or something like that. And then the second question, which I already alluded to is, well, what about the canon wars, is it important to include female voices? Is it important to include minority voices? And if so, why?

Jen Frey:

Thank you. There's a lot in that question. So let me start with the question of why ancient texts. Let's go back to my claim that a liberal education should be cultivating wisdom. Practical wisdom requires memory. When Thomas Aquinas talks about prudence, he says it has integral parts. What are integral parts? The integral parts are the habits that are necessary for the virtue to even be cultivated, let alone exercised. It depends on, in a way things outside of it. And one of the first ones he mentions is memory. You have to be able to remember if you're going to going to deliberate well. And that seems obvious, but when we think about it more deeply, we have to recognize that we are a historical animal. We live in time and a historical way. The past bears on the present, the past bears on the future, and this is a fact, and interestingly is the future can also bear on the past.

And one thing that's really disconcerting to me and disappointing, is the extent to which through no fault of their own, young people today know almost nothing about history. I think that's both sad and dangerous. It's dangerous for democracy, and it shows some of the really deep problems and education today. The thing is, we do need to understand our own tradition, and I'm very committed to that. You can't enter into conversation if you have no idea what people have been saying. And you can't really understand your own beliefs. The thing is, what does a liberal education give you? It gives you your own beliefs. Everybody has beliefs. You enter college, you have all these beliefs. But if you stop and think about it, how many of those beliefs can you actually justify? And what I found as a young person was almost none of them.

I have all these really strong beliefs, but once you pressed on them, it's like, I don't actually know why I believe any of this. It's just what I've been told. So in some sense the beliefs weren't really mine. They were put in me by others. And some of those beliefs I still have today, but a lot of them I don't. And what's the difference? The difference is a liberal education. I just think that if you're really going to come to have beliefs that you feel like you can justify, you have to enter into that conversation. And you have to know in a really deep and broad sense how we have come to think in the ways that we do. And one of the things that I found when I started reading ancient texts was just this sense of my mind being completely blown by just how different it was.

And it was just, again, transformative for me. It opened up a lot of imaginative possibilities that weren't there for me before. And so, yeah, I think it's critical. The point about the canon being exclusionary. I've

actually done work, I've been doing work on this. I'm an academic advisor for the Classic Learning Test, which is a company that has a testing alternative. It's like an alternative to the college board. So it's like an SAT, ACT alternative that is grounded in classical texts, right? It tests your knowledge of them. And I was in a project with many other scholars that are also on the academic board of advisors, and our task was to look at the author bank and to consider ways that it can be expanded or more inclusive. So we did that work, and I think that that work is important.

However, I think it's not enough. You don't want to add someone to the canon just because they're a woman. That's not a qualification. It has to be good. It has to be influential, it has to make sense in the curriculum. And so that was a lot of work that took a lot of, there was a lot of back and forth. We didn't always disagree. I'm proud of the revised author bank that we came up with. I think those are important conversations to have. And I do understand that representation matters, but the argument has to be more than that. There has to be coherence to the curriculum, and there also has to be an acknowledgement that certain texts rightly or wrongly just have outsized influence. Take for example, Hobbes, Leviathan, there can be probably no text I can think of that I disagree with more than Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan. But you have to read it, because you just honestly can't understand modernity without it.

I think that you have to balance these considerations when you're coming up with curriculum. And I think that work is important. I think that any canon is always up for revision, but what you don't want to do is to throw the baby out with the bath water and say, well, it's just all a bunch of dead white men, and it's oppressive or something. The thing is, and this is something that I say in the Liberty Matters piece, why did Aristotle speak? So why did Plato and Aristotle and Augustine and Aquinas speak to me when I was 18, when I was a young woman? Was it in all of their discussions of how women can't reason? No, it was not. Right? The reason that I could see myself in those texts wasn't because they were women or whatever, it was because of the broad vision that they were putting forward of how to think about being a human being.

I think that would it have been great if Aristotle didn't take such a dim view of women and their abilities? Yeah. But he was living in ancient Athens. It was a very different world, and it's important to place him in his context. And I think we can do that. And what I want to encourage students to do is to see themselves in ideas, what speaks to your mind and why.

Steve McGuire:

That's great. What about Western versus global or western versus non-Western? Because I think there's a lot of push to say that we're living in a globalized world, and so students should be exposed to that and thinking globally rather than within a western perspective. You might argue that, well, no, kind of similar to what you were saying a moment ago, which is that there's a coherent tradition across time here. You go back to Plato and Aristotle. And then there are thinkers who come along and they interact with them. Christianity is added into the mix and you have to work out what's the relationship between Christianity and Greek philosophy going to be. And that has to be worked out over and over again. And so in fact, someone like say Leo Strauss would say that the lifeblood of western civilization is the constant interaction between Athens and Jerusalem.

There's all kinds of variations on that. But the idea is that, well, there is actually a coherent conversation across time that's taking place, that has a particular influence on why the United States is here and why it is the way that it is, and that students should learn that with priority. And that's not saying that it's not important to read Confucius or that Confucius isn't wise or something like that, or that you couldn't put Confucius into conversation with people in what's normally called the Western. What are your thoughts on that? Because you could go and say, no, it's got to be a global curriculum, so we're going to pull from

all over the world, different traditions, and there would be value in that. But it sounds like you're thinking more along the lines of the Western tradition.

Jen Frey:

Yes, I am thinking more along the lines of the Western tradition. My friend Eric Adler, he's an advocate of the global tradition, and he makes a lot of interesting arguments for it in his most recent book, *The Battle of the Classics*. There is a lot of value in that. I certainly wouldn't deny that. I also think you shouldn't bite off more than you can chew. And I think the more you try to expand, in some ways it just becomes too big. And again, I think that there is a stronger case for focusing on the stream that flows out of Athens and Jerusalem, because those are the mainstreams that explain our world. That is to say the world in which I live and operate, which is the United States and our American universities. And so I think it makes sense to prioritize that tradition, but I also think that there are so many ways outside of the classroom that you can bring in other perspectives.

One thing that's so exciting about an honors college is that it's so much more than classes. That's at the heart of it, but it really is a living learning community where there's so much going on outside the classroom and there are going to be plenty of opportunities for lectures or workshops on Confucius or different traditions. All of that is fine. Well, more than fine, all of that is good. But in terms of the curriculum, because the honors college is a replacement gen ed curriculum, there's only so much we can do, especially if you are a petroleum engineer, which I think is one of the number one majors at the University of Tulsa. There's only so much room you have for classes outside your major. And so we have to make some tough choices. That's just the reality of this kind of thing.

And I think studying the tradition out of which our institutions have arisen isn't saying, well, this is the best. It's just, again, to acknowledge the role that memory plays in practical wisdom. And that's the argument.

Steve McGuire:

That's great. The next thing I want to ask you about is how this vision fits into the contemporary American university. And I'm thinking of some things you said in an essay you wrote about a year and a half ago in *The Point*, of the universe and the university. You talked in there about how you're a philosopher. I think you're thinking of philosophy in particular, but probably generally the humanities that they're in crisis. And I know there's some people who say, well, the humanities have been in crisis ever since there's been the humanities and that sort of thing. But it does seem particularly bad right now. And I think they are also counter-cultural, something you were recently called in an article at *The College Fix*, I believe it was.

But we live in a fairly utilitarian world, and I think that's a big part of western modernity in general. But especially these days, I'd say since say 2008, 2009 in particular, there's just an increasing pressure for education to have some obvious financial benefit. If you ask students, freshmen, when they show up for school, why did you come to university? Almost all of them will say, because I had to to get a job. That'll probably be the first thing that comes to mind. The second thing will probably be, well, all the parties like classical liberal education or philosophical education for most will be fairly far down the list. But anyways, you've just got this extreme pressure, and it sounds like you're said a lot of your students are probably going to be in more vocational programs or STEM or business, and then the honors college will be in addition to that.

But in general, how do you make the case to spend time and resources, both from say a student perspective, but also I think from an institutional perspective on the education that you'll be offering in the honors college?

Jen Frey:

To be honest I think we have to go back and reflect about what higher education is. What is that adjective really doing? It's higher in cost, including opportunity costs. It's higher in whatever prestige or something. But those don't seem like the relevant senses of higher. I don't think enough people have stopped to reflect on what it would mean to lose meaningful higher education. The idea that we need to create a space where people can really reflect, that's the goal, is actually really to seriously and in a disciplined way reflect on what is a human being in citizen. And the pressures against that come from so many different sides. There's the activist, we constantly just have to be working for the revolution sort of thing. The point of study is to change the world, et cetera, et cetera. That's one line of pressure against it.

Another line of pressure, again, is this utilitarian push to make everything about work. But really I just think people have not stopped to pause and think enough about what it means to lose these institutions that are just dedicated to reflection and study for its own sake. And what was the value of that to begin with? I recently wrote a piece on Martin Luther King, Jr. since it was recently the holiday in which we honor him. About the extent to which his activism grew out of his liberal education. And I sat down and I read his autobiography, and by his own account on his own telling of his own story, the connection is absolutely essential. It was in the university that he discovered a vision for his activism. And he was primarily a philosopher. What he studied more than anything else was philosophy. And of course there was also theology.

And what he came to see in all of that philosophical and theological reflection was a vision of justice and a strategy for the pursuit of justice that he felt represented what he really and truly believed was good. But it took him a while. I just think that we have lost our sense of the value of stopping and reflecting for its own sake, where you just are trying to figure out what's true and you're not yoking your reasoning and your study to the tyranny of outcomes, whether those outcomes are political or whether those outcomes are for the sake of work. You simply are trying to understand what is true, what is good, what is beautiful. And we had institutions, we had carved out institutions for that because we recognized the value of it. It was obvious. It's not obvious anymore, obviously.

So we need people who are able to articulate that value. And this is also critical, who can exemplify it, who can show people this is what it is. That's what I'm trying to do.

Steve McGuire:

That's great. You can ask, well, what are you working for? Work is a means to an end, and it seems like liberal education is one of the things that you can afford to do or find the time and ability to do after the work is done. But then it does seem to have this mutually supportive relationship where in turn, like what you're saying with Martin Luther King Jr. that affording people that time and the space to do this reflection and this thinking can then come back and actually have a pragmatic positive impact, even though that's not its essential or main purpose when it's being undertaken for its own sake.

Jen Frey:

The thing is, again, in a way it's this just common sense. Human beings need more than work. People need to secure their material needs, so they need money and shelter, but people have spiritual needs.



We're rational animals, and people also need to find meaning and purpose and value in their lives. And people need to be able to understand, exactly as you said, what am I working for? What am I trying to build? Why am I doing any of this? And the university if it's doing its job, is creating a space for a reflection on, what do I value and why? Who do I think I am? What kind of thing am I? What would a flourishing society look like, and why would it look like that? When you stop and think about it, it's just to me it's like, well, obviously that's critical to any civilization. It's critical for a human being.

Steve McGuire:

Right. Sure. You mentioned that we're rational animals, earlier I think you mentioned we're historical animals. Aristotle-

Jen Frey:

Those are two sides of the same coin, I think.

Steve McGuire:

What about political animals? You've mentioned a couple of times things that I think move in the direction of reflecting on that as well. I'm interested in what you've said a couple of times about how the honors college will be a living and learning community. These students will presumably be together not just in class, but outside of class as well, and getting to know one another and befriend one another. And that's part of the whole process or part of what you're offering. Also at the very beginning of our conversation, you also talked about the ends that are being pursued as being ends in common. They're common goods. I think maybe an example, take something like wisdom. If I become wise, this isn't a zero-sum game. I don't have to take wisdom away from you in order for them to be wise.

And so it benefits me and it benefits the community if I become wiser. And likewise if you become wiser and anyone else who is in the classroom. It's an example of something where we can all come together in a sense of true community around a common good that we can all share in and benefit from at the same time. And obviously there's a lot of talk these days about higher education being politicized, but also more generally about political polarization in the United States, declining trust in the institutions of democracy. There's these scary stats about how young people increasingly don't think it really matters whether we have a democracy or not. And one could get the sense, although I think this is overblown, but you could get the sense that things feel like they're starting to become a part of the seams in our society in the United States in particular.

And so I wonder maybe if you want to just say a few things about how the kind of education that you intend to offer in this honors college could have a positive impact on these political and social tensions or problems that we're experiencing today.

Jen Frey:

I do think we're political animals. But I think that in the deep and fundamental sense we're born into political communities and can't really become fully human outside of them. We need to live under laws and norms, and there has to be authority. Because we need justice, but also because we need virtue generally, and we need to acquire language. And also just human beings are by nature, animals that take a surprising amount of time to just even be at the point where they're not just going to die. Other animals aren't like that. And also human beings are in very interesting ways self-destructive in ways that other animals just really are not. I think, yes, we are political animals, however I don't think that we

need more activism in our universities. I think a lot of people think that somehow we're going to fix our universities by having a different kind of activism in them.

I don't think that's true at all. I think that part of higher education reform is getting some of the activism out of it. So again, and that's because I think that first and foremost, essentially it's a space for critical reflection and free and open inquiry. And I think that to a certain obvious extent, activism is opposed to that. The activist knows. Activist knows exactly what he or she wants, and their inquiry is yoked towards the realization of that. And I just think that if you already think you have it all figured out, you're not in the right space for general liberal learning. I don't think we need more activism. What was the other aspect of your question? I'm sorry. There was something else there.

Steve McGuire:

Well, I was just thinking to what you had said earlier about the idea that these are goods in common, and I was thinking that this is a way of modeling community or participating in common goods together in a way that overcomes the things that divide us.

Jen Frey:

Yes. Okay. Right. The point about division, thank you. We are incredibly divided. Part of that reason is because we have entire streams of seeking profit that really depend on dividing us. There's a whole economic system that's built up around the need for us to be permanently divided. I think that in terms of what we're doing in higher education, what we're doing in education generally, because I do work not only in higher education, but in primary and secondary education as well. And I think that the fate of higher education is tied in interesting ways to the fate of primary and secondary education. But I would simply say that we really need to create spaces where people who have very different perspectives and very different backgrounds and very different first principles can enter into dialectic exchange with one another. And I think that this does have to be modeled, and it has to be modeled throughout the university.

It has to be modeled by administrators as well, and not just professors. And I think that it's pretty safe to say that we haven't been modeling that well. The cultural wars came to campus a long time ago, but they have not served higher education well. I just don't think there's any argument that they've served higher education well. My view is you can culture war on your own time, but when you're really engaged in liberal learning, you need to set that aside and you need to be in a different space. I think that this is actually very critical for young people to see, because people aren't showing them how to do this. And the truth is that, if that thing is being modeled for them in a serious way, it would have, it would have I think, incredible impact well beyond the classroom. But that's something that you have to invite people into.

And the only way that you can do that isn't by just coming in and wielding your sword and telling them this is the way it will be. That's not how you build an institution, it just isn't. That's not how you bring people to the table who don't already completely agree with you. You have to do the patient hard work of showing people, you have to model it. You have to show people how to do this. And that's what I want to try to do. I want to show people it's possible. I know that it's possible. Like anything good, it's hard.

Steve McGuire:

I'm thinking earlier when we were talking about what you had written in your essay in *The Point* about philosophy being in crisis. Would you see that more as a cultural problem rather than a political problem

in the sense that reason that philosophy or the humanities or the great books in general have been devalued, that's owing more to features of our culture like it's instrumentalism and that thing? Or do you think that there's also been political or activist push in some cases to either alter those kinds of programs or to push them out of the way and make room for forms of study?

Jen Frey:

The thing is, I don't think it's any one thing. I think it's a perfect storm of a lot of things that over time have really pushed liberal learning to the sidelines. And everything that you've mentioned has been a problem. But I could add probably at least 50 more. And that's why it's so difficult, because we can't actually reduce it to one thing. There are people who just think, it's DEI or it's this, or it's that. It's not any one thing. That's the truth. And it's not like you can just do this one thing and it's solved. And I would also say that the way that you try to bring about reform really matters, because you can't get to liberal learning by just, you can't get to Socrates by being Callicles. Right? It doesn't work that way.

You can't say, well, what we really want is dialectic and so we'll just impose it. I think you end up becoming a fun house mirror image of what you say you oppose. And people see that. And young people, young people understand and they see exactly through that, because you can't actually fool young people. I love college students, and one reason that I love them is you can't fool them like that. They'll see, your actions have to match your values.

Steve McGuire:

Interesting. One last one I guess on this theme before we move towards the conclusion. The argument out there is that the universities have essentially been captured by the left or by progressives. We could debate what the appropriate term would be. You might just say Democrats. But they've been historically captured. And the problem with the people who have captured it is that they're not interested in intellectual diversity. What they really want to do, they're more activists in terms of how they think about these things, and they just want to reproduce themselves. And they basically want everybody who works at the university to be within a very small Overton window that at least leans towards the left.

And so the idea of negotiating with people like that, or trying a more virtuous approach towards trying to fix the universities or write the balance or whatever you want to call it, is just not realistic. They've shown that they're not going to respond to that. So this is the argument that you're getting from a certain segment of the right, is that, and it's not just in higher ed, it's everywhere in American politics. We need to embrace political power and be willing to use political power in order to push back against those who have shown that they're willing to use political power to get what they want. I just wonder, what is your response to that kind of argument?

Jen Frey:

I think it's both misleading and unhelpful. For every Josh Katz, there's a Steven Salaita, right? The idea that the truth is about the way that most universities run is that the bottom line is money and prestige. I think that if you don't see it through that realistic lens, you're bound to misinterpret a lot of what is going on. In terms of university professors being fired or academic freedom violations, the reality is it comes from all sides. The real thing that I want to say is that education reform, any institutional reform is hard work. It's a long slog. I'm deeply committed to it, but I would forgive a lot of people for not wanting to get into that long, hard slog. And the thing about institutional reform is that you know, have to, especially in the academy, the academy is a special institution. And I think that we need to try to respect the processes that are in place.

And a lot of what has gone so dramatically wrong in higher ed, whether it is the unjust firing of Steven Salaita or whether it's something that fits the more right wing narrative. Either way, in those cases, what happened was that the processes that were in place were either abused or just not respected at all. And so we have to stand up for those processes. And we also have to think more strategically about just allowing for there to be diversity of institutions. Now, I've spent the majority of my adult life in public state, right? State schools. I'm at the University of South Carolina. I got my PhD at the University of Pittsburgh, I went to Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. And I am a champion of public higher education generally.

But I think that when we think about state institutions, we do have to take very seriously that this is an institution whose mission is at the surface of its state. And so all citizens of the state need to feel like it's a place where they can come and have an education. And for that reason it should not be ideologically coded either way. And so that's what we need to recommit ourselves to, is to serving the diverse population of a state. I'm just not convinced that, for example, just a conservative takeover of a public university is a meaningful way forward. That was supposed to be the problem. I just don't know how you solve a problem by just reduplicating it. Look, it will be effective in the short run. You are now in charge. But I think in the long run, what people might find is that it's maybe not a great strategy for running an institution, because the truth is for institutions to run well, you have to have buy-in.

I'm not convinced that you get it that way, let's put it that way. And I also don't think that the language of war itself is the correct language through which to understand liberal learning. And so that's a case where again, you're not modeling what you say you value. You say you value dialogue. You say you value liberal learning, but you don't speak an act as if you value that. So again, what are you modeling for future students? Is that the way you want them to be in the classroom, for example?

Steve McGuire:

Interesting.

Jen Frey:

In the classroom, do you want them to approach study as, quote, vanquishing your enemies? That's not liberal learning. That's like maybe debate, and that's something different. Debate is not dialectic. You go into a debate, you know what you think and you want to win. That's not liberal learning.

Steve McGuire:

I guess there is a place for that in the university, but that's certainly not what it sounds like you'll be seeking to focus on or to cultivate in the honors college that you'll be starting. I should mention by the way, you were talking about the classical learning test earlier, and ACTA, we actually recently partnered with them, and we're going to be offering a joint scholarship to students. ACTA has a program, you may have heard of it or maybe not. It's called What Will They Learn? And we evaluate the core requirements and a few other things at universities around the country. And so the idea is that students that score a certain score on the classical learning test and then attend a school that has at least a B grade in What Will They Learn? Will be eligible to apply for these scholarships.

Jen Frey:

Well, that's fantastic. That's fantastic.

Steve McGuire:

Neat, little joint venture going forward.

Jen Frey:

And I am happily partnering with CLT in terms of trying to bring students to the honors college.

Steve McGuire:

Good.

Jen Frey:

And I will say in terms of people who are doing education reform that I really admire, Jeremy Tate is really high up on that list.

Steve McGuire:

Right up on the list. He seems great. I'll actually be speaking at the Classical Learning Summit that they're doing down in Florida here in about a month. I haven't met him in-person-

Jen Frey:

Fantastic.

Steve McGuire:

... but I'll then hopefully.

Jen Frey:

Fantastic.

Steve McGuire:

But just as a way of wrapping things up, I'd like to just go back more concretely to the plans for the honors college. You're still at the University of South Carolina. You'll be joining the University of Tulsa, I assume in the fall.

Jen Frey:

July 1st.

Steve McGuire:

Okay. In July, and then the fall-

Jen Frey:

Although basically I'm already doing-

Steve McGuire:

You already doing two jobs.

Jen Frey:

I'm doing about five jobs right now, which I don't recommend.

Steve McGuire:

Maybe let's just close by, if you'd like to say a couple things about what joining the honors college would mean for students at the University of Tulsa and why students there might want to join it, what they could expect, why parents might want to send their kids to the University of Tulsa so that they could do petroleum engineering and study Aristotle with you. I don't know how much you have laid out so far, but when could they apply? What will they be doing when they get there? Anything you can say about that?

Jen Frey:

Applications to TU for next academic year that's already been taken care of. And so we're really talking about 2024. And then I think applications open in September. And so, one of the things that I'm working on now is, in addition to hiring staff, I am working on the kinds of materials and websites and things that we need to put together. But in terms of what my elevator pitch is to students, I just want to say coming into the honors college is going to create a wealth of opportunities for them. First and foremost, of course is the opportunity to have this accelerated, integrated liberal arts education, which is going to be a fun and exciting adventure. But there's also going to be a lot of mentoring and support. Our students will do some honors thesis in order to graduate with honors, but we really are trying to build a college in the old-fashioned sense of the collegium.

And so I want to talk about all of the different aspects of that college experience that I think will be very attractive to them. In terms of parents, what I want to stress is just that the honors college, here's one thing that I say to parents all the time. Sometimes I feel like parents are really worried about the wrong things or focusing on the wrong things when they look at colleges. They're focused on various outcomes or various forms of credentialing. But the thing is, almost all the schools you're looking at have all of that already. What does the TU Honors College have on top of that? And this is the thing that I think parents need to focus on more. What really happens to young people when they go to university, is they make the friends that will really shape them for the rest of their lives.

And what kind of friends really do you want your children to be making? And what kind of graduate is that university producing? What kind of community is there? What kind of student is attracted to this school? Are they attracted to it because it's a party school? What's drawing students in? And I think in terms of the honors college, that's a place where you can expect your child to be making the friends that are going to shape them for the rest of their lives. And that too is a very important formation that is just natural and it will happen and is part of university education. And so it really is important that you look at the community that they're entering. And what I would say to parents is, I can promise you that this is going to be a community for your students that is going to be positive and transformative.

Steve McGuire:

Well, that sounds like a great place to end. Good luck with the move. Good luck with the new program. I'm sure it's going to be a great success. And I'm really glad that you're going to be starting and building this program there. Thanks for joining us today.

Jen Frey:

Thanks for inviting me on to talk about this stuff. I really appreciate it.