

Michael Poliakoff:

Welcome to Higher Ed Now. I'm Michael Poliakoff, the president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. And it is a pleasure and an honor to welcome to Higher Ed Now Chuck Davis, who is the chairman and the president of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance. Welcome Chuck.

Chuck Davis:

Thank you, Michael. It's great to be here and to speak with you again.

Michael Poliakoff:

I'd like to start by asking you, what in your experience, whether as a MIT student years ago, or in your role as an alumnus, what's given you the passion and the drive to take up the helm now of the Alumni Free Speech Alliance?

Chuck Davis:

Well, as a student, I was coming from the south, so a little bit of a minority going into Cambridge to begin with, and I was a ROTC scholarship student. And then while that was in the 80s and the Reagan buildup during that period, it was still very much an outlier. So my experience at university right off the bat was being someone who was a little bit conventional and there's attributes of themselves that you really can't hide or suppress. When I was on active duty, I was actually stationed in Germany and I got to visit Eastern Europe both before and after the war and meet people who had grown up in communist societies where expression was suppressed. And frankly, a lot of their personal stories were heartbreaking. They simply had not had the opportunity, and I literally saw people streaming across the border just to get to an area where they could express themselves.

And it wasn't mainly an economic migration, people felt suppressed. And then if you fast-forward a little bit later after I've left the military, I've gone to grad school, I'm working in a bank in New York, which is where I spent most of my career. My sister took a different path and she actually became a history professor. My brother-in-law was also a history professor and then department head and dean. And so for two decades I started hearing these stories about what was going on on campus and how there was an orthodoxy setting in. And people who did not conform were seeing their careers impacted. And so this all began to sound pretty familiar in a bad way. Is that distressingly similar to the stories that I had heard coming from people who grew up in East Germany, in Poland and in the Soviet Union.

Michael Poliakoff:

And I think you're driving towards a point that is extremely important for us to remember, that our politics as Brett Stevens has reminded us will be downstream from culture. And if we allow the universities to slide into this repressive operation, then we are not just damaging the quality of education but damaging the future of our nation. And I know that you as somebody who actually won the Bronze Star for service to this country would take that very much to heart.

Chuck Davis:

Yeah, very much so, Michael, and you, excuse me, you right off the bat, went to culture. And that's something that we've at AFSA very much focusing on that to make universities places that are safe for free expression, is it a culture change. And there's a lot of tools to make that change and we're really trying to identify them and address this as a cultural issue. There's unfortunately no single silver bullet that's going to help with that.

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Michael Poliakoff:

I want to talk in some detail about your grand strategy for the alumni free speech [inaudible].

Chuck Davis:

I'll oversell it.

Michael Poliakoff:

This is an extremely important moment for American higher education. Of course, we are the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. And since 1995 we have been laboring on this front. We were overjoyed in October, 2021 when Stuart Taylor, who's on act as board of directors and Ed Yingling published that wonderful op-ed in the Wall Street Journal. And even more thrilled by the strong response that it got, how many alumni around the country responded to this? And you took the helm of AFSA in January of 2023.

Chuck Davis:

January this year.

Michael Poliakoff:

And already we have seen some extraordinary growth in October of 2021 when AFSA first had its debut, there were five very fine member groups, one of which was of course the one that I think you were heading at the time, the MIT Free Speech Alliance.

Chuck Davis:

Actually MIT was not one of the first five. I joined shortly there afterwards and actually was already a member when they asked me to step up there.

Michael Poliakoff:

Okay.

Chuck Davis:

It was Washington and Lee, UVA, Davidson, UNC and Princeton were I believe the founding five.

Michael Poliakoff:

Right. Thank you for clarifying that. I want to go back to the MIT alliance in a moment. But what I find so remarkable is that from those five founders, we saw 16 groups when we had our summit just this last March. And I understand there are 15 more in the pipeline. So with that, I want to turn back to you, the grand strategy. What are you envisioning now for the Alumni Free Speech Alliance?

Chuck Davis:

Okay, well let me, I'll get to that. But first off, I have to say thank you to ACTA and yourself, Michael for the support in helping nurture the alumni movement and AFSA specifically. And I'll still relatively early on to the discussions, let me lead in with what I think is the selling point and the value add for AFSA, which is that we've discussed this before, that the alumni organized focused on a single university campus alumni groups are the essential but previously missing element in actually affecting change on

American campuses. And there's lots of groups out there. You guys are focused on universities AFSA's focused on free speech. There's a whole set. But what's never existed before is organized alumni groups who are focused on a particular university where they have particular standing to speak on the issues.

And I think you said it, I'm just flagrantly ripping off your phraseology, which is that they're the guardians of the culture and the values of their university. So I mean people get really passionate. I love MIT and I could tell you, coming from South Alabama, the opportunities that MIT opened to me, it was my entire life. And so that's what we want to make sure that everyone has an opportunity for. So with that, the grand strategy is simply that. One, we need more groups, we need... Five groups growing to 16, that's good, that's a 300% plus growth. But if you look at the number of universities in the country, it's still a 0% market penetration when you round it. So our big audacious goal is I'd really like to see 75 or 100 groups in three years. The second thing, and I'll come back to that growth strategy in a moment. The second point that we want to focus on is actually providing support and helping the groups that are already up and running.

We looked at a variety of ways of doing that and some of them are simple and actually don't take any money. A lot of them do require some funds and staffing. So for example, we set up a YouTube channel so that there's a mechanism to broadcast and I'd like to invite anyone to check out the Alumni Free Speech Alliance YouTube channel. So for example, the MIT group had a debate on DEI, there was maybe a hundred people in the audience live there was 900 online live watching it. And in the month or two afterwards, I think we're up to about 24,000 views on that debate. So there's a real opportunity to reach people and share. And then there's the third area that we really haven't done much on, but I'm going to place hold it because I think it's important and I call it leveling the playing field.

And so the point I make when I talk about this is that, there's a lot of speech suppression. Fire is known for having their database, they've been around a while and they're doing good work. No one thinks we'd be better off without them, but they're still recording new incidents. And again, these are only the ones spiraling bothers to respond to at over 12 a month on average. I mean if you look at it in terms of school days, there's almost one every other day. So clearly people need more support in enforcing their rights. And I want to look at ways and question and probe so that people smarter than I on this can help identify ways to remove barriers, to make it easy for people to stand up for themselves.

So that's the groundwork. Our three bullet points are, grow the number of chapters, support the chapters that we have, then make it easier. Find ways to make it easier through policy changes or other suggestions for people to actually stand up for themselves. And then going into a little more detail on the growing existing groups, there's... We have ongoing discussions right now with 24 different groups of alumni who have reached out to us. It's really a vast swath of universities, everything from Dartmouth in the northeast to UCLA in the southwest. I think, and we maybe have University of Oregon, Michigan, Michigan State. It's really quite a, and even Berkeley, which I love because they're the home of the free speech movement. So we're working with those groups and what we're trying to do is make supporting them and getting them up and running a standardized repeatable process to make it as easy as we can.

We're also focusing on what are the things that people find difficult or what are the blockers? So that we can provide assistance for them. So for example, one of the key things that people need to do is set up a website to reach out and contact other alumni and grow their membership and awareness. Of course there's tens of thousands, millions of websites, but most people actually haven't built one before. And how do you do it? How do I host it? How do I advertise it? Who's going to pay for it? Oh my goodness, this is not what I signed up for. I just want to help my school.

And so, we've set up some program and we've been able to get some funding from various people. And I like for example, to thank the Stanton Foundation, is finding vendors that not only we can recommend but also that we've contracted with. And when we see a group of alumni that have potential, we can

offer them, "Look, we've got websites, we will set up your website for you. Obviously you need to help us with the material and we'll host it for the first year while you get up and running." So the intent is to remove as many barriers as possible for groups to get up and running.

Michael Poliakoff:

This is all absolutely wonderful and I think I hear you moving towards the twin pillars of campus change. One is clearly the resources to stand up to the offenses, the silencing, the challenging, the problems of administrators who will not protect free speech, which is where the alumni voice can be a powerful one. And the other the change of culture on campus, which is of course part of the enduring contribution. When I dream, what I'd like to think of is a time when students, and faculty wouldn't think about wanting to cancel. When they would find it absolutely contrary to everything they believe in to shout down a speaker. We're not nearly there.

Chuck Davis:

Oh no, not unfortunately. And I think a lot of this is also related to what some people have described as a monoculture on campus. As I am thinking that this might come up, this is why when I started talking about my experience with MIT, I led in with, I was always a little bit of an outsider and from an earlier age developed a comfort with that, and many people aren't though. And that was unusual. So when you have a culture that is very vocal and many people are speaking along the same lines, most people are not really that comfortable in standing up and going, "Wait a minute, I don't agree with this." Well, some cultures, some organizations are better at supporting that than others. And by all indications, universities are not particularly welcoming of dissent, although one would think that would be a core mission of the university is to critique, to analyze, to ask probing questions. But yet that mission or they may be, the implications of that mission seem to be, have become bothersome.

Michael Poliakoff:

You're quite right that we see a seam of really quite appalling things happening from Stanford to Pittsburgh just to take two of the more recent ones. But before we get our audience...

Chuck Davis:

you frozen, if you can still hear me.

Michael Poliakoff:

And Lord knows it was-

Speaker 3:

Michael, you have to do a restop because you froze. So take that question again.

Chuck Davis:

From to Stanford to Pittsburgh and then right after that you froze.

Michael Poliakoff:

You. You're absolutely right, Chuck, that we've seen a progression of really, really appalling incidents. One might say from west to east, from Stanford to Pittsburgh with lots of places in between. But before we get our audience into a pessimistic funk, I wanted to invite you to talk about some of the successes

that we've been seeing, some of which are really the work of AFSA or AFSA affiliates. You already mentioned MIT and the great debate. Who would've thought that one could have a high profile debate on DEI, but the MIT Free Speech Alliance saw that through. So I want to turn that over to you to give us some hope for a moment while we talk about the things that we have to do to continue the momentum.

Chuck Davis:

There is hope, Mike. And I think that's really the main point. So a point to emphasize is, for anyone listening to this that's concerned, you're not alone. And that's one of the real major points for not just AFSA, but each individual chapter is to provide support to people who, they feel empowered to actually stand up and speak out because, alumni are critical it's that critical voice and you can't ignore them long term. And so a few of the wins that the affiliated groups have racked up, and none of these are of course final, right? There's no final victories here, but steps in the right direction. So Cornell, the Cornell Group, Cornell Free Speech Alliance has been publicizing a lot of the issues on Cornell and they've been very aggressive in reaching out to both alumni and to the board. And of course, I'm pretty sure the administration would not acknowledge the causal relationship, but coincidentally, the Cornell president announced that this upcoming year is going to be a year of focus on free expression.

Again, they and AFSA's is watching that carefully to make sure that in fact they're follow through matches their promises. Stanford was the same way. In fact there's two wins there at Stanford due to the Stanford alumni group making noise, having contacts in the faculty and shining light. The Stanford IT organization had a language guide which was sort of very politically slanted and they were trying going to be reviewing and scrubbing all the websites to make sure that people used only approved language, which sounds fairly Orwellian. They also had what they called a protected identity harm system, which again, is kind of an outgrowth of a legitimate need that a university has for keeping behavioral records with students, how they were literally advertising this and even including posting on YouTube videos around, if someone says something that you found offensive, even if you don't think they meant it to be offensive, you can report them. "Go online." It was [inaudible] and in the extreme. Well that type of thing often doesn't stand up to publicity.

And they were able to generate publicity and through AFSA there was other contacts available. We have an explicit biweekly networking and exchange forum. And with the information that we were and contacts through there, people who had press contacts from other universities were able to help leverage and amplify the stories. And so we actually had stories in the Wall Street Journal around some of this, and that was directly a result of the AFSA connection where someone at another school was able to help out. MIT after famously canceling Dorian Abbott for unrelated views on DEI that unrelated to his conversation or his lecture, he was invited to, they announced a, I forget what they called it, may have to drop that flow, but, what a year... I'll just want to restart there. With MIT famously canceled Dorian Abbott because of his views on DEI, he was invited to present the Carlson lecture, which a very prestigious public lecture series, which was imminently qualified to give. And because of an uproar over his views on hiring on merit, which apparently some people find controversial, he was disinvited.

Now fast-forward and solely because of the uproar and the publicity that was sustained by the then new MIT Free Speech Alliance, the administration was essentially forced into appointing a committee to work on in creating a free expression statement. What they came out with is substantially similar to the Chicago principles and then it was actually with probably more contention than I would've expected, debated on and ultimately approved by the faculty. After that, the new MIT president Sally Kornbluth actually endorsed the statement, adopting it as official policy and then directed an effort to ensure that all of MIT's existing policies and procedures were reviewed to be made compliant with that statement of principle. So that was a huge win that we can say pretty clearly would not have happened without the

engagement of the MIT Free Speech Alliance and the alumni pressure that they brought UNC. They've been leading the way in a lot of things and they established a school of civic life recently to basically take an area and create... Sometimes you may decide that certain areas, maybe certain companies or departments are beyond reform or maybe they need competition.

And so they actually established a new school whose focus is on civil engagement, civil life with an inherent emphasis on free speech. They also formally and from my board of trustee level prohibited the use of DEI statements, which again starts to sound very political and I don't want to emphasize, at least from my perspective, it's not that I don't know of anyone that by word or deed these days is against equal opportunity for people. But in fact, what you're saying in the way these mandatory statements are done and scored, saying that you believe in equal opportunity will actually get you failed. [inaudible].

Michael Poliakoff:

I actually published an article in on Forbes about that a few years back when Berkeley premiered this. And the way that rubric was written, it actually would've made it impossible for a young Albert Einstein ever even to have his general theory of relativity reviewed by the faculty screening committee. Well, because they would've cut him immediately when he said, "I treat everybody the same." That's considered a failing answer.

Chuck Davis:

Well, think about it this way. Martin Luther King would've been failed or never even admitted to his doctoral program if he believed that we should judge everyone by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. Like, okay, Mr. King, you are a no go here and not suitable for this doctoral program.

Michael Poliakoff:

We are in a very, very strange world, rather a Louis Carroll world where it seems like we really did get pulled down the rabbit hole when we weren't watching. It's been a great catalyst to have these alumni groups. And what I'm so excited about as president of ACTA is the synergy that this is creating. UNC, I think I may have mentioned that my colleague, Armand [inaudible] and I led a board retreat in November. The board of trustees at Chapel Hill and the chancellor were there for a day and a half. And at that time, we got a chance to talk about the need for doing something that would create an independent unit, whether we called it a school or an institute. And it's wonderful to see what has happened because of the Martin Center's outreach in North Carolina and the alumni, North Carolina University alumni group that have created this kind of groundswell that the trustees could then pick up upon and further.

Of course, the battle's not over. We're going to have a lot of fighting to do in North Carolina to make sure that this is not pulled away by the accreditor or by any of those forces that really want to crush these independent movements that build so much intellectual diversity. And that'll pull all of us into that struggle. It's a struggle I'm proud to be part of.

Chuck Davis:

And one thing I think it's important to emphasize, Michael, is when we talk about things like that, these are cultural issues. And culture's a reflection of essentially everything in a society. In fact, it was more in the organizational sense, but I read a definition once of culture as the expected norms of how an organization operates. And really what that comes down to is, how do we as members of a civic society

or civil society interact with each other and our institutions within that society? And I think the point that's got so many people riled is that the view that I'm being civil, I'm treating people the way I would like to be treated, the old golden, the original golden rule. And in its changed for that people are actually responding negatively. And so there's pressure to act a certain way even when you have deeply held philosophical views that don't match that.

And again, people find it offensive. And I think that's something that a lot of folks don't really realize is that, there's goodwill and on both sides. I mean there's more than, I guess there's more than two sides is the point. And that a lot of times you have to be very careful not to demonize people that disagree with us. That rather we should ask questions and engage and work on understanding what exactly do you think? How do you feel about a particular issue? Because once you do that, then you can start asking why. And we need to encourage that. And that's how you build a respectful civil society. That's how you build an effective organization. That's how you build an effective friendship, a marriage.

It's a basic human interaction paradigm. And, to bring this back to the university, Michael, is that when people are shut down, shouted down and canceled, there's a withdrawal, there's a disengagement. And so it's not that we have a view that must prevail and we need to win over a different view, but rather we want an open forum where everyone can participate. In fact, I was having a discussion once with the university administrator that I won't mention around, "Well, not everybody thinks they would feel welcome in your organization. I said, well, if you believe in censorship, no, you're, you wouldn't, although would love to talk to you and find out why. That in fact, my counter position, and I'm very aggressive on this view, is that free speech is a necessary precondition for everyone to feel welcomed.

Because if there's speech that is considered beyond the pale, particularly when that speech is in practice, and let's just be very practical for a minute views that the majority of Americans may hold, then you're really saying to a good chunk of the people in this country that you are not welcome. I mean, it's the very opposite of creating a welcoming and an open environment, which I think should be the goal.

Michael Poliakoff:

And of course, as we said before, that will filter down in a most destructive way into every aspect of business, of industry, of government. One of the things we-

Chuck Davis:

I'm sorry, Michael. Before we go there, and because we started, you were talking about USC and the work they've done there, and I guess the point to bring that back to USC is not that, oh, we've got a school now versus the other schools that they have, but rather to use these schools and every one of the things I try to talk to the AFSA chapters about and encourage is modeling this type of respectful engagement where you're not just ignoring people, letting them talk and ignore them. I guess at times can be a step forward, but you really want to be engaging in people and having discussions where people don't agree and showing how that's done and what it looks like. Because we are seeing that people are coming to college, they're graduating high school and they've never been exposed to that.

In fact, I had another university official who covers a, I'm trying to be very respectful of his privacy, but was responsible for an area of student life and within their university, really said that much of his organization, what they deal with is actually students coming to them with complaints that aren't actionable. They're nothing the university should get involved in. And he understood that what that was showing was that students don't know how to engage someone. I mean, there's really two levels. One is they don't know how to engage someone and speak to them that they disagree with, but on a rather

more disturbing level that students are showing up at top universities with the expectation that they're never going to hear something they disagree with. And when they do hear something, it's not an opportunity, it's a problem. And that I think is a very, very dangerous cultural issue.

And so that's what the schools for civic life, that's what the debates, that's all of the efforts that we're trying to bring about are to change the rules, make the universities more formally open, but also to model and show people what it looks like. And that yes, you can have a debate on a contentious issue like the MIT group did on DEI. And as I jokingly said at one point, and no spectators were harmed, nobody had to be rushed to Mass General with damage inflicted by dissenting opinions. I think everyone left the evening with a better appreciation of a whole range of views.

Michael Poliakoff:

One of the things that has been really heartening for ACTA is indeed that, the growing momentum for the institutes that will give a forum for this kind of intellectual diversity and exchange. We've seen this now and proud to say we were part of it. We've seen this now in Ohio with legislation seeking to establish two such institutes that's before the legislature. Now, there's the wonderful new institute at Tennessee, the Institute of American Civics. There is the splendid, of course, paradigm in Arizona at Arizona State University. And in all of these instances, it's part of the charter to emphasize open civil exchange, intellectual diversity. And one of the things that excites me so much about AFSA is the potential of the alumni to be getting behind these things, to making their voices heard and perhaps even helping to support them as they grow.

I'm delighted to see that MIT now has a concerned donor fund so that philanthropy can be targeted. This of course, is something that we do through our Fund for Academic renewal, which is to let people who love their university know you don't need to write a blank check. You can support some element that will advance the things that shaped you when you were a student there. And we can help you write a gift agreement to make sure that the money will not be used for any other purpose. And I'm just delighted to think of the way that the AFSA chapters can begin to use the power of the wallet, not in a mean spirited way, but in a way that actually shows a real love for the university, a love that helps build it.

Chuck Davis:

And that's an important point, Michael. And again, it's in my prior role as the president of the MIT Free Speech lunch, I actually had this conversation with our head of Alumni Affairs in terms of whether we as an organization truly supported the institute. And one of the points, which by the way, we clearly do, we're concerned about making MIT as good as it can be. I say we, I am still on the board of the MIT Free Speech Alliance even though I'm no longer the president. We want to make it the best university it can be and ensure that it remains the preeminent STEM Institute in the world. And they explicitly brought up the Concerned Donor's Fund and our current president, who was a Wayne Stoddard, who was a fantastic and very knowledgeable and smart gentleman, had a wonderful insight. Which is that, our target audience with the Concerned Donor Fund is not people who are giving to MIT.

That's just not a avenue that's going to give us any leverage because they have a huge endowment already and there are plenty of people that are giving money. The target audience is the people who have stopped, who are no longer giving to their university. I'll make this more general now because they don't like what the university is doing. And by giving to a targeted donor, well, we called ours the Concerned Donor Fund. You can give to your institute, you can give to your alma mater and know that the gift is going to be used in a way that you're comfortable with and you may actually be specifically

able to approve. And for example, I happen to know the MIT fund actually received a nice \$5,000 contribution this week, which we're very grateful for.

And so we haven't decided how to use that yet. But one of these suggestions was, we were helping facilitate the formation of a student free speech group and maybe there's some opportunity there to support them so that that's obviously a use, whether that is ultimately what they use it for or not, that's very consistent with the intent of any donor that's giving funds through that venue. And you certainly don't need to worry that your gift is going to be misappropriated by the university.

Michael Poliakoff:

And this is of course, again, where the wonderful synergy can take place. And AFSA is doing so much to bring in that crucial element that was such a gap on so many campuses of active alumni. When they combine with interested students who are looking for opportunities to make their campuses real sanctuaries for the free exchange of ideas. And every once in a while I have a student contact me and say, "Can you connect me with some alumni who believe in these things?" And I'm always delighted to do that. Faculty who have felt alienated, silenced, sometimes intimidated. And these growing programs, I know we talked about our campus debate and discourse program when alumni can be a support for the growing movement on campus to have parliamentary style debates. Not winners and losers, [inaudible]. Just the opportunity to take a controversial question and to get students habituated to talking to disagreeing in a civil manner. I think I may have mentioned we've now done a, I guess almost 150 of these around the country. And we're so excited at the possibility to work with AFSA chapters. As we have done already, principle.

Chuck Davis:

And Michael, that's a great example of one of the things that I want AFSA to do, which is to be the vector for distributing all of the resources that organizations like yourself have to a university. Where you've got alumni that are concerned, but the administration may not be friendly, the faculty that are maybe afraid to speak up or being held back in various ways. But that's through an active, a alumni chapter that's focused on that university because they have a particular buy-in and passion for that, by making sure that those chapters know what resources are available from groups like ACTA, that we can, instead of you're doing 100, I don't know how long it took you to get there, but would love to double that, and enable more because as we've been talking, it's cultural and people need to see it.

And then maybe they can get a little bit more comfortable stepping up and doing it. So that's a very key aspect in helping change the culture, is giving people a different set of experiences.

Michael Poliakoff:

This is an exciting conversation and love to build upon that. I really would like to get to a point where a school would be embarrassed to say, "We don't have these sorts of campus debates on the pivotal issues of the day." I've seen debates on funding of the police right after the George Floyd demonstrations when things were so very volatile. Never an angry word between the students pro and con on what the level of police funding should be. We've seen debates on confederate monuments, on assault weapons, and the uniformity of all of these is that students rise to that level of expectation. Quite contrary-

Chuck Davis:

Michael, they really do.

Michael Poliakoff:

And having alumni who can be the garden guardians of values, the voices of experience who can, when necessary give the school a bit of a nudge. We have as a campus freedom initiative that's been active on a number of campuses including MIT and Stanford. And one of the things that we recommend is, as the Cornell alumni are doing so well, make this part of orientation, let's give a real push to ensure that when students get onto campus, they're already being habituated to the discourse that you described where disagreement is not something that needs a therapist disagreement.

Chuck Davis:

It's actually, I think it was John Tomasi. That told me orientation is a special time because although people are very rushed and there's very limited bandwidth, it gives you a unique ability to tell your incoming students who you are. And you don't really get a second chance to do that. And again, we haven't seen anything come out of it. But I also understand from sources that I spoke to that that's another initiative that President Kornbluth at MIT has kicked off, is having some senior administrators look at incorporating the free speech, not just into the orientation as a one-time event, but beyond that. And we're really hopeful that something will come of that. Because as I said, it is actually, as I'm quoting John Tomasi saying, "It's a unique opportunity to say who you as an institution are."

Michael Poliakoff:

Yes. What a wonderful way for a beloved alma mater to differentiate itself. And of course, we're now in an environment in which smaller schools need to be pretty concerned about whether they're continuing to attract the students that they want, and let's bring that competition on in such a way that schools will vie with one another to be the havens for the free exchange of ideas, the very-

Chuck Davis:

Michael, that's a really important point. And it's honestly something that I'm aware of, just generally knowledgeable about education. But I haven't literally connected the dots there in terms of an opportunity to create a marketing niche for universities to differentiate themselves, particularly as you said, on the smaller and mid-size level where they're known for this. And students that don't want to feel like they're not welcome because their views are not welcome, have an opportunity to go there. I think there are some concerns around further stratification of across society and kind of self-segregation into this is the Fox group and this is the MSNBC group, and this is the NPR group, or however you want to differentiate it. I think I would much prefer to be a much bigger mixing and melting pot if I can use that old tired metaphor.

But at the end of the day, you're right, universities are facing declining demographics and they're going to have to compete. And if students feel a need to be comfortable at where they are attending university and a lot of them are not. That's an opportunity and that, again, I don't want to be pessimistic because we're really talking about what you can do about it, but that's not just me saying that. I mean, survey after survey consistently show 50% and higher of students feel uncomfortable expressing themselves both in a classroom and in their dormitories where amongst their friends and just associates and in a classroom should be the freest speech environment on the planet.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well, Chuck, this has been enormously uplifting and exciting. In closing, what I very much like you to do is to share with us the vision. Where would you like to be in five years? What would make you feel that this had been the most resounding success?

Chuck Davis:

In five years, if there are a hundred to 200 universities with active alumni chapters focused on free speech, there is a robust pipeline of programs and resources to help them effectively engage both with students, with faculty, with the administration, with the board to support a very diverse culture and intellectual debate. And that we've starting to see a reduction in the level of speech suppression and censorship. I mean, I'm a numerical person, I am an MIT engineer. I actually have a master black belt certification, so very familiar with statistical process and all. I would love to see downtrend in the fire data where they've collected this.

So there's some things that you can look at. And I think at the end of the day, this all makes the university as an organization, as an environment, more nurturing, more open, and one that's going to produce better results, both in terms of science and literature and all the things that are supposed to come out of the university, but also students that can then be civilly engaged and be more productive members of the body politic of this country, and be better citizens of their community and the world.

Michael Poliakoff:

That's beautifully, beautifully expressed.

Chuck Davis:

And let me throw out. And again, I'm totally new to the nonprofit world. I come from a business background. I can run an operation, I can write a business plan. I'm slowly learning the art of fundraising, but if anybody listening likes what they just heard, I'd be happy to talk to them because these take resources. And it doesn't necessarily take much, but there's an ongoing level of support that's needed as you well know, Michael. So I would throw that out to any concerned listeners that share this vision.

Michael Poliakoff:

ACTA will be at your side, Chuck, as you know in all these operations. I know I've rather used that word synergy a few times already, but it really is a synergy when we get alumni and trustees and concerned faculty and concerned students all moving in the same direction.

Chuck Davis:

I don't mind you using it because it's not just a buzzword in this case, it's actually we've seen it and it's real.

Michael Poliakoff:

And we've seen the victories as we talked about, not typically overhauls, but real and substantive progress. We saw that at Davidson. We're seeing it in North Carolina, we're seeing it at MIT, we're seeing it at Stanford. All the op-eds and the social media and the convenings, these things matter, and I will end with Churchill-

Chuck Davis:

You take one step at a time, right?

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Michael Poliakoff:

I will end with Churchill. "Never, never give up in any matter, great or small, never, never, never." And what thrills me so much about AFSA and your leadership is it's clear that these alumni groups are not giving up. The importance is too vast for that ever to happen.

Chuck Davis:

No, we're definitely in it for the long haul and building that core infrastructure to sustain it and grow it is a priority. And what we're talking about is these small steps that we've had, these small victories we've had so far. As they say, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," and you have to keep plotting along. I mean, a lot of times the victory belongs to simply the methodical and steady.

Michael Poliakoff:

Yes. Chuck, thank you for being with us today.

Chuck Davis:

Well, thank you, Michael. It's been a pleasure working with you this year and can't say enough how much I appreciate the support from ACTA, yourself and your staff. They're absolutely great.