**Improving College Teaching, Discrimination Against Asian Americans in Admissions**
**What Happens Next – 9.19.2021**
**Jonathan Zimmerman and Patrick Allitt QA**

Larry Bernstein:

Let's start with you, Patrick. You mentioned Mark Bauerlein, who was on the show talking about The Dumbest Generation. He definitely thought that students were learning less, spending less time on homework, producing less product, appearing seemingly not as aware of the issues, reading less. Why do you think that Mark's wrong? Why is it that the students are about the same, even though they're working less, reading less and being less involved?

Patrick Allitt:

Well, I think because my experience as a teacher has always been that the students are adaptable and they'll respond to the ceiling you set on the floor you establish. So in other words, if you make great demands of them, if you say, "Here's the work you're going to have to do," they might grumble, but most of them will do it because they're very strongly motivated by grades, at least the students I teach in a selective university.

Patrick Allitt:

On the other hand, if you set the standard low, and if you spend too much time reassuring the students and they start to realize they can get away with doing a small amount of work, they will. And I think that's been true, both in my classes and in the classes of all my colleagues over the whole period of my teaching life, which by now stretches nearly four decades, including my years as a graduate student. In every class I've taught-

Larry Bernstein:

Patrick, just a second. In your first class, you establish rules of the road, what you can and can't do and what's expected of you. Do you think that's important? And what are those rules?

Patrick Allitt:

I think it's absolutely vital, yes. The thing is to start by making it clear to the students that they're not going to be able to relax in your class, that you're establishing high standards, and above all that they're going to be obliged to participate. I let them know that I'm going to call on them regularly and that I'll never let anybody simply sit in class and drowse through it. I don't let them bring in computers. I don't let them eat. I don't let them miss class.

Larry Bernstein:

Wear a hat.

Patrick Allitt:

I do everything I can, oh, that's right, and don't let them wear hats. I don't want them to think that this is ordinary time. I want them to think that this is a time where they're going to be, have to, working to their absolute peak. Now what happens is that a handful of students nearly always drop out in the first week. And I'm very glad to see them go because they are the ones who probably were hoping that it would be easy and simple. But even of the ones who are left, although I like them very much and enjoy teaching them, the great majority of them calibrate their workload exactly to the acceptable minimum point. In other words, they do just enough and no more. And I say to them, "Your education is mainly your own responsibility. I can help, but you're the ones who educate yourselves." And they always give me a dazzling smile, but then carry on doing just enough.

Larry Bernstein:

So how do we change that behavior?

Patrick Allitt:

I don't think we can. I mean, unless we went through an enormous overhaul of the system of the kind that Bryan Caplan recommends, in which we are left, literally, with a tiny, tiny minority who want to be scholars, and that we come up with some sort of alternative arrangement for credentialing, we're going to limp along with the system more or less as it is now.

And obviously, the structural forces keeping it in place are overwhelmingly strong. So many people's livelihood now depends upon the system being more or less the way it is. I can't really foresee a way in which we can break out of the trend we've gotten there now, without a lot of blood being spilled. One of the things I've been hearing ever since I became a professor is how we've reached a position of crisis and things just can't go on this way. They were saying that in the '80s about tuition, which in retrospect seems astonishingly low by comparison with how it is now. And yet somehow we have carried on with this. The tuition's risen. The trends have continued, but the level of teaching and the level of learning remained about the same.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

I think Patrick's right if I could cut in here, but I would just add two things. I think there's change over time as well. And let's take two things that he mentioned, grades and work, and then also tuition. Everything Patrick said I agree with, especially what he said about expectations, but it's also true then when you look at our expectations over time, they've gone down. So it isn't just that grades have become inflated. The news is worse than that. We now give more grades for less work. So I don't think that's baked in. I think things have changed. I'd say the same thing about tuition, in so far as one of the reasons that it was more affordable in earlier eras is that in the United States at least, the States had a much bigger hand in funding tuition, especially via grants rather than loans.

Now it's become a private good and you are pretty much on your own in terms of what you can do and how are you going to finance that. So none of this discounts what Patrick was saying, I think he's absolutely right, but it also speaks to really important changes, I think, in the political-social environment that change all of this, too.

Patrick Allitt:

One of the things that Jonathan says in the book is that the introduction of student evaluations of faculty members in the 1960s was well-intentioned, but has had the unfortunate side effect of causing the teachers to think, because I need to get good reviews, I've got to be easier with my grading and easier with my exams. And so we've slipped into this mode of thinking that. Students paying high tuition want to get a good product for the money they've spent. That has just become more like a consumer good.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Absolutely. And it is true up until right now that the best predictor of how high you're going to rate a professor is the grade you expect to get in her or his course, which is not good news. Just to be clear, I'm actually a supporter of student evaluations. I just think they're a necessary condition and not a sufficient one. I do think there're important things that student evaluations can tell us, like does the professor return written work on time? It turns out that's a very important matter in terms of student learning. It's pretty much a binary and the students are very good judges of it. Does the professor make herself or himself available outside of class? That's also very important and the students can judge it very well. Is this an academically sound class? That is not something students can judge well, any more than I could go into a physics class and judge it. They don't know enough, just like I don't know enough physics.

I actually think that there are things we can change. We just don't have the will to do so. So on the evaluation front, we have peer review for our written work, but not for our teaching. So when I wrote my book, The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching, I did not submit it to my students for evaluation. I submitted to people like Patrick, who were experts in the field of history and of education, so they could determine if I had something important to say. We can do the same thing with teaching. I believe we should. I would be quite happy to have somebody like Patrick to be in my classroom, interview me afterwards, look at my assignments and render a judgment about what I do. I think that would improve our teaching considerably. We just don't have the will to do it.

Larry Bernstein:

Patrick, you want to spend a second and talk about what you did in your teaching class?

Patrick Allitt:

Well, I used to be the Director of Emory's Center for Teaching and Curriculum, which was again a very well-intentioned organization, whose job was to try to help teachers improve and to be a little bit more systematic in studying how the teaching was being done. But the reality was that the clients we had were almost entirely graduate students and beginning assistant professors. Once professors had got tenure, their tendency to fall away from availing themselves of our services was very, very steep indeed. I spent a lot of time visiting other professors' classes, usually beginners, and I was able to tell them certain things and counsel them about best practices. But of course, while I wasn't able to do was to transform the institutional culture. As

Jonathan says, if we were really serious about it, we'd have almost as much scrutiny of young faculty's teaching, in fact faculty at every level that are teaching, as we do of our scholarship.

But in terms of the personnel resources required, it would be absolutely massive.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Oh, it would be.

Patrick Allitt:

And the many things that he says in the book, rightly in my view, is that because these things are low-status activities, faculty do everything they can to avoid involvement with it. If you look at the structure of rewards for exceptional faculty, it's usually that they get the opportunity to teach less. It would be a healthier society if we said, "Congratulations, you've done exceptionally well and now we're going to give you the chance to teach more."

Jonathan Zimmerman:

And even the presence of these centers for teaching and learning, one of which Patrick heroically directed, indeed they illustrate the same status problem. Let me be clear. I have enormous admiration for people like Patrick who have worked in that zone, but the whole reason these institutions developed, and I trace this in my book, is precisely because we realized we were putting such a low premium on teaching.

And there was a moment in my book, everyone in a narcissistic way has their favorite quote from their book, but mine is about this subject. Colby College, tiny little place up in Maine, is starting a Center for Teaching and Learning and this old head, somebody who is probably now, he's probably in his 60s or 70s, he was about to retire. He reads about this and he writes, a center for teaching and learning, isn't that what Colby is? And of course, the answer was, not anymore. Because even in places like that, you have to publish out the wazoo now to get tenure.

And so starting a center for teaching and learning, it's a little bit poignant because it almost underscores the opposite of what it's trying to promote. It's like if you see a sign for authentic Chinese food, it's probably not authentic. The very need to underscore its authenticity suggests that it isn't. And for me, these centers for teaching and learning, there's something very poignant about the story. Obviously, and ostensibly, they're there to try to promote this activity. And of course, that's what they're trying to do, but the very need to create an organization with that title shows just how low the status is.

Patrick Allitt:

One section of your book I enjoy, Jonathan, also is the section about Woodrow Wilson's attempts at Princeton to improve teaching by setting up this preceptorial system. But the poor old preceptors themselves instantly became the peons of the educational hierarchy, because they were teaching all the time. They could no longer be scholars. Therefore, everybody looked down on them.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

A lot of them didn't get jobs after that. It was really a disaster because at the beginning they had to read thousands of pages and in a bunch of different subjects and it wasn't tenable.

Patrick Allitt:

Right.

Larry Bernstein:

We got a question from the audience. This is from Alan Herskowitz. He mentions that the field, the knowledge base of what they're teaching isn't constant over time, it's growing and becoming more complex. How does that affect teaching and also the student's involvement?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Well, one of the stories I tell in my book is that the research revolution that Alan is referring to had an enormous effect on teaching because what it did was it promoted lectures. There are many reasons for that, one of which was in the early 20th century, a lot of the new knowledge wasn't in books yet. And so really the only way to transmit it was via lecture. But you also see a change in the status of the professor. The professor was no longer the sort of avuncular minister of the 19th century. The professor was an expert who would profess, hold forth with this new knowledge. The problem, of course, though, William James put his finger on it in 1903, right at the beginning of this revolution. And incidentally, William James did not own a PhD, even though he taught both philosophy and psychology at Harvard. His only advanced degree was a medical degree. James said the PhD octopus is going to be a problem. And he says because we're hiring people, not based on their success as lecturers or as teachers, but because they came up with something cool in the laboratory or the library, and that doesn't predict for any success in the classroom, indeed, there may sometimes be an inverse relationship.

Patrick Allitt:

...on 19th century colleges, many of which were run by Protestant denominations, as a situation which was dreadful and which we're lucky to have gotten away from because the professionals themselves were susceptible to heresy trials. But at least in those days, the colleges were serious about their teaching mission. Whether they did it well is another matter, but at least they wanted to do it well.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

That was their raison d'etre. The other thing that I would add that I think is really important is, part of that mission Patrick was referring to was explicitly to make better people, which again, sounds so archaic now. If you went up to most people who teach at my institution and you said, "Are you trying to improve the student's character?" They would say, "Hell no, I'm trying to teach them biology or physics or history, whatever it is I teach."

But again, I think that's a function of the revolution that I was describing in response to Alan's question. You were no longer somebody whose main charge is actually to teach or improve

human beings. You're somebody whose main charge is to advance the field of biology. It's a different purpose.

Patrick Allitt:

Right. Yes, one of the things that has happened in higher education has become more and more massive, is this balkanization into different subgroups, so that you and I, Jonathan, because we're both history professors, in a way we're much closer to the history professors at the other campuses than we are to the teachers of the hard sciences on our own campuses.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

And many of us know absolutely nothing about, not only these other disciplines, but even about the structure and the politics of the university.

The real problem in higher ed is that almost none of us are specialists in higher ed.

Patrick Allitt:

Right.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

We're specialists in, in Patrick's case, the history of capitalists and conservatives, or in my case, the history of American schooling, but we don't have that deep picture perspective on all the different parts of the machine.

Patrick Allitt:

It's also true, isn't it, that there's a kind of structural antagonism on between the professors and the professional administrators. One of the fields that's grown a lot in the last half century is university administration. It's possible now even to get a higher degree in university administration, where you don't have an expertise in one of the academic disciplines, but just in how to run the place. I know that routinely I and my colleagues love denigrating the professional administrators, because we think they don't know what they're talking about because they don't have these professional credentials. Although, I have to admit that it's equally true that we'd make a terrible mess of running the place.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Of course, and God forbid, they have that credential in that thing called education. This is also a theme in my book. I've spent my life on the borders of all this because I'm a historian, I have a PhD in history, but I've always worked both in history departments but also in schools of education. Obviously, there's an enormous status differential between those. This, I argue in the book, has turned out to be an inhibitor on improving teaching because it's associated with the ed school, which brings it down a status peg. At every juncture, when somebody suggests we should improve college teaching, the person on the other end will roll their eyes and say, "Oh, you mean like they do at the Ed school? I mean, have you seen the mess they made of K

through 12 schooling, and now you want to bring that into higher Ed? No, thank you. Let's leave that alone." These things are real.

Patrick Allitt:

Absolutely right.

Larry Bernstein:

I had a question about some of the work by David Figlio at Northwestern. He did a paper with Morty Shapiro, the president of the university. They analyzed teachers to see how students did in the next class in that same subject. They found that adjunct professors did as well as the tenured professors in terms of quality of teaching using that metric. It turned out that the bottom 10% of the teachers, were a complete disaster. Yet, these tenured professors continue to teach. Why do universities, if they can recognize who the worst teachers are, allow them to continue teaching?

Patrick Allitt:

Well, one of the things that happened over the course of the 20th century is that the organizations dedicated to defending the academic disciplines were very successful in establishing the principle of tenure. Tenure has come to be granted on behalf of the scholarship that's done. A good scholar who teaches badly does get tenure, but a bad scholar who teaches well doesn't get tenure. In other words, the people whose future is considered least is the students. The history professors take care of each other, and when they say that somebody is a good historian, what they mean is that he or she is a good history researcher and writer, and a good physicist means somebody who does good experiments and writes them up and advances the field, without consideration for the students at all.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

The other thing that I'd add is, as somebody who is a great defender of free speech and academic freedom, that's what my most recent book was about, it is appalling to me that people use tenure as an excuse for sloth and poor teaching, because obviously that was not the purpose. If you go back to the early 20th century, figures like John Dewey and Arthur Lovejoy, they supported and indeed created academic freedom and tenure in order to protect people's right to say and write and believe what they want. Tenure should protect your free speech rights. It should not protect poor teaching. As somebody who is a vehement and vociferous defender of free speech, I'm appalled at the way we can lose sight of that distinction.

Patrick Allitt:

In fact, it's even worse than that, isn't it, Jonathan, because not only does tenure protect bad teachers, once you've got tenure, you can also, if you're lazy enough, give up doing the researching and writing as well. Every college has got the examples of people who wrote a book, got tenure, and then never wrote another one because the incentives to do so are now so much lower.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Indeed, I mean, to me, this is not an argument against "tenure", and I don't want any of our listeners to take me as saying that. Again, I mean, I'm a person of extremely strong and sometimes controversial opinions and I can assure you that at my current institution I would have been fired five times over if not for tenure. Again, I'm a huge supporter of tenure, but those of us who do support it, I think it's incumbent on us to address precisely the downsides that Patrick is describing. In order to, let's just say, defend free speech and academic freedom, what we need is to come up with tenure system that does not also allow the kind of sloth and cynicism that Patrick is describing.

Larry Bernstein:

Patrick, you did that Great Courses class, where you met some of the finest professors around the United States and you tried to figure out what is it they were doing right. What did you learn from that that will help push teaching to the next level? Given that the professors isn't being taught how to teach, what are the ways and means to make the professor better at what they do?

Patrick Allitt:

Well, the thing that all the really great teachers had in common, I think, was that they were very enthusiastic about their subject and they were capable of communicating that enthusiasm to the students so that they both felt it and they could show why it was something to be energized and excited about. One of the strange things about academic life is that to be a good researcher you tend to need a lot of patience and a lot of steadiness. In other words, it often rewards introverted personalities. But to be a good teacher, you need to be a great extrovert and not many people are masters of both. You tend to be good at one or the other, but not both. I think the really great teachers I met around the country while I was making that course, it's called the Art of Teaching, was finding people who have mastered both, but they also were capable of remembering what it's like to be a student who's struggling in the classroom.

Another of the weird characteristics of academic life is that we all teach topics that we're good at. In other words, because I was good at history at school, I ended up as a history teacher. In a way, it might be more appropriate for me to be a math teacher because I struggled with math and therefore I can identify much more readily with a student who's struggling with math and feeling baffled by it. But of course, we don't have a system which works like that. I think one of the things that a really good teacher needs to do is to realize what it's like to be in the class and to be bewildered, and then to find ways of expressing to the students or explaining to the students, here's how to think about it, here's how I'm doing it, here are the stages which break down my argument. As you become an expert in a subject, it's very easy to forget the intermediate stages, which need to be filled in, in order that a student who's new to it can understand it and can understand the chain of reasoning.

I would say it's those things. It's being able to explain clearly and well and in a non-condescending way, and showing enthusiasm and also showing that the topic is capable of generating enthusiasm. One of the things that most students of history hate is chronology,

learning the date. I always make a point of saying, "Oh, I love these dates. I think the dates themselves are so fascinating, so brilliant because they clarify everything so clearly." Now, of course, that doesn't make the students love learning the date, but at least it shows them that there is somebody on this planet who's capable of loving chronology.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

I would endorse everything that Patrick said and also say that we actually now have some compelling evidence for what he's saying, that is in terms of the research about college teaching, which recently I think has gotten much better and has been very conveniently collected in a book by a guy named David Gooblar, who's the head of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Temple University here in Philly. It's called The Missing Course. What he does is he synthesizes a lot of the research that's come out in recent years and it very much confirms what Patrick is saying. The most successful, the most effective teachers are the ones who expose the students to what is behind the curtain. What do historians actually do? How do they tell stories? How do they come up with evidence? I think the best teachers in any discipline or the ones who expose the students to that. Don't make them guess, actually illustrate and show in what they do how this way of thinking, which is really what a discipline is, how it works.

But let's also look at the title of Gooblar's book, which is poignant, The Missing Course. Why does he call it that? Because as he points out, there are a couple of million college professors and most of them have never been exposed to the research that he collects in the book. Everything that Patrick has said is correct, I think we have evidence that is correct, but most professors, of any subject, have never heard that evidence. That seems like a scandal to me.

Patrick Allitt:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

Patrick, what should the goals and objectives of the teacher be in the classroom? In other words, is it skill building, is it content? I know a lot of the students, as soon as that class ends, that final exam is handed in, a lot of it is completely erased, content-wise. What is it? Are you trying to develop a skill? What do you hope to achieve, as a teacher?

Patrick Allitt:

That's a very good point, Larry. Before every one of my courses begins, I try to think to myself, "What do I want them to have learned by the time this semester ends, and above all, what do I want them to learn which they'll be able to hold onto?" I think it's two things equally. One is to teach them how to think historically, in other words, to understand the importance of recognizing that in different times and places, people's way of thinking was completely different from the one that the students have today. In other words, they've got to be serious about relativizing themselves and the thing they're studying. The other is to actually learn some of the content. In other words, they've got to learn who did what, where, when and why. In that sense, I'm old fashioned, that I want them to learn the facts, I want them to learn the

chronology, I want them to learn the reasoning. I want them to be able to be able to understand the process of historical change.

I think these days, our undergraduates tend to be incredibly moralistic. John mentioned this new TV show, The Chair, which is very good fun and it certainly shows the students' willingness to moralize every question. In fact, they're specialists not only in procrastination, but also in righteous indignation, they love that. I think he's a very good exercise for students in history classes to put themselves in the position of people in other times and places in history who thought what to them are horrific thoughts, like the reasonableness of slavery. Not that they've got to become defenders of slavery, but they've got to understand that there were people who did defended it in good faith. That's an exercise that the students don't like doing, but nevertheless, I think it's a necessary and an important one.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

I would agree with all that. The only thing that I would add is that I don't think Patrick should apologize for having them learn names and dates, because I don't think they can do all that other stuff that he's talking about unless they have those names and dates. With my undergraduates, I always begin by giving all the expectations, like Patrick was saying. Then the essay assignments, I say, "Look, I know what you're thinking, because I've been doing this a long time. You're thinking, 'Does this guy want our point of view, or does he want the facts?'" I say to them that the very fact that we ask that question shows how badly all of us have been miseducated. The answer of course is I want both, all the time.

I say, "Facts without your perspective, they really will be worthless. Nobody's going to care." I always say, "You don't know my second daughter's birthday, and there's a reason you don't know it. The reason is you don't care. You could ask me and I would tell you, but you probably won't. It's not a state secret, but it doesn't matter." Facts without a perspective, nobody will care, but a perspective without facts, we have a clinical word for that in our profession, it's called bullshit. All perspectives are not created equal. The ones that are the best draw throughout carefully and fully on those things that Patrick is calling names and dates. I don't think there's a tension between those at all.

Larry Bernstein:

Patrick, one of your first assignments, as you described on your Great Courses class on teaching was write a thousand-word essay on the causes for the Second World War. Then the second week, after you hand back the paper, you say, "All right, this week, I'd like you to write a 500-word essay on the causes of the Second World War," and then the third week, a 250-word essay on the causes of the Second World War. What are you trying to achieve with that assignment, and is it successful?

Patrick Allitt:

Well, Larry, that's opening up this huge realm of student writing. I dare say John and I agree that student writing isn't what it could be, but it probably never has been. I'm thinking there of Benjamin Franklin's letter, I think to his niece, where he says, "I'm writing you a long letter, because I don't have time to write you a short one," meaning that being able to compress is

itself a skill and it's a difficult skill. I want to teach students or to show them that whatever the length of the assignment, if they write it well, they can do a good job of it, but if they write it poorly, they'll do a bad job of it no matter what the length. It was really a question of deciding on priorities and also learning how to compress a lot of information into a short space and then express it with elegant simplicity.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Well, I would endorse all of that. The only thing I would say apologetically is I have attributed the Franklin quote to Voltaire, which shows you, again, that principle that almost everything attributed to either Voltaire or Churchill they never actually said. Mark Twain is in that category as well.

The only thing I'll add here is that there has been some unfortunate change over time here. Richard Arum, who's now the Dean of the Ed school at Cal Irvine, he did this amazing survey a couple of years ago showing that in any given semester, half of the students don't have a single course requiring a total of 20 pages of writing. Let's repeat that. Half of the undergraduates don't have even one course requiring as much as 20 pages of writing.

Look, if you don't assign it, they will not learn it. It's pretty simple. I play tennis, I don't play squash. If you put me in a squash court, I wouldn't know what to do. It's not because I'm not a good person, it's just because I haven't engaged in the practice. Again, it's like everything else, you get what you pay for and you get what you demand. I know because my first appointment is an Ed school I shouldn't say this, but I will anyway. I think most educational questions are relatively simple. It's the politics that's complicated. If we want people to be good writers, we'll assign a lot of writing, and if we don't assign a lot of writing, they will not be good writers. It's persuading people about the need to do that.

Larry Bernstein:

I got a question from one of our listeners, Rajeev Nurang. Rajeev wants to know, how should a potential college applicant choose a university for him or herself? I have college kids right now, and we did the college tours. It seemed that they always focus on strange things, like housing and food, and not so much on what to major in or what the value of the degree was. Thinking about that, how should we think about how to match your child with the appropriate university?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Well, I can tackle that one because of course I did the same thing with my daughters who are now young adults, so I remember it all very well. Here's a couple of things I'd say before we get going, I don't know which schools Rajeev is talking about in the question, But one of the themes I always emphasize with my own students when we study universities is we need to get out more. By that, I mean we need to look at the broad landscape of American higher education and not assume that what we're doing is the norm.

One of the great trivia questions that I begin with, with my students, is how many colleges in this country accept fewer than 20% of their applicants? The answer as of two years ago was 46.

Usually the students say like 300 or 500. Now, the reason they say 46 is they're at Penn and they applied to those 46 schools. Point number one is not everything looks like those 46 schools.

Point number two is we have radically fetishized the differences between those 46 schools. They're all amazing, absurdly over-resourced, incredibly beautiful, fantastic places. I knew people that teach at all of them, I knew people that went to all of them. What I would say to people who were applying within that 46 is do not fetishize the differences between them. There's no evidence that getting into one over the other is going to affect your life course. I would apply to a bunch of them, spend some time at the ones you get into and pick one. It's not going to make nearly as much difference as you think it's going to make.

Patrick Allitt:

I agree with that completely, that what really matters is the student's own qualities, the qualities the student brings to it. An under-motivated student at Harvard will get much less out of their education than a really zealous and enthusiastic student at Southwest Missouri State.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Indeed. Alan Krueger, who taught at Princeton for years and years and tragically died a couple of years ago, he did a very famous experiment that everyone applying to college should have to read, I believe. This is what he did. He looked at the life course of people that went to Penn and Penn State. Now, of course, I teach at the University of Pennsylvania. People here hate it when you confuse us with Penn State. I don't mind at all, by the way, but they are different institutions, different histories, different profiles. It should not surprise you, and of course Larry went to Penn as well, that on the average, people who went to Penn "do better "than people went to Penn State. When I say "do better", I'm talking about the standard indicators that economists use, so salary, other professional degrees, home ownership, all that stuff.

But what Alan did, which was brilliant, was he discovered that after the 2008, '09 recession that there were suddenly a rather large number of people who got into both those institutions but actually went to Penn State for financial reasons. Then what he did was he looked at the kids who went to Penn State that had also gotten into Penn and chose Penn State, their life course was exactly the same as if they had gone to Penn. There was a literally no difference. That's really important and I think it provides a very powerful confirmation of exactly what Patrick was saying, that it's not the institution, we radically exaggerate those effects, it's the student. That's what matters.

Patrick Allitt:

Yes, I agree. That's particularly because most of the institutions themselves are rather timid. The rhetoric of the place where I work is of bold leadership, but the reality is of anxious following. It'll never strike out on its own with a new policy until it's confident that the Ivy League's already doing the same thing.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Yes, and this is what always amuses me when I turn on Fox News and they're talking about how the horrible, radical indoctrination that happens at these elite schools. First of all, at the elite school that I teach at, about three quarters of the kids, after they get their degree, trundle off to one of three things, consulting, banking or tech. I'm like, "Well, that's a pretty weird thing for a bunch of radicals to do. If we're trying to indoctrinate them, we've done a pretty bad job."

But to Patrick's point, they're just conservative in a dictionary sense. Okay, everyone voted for Obama or Liz or Bernie, but if you think about the term conservative just in the dictionary sense, it's somebody that is skeptical of change and often opposed to change. That's what universities are and that's what people who work at universities are. Don't kid yourself. It doesn't matter who they vote for, we're all conservatives. Look, in some ways that's not bad. Part of the purpose of the institution is to conserve things that maybe other people don't care about or should care about more, but it also makes change really hard. We don't like it.

One thought experiment I love to do with my undergrads is I say, "Imagine that Woodrow Wilson, who came up earlier, or Teddy Roosevelt, as in the junior high school of thought experiment, they came back to life. If you showed them, say in the United States, patterns of transportation or communication or patterns of gender roles and marital relations, they would be astounded, if not appalled. But then if you took them into a university and they just spent a day there and watched our classes, they'd be like, 'Oh yeah, I remember this.'" I mean, okay, there's PowerPoints, so what? But in terms of its structure and its cadence and it's rhythm, I think they would be altogether comfortable with it. They would say, "Oh, I remember this. That guy gave a lecture and then there were these TAs and they had these discussion sections, and people ended up looking at the ground for a long time and watching their watches. I remember that."

Patrick Allitt:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

I have two college kids, one's at Northwestern, one's at Penn. What should we, as a parent, be telling these kids? I mean, I know what Patrick wants is to have a child who is so interested and wants to read more, but it's tough for a parent to kick that into the child. What can a parent do to improve the quality of the college experience for the kid?

Patrick Allitt:

Larry, I think it's important to be high handed. This may be a residue of my British upbringing, that your job as a parent isn't to be democratic and isn't to be too willing to defer to your children's preferences, but simply say to them, "So long as you're living here, I'd like you to spend two hours every day reading quietly." You take away their phones, you turn off the TVs and you actually sit together and you all read. Now, obviously in a way that's coercive, but reading's addictive and once they catch the bug, they'll keep on doing it. Whereas if they don't do it, they'll never become well-educated.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Huh. Well, I think that's wonderful. I'm not sure it would have worked with my daughters. I don't think I have that sort of stiff British, upper lip that Patrick has. I guess the other thing that I'd add, as much as I admire that, I would say, tell your kids to chill, tell your kids that the game is now over and they have won it, tell them not to believe the hype about how much everything now matters, how much your grade point matters, your internships. In the grand scheme, they're one percenters or 0.01 percenters. Don't keep playing the game, admit that the game is essentially over, you've won it. Now, try to use that privilege to learn as much as you can and to use this time not to stress about the next steps, but to soak in everything you can, meet as many different people as you can, and chill.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think the choice of major matters?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Not in the least. I think that too is radically over fetishized. Obviously, look, there are some exceptions to this. Obviously, if you're going to be a physician, not all of the pre-meds major in the hard sciences, but you're going to have to master the hard sciences one way or the other, not just by the way to pass these tests, but the life sciences actually matter in your professional practice. But I've never seen any research suggesting in a broad sense that the choice of major has any effect on people's long range life outcomes. I think it's what you do within the courses that you take that matters, not so much the courses that you take, if that makes sense.

Patrick Allitt:

That might be another place where you and I differ a bit, John. Again, this is part of my British experience. As an undergraduate at the age of 18, When my generation went to college, we went to study just one subject. Every single college class I did was a history class. I didn't object to that, I thought that was fine. The American system defers the choice, doesn't it, a lot longer. It's more merciful here because it lets students wait until they've already done two years of college and taken a wide variety of courses before they have to start to specialize.

But I like the system, which they use at Brown, where they don't have any requirements and they just let students take whatever classes they want to. So that, for example, if a kid comes into college already firmly convinced that he or she wants to be a physicist, I think they should be at liberty to take nothing but physics classes and to just chase that hard, right from the beginning. Just as in the British system, if you're going to be a doctor, you start medical school at the age of 18, if you're going to be a law student, you start law at the age of 18. That seems fine to me, that some people should have a liberal arts option and some should have the vocational track from early on.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Well, this is complicated. Again, you're European and I'm an American and I think our differences are coming out here. I absolutely hear what you're saying. I think for some people

that can be an enormous upside, it clearly was for you. You mentioned Brown, Hampshire College is even more radical in that way. Ken Burns, the filmmaker, he's a Hampshire guy and a huge advocate for Hampshire. If you hear him discourse about this, he'll say, "Hampshire just let me do film and just let me immerse myself in film like nothing else."

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Now, I'm not sure Burns is the modal case here, because if you've ever seen him interviewed or read anything by him you also know that he told himself a whole lot of stuff about other things. I'm not so sure that the model necessarily predicts for that. I would say that there's a civic function for education that in some ways becomes, well, loss is too strong a word, but I think that if you only take physics, I think that may be a problem when we consider the fact that you're also going to be a citizen. I think that preparing for citizenship requires us to have a wider liberal arts education where we learn about things like the Great Depression, so if somebody on TV is saying, "It's just like the Great Depression now," at least you'll have enough of a reference there that you'll know what they're talking about And hopefully be able to come to some sort of considered judgment about what that might be. If you've only taken physics that might not be possible.

Patrick Allitt:

Right.

Larry Bernstein:

And you would know it starts in 1929.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Exactly. Exactly, because I love that date. I just love that date.

Larry Bernstein:

It's a great date.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Right.

Larry Bernstein:

This is the part where I end each talk on a note of optimism. Patrick, why don't I start with you? What are you optimistic about as it relates to the student-teacher relationship?

Patrick Allitt:

I'm optimistic about the fact that I'd have thought those students by now would be absolutely crushed to the ground with misery and resentment about COVID regulations, but the reality is that they're as buoyant and optimistic as ever. Even though I said some hard things about students, I do think they're lovely people to spend time with. They're young, healthy, hopeful,

haven't been beaten down by experience yet, and they seem to be enjoying it just as much now as they did in the days before we all wore masks all the time.

Larry Bernstein:

Jonathan, what about you? What are you optimistic about?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Well, I'd endorse all that. The only thing that I would add is that the one thing that hasn't changed that gives me enormous hope, and frankly just makes me feel incredibly fortunate, is that it turns out that 19 and 20-year-old human beings, like your kids, Larry, are the most interesting human beings on earth in my view, and this is why.

They've seen enough of the world start to understand it, but they don't yet know what their place is going to be in it. And for me as a teacher, that's a magical combination, because once you know what your place in the world is going to be, you become less interesting. I think I'm way less interesting than my students, because I've kind of done what I've done and the gig is up. That's not the case with them.

So they're starting to understand really important things about how the world works, but they don't know what their position, what the role in that world is going to be, and understand that brings enormous anxiety, especially during tough economic times or even tough epidemiological times. But for me, it's the good stuff. That's what makes it so exciting, and it hasn't changed. It won't.