

## **Improving College Teaching, Discrimination Against Asian Americans in Admissions What Happens Next – 9.19.2021**

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast where experts are given just six minutes to present their argument. And this is followed by a question and answer period for deeper engagement.

This week's topics include the university classroom and the lack of improvement in both teaching and student performance. And then we will discuss the ongoing discrimination against Asian-American applicants to the top universities.

Our first speaker will be Jonathan Zimmerman, who is a Professor of History of Education and the Judy and Howard Berkowitz Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Jon has written a new book entitled *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America*. What Jon finds is that there is very little training in the professorate and the teaching results are mediocre. I want to learn from Jon what we can do to change the university's priorities to emphasize teaching.

Our second speaker will be Patrick Allitt. You've met Patrick several times on What Happens Next, both as a speaker and as a co-moderator. You may recall Patrick's discussion about John Snow solving the cholera epidemic in London in 1854. Patrick also made a presentation earlier in the year about the writings of George Orwell. On this program, Patrick will be discussing the current performance of university students. Patrick is a Professor of History at Emory University and the author of the book, *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student, A Semester in a University Classroom*.

Our final speaker today is Kenny Xu, who is the President of Color Us United, which is dedicated to ending the discrimination of Asian-American students in the college admission process. Kenny is one of the leading participants in the ongoing lawsuit, *Harvard Students for Fair Admissions versus Harvard*. Kenny has recently written the book *An Inconvenient Minority: The Attack on Asian-American Excellence and the Fight for Meritocracy*.

All right, let's begin today's program with our first speaker, Jonathan Zimmerman. Go ahead, Jon.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Thanks very much. This book on college teaching began to take shape about 10 years ago when I was teaching in New York University, and I was fortunate enough to receive its university-wide Distinguished Teaching Award, which was a tremendous honor. There was a lovely dinner. Both my parents were still alive then and they came to it. It was a memorable time. But one of the things that stuck with me is when I was called up to receive my award, my Dean introduced me and I looked at the lecture in that little light, and I saw that she had a list of the books I had published. And then at this teaching award dinner, proceeded to list the books that I had written. And to me, that really says a lot. This is not a diss on my Dean, who I really liked, but

what else did she have to go on? She had never seen me teach. And even if she had, what would a single snapshot have told her about my teaching?

That's the reason I call my book *The Amateur Hour*. It's not because teaching is bad or that teaching is good. I don't think amateur refers to either of those things. After all, the best gymnast in my youth was Nadia Comaneci and she was an amateur because at that time, all the Olympians were. It's called *The Amateur Hour* because the teaching function remains amateur in a sociological or a structural sense, meaning we don't have a shared set of understandings about what constitutes good practice. And most of all, we don't have systems to try to encourage it or see if people are following that practice or not.

I began the book right after going to a debate about online instruction, which has since, of course, because of the pandemic, become a hugely contested subject. And this is about five years ago, and there were two speakers and one of them was taking the futurist position and the other was taking the Luddite position. So the futurist said that everything was going to be better. And the Luddites said that everything was going to be worse in this brave, new, online universe.

And what I realized when I started writing the book is that they had much more in common with each other than they realized. What they had in common with each other was that they both assumed they knew what the baseline was. So if you want to say, quote, everything is going to be worse or everything is going to be better, you need to have some understanding of what constitutes everything. And in fact, we don't, because this teaching function, in addition to being amateur, it's also been quite private, which is ironic. College teaching is a public activity that's done almost entirely in private. So it's actually quite difficult to research, but I did the best I could, drawing mainly on people's memoirs and letters, and also student teaching evaluations, to try to tell the story of what college teaching was so we could try to figure out what we wanted to be.

The biggest surprise for me in doing that research was the long history of critique and reform around college teaching. Patrick is going to speak in a while, and he's going to tell you that college teaching has remained fairly static. And I think he's right, but what hasn't been static is that cycle of critique and reform, which has been quite dynamic. What you see across the last hundred years is the university growing, students expressing great disappointment and what that's done to teaching, followed by bouts of reform or efforts at reform, and then followed by yet more disappointment.

So just to take one example before my six minutes are up. In the 1920s, you might know the university suddenly got very, very large because it was a time of great prosperity in the United States. And mainly because women were now going in huge numbers. So at places like the University of Michigan, students show up for class in a room that fits a hundred, there are 250 people there. There's a guy speaking into a microphone that doesn't work. Nobody can understand him. And they start running to the Michigan Daily and saying, "Why are we here? And why are our parents spending money for us to be here?" That's when student evaluations began, in the 1920s, which were student-driven. That is, they came from the students. Later of course they were adapted and some people say co-opted by the institutions, but there were

also a whole set of reforms that came out of that because of student demands. There were smaller seminars and tutorials. There were honors programs created.

And then the pattern would repeat itself in future eras. So in the 1950s and the Cold War, in part because of the GI bill, the universities get suddenly very huge. There's a lot of dissatisfaction expressed, especially among the veterans who compose half of all undergrads by 1947. They start to demand better teaching. What you see is a growth of new seminars. You also see televised instruction. Neither of those turn out very well.

Then in the 1960s, the same pattern. Enormous growth, in fact, the greatest ever, mainly fueled in this case by the federal government via the Higher Education Act, which freed up federal dollars for people to go to college. But suddenly in places like the University of Minnesota, you have 2,000 students in Intro to Psych. And you see a lot of student dissatisfaction. We tend to forget that the student protest movements in the 1960s, which were, of course, aimed primarily at the war in Vietnam and civil rights, were also protests about poor teaching. Figures like Tom Hayden and Mario Savio savage what they called the mass class. And they said, "Do not fold, bend or mutilate. I am a human being."

To come up to the present, I think that what we have right now is we have a lot of dissatisfaction among students, but no protests. And even though I'm one minute over, I am going to take a minute to draw from the Netflix show, *The Chair*, because there's a perfect example of what I'm talking about in there. This is not a spoiler alert. *The Chair* hinges on this young male professor who in an ironic gesture uses the Hitler salute. And this creates a huge stir on campus and massive protests, a lot of noise. But the fact that this young male teacher is completely mailing it in, to the point of not even knowing what class he's teaching when he runs in the classroom, that doesn't seem to be exercising anybody. So the real question is, when will the students step up and demand, again, that teaching be better.

Larry Bernstein:

Jonathan, thank you. All right. Now we're going to take it from the student perspective. Patrick Allitt, Professor of History at Emory University will discuss the student. Go ahead, Patrick.

Patrick Allitt:

Great. I read Jonathan Zimmerman's book with great pleasure. And it's an honor to appear alongside him in this session. There's something rather special about the book. Historians usually trace change over time, showing how the interplay of social forces, new technologies, and political decisions creates a new reality. But what he's done is to show how, despite social, technological, and political changes, everything stayed the same. At least in this area of educational history. Students grumbled about having boring professors in the 1790s, and they're still grumbling about boring professors in the 2020s. Just glance at [ratemyprofessor.com](http://ratemyprofessor.com). Back in the 1790s, the professors retorted that the students were lazy, poorly prepared, and insufficiently motivated. They're still saying it. In every generation, the college administrators have tried something new, but it never works very well. So then they go back to the old methods.

I've been a college professor for 33 years, since 1988. When I first took up this job, the Cold War was still going on. And the birth of the students I'm teaching now lay 15 years in the future. When the history of these 33 years comes to be written, it will be brimming with dramatic moments like the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11. Also, with tectonic shifts in geopolitics, the rise of the internet, cell phones, renewable energy, virtual reality. But when I look back over my work as a teacher in these decades, I'm far more struck by the continuities than by the changes. It's all very well to talk about the special characteristics of Generation X, Generation Y, and the Millennials, but all these groups, at least when they played the role of students, had far more similarities than differences.

There are certain bedrock realities in higher education that are going to be as true in the 2020s as they have been for centuries. First, the really successful students are those who educate themselves. Teachers can guide them, but they have to take the initiative and do more than the necessary minimum. They have to be proactive. The reality now, as always, is that most of them are not. On the contrary, the students are specialists in doing just enough and specialists in procrastination. The clearest evidence of this comes in the matter of deadlines. On my syllabus, distributed to students in late August, I wrote that their final papers are due by 5:00 on December the eighth. I already know that not one paper in 30 will arrive before that day and that 26 of them will appear in the last 10 or 15 minutes before 5:00. And that there will also be two or three sad excuses for missing the deadline. This is as true as it was in the '80s and '90s, neither more nor less.

Second, the really successful students are the ones who love to read and who when they finish their assignments, read more. Although we enjoy something approaching mass literacy, we certainly don't have a mass love for books. Regular surveys show that most Americans can't understand a straightforward recipe or a simple set of instructions, and that they read at or below the eighth-grade level. That's been true for a long time, too. Throughout most of world history, the idea that everyone could learn to read seemed completely utopian, even when America tried the experiment anyway, and found that it could work, literacy became for most people, little more than a useful tool.

My Emory colleague, Mark Bauerlein, who's appeared on What Happens Next, published a book in 2008 called *The Dumbest Generation*, arguing that the students were getting worse. I enjoyed it, but I don't think he was right. I think the students are just about the same. Higher education is just too hard for most people and it's always has been. He was right to point out that we now require less work of our students than formerly, and that we give them higher grades. But when everyone's getting a B plus or better, we still find ways of distinguishing the better from the poorer.

I'm more sympathetic to Bryan Caplan's 2018 book, *The Case Against Education*, in which he points out the students and their families pay colleges outrageously high tuition, not because they want education, but because they want credentials. He adds that there ought to be a far more efficient and cost-effective way of giving them.

Another of the perennial discussions among historians, along with the tension between continuity and change, is the question of whether there is such a thing as human nature or whether what we think of as human nature is actually a cultural artifact. The evidence is strong

on both sides. In favor of a permanent human nature, we can understand very well the motivation of many characters in Homer and the Bible, written thousands of years ago. In favor of the cultural theory, ideas about honor, honesty, gifts, beauty, freedom, and justice, the things people will sometimes die for, have varied enormously.

Evidence taken from the field of higher education, however, suggests a deep and ineradicable continuity. My six minutes are nearly up, but let me mention one more thing that never changes. We hear a lot today about how higher education is in crisis. Doubtless it is in crisis, but don't forget, it always has been. There's never been a moment in American history when one or another group wasn't lamenting the sorry state of our colleges and universities, deploring the badness of teaching and the badness of students and so forecasting disaster. My prediction for the 2020s is that higher education will in fact go on more or less as it has been doing for the last 200 years with all its joys and all its imperfections and that so will the lamentations.

Larry Bernstein:

Fantastic, Patrick. All right. 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'être*. 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 its 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.

Larry Bernstein:

Okay. We're going to switch it up. We're going to go to our next speaker, who is Kenny Xu. Kenny is the president of NGO, Color Us United. He is a lead participant in the Harvard Students for Fair Admissions versus Harvard legal case. And he's also the author of *An Inconvenient Minority: The Attack On Asian-American Excellence and the Fight For Meritocracy*. Kenny, if you're there, go ahead.

Kenny Xu:

Well, just thank you so much to Patrick and John. On the matter of does major matter... John mentioned this might be an American or British sort of thing, but as an American, I do have to take the side of Patrick a little more because major does matter. Otherwise, we wouldn't see the starting salaries of math majors is so much higher than the starting salaries of English majors.

And by the way, this is speaking as someone who was both a math and English major, but the starting salaries of math majors are \$88,000 a year. The starting salaries of English majors are \$50,000 in college, which leads me to my point about what my book *An Inconvenient Minority* is about. It's about choices. That's what my book is really about. It's protecting the right to the fruits of your choices.

Asian-Americans in this country are some of the hardest studying people in this country, objectively. The average time or hours a week an Asian-American studies per week is about 14 hours a week. That's average, which is about twice as high as the average American. The average white person is about seven hours, and the average black person is about five hours.

So Asian-Americans study twice as many hours per week as the average American. They also have higher two-parent family structures. They also invest significantly more as a percentage of their income on education, learning-related opportunities, and yet schools like Harvard University, Ivy League, elite schools, UPenn, Princeton, Stanford, the ones that we've been talking about unfairly deny them admissions based on their scores, based on the level of their hard work.

Harvard has consistently limited Asian-Americans at their schools to less than 20% of the student body, even though their own analysis says that if merit were the factor, the primary factor in their admission, Asian-Americans would rise to 43%. 43% of their student body. And this is based on the distribution of math and reading SAT scores in this country. Did you know that the number of Asian-Americans in this country who have math SAT scores higher than 700 out of 800 which is an elite math SAT score. The number of Asian-Americans in this country, a proper estimate would suggest it's about 7,000 to 10,000 per year.

In contrast, the estimated number of black Americans who have scores of the SAT that are above 700 in math is between 500 and 2,000. And Asian-Americans, of course, are a smaller group. We're half as big as black Americans. Yet they have scores on the upper end, that are four times as much as black Americans, and yet they're admitted to Harvard at a rate that is about a fourth or a 10th as much as black Americans in these schools.

So ultimately what you're doing as a culture when you consistently push this kind of policy in our elite universities, which is now spreading to public schools, gifted and talented programs, diversity and inclusion industries in this country, ultimately what you're doing is you are not allowing the fruits of one's choices to properly manifest themselves in their reward and in America, which is what meritocracy is. That's why my book subtitle is: *An Inconvenient Minority, The Attack On Asian-American Excellence and the Fight For Meritocracy*. The fight to have the fruits of your hard work, your effort, and your skill accurately and properly rewarded in our country.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Kenny. The reason I think that the African-Americans are given a leg up is the historical discrimination. How should we consider historical discrimination in the context of this?

Kenny Xu:

You shouldn't consider it up to the point where it actually impedes upon the progress of a student. When a black American is admitted based on Affirmative Action into a school like Harvard University, you are admitting, largely speaking, black Americans with SAT scores in the 600s. And of course, there are exceptions. There are some black Americans whose SAT scores are in the 700s or 750s, but those are comparatively fewer. You're admitting black Americans whose scores are in the 600s, or maybe even high 500s in the same place where they're Asian-Americans and whites with scores of 750 and higher. If you're an Asian-American and you score less than a 700 on an SAT, you're not getting into Harvard. You're not getting into Princeton. You're not getting into any of these schools. Your chances are basically zero.

So, what happens within a system of Affirmative Action, you're creating an environment where these black Americans are viewed, and consequentially view themselves on the lower end of the spectrum. This is called a mismatch effect. And this mismatch effect is so strong that if you look at law school data, you see black Americans mostly in the bottom 25th percentile. Not only is the average salary coming out of law school correlated to the prestige of your law school, but it's also correlated with where you graduate, your class rank within your law school. The prestige factor of getting into Harvard Law School compared to getting into a second tier law school gives you a salary bump of about 25% on average. But then the factor of graduating in the bottom 25% of your class gives you a 25% to 33% downgrade in your starting salary on average, canceling out whatever benefit that you got for attending a more prestigious law school.

Kenny Xu:

So the reality of Affirmative Action for black Americans is that it's actually not doing what it's intended to do, which is to uplift the black community. And even worse, it's causing actual discrimination to be legitimized in our country.

Larry Bernstein:

How does it impact the Asian-American community to know that they're being actively discriminated against?

Kenny Xu:

It increases the competition culture up to like 120%, 130%. I lived in a pretty highly educated community, and lots of Asians, lots of whites, some blacks, some Hispanics. But the Asians in my high school, when it came down to application time, you saw it in their faces. They weren't talking with their best friends anymore. They were talking with their competitors. Because they knew and they were correct that they were going to be judged at their school not in relation to the general people in their school. They're going to be judged compared to the other Asians at their school. So what it does is it creates a biting hyper-competitive competition culture, causes high rates of depression, high rates of social anxiety. Asian-Americans sometimes never recover from this level of hyper-competition and the distrust that forms between them and their own pair bonds on the race to get into elite schools.

Larry Bernstein:

Let me try a different topic. There are certain schools that do not discriminate. When my father went to college in the mid 50s. He got a full scholarship to both Caltech and MIT, and ended up going to Caltech. Today Caltech, I don't believe discriminates on the basis of race, and it is a predominantly Asian school. Is that what you want? Do you want the schools like Caltech where the cream of the crop, the best engineering schools will be predominantly Asian?

And why doesn't Harvard do this? What are their motives as to why they want to discriminate against Asians?

Kenny Xu:

I'll answer the second question first. Why does Harvard do this? Harvard does this because there are strong financial donor-related and virtue-related incentives to do this. So Harvard really believes that they're at the top of the food chain. That's what you need to know about Harvard. Harvard people and administrators really believe cosmically that they're in charge of determining society at large. Their motto says it all. "We build the next citizen leaders of society." That's what they call it. And they look around the world and they see, "Well, we don't want our leaders to be 40% Asian. These are the people that are going to conquer the world." So of course, they feel strongly like that they need to balance out the races in order to accomplish their cosmic mission.

Now, this is based on an entirely arrogant view of themselves, but it's also based on a very warped view of progressivism where they actually think that Asians are more privileged than black Americans in this country. Privilege is the key word there. Privilege means unmerited benefit. If you earn something based on your hard work, your effort, your skills, you're not privileged for getting it. You're doing it because of your hard work. But they think that Asians are more privileged than black Americans because Asians tend to be more successful socioeconomically than black Americans in this country. But that's not true, because Asian-Americans come to this country facing sometimes even greater disadvantages than black Americans in this country. A lot of Asian immigrants come here; they don't even know English. That's the first thing. The Vietnamese population in this country, 80% of the first-generation immigrants didn't know English before they came here. And within one generation, they were able to build themselves through hard work into achieving the prerequisite test scores, English language skills, and assimilative capacity to be able to achieve middle-class success. That's not privilege. That's merit.

Harvard believes that Asians got this way because of privilege, or white adjacency, or whatever you want to call it, but it's an untrue phenomenon. But that's what's influencing them. So that answers your second question, I think.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you make of the citizens of California's decision to stop discrimination in the state system?

Kenny Xu:

I support it. I talk about it in my book, *An Inconvenient Minority*. The reason why Asian-Americans are an inconvenient minority is because they show that hard work, effort, and making good life choices actually pays huge dividends in this country, regardless of your minority status, regardless of so-called white privilege, regardless of so-called systemic racism. The majority of your life and the majority of where you end up is largely dictated by your commitment, your effort, and your choices.

And in terms of Berkeley and Caltech, that's what I want an admission system to be. Berkeley, the UC system, especially the elite colleges that you're not allowed to discriminate on the basis of race in California. That was because of a 1994 resolution called Proposition 209, which banned using race as a factor in any of these considerations. And as a result, Berkeley has a pretty high percentage of Asians, so does Caltech. Caltech is almost 50% Asian. But all the while, Latino students, black students have been increasing as well, surprisingly. You know why?

Because there are many smart Latino and black students in this country who know that they're getting into these colleges because of merit and not because of their race, making it more likely that they want to actually choose these colleges and acclimate into these colleges. So since 1996, when Proposition 209 passed, banning race discrimination, the black population, the Hispanic population has been increasing. Now in 1996, the black population in UC Berkeley did go down by half. But that's the necessary consequence of eliminating Affirmative Action. But since then, it has been increasing and increasing, and now it's at 10%. And all props to them, because they know that they're getting in because of merit.

Larry Bernstein:

Harvard has this quality they're trying to evaluate, which is some sort of psychological personality test. And the Asian-Americans have done quite poorly on that test. Do you feel like that whole metric is just bullshit?

Kenny Xu:

So it's not a psychological evaluation. If the personality score that Harvard uses to grade applicants was a psychological measurement, I think Asian-Americans would probably do better, and I would be more fine with it. One of the three things that Harvard uses to evaluate applicants, according to Harvard's own academic public release data, because of this court lawsuit, Harvard was forced by Students For Fair Admissions against Harvard, suing on behalf of Asian-Americans. Harvard was forced to release their 90,000 pages of alumni admissions data. And they grade people on three things. Grades or academics, extracurriculars, and personality. And Asian-Americans score highest in academics at Harvard. They score highest on extracurriculars. And they score lowest on this personality score. Now, what is personality score? How do they measure it? The answer is they don't really, because they say it's based on your leadership characteristics, your humor, that kind of thing, everything like that.

But the way to measure those kinds of things, if you could measure that at all, would be through an alumni interview or teacher recommendations. Well, it turns out Asian-Americans kill both of those things. They score just as high as whites on alumni interviews. They score a



little lower than whites on teacher recommendations, but higher than blacks and Hispanics, and yet Harvard ranks Asian-Americans lowest on the personality score out of all of the races. Below whites, below blacks, and below Hispanics. What that suggests to me is that there is no objective basis for how Harvard evaluates personality score. Either they're using the stereotypes of Asian-Americans' test taking personalities, test taking robots with no personality. Either they're using that stereotype against Asian-Americans or they're just using personality score as a proxy for race.

Larry Bernstein:

Tell us about the lawsuit. I understand you lost in District Court. It's headed for appeals. What are the next steps? And what do you think is going to happen?

Kenny Xu:

It's not just headed for appeals now. It's headed for the Supreme Court. The lawsuit *Students For Fair Admissions versus Harvard* was filed in 2014 by a group of Asian-American applicants who sued Harvard for this discrimination. This longstanding discrimination against Asian-Americans has been happening over the past 30 years. Harvard says, "No, we don't discriminate against Asians." But it was forced to reveal its data. And the data reveals that Harvard places huge penalties on Asian-Americans specifically with regards to personality. And that's how they justify not discriminating against Asian-Americans. They say, "We don't discriminate against Asian-Americans because Asian-Americans are just worse personalities." And unfortunately the District Court bought Harvard's explanation for that. But now it's going to the Supreme Court.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do you think the District Court came up with their conclusion?

Kenny Xu:

Well, I read through the whole ruling. I read through Judge Allison Burrough's ruling, who's the Massachusetts District Court judge. I recount both sides of the argument in my book *An Inconvenient Minority* before ultimately siding with the plaintiffs.

But there are two economic data sets that were revealed before the court that the court analyzed. Sorry, that the plaintiffs and the defendants analyze. And the court sided with the defendant's analysis. One, because the court is chained to original Supreme Court precedents. If your listeners remember, in 1979 the Supreme Court ruled that colleges could use race in admissions, so long as it was narrowly tailored and it wasn't the only thing that you use. But they could use race in admissions.

So the District Court had to go with the Supreme Court's original standard, which is that you can use race in admission. So under that higher standard, it was already going to be difficult for the plaintiffs to win. But then this court sided with the defendant's analysis of Harvard's admissions data, which the defendant's analysis says that Harvard doesn't discriminate against Asian-Americans. It's just discriminating against people with lower personalities. It's discriminating against people who are reciting in certain areas, who are choosing certain majors.

Harvard tried to say holistically that the Asian penalty wasn't it, it was the personality penalty that was harming Asians. But the personality score at the root of this had no objective basis on it. So that's why I disagree with the defendant's analysis, the claim, because where was the objective data that this personality score, that it hurt Asians rested on? There was none.

Patrick Allitt:

Patrick Allitt here. If I can ask you a question, Kenny. Do you favor American universities going over to a system where academic criteria are the only criteria for admission?

Kenny Xu:

Well, to my understanding... Is that how the elite British universities do it, Oxford and Cambridge?

Patrick Allitt:

Yes.

Kenny Xu:

Yeah. Then I support it. That's what I see in other systems across the world. It's worked perfectly fine there and I think it can work perfectly fine here.

Patrick Allitt:

So presumably it would be the death of things like Division I sports.

Kenny Xu:

So athletics is a little tricky in terms of using that as a factor for admissions, because athletics, it's genuinely meritorious. That's how I want to put it. I believe in a meritocracy. I believe that people should be evaluated on the basis of merit. But if colleges are now defined not just as academic centers of excellence, but athletic centers of excellence, then obviously you'd want to admit based on athletic merit. So I'm okay with athletics-based recruitment and admissions and everything like that. What I'm not okay with is admissions based on race, admissions based on backgrounds, admissions based on your last name, or characteristics that are ultimately irrelevant from the standpoint of merit.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Kenny, how about if your mom or dad went there?

Kenny Xu:

I'm not okay with legacy admissions either. This could be certainly a more controversial take, but no, I think admissions should strictly be based on merit. The issue with legacy admissions is that you're basing it on some kind of family line or family hierarchy, and that's irrelevant from the standpoint of merit. Your family line does not really define you from a meritorious perspective.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Well, I agree with that completely. And that's why I was surprised by your question about Affirmative Action for athletes. Because let's face it, that's what we have, Affirmative Action for athletes. At most of the small schools, that boost is much greater than the boost that minorities get. Because think of a place like Williams College. Tiny little place. You need 60 guys for the football team. Think of the fraction of the kids at Williams, the male kids that are football players. Do the math. It's extraordinary.

Earlier you were talking about the need to base all our decisions on academics. So what's with the sports thing? Yeah, that's a form of merit, but why is it a form of merit that these universities should credit?

Kenny Xu:

Wait, when did I say we need to base all our decisions on academics?

I said we should base our decisions on merit.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Which would seem to be defining in academic terms, right? I mean, all the stuff about the SATs and scores and grades and hard work. And I'm totally down with that. And that's why I'm confused by your comments about the athletes.

Kenny Xu:

There's a reasonable case that suggest that colleges these days are now not just academic recruitment centers, but also athletic recruitment centers. So if you're an athletic recruitment center, then you should admit people based on athletic merit. So that's what I think. Meritocracy is not just about, "Are you the smartest or most intelligent?" It's, "Are you genuinely the most meritorious for whatever you are trying to get into?" And if you're trying to get into an athletic recruitment center, whoever plays the best tennis game should get into the athletic recruitment center. Whoever plays the best football should get into the athletic recruitment center. That's what I mean.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

How about then two tennis players, one of whom is marginally better than the other, but in the first case, that guy, when he was six was sent down to one of those tennis academies in Florida. The other kid in my thought experiment, he's not quite as good at tennis as the first guy, although he's pretty good. And he just came from a poor circumstance and just started hitting on a court. If we're going to do this purely by merit, as you're describing it, Kenny, we'd have to take the guy who went to the tennis academy in Florida. Would we not?

Kenny Xu:

Right.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

How fair is that?

Kenny Xu:

Yes.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

I mean, how fair is that?

Kenny Xu:

So I would say that that's fair. From the mismatch effect, you wouldn't want the kid playing significantly worse tennis on the same team as kids who are playing at the US Open. That kid would just get crushed. He would get demolished. It doesn't matter if he comes from a poor background.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

No, but Kenny, all these kids are great tennis players. He's only marginally worse in the example. But if you want only to reward the skill in the way that you're describing, it seems to me you have to ignore the very real inequalities about how people acquire certain skills.

Kenny, I agree with much of what you're saying, but I think it also ignores certain really important realities. You're taking people's skill and merit as sort of settled. They just exist. And what that ignores are circumstances that promote certain skills and inhibit others. That's the point of the tennis example. It's true that the first kid is a little bit better in tennis, but that's not because necessarily his "merit", this sort of mystical inner substance. It's because he had all these coaching advantages. That matters. That's going to improve his tennis game. But it doesn't strike me as particularly fair to give that guy the nod when there's this other kid who didn't have all those advantages, could in fact turn out to be a better tennis player. It's quite possible. Maybe there's more potential because he didn't have all that coaching. But your merit model seems to ignore all of that.

Kenny Xu:

Well, no, because you're ignoring the fact that there are other schools. Say Vanderbilt University's tennis program is number one in the nation. And then say, Penn State's tennis program is number 10 in the nation. Vanderbilt's going to recruit the best athletes. Let's say under my merit model, they exclude the guy who was marginally worse, but raised in a much poorer circumstance. He's still going to have the opportunity to go to Penn State, the number 10 tennis program in the nation, and maybe be the leader at Penn State. And you know what? After a year at Penn State, he realizes, "I'm the best guy on the team by a pretty wide margin. I'm improving just like you said I was going to improve." Then he has the opportunity to transfer into Vanderbilt and actually get in based on his actual merit and qualifications. So we're really not just talking about you're either included or excluded. I think there's room for including under a meritorious model based on merit in all of these circumstances.

Larry Bernstein:

Jon, this is Larry. Just following off of that example. Why not leave it to the tennis coach? The coach can evaluate the potential for the kid.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

That is the argument for affirmative action, is "Let the institution decide the potential, and in the course of that, they're going to have to build in the circumstances from which this kid came." So I-

Kenny Xu:

Okay, well, the more... Yeah, go ahead.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Yeah, right? That's part of the judgment-

Kenny Xu:

The more you let an institution decide, the more you're allowing human error ultimately to decide. That's the issue with giving institutions too much leverage over this entire process, is because institutions and people are prone to the same sort of errors that you and I are prone to. Let's not assume that there's this mystical college admissions officer who is the Platonic guardian state who can make effectively the most rational and best decisions for other people. We know that, for example, what we call holistic admissions processes benefit the wealthy and privileged more than objective meritocratic admissions process based solely on SAT scores.

How do we know this? Because in the New York City system, you have these specialized high schools in New York City where the gifted and talented programs, like Stuyvesant High School, Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech, where kids are admitted only on the basis of a test score. That's it, one test score. And the guys admitted into Stuyvesant High School and Bronx Science High School, 50% of them are on free and reduced lunch.

And you have this entire separate system in New York City, by the way, that admits based on holistic admissions, I'm talking about things like Hunter College, some of the more charter private schools, they say they admit on holistic. Their student body is much richer. Their student body is much richer, and the conclusion I've come to realize why their student body comes that way is because richer people know how to play the game that poor people don't know how to play. They know how to curry up to the counselor, they know how to write the essays, they know how to make your kid look good and holistic and extracurricular and gifted, they know how to pile on the extracurriculars. Poor kids don't have access to all of that thing, they bet their things on the test. Ultimately, that's what matters, and that's why I think that things should be based on objective meritocracy as much as possible.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

You know, I'm friendly to that, in principle. The only thing I'd add is, it also allows them to game the system in illegal ways, like bribing the polo coach to say that your kid plays polo, which

again, raises the question for me of why the kids playing polo should have anything to do with whether you go to Stanford. I don't believe it should.

Patrick Allitt:

There's also this factor, the NCAA itself acts in bad faith all the time by pretending that student athletes are real students, whereas in fact, they're really gladiators. What they want to be is athletes, and they know that, especially in the case of football and basketball, they've got to go through the colleges, whether they want to or not. But to them, the academic life is a distraction. Surely the solution there is the division three model, where students are admitted for academic reasons, and then if they can play tennis, they go up for the tennis team, and if they can't, they don't.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Yeah, but I think there's a little bit of myth-making in that, Patrick, because at the division three places, actually they get an enormous boost from their athletic ability. In fact, they get the biggest boost of all, because those places are so small. The coaches at Williams exert an enormous influence over the admissions process, and they do benefit people. It's affirmative action for sport scouts. That's literally what it is. And again, we can debate whether it should be that, but there's no denying that it is.

Kenny Xu:

Jon, do you think that college should just be an academic institution?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

No. I think there are many factors that should go into it. But of course, I think that one of those factors should have to do with the background of the student, not the racial or ethnic background. And on that score, I agree with you. The social class background, which incidentally is not a term that's come up in this discussion thus far, which I think is extremely indicative of the problem. Americans don't know how to talk about social class. I absolutely agree with Kenny that race is not a good proxy for opportunity or ability. You know who else agrees with him? President Obama. President Obama famously said that when his daughter was applying to college, this is the first daughter when he was still in the White House, that she should not receive any sort of preference from Harvard or any other place by virtue of her race, because she, this is Malia, had had what Obama, in his inimitable way, described as, quote, "A pretty good deal."

And I think Obama's right. But the problem with this whole debate is that the difference between somebody like Malia Obama, who had enormous advantages growing up, and the great bulk of African-Americans in this country who haven't had the same sort of advantage. I do not think it's fair to ignore those advantages and disadvantages when we think about who we want to admit, I think we should focus on them. We could not think about them in racial terms, we could think about them in class terms.

Kenny Xu:

Yeah. You give a reasonable defense of the socioeconomic-based affirmative action, which I've also considered. You actually make two points I want to address. One is about Obama. Yes, Obama said that, but you know what he did during his administration? His Department of Justice instructed colleges to implement race-based affirmative action equity plans and to set diversity goals. So he can talk with one side of the mouth and do something with other sides of the mouth. That was classic Obama.

But secondly, the socioeconomic affirmative action. I'm more sympathetic to it. I get it. First of all, we know race-based affirmative action is particularly egregious, because there are a lot of black rich people in this country today, and the people getting into Harvard who are black, actually half of them are from black immigrants. The other half, I think 50% of them, come from private schools. 71% of them come from upper-middle class or higher backgrounds. It's just totally unfair.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

There are Asian rich people too.

Kenny Xu:

Harvard is a college for a lot of rich people. So even among rich people, there are gradations of merit. I'm more sympathetic to socioeconomic class, but it still assumes a certain arrogance of the superstructure. It still assumes that it's Harvard's responsibility to right these inequalities. It's Harvard's responsibility to train these kids. And more importantly, only Harvard can do it. You send these socioeconomic kids to Penn State, God forbid, they're going to do so bad in society. And I think... What we've already discussed, what you and Patrick have already discussed is that the prestige of the school doesn't even really matter. If you're a smart guy, you'll be able to accomplish your way out of it, you'll be able to do fine in life. So I still don't really see a true reason why you need to compromise a strictly merit-based system.

Larry Bernstein:

Jonathan, I have a question for you. Let's imagine that you're an admissions officer and it is Obama's child who's applying. It seems it would bring great prestige to the university, to have Obama's child attend your school. And also there's another benefit, that the child has been exposed to unique experiences, having grown up in the White House. That child will have met some of the world leaders, and been involved in some of the world's biggest decisions. And then that child could inform the rest of the students in his or her class what that was like.

When I was working at Salomon Brothers as a financial analyst, I had the opportunity to interview Helmut Kohl's son for a job to work at Salomon. And so my boss said to me, "What do you think?" I said, "Oh my God, it's Helmut Kohl's son. How do we not hire the guy? Who knows what doors that kid can open? He's fine. Let's take him." So I wonder, how should we consider social class and the benefit that social class brings to an institution?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Well, look, I mean, the Malia example is right on point, because Larry, you're articulating the diversity rationale. In some ways, this entire argument is a little bit irrelevant, because of the way that we've constitutionally defined affirmative action. So Kenny said that the Bakke case was in '78. And the Bakke case is the most, to this day, the most misunderstood case in all of American law, as best I can tell. Most of my students, before they read the Bakke case, having listened to a discussion like this one, they think what Bakke is going to say is, "If you've come from a group that has suffered some sort of historical contemporary discrimination, we can give you a leg up on that ground."

Not only does Bakke not say that, but it says you can't do that. So in a way, this discussion is academic in the worst sense, because what we're talking about, believe it or not, you're not allowed to do. What it says, the Bakke decision says, it says you can't actually do admissions that way, because A, we can't measure the degree of discrimination that the group or individual has suffered, and B, we could never devise an appropriate remedy. So if you can't admit on that basis, and again, the basis being historical contemporary discrimination, on what basis can you use this as a plus factor?

That's where the diversity rationale comes in. And what they say is, you can use it as a plus factor, not the only one, because we believe that if you bring in a wider array of people from a wide array of backgrounds, that everyone will learn more. And I have to say that I agree with that, deeply and profoundly. My trouble is just with the way we've defined that diversity, because it's entirely in terms of racial and ethnic phenotype. And what that's going to do is create situations where everybody looks different, but is mostly from the same place. And, I should add, the same political party. If we thought about diversity more widely, we would bring in a wider array, not just of races, but of social class, of religion, of geography, and I do believe that that would educate all of us much more than if we were all from the same place.

Kenny Xu:

Jon and I are in agree about the benefits of diversity. Not of diversity of race, because what does race really mean except as a proxy, and a pretty weak proxy at that, of certain intellectual paradigms? But yes, diversity of intellect matters. Diversity of the way that you view the world. I would say intellectual diversity is much more important than racial diversity. I mean, that's the subject of Jonathan Haidt's work, and that's why I think you do need more conservative, libertarian perspectives. Conservative perspectives at universities for sure, just because of the nature of how complete liberal-dominated it is, but let's also talk about the costs of diversity.

Diversity without unity leads to dissension. It causes empires to fall. It leads to crises, and even within groups. I did basic organizational communication studies, and even within a group of four or five people, one, there is no firm goal in mind that all four people are unified on, number one, and number two, if those four people do not respect each other as equals, then the net positive value of diversity becomes a net negative value.

So, diversity becomes a value under certain assumptions. The premise is that the goals are the same, and that people are on equal footing and respect each other. But what racial preferences has eliminated that second premise. It's created a place where people are not at equal footing. And at this point, diversity loses its luster. It loses the rationale. And so the whole premise of



Bakke, which is that diversity is helpful to a university, is being challenged right now. And this is why this case is so interesting. It's why we need to talk about it. And this is why I'm more skeptical of the value of benefits of diversity, per se, if it's not implemented in the right environment,

Patrick Allitt:

That's a very good point. I was thinking about this in the context of the earlier discussion of teaching, that when I'm in my class, no matter who's in the room, I don't want them to be diverse in their learning of the things I've got to teach them. That is, I want them to learn what I've got to teach them, and as much as possible, I want them to learn it so that they all come to the same understanding of it in the end. Whether or not diversity is a virtue to the people coming in, I'm trying to diminish their diversity in the process of teaching them a certain history, which requires a lot of very particular qualities, which are the presuppositions of their being able to learn it by the time the course is finished. So in that way, I'm also skeptical of the idea that diversity in and of itself is a good thing.

Larry Bernstein:

In these top universities, we have a substantial number of foreign students, and a lot of them are from Asia. What distinguishes many foreign students is, they don't have access to financial aid, they've got to pay full freight. How do you think about the importance of foreign students, its role, and whether or not discrimination is appropriate or not?

Kenny Xu:

It depends on your worldview. If you are "America first," then yeah, you should have a preference for American students, because ultimately, why is meritocracy valuable? Meritocracy valuable is in the sense that it strengthens your country. You don't want meritocracy for the sake of strengthening the world or strengthening your competitors. You want meritocracy for the strength of strengthening your country. So yeah, I mean, if you want to have a preference for American students, I can understand it. If you're one of a more globalist mindset and you think that strengthening the world strengthens America, or maybe on a matter of principle, you're just against the whole concept of "America first," then sure, admit international students with the same preference skills that you're admitting regular Asian-American students.

The only, the only other issue that I see with regards to international students is the issue of espionage, especially with rising rivalries with China and everything like that. I am of the belief that the vast majority of international students come here just to study and learn American culture and transfer into American history, and it's an exercise of our soft power, which is great. Even the majority of Chinese international students. But in the cases where there's espionage, yeah. Get rid of them, weed them out. This is why we have an FBI. This is why we have a CIA. That's not the role of the university to police it. But one thing you shouldn't do is that you shouldn't racially profile. You shouldn't say, "Because this person is of a certain race or from a certain country, they must be an espionage, or they must be treated with that characteristic."

Jonathan Zimmerman:

I agree with everything that Kenny just said, and it's certainly not the job of universities to try to police espionage, which has been radically overstated, although of course, it happens and it's real. However, it is the job of the university to attend to academic freedom and free speech, and I think that's an area that often gets short shrift in this discussion. I have had students in my own classroom from China and other countries tell me they do not feel at liberty to speak about certain issues in my classroom because they don't know who's listening. And I think this is a real issue that hasn't gotten nearly enough play. If we believe in what we're doing, we must create circumstances where everybody feels at liberty to say what they think, but because some of our students come from places where you are not at liberty to do that, they don't feel safe in our own classrooms, and we need to take that much more seriously than, than we have up until now.

Larry Bernstein:

Jon, are you saying that it could get back to the secret police in the relevant country that the child has said something?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

It already has. There's a guy in jail in China right now for something he Tweeted when he was a student at the University of Minnesota. Larry, it's already happened.

Kenny Xu:

Wow.

Larry Bernstein:

I didn't know that.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Yeah. Everyone should know it. It's just, we don't care enough about it, is the problem. We want their tuition dollars, of course, but we're not willing to take the other steps to make sure that they get the full benefit of what we're doing. And I should also add that other people get the benefits of their presence. It's back to the diversity thing. If these kids are biting their tongues, we're not leveraging what they can bring to us. It's not good for us either.

Larry Bernstein:

I was looking through the Penn graduate students per department, and particularly in the math and sciences, it's almost exclusively Asian. Kenny, are you getting what you want in the graduate program? And what is it about the graduate programs that minimizes discrimination? Or do you think what it is, is that the general American, if it skews foreign, finds that there are better employment opportunities outside of the workplace and don't find the same value add of the graduate program?

Kenny Xu:

I don't know what to say in terms of, am I getting what I want? What I want is a merit-based system. I don't really care about what they look like, if they were 10 black kids, if they were 10 white kids. Doesn't really matter to me so much, necessarily, as long as the elite programs are getting the elite graduates.:

I'll tell you something that too often happens with regards to graduate programs. You have Princeton's math PhD program, which is the number one math program in the entire world, and they've recently been conducting racial preferences and admissions. They recently admitted this black woman... I recount this in my book *An Inconvenient Minority*, by the way... And admitted for... She told a really good story about herself. However, her math credentials were not necessarily up to par, but they admitted her anyway. They were moved by her story.

And the professor who recounted this to me, his name is Sergiu Klainerman, you can look him up, Princeton math professor, he tells me that this woman, soon as she gets into this elite math program, is confronted with the reality of other students who were the 10 or 20 brightest math students in the entire world. And this woman was not bad at math. She was merely great at math, whereas the other people were world-class elite. She fell behind very quickly, and had to drop out of the program and grew very bitter and resentful towards her alma mater for it. This is the kind of thing that doesn't help anybody. It does not help the kids that are put in before they're ready. It does not help the brand or reputation of a college. The only way that they're able to paper over this is simply to suppress it, to not tell that story. But I do.

Larry Bernstein:

This is the part of the show where you get to end in a note of optimism. Kenny, what are you optimistic about?

Kenny Xu:

I'm optimistic based on the conversation that Jon and Patrick were having before I appeared on the show, which is that even if you don't get into an elite university, you still have a great chance at life, assuming you're sufficiently merited to it, and that hard work and skill and learning, there's no substitute for that, which is a note of optimism. Society, isn't necessarily a game about which university you get into, and that's something when I speak to Asian-Americans, I tell them a lot, because Asian-American parents are so obsessed with getting their kids into these elite universities, because unfortunately in countries like China, you have such a scarcity of top universities, that if you don't get into one of the top universities, your opportunities are dramatically limited. But in America, that's not the case. We have the best higher education infrastructure in the entire world. And you'll be fine regardless of where you attend. This optimism is partially the reason why I don't support preferences, and this optimism is a reason why I imagine things will fix themselves out in the future.

Larry Bernstein:

Okay. That ends today's session. I want to make a quick plug for our next episode. Our first speaker on September 26th, Sunday will be Martin Pauli, who is professor of architecture at

UCLA, who focuses on structural engineering. I hope to learn from Marty what caused the collapse of the Champlain Tower in Sunnyside, Florida. I've read the articles and I've read the news, but I still don't understand the design engineering flaws that resulted in that building falling down.

Our second speaker is my friend Ed Glaeser, who is the Fred and Eleanor Glimp Professor of Economics and the Chairman of the Department of Economics at Harvard University, and he is the author of the recent book that was released just a week ago entitled *Survival of the City: Living and Thriving in an Age of Isolation*.

If you're interested in listening to a replay of today's What Happens Next program or any of our previous episodes, or wish to read a transcript, you can find them at our website, [whathappensnextin6minutes.com](http://whathappensnextin6minutes.com). Replays are also available on Apple Podcasts, Podbean, and Spotify.

I would like to thank today's speakers for their insights. I would also like to thank our listeners for their time and for engaging with these complex issues. Please stay tuned for next Sunday to find out What Happens Next.