

“Defining Democracy & Academic Freedom on Campus”

The aims for this first seminar were to generate multiple points of consensus across a spectrum of perspectives about the relationship between higher education and democratic society, evaluate criticisms of the academy, and articulate the role of academic freedom as a tool for democracy. Christopher Koliba’s white paper served as a starting point for discussion, followed by comments by Stephen Jackson before opening the floor to dialogue.

In his overview, Koliba emphasized several points from his paper: definitions of the social contract; distinguishment between capital “L” Liberalism and liberalism; the utility and ability of higher education in upholding a liberal democracy; critiques of higher education from a broad range of perspectives; and the contours of academic freedom. Stephen Jackson’s subsequent comments highlighted the incongruence between Enlightenment values (i.e. equality, rationality) with the academy’s history of expropriation of labor and land as well as its continued resistance to meaningfully reckon with that history. As such, the conveyance of knowledge and truth seeking were not the original intentions of higher education but rather the reproduction and commodification of knowledge. Jackson stated that hard-won gains in the academy remain tenuous, raising serious concerns about the efficacy of a social contract that fails during times of social upheaval. Jackson concluded by pointing out that bad faith critiques of higher education distract from meaningful discourse about the mission of higher education at KU and in Kansas at large.

Collectively, attendee comments connected over three key themes: the validity of various criticisms of higher education, the harms of Enlightenment narratives about higher education and liberal democracy, and the social contract as it pertains to pedagogy and discipline methodologies and content.

Speakers contended with a number of the critiques of higher education, however of the six highlighted in Koliba’s white paper, most comments focused on neo-liberalism, “lower-case l” liberalism, and authoritarianism. Comments from these speakers indicate a perspective that the university’s indebtedness to corporate and private interests limit researchers’ pursuit of truth. One such example is the university cutting funding for the basic sciences, which serves the broader public, to prioritize technology and entrepreneurship, which ultimately only benefits the few. Additionally, when the state and broader public’s interests do not align with rational approaches to knowledge production, scholars are unable to fully exercise academic freedom since they are restricted by political agendas of the day and anti-scientific viewpoints. When such forces dictate funding, hiring, university budgets, and curricula, they undermine core tenants of liberal democracy, namely checks on power and scientific reason.

Further, broader social mistrust in higher education continues to weaken the university’s discretion and its ability to serve the public. How can we strengthen the university’s resiliency in times of discord and strengthen public trust? What are the limits to the social contract, especially when the non-specialist public threatens to undermine the academy’s ability to function with

discretion? How can the academy support a marketplace of ideas when some ideas threaten the core tenants of liberal democracy?

Other comments centralized around the critique of higher education as a colonial structure that prioritizes European and Euro-American perspectives of reason and rationality above all others. Such comments argued that myths of the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution continue to perpetuate harm by framing the rise of Area Studies (Ethnic Studies, Indigenous Studies, etc.) as the natural outcome of the academy's pursuit of truth and equality. Some attendees argued that, to the contrary, the academy's beginnings with enslavement and colonialism ensures that Indigenous nodes of knowledge creation and Black feminist thinking continue to be not taken seriously and are met with resistance. Some stated that historically and today, non-Western ways of knowing and creating have been labeled as "alternative" and therefore irrational, secondary, or supplemental, not essential. Some commenters contended that these Area Studies, the faculty, staff, and students who have a home in them, and the policies that protect them (i.e. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), are at the center of authoritarian and anti-intellectual attacks. There is a deep concern that peers and university governance are slow to protect this new generation of scholars, if at all. However, one of the concerns with presenting critiques of the predominance of Western rationality and reason is that bad faith actors misalign those critiques to undermine the mission of higher education as a whole in the name of individualistic representation and beliefs.

Finally, many speakers raised multiple concerns about discretion within the classrooms, ranging from student perspectives about higher education and the ability to teach according to one's disciplinary norms. In some instances, there is a disconnect between students' expectations and instructors' assumptions about the purpose of higher education. Students, their parents, instructors, and administration all bring with them their own understandings about higher education. Although some instructors view their role as teachers and researchers as contributing to liberal democracy by preparing students to be informed citizens, many students and their parents, who are taking out loans or paying out of pocket for tuition, view higher education as job preparation and investment for the future. For many, this ideological disconnect and media give life to the specter of a "capital L" Liberal agenda within the classrooms and syllabi. Some students enter higher education with the view that their opinions to hold the same, or more, weight as research outcomes and believe that their personal beliefs, regardless of their relevance to disciplinary norms, must be honored as meaningful contributions to class discussions and assignments. So, like those criticizing the neo-liberalism of the academy, there is growing distrust in administration that prioritizes student and other non-scholar views over the democratic values of research and pedagogy.

Concluding the discussion, an attendee provided insight from his work as a legal scholar assisting the KU's social media policy following backlash from a KU journalist's incendiary comment on a mass shooting in 2014. In his capacity, he helped finetune the policy which was initially unduly restrictive on faculty expression. In Epp's experience, the First Amendment does not provide the strongest basis for academic freedom. Rather, in the case of social media policy,

he argued that the university must protect academics from whims of the day, and at the same time, academics must demonstrate their responsibility to the public.