

Session Overview

Session Title: “Sovereign and Free? The Relationship between KU, the Kansas Board of Regents, and Local Economies”

Date & Time: Wednesday, May 6, 2026

Location / Format: Hall Center for the Humanities, In-Person

Session Type: Moderated Panel and Breakout Group Discussion

Moderator / Discussion Leader: William Duncan, Ph.D., Co-PI for the Sawyer Seminar Series, Assistant Research Professor for the Interdisciplinary Data Science Program, and Co-Director for the Kansas Data Science Consortium

Presenter Information

- Donna Ginther, Ph.D.: Roy A. Roberts Distinguished Professor of Economics, Director for the Institute for Policy & Social Research
- Rusty Monhollon, Ph.D.: Former Vice President for Academic Affairs with the Kansas Board of Regents
- Ben Merriman, Ph.D.: Associate Professor for the School of Public Affairs & Administration

Stated Framing or Guiding Questions:

- What justifies public funding for higher education? (i.e. what is the state's legitimate interest that justifies the use of taxpayer dollars to fund the activities and programs?)
- Can public universities be entirely self-regulating? If not, in what scenarios is oversight of public institutions justified by a Board of Regents? The State Legislature? How should we balance academic freedom with democratic accountability?
- The state of Kansas would like the Regents institutions to pursue more economic development goals, ranging from launching more start-ups to generating more innovation. Given KU's mission, and the mission of many institutions of higher learning, is local and regional economic development a valid endpoint or a distortion of the mission for a university like KU?
- What is the role of the Humanities in shaping the relationship between a public university and society, especially in light of the emphasis placed on workforce development, economic development, and innovation in modern universities? How do the Humanities contribute to public trust and legitimacy, especially when their value is not easily measured?
- If a public university faces binding budget constraints, how should it allocate resources across competing missions (e.g. workforce training, research, humanities education, access, regional development)? What principles should guide those trade-offs?
- What does a public university owe to the broader public to maintain legitimacy and trust, and how should that shape its teaching, research, and public engagement?

Audience Composition

- Faculty: 19
- Undergraduate Students:
- Graduate Students: 2
- Staff: 3
- Lawrence Community Members w/ KU affiliation:

- Non-KU-affiliated Community Members:
- Cohort Participants: 17

Pre-Session Audience Sentiment (if collected)

- Key expectations or questions: N/A
- Notable concerns or tensions: N/A
- Themes emerging prior to discussion: N/A

Core Content Summary

- Key arguments or perspectives presented:
 - o Duncan opened the Seminar with a brief presentation to frame the conversation about the relationship between KU and the state. His presentation captured one critique of higher education: that some disciplines have a predisposition to certain ideological orientations (the research topics pursued, interpretations of data, etc. See Kahlenberg and Lin, 2026). Some view the empirical data on ideological orientation as evidence that academia has gone in the wrong direction, or that, due to researchers' subjectivity, those disciplines have no merit and therefore should not be publicly funded or subjects for students to study. Duncan argued that we need to move beyond this critique. While data shows that some disciplines, such as American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Gender Studies—notably fields in the Humanities—have a “liberal” ideological bent, we must decide for ourselves as an institution whether this matters by focusing on our mission and vision (“To educate leaders, build healthy communities, and make discoveries that change the world” and “To be an exceptional learning community that lifts each member and advances society,” respectively) and consider how to navigate the different perspectives of constituencies, such as voters, business owners, and interest groups.
 - ♣ KU’s mission and vision statements framed the following conversation, both on the panel and in breakout groups, with panelists and attendees discussing where the mission and vision felt like it fit KU's reality, and where it might need revisited.
 - o Ginther discussed the economics of higher education, noting the positive spill overs, which include citizens who are more likely to get married, pay taxes, inform themselves about politics and vote, and live longer and healthier lives. She argues that new knowledge and innovation have a positive impact on economic development, and the restriction on scientific research hurts the state’s economic growth. Donna noted that KBOR oversees a discretionary budget for 32 different universities and colleges, all of which offer different kinds of higher education deliverables (R1 flagship universities, smaller regional universities, and technical and community colleges). In light of that, KU needs to clearly articulate its value and contributions to the state of Kansas.
 - o Merriman’s points pertained to tension between the public university and the state, and how the Kansas Board of Regents’ most important function is to act as a buffer between KU and the state of Kansas. He argued that while KU requires a regulating body to hold the university accountable to the state’s citizens, that body should not control KU’s pursuit of truth. Ben defined accountability as ensuring that the university makes an honest effort and responsibly/efficiently uses public funds, not controlling the content of research. Since KU is not a land grant

institution, financial investment in the university can be understood as a gift and commitment to bettering Kansas society.

- o Monhollon's comments largely centered on promoting a precisely defined mission for KU. In light of the challenges KBOR faces (understaffing, too many institutions to manage), he reiterated that KU needs to develop ways to communicate its value to the public through economic and workforce development as well as individual growth, or "the good life," for individual citizens.
- Major themes discussed:
 - o Indicators of "the good life" or individual success
 - o Positive impacts of higher education on economic flow/the state economy
 - o Negative impacts of threats to academic freedom on economic flow
- Points of alignment across perspectives:
 - o KU is an essential institution for the state of Kansas; it produces a significant part of the state's workforce, especially in public administration and the training of professionals like teachers, doctors, and health care practitioners.
 - o Advocates for KU need to be able to articulate precisely the unique mission and values of the institution to KBOR, legislators, and the public to protect the university's funding and academic freedom. One key way to better communicate KU's value and purpose is to humanize higher education and academia by teaching outside of the classroom through interactions with stakeholders, including members of the local community, KBOR Regents, and legislators
 - o Higher education institutions need measures of accountability for use of public funds, but this accountability should not come at the risk of academic freedom
- Points of tension or divergence:
 - o Economic value of higher education for the state and nation
 - o Personal value of higher education
 - o Moral or civic value of higher education for the state and nation

Dialogue & Engagement Highlights

- Notable audience questions and comments:
 - o There were six breakout groups, each assigned one of the framing questions to guide the conversations. The following points are summaries of the views each table's spokesperson shared with the larger group, supplemented by available notes from participants.
 - o **#1: What justifies public funding for higher education?** (i.e. what is the state's legitimate interest that justifies the use of taxpayer dollars to fund the activities and programs?)
 - ♣ As instructors, we help foster critical thinking skills and present a variety of perspectives for students. In doing so, we challenge students to be precise and deconstruct ideas and themes with specificity. This type of learning is not always visible or easy to understand unless one has already done this type of learning. How can we translate the value of this type of learning to those not in our classrooms?

- ♣ Academics should do more public engagement but public engagement is not highly rewarded in the tenure and promotion process.
- **#2: Can public universities be entirely self-regulating?** If not, in what scenarios is oversight of public institutions justified by a Board of Regents? The State Legislature? How should we balance academic freedom with democratic accountability?
 - ♣ Universities cannot be self-regulating; therefore, the question becomes how to balance academic freedom with accountability. Since there is no consensus about what academic freedom is, it is difficult to protect from bad faith interventions. Although there has yet to be a singular definition of academic freedom, the state should protect it because the benefits are worth the risk.
 - ♣ A key issue: KBOR interfering with faculty's right to create their own curriculums.
 - ♣ Regarding KU's Vision Statement, it is true that academics fail to articulate their value, but there is also a disinformation industry about academic freedom and higher education; these critics have no obligation to cite their sources.
- **#3: The state of Kansas would like the Regents institutions to pursue greater economic development goals, ranging from launching more start-ups to producing more innovation. Given KU's mission, and the mission of many institutions of higher learning, is local and regional economic development a valid end or a distortion of the mission for a university like KU?**
 - ♣ Higher education focuses on exposure to influential bodies of work, vocational training, and developing critical thinking skills. Tensions in the current moment boil down to higher education's transactional relationship with students and the breakdown of democracy.
 - ♣ Building trust will not result from a strong communication campaign; it can only occur when the divides between rural and urban, the "elites" versus "the rest," are addressed.
 - ♣ If KBOR is the buffer between KU and the state, how do we begin conversations about the micromanagement of our curriculum, DEI, and race?
- **#4: What is the role of the Humanities in shaping the relationship between a public university and society in light of the emphasis placed on workforce development, economic development, and innovation in modern universities? How do the Humanities contribute to public trust and legitimacy, especially when their value is not easily measured?**
 - ♣ In defining the role of humanities in the relationship between the university and society, the group defined a list of skillsets rather than disciplines. These skills include: critical thinking, ethics, respect for diverse perspectives, respect for historical truths, and empathy. Humanities education is more useful to the workforce than preprofessional training due to the development of these skills.
 - ♣ The Humanities offer much more than just economic value, because they help us understand where we are as a society, and where we ought to go.

This cannot be reduced to economic terms. Whose interest does it serve to wonder about the earning potential and economic output of our students?

- **#5: If a public university faces binding budget constraints, how should it allocate resources across competing missions (e.g. workforce training, research, humanities, access, regional development)? What principles should guide those trade-offs?**
 - ♣ Our disciplines' missions should not be perceived as competing for students, for financial resources, for survival, but we are often pitted against each other in times of scarcity.
 - ♣ The Humanities provide opportunities to develop critical thinking skills for the regional workforce and through interdisciplinarity; we must identify and fill the gaps in our disciplines (as well as those outside of the Humanities). Interdisciplinarity and collaboration allow us to share spaces (potentially generating more research productivity), information (fostering more supportive promotion and tenure experiences and policies), and encourage story-telling and dialogue.
 - ♣ We must engage with the community meaningfully, too, not just folks in other academic disciplines, to rethink research questions and see our work in new ways.
- **#6: What does a public university owe to the broader public to maintain legitimacy and trust, and how should that shape its teaching, research, and public engagement?**
 - ♣ The public university must participate in relationship-building and think about how those authentic, trust-based connections can be established more effectively, and sustained over time, on and off campus at KU. Meaningful communication with people outside the higher education sphere requires dedicated time to identify gaps that exist and show up for exchanges in person.
 - ♣ Some of the trouble/risks for academics and individuals in higher education are due to social media and the internet.
 - ♣ We need to consider the nature of expertise and how higher education institutions contribute to gatekeeping or otherwise restrict autonomy and success of non-academic ventures.
- Examples of cross-perspective dialogue:
 - Both the panelists and group discussions presented varying perspectives about how to measure and communicate KU's value, economic and otherwise.
- Facilitator strategies that supported balanced exchange:
 - In addition to framing questions for the Seminar, the moderator tailored specific questions for each panelist according to their expertise and experience, which enabled guests to offer varying perspectives on KU's value to the state and individuals. William also created a seating arrangement wherein each discussion group comprised of a variety of perspectives, including the panelists, Co-PIs, Cohort members, and public attendees, also taking into consideration discipline/field of study and status as students, staff, and faculty.

Post-Session Audience Response (if observable)

- Feedback :
 - o Positive response to assigned seating and breakout groups
- Follow-up conversations needed:
 - o Evaluating the KU Mission and Value statements
 - o Communication strategies to discuss academic freedom with the public and other state constituencies
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Outcomes & Takeaways

- Key insights generated:
 - o There is a concern that academic staff and faculty need to communicate the importance of the Humanities, higher education, and academic freedom to state constituencies and the general non-academic public. The voting public, business owners, professional workers, and government leaders all have a stake in higher education and academic freedom, whether the benefit is financial, civic, or personal.
 - o In order to best communicate the value of higher education, academic staff and faculty need to articulate these values precisely and provide (already existing) evidence in an accessible way.
- Contributions to broader seminar goals:
 - o Consideration for the economic impact of restrictions to academic freedom and how public distrust in higher education institutions seriously impact research universities' ability to positively contribute to society
 - o Considerations for communication strategies to engage with non-academic public/state constituencies

Action Steps

- Materials to archive/distribute:
 - o Session Slideshow
 - o Merriman, Ben. "An Incomplete and Idiosyncratic Answer to the Question: What do the University of Kansas and the State of Kansas Owe Each Other?" White Paper. The University of Kansas.
 - o *Report of the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education*. April 10, 2026.
 - o "What is College For? An Exploration of the Current State of Higher Education, with Thoughts on its Future"
 - o Borjas, Gorge J. and Nate Breznau. "Ideological Bias in the Production of Research Findings." *Science Advances* (January 2026) 12: 1.
 - o Kahlenberg, Richard D. and Lief Lin. "The Distortion of American Studies: How the Field's Leading Journal Has Embraced a Worldview as Slanted as Donald Trump's." *Progressive Policy Institute* (January 2026).
 - o Manzi, James. "The Ideological Orientation of Academic Social Science Research 1960-2024." *Theory and Society* (March 2026) 55: 25.
- Opportunities for publication or public scholarship:
- An off-campus forum (Lawrence Public Library? Topeka Public Library?): "What Is Academic Freedom? Or, Is College Just a Free-For-All?"
- Reminders:

- o UC Chancellor Howard Gillman will give a public presentation on September 8, and will come to the September 9 Seminar
- o The Fall 2026 Sawyer Seminar Schedule
 - ♣ Wednesday, September 9, 12-1:30 pm
 - ♣ Thursday, October 1, 11-12:30 pm
 - ♣ Wednesday, November 4, 12-1:30 pm
 - ♣ Thursday, December 3, 11-12:30 pm