

Doug Sprei:

Justin and Jennie. Three is company. And I thought it would be a good chemical combination because the two of you have known each other since high school, and you're both debate nerds. You're also state-of-the-art educators in my book, and we're all here at PLU doing something really unique and original. And I just want to unpack that experience with you a little bit. It's really an honor and a pleasure to have both of you together and also to be working with both of you in our program as it catches fire all over the country.

First of all, I mean, let's start where we are here at PLU. We're at a conference, the Wang Center Symposium. The overall moniker for this thing is the matter of loneliness, building connections for collective well-being. I've been wondering and asking people, what is our place as people who are bringing debates and discourse and civil discourse and dialogue and conversation to students primarily, how does that connect with the theme of the conference?

And Justin, why don't you start, because I think part of the reason I'm here is because this is your brainchild. You started talking to me about this months ago, and it was just an idea germinating. And here we are having an incredible conference.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah. I mean, one of the things that we've been thinking about is perhaps part of the reason people are feeling lonely is due to the polarization that people feel like they can't speak up and that they're looking for connection. So we thought that this would be an important area for them to explore specifically in the classroom space. That looking and being able to speak up and explore contentious ideas might be an area where they could find connection and meaning with one another.

Doug Sprei:

What made you reach out to us at Braver Angels in the College Debates and Discourse Alliance, of which Jennie is a part, and she also represents herself as an educator at Baltimore? What made you connect with the idea that we would add some value to this conference?

Justin Eckstein:

Well, I've worked with you all for a while, and I remember sitting back at the Summer Institute and seeing the way that you all were able to really facilitate deep, meaningful conversations with students and get them to come out of their shell. And that in particular seemed to me to be really what we were trying to do here, which is get students to come out of their shell, which is one of the issues I think that's coming around with our technology is that we're turning inward so much. I thought this would be the logical next step for doing something like what we're doing here.

The second thing is I really wanted to move away from the model in which we just have a viewing or a spectator experience with a lot of events.

Jennie Keohane:

Love that.

Justin Eckstein:

And one of the things that I think is really great about what we're doing here is that it is immersive, to use your word.

Doug Sprei:

It's one of my favorite words.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah. So as opposed to being just merely a spectator, we're inviting everybody in. So you're able to impact so many more people in the process.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah. Well, Jennie, we've been working together for a while, and I have had the delightful experience of meeting your students who kind of, to me, reflect a little bit of who you are as an educator, and they're a little bit out of their shells.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah. Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

And I think that's kind of remarkable because some schools they go to, they're not. They're definitely in their shells as Justin was just talking about. But what attracted you to kind of coming here, joining our team, and leading some debates and adding some real original energy and insight into this event?

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah. Well, like you said, Doug, Justin and I have been friends since high school. So as academics, we're not super well compensated for our work, but the best part of the job is getting to show up for your friends and to get to see their lives in action. We go to conferences once or twice a year, and now I get to see where Justin works and I get to meet Justin's students. That's really an incredible opportunity.

But perhaps more importantly, I really now feel like I am in the trenches with the College Debates and Discourse Alliance in a good way. This is the first time I have showed up to moderate to chair debates where the four opening speakers that were chosen were not my students, and I had no idea what they were going to say, and I did not know that they were actually going to show up. And of course they have, and we've had wonderful conversations, but I really now feel like I have done the thing. I am leading debates. And now I really feel like I believe in the process even more than I did before because it really works when a stranger. I am a stranger to these students when I walk in.

But that the format that we have here of how we do these debates is really telling and powerful because I have left these rooms feeling like we have had moments of connection in our conversations. And it's me, a stranger, coming in to do that with these students. Which, again, as something you've said before, Doug, is a testament to the wonderful educators that we have at PLU that have prepped the students to participate and to think about the topic. But it really works. It really works.

Doug Sprei:

I was really surprised to learn that you were a little nervous coming here because I've been with you in your classes. I've chaired some of your debates. I've watched some of the debates unfold with your students at University of Baltimore. It's always a delight. So the debate experience we had last week at University of Baltimore was wonderful. The students came alive. I didn't know them at all. You know

them very well. They caught fire around the topic of should the United States enforce mandatory voting?

Jennie Keohane:

Yes.

Doug Sprei:

Or something like that. I didn't know what to expect. And all the speakers, not just the opening speakers, but all of them across the board in the debate were very animated, very thoughtful in all kinds of ways. So it sounds like you had the same experience today coming to Pacific Lutheran with a roomful of students you never met before talking about universal basic income, right?

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I feel like I have been truly welcomed here as a debate moderator. And academics, I think we like our control. We walk into class with our lesson plans. We know what we want to do. And to be frank, when I have debates in my classrooms, I have carrots and I have sticks. Here, I have neither. Not to mention students I don't know. But yeah, so the debate topic that most of the classrooms that we're doing here at PLU is about whether citizens deserve universal basic income.

But in Justin's class, a couple hours ago, we had a rousing debate on whether the drinking age should be lowered to 18, a debate I have never done before. It was really wonderful and especially wonderful because students were truly speaking from their own experience. We talked about whether bar culture or house party culture is safer, and who is it safer for, whether students would be more likely to call people for rides when they've had too much to drink if it was legal to drink when you're 18. So yeah, just really wonderful ways to connect to things that students think about really regularly. That was also the first time I have walked in to chair a debate where we didn't have a topic. It was my first time doing live topic selection. And that was perhaps even more fun than the real debate was getting topics from the students, what they wanted to talk about.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah, you did so well.

Jennie Keohane:

Thanks.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah. Yeah. She went in and mastered the room.

Jennie Keohane:

It was fun.

Justin Eckstein:

What's really interesting was watching Jennie go in there and just own the room. I thought it was interesting to hear you talk about carrots and sticks. And one of the things about being the chair is it's about... I believe the kids call it the riz.

Jennie Keohane:

The riz. The riz.

Doug Sprei:

What does that mean?

Justin Eckstein:

The riz. It's short for charisma.

Doug Sprei:

Oh.

Justin Eckstein:

Yes, yes. Yeah. And it's about the way that you can hold the space of the room and extract in divine topics and then be able to coax people out to speak. I think it's really amazing to watch Jennie in the room because she's able to do a really good job of it. It's also really great to see Sadie do it. I'm looking forward to-

Jennie Keohane:

Sadie has a lot of riz.

Justin Eckstein:

Sadie has a lot of riz. I'm looking forward to watching you hold court as well. But that's why I think what's really interesting about the chair is you're not just a stranger. You're performing a role, right?

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah.

Justin Eckstein:

You become Jennie. Dr. Keohane becomes Madam Chair. And in that role, you get to exercise certain bits of rhetorical authority. And it was awesome to watch and you held it well.

Jennie Keohane:

Thank you.

Doug Sprei:

Well, what came into my mind was, and then I realized this is the title of Monica's book. I never thought of it that way. Okay. So what I never thought of that way was the riz. Actually, every debate I chair, I want the riz of each student to have a place and a chance to really resonate and be expressed. And students are so diverse. They're neurodiverse, they're physically diverse, they're coming from all points of view. But I feel like we've done our job as a debate chair if that can happen, because then the debate takes on a life of its own.

I am glad you're discovering something about that because I've been working with you for the past year as Professor Keohane, our Templeton Foundation fellow on the project. But it's refreshing to see you step into the debate chair role because there's something that... I mean, we all gain so much from it.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah. Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

I remember being at University of Baltimore. You were talking earlier just now about the drinking age debate and how students told personal stories. When I chaired your classroom debate at University of Baltimore last year, the topic was the Second amendment assault weapons topic, gun control.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah, yeah.

Doug Sprei:

And a number of students in your class who are urban residents of Baltimore in that environs brought personal stories of being affected directly in their families by gun violence. It was incredibly vivid and heart-rending in some cases, but very powerful. Some of our best debates come to life because students tell stories, right?

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

Have you noticed that?

Jennie Keohane:

The universal basic income debates that we've been having as well really are bringing to life students here at Pacific Lutheran, which certainly Justin knows better than I do, but students talking about growing up on welfare, single parents, the challenges of paying for college education. So all of that, even a sort of broader topic like UBI connects to the college experience.

Justin Eckstein:

I mean, part of that is by design here, at least as regard to UBI, is we tie that with the Growing Resilience in Tacoma program. So the application is opened at the beginning of this week, and they close at the end of this week. So we wanted to use and pair the opportunity for these discussions with maybe the option for some of the students who are eligible for this program to sign up for it.

Doug Sprei:

Well, so this is our debate format intersecting with life in a way. So now finally, I think for the first time, I've unpacked the acronym GRIT. That's what it is?

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah, Growing Resilience in Tacoma. So tomorrow when we have the larger event, you're having members of the city council coming who are going to be talking about it. Your first speaker is going to be the deputy mayor Christina Walker talking about the program. What's interesting about the Growing Resilience in Tacoma program is it was like one of the earliest pilot programs for a city-based UBI. It's technically distributed through the United Way. So it's local, and then we're talking about for people who it literally affects. So it's not just a disembodied policy discussion, which I mean the guns ones aren't for your students either, but I like to make sure that we know that some of these could be like, "UBI? That's a philosophical idea." And it's like, "No, it's here in Tacoma and a lot of people are learning about it because of this discussion."

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah. Although a fun story from one of the debates I chaired this morning, one of the students there was from Alaska, and so got to connect the conversation that's happening in Tacoma with what already happens in Alaska. I don't remember the acronym for it, but it's the pipeline distribution stuff. So it was talking about her experience growing up there where there is already a version of UBI. So got to see. And it was really cool to hear students talk very informed about these big policies.

Doug Sprei:

I chaired a debate in Southern Virginia University with four colleges, of which Virginia Military Institute is one as part of our Templeton project. The debate topic was universal basic income. And a student from Alaska stood up, and it elevated the whole conversation and animated it because she explained that everyone in Alaska gets a form of universal basic income, although it has a different acronym of some sort.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah, yeah.

Justin Eckstein:

I believe it's PFD.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah. And it's coming from revenue from oil profits, basically the energy industry in Alaska. So it's not something that necessarily could be replicated in other states, but just the fact that there was someone having that living experience and explaining it to the rest of the group just opened up the conversation exponentially.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah. Well, one of the things I think it does is it makes it thinkable, right? Because when you first talk about a universal basic income, you don't think about that it's possible. Then when you start giving examples of how it exists in real life and it is implemented, then they're like, "Oh, wait, this is something that can happen. Let's have a conversation about it."

Doug Sprei:

Similarly, in the debate on voting. At Baltimore, a student got up and talked about how it's actually mandatory in Australia.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah, yeah. And we all learned the term, was it donkey voting? Yeah.

Justin Eckstein:

Wait, wait, wait. What is donkey voting?

Jennie Keohane:

Oh my gosh. I'm going to have to try to remember this. Oh. So in addition to being required to vote in Australia, they do ranked choice voting. So donkey voting is when you go into the voting booth and just 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, right down the ballot. So clearly people who haven't put time or thought into how they want to vote. So yeah, one of our students taught us that term as part of that debate. In terms of the experience, we heard from students who were like, "I didn't have good social studies education. We need more education for voters. We need candidates who show up for us and who do more than just knock on doors every four years." Also, one student talking about how she works in a preschool and how she can see mini democracy and action among the children. So she was making an argument for, we really need to start voter education and civic education early because students and children are ready for it.

We started talking, too, about one of the agreements that came out of that debate was that voting is important. That didn't mean that everyone agreed that we should mandate it. Certainly they didn't. So if voting is important, the question sort of unfolded into, how do we ensure that people have access to voting, that people have education for voting and all sorts of things? Also, an interesting intersection of lots of perspectives.

Doug Sprei:

Let's unpack something that Monica Guzman said about an hour ago when we were present at her talk, which was really, to me, incredible. It was a wonderful conversation in front of a very large audience of students. Something that stayed with me after the conversation ended was when she talked about people hear others better when they themselves feel heard.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

Did you hear that? Did you pick it up?

Jennie Keohane:

That blew my mind. Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

And I think that's something we're actually enabling in a Braver Angels debate room, aren't we? I mean, how did that strike you?

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah. Well, something I heard the feedback earlier today was one of the things that you're doing through the design structure is you're enabling someone to get up, say everything that they want to say, and then allowing each person to take their time to ask the question that they want, which in turn allows everyone to feel or say everything they need to.

Whereas if you do a normal conversation in class, like a classroom conversation, sometimes someone gets half of what they want and they're like, "Oh, I need to ask again," or they don't get all the question they want.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah.

Justin Eckstein:

So I think by design, you're enabling someone to say all they want and feel like they've said it, and oftentimes they'll feel more heard, which I think is what you're seeing and hearing then in the debrief.

Jennie Keohane:

And also, the idea that the debate is structured around speeches and questions means that as people are listening, they're not immediately brainstorming counter arguments. So you're listening to listen instead of listening to respond. Or maybe we could say you're listening to understand as opposed to listening to respond.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah, I think that's a really good point. Jennie and I both come from a competitive debate background, and the first thing you'd want to do, you hear an argument, you're like, "Well, I have seven points to respond." So you're just making sure that the argument aligns with your [inaudible 00:19:29].

Jennie Keohane:

Only seven, Justin? I thought you were good at this.

Doug Sprei:

Both of you, as I've gotten to know you, are very dedicated educators. That's something I really, really respect, and I feel very blessed to be close to, to get impressions of that, and learn from it. At ACTA and at Braver Angels in our alliance, we work with institutions a lot, so there's a lot of this big thinking around the educational mission of the institution, but I also think that the faculty members that I meet individually, they have their own educational mission.

I was wondering if both of you, one at a time, could talk about how this debating and discourse work that we're doing with students, the stuff we're talking about and the immersive experience we're giving them, how does that map to your own ethos as an educator, your mission as an educator? Because I think there's something intimately intertwined there, and I'd love to hear you kind of unpack that.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah. Do you want to go first?

Justin Eckstein:

Sure. For me, I really want to teach students to find their voice and be ready to use it in public and not be afraid to use it, but also be willing to undertake the risk of using it and listen to the other. That's very much entwined with all of the work we're doing. So to unpack that a little bit further, I mean, I could go on a long rant about this, but I think that essentially you have to be willing to hear the other side if you're willing to risk your viewpoint. But I find that many students are afraid at the very beginning to even offer their viewpoint because it is scary to risk your convictions in public. So I think we need to learn how to do that, and every step of that way needs to be taught and cultivated. I really try to bring that out in every single part of my teaching philosophy, and then how to also listen to someone else to extend the conversation in a meaningful way.

Doug Sprei:

And you're doing all kinds of interesting... You've got a whole menu of approaches you're taking in your classes. Braver Angels is basically just one thing you do. There's other kinds of conversations, other forms of things that you're doing?

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah. Well, I've been really taking seriously the idea that we don't know how to talk to each other. So taking a step back, the history of our discipline speech has been interested in dialogue and conversation as it intersects with the civic. So as far back as we go, that's what we've studied. I've been thinking about all the different parts of it. So for instance, I'm teaching a media class for which Sadie is rizzing in right now.

Doug Sprei:

She's rizzing. That's the new synonym for chairing.

Justin Eckstein:

Chairing, yes.

Doug Sprei:

Rizzing. I like that.

Justin Eckstein:

And I'm really interested in teaching those students how to have a meaningful conversation that isn't just a yes/no question about the reading. So I want them to be able to, can you take notes by somebody talking? Can you identify relevant themes, and can you build good questions that are designed to extend conversations in meaningful ways so the other person feels heard and that you can build out something interesting? What does it mean to practice listening in a democracy?

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah, I love that. I will certainly co-sign everything that Justin says, and I think to venture a guess that these deep commitments about helping students find their voices, helping students to know that it's risky, but it's worth it to use your voice are things that come out of the debate education that we had as competitive debaters. That said, I don't know that all the skills that we were taught as debaters, which can sometimes be a little tricky, are useful or maybe even good for democratic society.

Things I'll say. One, I think it's really understandable why students feel afraid to speak out these days. Monica talked about this a little bit in her talk, too, that social media encourages sort of the knee-jerk reaction. We assume what's in the head of our audience without even really knowing who our audience is when we post on social media. The fears that students have had or that students may sometimes have about speaking out in class or in society are founded and they're real. So the skills that Justin identified that are also central to my pedagogy, I think can help work against that.

The second thing I'll say, too, which really gets to your point about listening and conversation, is that the students that are coming in as freshmen now are students that spent a chunk of high school going to class online. So I watched them, and this was so pronounced to me when I taught a class of freshmen this past semester where we did debates and had a great experience. They are starved. They are hungry for connection in a way that I really think they don't even know how to articulate. I just watched them before class and after class, and it used to be... And this is not like oh, the good old days kind of thing, but that students would be talking and joking before class. Now they're all on their phones. Not all the time, but I just really feel a deep hunger for interpersonal connection and I think intellectual connection, too.

But the skills that we build in the Braver Angels debate formats and in other types of the critical thinking, the public speaking that is so central to Justin and my home discipline of communication are so important now because of the contextual environment that we find ourselves in. And I haven't even mentioned politics. We don't have good models for civic engagement when we watch TV and turn on social media. So it just really feels like at this current moment, students are hungry for it and they have the capacity for it, to do it, to have these conversations, which the Braver Angels debate format has taught us better than anything. All of the things that we're doing with the College Debates and Discourse Alliance are both incredibly needed and so central to the things I try to do as an educator.

Doug Sprei:

Well, I've lost count of the number of times after a debate that students will flock up to us after the debate is over and it's like, "When is the next one? What it's going to be about? When can we do this again?" I think they really are hungry for it. I think they really enjoy it, and there's something about it that's very, very elevating for them and engaging. This form of debate, as you pointed out earlier, is immersive. Also, non-competitive.

I had the fortune to go to Arizona last year. I was asked to be a judge at the Regents' Cup debate competition at Arizona State University and University of Arizona. Karrin Taylor Robson, who's on ACTA's board actually is the sort of godmother of the whole thing. And it's really an incredible event. Great debaters from all over Arizona, and we're probably going to expand it across multiple states. So that was my first encounter with the world of competitive debate, which you guys are naturally like fish and water comfortable with.

But let's talk about the differences. I was actually very inspired by it, but I also felt glad as anything to be kind of involved in the work we're doing where it's not competitive because it's not a performance art, it's not a spectator thing, and you're not being judged and there are no prizes. The prize is just coming out of a room with your mind expanded. But I guess there's a place in this world for all kinds of debate.

Jennie Keohane:

Sure. Yeah. I mean, one thing I'll say, and I'll be interested to hear what you have to say, Justin, is I very heavily believe that joining a competitive debate team when I was in high school was the best thing I could have done for myself and first is research. It taught me to research. When you go to competitive debate tournaments, you have to have done your research. You have to be able to say where you did the research. You probably have to be able to say how the study your sighting was conducted.

The second thing I'll say is it taught me to write, and it taught me to write quickly and clearly in short sentences, and being able to write quickly... The first draft isn't the best draft, we know that. But being able to write quickly was what got me through graduate school, being able to read, write, and research quickly, because in competitive debate, the topic changes and how often it changes depends on what kind of-

Justin Eckstein:

In Lincoln-Douglas competitive debate.

Jennie Keohane:

Yes, yes. It depends on what kind of debate you're doing, but the topic would change three times a year. So you would have to throw out all of the research you've done. You'd have to rewrite your opening cases.

The third thing I'll say that I think competitive debate taught me is at a competitive debate tournament, you have to argue both sides. No one cares what you actually believe, and it flips. One round, you'll argue affirmative. The next round, you'll argue negative. So regardless of how deeply felt your personal convictions were, you had to do the research and you had to feel confident standing up in front of a judge and an opponent arguing the opposite side of what you believed. I think for me, there are arguments to be made about moral relativism for sure, but for me, that taught me that issues have nuance and multiple sides, and it made me, I think, a more empathetic person.

Justin Eckstein:

That's Aristotle's argument, right?

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah. Yeah.

Justin Eckstein:

I mean, competitive debate gave me everything I have today. I mean, I love it. I would say that competitive debate is a good critical thinking activity. It gave me everything Jennie said and ladders of opportunity. It paid my way through college, graduate school, so very material things, as well as it introduced me to whole swaths of literature I would've ordinarily never stumbled upon. I was introduced to Nietzsche, which influenced how I did my graduate work.

Jennie Keohane:

I was also reading Nietzsche in high school for debate.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah, it's just like the things that you find your way to. What I'll say, one of the main differences is something that Jennie pointed out, which is the division between commitment and conviction. And I think that's one of the main rubs across different formats. That is for a debate tournament to happen, it needs you to switch sides often between aff and neg. And we could talk about the history of how that came up in the 1920s perhaps for another day. But going back and forth means that you're divorcing commitment for conviction, and that makes it exclusively a critical thinking game. What I like what you're doing here by not forcing sides is you're actually allowing people to sit with their commitments. And if you're not tying that to the win, you just allow people then to change their minds.

Doug Sprei:

Naturally.

Justin Eckstein:

Naturally.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah.

Justin Eckstein:

And you allow them to practice what is called in the literature a discussion-minded attitude, which is they're willing to change their mind when confronted with another reason. So now you're starting to play democracy. So now it's no longer about how can we do critical thinking, but instead, how do we confront difference?

Doug Sprei:

That's right.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah. One thing I'll say about the debate we did this morning on the drinking age was we did some straw polling at the beginning to make sure that we had some differences in opinions so we would actually be able to have a debate. But I wasn't going to do this, but one student asked me at the end of the debate like, "Hey, can we see where people are sitting now after having talked about this for an hour and a half?" And I was like, "Oh, well, there are no winners here." And he was like, "No, I'm just kind of curious." So we did another poll at the end. I was like, "Give the people what they want." And it turns out a lot of people did change their mind and they changed their mind to the, no, we should not lower the drinking age perspective, which maybe flies in the face of what you think you know about college students. But the conversation was so rich and nuanced that, yeah, people changed their mind.

Doug Sprei:

I've seen that happen a number of times. That's just one of those wonderful side effects that I've never ceased to marvel at. Why don't we shift in the time we have remaining toward an aspect of our program, which you know our program, again, is very inclusive. It's not just of the natural debaters or the ones who really love debate. Also, it's just such a random act of nature who's going to walk into the room? How many students? And some of them have never had a conversation like this in their lives.

They tell us that. And it's really quite lovely to see those students who have never debated anything, much less maybe even expressed a political or social viewpoint in front of an audience before, do that.

Now, in the process of growing our program and getting grants and making commitments with grants, we have, through the Templeton project mostly but in our other North Carolina project now, we're doing the same, we are cultivating student fellows. We call them student fellows. They're really leaders on campus, and they're not naturally like the competitive debater types. They're more like interested in what you said earlier or just now about encountering difference and making that possible and enabling depolarizing conversation. We have found that if you can get a couple students on campus who can become ambassadors or emissaries for the mission, they can kind of infect their friends with the interest in it and the enthusiasm and they can kind of help cascade our work out on that campus. We're doing that at your campus, University of Baltimore.

I wonder if you could kind of riff with me a little bit on why this approach seems to be pretty effective.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah. I mean, we talked about carrots and sticks before, and I'm going to be real. It helps when you're holding campus debates where students don't have to come to dangle a little extra credit. But the truth of the matter is, when... And the University of Baltimore is a commuter campus. We don't have dorms. Students aren't living together. Our average undergraduate age on campus is 30.

Doug Sprei:

Really?

Jennie Keohane:

Undergraduates. Yeah. And actually our average graduate age is actually lower than that, but most of our students are working full-time. But when someone that sits next to you in class asks you to show up for a debate, they're more likely to show up when their peers ask than when I ask. And it's super cool.

I'm watching one of my student fellows now, and we held a classroom debate in my class about whether we should take down Confederate statues, and it was a really wonderful debate. And after that debate, like you said, Doug, students were so jazzed. I had mentioned that we're having a campus-wide debate coming up actually the week after, but watching a student fellow of mine who is in that class, [inaudible 00:35:24], shout out to [inaudible 00:35:26] start whipping in the political sense, not the literal sense here, but being like, "Hey, come to the debate next week, and do you want to be an opening speaker?" It's different when your peer asks you to support them in a project on campus as opposed to just me. And having a group of students excited about it on campus is irreplaceable.

Last thing I'll say is, as you mentioned, Doug, it's not always the students that have debate training from high school that want to get involved. Shout out to Sophia, one of our fellows at the University of Baltimore last year, she has since graduated, but not the kind of student that talks in class all the time, but the kind of student that wants to sit and think. So when I asked her to get involved in this project, she said yes without hesitation. This project means a lot even to the students and maybe especially to the students that don't raise their hand in class all the time, but really want to sit with the ideas and believe that this type of engagement is necessary.

Doug Sprei:

And I would submit that Sophia had something to do with how the program has taken root at Baltimore with you and others like her. We have a thriving program at Baltimore now.

Now, circling back to where we are here at PLU, let's bring our conversation to a concluding chord. Justin, the symposium is in its second day, it ends tomorrow. But what are you hoping for and what are you and your team who put this thing together hoping for in terms of its residual effects, its after effects, its ripple effects?

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah. I mean, I'm hoping people love it. I'm hoping that there will be a swell of support and that they clamor for more. I'm hoping that I can convince you, sir, to help me apply for a Murdock grant and that we can work together.

Doug Sprei:

Ladies and gentlemen, you've heard it here.

Justin Eckstein:

Not to be specific.

Doug Sprei:

No, I get you. We have a lot of opportunities in front of us to go up for certain lines of funding. It's interesting when it comes to foundational funding or major gift funding, it's nice to get a grant or a gift that enables full operational openness just to drive the program in any way we see fit. But more than sometimes, the grant or the gift is tethered to some kind of directional thing or some kind of outcome or a specific focal point. Murdock is here in the Pacific Northwest, right?

Justin Eckstein:

Specifically tied to enhancing democracy in the Pacific Northwest.

Doug Sprei:

Well, let me ideate with you a little bit.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

Because I think about this and I talk about this with Sadie Webb and others on our team all the time. There are frontiers out there that we haven't touched yet. We've got this wonderful community college, Linn-Benton Community College in Oregon. They're a Mark Urista professor-

Justin Eckstein:

Coming out tomorrow.

Doug Sprei:

Coming out tomorrow with seven students. Community colleges are delightful to work with. And you mentioned the average age at Baltimore 30. I don't know what the average age of community college students is, but the ones that I have met have jobs, have children, are juggling education with life and

responsibilities. And it's really a wonderful dynamic to be working with community colleges, and there are so many of them. So I feel like-

Justin Eckstein:

The ones in Washington are really unique because of Running Start.

Doug Sprei:

It seems like we could find a direction like cascading our program out in the community college space across the country or do it state by state. I mean-

Justin Eckstein:

Well, I bring up here because insofar as... I bring up Washington and Running Start, because it provides an interesting wrinkle, right? Because a lot of high schoolers go to our community college because the last two years, they leave with an AA. So I don't know how that implicates the program.

Doug Sprei:

And a lot of states, the community colleges feed into the state universities or the four years. And going even earlier into the life cycle of a student, we've had a couple of debates where high school students actually showed up, which is an incredible thing also. So there is so many frontiers to work on.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah, I mean, one thing I'll say, we brought folks together at the National Communication Association Conference in National Harbor, Maryland, last year to have a conversation about debate, civic engagement, deliberation in the classroom. One thing that stuck with me was Leila Brammer at the University of Chicago was talking about summer institutes where high school students come to the University of Chicago and they learn the skills of civic engagement and debate and deliberation. So yeah, I mean, there's a lot of folks across the country interested in this work at all levels of the educational life cycle and many new frontiers.

Doug Sprei:

Last question for both of you. You work in large university settings and they're bureaucracies. You have department heads and you have administrative heads. You've got presidents, you've got provosts, deans, and so forth. How does it all work for you as you carry this personal love for the work we're doing, but you also have to make it fit to the structure and the whole atmosphere of the university and the way that it conducts itself as an institution? How do you play that game?

Jennie Keohane:

That's a great question because, I'm going to be honest, a lot of the work I've been doing with the Templeton grant and building the program at Baltimore has been happening for me on nights and weekends because I just don't have time to do it during the week teaching all of the classes that I do and being responsible for the grading and the other administrative tasks that I have on campus. So it's hard. It's hard.

The biggest thing that I wish that funders could give us is time, extra hours in the day so that we could do this.

Justin Eckstein:

A course release.

Jennie Keohane:

A course release, yeah. Because when it comes to working within university bureaucracies, and I know this isn't true everywhere, but no one at the University of Baltimore has said, "We are not interested in civic discourse. We do not want students to leave our university prepared to engage in the society beyond." It's sort of undeniable, I think, that the skills that we're building and the things that the college Debates and Discourse Alliance offers are key elements of the college experience and what we hope college students can do when they leave our environment.

The challenge, of course, is that especially at public institutions that struggle for funding, faculty are busy and there's just not enough time in the day to answer the emails and do this work. So I do this work because I love it. Yeah. The challenge is not necessarily university bureaucracy, although being able to convince university administrators that this work is valuable enough that we should teach fewer classes so that we can build these programs, I think, I guess would be the frontier to use that word again.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah. I mean, for me, I worked it into the symposium as I made arguments about the relationship between the symposium and why I thought this was a critical component, and I thought that we could work it into the first year experience trying to find natural places where there's synergy between learning outcomes in what we're doing. So I think that the home for this sort of work needs to be written into the curriculum.

Doug Sprei:

I love that.

Jennie Keohane:

Yeah, yeah.

Doug Sprei:

And I've met some of your colleagues here. They're all in on this symposium and they're all in on supporting you, which is lovely. I think we'll end here, but I think what we've done is also tee up another conversation because I think you've brought something up very, very important.

One of our faculty leaders, the one I mentioned, Mark Urista at Linn-Benton Community College, actually got... This is what is called course release. So it means he can teach one less course and get that time back to dedicate to our program, which is really important because, like you said, almost every faculty member I meet and some of them really intensely are putting in extra hours because they love it and they believe in it. We're hoping that we can help them get as much professional support and relief and just take the stress out of it and just make them more empowered, and also in time of day, not time on weekends.

Jennie Keohane:

Yes.

Doug Sprei:

So I think that's a really important conversation to have, the pressures that faculty face in doing this work. But anyhow, thank you so much for joining us on Higher Ed Now.

Justin Eckstein:

Yeah. Thank you for having me.

Jennie Keohane:

Thanks for having us.

Doug Sprei:

And we'll talk again soon.

Jennie Keohane:

Awesome.