

**This transcript is edited and condensed.**

**John Matze, Host of 'Greater Perspectives'**

Hello and welcome to another episode of Greater Perspectives. This week we have Greg Lukianov from FIRE – a free speech advocate, lawyer, and really an expert on the topic. We're super excited to have you here today.

**Greg Lukianoff, President of FIRE and Author of "The Coddling of the American Mind" and "The Canceling of the American Mind"**

Thanks for having me.

**John Matze**

So what is it that you guys are doing over at FIRE, for those who aren't familiar? I recently read a piece about your ranking of college campuses all over the United States. Tell us more about what you do.

**Greg Lukianoff**

Sure. FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression) celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. We're 25 years old this year and I've been with fire for 23 of those.

I'm a constitutional lawyer specializing in the First Amendment. I started as legal director and then I became president in 2006. In 2022, we changed our name from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, because we wanted to signal the fact that we were extending beyond just campus work. And it's been nonstop craziness since then.

The [college \[free speech\] ranking](#), interestingly, is something that we started in 2019. And it's partially one of the reasons why we felt like we could expand off campus.

For almost all of FIRE's history, people were asking us, 'OK, you focus on [college campuses]. Can you expand beyond that?' And my answer is always... a lot of the most important free speech fights are being battled on campus, and [colleges] educate our future lawyers and our future politicians. It really is important to win that battle on campus.

**John Matze**

By 'win that battle,' you mean specifically ensuring that free speech discussion and debate thrives?

**Greg Lukianoff**

Yeah, win that battle for freedom of speech and for academic freedom.

We were founded in 1999 to defend freedom of speech on campus and then we expanded beyond it in 2022. The ranking was something that we started doing in a sort of primitive form in 2019.

We started with 50 schools and it was based on the largest survey of student opinion ever conducted at the time – to figure out what campuses actually had students who said the atmosphere here for disagreeing with your professors, for disagreeing with your fellow students, is good.

That had a low percentage of students who said, 'violence is justifiable in response to freedom of speech' and 'shout downs are okay.' (?)

If you have a high level of people saying 'oh that's fine' when it comes to violence in response to free speech, that's a negative.

But if you have a high level of people saying 'I don't worry at all about disagreeing with my professors,' that's a positive.

As the years have gone by we've been able to improve upon and expand the way we do the campus free speech ranking.

### **John Matze**

And it should come to no surprise who consistently is ranked last on free speech.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

Harvard ranked dead last on our ranking this year.

It was funny to hear them immediately assume our methodology was flawed, or that it was some kind of stunt. [The ranking] based on the largest study of student opinion ever conducted, plus the largest database of student cancellations, professor cancellations, campus speech codes, and deplatforming ever assembled.

Not only did Harvard score dead last, it got our first ever negative score.

### **John Matze**

How do you get a negative score?

### **Greg Lukianoff**

First of all, you do poorly on the poll part, where high levels of students think violence in response to speech is not so bad. And not well on the tolerance part, where people feel like they can't really disagree with each other.

So if you punish professors for speech, then that's a ding. You get a negative score for that. If you de-platform speakers due to student or administrative demand, you get a negative for that.

You get a positive if you stand up to them.

**John Matze**

It's the real-world version of banning people?

**Greg Lukianoff**

Yeah, there's a fair amount of that. And also, do your policies protect freedom of speech?

We factored those all together and Harvard scored a negative 10.69, which we rounded up to zero. It was a good chunk even below University of Pennsylvania, which was second to last. Right above University of Pennsylvania was University of South Carolina, which hasn't been doing a great job. And then right above that in fourth-to-last place was Georgetown.

Meanwhile, schools like Michigan Technological University finished first. Auburn did really well. University of Virginia finished in the top 10. University of Chicago was 13th in the nation.

But the Ivy League schools did terribly. Which is really interesting because actually everyone loves to know who are the worst offenders? But actually, I think the more important takeaway of all this is actually – where would you want to study if you were in pursuit of intellectual freedom and knowledge?

That's one of the things we're trying to do with the Campus Free Speech Ranking – encourage people to reward the schools that are good on free speech and to encourage them not to apply or, certainly not donate to some of the schools that are terrible.

I say donate with such disdain because it's kind of like...you shop at Walmart, you don't really feel additionally compelled to just send them money for no good reason. And when you look at some of these, you know, the Harvards, my alma mater, Stanford, and Princeton, – they're perpetual motion machines when it comes to how much money they have in the bank.

We still have a billionaire/millionaire class who sends tremendous amounts of money to these schools. It's weird

**John Matze**

Especially if they're reinforcing the idea that the First Amendment isn't as important as it should be, whether they say it or not, right? It doesn't matter what they say.

**Greg Lukianoff**

Yeah.

**John Matze**

If they're taking action that hurts the First Amendment and people's rights to free speech, it doesn't really matter if they're saying they support it – they don't.

**Greg Lukianoff**

Well, unfortunately, that has also been a change. It used to be normal for people to [support] freedom of speech, but they disagree with it in one or two cases or whatever.

But one thing that we could see coming in our 25 year history was that there was a movement afoot to get more people saying, 'actually, I disagree with free speech as a concept. I philosophically disagree with freedom of speech.'

We see a lot more of that today than we did earlier in my career. But we definitely saw that trend coming.

### **John Matze**

In your book [\*The Canceling of the American Mind\*](#), you brought up a few points that I think are really interesting. One of them being the university/education industry as a whole in the United States.

The education industry is not this small, weak, underfunded entity that it pretends to be. It's in fact the largest – I think it was 1.4 trillion in revenue annually, right? If you were to combine the gross revenue of Apple, Google, Facebook, and the entire electricity expenditures of all people in the United States together, it still pales in comparison to the amount of income that the education industry brings in annually.

You had mentioned in the book that one of the reasons why that's so important is when people are the elite class – and it doesn't get more elite than the most massive industry in the country – they feel the need to control the narrative and control speech.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

That whole section, where we explain how massive and wealthy the higher education juggernaut in the United States is, really needed to be in there.

You talk to people at these schools that are sitting on, I don't know, 50 billion dollars in their rainy day fund and they talk as if they are –

### **John Matze**

Fifty billion! How many boats are we going to be able to buy with that – only a few yachts and private jets.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

Yeah. They talk like they're the underdogs. I was so amazed watching someone defending Harvard accusing its critics of not wanting to be involved with the hoi polloi and I'm kind of like...wow you guys are really out of touch.

### **John Matze**

What's a hoi polloi?

### **Greg Lukianoff**

Regular people, as my British mom would say. It was basically trying to more or less commandeer the, I guess, Harvard as being the favorite little guy. And it's like, are you out of your minds? [Harvard] is the definition of the man.

### **John Matze**

And they're training the next generation of the man, if you will, with their ideological bend. At least that's how it feels. I don't know if I can necessarily prove that.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

Oh, no, no, no, no. That's entirely fair. And one of the reasons why, when people actually say, 'oh, you focus so much on Harvard and the elite colleges.' I get annoyed at that.

I spent a lot of my career defending people at schools that aren't all that well-known and was told, oh, nobody's going to care about this because it's not Harvard and it's not Yale. And then when we actually do take on Harvard and Yale, they say, oh, those aren't the schools most people go to.

Harvard and Yale – those are two schools that are more important than they should be. Nobody believes that more than I do. Every single member of the Supreme Court either attended Harvard or Yale at some point. When you look at our political leadership in the country, it's wildly disproportionately Ivy League, Harvard and Yale, Stanford, Duke, a couple others.

We are unfortunately dominated by elite institutions. I think it's unhealthy. I wish it wasn't the case. But as long as it is, we have to care more about these schools.

And these schools are uniquely dysfunctional.

### **John Matze**

So if these schools are the ones that are predominantly making up our elite kind of leaders, if you will, around the country, they also have an ideological bias and are not respecting people's rights to free speech and challenge on their campuses.

What does that say about the potential tolerance of some of the founding values of our country – freedom of speech, expression, rights of discussion, debate? What does that say about their tolerance and how they're prepared to then be our leaders around the country?

### **Greg Lukianoff**

Well, everyone should be really worried about this. To go back to Stanford Law School – I was really horrified earlier this year. We devote an entire chapter of *Canceling of the American Mind* using it as a case study that shows almost everything that's wrong with higher ed today [in a single incident](#).

About a fifth of the law school class, in coordination with administrators, came to shout down a Fifth Circuit judge named Kyle Duncan. He was a Trump appointee.

They shouted him down for 10 minutes when he tried to speak to the Federalist Society, then an administrator gets up and read a prepared speech for seven minutes, questioning whether or not the juice of free speech was worth the squeeze of the pain that free speech causes.

It's just a perfect example of all the problems in the way we argue. To have one-fifth of the class show up and show such little understanding of the right to listen, the free speech rights of the Federalist Society to invite who they'd like to hear, should scare everyone to death. These are going to be the people who dominate the courts in the future and dominate the profession.

### **John Matze**

Courts aside, there's a general lack of tolerance for people with differences in opinion. 'Speech is violence' is a phrase I hear getting thrown around a lot. You know, the idea that saying certain things can hurt people and that, somehow, emotional pain justifies any kind of other action.

From my perspective, people have the right not to listen. You don't have to debate.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

You also have the right not to attend a speech and to let other people attend a speech.

The past couple of weeks at FIRE we've seen a huge number of shout downs on campus, including at Berkeley, including at – God, there was one at Yale, there was another one at, I think, [UC] Irvine. There was one at [University of] Puget Sound.

### **John Matze**

What is a shout down, for your definition?

### **Greg Lukianoff**

A shout down means shouting so that someone can't speak. At Berkeley it was actually even worse – it was outright violent. The students got together in order to, in their own words, shut it down. And it was an IDF soldier speaking about the conflict in the Israel-Hamas conflict.

They swarmed the venue at Berkeley. They smashed windows and filtered in and led to the evacuation of the speaker there. There was violence. People were assaulted. To us, that's obviously mob censorship. That is a heckler's veto.

Then you deal with people on social media being like, well, it's just their free speech rights to shout them down and engage in violence.

### **John Matze**

That's a real overstep, right? The amazing thing about free speech is you can justify and make a case for anything. For people who are struggling to make a good case, whatever they can come up with to censor it then becomes the default position.

Ad hominem, attack the person's credibility, just shout them down or scare people from even entering the building if you can.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

You don't have a right to engage in violence. You don't have a right to engage in threats. You don't have a right to prevent other people from attending a speech.

It's funny watching people try to make this argument with a straight face because they're just... people who are used to being the dominant popular force on campus. There are people who assume the mob is naturally on their side.

### **John Matze**

Well, if they get the most likes and clicks on Twitter and Facebook with their ridiculous position, they feel confident, right?

### **Greg Lukianoff**

And as soon as it's actually a speaker they liked and that happened to, they would immediately say 'A bunch of fascists showed up and shouted down our speakers and resorted to violence.'

You'd get it if it was someone you liked.

### **John Matze**

That's why you have those protections. It's because you may not be correct.

I think people struggle with this idea that – I might be wrong with my opinion. Therefore, I should let somebody share theirs, especially if it differs from mine. Maybe they're right. Maybe they're wrong. We should listen to it, argue it, debate it and have that conversation.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

At the heart of freedom of speech is epistemic humility. The knowledge that in the grand scheme of things, not only do you not know everything, you can't.

### **John Matze**

If we go back to your book *Canceling the American Mind*, one of the points that you'd mentioned is that in all of the communist Red Scare eras, there were not as many average – daily or yearly – cancellations of professors for what they believe, as there are today.

Now it's an unprecedented and scary amount of professors that are losing their jobs.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

People have really exploded [to this fact]. And every time they've reacted to it like, 'well, that's just that's just hyperbole.' Well, actually, there are numbers on this.

The Red Scare is generally the second Red Scare, which is McCarthyism. The first Red Scare is much shorter – 1919 and 1921. The second Red Scare, which is basically considered to be 1947 to 1957. A law was established [protecting academic freedom](#) in '57.

The best study of McCarthyism at the time indicated that about 62 professors were fired for either being communists or saying they were communists. And about 100, roughly, overall, were fired for political opinion writ large.

When we looked at the numbers for nine and a half years of cancel culture, which we defined as beginning in 2014, we find that it's almost 200. Literally twice as many that we know of.

It's a little scarier when some of the calls are coming from inside the building. Essentially it's the professors and students and administrators who are, in many cases, demanding that other professors lose their jobs over their opinion in an environment where there are almost no viewpoint diversity at these schools to begin with. You're talking about incredibly homogenous schools to begin with.

There's the whole conformity gauntlet, which we talk about in the book as being conformity inducing pressures at every level to prevent these incidents from happening in the first place. The law is supposed to be protecting them now, unlike during McCarthyism, and there's still nearly twice as many professors losing their jobs.

There almost certainly will be more once you actually compare the 11 years of cancel culture to the 11 years of McCarthyism.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

When you look at the post-1973 campus, there is nothing even vaguely like the situation we've seen over the last 10 years. And again, under a circumstance of very low levels of viewpoint diversity.

Post 9/11-slash-Iraq War. How many professors lost their jobs then? We looked into it and we found about 15 attempts to get professors punished, with about three fired.

All three of those were fired for reasons that actually didn't seriously implicate the First Amendment.

### **John Matze**

What would be an example of that? What would not seriously implicate the First Amendment?

### **Greg Lukianoff**

Sami Al-Arian was one of the first cases that we fought at FIRE that was big and well known.



Bill O'Reilly signaled him out after 9/11 for having ties to terrorism – ties to Islamic Jihad, to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The University of South Florida, which had previously done an investigation on Sami Al-Arian and decided, you know, oh, no, these aren't serious allegations, didn't want to say, okay, maybe there was something more to this.

So they decided instead to fire Sami Al-Arian for saying “death to Israel” in a video from 1989.

As soon as it became him actually saying something [controversial] that they were justifying the firing based on, it became a FIRE case.

There were six of us back then. We had no money and we had this incredibly unsympathetic case. We all kind of looked at each other like, oh, this might destroy the organization.

The secret motto of FIRE is we'll run this bus into a wall rather than be unprincipled. If this is what brings us down, this is what brings us down. But we're still going to do it. And so we defended Sami Al-Arian and we defended his free speech rights.

Eventually, he was indicted for having ties to Muslim [terrorists].

### **John Matze**

At that point, you probably bailed on the case.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

I wouldn't say we bailed on his case. They changed their argument. It was no longer about speech. It was about him being indicted. And we're like, yeah, you can fire someone for being indicted for having ties to terrorism. That we understand.

In that case, they fired him for something that they absolutely can fire someone for, that doesn't really seriously implicate First Amendment rights. So all three of those cases, all of them were justifiable for things that didn't actually implicate freedom of speech.

Of the thousand attempts to get professors fired over the last nine-and-a-half years, they've been overwhelmingly over either jokes or people speaking online or, worst of all, their research or their pedagogy – the stuff that tenure was designed to protect.

And you're still talking about almost 50 tenured professors losing their jobs. Earlier in my career I thought it was impossible for a tenured professor to lose their jobs for their research.

### **John Matze**

That was always the stereotype – once they reach tenure, there's nothing that can get them fired. Obviously, that's not true, especially not now.

One thing that you had mentioned in the book was that there is an increase in a lack of [political] diversity at universities, in the last, I'd say, 20 years. It was never 1:1 left and right, but it's definitely gotten so skewed left that it definitely could explain some of what we're seeing here.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

The viewpoint diversity in the various departments has gone way down since the 1950s and '60s. And in the 1950s and '60s, the ratio of left to right among the professoriate was roughly, by some estimates, 2:1 or 3:1 left to right.

Now you're talking about departments that have literally no conservatives in them whatsoever. In one study of Harvard, the ratio is something like 88:1.

### **John Matze**

The claim that there is no bias at a university when your left-to-right ratio is 88:1, I think that goes out the window, doesn't it?

### **Greg Lukianoff**

Well, I mean, it's silly to argue that there's no bias in higher education. Most serious people have stopped making that argument.

There was a time when people claimed there's not even that bad of a political tilt. Now [the argument] has moved on to – okay, it's really obvious there's a major political tilt, but it's justified. And people end up going to arguments like, oh, liberals are just smarter than conservatives.

So your argument is just elitism.

### **John Matze**

Anybody you disagree with is stupid.

### **Greg Lukianoff**

Exactly.

The bias, particularly in elite higher education, is remarkable. Even in departments that people think of as being more conservative, like economics, I still think the overall ratio in a lot of schools is still like 4:1.

This is a problem and people have been sounding the alarm on this.

Earlier on, there was a lot more skittishness in saying so because it sounded like a partisan argument by itself, to make the point that there's a problem with having a lack of viewpoint diversity.

But if your job is knowledge production, it's really important to have people who disagree with each other because the way you get at knowledge is by people disagreeing with each other.

### John Matze

In universities, there's a large movement to have economic diversity, to have ethnic diversity, religious diversity. Why not political diversity?

### Greg Lukianoff

My co-author of [Coddling of the American Mind](#), Jonathan Haidt, started up the [Heterodox Academy](#) in order to defend the idea of viewpoint diversity in higher education. They've been able to make this argument more palatable to people who once might have dismissed it.

But in terms of actually changing things, unfortunately, the lack of viewpoint diversity is a problem that has only gotten worse in higher education. And I don't honestly think that most of these institutions are serious about changing that.

That's one of the reasons why I think people take higher ed and the position of the expert class less and less seriously over the years.

### John Matze

Some of the things that come into my mind – why is it that these universities have started having this bias towards one ideological viewpoint? Is it a chicken-and-egg thing?

Then I started thinking, oh, I bet some conspiracy theorists would love to run with this. You could make the claim that [academics] are just preparing for the next generation of political class or whatever. They're trying to skew the game. A lot of this stuff also could lead to conspiracy for the people who are paranoid.

This should be addressed. It definitely leaves a lot of people frustrated and confused. And I think tackling this issue would help the country.

### Greg Lukianoff

Unfortunately, we probably need entirely new institutions. It's one of the reasons why the University of Austin is something I have some hope for.

It's an experimental liberal arts university in Austin – not a conservative college, just an old-fashioned liberal arts college starting from scratch.

We need a thousand more experiments like that. We need small-scale institutions that consider their entire job to see if they can replicate the findings currently produced in higher education.

By the way, it also turns out that when you do any kind of fair science on them, it turns out that the biases that existed prevented a more effective knowledge producing product. I think that

people really start wondering, like, why is everyone going into huge debt to go to these institutions? Why are we massively federally funding them?

### John Matze

I don't think that people should be going massively into debt to pay for these organizations. They're extremely wealthy, these organizations.

You've got these poor people, people who just graduated high school with nothing to their name and they start off with a two-hundred thousand or one-hundred to two-hundred thousand dollar debt to their name.

For what? To give the money to a university that is extremely wealthy?

Obviously not for [people studying] computer science or engineering or maybe physics, even law, doctors. Anything that requires an education of that caliber, I can understand it being an investment. But if the job doesn't pay off at the end of the day, it doesn't make sense.

### Greg Lukianoff

That's one of the things about public funding – public funding needs to make an argument for a public benefit.

I remember reading this book, *Higher Education?* by Claudia Dreifus and Andrew Hacker. They were trying to make an argument for higher education as it currently exists and the idea that they have to prove that there's a public benefit to it is silly.

It's not silly if you're trying to actually prove why the public should be massively funding it.

### John Matze

If you're receiving public funding for, I don't know, to say – it is really important that we have a lot of history majors or it is important that we have people learning some of these arts. The funding should go to help people study that, because at the end of the day, a degree in those might not earn the person a return on investment comparable to those who are studying for something that's more of a high paying job. So it would be in the interest of the university, in theory, to help facilitate that.

But instead, I think a lot of the people are paying the same kind of rates. It's hard to justify going into debt for something that's just not going to pay the bills at the end of the day.

### Greg Lukianoff

It seems like we did like the worst of both worlds.

Instead of actually letting the free market work or having a system by which we massively publicly fund higher education, but then also say, oh, but don't go nuts, keep your costs under

control, don't massively bureaucratize – we chose neither. We just decided to create a system that was guaranteed to lead to a massive expansion of the bureaucratic class.

The main problem in higher ed when it comes to professor and student cancellations is the administrative class. So much of that [tuition] money has actually gone towards making the situation for both due process and free speech worse on campus.

### **John Matze**

That may be the hint towards the answer of our chicken-and-egg question we had earlier.

I've found online, on social media now, it's nearly impossible to talk with people anymore, at least on most mainstream platforms. That's a problem that I'm trying to tackle with Hedgehog. That being said, there is the Israeli and Palestine conflict right now. And that has led to a lot of just heated, crazy discussions – not just online, offline, everywhere.

How do we protect discussions with that topic? And where do you draw the line of what is and is not acceptable to say?

### **Greg Lukianoff**

I've got to give credit actually to an Ivy League school that I think has done a good job on this.

One of the reasons why we haven't seen as many issues at Dartmouth is because – what they started doing pretty early on was they started having actual public dialogues between the pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel students before there was a major crisis.

Try to do this after a crisis? Good luck with that. But if you do the hard work and lay the groundwork in advance, you can create a situation where people are like, okay, oh, well I definitely, passionately disagree with you, but I don't necessarily think that everyone on your side is necessarily stupid or evil.

That's the starting point at which anybody going to higher ed should be at – unfortunately, that's not the world we live in.

Dartmouth actually did a very smart thing by doing this work in advance. And I give them tremendous credit for it. I have fingers crossed for Dartmouth continuing to innovate in that way.