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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** Goes to that idea of people being in their own, you know.

[00:00:03] **Speaker 2** Kind of bubbles. Well, and that's so interesting to hear of medicine, like. Even when we were growing up. I mean, I have a sense of that, that it's always been a bubble. I mean, you know, I mean, I know the saying with 26 miles or whatever, right? So old. But yeah. Sure. Anything?

[00:00:25] **Speaker 1** Sure.

[00:00:26] **Speaker 2** And I realize I'm slumping. I'll sit up a little straighter. But I think it.

[00:00:30] **Speaker 1** Was more so than because, you know, I mean, today we had we had the inflection point of Scott Walker, and, you know, it was much more so. When no one questioned that. I don't think I mean, I wasn't paying attention to those issues then. Yeah. Okay. All right. Well, again, thank you so much for doing this with us.

[00:00:57] **Speaker 2** Well, thank you for inviting me.

[00:01:00] **Speaker 1** So your opinion piece in The Journal Sentinel saying that the sentiment that professors are indoctrinating students with liberal ideology you described as disturbing to you. How so?

[00:01:14] **Speaker 2** It just does not at all match my reality And the discussion around whether or not indoctrination is going on on the UW Madison campus is just so far removed from my daily life. And I, you know, as a person who has grown up in this state and worked at this institution at UW Madison, basically my entire career, I have been fortunate to have this job since I finished my dissertation. I mean, I just I worry a lot about the criticism of this place because I know that it's the UW Madison system is so beloved by people of this state. And my experience with students on this campus is just it's just very different from the debate that's going on around indoctrination.

[00:02:08] **Speaker 1** So meanwhile, though, and not specific to your instruction, what about the free speech survey undertaken by the UW system that Republican legislators themselves called troubling, where it found that 60% of Republican students feel, quote, pressured by an instructor to agree with specific political views being expressed in class. What about that survey?

[00:02:33] **Speaker 2** Well, there's a few things that really troubled me I find disturbing about that survey. One is that in a way, it's been my life's work to create an environment in my classroom in which students of all political leanings have this space to think and talk with each other and question each other and graduate from that class with a more profound sense of who they are as a citizen. So that's one thing that just really disturbed me about that, because it just runs against the grain of what I've been trying to do for decades in my own life. But it also doesn't reflect very well the concerns that I hear students expressing. So mind you, most of the students I interact with are political science students. And so they're not representative of the whole campus. And maybe the students that I get to have time with self-select into my class. It's hard to know, right? But the things that they're concerned about. Free speech does not come up. They're concerned about tuition, about the cost of living in Madison, about LGBTQ rights, and that their classmates like discrimination they see against their classmates and also students of color, continuing to express concerns about how they're treated on campus. Climate change, the job market. I mean, there are other issues that are really pressing for students. And there's another thing that really troubles me about that survey is that it really does not comport well or match well with the results of our own UW Campus climate Survey, which was conducted in 2021, which is I read the fine grained details of the methodology of that survey was very carefully conducted with very close attention to who's responding to the survey. Varied all kinds of strategies in terms of incentives to get as many students, a wide variety of students to respond. And what that survey found, it had a bunch of different measures of who felt welcome on campus. About 20, if I remember right, and according to none of those measures do self-described conservative students say they don't feel welcomed. And yet there was a question on that survey asking Who do you think doesn't feel welcome on our campus? And many, many people said conservative students. So there's this perspective that conservative students are silenced on our campus, but conservative students themselves do not report feeling silenced. So I'm worried. There's a big mismatch in my mind between the results of the Free Speech survey and our own campus climate survey. You know, mind you, it all surveys. There's room for error and interpretation. But I just I worried increasingly that too much of the conversation was about the mistreatment of conservative students. For all three of those reasons, I worried.

[00:05:45] **Speaker 1** So you wrote in your opinion piece specifically about spring semester this past spring semester course that you taught. It's a public opinion course and you describe how students felt taking talking about politics at the start of your class. In the midst of this polarized kind of climate, what was that like when they first step into that class?

[00:06:10] **Speaker 2** They're quiet and reserved, and like many young people, lots of people these days, I see them at roundtables at about six students and they sort of buried themselves in their phones. Right. They're not quite sure how to engage with one another. And then as they started to talk, expressing concerns about the nature of our politics. And, you know, I do I say like the first day of class, we're going to start talking about the hard stuff and we we're going to just confront reality and talk about how divided we are. We feel like we are, how difficult it is to talk about politics. But just stick with me and you'll see at the end of the semester how different it feels.

[00:07:00] **Speaker 1** And what is that like for those students breaking down those barriers? How hard is that?

[00:07:07] **Speaker 2** Not so hard, I don't think. I mean, that's not the reflection I get from them, because it doesn't take much for you to create. Just sit people in a circle and say, I want you, you, you pick who's going to be the facilitator here. I'm not going to run your discussion, but based on arbitrary things like whose birthday is next? And then here's the question I want you all to talk about with respect to the the thing I signed you to read for today and have at it. And they find like it doesn't take long before you realize how enjoyable that feels, right? To actually hear what your peers are thinking about something that you yourself have engaged in, and then the feeling of being heard. So they they take too quickly. It doesn't take more than a few class periods for the students to say this is a really unusual class. The format and I love it. I didn't know what to expect, but this feels really good.

[00:08:16] **Speaker 1** Were there instances where there were students who would self-described as conservative and those that would self-described as liberals who came together and learned about each other?

[00:08:29] **Speaker 2** Sure, sure. And I don't not. First day of class. I don't ask people. You self-described as anything, never in the entire semester. But as they discuss, they choose what they want to talk about, about themselves. And some students did. And I don't get to hear every conversation. I'm walking around the room and sort of eavesdropping as I can, sitting down and inserting myself in the circle from time to time. But what I observed was students asking each other questions, listening a lot, expressing some surprise, like, Wow, I've never heard about that. And I would say, what's one? A few class periods, especially stick out to me were a few weeks and I signed them a book that I wrote in 2016 about our own rural urban divide here in Wisconsin. And most of the students are from an urban or suburban communities, many of them from Wisconsin, but some of them from elsewhere. And they do express surprise things like, well, I didn't I've never heard of that perspective. I've never I've always wondered why. Why would people in a rural community vote for a Republican candidate when it's clear to me they would benefit from having more government programs or they would benefit from.

[00:10:02] **Speaker 1** Or I'm sure that phone ringing.

[00:10:05] **Speaker 2** Oh no.

[00:10:08] **Speaker 1** It's closed for the summer.

[00:10:10] **Speaker 2** People are looking for their newspaper.

[00:10:12] **Speaker 1** Excuse me. I mean, do you feel like whoever that was will call right back? I don't know.

[00:10:20] **Speaker 2** I don't know. I don't.

[00:10:22] **Speaker 1** I wonder if we should unplug the phone, you know, because if it's anybody like me, they'll call right back.

[00:10:30] **Speaker 2** Well, you're. You're probably super persistent. Yeah, but maybe there's a voice message and people realize. Oh.

[00:10:41] **Speaker 1** Oh, did you just hit your head? Ow! Ow! Ouch. So I'm going to ask that again, because that's the. That's the none. It okay?

[00:10:49] **Speaker 2** Yeah, Well, yeah, I mean, it was definitely.

[00:10:53] **Speaker 1** Well, I'll. I'll wait. You. Yeah. So. So I think we're. I don't even think I asked you a question of that, but what did you observe when students started having these kind of aha moments about. Oh, I guess I think. Yeah.

[00:11:12] **Speaker 2** Yeah. So there will be times. So especially when I was I assigned to them portions of a book I published in 2016 about our own rural urban divide here in Wisconsin. Many of the students, most of them are from an urban or suburban area, would say things like, Oh, I never heard that perspective, or I've always wondered why. Why did people in rural areas of the country vote for Donald Trump? Because he seems to me like he's a candidate that wasn't going to help them or he would be not supporting the kind of policies that I think would benefit people like them. And I never heard that Maybe they felt that whatever the government had been doing in the past was not working for them or communities like theirs. And so they didn't want a candidate who was, you know, arguing for more government programs. So sort of surprise, sort of I've never heard that. And I've never they wouldn't say empathize. I'm trying to think of the way they would phrase it, but it makes sense to me. I don't agree with it, perhaps still, but I understand that they're not evil. There's nothing wrong with them. They're not ignorant. It's not a lack of information. And that, you know, it's and and I think what's most valuable is people express things like it made me rethink my own views, not necessarily change them. And that isn't the point of my class. I'm not trying to change anyone's view. I'm trying to get them to understand more deeply themselves, their own views, and to just basically see people with different political views as human beings, you know, as equally as human and equally as dignified and worthy of respect as they themselves are. And it's, you know, you can imagine it's a beautiful thing to watch happen.

[00:13:13] **Speaker 1** So the other thing that you touched on in this class was race. And what was your take away from that?

[00:13:22] **Speaker 2** Students, I mean, people in their late teens, in their early twenties, at least the students I encounter on our campus really concerned about race, race relations, what how we handle it on our own campus. Part of what we do when we talk about the role of race and public opinion in the United States in general and how it influences people's opinions. And but we also talk about race on our own campus. So we read some recent reports of that have been produced by members of the campus community to help us understand our own history here with respect to race relations. And students expressed surprise at some of that history. And we primarily, the white students, right, say I never realized that the KKK was a presence on this campus and that it wasn't just a so-called few bad apples, but it was sort of accepted by the general culture here. But then another thing I do is I play some excerpts for these students of conversations that students of color and I organized on our campus a few years ago. And as part of a kind of tech human platform I've been creating with a lab out at MIT to help people listen and understand each other better. But they're basically conversations among students of color talking about their experience on campus. And I play some of the excerpts of those conversations for the broader class, which is predominantly white. And the students are shocked to hear some of these stories of of students just talking about the discrimination they face just in everyday life on campus, not violent, but sort of just the the common experience of it. And it's it's invisible to a lot of these students who don't experience that personally. So we talk about that as both the way you have to really listen carefully for different facets of public opinion and. The way people's experiences are such an important part of the way they see the world, but then also as a step towards, okay, we learned about what public opinion is, how it works, how to measure it. But now, what's your role in public opinion when you leave this class, when you leave this university? What kind of a person do you want to be out there in the world? How do you want people to respect you and listen to you? And what are you going to do to make sure we have the kind of democracy where sitting down and talking with one another is not unusual.

[00:16:18] **Speaker 1** So in the end, as someone who studies and researches division and public opinion, what's your prescription for healing not just on campus, but more broadly?

[00:16:32] **Speaker 2** A few things I would say. It's not uncommon for a lot of us these days to find ourselves in a in a situation in which we're encountering views we don't agree with, whether it's through some kind of media or in person. And I would say when that happens, just pause. And if you have the opportunity, ask the person expressing those views. Tell me more. Help me understand where you're coming from, because I'm seeing things a little bit differently and I'd like to know where you're coming from. Grant yourself a momentary luxury of being a researcher like me and don't feel as though you have to defend yourself, but just try to be a learner. But I would also say a prescription is every time you think our democracy is broken and there's no hope, just. Have a conversation with the people in your life, even if you think you know them really well and ask simple questions like, What are your big concerns about Wisconsin, about the world right now? And you will notice how great it feels to listen to someone and then have them listen to you. And it will be reassuring because a lot of times what we see and hear about is the inability of adults to talk with one another as just humans trying to make sense of the world. But people can do it pretty easily. And it's it it's very reassuring and it will infuse you with hope. It certainly certainly does with me.

[00:18:30] **Speaker 1** All right. Thank you. Thank you so much.

[00:18:34] **Speaker 2** You're welcome. Thank you.

[00:18:35] **Speaker 1** Really important stuff. I loved learning about what you do in your class.