

**Title: Chad Wellmon, Do Universities Have a Clear Purpose?**  
**Episode: 44**

*This transcript may contain material that was edited out of the audio recording.*

**Transcript**

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[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here is your host Chris Martin.]

**Chris Martin:** In 2016, Jonathan Haidt gave a talk at a number of American universities in which he made the provocative argument that universities must choose either truth or social justice as their primary motive for operating. He argued that universities used to be centered around truth, and that going forward some universities could continue to do that, whereas others could be frank about declaring social justice to be their primary motive. (He did not argue that students couldn't pursue social justice at a university but simply that the university itself had to choose one primary goal.) Today I'm talking to Chad Wellmon, an expert on the history of universities, about whether universities truly were motivated by the pursuit of truth or whether history is in fact more complicated.

I've known Chad since 1995 when he and I were classmates at Davidson College and in the same humanities class. Chad is now an associate professor of German Studies at the University of Virginia. His interests include European intellectual history, and media and social theory. His most recent book was *Organizing Enlightenment* was about the foundation of the modern research university. He's also the co-author of the upcoming book *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*.

**Chris Martin:** So we're here primarily to talk about your recent essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Part of that was a response to Jonathan Haidt's assertion that the university must choose one goal, one ultimate goal of truth or social justice.

You've pointed out in several of your writings that universities have actually always been divided and different people within university have sought to pull it in different directions. Can you elaborate on that?

**Chad Wellmon:** Sure. I think my point was basically a historical one. That's simply to say that universities have never had just one purpose. They've always pursued multiple – some could even say I think competing purposes or ends. You know, whether that's the attempt to maintain church doctrine or educate clergy, the attempt to form democratic citizens, produce economic value, to create and transmit knowledge or quite simply just to maintain culture and class. I think various universities across time and space have pursued multiple ends.

Now that's not to say – and I think this is important and this is where I think the claim that universities have historically pursued something like truth...there's a certain and very important

truth to that. But I would put it something more like this. There is a certain kind of norm and a functionalism, this thing called the university. The social institution has historically what distinguishes the university from say just a factory or a court or even historically a library or a lab, is that they have been bound up historically with creating knowledge and educating people and those two functions have worked together in different ways and of course what it means to create knowledge to educate people varies historically and culturally as well.

But I think my main pushback in this notion that universities have to choose between two different teloi, two different purposes, I think that really underestimates the complexity but also the resilience and variety that universities have displayed over the past centuries.

**Chris Martin:** When the university was bring run by clergy, why wasn't there unified purpose at the time? Who were the clergy battling against?

**Chad Wellmon:** Right. So take for example the university – 13<sup>th</sup> century Paris. It's not even really accurate to say they were run by clergy. I mean they really were – these were corporate institutions. Think of them more along the lines of guilds. I mean that's what these early, early modern universities were. They were corporations of students and scholars who were bound together for their own internal purposes and one of those was to train future clergy.

They were given license basically in very formal ways by the church, but also crucially by the state. So universities have historically functioned as not fully autonomous but strangely autonomous institutions and you can see this weird kind of social space that they have always occupied or traditionally occupied opens them up to competing pursuits. So when you're talking, say again about 13<sup>th</sup> century Paris, you have very explicit state interests but you also have very explicit church interests. But you also have very distinct internal interest, right?

So you have the students and scholars pursuing their own ends and of course their notorious battles even internally between say students and scholars. You know, such that entire universities – you know, students will get up and try to leave at Jena, the German University, early in the eighteenth century. There were tensions *and they* tried to move after problems with local civil authorities. So even internally, these tensions bubble up and become pretty acute sometimes and then they're of course repeated externally as well.

So again that's just this notion that university pursues one purpose undersells that and I think there's a real – in terms of how this history affects today, if we don't understand the complexities internally and externally of the different groups that universities are trying to appease or the different ends that universities are pursuing, then we're missing something important.

**Chris Martin:** And your book *Organizing Enlightenment* is about the foundation of the Modern Research University in Germany. At the time the Modern Research University was founded, was there at least briefly a period when there was some collective purpose?

**Chad Wellmon:** No, in short. I think it was ideal, right? It was very normative. So over the course – you know, by the early modern period into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, by and large universities were almost second rate institutions, right? The real knowledge production, the new forms of

knowledge, especially with regards to the emerging natural sciences. Those are really taking place in a host of other institutions like salons and academies and odd ways, even libraries.

So universities up through the 18<sup>th</sup> century were kind of secondary institutions in that regard. But something did – something very interesting began to happen especially in Germany universities over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that is this much closer relationship between universities and the state. So you have something like the University of Göttingen, founded in the 1730s and I think you really could argue that there was a coherent purpose to a university like Göttingen and that was – it was a mercantilist institution. It served to make money for the state coffers and by and large, 18<sup>th</sup> century, these enlightenment factories as they were called, did have a coherent kind of organizing purpose and they were closely bound up with the state.

Out of this institution emerges the research university and that was the – that book was about the emergence over the course of the late 18<sup>th</sup>, early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The university with which I think most of us are familiar with this – kind of the R-1 as we call them, right? In the United States. But these institutions which are devoted to creating and transmitting knowledge and – but in a very particular way.

So in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you could argue that the research university emerges as a distinct ideal that tries to give a clear purpose and a clear focus to what universities do. But just as importantly, what distinguishes these institutions from the rise of more complicated public's fears and other ways of creating and transmitting knowledge, especially wrapped up with newer technologies like print.

**Chris Martin:** When it comes to educating students in terms of a moral character, you've written about that as well and how the American university, this peculiar thing happened where that duty got shifted to extracurricular organizations, which is why people from Europe and Asia, people like myself, when they come to the American university, tend to be surprised by the amount of extracurricular activity there is. How did that shift happen? How did moral character building get outsourced in that way at the American university?

**Chad Wellmon:** Yeah. So the research university, the model is adopted and adapted in the United States, over the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in large part from kind of German models, but really transformed once they came to the US in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

But as universities like Johns Hopkins and Stanford and Chicago were established, these new universities but even – but also established universities especially Harvard and then with the moral act state universities, when they began to adopt this research model, you know, universities are about producing research, that really began to put another alternative about what higher education could be over and against what have long been the case in the American context, which was basically the classical college, right?

This collegiate model, Harvard, Yale, Princeton that had been around for centuries in which you had a fixed curriculum. You had daily chapel. You had a college president who was also clergy of some sort, the capstone course that everybody would take and that would usually be taught by

the college president with something like a moral theology course. This capstone course kind of embodied what this classical American college was.

It was a cumulative course that brought together questions about truth, questions about morals and questions about religion into one coherent seminar and the research university model put all kinds of pressure.

**Chris Martin:** So there was also an implicit assumption for a very long time that if you were attending university, you were a Christian.

**Chad Wellmon:** Oh, absolutely, at least for these American colleges. They were explicitly although very broadly Protestant, right? So it was a white male, largely East Coast actually kind of underlying Protestant culture and the – the question of confessionalism was one that riled and – you know, the American colleges for decades. But the broad kind of background culture was absolutely this elite Protestant – vaguely Protestant culture and that gave kind of the cultural – the shared cultural foundations for things like chapel for – things like shared norms, for things like a shared moral code.

That really allowed for this set curriculum in American colleges and that starts to dissolve and face all kinds of pressures by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**11:25**

**Chris Martin:** All right. The United States, obviously being a nation of immigrants, started to have much more religious diversity than nations like England and France and Italy.

**Chad Wellmon:** Right. That and then you also – you have increasingly – especially with the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the admission of women, the admission of Jews and then slowly, very slowly as kind of racial segregation is challenged both in the courts and by – even internally by students and some faculty.

You have an influx of new populations, of new groups of people who had traditionally been shut out or as it was the case here at University of Virginia, enslaved people who built the university slowly and gradually over decades and decades and decades, finally get access to these institutions of higher education and with all of this, right?

So on the one hand, you could look at the American college, this fixed curriculum as a bastion of coherence and moral community. But it's a very, very – it's one that's explicitly white, explicitly Protestant and explicitly elite and which excludes most people.

Once those barriers start to come down, then you have a century of attempts to try to – on the part of these institutions, many of them trying to recover some sense of coherence, some sense of unity, some sense of integrity. These show up in debates which we're very familiar with but perhaps in a – from a different frame. Debates about Western civilization, debates about the canon, debates about the humanities, debates about general education and I see all of – you know, today so many of the issues that Haidt for example discusses, for me, you can't talk about

these issues on campus without talking about this very long history of attempts to figure out what might bind universities together and colleges together and give them some sense of coherence.

This comes directly back to your question. I will stop right there. But maybe we can go back to it. The question, the other thing I see is the institutional shift that came to mark American universities and colleges over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it's this massive chasm that developed between curricular and extracurricular institutions or this extracurricular divide that came to characterize the American university over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Chris Martin:** And how successful do you think extracurricular activities have been at the American university in terms of building moral character?

**Chad Wellmon:** Well, not very. At least in any kind of coherent sense, right? If you think of moral character, to quote 19<sup>th</sup> century theories, as “the harmonious development of faculties or capacities,” not very. But my concern—do I think they were successful? They were successful in certain ways. So take a place like – again, I will just use UVA, University of Virginia. We have this very long history of student-run, almost autonomous student life here in which students take very seriously. They run massive numbers of organizations. They do kind of incredible things both here on campus but also throughout the community.

But what happened over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is as that, as the classical college was overtaken by the research university at the beginning of the century, there was a great anxiety that among kind of university administrators in particular, the undergraduate education was just being marginalized, right? And that was always the focus of American colleges, those four years of undergraduate education.

They were losing funds but also attention and also thought to graduate education and professional schools, right? This is what's getting all the attention, the concerns go. There's kind of this no man's land for a number of decades and then there's kind of a renewed attention beginning kind of the 1920s and 1930s when you have – you know, most people think the Harvard, Yale, Princeton college house system goes back centuries. But it's actually from the late '20s and 1930s and those were explicit attempts to refocus those institutions on undergraduate education, right?

To give a certain coherence about it. I mean so you have these massive investments of funds and energies and fundraising to build back up undergraduate education and try to recover some sense of coherent undergraduate experience.

But what happens is this energy, most of it comes from administrators. Most of it comes from well-meaning donors as well. They end up building up this entire para-institution at American colleges and universities.

This is what we call extracurricular life. Or the Office of the Dean of Students, counselling centers, big time college sports. I mean this is when the first big stadiums are getting built. This is when you have the career services center. You have this entire infrastructure which if you spend any time on an American college or university, you're very familiar with.

So you have this entire secondary institution built up and basically its mission, like what it takes as its self-understanding is the cultivation and development of something like moral character. Then don't forget although this is often what has happened, you still have a curriculum and a faculty kind of across campus doing what they've always done.

**Chris Martin:** Right. So this is the same period also when you find universities trying to defend Western civilization or defend Western values and you see the foundation of the humanities course at Columbia to assimilate new immigrants.

**Chad Wellmon:** Right. So you could say – so this is – you have this extracurricular build-up, the secondary institution build-up and you still have certain pockets of faculty who are still interested in undergraduate education, right?

For many faculty, I would argue even obviously until today that all of this whole extracurricular business comes as a giant relief, right? I mean if you don't have to worry about your students' souls, then you can – you're going to have more time to write.

**Chris Martin:** Especially if you want NSF funds.

**Chad Wellmon:** Yeah, exactly, right? If you don't have to eat with your students and constantly read with them and reflect on them, not just in classroom in lab time but over the evenings and walk around with them on campus, then you're going to have a lot more time to do research, whatever that might be.

But there are pockets of faculty members who for varying reasons try to recover something of that coherence that they imagine, that the classical American college provided. I would say things like the Columbia humanities sequence, all of the general education programs, which none of them emerged until they start showing up in the 1920s and 1930s, Chicago's core.

Those are all efforts by faculty to – you know, depending on which figures we're talking about, trying to take back or recover something that they felt was lost and in a sense something that they felt responsible for, right? Something like a whole education of the student.

**Chris Martin:** I mean these were basically anti-fascist courses

**Chad Wellmon:** Oh, yeah, the first one – well, yeah, the first ones, you know. So the Columbia course started out as the War Aims course, right? The one you I think you initially mentioned. This was at the final years of World War One and it kind of spilled on after. They were defending America's decision to get involved in the war.

These courses laid claim to: "There is a coherent culture. There is a coherent civilization that we want to defend over against fascism, totalitarianism."

Another key point and timeframe in this is the late '30s and 1940s.

**Chris Martin:** Right. I mean we could even call them the first antifa.

**Chad Wellmon:** Oh, no – yeah, yeah, yeah. It might be – yeah. It might be true. But then you also have a resurgence of them in the Cold War in a lot of ways, right? So it's this external enemy and other that can help define a culture and a civilization were crucial to the emergence of the humanities as an institutional project of general education as an institutional project and these are always – again and again, it revolves around coherence, integrity, harmony where moral character is a stand-in for all of that.

Humanities – you know, lit professors might not use moral character today but they're going to have other words for it, right? They're going to have a different stand-in for that attempt to recover.

**Chris Martin:** Can you talk about what you think extracurricular life at American universities is now doing?

**Chad Wellmon:** Yeah. It's its own institution, right? You hear these complaints about lazy rivers and climbing walls and buffets. But that really I think obscures on the one hand the real richness of this extracurricular life, right? The real value that all of these extracurricular programs have brought in. You know, so for example here at the University of Virginia, I'm – what's called principal of Brown College, which is UVA's oldest residential college.

You know, my students, they live in dorms for four years. I live on grounds with my family with them. So I guess you could say that that's extracurricular, right? They're not classes that I teach. But there is some amazing stuff that goes on there. We eat with them. I lead a science fiction reading group, something that I'm explicitly not an expert in. But they come to my house and we read and we – it looks like a relaxed classroom. But what has happened is, is – again, as I mentioned earlier, is this is created in general and that's kind of an exception. You know, my role as a residential college principal, this is kind of an exception.

Otherwise, faculty do their things. And an entire professional army they are the ones who look over the succor and care of our undergraduates. And for the most part, they are amazing and incredible people who – from personal experience I can attest to the fact that they are indefatigable in their work and they keep – have kept several students alive. Just basically alive.

But they do that from across campus, right? They do that with very little relationship to what happens in the seminars, the courses and the labs and the curricula that faculty lead. So you have two separate institutions. One charged with kind of the moral care of character of our students and the other charged with kind of the intellectual life of our students.

That is a unique development and kind of the history of universities, that these should be so bifurcated and I think that's a real problem, that this sharp divide between an intellectual life, a life of the mind and the life of a moral character and a moral life.

**Chris Martin:** And you've written about Teresa Sullivan. She was the president of the UVA during the time of the neo-Nazi march. You've written about her response and how you felt it

was inadequate because there was a lack of moral clarity. She for some reason did not explicitly name white supremacy as the ideology that motivates this neo-Nazi march.

Why do you think this is happening at the administrative level?

**Chad Wellmon:** So my initial response to that was sharply critical of President Sullivan and her initial reluctance to name the white supremacists who marched across grounds.

Then I began to qualify that. Then I said, well, what should I expect? What should any of us expect from a university president? Because university president, she isn't – you know, like one of those 19<sup>th</sup> century college presidents who taught a moral theology seminar to all of the fourth year students that tried to bring everything together.

She runs a massive corporation, right? She runs a massive international corporation more – in excess of \$3 billion annual budget, an entire health system with the hospital and all of its adjunct facilities, entertainment complex, a sustainability enterprise, an entire human resources division, a massive investment firm.

So to compare and to even expect kind of a moral coherence or a coherence of purpose from a university president today maybe is a bit unfair or at least – it's what I started to think or at least is not being honest about what the university has long been, which is a much more complicated kind of international enterprise, at least kind of big, kind of state R-1 institutions like the University of Virginia.

**Chris Martin:** When it comes to students who are explicitly pursuing social justice, in your experience, do you feel like they're pursuing it in a way that creates tension with the goal of truth-finding?

**Chad Wellmon:** Sure, yeah. I think so. At least it's intentional with the goal of truth-finding as understood according to this vision of the university that no longer exists.

I mean to be honest, in my experience like for example here at UVA, it's completely unsurprising that – say what has been called I think rather dismissively, kind of the social justice lawyers, that they would appeal to bureaucratic processes, right? Be that disinvitations of speakers, no platforming because that's what they have been taught, right?

They had been taught – we have taught them. Faculty have taught them that the place for questions about moral injury and desire and personal front are to be submitted to a bureaucratic process, right?

So these questions about moral injury are they transmuted into some object, say a complaint that has to flow through a depersonalized procedure that produces an outcome and then is adjudicated, right? That's very different from addressing these questions as questions of character, duty, moral insight, evil, justice. You know, all the kinds of things that I would hope still on occasion you can address in seminars, in classrooms.

So they're very adept at understanding what the system wants, be that AP courses and applying to colleges. You know, these – especially these elite students. They're very adept at understanding what's expected of them and then providing that.

So what this bifurcation of curricular and extracurricular institutions has done I think has trained students, has formed students and faculty as well and staff as well to understand intellectual desires and moral desires as separate projects, as separate desires, right?

So they know how to – they know how to comport themselves in a classroom. They know how comport themselves within the bureaucracy. So do I think there are limitations to that in the actions of the students? Absolutely. But I would just as vigorously want to say that they had been formed to do that. So in that sense, they are doing what they have been trained to do and quite frankly, I don't think the university has really any facility at this point to address that gap and to train them and teach them that there are other ways to address these issues.

**Chris Martin:** And quite a few authors have recently printed out that there seems to be the stark change occurring around 2012 where students became much more vehement in terms of arguing for disinvitations. Do you have any idea what happened at the beginning of this decade to propel that?

**Chad Wellmon:** I don't. Well, I mean I have ideas. It's a very tough question. One, I don't know the data well enough to really comment on whether we can see proof or evidence for an increase and say kind of disinvitation and no platforming. I would also say as we know kind of with the Milo [Yiannopoulos] episodes that many of these campaigns, these so-called free speech campaigns were highly orchestrated I think to produce a certain outcome paid for to produce a certain outcome, right?

So that I see it more as a performance art. But all that said, right? So I wouldn't want to make this simply kind of a question to try to adjudicate whether disinvitation has increased or not increased because I would say in my own experience here and I think research that Haidt summarizes well and addresses well for example. The increase in anxiety and depression and suicide rates not only in college students, right? But what I understand kind of extending over American adolescents has increased and that is something I see on a daily basis not only as a faculty member but as a principal and universities kind of inherit this at the backend of adolescence.

But what I would say is this, is universities are more fundamentally ill-equipped and this just returns to what we were talking to, to deal with these because all of these questions unfortunately are handled in a distinct one area of university life and that's the extracurricular life, right?

So if there is something like a persistent purpose among multiple and competing purposes, right? You know, Haidt calls is "truth-seeking". I might call it "education and knowledge creation". If the university is going to distinguish itself and remain an institution that has an identifiable set of purposes that distinguishes it socially and that – what it can do better and what society I would quite frankly say desperately needs right now.

Then it can't simply turn itself into another massive counseling center for 18 to 22-year-olds, right?

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**Chad Wellmon:** It can't take on the burden wholly, right? Of other public institutions as they crumble. But what it can do, at least it has – maybe historically it has the resources although right now, as I mentioned, I'm not very sanguine about it. What it can do is say, well, what we as university can do is address this differently, right? We can address this as an intellectual and as a moral matter.

I think that's the really salient point of distinction for universities is that these questions which are crucial not only to the well-being of our particular students but also to the well-being and flourishing of our society, these are questions that can't be bifurcated into kind of intellectual and moral projects or political and simple university projects.

I mean these are common social problems and common social questions and that's what universities have long done in various ways. They've responded to and tried to help their societies, their cultures understand and better address the most pressing issues of the day and if one of those is mental health or the question of well-being in a – kind of a hyper capitalist area, then I think that is something that an extracurricular-curricular model is not going to do very well.

**Chris Martin:** Oh, it is definitely a puzzle why 2012 was this turning point.–We chatted a bit about this offline. But I do see that – I think you agree that – happiness courses like the one at Yale and the one I teach at Georgia Tech too are to some disagree a way of getting – putting scholarly attention rather than just outsourcing this coping with anxiety and depression to student services.

Getting students to see sociological and historical changes in America and in the world. It might be precipitating mental illness and helping students cope with these illnesses and prepare them to deal with difficulties that – in a way that they won't learn from other courses they are taking.

**Chad Wellmon:** So I think all the courses you just mentioned are examples of strong desire on the part of students who seem to enroll heavily in courses like this, to address not only as you were saying. I think it's very important kind of historical, sociological questions, but also philosophical and religious questions about what it means to lead a good life, what it means to lead a full life.

It provides consolation. It provides critical distance. It provides – it can provide all of these things to think through with students. How have different traditions, religious, philosophical, political, social understood happiness, understood well-being, right?

**Chris Martin:** Right. Well, I think that's a good place to wrap up. Thanks for joining us on the show today. It has been great having you.

**Chad Wellmon:** Chris, thank you so much for the invitation. It was really fun.

**Chris Martin:** You can learn more about Chad at his blog [chadwellmon.com](http://chadwellmon.com), where you can also find a list of his recent publications. He's also on twitter at [cwellmon](https://twitter.com/cwellmon)

I hope you enjoyed the last episode with Kevin Kruse about Fault Lines. His coauthor Julian Zelizer will be on an upcoming episode.

If you enjoyed the show please review us a review on iTunes. And if you have any comments about today's episode, you can contact me at [podcast@heterodoxacademy.org](mailto:podcast@heterodoxacademy.org) or tag me on Twitter [@Chrismartin76](https://twitter.com/Chrismartin76). If you're an academic, you can also learn more about joining HxA at [heterodoxacademy.org](http://heterodoxacademy.org). Thanks for listening!

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