Introduction & Keynote Discussion

Barbie Zelizer

Good evening, good afternoon, good morning. Whatever you want it to be, it can be. I'm Barbie Zelizer, Director of The Center for Media at Risk. And together with Guobin Yang. Director of the Center on Digital Culture and Society, I'm super pleased to welcome you to this year's co-hosted symposium, "Academe in the Age of Social Media: Scholarly Inquiry at Risk?" We start tonight with a double feature. Two keynotes, splitting the time, addressing the different implications of what it looks like to be put at risk and what it means. And for those of you who haven't been with us before, today and tomorrow's events are put together beginning to end by an organizing committee of Doctoral Fellows affiliated with one of the two Centers tonight.

Tonight's event will be moderated and led by Jenny Lee. So let me tell you a little bit about Jenny. She's a fifth year PhD student who's working on cultures of surveillance and labor, particularly from a feminist bent. Her dissertation, tentatively titled "Surveillance as Housework: Care Cameras and Community in the New Neighborhood Watch," investigates doorbell cameras to reveal the social narratives that people employ when engaging with this technology. To date, Jenny has six different publications on topics ranging from information, anxiety and COVID contact tracing to "Next Door" users' post-racial strategies. She's presented eight invited talks and conference presentations and she is the recipient of the esteemed James D Woods Award for Outstanding Teaching. In her prior life, Jenny was a strategist with Facebook. So please welcome Jenny Lee.

Jenny Lee

Good evening everyone. Thank you so much for being here. Thank you, Barbie, for that very generous introduction. My name is Jenny Lee. I'm a Doctoral Fellow in the Center on Digital, Culture and Society here at Annenberg, and I'm really looking forward to tonight's keynote. We can think about this keynote as setting the stage for the conversations we'll be having over the next couple of days about scholarship and risk in the age of social media, taking us through iterations of this relationship and revealing what exactly the stakes are in this current moment. This keynote lays the groundwork for the kinds of questions, problems, solutions and futures we examine and imagine about scholarly inquiry and the university, throughout the symposium, but also for many years to come in our own research and our own practice. With that said, it is my privilege to be able to introduce our keynote speakers for tonight.

First, we have Doctor Rebekah Tromble, who is the director of the Institute for Data Democracy and Politics and Associate Professor in the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. Doctor Tromble's research focuses on political communication with a particular interest in political discourse on social media. She leads an interdisciplinary, cross-sector project funded by the National Science Foundation to develop "Expert Voices Together," a rapid response system of support for journalists and scientists facing campaigns of intimidation and harassment. Doctor Tromble also regularly serves as an

advisor on topics of digital platform accountability, transparency and responsible data access and use. Next, we have Doctor Todd Wolfson, who is an Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University. Doctor Wolfson's research focuses on the intersection of new media and contemporary social movements. He is the Co-Director of the Media Inequality and Change Center, a partnership between the University of Pennsylvania and Rutgers University, and he is currently president of the American Association of University Professors. For the last six years, he has been in leadership of Rutgers AAUP, which represents 6000 faculty, grad workers, postdocs and counselors across the university. Prior to his work as an academic union leader, Doctor Wolfson also worked as a community and labor organizer in Philadelphia. Please join me in welcoming our keynote speakers. I will give the floor first to Doctor Trumble and then to Doctor Wolfson for their remarks. And then we will open up for an audience discussion.

Rebekah Tromble

Thank you so much, Jenny. Thank you all for inviting me here. It's a real privilege and honour to talk to you tonight. I'm going to do this a little bit differently. I'm going to start my talk this evening, seated, to share with you what really starts off for me as a personal story. I will talk you through some of how that personal story then led to the work that I've been doing for the last several years. And then I will get up, go to the podium and and share with you some of the outcomes of that. I'm going to walk you through just a little bit of a website that's full of all sorts of

resources that my colleague, Katie Searles and I have developed. Before I start the personal component of this, I ask that everyone refrain from tweeting the personal components of this in particular. I've talked publicly about these things before, but I'll be very candid that I right now am on high alert because a couple of let's say, well-connected folks have me on their radar right now. So the less that my name around these specific things is on Twitter or X in particular, but even Blue Sky, keep the personal stuff off for the moment. I'd appreciate that. All right, so let me share the personal story for me. This all begins in 2018.

I was an assistant professor of Political Science at Leiden University in the Netherlands. I was honestly thinking about leaving academia at the time, I was a political communications scholar. I didn't feel like I was really making any headway. I was sitting just down the road from the behemoth that is University of Amsterdam, and as a Political Communications scholar, I felt like I couldn't make any headway while I was sitting next to this behemoth. And out of nowhere, I got what felt like a career changing, life changing opportunity. And it turned out it was career changing and life changing, but in many ways that I expected and then didn't expect. I, on a whim, put in an application as part of this request for proposals that Jack Dorsey had personally authored calling for independent scholars to propose research into the health of conversations on Twitter. I put together a proposal that included a number of really fantastic interdisciplinary scholars, including Jenny Stromer-Galley at Syracuse. And thought, this is going nowhere, but it's kind of cool and fun,

Let's give it a try. A couple months later, I get an email saying, "guess what? We're giving it to you." Like what? First of all, we asked for a lot of money. Are you sure? And then you know why us? But yes, they were willing to give us a lot of money and it was us. And so we were really excited and had a bunch of conversations with folks internally at Twitter about what this would look like.

They were promising us the sun, the moon and the stars in terms of exclusive data access, the sorts of things that you don't get through the API. Like you got to lift up the hood to get them. And so this was going to be career changing for us. The research that we were proposing to do would look at three different elements of health in conversations on the platform. First intolerance and incivility. Those two concepts really come out of the work that Patricia Rossini has done on helping us try to distinguish between different forms of intolerance and to recognize that intolerance and civility are fundamentally different things. And then echo chambers. So those were the three components. And we were particularly interested that we were proposing to develop some computational models to help us analyze these things. We were particularly interested in the contextual elements. How is it that different user communities perceive and respond to these different forms of incivility, intolerance? What do they see as each of these things?

And so on. So we're really, really excited. There's going to be some computational coolness in this. There's going to be a lot of great social science. And that's what gets me going. What we weren't thinking about, despite being a bunch of scholars

who study bad stuff that happens online, was the way that the public might react to this work. This is the summer of 2018. Twitter had promised to announce it publicly and they were behind on everything. So they rushed out the public announcement, and it came. I think it was July 31st of 2018, right on the heels of the first wave of right-wing claims and complaints about the so-called "shadow ban" on the platform. And so here I am, the lead of this project that is using terms like incivility and intolerance. I'm all the way across the ocean in the Netherlands, but within three hours, three hours of the announcement, the worst picture that they could possibly find of me was superimposed, stretched across the front page of Infowars, and I was named "Twitter's new censorship czar in chief." The attendant article included a picture and named my husband. It gave our not precise address, they couldn't get ahold of that, but named the building that I worked in at Leiden University and so on. You can imagine what those comments look like. You can imagine all of the additional coverage, all the stuff that was happening on Twitter, right? This was picked up by Breitbart and RT within 24 hours. We were the lead story on Fox News, both cable and online. And of course, it was personalized. It was all the women in our project who were attacked as the lead. I was the primary target, but all of the women, the men in our project weren't named at all.

And they had gone through our tweets and found all of us saying some things critical of the Trump administration. And so, of course, this was a bunch of leftists who had been hired by Twitter to come in and censor conservatives. We knew this wasn't

true, but none of that matters. I had to move offices. And again, this is all the way across the ocean. But it was serious enough that nut jobs in the Netherlands picked up on it and I was getting threats locally. And so I had extra police patrols in front of my house, and though the whole thing moved on relatively quickly, the most intense part was about seven days. Within ten days, they had keyed in on a new New York Times tech reporter who was the target of choice and they used the exact same playbook against her. I finally met her recently, a couple of months ago, and I was like, "I have to give you the most perverse thank you ever, because you took the heat off of me." But in any case. Luckily, the worst part was relatively short-lived, but the effects were very, very long-lived. It was really difficult for the team, right? We were just trying to get this project off the ground, and this happens right at the very beginning of it, and it just tore us apart right from the start.

There were ways in which we really rallied around and came together. But the truth was, it was such an immense strain that it was hard to permanently lean into that. But then of course, the personal effects were really, really damaging, right? For me, it was hard to accept at the time because I think of myself as really tough. My therapist says it's my "Rebecca Made of Steel" persona. But, you know, I try to think of myself as super tough, things don't get to me. I would walk out of my house – again, it's in the Netherlands I live in the middle of this beautiful little canal-surrounded city - and someone on a bicycle would ride past me and I would freak out, right? It was literally a PTSD reaction that was hard for me to accept that that I was experiencing. But the hardest

thing for me from a personal perspective was that I'm a preacher's daughter from Wyoming, right? I grew up deeply conservative. Yes, I've always been a Trump critic, but my family and friends are Trump supporters. I very much understand and work very hard in my teaching and in my research to try to understand multiple perspectives. And yet the very people who I hope would love and support me through all of this said things like, "well, doesn't Fox News have a point, Rebecca?" And just knowing that there was this large part of the American public that saw these stories and thought of me as the devil, as public enemy number one, even if just for a short period, was devastating to me.

Colleagues didn't know what to do. They were broadly supportive, but they also didn't know what to say. They didn't know how to help. So, they just sort of shrunk into the background. Also, a bunch of Dutch colleagues who really didn't get the US dynamic, and bless them, were just a little bit arrogant about it. And so, I spent about six months in a really dark place. Then about six months after that, I decided, all right, I'm in a place now where I feel comfortable talking about this a bit more. I started talking semi-publicly about it. That felt really good. So I started talking more publicly about it, and particularly focused on trying to help Europeans and the Dutch system, in particular, better understand what this was so they might be able to react to it properly, to prepare for it.

And that felt really empowering. And a lot more scholars started coming to me and saying, Rebekah, thank you for telling this story. We're having these similar

experiences. And what I realized I really wanted to do was what I do best: put my empirical research hat on and use the skills that I have as a political communication scholar, right? Studying the bad things that happen online and my own personal experience and passion to spend more time looking into what other people are going through and how, in fact, we might help them.

So that's what I've been up to. I've been doing some other things in my career as well. But that work was supercharged about a little over three years ago, when a team that I'm leading put in a proposal to the National Science Foundation Convergence Accelerator program and received a phase one and then phase two grant to begin work on what's known as "Expert Voices Together." I'm going to tell you quite a bit more about that project, which will officially launch in January. But all of the sort of core things that I'll tell you about what we found in the research come primarily from that project. So, what we've done in that project is focus on two core communities. The basic justification for what we've been doing is the notion that the very voices that we need most in a sort of screwed-up information ecosystem - the expert voices - are really under threat right now. And so we need to do things to figure out how to better support them in the name of a healthier information ecosystem.

So in the core work that we've done so far, we've focused primarily on journalists and researchers. The next phase of our work, which we've actually begun, is working with election administration officials. We also intend to work with public health officials and can see this extending into

other categories. But journalists and researchers, first and foremost. We wanted to go into this with a trauma-informed lens. So, everything that we've done has been with a mind that even just having these conversations: going to our participants, asking them to do interviews, asking them to do user testing, is putting them at risk, because we're asking them to go back into a mindset of moments where they've experienced trauma. And so, we have been mindful in all elements from the design of the interviews that we've done, the interview protocols, to the actual technical tools, ensuring that various websites that we've developed, back-end tools, that we're using this trauma-informed perspective throughout. It's trauma-informed both in research methods and in design methods, technical design and even software engineering methods.

We've now done formal, sort of traditional semi-structured interviews with more than four dozen journalists and more than six dozen researchers. And then we have quietly been testing the system, so actually providing direct support to about two dozen journalists and over 100 colleagues in mostly academia but also civil society researchers.

What are the key things that we found in this? Well, first, it really sucks to experience this, but I want to share a little bit with you about the common tactics that most folks are worried right now. So, there are two broad categories of risks that we're seeing most. There are a number of others - I won't have time to go into those in detail - but there are two broad categories. And sorry, I should have been clear, all of our research is focused on US journalists and researchers. One of the things that we

realized pretty quickly is that there hadn't been a lot of recognition of the threats that US-based journalists were facing and how those were escalating. And so, we've exclusively focused on the US. So in the current context, what we're seeing - and now I'm going to shift to focus exclusively on scholars - what we're seeing is a politicized environment where individuals are being targeted with the idea of undermining larger bodies of research. So researchers in the mis- and disinformation space have been particularly under pressure of late.

But of course, there's all sorts of historical context for this. Climate science researchers have long been facing these pressures, so do tobacco scientists, scholars who work in medical fields, anything where there's animal testing involved. It's not that it's just one group of scholars, this is a very well-worn playbook. At the moment we're seeing those threats go up quite significantly, because what we've got is this ecosystem where individual, usually online influencers of some sort or another, are upping their cachet working to get inroads with politicians. Those influencers are then creating just enough of a nugget of a narrative, right? Sometimes it's happening on X, sometimes it's Substack, wherever it is. They're asking the questions. They're saying the thing that then policymakers, both in Congress and in State Legislatures, are using as evidence in formal and informal inquiries and also subpoenas. We're also seeing a number of lawsuits by individuals and by civil society organizations, and one of those made it all the way to the Supreme Court. Recently, the Murthy v Missouri case, which fundamentally started out as a claim that

scholars at the University of Washington and Stanford had colluded with the Biden administration and platforms to censor Americans. Never mind that the project operated under the Trump administration. And ultimately, it was thrown out on the basis of standing. But because it was thrown out on the basis of standing, all of the folks who were behind this lawsuit are continuing to claim they still have all the grounds for this and lawsuits are continuing.

So those are the sorts of things that we're seeing coming from external actors. Then there's the stuff that is sort of hybrid in nature, where it might actually be a colleague. It might be a student who surreptitiously records or shares something that's taken out of context, shared with external actors and then weaponized against folks. This is one of the main ways that actors then bring in all of those other actors again, because they jump in. This is one of the main tactics that's being used against scholars. And so we're seeing so many people impacted.

The thing is, this is proving incredibly successful because they're focusing on individuals. And you would think, well, a strategy of going after the individual, you've got to do that so many times over and over and over again. How can that be effective? But when you've got policymakers involved who can bring in the weight, even just the mere threat, right. A question coming from a State Policymaker, a letter of inquiry coming from Congress. Institutions crumble as soon as they see those things. Also because they have to immediately get lawyers involved. And that is insanely expensive. Another thing that's being

weaponized are Freedom of Information requests. Kate Starbird has talked about this quite a bit publicly. I believe now she's received something like 50 different Freedom of Information requests. And scholars have to respond to every single one of those. Most universities don't have systems in place to support with that. And frankly, if scholars don't get involved in supporting those requests, universities are going to turn everything over. And this puts you, your colleagues, your students, everybody else at risk. So you really only have to go after a few individuals to bring in massive amounts of resources across institutions.

And what are institutions doing? In the vast majority of cases, they are acting in their own interest. Right? They are hanging the scholars out to dry. And they're telling scholars "don't respond to this at all," which, to be clear, can be okay, but it should not be the default response to anything. And most importantly, decisions about how to communicate need to be driven by the scholars who are being impacted directly. And most institutions are not doing any of that. So what this ultimately means in the end is that the biggest, clearest impacts on scholars are twofold. One, the whole thing is wasting their time and energy. It's just grinding them down and it's making it really hard to do the work. Folks are talking about leaving. For the most part. We're talking about scholars who just care so deeply about their work. They're hanging on by their fingernails. But still, they're absolutely having thoughts about leaving. PhD students, in particular, are watching this and wondering, do I even actually want to do this thing? Because damn, it's scary. And then really, most importantly,

the whole thing is so isolating. This was my experience, and it's what we've heard to a person, right? The most fundamental impact is how isolating all of this is.

Colleagues, some colleagues rush at you and say, "what can I do to help? What can I do to help? What can I do to help?" And when you're in a moment of crisis and panicking, that kind of rushing is counterproductive because they don't know what to tell you in the moment. They're in crisis, they're freaking out, don't know what to say, and then it feels like more of a pile on, right? It contributes to the feeling of overwhelm.

The flip side are those colleagues who just shrink into the background, and even those who initially come forward and say, "hey, how can I help? How can I help, how can I help?" When they're not told concretely, "I need you to do x, y and z", then they also fade into the background. Some of the scholars who fade into the background are doing so out of self-preservation, right? They're worried that if they get involved, they're going to be implicated. Others are fading into the background because they just don't know what to do. And to be fair, this is hard. If I hadn't gone through this myself, I would have had no idea how to react. If I hadn't been doing this research. I wouldn't have known how to react.

So the first takeaway message that I want to share with everyone here is actually focused more on that individual level. What can we do when we see one of our colleagues who's going through this? It is so important, right? One of the fastest, best, strongest impacts that we can all have is to make it clear to our colleagues that they're seen and valued. And so my colleague who has been my partner in

crime in all of this work, Professor Kathleen Searles, who was long at Louisiana State University and is now at the University of South Carolina. We tell everybody to say three things when you see this happening to a colleague. One is some variation of "I see you," right? You're not. This isn't going unobserved. I recognize what you're going through. Two "you don't deserve this," right? This should not be happening to you. It's unfair. And third, and most importantly, by far. Most importantly, "your work is so damn good." And then be concrete about why it's so damn good, right? We all wrap up our identities in the work that we do and these attacks come at us from both angles, personal and especially for women, people of color, other marginalized, minoritized identities. You know, the personal attacks are disgusting and overwhelming, but they also come at you for the work itself. So you get that two pronged approach. And it's just so demoralizing. And we've heard from both scholars and journalists that the most effective thing that people say to them is, "here's why what you do is really, really, really good." And your community sees and hears that, right? So say those things when you see this happening.

I only have a few minutes left now. I'm going to do this quick switch. We have been working on developing two very practical outcomes for all of this research. You haven't seen us publishing on this because we've been heads down in the actual development component. The first is Expert Voices Together, which I noted will launch in January. We're going to do a soft launch. We're rolling out first for journalists, but only a matter of months later will come out to provide support for for scholars. And that is focused on

individualized crisis response support. So, if you're going through it, you can come to our website, fill in a simple intake form that goes immediately to our trained care coordinators. They're essentially case managers who will draw on all of the tools that we've built through our research to provide direct support. That includes things like digital security support. How do you lock down your different accounts to help you do what we refer to as community mapping, which is essentially finding who in your personal and professional worlds might be of support to you in a whole variety of different practical ways? These are things that it's really hard for us to think through when we're in crisis. And so we get a person to you who can help you map those things out.

In the meantime, the other piece of the work that Katie and I in particular have done, in September, we launched the Researcher Support Consortium. The RSC is focused on understanding that we're not going to help with any of this without an institutional response. And so, the Researcher Support Consortium is focused on that. And you'll see we have a tab here that focuses on the problem. We give you a basic overview and then also some more details like attacker types, attack types, the actual tactics, the themes, who tends to be impacted and overall how it actually harms people, the impacts that it has. And then you'll note we have materials here for funders. But most importantly, we focus on institutions. And here, this is primarily universities.

We've created a toolkit that universities can download, give step by step guidance on policies and ways to put together

proactive and responsive internal teams within universities, and how to think through all the way down to how do you actually talk to the researchers in question. We have a few resources here for researchers themselves. So if you are experiencing this, and particularly before we launched Expert Voices Together, there is a place here for you. But this doesn't have everything. The Expert Voices Together website will have a lot more, because we want to make it clear that the Researcher Support Consortium is an institutional focus. And then basically, we've got a bunch more resources. We also have a receipts page where we give all the citations of the materials that we've drawn on.

There's a ProtonMail account that you can use to reach out to us. And I also want to make clear that while we recognize that things like this toolkit are absolutely essential, even this is just a first step. It's one thing to make these informational resources available all in one place. It's another thing to get institutions to implement them. So, if you are in a position where you're starting to think about this, particularly if you're a department chair or in a leadership position in administration, we are working directly with institutions, doing consulting directly with institutions to, on a context specific basis, help implement these things. We're running workshops for departments and, and then we're working with administrators at all levels to help them think through: How do we adopt policies? How do we identify the people who need to do different things? And how do we train our people to actually respond appropriately to this? So, this has been a labor of love. It's been really difficult at

times and I will tell you, the work itself has put a target on our back. Ted Cruz, in particular, loves me right now. So it's going to continue to be, frankly, a bit scary for us, but it's a passion project, and we are here to support all of you and your colleagues. And if you need things, we've got a nice proton email account here. Please reach out to us and we'll see what we can do to help.

Todd Wolfson

Hey everyone. How are you all doing? I first want to thank Guobin and Barbie and your respective Centers for having me here tonight, and also for the organizing committee and for Jenny Lee. I really appreciate it. And also, it's great to share a stage with you, Professor Tromble. Thanks for the work you do. Seriously. And I'm sorry for what you've been through. You know, as president of AAUP just for the last 5 or 6 months, I can say that I have seen more cases of political repression of academics. It's mostly on pro-Palestinian speech, and it is unbelievable how many cases are coming in at the moment. So your work is sorely needed.

I want to flip it and talk about the risk to the sector right now. I think it's really important in building off the risk to individual scholars and journalists that we also need to be really clear about the risk that higher ed faces in this moment, because I don't think we've seen a risk like this before. Tonight I'm going to argue that one of the key ways to fight back and to protect academic freedom, to protect freedom of speech and to protect higher ed writ large, is through organised labor and through organising. So I think it's also important to flag the renaissance here at Penn that we've been seeing over the last

couple of years with Higher Ed workers across this campus unionizing or at least organizing to lift up their voices. We've seen the librarians organize and unionize. We've seen the residents at the hospital organize and unionize. We've seen the grad workers through GetUp. I'm dating myself, but I was at grad worker here many moons ago and we started GetUp. We didn't get a union then, but it's so gratifying to see you all finally win. So congratulations to that.

And I also want to flag the amazing, phenomenal leadership of AAUP-Penn which, you know, we're here at a private university where tenured faculty don't have the right to unionize, although we should be thinking about recognition strikes, but that's a different story. But they have just shown phenomenal leadership fighting back against political repression. I think some of the best in the country for a non-union campus. And so, I just want to mark those things. I think they're important to mark.

So it's an honor to be here. And so where I want to start is the fact that because our colleges and universities in the US are under attack, that's where we're at. And, you know, it's amazing that that's a statement that's not controversial. We all know it. At this point, it's clear as day that we are under attack. The fascist wing of the Republican Party has targeted higher ed for a radical takeover. And I want to bring this to life and situate it in Florida, because where else do great things start but Florida? But then we need to recognize that what's happening in Florida is meant to happen to the sector. So let's start with the idyllic New College of Florida (NCF). NCF is Florida's State Honors college and

one of the premier liberal arts colleges in the country, consistently ranked as one of the top five public liberal arts schools. But for Governor Ron DeSantis, he saw in this quaint, progressive college on the shores of Sarasota Bay an opportunity to create a conservative beacon, a Hillsdale of the South, so to speak. Which would also fuel his presidential ambitions. Right. There was a lot going on here. And the annexation of NCF was swift. It began in early 2023, when DeSantis appointed conservative allies to a majority of the board seats. Within a month, the new board fired NCF's first female president, Patricia Okker. Two years into her term, within a month, and they appointed Richard Corcoran, who is a lawmaker and DeSantis ally, as the interim president. Now, he's actually the president. Some years later, and this was just the opening salvo.

By the summer of 2023, the board dismantled NCF's DE&I initiatives. They fired multiple administrators. They denied tenure to a majority of the faculty going up for tenure that summer. And they abolished the Gender Studies program right off the bat. By the fall of 2023, 40% of the faculty had left and 100 students, which represents about 10% of the student body, had left. Most recently, here's a doozy. We found that the NCF leadership decided to dump the books from the defunct Gender Studies program into the trash. They weren't even going to donate them. They just dumped them into the trash. And they got pictures of it, but don't have any fear because they have a new class this fall called "the Woke Movement." Chris Rufo, the conservative provocateur known for engineering the national attack on Critical Race Theory

and the most high profile DeSantis appointee to the NCF board, detailed their brazen attack. He said, this is a quote: "We are now over the walls and ready to transform higher education from within, under the leadership of Governor DeSantis, our all-star board will demonstrate that the public universities, which have been corrupted by woke nihilism, can be recaptured, restructured and reformed." And I want to underline recaptured, restructured, reformed, because that's the agenda that's in front of us.

And the New College was the tip of the sword in Florida. They also signed a series of state bills into law that take direct aim at the rest of the public system there. These sweeping bills, which the American Council of Learned Societies called a "frontal attack on academic freedom," defund diversity, equity and inclusion programs for the entire sector and eliminate major key subjects, including race and gender studies. They create post-tenure review for faculty. They force unions to get over 50% density marks. They wrest academic hiring out of the hands of the faculty and into the hands of political appointees. That's a really important point here. And they've created new curricular requirements around Western civilization. The AAUP did an investigation and concluded, quote: "Academic freedom, tenure and shared governance in Florida's public colleges and universities currently face a politically and ideologically driven assault unparalleled in U.S. history. If sustained, this attack threatens the very survival of meaningful higher ed in the state, with the direst implications for the country." This summer, building on that, the University of Florida ran keyword searches on all

syllabi and curriculum, and if you have something like "Gaza" in your syllabus, they make you take it out. So it started there. And now it's at North Texas, I think they're doing it there as well.

This was happening during the presidential campaign when DeSantis was still running. And so Trump was watching this. And he didn't want to get outdone. You know, he never likes to be outdone on anything. So, he addressed his policy program for higher ed in a video in 2023. And this is amazing. This is his higher ed policy program. The title of it is "Protecting Students from the Radical Left and Marxist Maniacs." That's the policy program for Higher Ed. And so in the address, Trump laid out plans for higher ed, and taking it back from the, quote: "lunatics indoctrinating our children by firing," quote, "left wing accreditors and taking over accreditation boards, thereby setting new standards that include defending the American tradition of Western civilization and removing all Marxist diversity, equity and inclusion bureaucrats." Trump went on to say that he was going to seize endowments. Penn's got a big one. So he's probably looking here to give that money back to people who have been injured by DE&I initiatives. So that's the plan.

And then, of course, Trump's VP is JD Vance. And JD Vance has been on the record saying that higher ed and professors are the enemy, and that he really favors the strategy of strongman Viktor Orbán, who took over the public universities in order to control the teaching, the research and the learning that happened. And the ones that didn't listen had to leave the country. Right. So that's what they're emulating.

The attacks on higher ed and the desire for the government to have direct control over what faculty teach and research and what college students learn and say is an authoritarian fever dream. So how did we get here? How did one of the most trusted and respected sectors in US society, become a convenient, easy foil for the right? And most importantly, how do we reorient higher ed so it can truly serve as a central institution for knowledge production and innovation? Stay as the bedrock of a democracy, create and cultivate critical thinking and stay as the engine for our economy, but also for social mobility and social progress. How do we get there?

So to begin to answer those questions, I want to discuss the hollowing out of US higher education over the last 50 years. And this is important because there's an uneasy marriage between right wing politics and neoliberal logics. Right? They're married together in ways that we haven't fully thought through. And so these new liberal logics that have dominated our post-secondary institutions have emerged on the back of - and I'll make this argument later on - the back of anti-democratic forces.

And then the hollowing out of higher ed through neoliberalism and corporatization has then enabled those same anti-democratic or fascist forces to then attack the sector. And so there's a real uneasy marriage between these things that we need to understand if we want to figure out how to fight back. But overall, I also want to argue that organized workers on our campuses - union and non-union - in collaboration with students and communities are our best hope to offer,

first and foremost, a counter imaginary to what the Trump DeSantis Rufo crowd is putting out there. Right now. There's only one group talking about higher ed, and it's not us. It is not us, right? And so the imaginary of higher ed right now is being spun by someone else. And we have to grapple with that. So at one level, we need to figure out how to revitalize and reimagine higher ed. And at another level, we need to organize in order to create higher ed as a public good, which is what we need it to be.

But before I go there, I'm going to start where these questions began to arise for me, which is far away from the noxious politics both of D.C. or Tallahassee. But in my role as the president of the Academic Worker Union at Rutgers, Rutgers AAUP, and really talk through what I saw when I was president during the COVID crisis. And I want to take us there because my analysis of both what we're up against and what we need to do flows from my experiences in that moment.

And so let me take you back to April of 2020 as the first wave of the pandemic was at its height. And as we know, it hit the northeast first in a particular way in the US. So when it was hitting and when Rutgers shuttered, a bunch of leaders of unions representing about 20,000 workers began to meet to plan a collective response. We already knew that Rutgers had a strategy and Rutgers Strategy was going to be to bore the crisis on the back of the most vulnerable. That's what they always do, and that's what they were going to do, right? They were going to lay off the most vulnerable. And so we were like, what do we do? How do we get out in front of this? And so we came up with a

plan. And the plan was called "a people centered approach to the pandemic". And the goal was to protect the most vulnerable students and workers at New Jersey's largest university and the state's second largest employer during this emergent health crisis.

So we did it through this thing called the Coalition of Rutgers Unions. We call it CRU, and we advanced the plan centered on the concept of solidarity and care, where all Rutgers employers and employees would sacrifice to protect the most precarious workers and students on campus. The focal point of this proposal was a thing called "workshare," where all 30,000 employees, union and non-union would take part. And this builds on the concept of workshare as European. It's not really used much in the US, but basically the idea is the government and the employer share the salary of employees during a financial crisis to reduce the economic burden of the employer, to prevent mass layoffs. Right. That's the purpose of it. And our proposal was that all Rutgers employees furlough while the large majority of the workforce is kept financially whole through a mixture of unemployment at the state and federal level through the CARES act. And the CARES act had this unemployment boost of $600 a week that made it possible.

At the time we put this plan forward, it would have been the largest workshare program in the history of the country. And it would have saved Rutgers somewhere between $120 and $150 million. And in return for this voluntary work share, I want to be clear, they couldn't make us do this. This is something we said we were going to do in order to win some things back.

And what we wanted was the university to act like a beacon in a crisis, to take proactive measures to protect the most vulnerable workers and students on campus. Specifically, this meant no layoffs of staff and adjunct faculty during the pandemic, one year of additional funding for grad workers that couldn't do their doctoral studies, and an emergency fund for undergrad and grad students impacted by the pandemic, particularly international students that weren't eligible for CARE support. And we also wanted free COVID testing for the communities adjacent to where we were working, which are New Brunswick, Newark and Camden, which are majority Black and LatinX communities. And we also wanted a commitment to get our salary increases paid.

We negotiated for a month. The university placated us with half-hearted negotiations. But at the end of June of 2020, they rejected the proposal, declared a fiscal emergency, laid off over 1000 workers, disproportionately women and people of color, stripping these workers of health care amid one of the greatest crises in the country's history. Rutgers management also canceled the raises of all employees among a series of cost cutting measures. And, astonishingly, the money they saved in the layoffs and the canceling of raises was dwarfed by the money they would have saved if they had taken our proposal.

In the months that followed we kept pressure up. We had political pressure. We had legal pressure. We had organizing. We did a series of work actions, and ten months later, a new president had come in over that summer, Jonathan Holloway, who's now on his way out, and we got him

to sit down and agree to a scaled-back deal. It wasn't the whole 30,000. It was about 20,000 workers. And we got all of the 8000 laid-off workers rehired. We got our adjuncts rehired, and we got a commitment to no firing for about two years from there forward. And we got this extension program for grad workers. And as I mentioned, during these tedious and at times callous negotiations with the university, I was the president of the Faculty Union. So I was both part of the team that reignited the coalition. And also I was part of the team leading the negotiations. And so coming into my term as president of the union, I really thought I understood the problems we were facing in higher ed. I thought I had a grip on what needed to be done. But the COVID crisis exposed a series of contradictions at the heart of higher ed that were much deeper than I had realized. So that, in a sense, the scales fell from my eyes and I began to realize what I think we all know now, which is that we're in a much bigger fix than we thought we were.

And therefore, reimagining and restoring our higher education sector is going to require bold, collective action. And so that's how I started. And let me say a little bit more about this. Throughout the pandemic, a few core dynamics emerged for me at the intersection of the neoliberal university, worker power and the future of the sector. First and foremost, I directly experienced the ramifications of the rise of the corporate university and the deeply flawed leadership of most of the people that run our post-secondary institutions. And it's not their fault. It's a structural problem, right? We need to be clear about this. It's not "you should be mad at your individual president or whomever." It's not

them. This is a structural issue. And so, at one level, it was recognizing that. But at the same time, I also glimpsed the power workers in the sector could possess if we begin to unify as a single workforce. And importantly, I began to see how, in harnessing that power, workers could reimagine higher ed as a true public good, but only if we organize and build power not as faculty, not as maintenance staff, not as grad workers, not as librarians, but as a singular workforce united with our students.

It's the only way forward. So, you know, as I said, I was a chief negotiator in this process. And you know, we were bargaining with the university for months over COVID-19. And so I had a front row seat to the university's chaotic decision making. And as I reflected on those negotiations, the most striking aspect of the process was not the inhumane decisions they made, although from my vantage, they made very inhumane decisions that didn't make sense. But what was most shocking was who led Rutgers in this moment of crisis: the people at the helm of New Jersey's landmark institution of higher ed were a mixture of lawyers and accountants. Those were the only people in the room, no academics at all.

I don't know if you all know Benjamin Ginsberg. He writes on higher ed, and he's written a really beautiful treatise on the rise of the corporate university and the proliferation of non-academic, what he calls "deanlings and deanlets" that have seized control of our public institutions and run them like corporations. And as a faculty member, I've experienced it. I've experienced it in my life as a teacher, in

my life as a researcher. I think we all have as we live and breathe in the university.

But it was another scale watching the Rutgers administration navigate the complex demands of the pandemic. It was just a different order of magnitude as the crisis unfolded, and we had to think through the impact of COVID, the impact it was going to have on tens of thousands of people. And I was negotiating with administrators. You could see that they had no real commitment to the employees. They had no real commitment to research, teaching and service, the core fundamental mission of the university. From my vantage, we were looking at a completely different construct from what they saw on one side of the table. And what I saw was a completely different thing.

In practice, this meant that during the unprecedented health crisis, the primary concern for the administration was safeguarding and growing the reserves. And in so doing, protecting the university's credit rating, while simultaneously shielding the university from legal exposure or public relations scandals. That's what they were thinking throughout this process. Accordingly, they didn't ask the fundamental question "what is the role and responsibility of a large public institution to its students, to its employees, to the state of New Jersey during a crisis?" Nor did the leadership center the core values of the university, as I said, teaching, research and service.

Now, it goes without saying that this is narrow, it's disappointing, but it gets even worse when you realize that Rutgers is one of many. This is how higher ed is today. And so that's what I saw from the administration. And in stark contrast to

this corporate vision of the university, the workers at Rutgers came together and forged a different image of the university. At the heart, as I said, was an idea of solidarity and community of care in which the needs of the most vulnerable are prioritized. In this respect, workers at Rutgers advanced a different image of the public institution, one that acts as an anchor for the broader community and a guiding light for a society adrift and for the workers and their unions. It was clear that in the crisis, the university should center the 100,000 people that make up Rutgers. Rutgers is 70,000 students and 30,000 workers, as well as all the communities they touch in New Jersey.

But it wasn't just this alternative vision that I saw. I also witnessed the true power we had over our workplace when we broke down the divisive barriers that separate us, and we worked across job categories to make our collective demands on the institution. At Rutgers, when we stopped thinking solely about our individual unions and instead took an approach that encompassed all workers with students, we were far more powerful. And that was also what enabled us to offer a different vision of the university.

So, I want to note here that my belief is that the reason they didn't take that people-centered approach is they were afraid of the 20,000 workers split across 12 unions, bargaining as one. That was what stopped them from taking the deal. So I guess I'll say one other thing about this, which is that, and I won't go into this in detail, but, you know, building on that, we decided to take this same approach to the next contract campaign, which is about a year and a half later. And so we built an

alliance of only three unions, but representing 10,000 workers and all the academic workers at the university. And we went on strike in the spring of 2023. And we centered some of the same ideals. We prioritized the most vulnerable workers in the unit, which are adjunct faculty, grad workers, postdocs and non-tenured faculty. And with that solidarity and militancy, we were able to win 40% raises for our adjuncts. We were also able to win two year contracts or four-semester contracts for adjuncts after a number of semesters. Grads won a 33% raise. We won a commitment to five years of funding for every doctoral student that comes in, and we won something called presumptive renewal for a non-tenured faculty, which is close to tenure but under a different name.

And we also built closely with our undergrads and the community around us. And so we also got a commitment from the State to fund a non-profit that we since established that they're funding, that addresses the astronomical housing costs. So there's a fund of $100,000 per year that goes into this, and we give it out to students in the community. And I'm leaning into this to say that it sort of shows what a united workforce at the local level can do in response to the power arrayed against us.

So I do want to say one thing about the history, and then just say a little bit about where to go. And I only have five minutes. So I'm going to try to say this quickly. So there's a history that brought us to this moment. There's an unimpeachable record of Federal and State divestment from public higher education over the last 50 years. And it's important to note that that

divestment from public higher ed began to develop at the same time that Black people and people of color, more broadly, were getting access to free or highly subsidized higher ed at institutions like the University of California System and CUNY. Moreover, defunding of higher ed began on the heels of the 1960s because college campuses were the backbone of the social movements of the 1960s. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement, the Civil Rights movement, the antiwar movement, even the Black Panther Party all used campuses strategically.

And so it's on the backs of that that the universities were defunded explicitly. So California was ground zero for this fight, recognizing the role college campuses played in the emergence of many of the social movements of the 1960s. California Governor Ronald Reagan tied State divestment from the University of California system directly to the radicals in Berkeley during his 1970 re-election campaign for California Governor. Reagan's education advisor, Roger Freeman, declared, quote, "we are in danger of producing an educated proletariat." We have to be careful about who we allow to go to college, right? So it was explicit. So with this in mind, during his tenure as governor, Reagan cut back state support for the University of California by 20% and introduced new fees for college students.

But Reagan wasn't alone. He wasn't the only conservative leader that targeted college campuses in the aftermath of the 1960s. In 1971, Lewis Powell, who after that became Supreme Court Justice, was commissioned to write a report for the US Chamber of Commerce, which famously

became known as the Powell Memo. In this report, Powell argued that the free-market system is under attack and that college campuses are the main source of anti-American sentiment. And he begged the Chamber of Commerce to invest in a strategy to take back our campuses.

And so this attack was first political and opened the door for a set of neoliberal logics to take over. The divestment happened first on political terms and racialized terms. And then it opened the door for the sort of corporate university that has emerged. So, it wasn't just the narrative we hear is "it's just neoliberalism, you know, it's just neoliberalism. It's taking over our universities." But it's not just neoliberalism. It's an entwined relationship between fascism and neoliberalism that has led us down this path. If we're going to fight, we have to understand how that works and then respond to it. Wendy Brown has talked about how neoliberalism has leaned into and inspired anti-democratic forces. I think it's a little more entwined than that. And in fact, we might see that those anti-democratic or fascist forces actually leaned in first in certain moments. So it wasn't just the outcome of neoliberalism, but actually inspired neoliberalism in certain ways.

There's more to say about this, but I'll say this, that we have to figure out what has to be done right now. Trump's about to take office, and the target is squarely on some of us, our backs as individuals and definitely on the back of the sector. And so let me just tell you some of the things that they're going to. The accreditation, it's not a joke. So one thing that's seriously being considered is throwing out the current

accreditors, loading the accreditation boards with people who are politically allied with the right and then resetting standards. So let's walk down this road a bit. You reset standards so that a university that has DE&I programs, a university that that teaches Critical Race Theory, a university that has a Gender Studies program or an Ethnic Studies program, or teaches Sociology is not accredited anymore. But that's not where it ends. Because guess what has to happen for students to get Pell Grants? The school has to be accredited. So it's a lever that would completely undermine the funding of our university. So that's one right. And that's not even a jump. I think we're likely to see something of that nature.

Another one they're going to, and this is already happening, they're going to expand the definition of anti-Semitism to align it with criticism of the Israeli state. They're going to do this. And then they're going to tie that to Title Six, and then they're going to say that campuses that are anti-Semitic or Pro-terrorist need to lose funding.

And so last year, we saw more cases of political repression in higher ed than we've ever seen, and in the public sector, at the least, there wasn't a funding mechanism. I know there was at places like Penn with donors, but in the public sector there wasn't. If we think our administrators folded quickly without a funding mechanism, what do you think they're going to do when they're scared about losing massive funding? Right. What are they going to do when the professor comes out and talks about a free Palestine? What are they going to do to that faculty member? And I completely agree with Doctor Tromble, which is it will

overwhelmingly come down on the backs of women and people of color. That's how it has happened so far, and that's how it will continue to happen.

So the last thing I'll say, because I'm out of time is there are strategies. One, we're living in the midst of the greatest militancy in higher ed we've ever seen. Right. And so we're not starting from nowhere. I think at one level, doing what Penn has done is important. Organizing, and importantly, organizing wall to wall. We can no longer play into these divisive boundaries between faculty and others, and tenured faculty need to get off their high horse and step into relationships with other workers.

That's the only way forward. And alongside building at the campus level, we need a national campaign. As I said, we need to reimagine higher ed. We need to make an argument for higher ed that's public, that counters the argument that's out there right now. And then we need to build allies, right? If higher ed is isolated, higher ed is dead. It must build allies. So I'll say this last thing.

In the fall in my role as AAUP president, I got all of the presidents of the higher ed unions AFT, NEA, SEIU, 11 of them. We all committed to a shared program for the future of this sector. And we have to do something like that now. But it needs to be much bigger, and it needs to be a strategy for defending our campuses and advancing our campuses. Right? A legal strategy, a political strategy, a media and messaging strategy. And it can't just be labor. It needs to be the ACLU, the NAACP, it needs to be an alliance of workers in the sector in all their forms, students, the communities where we work. And then it has to be an alliance with civil society, or we're not

going to be able to fight back against the forces in front of us. So that's what's in front of us. We got work to do. Thank you.

Jenny Lee

Thank you both so much for those reflections. You've given us a lot to think about. I will kick off our audience discussion with the first question, if I may. I think that the combination of these keynote presentations is so important because this past year, especially, has really demanded that we think about academic risk both online and offline. Many of us have experienced, or at least witnessed so many crises around harassment, doxxing, silencing on social media. At the same time have witnessed and experienced crises on the ground physically at our universities about academic freedom, our rights to assembly, our access even to certain parts of campus. I mean, this was a really hard year, and it looks like it's probably going to get harder. I think a lot of us are sitting with this weight of what a future will look like for academia. And I know that sometimes these problems can feel too big and solutions just too far and too impossible to reach. And it also doesn't help that a lot of the time we're really good in academia about identifying problems, analyzing problems, critiquing things. Prescribing solutions is way trickier. There's a lot of pressure. You really want to get it right. Both of you have talked about solutions tonight. And so for those of us who are taking these suggestions about community and organizing and finding support, knowing that it's going to be different for every one person, I was hoping you could both share with us the process of how you

got to these solutions. What was the behind the scenes work of getting there before you knew what it looked like? What went wrong? When did you change course? And when did you feel confident in the ways that you were tackling these challenges?

Rebekah Tromble

I'm going to start off answering that question by saying - first and foremost - that when I talk about how the most profound impacts of these forms of individually focused, targeted intimidation and harassment are isolation, the flip side of that is the only way to deal with any of this is through community response. And that includes unions. One of the things that I normally say when I talk about this work is this is an occupational hazard. It is the important work that we as students and scholars are doing that puts us at risk. And as an occupational hazard, it means that our institutions actually have a responsibility to protect us. They're not hearing that message and they're not going to understand that message without collective power. And that includes unions. I am so incredibly grateful for everything that you personally, Todd, have been doing. We don't get through this alone. We have to get through it together. And so there are small ways that we can do that. And I gave you some examples of that. The things that you can say to your colleagues. As academics, we like to find problems, not solutions. We like to get in our heads and think about these things. We're not particularly good at collective action, but we're in a world now where we can't do anything differently.

How did I get to that point? Personally and honestly, I grew completely disillusioned by academia, and I couldn't find my place moving forward in it anymore as a traditional scholar. Now, to all the PhD students in the room, this is like total survivor's bias. And this is not a necessarily recommended pathway forward. But before I started doing this work, I had the protection of tenure. I just squeaked through, just barely managed to get tenure. And when I finally had that protection of tenure, I did a lot of hard thinking and honestly, on the back of getting all of these attacks, I was like, what is it that I care about? What drives me, what makes me passionate about the work? And it was doing public facing, high impact work. And then the more of that I did, the more I realized I had to protect myself and everybody that I was working with because of the backlash from all of that. And then just sort of naturally found myself doing a bunch of institution-building. Right. So I'm also the co-founder of the Coalition for Independent Technology Research with someone that I think a lot of you know, Nathan Matias at Cornell. And, you know, we bring researchers across academia, civil society and journalism together to defend the right to do the damn work. That's what it's going to come down to. Not everybody can do that day in and day out. Get tenure first. But also. Right. Think about all of the things that you can do now while you're working towards that, to support these larger collective actions, it's essential.

Todd Wolfson

That is a hard question. Well, I think actually the most important way forward is, we need to start talking to our colleagues. Every day, in every way. And not just the colleague who is, you know, in

your department, but, you know all people who are working on our campuses. It's really important. And one of the reasons, I mean, there's so many reasons why that's important, but the elitism tag on the university is undermined because the majority of workers at our universities are blue collar workers. Right? And so if we're not making common cause with those workers, and if we're not making common cause with the communities where we work, then we're going to be susceptible to that. And I don't mean transactionally, I think it's a transformational really, but I also think we have to see that. So I really believe that talking to colleagues, talking to people who you work with, talking to people in your community is point one.

And I guess the only other thing I'll say, you asked how I got to my thinking on this. I'll say two things. One, it's been the privilege of getting to work with a lot of other people who are a lot smarter and a lot clearer than me that have been, you know, with me through all sorts of struggles, but then also failure. I mean, we're going to fail a lot in the next year. Let me be clear. And there's going to be a lot of hard times in front of us. And so we can't be afraid of that. And in particular, we can't let failure stop us from making the bold moves we're going to need to make in response to this moment. We will fail. But if we are defensive and if we build smaller and smaller circles of defense, we're screwed. So I really think we need to figure out how to be bold. And that means being comfortable with failure.

Jenny Lee

Thank you so much. I will turn it over to the audience. So if folks could just raise their hands and then a mic will get to you.

And please just make sure to introduce yourselves.

Christo Sims

Thank you so much, both of you. My name is Christo Sims and I'm an associate professor of communication at UC San Diego. I thank you both for these sobering remarks, but I think they're very spot on and very important. My question is maybe a little bit for Todd, but Rebekah, I think you could probably also add to it, thinking about how we try to start building these broader networks of solidarity. Like one thing that seems to be a challenge for me is, at least at UCSD, is that it's not like there's just one big academic community. And I saw this very much last year with the Gaza protests, where, you know, like at a lot of universities, there was a crackdown and they brought in militarized police. And this led to a no-confidence vote. And there was also a no-confidence vote in the Chancellor that got put forward, which passed. And we're a very STEM-focused campus. We have a medical school. And it was a real wake up call that like what I think of as the university is actually only a certain fraction of the university, and it's that fraction that's really being targeted, right? It's the Gender Studies, it's Sociology, it's these departments and research programs that the right doesn't like, but they're perfectly okay with other programs. So how do we try to build solidarity, particularly with other disciplines that maybe have bought into the neoliberal university a little bit more and have reaped some of the rewards of it? Because at least in my university, that seems to be a major, major challenge.

Todd Wolfson

Organizing with STEM faculty can be hard. And I think it's important to note, because not everyone in Social Sciences and Humanities understand this, that STEM faculty are most entirely driven by grants. And then they employ people. So there's so there it's a very entrepreneurial part of the university. And so the logics that drive it are different. And so I'll just say when we won massive gains for our postdocs and for our grad workers, our STEM faculty were furious at us, furious, furious at us. And the University of California system won really big wins. And the STEM faculty were really upset.

So say the Stem faculty budgeted 3% raises for its postdoc and we got a 10% raise. We also put a demand on the table that Rutgers had to pay the 7%, and we won it. Stem faculty were still mad at us, but we still won that. But I think like, we really have to meet folks where they're at. And so for us, one of the big campaigns we've taken on is pressuring NIH funding and NSF funding to flow to universities in a way that's more just when the universities are paying grad workers or postdocs more. And so the NIH and NSF are like disincentivized to give grants to Rutgers or University of California because of the high pay of the STEM workers. And so we have run a campaign with them to fight on that. And so, I think you got to start with where they're at and hear what their concerns are, and then bring those concerns into the larger community of concerns that you're fighting over and not expect that they're going to stand up with the encampments, potentially the way the other parts of the university will. And sometimes you have to agree that you're going to meet on the other side of the mountain. But it's not easy.

Rebekah Tromble

I think this gets back to basic organizing principles. A lot of the work that I do is just day-in and day-out organizing. I'm convinced that it's really important to recognize that different people, of course, bring different perspectives, but also bring different talents to organizing activities. And so I don't ask everybody to do the same things in the same ways. And one of the ways that I've found I can most effectively drive home the potential threats here to colleagues in fields that don't necessarily feel it as directly is to help them see that the institutional level threats are also existential threats to their work. So, undermining the core values of teaching and learning, undermining trust in scientific research and education, and directly going after federal dollars, whether it's in student funding, Pell Grants, and so on, whatever it might be. All of that is under threat right now, and people don't necessarily see that directly because it's become clearest in certain areas that they're adjacent to. And so it takes time to have those conversations and bring people along to see that.

Nicolette Alayon

Hi, my name is Nicolette Alayon. I'm a visiting provost's PhD student, but I'm getting my PhD in political science from Northwestern. I study social media, influencers and celebrities, so I'm wondering if there's a role for academics stepping outside of the academy to educate the mass public. I think about recently, Mark Cuban was on a podcast and said "I've done all of these major changes to

health care. I'm going to start a university." Whether or not that's possible is one question, but the fact that people are watching these podcasts and getting information from people that are not a part of the academy, and also what about the purpose behind this information. He literally says, I want to be able to say that I made this change, whereas everybody in this room is like, I want to educate the mass public. I want to create a safer and better democracy. So with that, do you think our role as academics is to put ourselves in these spaces, like on podcasts, or is the harm too great?

Rebekah Tromble

Is our role to try to educate the mass public? Yes. In the particular ways that put us as individuals at risk. Not necessarily. We have responsibilities in our classroom. We're being encouraged all the time to be talking to the media and on social media. We want the impact, right? But I think what Todd was talking about in terms of creating the counter imaginary is the heart of this. I've been working with different organizations, including the coalition for Independent Tech Research, and one of the things that we've been really focused on is how do we create a kind of counter-narrative? How do we get allies out in media spaces, sharing a narrative that we need? And the truth is that without that high-level institutional collective agreement, that the counter imaginary really is where it's at, individual scholars are going to be a drop in the ocean in all of this. And so for me, the level of risk that you encounter probably isn't worth it for that individual level action, because let's face it, we are now in a world right, as a political communication scholar, I'm

talking to my students every single day about the way that our media ecosystem has been built up not just on social media, but in broadcast and print media to amplify these anti-science, anti-higher education messages. And we ain't got nothing at the institutional level that is ready to counter that. Are our universities going to get there? So we need our voices out there, but they're probably more effective contributing to the more internal discussions to sort of push the institutions in the right direction.

Niels Mede

Thank you very much. Niels Mede is my name. University of Zurich, Switzerland. I focus on science communication. And my question is more specifically to you, Rebekah. But maybe you can add your thoughts on that. You mentioned that with the researcher support platform, you focus on institutions also. And my specific question is who do you target specifically? Are there specific positions, social media managers, press offices, trusted persons and so on. Are there any people who feel responsible for that? Because from my own work and research, I feel like there's very much potential. There are very few formalized support structures. And that's basically the bigger question. How do we actually make institutions build sustainable support structures?

Rebekah Tromble

Yeah, it has to be a whole system approach to really get it right. What we're doing right now is to look for the openings wherever they lie. We are finding most of them at the department level. We've been running a lot of workshops that do sort of two things. One, they're awareness raising

within a department. And then we work really closely with the department leaders, usually the department chair, to identify safe, higher level administrators. Those are almost always Associate Deans for research, to invite into discussion. And we also do a risk assessment, which is part of the awareness raising, but not just for the department, also for the administrators. And so they get an opportunity to hear from the scholars themselves, what are the things that we're worried about every single day? What are the things that we're facing? And we do the exercises that create the laundry lists. And then we break those down and analyze them. What are the most likely risks? What are potentially not very likely, but in fact, would have really high impact if this happened? And then try to focus. Do some deeper dive discussion on one or two, maybe three things that people are most worried about overall.

And then that sort of feeds up the food chain. We've never started at a president or provost level. The conversations are not effective starting there, but building from middle management up, if you can get especially a college or school level agreement. It can really help create pressure further up the food chain. So that's the way that we've been going about it. We have to have the whole system response for it to be totally effective.

Just another quick example, one of the things that that we're starting to do is mini training sessions for members of General Counsel's offices. Because we all know the lawyers come into the room and start lawyering and even if they're really trying to be attentive to the needs of the individual, just the way they talk about

these issues is terrifying. And they don't feel supportive at all. And so we're just trying to help administrators understand what they can do to be more supportive.

But when we get to that higher level, you are asking specifically about like PR kind of folks, comms folks within the university. One of the things that we're saying constantly is if universities keep handling this in crisis response mode, you are never going to get this right. You have to go into strategic communication mode and plan for those crises ahead of time. And the comms folks get that. So you speak that language and then you start to get them on board.

Todd Wolfson

My experience is that administration will never move toward something unless you apply serious pressure, a collective pressure. But one thing for us to think about for academics is that universities and colleges want us to be online more, right? They push that. And so we ran a campaign to make sure that our members were indemnified for their speech online. And we had to have a massive battle with with General Council to do that, but we won it. And so that's something for every university to really think through. If they want us to be online and to extend our research into social media, then we should be legally protected for our speech online by the university. They should be indemnifying us. We won that, but I don't think many universities do.

Sarah Jackson

Hi. Sarah Jackson here at the Annenberg School for Communication. I have a question/comment about something I'm particularly mad about today. So I'm going

to try to relate it back to social media. I wonder if you all could say a bit about how the relationship to the university and the development of surveillance technologies and policing come into this because I think much of what we've seen recently has been that part of why both faculty and students come under attack is because of a kind of heightened environment of surveillance that technology, social media, digital technologies, but also the very technologies that engineering schools are often developing on the campuses that we all work at.

And so I would just like to read this quick little blurb from a Daily Pennsylvanian article that was published today here at the University of Pennsylvania. "Penn is set to launch a Master's program in police leadership in fall 2025. The two-year program, which will be housed in the School of Arts and Sciences, will be the first graduate program of its kind in the United States. A cohort of 15 students, composed entirely of senior leaders of the Philadelphia Police Department will inaugurate the degree, with plans to expand by 30 candidates each successive academic year and in the short term." So. I have questions about how we work with and through organizations who have deep commitments, not just to neoliberal values, but in some cases, fascistic ones. And those are sometimes built into the very institutions that we work at. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about policing and surveillance in relation to both your experiences.

Todd Wolfson

I'll just go first and say the encampments were a clear sign that we have a problem in front of us. And that problem is going to get worse. I know I didn't witness what happened at Penn, but I understand that it was pretty bad. And I understand that this campus was barricaded for a number of months after the encampments.

Here, I can say, at Rutgers, the encampment negotiated with the administration, but only because the union did a ring around the encampment to make sure the police didn't come in. And the president of the university had some 400 police waiting to come after us and our students. I think under Trump and given that people are going to feel more licensed, the more resistance we see on campus, the more militarized police response and the more violent it's going to get. And so I think it's a real concern. One of the concerns I have is, you know, a continuing genocide in Gaza and increased protest in the spring and under a Trump presidency, a whole different approach that reflects back to Kent State. And so that's a fear. I wish I had an answer. I think we're going to have to deal with it, though.

Kirsten Lydick

I'm Kirsten Lydick. I'm a PhD student here at the Annenberg School, and I study civic and political participation from a psychological perspective. One thing that I'm wondering about is a big barrier for people to participate in organizing is a sense that we don't have enough time. And as academics, we're consistently pushed into this tunnel vision of success and all of the many constant marathons that we have to run through to get there, even though it never stops. And we don't have time. We don't have time to sit down and really talk about these things and organize. And so what is it that we have to sacrifice? What

is it that we can sacrifice in this process of organizing? And how do you think about that, that sense of sort undisclosed time poverty that we're experiencing that prevents us from organizing? And another thing that's come up for me throughout the session is that maybe it's not so worthwhile to work through the institution, but aside from the institution, and I'm wondering how you think about that in terms of building social capital and counter-institutions that don't rely so much on support through institutions, but can foster support and the necessary safeguards for individuals within the network outside of that.

Rebekah Tromble

Don't do what I did. I'll be really frank with you, my health is shit because I spend so much time on this. So how do we deal? What do we give up to deal with the poverty of time? I think that, again, sort of aligned with something that I said to the question that Christo asked earlier, if we can recognize universities are big, diverse places, right? Diverse in a bunch of different ways. There are different people at different stages of their career, in different careers, at different levels. And, you know, one of the most powerful things that I walk away from Todd's talk that I know I'm going to be thinking about later tonight, is how we have much more of a responsibility to reach across boundaries, to talk to people in other roles, to work with staff and so on. And so for me, the first thing is you don't have to do it all and you should never expect to do it all, no matter how much passion you have. You can't do it all. People will continue to ask you to do it all, but set up some boundaries for yourself. Second, some forms of

collective action and power building and movement building happen really just in simple conversations, right? When you're getting together for a beer with other PhD students. Just making this a five-minute component of the things you're talking about. But more than anything, using some of the time that you're together to express support for one another, you really build solidarity through those types of interpersonal connections.

Todd Wolfson

There are a couple of things on my mind. First, I think it's important for academics to remember we are workers. I think that's one of the plagues of higher ed and for academia, is that we think we're some sort of special unicorn that exists outside of the actual structures, and we're not. And so if you actually can connect with that reality, you can create healthier boundaries around your scholarship because you're a worker. But the other thing that I would say is, is there has been time here, you guys, grad workers won GetUp over 20 years and three campaigns. You now have a union that's bargaining for a contract. And the AAUP, the tenured faculty are the only non-union organization in the country I know that's got an active campaign for parental leave which they're fighting for. So I think you are achieving it. And the other thing for me is organizing work is nourishing, in a way that a lot of other work isn't. And so I would think that in some ways it really actually helps you do your scholarship. If you're in a healthy environment for organizing.

But I also want to respond to your institution question. I want to restate again what I said, which is higher ed has been hollowed out. And so the reason that my

president and your previous president and many other presidents that had to go down to D.C. couldn't articulate was because the institutions have been hollowed out from the core. And so it's very hard to put out an imaginary of what higher ed is meant to be when the university no longer knows what it is. Right? And so that's a structural problem. It's a structural problem that we have to face. It's a structural problem that Rutgers no longer remembers what it is at those levels of leadership and no longer can lead from there.

And so what's important about this is that the administrators of our institutions at the highest level, and the politicians are not going to get us out of this. If you are going to put your faith there, it's not going anywhere. And so if you reflect on that, then there's a realization that there's only one way forward, which is students in our campuses and the workers that make up our campuses and building there. And that means that sometimes you have got to work through your institution. But yes, you're building counter power, whether through a union, whether through another form of coalition. That's the only way to build a real agenda that will move us forward in the sector. So, I'm not saying we don't work with our institutions. I have to all the time, but through another base of power.

Barbie Zelizer

I want to say thank you for a terrific opening set of keynotes. I think that you both managed to think aspirationally about this topic and give very wonderfully grounded examples of how to kind of wrestle with it.