

Title: Carol Quillen, Leading a Liberal Arts College
Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy
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Transcript

Chris Martin: Carol Quillen is my guest on this episode. She's the president of Davidson College, my alma mater, and she is also a historian by training. She received her PhD in history from Princeton University. In 2018, Princeton awarded her the James Madison Medal, given in recognition of a distinguished career. She has published essays and talked about the usefulness of debate and free expression in academia, and has also commented on the limits of free expression.

She is also an alum of the University of Chicago and here's an excerpt from a recent essay of hers called "Time for a Detox How the Sugar High of Certainty Impairs Speaking About Speech" from 2018:

"As an alumna, I appreciate the University of Chicago's clear focus on open, rigorous inquiry. I have never been, not before or since, in another place where thinking mattered so much and I loved it. No surprise, then, that U of C led the way in aggressively affirming what has become a widely adopted commitment to campus-wide freedom of expression....

...the University is committed to the principle that it may not restrict debate or deliberation because the ideas put forth are thought to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the members of the University community to make those judgments for themselves. [...] the proper response to ideas they find offensive, unwarranted and dangerous is not interference, obstruction, or suppression. It is, instead, to engage in robust counter-speech that challenges the merits of those ideas and exposes them for what they are.

I support my alma mater's stance. I also regret how U of C's specific framing has since constrained debate at institutions whose purpose includes educating engaged, responsible global citizens.

In the classroom, it's possible to believe that "robust counter-speech" will expose bad ideas. But in the world, who can credibly claim that the best ideas always win? Maybe, taking the long view, one could imagine, as John Stuart Mill (in *On Liberty*) does, that "in the course of ages" truth will eventually withstand all attempts to suppress it. But this can take centuries, during which time false ideas reign and damage is done."

Chris Martin: Carol Quillen, thank you for joining us on the show today.

Carol Quillen: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Chris Martin: I would like to start by talking about some of the pieces you've written and talks you've given about the nature of free expression and problems related to free expression in today's age when it comes to college.

You've argued that sometimes college students are protesting certain speakers not because they lack open-mindedness but because they are aware of political history. But you also have argued that free expression is very important.

Can you talk a bit about how your positions on these issues have evolved over time?

Carol Quillen: My position on these issues I think is grounded both in history – I'm a historian by training – and also in my own experience. So historically, we know that without a commitment to free expression on the part of governments and also institutions, many of the ideas that we now cherish would never have come to light.

So the importance of creating an environment where new ideas, potentially radical ideas, ideas that challenge the status quo can be heard is important to notions of social progress, to the evolution of democracy and democratic political institutions and to – honestly to the progress in other fields of inquiry.

So I believe very strongly in the importance of free inquiry in that sense. I also think it's important to recognize how the environment in which we're operating has changed and technology and social media and instantaneous global communication has changed our environment.

Our students are often reacting not so much to the idea of ideas, which they disagree, but rather to that speed with which ideas promoting violence become violence and I do think that that is somewhat different.

I think when our students hear that a person says something, it gets posted on the internet and days later, 10 people are dead and that thing posted on the internet gets cited as the reason for the violence. I think our students are going to react to that.

Chris Martin: So your background involves being at the University of Chicago for your undergrad and you've written about the Chicago Statement of Principles. How do you feel about those statements? How do you feel about those principles now?

Carol Quillen: I think Chicago's statement has itself evolved. Let me speak initially to my experience at the University of Chicago where I had professors who had a profound impact on me, with whom I disagreed significantly.

My mentor Karl Weintraub and I did not agree politically on everything. I was fortunate enough to take a class with Allan Bloom with whom I disagreed on almost everything. I learned enormously from the challenge of having to refine my argument in the face of very smart people who disagreed with me and I believe that's a valuable educational experience and I actually

believe along with Max Weber that is the job of a professor to point out the weaknesses of a student's position, whatever that position is.

But all of that presumes substantive debate, substantive debate based on a shared set of facts, based on a common understanding of what an argument is, substantive debate that eschews name-calling and simple epithets and that environment is not the one in which we're operating now.

So somehow what I want to try to do is recapture or recapture in our context an environment where substantive intellectual conversation about ideas such that the process of having the conversation actually opens up new areas of inquiry that didn't exist before, right?

So it's not who's right. It's rather, "Wow! You think that. I think this. If we share our ideas, what new paths of inquiry are opened up by our conversation?" That's the environment that should reign at our institutions of higher education.

In order for that to happen, every person has to feel like they can speak and that means that when you speak, you can't fear being shut down simply because of who you are. That's where I think the difference comes in. The poster children for free speech early on were people who didn't actually have ideas to be honest, right?

They had epithets. They called people names. They made fun of other people. They didn't have positions. They had provocative statements that they made. It was the politics of provocation. That's very different from someone coming to the table with an actual position with which I might disagree.

So the example that I always use with our students is – because they don't remember Saturday Night Live in the early days, but I do. I remember the – you know, the takeoff on the McLaughlin Group where – you know, "Jane, you ignorant slut." So I say OK – because someone could say to me, "Carol, you ignorant slut." There's no way to refute that. That's just name-calling. There's nothing I can say to refute that or make that different or take that away.

But if someone says to me, "Carol, women should not be presidents of liberal arts colleges because women should stay home and take care of children and run the family because the family is the bedrock of a democratic society and without the family, the whole thing falls apart," someone could say that. That's an argument.

I don't agree with it but I can – we can talk about that. I don't think that distinction which matters so much to me and mattered frankly to my professors at the University of Chicago, I don't think that distinction is made often enough.

Chris Martin: One of the interesting developments at Davidson, when it comes to learning about different perspectives and maybe weaknesses in some perspectives is you hired William Kristol, the son of Irving Kristol, former editor – well, William Kristol is the former editor of the

Weekly Standard and he's the son of Irving Kristol, as the college's inaugural Vann Professor of ethics in society. It's a visiting position I believe for about a year, a year and a half.

Tell me a bit about the rationale for hiring him and whether that had to do with helping college students understand some conservative intellectual thought.

Carol Quillen: Well, we hired Dr. Kristol because he brings a range of experience to our campus that sometimes academics don't have, right? I mean he has been active in public service. He has edited an important publication in addition to having a PhD and being a college professor.

So he sort of – he brings a lot to any institution where he teaches and we thought our students would benefit enormously from his experience in the Department of Education as Chief Staff to the Vice President. He has an enormous political experience as well as his position as one of the kind of thought leaders of the conservative – the modern conservative movement.

He's also staking out a position, an ethical position on sort of how one makes political decisions. He's thinking a lot about that, the ethics of political decision-making and that kind of ethics in practice was exactly what we wanted the Vann Professor to bring to our campus.

Yes. I think it was important to me to have in our community that kind of representation, right? The combination of someone whose politics probably are not shared by most people here, although they're shared by many people here, and he brings also this practical political experience. Someone who has read a lot of political theory is a very accomplished thinker and who has also this practical experience. That's really the idea of the Vann and he has taught a seminar and he's commented on that. He's not even sure what the political affiliation of his students in his class are. So I think we got the whole package when we had Dr. Kristol.

Chris Martin: One of the interesting things about William Kristol that only Davidson graduates might appreciate is that he actually resembles Bill Lawing in Davidson's Music Department. I don't know if you noticed this on video. But every time I watch a video of him speaking at Davidson, I think, "Wait, what is doc doing up there?"

Carol Quillen: Yeah. Yeah. I think I have heard a few comments about that, about the uncanny resemblance between Dr. Kristol and Dr. Lawing.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I was a music minor. So I knew Dr. Lawing pretty well. Yeah. But on a more serious note, I mean he's known for several things but one of the things that he's known for among people of my generation is his opposition to the Bill and Hillary Clinton healthcare plan and his memo in the – I think it was 1994, his memo about how republicans should not cooperate at all and reach a compromise there.

Then among people of my generation too, he is known for his support of the Iraq War. Have those positions of his become controversial at Davidson? I mean in other words, was his hiring controversial because of this history that he has in any way?

Carol Quillen: I don't think his hiring was controversial. I think the positions are fair game for student questions and I think he would say exactly the same thing. He's a public actor who has taken public positions and students and frankly anyone else has the right to question those positions and to ask him what the rationale was for those decisions, how he came to those positions, whether he would still support those positions.

So our students have had the opportunity through a couple of public events to sort of ask him directly about those and other positions he has taken in the past.

At the same time, like all of us, I'm sure his positions on some issues, though perhaps not those, but some issues, his position has evolved. So we have to allow him the opportunity to think about – we have to view him as a person who is always thinking, right? Who is always thinking, always questioning, always asking himself, “Was that the right thing to do?” especially given the fact that he takes very seriously the consequences of the decisions that public figures make.

I think this is one of the reasons why he's such a good inaugural professor in the position that focuses on ethics. He thinks about the implications of the positions that he takes and he thinks about it in a way that's informed by his knowledge of political philosophy as well as his practical political experience.

Now he and I do not agree. I mean let's be clear about this. We do not agree on many things and I've had wonderfully rich conversations with him where I've learned a lot. So I want all of us to benefit from that opportunity.

Chris Martin: Now one of the interesting bits of history there is that he is the son of Irving Kristol who is one of the most influential conservative elites of the 20th century in America. Definitely influenced many politicians and many members of the public with his writing and his thought.

Have Davidson students learned a bit more about mid-20th century conservatism because of William Kristol? Does he talk about his history there?

Carol Quillen: That's a good question. I don't know the answer to that question in the context of his class. I think he talks a lot about sort of a political theory and its many dimensions. So students are hearing his take on a political history that might or might not be familiar to them.

I will say the person that talked the – whose narrative of modern conservatism was shared with students is Jonah Goldberg who was here a couple of years ago who very – has a very clear understanding of what he takes to be a history of modernity and that is not necessarily the narrative that other people might construct. But it's informed. It's substantive and interesting. So I think our students had benefited already from that, if they were here at that time.

Chris Martin: And if it's not confidential, who is the next professor of ethics in society going to be?

Carol Quillen: I can't tell you yet. But we will be able – we should make that announcement pretty soon.

Chris Martin: But is your sense of that position consistently going to go to someone who has experience in public affairs rather than academia?

Carol Quillen: No, I think what – you know, it's new, right? So I would say that we are – that it will be someone whose work in some ways speaks to important public issues. That work may not necessarily be in politics or outside of the academy, but somebody whose research speaks directly to important public issues that we're all grappling with.

Chris Martin: And you mentioned earlier in the interview that the atmosphere now is different when it comes to violence and speech. Another thing that's different now is the level of propaganda that you find in social media and propaganda has always been with us. But there is a certain level of misinformation that you now may succumb to if you're just getting news from social media.

So is Davidson trying to educate students to be more informed when it comes to being consumers of media?

Carol Quillen: Yeah. I think we, like many institutions, are trying to think through how to be more informed consumers of media, how to be ethical users of social media and distributors of social media and what it means to make the commitment to caring about the facts.

I think the thing that scares me the most is an indifference to the idea that some things can be lies. You know, just this sheer indifference to whether or not something is a lie.

I know the idea of truth is complicated and you know and a lot of my conservative friends have said to me, "Well, you academic liberal theorist, you reap what you sow," right? You've complicated truth for a long time. You've talked about how truth is elusive, how they're multiple narratives, how the facts lend themselves to multiple versions of the truth and now that's coming back at – and that's coming back in this kind of very dangerous way politically.

What it would say is that truth is complicated and there are multiple versions of it and we may never get to it exactly. But there are also lies and calling out a lie is really important. It's an important intellectual obligation and I feel – I worry that we as a society have become indifferent to that task when the lies serve our political ends. We've just completely lost sight of the fact that the difference between something that is partly true, kind of true, could be true, is true and a fabrication, that that difference matters.

So I hope that we can help our students – Davidson's mission includes the words "humane instincts" and "disciplined and creative minds". A disciplined mind is one that distinguishes, that makes important distinctions between epithets and arguments, between lies and something that's true, between fiction, complete fabrication and something that actually happened.

Making those distinctions is really an important part of an education. I want our students to be able to make those and not to resort to leaving out crucial facts because they don't serve their argument and that's what scares me. Just like the sense that that's OK. I can ignore everything that doesn't support my position because at that point, we're making all of our decisions based on ideology and not on evidence. I don't see how that's good.

Chris Martin: Is there any way you're evaluating how well you're doing this at Davidson? Is there any way of evaluating how well recent alumni understand the news? I know that's a challenge. But how are you evaluating how well Davidson is doing relative to maybe other institutions?

Carol Quillen: Yeah. I don't think I have a good answer for that question. I would say that we – all we can do is watch what our alumni do and try to make sure – I mean I can just speak from my own experience, what I've tried to do with students who are interested in public service is try to connect them with Davidson alumni and others whom we know in public service so that at least young people can have the benefit of someone who has done the work in the past.

Again, what I worry about is not that our students can't distinguish between what's true and what's not. It's that they will cease to care. Our students are really smart and they're very discriminating and they can likely make these distinctions.

What I worry about is that in the interest of making a point, they will simply ignore inconvenient facts and that to me is very scary. Why do I think they might do that? Because that's what they see around them. That is their idea of the public sphere and as you say, that has probably always been a little bit true. But in an era where news is so highly curated and we're basically operating from very different sources of information and very different sets of facts, it becomes all the more important that we care.

Chris Martin: Right. I mean one interesting development now is that Russian propaganda is affecting the United States and I've heard from several historians that the current Russian strategy is not to spread one particular lie but rather to spread enough various types of misinformation that people just get fatigued.

Carol Quillen: Yeah.

Chris Martin: And feel like it's too difficult to discern the truth. I myself am not sure how to prepare students for that kind of world because time is scarce. So how do you motivate people to care enough to discern the truth in that situation?

Carol Quillen: Yeah. I mean it's almost like you have to look for independent verification and, in some sense, there are some scholarly techniques for doing that in the field of history. There's often competing views of particular historical events. Sometimes whole events are fabricated, right? And you have to figure out whether this actually happened.

I think with students, with our students taking – trying to get them to question their own assumptions, the assumptions through which they view the world and to have the capacity always to be aware of one's assumptions and to question things that you've always taken for granted, that that's a habit of mind that one can develop.

Through practice, that habit of mind makes discriminating between what is likely and less likely a little bit easier. You don't allow yourself to be swayed by what you wish were true. You know, and that's really what I worry about.

It's much easier to view the world in simplistic terms. It's just easier. As you say, it's less tiring. It takes less energy. You kind of can operate in this kind of simpler place. But the world isn't that place and to the extent that we're educating students for lives of leadership and service.

We actually have to help them confront the complexity that is out there and to be able to manage it with kind of creativity and intelligence and resilience. So I just hope that we continue to point out to them.

Look, the world is not simple and imagining that it is won't make it so.

Chris Martin: When I was at Davidson in the mid-90s, I feel like the ratio of conservative students to liberal students was maybe 50-50 or close to that. Maybe a bit closer to 40-60 and I get the impression that still close to that. Maybe it's 30-70 right now.

But because of Davidson's location in the south, it's not like a northeastern liberal arts college where maybe it's 95 percent of the students are – self-identify as liberal. So do you feel like there are constructive conversations at Davidson?

I feel like during my era, there were. I mean there was some tension of course but overall, there wasn't a desire for censorship. There was a sense that you could have interesting conversations. Do you feel like the atmosphere there is still one where people appreciate the ideological diversity of the student body?

Carol Quillen: I think – so the short answer to that question is yes. I think we need to be clear about what we mean by liberal and conservative and we need to be clear about what we mean by tolerance or support for diversity.

A lot of times what happens is students on the left will call out views that they take to be either implicitly or explicitly racist and that challenge, your ideas are racist, is taken as a sign of intolerance. So the question is – for me is really how do we have conversations with one another that are honest and that – where nobody feels as if they cannot speak.

I don't – I would also say that the stakes are really high right now. There are policy solutions that are being debated that for some of our students are threatening. You know, materially threatening, right?

So when you have a campus that has DACA students, when you have a campus that has international students, when you have a campus that has Muslim students from certain countries, there – or faculty who are on particular kinds of issues, there's a sense that their place in our community and in our country is precarious.

That does really raise the stakes. That raises the stakes for everybody. So these are not academic discussions. I mean I loved Allan Bloom and every single discussion I had with Allan Bloom was an academic discussion. It was not a discussion that was in any way going to impede my ability to live my life as I chose to live it.

So I don't know how to talk about this in a way that acknowledges that reality for our students and that if we want to believe in free inquiry and there are students who can substantiate an argument that certain policies or certain structures or certain institutions in our country are racist, they need to be able to say that without being called intolerant because they're using the word "racist". Do you see what I mean?

So it's like it has to go both ways and somehow – so what I try to talk about is we want to have substantive conversations. We want to have conversations that are grounded in something. We have something here at Davidson called "Challenge the policy," where faculty get together and they present a shared set of facts on a complicated or controversial issue.

They've done inequality. They're going to do free speech and they talk about these issues first by setting a shared set of facts and then they provide different policy solutions or different policy alternatives that are presented by conservatives, liberals and others. The students then can talk about the policy solutions from a shared set of understanding or facts and that makes a big difference.

So I'm really trying to figure out how we can construct that kind of environment for our students. We have a very young initiative called "deliberative citizenship" where faculty and students are working together to practice the skills involved in the collaborative inquiry that democratic societies require. So democratic societies require participation from all of us. We need to inform ourselves and we need to come together in a spirit of conversation where our conversation is a motive inquiry, where we learn things from talking to each other and new policy solutions emerge that were not obvious before.

So how do we create that environment? That is not the environment that students see around them. They see shouting matches in which the only thing that matters is winning and the sides are over-determined, right? So nothing new can possibly emerge.

So how do we – that is not the ideal structure for a democratic society. So how do we create that set of skills? How do we create an environment where students are practicing that set of skills, so that when they graduate from here, they can be participants in this democratic republic? And they actually value pluralism. They see that heterogeneity and a group of people that have different ideas and come from different backgrounds, that that heterogeneity actually inspires

creativity and new solutions emerge when those people talk to each other precisely because they don't all come already agreeing.

I worry that we don't value that anymore, that we don't see the creative spark that that kind of heterogeneity can inspire and that's what I want for our students. But that's – they have zero examples of that in the public and then like zero examples of that. So how do we create opportunities for them to practice that set of skills?

Chris Martin: Yeah. I don't think that's necessarily a new problem. If you look at the 1970s movie *Network*, you can see there the media is trying to – tries to get viewers through outrage and scandals rather than through substantive conversations.

Carol Quillen: Yeah.

Chris Martin: In closing, do you have any advice for other college presidents or deans or people who are in positions of leadership at colleges when it comes to tackling these issues?

Carol Quillen: I think it's important to stand for something. Do you know what I mean, you know? And I think sometimes these conversations about the importance of free speech and freedom of inquiry can make college presidents and others afraid to stand for the values on which their institutions were founded.

So our institution was founded on certain ideals. We have failed in our past to live up to those ideals but those ideals matter and those ideals include the dignity of every human being, right? An unfettered quest for truth. The idea that mutual respect and valuing heterogeneity matter and that we want to be an inclusive place for all of our students. I mean I think these things matter and you can stand for those things. You can stand for the dignity of all human beings and also argue for free inquiry.

I don't think college presidents should be cowed into this kind of false neutrality. You can have values and also believe in free inquiry. So that would be my advice. Have the courage of your own convictions and also stand up for the values in which your institutions were founded and try to construct for our students a context where substantive conversations can happen and where all conversations don't devolve into a debate.

Chris Martin: Well, Carol Quillen, thank you for joining us today.

Carol Quillen: Thank you. Thanks so much for having me. It was great to see you again.

Chris Martin: Thank you. The show notes include links to essays and talks by Carol Quillen. There are also links to recording of events at Davidson College featuring Bill Kristol. If you're affiliated with Davidson you might be interested in two earlier episodes of this podcast. Episode 44 features Chad Wellmon from the Class of '99 and episode 31 features Jessica Good professor of psychology at Davidson.

If you enjoyed listening to the show, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps spread the word about the show. And as always you can reach me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org and follow me on Twitter at [Chrismartin76](https://twitter.com/Chrismartin76). Thanks for listening.

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