

Subject: Re: Public Records Request (FL-NCF-23-0399)
Date: Monday, August 14, 2023 at 6:00:27 AM Eastern Daylight Time
From: Michael Pierce
To: AO Records
Attachments: PRRStoneman - PSC Emails (08-14-23).pdf

EXTERNAL SENDER

Good morning,

Please see the attached in response to your request.

Sincerely,

Mike Pierce

On Thu, Apr 27, 2023 at 11:38 AM AO Records <records@americanoversight.org> wrote:

Dear Public Records Officer:

Please find attached a request for records under Florida's public records laws.

Sincerely,

--

Marwah Adhoob | She/Her
Paralegal | American Oversight
records@americanoversight.org
www.americanoversight.org | @weareoversight

PRR: FL-NCF-23-0399

New College of Florida Presidential Search Committee Announcement

communications@ncf.edu Communications

To: communications@ncf.edu Communications

Bcc: bot@ncf.edu

Friday, April 7, 2023 at 3:34:39 PM Eastern Daylight Time

Dear New College Community:

Having consulted with Brian Lamb, Chair of the Board of Governors, I am pleased today to appoint and introduce the members of the New College of Florida ("NCF") Presidential Search Committee. The members are a distinguished group representing the NCF Board of Trustees, student body, faculty, NCF Foundation, alumni and other stakeholders and supporters of NCF. Each has agreed to make the significant commitment of time and dedication needed to identify highly qualified candidates for the critical position of NCF's next President. Those on the Committee possess a diverse array of expertise, professional interests and accomplishments.

I am also pleased to announce that NCF Board of Trustees member Matthew Spalding will serve as Chair of the Presidential Search Committee. Dr. Spalding is the Kirby Professor in Constitutional Government at Hillsdale College and the Dean of the Van Andel Graduate School of Government at Hillsdale College's Washington, D.C., campus. As Vice President for Washington Operations, he oversees all academic and educational programs of Hillsdale in the nation's capital. Dr. Spalding earned his bachelor's degree from Claremont- McKenna College and earned his master's and doctorate degrees from Claremont Graduate School. Joining Dr. Spalding on the Committee are the following 14 members:

- Robert Allen, Esq., NCF Alumni
- Dr. Mark Bauerlein, NCF Trustee
- Joshua Broyhill, NCF Student Representative
- Ron Christaldi, Esq., NCF Trustee
- Chad Choate III, Manatee County School Board Chair District 4
- Joe Jacquot, Esq., Shareholder Gunster Law
- Dr. Charles Kesler, NCF Trustee
- Dr. Matthew Lepinski, NCF Faculty Chair, NCF Trustee, Associate Professor of Computer Science
- Alan Levine, Florida Board of Governors
- Representative Fiona McFarland, Florida House District 73
- Kenneth Misemer, NCF Alumni
- Henry Smyth, NCF Foundation Board, NCF Alumni
- Norman Worthington, NCF Alumni
- Bridget Ziegler, Sarasota County School Board Chair District 1

A [presidential search webpage](#) has been established that will include brief biographies of the Search Committee members and a timeline. Meetings of the search committee will be publicly noticed. Email questions and suggestions to PresidentialSearch@ncf.edu.

The Search Committee begins its work in a momentous and transformative time for NCF. The President selected will have an opportunity to lead a top ranked public, four-year undergraduate liberal arts college and the state of Florida's legislatively designated honors college. With these distinguished and dedicated Search Committee members in place, we can now begin our Presidential search with the focus needed to ensure we identify the best leader to take NCF into the future.

Sincerely,

Debra A. Jenks
Chair, New College of Florida Board of Trustees
Class of '77

Today's windows for me

ballen@robertallenlaw.com Robert Allen
To: rcorcoran@ncf.edu Richard Corcoran

Wednesday, April 5, 2023 at 10:06:00 AM Eastern Daylight Time

11:30 – 12:30

2 – 6:30

Thanks, Bob

From: Richard Corcoran <rcorcoran@ncf.edu>
Date: Wednesday, April 5, 2023 at 12:30 AM
To: Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com>
Subject: Re: Admissions: A Radically Different Plan

[EXTERNAL SENDER]

Love the idea. I'll call you tomorrow.

Sent from my iPhone

On Apr 5, 2023, at 12:18 AM, Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com> wrote:

Hi Richard,

Hope all is well. I've been thinking about admissions.

Do you remember when I suggested the "Florida Fellows" concept for you at our dinner with Bill Galvano? In short, it was this – that you could generate a lot of applications by essentially telling the state of Florida that anybody in the top 1% of their high school in terms of GPA or SAT averages would receive a "full ride" assuming they had proper references. And anyone in the top 2% would be considered in a cue based on their application date.

Bright futures would almost certainly give these students free tuition. But you could give them free room and board plus a stipend to cover expenses. In that way you would distinguish yourself from other scholarships offered in the state.

This approach also has a quote diversity” angle in that it does not discriminate on the basis of any of the traditional criteria used to enhance “diversity.” That is to say, by being neutral, some enrollees would come from predominantly Anglo neighborhoods, some from predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods, some from predominantly Black neighborhoods, and some would be primarily Native American Indian locales.

If you made this announcement in conjunction with the announcement of the hiring of 10-20 stellar faculty members, that would be wonderful. But that’s probably not possible. So in my view the sooner you get out this type of newsworthy program, the better.

You could follow it within a week or two (or you could do it simultaneously), with the concept of a “New College Fellow” which would extend the same benefit the students from out of state. To qualify from out of state you would have to be in the top 1/2% for automatic admission and top 1% to be placed in the cue, right behind those in the Florida Fellows cue. The additional cost to the college for the out of state students would be for just one year because after the first year an out of state student qualifies as an in-state student.

Perhaps, if you if you would like, I can elaborate on this concept with your new Director of admissions. In addition to the foregoing idea, I developed a fairly comprehensive recruiting plan when I was a trustee many years ago. That plan was not considered by the then board of trustees as they did not anticipate the recruitment problem as I did. Uniquely, I had worked in admissions for a year in my last year at the college, while I finished my thesis. So I knew the reality of declining SAT scores.

In any event, if you think it’s appropriate, I would be pleased to speak to your new admissions Director about these ideas and discuss them with key members of the BOT.

Thank you very much and God bless you.

Bob

Re: From a remarkable student I'd like you to meet

rcorcoran@ncf.edu Richard Corcoran
To: ballen@robertallenlaw.com Robert Allen

Thursday, April 6, 2023 at 10:35:34 AM Eastern Daylight Time

Absolutely. Send me his contact. Sent from my iPhone > On Apr 6, 2023, at 10:15 AM, Robert Allen wrote: > > > Richard,
> > Can you meet him? > > > > Bob Allen > Sent from my iPhone > 305-490-6592 > robertallenlaw.com

Please give me any information in the future that can enable me, in one way or another, to help with the current reformation of NCF. I feel, in some ways, that this is exactly why I'm here at this exact time at NCF. This can be the best school in the country if things go the way they are so far.

Best,

Jesse Hudson, student

ballen@robertallenlaw.com Robert Allen
To: rcorcoran@ncf.edu Richard Corcoran

Thursday, April 6, 2023 at 3:00:57 PM Eastern Daylight Time

Getting his cell and email. He wrote this on the New College Conservative Facebook page – it's private, I created it:

I'm a non-traditional student (had no money for college and spent a few years helping take care of elderly friends/relatives). I chose NCF because of the ability to work on graduate level mathematics at an undergraduate level (I used my spare time prior to college to teach myself calculus 1-3, linear algebra, group theory, etc). I also have an interest in philosophy and spent countless hours prior to NCF studying Kant, Fichte, Aristotle, Heidegger—but especially Hegel (who reignited my connections with the Christian heritage I was so lucky to inherit as a young man from the South). I was unprepared for what I found NCF to be in its current state—a clown school of sorts. I'll stand by the majority of the math department any day—its rigor and advanced classes. But as a conservative student on campus, I have felt very isolated (chalking it up mainly—in the beginning—to my age difference from the other students). But I've realized that there is a serious problem with NCF in its current form, one that is ultimately a result of a very specific ideology that has captured the campus and spread like a virus.

I have never been as encouraged and optimistic as I have been meeting or speaking to the new members of the board. And they have 100% of my support—regardless of how the other students react to my position.

From: Richard Corcoran <rcorcoran@ncf.edu>
Date: Thursday, April 6, 2023 at 10:35 AM
To: Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com>
Subject: Re: From a remarkable student I'd like you to meet

[EXTERNAL SENDER]

Absolutely. Send me his contact.

Sent from my iPhone

> On Apr 6, 2023, at 10:15 AM, Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com> wrote:

>

>

> Richard,

>

> Can you meet him?

>

> <Screenshot 2023-04-06 at 10.12.49 AM.png>

>
>
> Bob Allen
> Sent from my iPhone
> 305-490-6592
> robertallenlaw.com

Re: First Things

rcorcoran@ncf.edu Richard Corcoran
To: ballen@robertallenlaw.com Robert Allen

Monday, April 10, 2023 at 6:02:48 PM Eastern Daylight Time

Great. Talking to Scott atlas too about his free speech group. Talked to mark for a while on faculty too. Thanks. Sending him our initial wave for eval.
Thanks Bob!

Sent from my iPhone

On Apr 10, 2023, at 5:15 PM, Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com> wrote:

First Things: The leading conservative publication in America dealing with the intersection of public policy and religion.
<https://www.firstthings.com/current-edition>

Rusty Reno: Their Editor, a powerhouse.

Founder: Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, a Lutheran liberal activist priest who became one of the most influential Americans, particularly among conservative intellectuals. <https://www.firstthings.com/about>

Mark Bauerlein: One of their top editors, also runs their very influential podcasts. It's an interstate highway into the most prominent conservative faculty members not just in America, but throughout the English speaking world. Among their authors: <https://www.firstthings.com/author>

I spoke to Mark today btw. He's enthusiastic about helping you recruit faculty, lecturers, etc.

Bob

From: Richard Corcoran <rcorcoran@ncf.edu>
Date: Monday, April 10, 2023 at 5:06 PM
To: Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com>
Subject: Re: First Things

[EXTERNAL SENDER]

First things? Reno?

Sent from my iPhone

On Apr 10, 2023, at 4:05 PM, Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com> wrote:

How would you feel about them moving their HQ to our campus?

Won't happen, but I'm a donor and I've told them I'm not going back to NYC until Bragg is out. And I'm going to suggest they move their HQ to Sarasota or Palm Beach.

Do you know their Editor, Rusty Reno?

Bob

Re: Did I send you this before? It's an important read about the history of New College and its failure to achieve its promise - the most important, I think

rcorcoran@ncf.edu Richard Corcoran
To: ballen@robertallenlaw.com Robert Allen

Sunday, April 23, 2023 at 4:35:56 PM Eastern Daylight Time

Reached out right away when I started. Haven't heard about Bruce Gilley.

Sent from my iPhone

On Apr 23, 2023, at 4:32 PM, Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com> wrote:

How did you find him or did he find you? Let me know when I see you next week. Has anyone mentioned Bruce Gilley, MA Oxford, PhD Princeton, teaches at Portland State to you, as a potential prof?

From: Richard Corcoran <rcorcoran@ncf.edu>

Date: Sunday, April 23, 2023 at 4:29 PM

To: Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com>

Subject: Re: Did I send you this before? It's an important read about the history of New College and its failure to achieve its promise - the most important, I think

[EXTERNAL SENDER]

We've been talking and he's helping. Great guy. Just emailing with him this afternoon again.

Sent from my iPhone

On Apr 23, 2023, at 4:16 PM, Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com> wrote:

<https://nathan-a-allen.medium.com/when-lilacs-last-in-the-palm-court-bloomd-d4185dbb474>

We need to find the author.... I will send you another one by him shortly.

Bob

Re: Bruce Abramson has expressed an interest in teaching (and help with administration) at New College

rcorcoran@ncf.edu Richard Corcoran
To: ballen@robertallenlaw.com Robert Allen
Cc: bthiessen@ncf.edu

Friday, March 31, 2023 at 6:09:45 PM Eastern Daylight Time

Thanks! Brad is going to reach out.

Sent from my iPhone

On Mar 31, 2023, at 9:21 AM, Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com> wrote:

Richard,

I met Bruce because he is a regular attendee of lectures sponsored by the Palm Beach Freedom Institute, which I chair. I believe his interest is worthy of consideration for several reasons:

1. PhD, MS and BA from Columbia; JD from Georgetown.
2. Six years teaching at USC.
3. Very interesting and diverse resume – reflective of intellectual brilliance, in my opinion.
4. Keenly interested in institutional transformation.
5. Willing to teach and to help with administrative matters – see his emails to me below.

Best regards,

Bob

From: Bruce Abramson <bdabramson@protonmail.com>
Date: Sunday, March 12, 2023 at 9:41 AM
To: Robert Allen <ballen@robertallenlaw.com>, Bob Allen <boballen2@icloud.com>
Cc: bdabramson@protonmail.com <bdabramson@protonmail.com>
Subject: Re: Follow Up Materials on New College Data Science

[EXTERNAL SENDER]

Bob,

The materials I sent you on Friday were all geared towards the academic track, as you suggested.

It occurs to me that when speaking to Richard Corcoran and/or the trustees, it's likely to be easier to bring people into administration than onto faculty. If so, the ideal way to bring me in would be to head a new Office of New Initiatives.

Whether such an appointment would use a VP, Director, Dean, or other title would depend upon by-laws and institutional structure, but it should be doable with minimal red tape. From such a position, I can certainly engage in teaching—and the job would obviously involve working with existing programs and faculty.

The materials I've been circulating related to taking over gatekeeping and messaging (i.e., vis-à-vis admissions) fall neatly into the "new initiatives" category. My course proposal does, as well. I consider it critical that by Fall Semester 2023, there be new things to highlight.

Pointing toward bad things that have been eliminated can only go so far. Without a near-term new thing to highlight with pride, the entire venture begins to appear defensive. When the goal is to build a new public institution model of classical education appropriate for the information age, it's important to start building.

Just a thought to share through the proper channels.

Thanks,

-Bruce

Bruce D. Abramson

bdabramson@pm.me

bdabramson@protonmail.com

www.BruceDAbramson.com

+1-202-299-4171

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----- Original Message -----

On Friday, March 10th, 2023 at 4:55 PM, Bruce Abramson <bdabramson@protonmail.com> wrote:

Bob,

As promised. Please LMK when you have further time to talk or to get together.

Thanks,

-Bruce

Dear Bob:

Thank you again for agreeing to introduce me to the right people at New College. This project in institutional transformation is one of the most exciting I have encountered in a long time. I am eager to become a central player on the team working to ensure its success.

As we discussed, two different strands of my career come together in ways that make me valuable to the project:

On the academic track, I was pleased to see that the school has staked out a strong position in Data Science. My academic research, beginning in the mid-1980s, marks me as a pioneer in this field. I was running large-scale simulation models, statistical analyses, and Bayesian reasoning as the basis of AI systems long before such approaches became fashionable. My two earliest systems predicted movements in global oil markets and forecast severe summer storms. I've attached a version of my CV that highlights my academic research; versions that include my broader work and writings are available on request.

Perhaps more tellingly given the current discussions swirling around New College, I have long believed that computer, information, and data science play critical roles in bringing classical education into the information age. I penned my first serious essay on that topic in 2005; recent conversations convinced me to reissue it on my Substack:

<https://bda1776.substack.com/p/toward-a-classical-education-for>.

This interest motivated me to sketch a curriculum that I have already shared with a couple of the new trustees. It combines the basics of my own undergraduate core curriculum with knowledge that I consider critical for today's informed citizens. It would ensure that graduates of all majors and concentrations gain a familiarity with:

- The history of Western civilization & thought;
- The classics of literature, art, and music;
- American civics and history;
- The rights & responsibilities of citizenship in a republic;
- Ethics, decency, civil society, and the role of tradition;
- Basics of math, statistics & computing;
- Basics of household/personal economics, government economic policy, taxation, and finance;

- Understanding and building suitable defenses against media, communications & propaganda.

That last bullet point is likely to be the least common consideration in such a curriculum. It's a topic on which I've been working for decades, but whose importance has only exploded into public consciousness over the past few years. I have developed an outline of such a course—organized in a way that would let me present material as a single seminar, a full year college course, or anything in between. I have attached the shorter version of the outline; further details are available on request.

I am excited about the idea of working with the folks who developed what appears to be a solid and well-connected (i.e., with local industry) Data Science program. I believe that it can expand in ways that make it the most effective bridge between the existing and the transformed versions of New College.

So much for academics. The second track along which my career has prepared me to work on this transformation stems from my consulting work. Nearly everyone who has ever viewed my CV has noticed that it's "nonstandard." Whether they mean that as a compliment or as an insult, they are correct. Long ago, I positioned myself as a methodologist, a troubleshooter, an issue spotter, and a special-situations expert. One of the tag lines I've used on business cards reads: "Ask the Right Questions." It's helped me find solutions for clients when others have told them that they'd waited too long and drained too much from their budget to be helped.

What all that means is that I'm the guy you call when your challenge contains so many moving parts, coming together in such unpredictable ways, that it's tough to know where to start, where to turn, what to consider next, and how to solve today's issue without exacerbating tomorrow's. The transformation of a sizable institution necessarily falls into that category of challenges. That I happen to know my way around academic institutions is an added bonus.

All told, I look forward to continuing the conversation with you, and to broadening it to engage with the folks fielding the team that will make this exciting opportunity a reality.

Thanks again,

- Bruce

Bruce D. Abramson

bdabramson@pm.me

bdabramson@protonmail.com

www.BruceDAbramson.com

+1-202-299-4171

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received this communication in error, please reply to the sender and destroy all copies of the message. Thank you.

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<Bruce Abramson - CV - Mar2023 - academic.pdf>
<Course Outline v2a - shorter.pdf>

Bruce D. Abramson, Ph.D., J.D.

bdabramson@protonmail.com

phone: +1-202-299-4171

Overview

Bruce Abramson is an experienced technologist, economist, attorney, and policy analyst specializing in research methodology and real-world problem solving. His pioneering research helped lay the groundwork for today's thriving fields of AI and Data Science. At a time that AI was oriented in very different directions, he studied the applicability of simulation, large data sets, statistical analysis, structured interviewing, quantification, and Bayesian Analysis to decision-making systems.

His 1987 dissertation has been credited as the precursor to what became known—twenty years later—as Monte Carlo Tree Search (MCTS). He has since expanded and distilled his problem-solving methodologies to tackle issues in technology policy, Middle East policy, intellectual property protection, international business, oil pricing, meteorology, battlefield intelligence, litigation, higher education reform, and other challenges.

Dr. Abramson has launched and led two tech-law/tech-policy consulting firms, a pro-Israel lobbying group, and a strategic advisory firm. He has published extensively in the scholarly literature of computing, management, and law. His books have addressed: Statistical decision-making in AI; the economics and law of the tech sector; life and society during the transition from the industrial age to the information age; the relationship between IP rights and development; Middle East history and policy; ideological polarization in American politics; and the corruption of America's elite institutions. He is also a widely published opinion columnist.

Education

J.D.	Georgetown University Law Center, 2000
Ph.D.	Computer Science, Columbia University, 1987
M.S.	Computer Science, Columbia University, 1985
B.A.	Computer Science and Mathematics, Columbia University, 1983

Certifications, Registrations, Admissions

Certificate in Mediation	University of California, 2009
Registered Patent Attorney	United States Patent and Trademark Office, 2013
Admitted to the Bars of	California, 2000; District of Columbia, 2001; New York, 2013
Admitted to Practice in	Supreme Court of the United States; U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit; U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit

Experience

Informationism, Inc. (2004–present)

CEO | Strategic Counsel, Expert Witness, and Research Lead

- Built a solo practice generating hundreds of thousands of dollars in annual revenues melding legal, strategic, and technical advising.
- Defended litigation clients against claims spiraling into many hundreds of millions of dollars, typically generating favorable confidential settlements at a small fraction of plaintiff's demands.
- Secured sizable confidential settlements for litigation plaintiffs.
- Published books, articles, and monographs about the interplay among technology, business, law, and public policy. Keynoted international conferences by invitation from their sponsors.
- Mediated numerous disputes to successful resolutions favorable to both parties.

- Helped major research universities, governments, and intergovernmental agencies refine and revise IP policies.
- Collaborative appointments have included: Senior Consultant at Charles River Associates; Expert at Rosenfarb, LLC; Counsel at Cittance & Chinta, LLP; Mediator at SEEDS; Senior Fellow at the London Center for Policy Research; Policy Director for the Iron Dome Alliance.
- Prominent clients include: the World Bank; Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute; Technical Chamber of Greece; Sheppard Mullin; Quinn Emanuel; DLA Piper; Alston & Bird; Turner Boyd; Wiley Rein; Rosen Saba; Foley & Lardner; Hantman and Associates; the Electronic Frontier Foundation; Keystone Strategy; and the Alameda County, CA Courts.

American Center for Education & Knowledge (2020–present)

Director | Public Policy Education and Research

- Developed mission and vision statements for a new charitable educational organization dedicated to the American ideals of individual liberty and personal responsibility.
- Led development and promotion of content and educational materials consistent with the organization’s mission .
- Appeared in print, on radio, and on podcasts promoting the organization’s mission and highlighting its approaches to different areas of American life, including tech sector and higher education reform.

London Center for Policy Research (2015–present)

Senior Fellow | Foreign Policy, Domestic Policy, and Economics

- Authored research monograph on the future of U.S. policy in the Middle East.
- Briefed Hill staffers and lobbyists on Middle East policy.

American Restoration Institute (2019–2023)

Founder | Public Policy Education and Research

- Established key principles guiding a new charitable organization dedicated to restoring American values and combating the dominance of cultural progressivism.
- Developed and published numerous materials covering larges aspects of domestic and foreign policy.
- Appeared in print and on TV discussing issues related to combating antisemitism, promoting Middle East peace, and securing religious freedom.

JBB&A Strategies (2018–2023)

Managing Partner | Politics, Policy, Litigation, Monetization, and Communication

- Developed strategic proposals for potential and active clients.
- Crafted political and policy advisory strategies for broad circulation, as well as for internal deliberations.
- Positioned political and policy strategies within print and broadcast media.
- Identified and recruited American and Israeli contributors to form a new international water company.
- Developed strategies for client deploying innovative technologies for sentiment research.

Iron Dome Alliance (2015–18)

Vice President | Director of Policy

- Played key role in promoting the genuinely pro-Israel plank in the 2016 GOP Platform.
- Co-founded and drafted policy framework for a new pro-Israel Super PAC.
- Published numerous columns and articles describing innovative approaches to pro-Israel lobbying.
- Devised strategic plan for enactment of new Middle East policies viewing Israel as the model success story rather than as a problem in need of management.

Rimon, P.C. (2011–2014)

Partner | IP Advisory and Litigation Services

- Devised and deployed factual analyses for litigation clients. Settled numerous matters on confidential terms that clients deem strongly favorable.
- Drafted and critiqued contracts, licenses, and patents that meld technical, legal, and business concerns. Provided the mechanisms necessary for clients to secure millions of dollars of business.
- Attracted, recruited, and served clients generating significant firm revenues.

United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit (2003-2004)

Clerk | Chambers of the Hon. Arthur J. Gajarsa

- Wrote over forty bench memos to help a Federal Appeals Court Judge prepare for oral argument and decide cases relating to a broad range of legal issues in intellectual property, international trade, claims against the U.S. government, veterans affairs, personnel, and other areas of the law.
- Drafted a dozen recommended legal opinions for a Federal Appeals Court Judge tasked with writing for the Court in cases involving patents, digital copyrights, antitrust, government contracting, veterans' affairs, tax, takings, and personnel. Worked closely with the Judge on both substance and presentation, and helped usher the opinions through the panel process to successful publication.
- Prominent cases included: *The Chamberlain Group, Inc. v. Skylink Technologies, Inc.*, 381 F.3d 1178 (Fed. Cir. 2004); *SmithKline Beecham Corp. v. Apotex Corp.* 365 F.3d 1306 (Fed. Cir. 2004); and *Unitherm Food Sys. v. Swift-Eckrich, Inc.*, 375 F.3d 1341 (Fed. Cir. 2004).

Charles River Associates, Inc. (2000-2003)

Principal | Valuation, Antitrust, and Technology Economist

also: Consultant, Competition (1998-2000); Senior Consultant, Competition & IP (2004-2014)

- Generated over four million dollars in revenues for major consulting firm;
- Devised and implemented valuation strategies for plaintiffs and defendants in lawsuits involving billions of dollars, including several bet-the-company cases;
- Gained regulatory clearance for clients seeking to complete multi-billion dollar mergers;
- Provided critical industry analyses to regulatory agencies involved in restructuring critical economic sectors;
- Managed and supervised teams of junior analysts within a matrixed organization.
- Prominent clients included: Procter & Gamble, HotJobs, AOL, RealNetworks, Bandag, Pitney Bowes, IBM, Northrop, Duke Energy, and Neopost.
- Also maintained contracting affiliations as a Consultant (1998-2000) and as a Senior Consultant (2004-14).

Gordian Solutions, Inc. (1996–2000)

President | Economic and Technical Consultant, and Research Lead

- Applied advanced techniques for data extraction, data integrity, and quantitative analysis to legal issues in support of litigation experts opining about hundreds of millions of dollars.
- Proved an assessment of zero damages against an unindicted co-conspirator client in a complex price-fixing case.
- Explored the applicability of innovations from Artificial Intelligence and Decision Analysis to the energy, environmental, and defense sectors. Obtained hundreds of thousands of dollars in research grants.
- Supervised teams of analysts involved in the collaborative preparation of economic expert reports.
- Prominent clients/collaborators included The Brattle Group and Charles River Associates.

Carnegie Mellon University (1994–1999)

Research Adjunct Professor | Engineering & Public Policy

- Secured grants from the National Science Foundation on the application of decision analysis and artificial intelligence to concrete engineering problems.
- Collaborated on conference presentations and articles on funded research.

Cambridge Research Associates, Inc. (1994-96)

Director | Economic and Policy Analysis, Defense Conversion

- Managed the engineering team conducting a process-oriented review of advanced military logistics. Developed a simulation system useful in identifying bottlenecks in logistical planning, and in deriving recommendations for speeding troop preparedness and deployment under a six-figure government contract.
- Identified defense conversion opportunities for projects that employed flight simulation and process simulation in the trucking, oil drilling, and commercial satellite industries capable of generating millions of dollars in additional revenues.
- Prepared a political security analysis for an American-allied air force subject to a multi-million dollar contract.

Information Extraction and Transport, Inc. (1993-94)

Principal Scientist | Advanced Computing and Military Intelligence

- Conducted technical and scientific research working primarily on ARPA (the Advanced Projects Research Agency) projects. Contributed to proposals necessary to secure government funding in the millions of dollars.
- Served as key member of scientific team developing Bayesian techniques to coordinate intelligence derived from numerous sources with varying degrees of credibility. Worked closely with both engineers and intelligence analysts.

University of Southern California (1987-93)

Assistant Professor | Department Computer Science

also: Fellow, Social Science Research Institute (SSRI)

- Taught graduate and undergraduate courses in computer programming, artificial intelligence, decision analysis, and expert systems. Received a university-wide award for projects in innovative teaching.
- Pioneered research on heuristic search techniques; the use of both classical and Bayesian statistics in the design of search algorithms; techniques for generating automated consensus drawn from divergent data sources; and the applicability of structured interviewing techniques first developed for small-scale problem solving into spaces containing tens of thousands of variables.
- Applied cutting-edge research to develop full-blown simulation systems for predicting price movements in the oil markets, and for forecasting severe summer storms.
- Prominent collaborators included the Atlantic Richfield Company, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Arthur Andersen & Co., and Putnam, Hayes & Bartlett.

Publications

Books, Monographs, and Volumes

- *The New Civil War: Exposing Elites, Fighting Utopian Leftism, and Restoring America* (RealClearPress, 2021). <https://amzn.to/3wgv2bW>.
- *American Restoration: Winning America's Second Civil War* (American Restoration Institute, Kindle Version 2019). <https://amzn.to/3v8twHR>.
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List of media appearances available on request

List of opinion columns available on request

Updated March 2023

**Information Integrity & Propaganda Defense:
Survival Skills for the Information Age**
Bruce D. Abramson, Ph.D., J.D.*
Course Proposal[†]

The abundance of information is the defining feature of our time. Like all advances in technology and communication, that abundance is a double-edged sword. Recent developments in communication strategy—from actors in the public and private sectors, domestic and foreign, benign and malevolent—have leveraged social media networks to blur the distinction between propaganda and news.

Historically, those reporting the news have at least strived to relate true facts with minimal bias, deferring interpretation and inference to others (including readers, opinion writers, scholars, analysts, and advocates). Propaganda is the intentional deployment of selective and fabricated information, embedded within a narrative, intended to sway public opinion and action. Recent years have witnessed the confluence of two dangerous trends. First, the tools and techniques available to propagandists have mushroomed. Second, a growing number of journalists have begun arguing that objective reporting is less important than “doing good” (presumably as they themselves define it).

The combined result has been a disaster. Deeply consequential mass movements based upon disinformation abound. Asset bubbles rise and fall with devastating economic effect. Media outlets with long and storied reputations for fearlessness and integrity crumble into activist rags. Politically motivated censorship gains traction around the world. Foreign powers convince citizens of their adversaries to act against both personal and national self-interest. Families and communities collapse in bitter rancor. Polarization abounds, as partisans inhabit increasingly divergent worlds. Language is deconstructed, often inverting the meaning of words long considered uncontroversial. Those are only some of the most obvious problems.

This course teaches the techniques necessary to navigate today’s information terrain safely. It begins with basic research methodology and critical thinking skills, then moves quickly into lessons and methods drawn from many different disciplines, including cognitive psychology, behavioral economics, formal logic, probability & statistics, computing, AI, law, game theory—and even Talmudic exegesis.

The purpose of the course is twofold. At its baseline level, it will provide all students with the instincts and intuitions necessary to function as informed citizens in the information age. At a deeper level, it will prepare interested students for careers across a broad swathe of applied data, information, and communication sciences. The importance of upgrading baseline intuition cannot be overstated. Many technological advances of the past two centuries have required such upgrades. The concepts in this course will provide the upgrades necessary to cope with social networks.

* Bruce D. Abramson, Ph.D. Columbia, 1987 (Computer Science); J.D. Georgetown, 2000 (Law). Full CV and publication list available upon request. Contact: bdabramson@gmail.com; +1-202-299-4171.

[†] Recommended placement: Program in Data & Information Science

I. Organizing Themes

A. Information & Propaganda

What is information? How does it differ from data? What does it mean for information to have integrity? What is propaganda? Why is the integrity of information so important—and why is it everywhere under attack?

B. Uncertainty

Propaganda typically preys on emotions to override reason. The two most commonly manipulated emotions are greed and fear. Greed promises individuals exceptional rewards if they act as the propagandist wants them to act. Fear promises individuals horrible futures if they fail to act as the propagandist wants them to act. Both forms of manipulation play on variations of three themes: Extreme outcomes, risk, and uncertainty. For reasons we will study, fear is the more powerful motivator—and is thus becoming the more common.

C. The Central Questions

In times past, we taught students to look for “the 5 Ws:” Who, What, Where, When, and Why. Sometimes we also threw in How. The modern world requires more sophisticated questions. The central questions taught in this unit will orient the rest of the course.

1. Can you define your terms?
2. How do we know that?
3. So what?
4. What’s the other guy going to say?
5. Are you sure you’re not talking about yourself?
6. Is it so perfect that it’s almost unbelievable?

II. Essential Tools & Techniques

A. Bayesian Analysis

Bayes Theorem is a straightforward mathematical formula, long disfavored as controversial among statisticians, that now forms the basis of most AI systems. Though the implementation of a full-blown Bayesian system can appear complex, the intuition behind Bayesian reasoning can be conveyed simply and with minimal mathematics. Mastery of this intuition is the key to facing the natural fear of uncertainty.

B. Incentives, Bias, and Credibility

The study of incentives underpins much of modern economics and psychology. It is fundamentally impossible to be alive and completely unbiased. Personal experiences shape perceptions, expectations, and in Bayesian terms, prior probabilities. Incentives motivate all

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people to search for different sorts of evidence and present their findings. Good faith analyses are transparent about biases and incentives and work to minimize their effect. Propagandists hide biases and incentives while professing their objectivity loudly. A basic understanding of bias and incentive is critical both in training good people towards objectivity and in defending against propagandistic exploitation.

C. Networks & Information Flow

Every idea—true or false, news or propaganda, informative or manipulative—must begin somewhere, then spread. Understanding how ideas flow, particularly through social networks, is a prerequisite to assessing their credibility. Labeling of ideas often assumes outsized importance. Those bearing labels like organic, grassroots, or scientific gain immediate credibility; those labeled conspiracy theories or denials lose credibility. Propagandists thus grab the positive labels for themselves while hurling the negatives at their opponents. A basic understanding of networks and information flow, as well as of the asymmetries that seem to favor propaganda over news, is central to any defense.

III. Advanced Topics

A. Value of Information

In attempting to diagnose and defend against propaganda, it's important to remember that not everything is a science. The world is full of observations that—for whatever reason—seem to apply often. Science itself overflows with laws, rules, and principles that apply with precision only under very specific circumstances, but that nevertheless teach patterns that often apply imprecisely. Many of these rules flow from the simple observation that actions matter far more than preferences. Whether in private life or positions of power, the choices that decision-makers put into action are hugely consequential. The information collection or opinions expressed along the way towards a decision lose much if not all significance after the decision has been made. Incentive systems, filtered through these general observations, provide propagandists with multiple opportunities for mischief.

B. Regulation & Law

Tell me how you regulate an industry or its products and I will tell you the configuration that industry will assume. The modern world has eliminated casual spaces like the back fence, the water cooler, or even the (literal) public square as primary sources of information. Even newspapers, magazines, books, and printed text may be on borrowed time. All news today flows across networks of privately owned computers. It's impossible to understand information flow—fact or opinion, true or false, objective or biased, manipulative or not—without some basic understanding of how we regulate the businesses creating, promoting, disseminating, and enabling information flow.

C. The Cult of Expertise

The modern world is far too complex to navigate without the help of narrowly trained, highly specialized experts. Few if any of America's leading institutions, however, seem interested in earning and maintaining public trust. Many of them simply proclaim that anyone who dares to

question the “consensus” wisdom of those boasting suitably impressive credentials is a dangerous denialist. Learning how to recognize the difference between informed expert opinion and bombastic, exploitative pronouncements is a critical survival skill.

IV. Other

Many other methodological topics and issues are relevant to appreciating information integrity, recognizing the common ploys of propagandists, and developing suitable defenses. It is worth beginning a list of such topics without building them out, as above.

A. Formal Methodologies

- Formal Logic
- Game Theory
- Algorithmic Thinking
- Incompleteness & Impossibility

B. Rules of Combat

- Triggers & Microaggressions
- Cancellation
- Individual vs. Collective Defense
- Art of War
- Color Revolutions

C. Persuasion Techniques

- Cold Reading
- Neurolinguistic programming

Re: Welcome feedback

rcorcoran@ncf.edu Richard Corcoran

Thursday, April 27, 2023 at 8:51:45 PM Eastern Daylight Time

To: nworthington@me.com Norman Worthington

Cc: cfitzpatrick@ncf.edu Christie FitzPatrick

Thanks! Very helpful. See you Saturday. Sent from my iPhone > On Apr 27, 2023, at 8:36 PM, Norman Worthington wrote: > > Richard, > > Attached. I think this is consistent with your key messages. > > Of course, change as you like where I am off course. > > Note that, the document refers to "tomorrow Friday April 28". Obviously this only makes sense if this message is sent tonight and should be adjusted if sent tomorrow morning. > > Hope this helps. > > - Norm > > > > > > > On Apr 27, 2023, at 6:22 PM, Richard Corcoran wrote: >> >> Yes. Like all 5. >> >> Sent from my iPhone >> >>>> On Apr 27, 2023, at 6:17 PM, Norman Worthington wrote: >>> >>> Ok, happy to assist. >>> >>> Will try to give you something you tweak to your liking. >>> >>> I would note that I actually see 5 (not 3) distinct messages in what you wrote: >>> >>> 1. Tenure faculty are safe and students should be reassured. >>> 2. Deferred candidates can reapply on the normal cadence (presumably without prejudice). >>> 3. We are not removing what is good but building upon this. >>> 4. Core curriculum. >>> 5. A hope for a culture of respectful engagement, even when we disagree. >>> >>> Each of these is distinct and helpful and I believe it will add clarity to present them this way. LMK if you agree and I will make the edits.... >>> >>> - Norm >>> >>>> On Apr 27, 2023, at 6:09 PM, Richard Corcoran wrote: >>>> >>>> 3 if possible. >>>> >>>> Sent from my iPhone >>>> >>>>>>> On Apr 27, 2023, at 5:40 PM, Norman Worthington wrote: >>>>>>>> Richard, >>>>>>>> Are you looking for: >>>>>>>> 1. Comments? >>>>>>>> 2. Minor editorial suggestions? >>>>>>>> 3. Expansion/elaboration and/or enhanced conceptual agreement within some of the numbered items? >>>>>>>> Happy to assist with any of these. >>>>>>>> - Norm >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> On Apr 27, 2023, at 5:29 PM, Christie Fitz-Patrick wrote: >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> Norm, >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> Richard would like to receive your feedback on the following message to the campus community as a follow up to yesterday's meeting. We would like to receive any thoughts this evening if possible. Thank you for your time. >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> Christie >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> New College Community, >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> Yesterday's board meeting was difficult for everyone, but I want to take the time to emphasize several important points. >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> 1. First, as I have stated from my first message sent to the campus, I assure you that all changes and recommendations will be thought through and students, faculty, and staff will be collaborative partners. I still also stand with a statement I made that we have no plans to fire tenured faculty and current students should be confident that they will continue to be able to pursue their goals in the traditional academic system of the college. My goal is to seek to make New College better through building on the best elements of the current system while adding more opportunities and possibilities for current and future students. The candidates that stood for early tenure yesterday will be able to apply for tenure in their mandatory year under the same criteria as established when they applied this year. >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> 2. Interim Provost Thiessen and I have diligently been working on developing the framework for a foundational core curriculum as mentioned at the Faculty Q&A session last week and plan to begin presenting this information to the Division Chairs tomorrow, Friday, April 28, for their initial thoughts and feedback. In the next week, we will share this information with the rest of the faculty for their input. >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> 3. As outlined in the article first shared with you earlier this week, it is important to improve society through tolerance and constructive disagreement. At New College, we are seeking a renewed focus on ensuring the College is moving towards a more traditional liberal arts institution. We seek academic excellence by providing an exceptional liberal arts education, and an improved environment for our students to learn and grow in. The success of this institution depends on our ability to work together. These initiatives will only be enhanced on our ability to respectfully engage with each other on matters of both principle and practice. >>>>>>>> >>>>>>>> I look forward to working with you to make New College the number one liberal arts university in the country and putting the college back on a path of amazing success and growth. >>>>> >>>> >

Re: Welcome feedback

nworthington@me.com Norman Worthington

Thursday, April 27, 2023 at 8:36:43 PM Eastern Daylight Time

To: rcorcoran@ncf.edu Richard Corcoran

Cc: cfitzpatrick@ncf.edu Christie FitzPatrick

Richard, Attached. I think this is consistent with your key messages. Of course, change as you like where I am off course. Note that, the document refers to "tomorrow Friday April 28". Obviously this only makes sense if this message is sent tonight and should be adjusted if sent tomorrow morning. Hope this helps. - Norm

Attachments:

New College Community letter April 28.docx 15k

New College Community,

I know yesterday's board meeting was difficult for everyone, not least for myself, but I'd like to briefly clarify and emphasize several important points:

1. Tenured faculty should be confident their positions are secure and students can rely on this promise to pursue their goals in the traditional academic system of the college.
2. I invite those candidates that stood for early tenure to apply next cycle under the same criteria as established when they applied this year. Their applications will be reviewed without prejudice.
3. I spoke about making New College better through building on the best elements of the existing system while adding more opportunities and possibilities for current and future students. I ask for a bit of time to demonstrate this pledge.
4. Interim Provost Thiessen and I are developing the framework for a foundational core curriculum as mentioned at the Faculty Q&A session last week. We shall present this framework to the Division Chairs tomorrow Friday, April 28. Subsequently, we will share this information with the full faculty for comments.
5. The article I shared with you earlier this week spoke to the importance of community tolerance and the value of constructive disagreement. A college, and especially a liberal arts college, should be a place where we practice these principles. The success of this institution depends on our ability to pull together and I seek to join with all of you to amplify those areas where we agree and accommodate each other where we do not.

I look forward to working together to make New College the number one liberal arts institution in the country and putting the college on a path of amazing success and growth.

Re: [Draft message for Review] Message from President Corcoran

rcorcoran@ncf.edu Richard Corcoran

Sunday, April 23, 2023 at 11:47:35 PM Eastern Daylight Time

To: nworthington@me.com

Cc: cfitzpatrick@ncf.edu Christie FitzPatrick, sue@suekeating.com Susan Keating

Norm,
Excellent changes. We'll send it out in the am. Thanks so much for taking g the time to do this.
Richard

Sent from my iPhone

On Apr 23, 2023, at 11:08 PM, nworthington@me.com wrote:

Christie and Richard,

Sue does not object to the paraphrasing and selective excerpts in the introductory paragraph below. However, it was confusing as to where Richard's comments ended and the excerpts from Sue's original email started.

We've taken the liberty of reformatting the original to quote, italicize and indent Sue's section to clearly set it off from Richard's. We've also added a closing paragraph (coming from Richard) that's consistent with the overall message but adds a personal tone to the message as well. Obviously, it's up to you to use this addition or edit as you see fit.

I've included PDF copies (that preserve formatting but may not be suitable for the NCF email system) and a Microsoft Word version as well. Also, for convenience, the original Tablet article (BTW, Ilana Redstone might be an interesting on-campus speaker).

Thanks.

- Norm

<Comments on Certainty Trap Email.docx>

<Comments on Certainty Trap Email.pdf>

<The Certainty Trap - Tablet Magazine.pdf>

On Apr 22, 2023, at 12:52 PM, Christie Fitz-Patrick <cfitzpatrick@ncf.edu> wrote:

Good afternoon Norm and Sue,

I hope you both are well. At the request of President Corcoran, he would like to send the following message to the campus community (faculty and students) early next week and would like your review prior to sending. Do you mind providing any feedback that you may have?

Thank you,

Christie Fitz-Patrick

New College Community,

I recently received an article from a very successful New College graduate that I wanted to pass along to you. I have paraphrased her comments about the article below. I hope you will find this article as interesting as I did.

The article is called "The Certainty Trap", by Ilana Redstone in Tablet Magazine. The article provides a fair analysis of how discussions about divisive topics are run, how people within those discussions bring their own biases and expected outcomes to a conversation and how these conversational strategies lead to impasse. The article also provides a glimpse of what could be the possible positive outcomes of accepting the biases and moving past them.

Here at New College we are not here to tell people what to think, but to teach them how to think. Learning how to think is taught as a skill, not a political or religious belief, taught as possibly one of the most valuable and marketable things you

could ever learn.

I also think it could be the messaging that might help the College to align itself with what it's always been: teach people how to think but help them to learn, listen and appreciate what others think, calm the waters of anger and suspicion from the community the faculty and the students, give the students hope that they're participating in something that's new and experimental and something that could have larger ramifications across educational institutions in the United States. New College could be the leader.

Richard Corcoran
Interim President
New College of Florida

<The Certainty Trap - Tablet Magazine.pdf>

I recently received an article from a very successful New College graduate that I wanted to pass along to you. I have paraphrased her comments about the article below. I hope you will find this article as interesting as I did.

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Here at New College we are not here to tell people what to think, but to teach them how to think. Learning how to think is taught as a skill, not a political or religious belief, taught as possibly one of the most valuable and marketable things you could ever learn.

I also think it could be the messaging that might help the College to align itself with what it’s always been: teach people how to think but help them to learn, listen and appreciate what others think, calm the waters of anger and suspicion from the community, the faculty and the students and give the students hope that they’re participating in something that’s new and experimental and something that could have larger ramifications across educational institutions in the United States. New College could be the leader.”

I’m committed to the idea that New College should continue to be a place where we do not tell people what to think. We are here to teach our students how to think for themselves, to sort fact from fiction and to be open to listening to ideas and beliefs contrary to their own, so long as they are presented in a respectful way. I’m not exactly sure how we foster and strengthen these core values but I’m open to all suggestions from faculty, staff and students on how we do so.

I recently received an article from a very successful New College graduate that I wanted to pass along to you. I have paraphrased her comments about the article below. I hope you will find this article as interesting as I did.

“The article is called “The Certainty Trap”, by Ilana Redstone in Tablet Magazine. The article provides a fair analysis of how discussions about divisive topics are run, how people within those discussions bring their own biases and expected outcomes to a conversation and how these conversational strategies lead to impasse. The article also provides a glimpse of what could be the possible positive outcomes of accepting the biases and moving past them.

Here at New College we are not here to tell people what to think, but to teach them how to think. Learning how to think is taught as a skill, not a political or religious belief, taught as possibly one of the most valuable and marketable things you could ever learn.

I also think it could be the messaging that might help the College to align itself with what it’s always been: teach people how to think but help them to learn, listen and appreciate what others think, calm the waters of anger and suspicion from the community, the faculty and the students and give the students hope that they’re participating in something that’s new and experimental and something that could have larger ramifications across educational institutions in the United States. New College could be the leader.”

I’m committed to the idea that New College should continue to be a place where we do not tell people what to think. We are here to teach our students how to think for themselves, to sort fact from fiction and to be open to listening to ideas and beliefs contrary to their own, so long as they are presented in a respectful way. I’m not exactly sure how we foster and strengthen these core values but I’m open to all suggestions from faculty, staff and students on how we do so.

NEWS

The Certainty Trap

The solution to our broken political conversation won't be found in censoring 'misinformation' but in recognizing the profound limits of our own beliefs

BY ILANA REDSTONE

MAY 10, 2022

IN 2005, THE WRITER DAVID FOSTER WALLACE GAVE WHAT *TIME* magazine has called “the greatest commencement speech of all time.” Wallace’s address breathed new life into “the main requirement of [such] speeches,” which is “to talk about your liberal arts education’s meaning, to try to explain why the degree you are about to receive has actual human value instead of just a material payoff.” He explored how human beings create and sustain beliefs and addressed the often negative ways we view others who don’t share those beliefs. But perhaps most importantly, he offered a reason why this is the case.

Wallace tells a story of two men, drinking together at a bar in a remote corner of Alaska. He describes one of the men as religious, the other as an atheist. They are arguing over the existence of God. In Wallace’s story, the atheist says:

Look, it’s not like I don’t have actual reasons for not believing in God. It’s not like I haven’t ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and I couldn’t see a thing, and it was 50 below, and so I tried it: I fell

to my knees in the snow and cried out “Oh, God, if there is a God, I’m lost in this blizzard, and I’m gonna die if you don’t help me.”

The religious man looks at the atheist, and says, “Well, then you must believe now ... After all, here you are, alive.” The atheist responds with, “No, man, all that happened was a couple Eskimos happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp.”

Wallace goes on to say that it’d be easy to take the “standard liberal arts” lesson from this imaginary exchange and simply conclude that the same experience can mean different things to different people. The lesson there would be one of tolerance, a reminder that we shouldn’t declare one man right and the other wrong. But Wallace goes further. He explains:

The nonreligious guy is so totally certain in his dismissal of the possibility that the passing Eskimos had anything to do with his prayer for help. True, there are plenty of religious people who seem arrogantly certain of their own interpretations, too. They’re probably even more repulsive than atheists, at least to most of us. But religious dogmatists’ problem is exactly the same as the story’s unbeliever: blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up.

In Wallace’s framing, the intolerance that we often witness (and participate in) is a symptom, not the actual problem. It’s an inevitable consequence of “blind certainty.” Each man in Wallace’s Alaskan story behaves as though his position deserves to be held with unshakable confidence. Of course, such certainty can be accurate neither for an atheist nor for a person of faith. Taking Wallace’s thinking one step further quickly brings us to some of the biggest and most controversial challenges we face today.

In the case of thorny issues, certainty can be an invisible trap. And it turns out that by recognizing it the way Wallace suggests in his story, we can better understand and navigate disagreements far beyond those that concern the existence of God. Certainty often leads to a tendency to be dismissive or disdainful of ideas, positions, or even questions that one doesn't agree with—particularly when those ideas, positions, or questions touch beliefs we hold dear. The most difficult problems set in when we hold them so closely that we cease to realize they're personal beliefs at all.

One of those problems is political polarization. The term is vague, but here I'm using it to refer to multiple, interrelated factors. One factor is the way the primary political parties have adopted increasingly more extreme positions, especially in the United States. Another is the growing tendency to express disdain not just for the position one doesn't agree with, but for the moral character of the person who holds it. Yet another is the exasperation many people feel with communicating across divides about difficult social problems. This is particularly true for problems that touch on topics related to identity, intent, fairness, equality, and various forms of bigotry—many of the most sensitive and controversial issues today. A final component in my umbrella use of the term “political polarization” is the pervasive lack of ideological diversity that has become the norm in many educational and cultural institutions. The negative consequences of these trends are difficult to overstate—and concerns about them come from all over the political spectrum (see [here](#) and [here](#) for examples). In other words, this problem is no one's alone—it belongs to all of us.

The magnitude of the problem has motivated several people to try to come up with solutions. Some see the answer as a fight against mis- and dis-information and a reconnection with what some might call ground truth—what's really real about the world. This has led to a proliferation of books such as *Disinformation: The Nature of Facts and Lies in the Post-Truth Era*, *After the Fact?: The Truth about Fake News, Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation*, *Politics of Disinformation*, and *The Constitution of Knowledge: A*

Others see the path forward in the establishment of norms of civil discourse. While this focus has also yielded books, its real impact has been in the development of programming devoted to this goal. Examples include the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona, the Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse at Grand Valley State University, and a \$150 million grant to Johns Hopkins University to “address the deterioration of civic engagement worldwide and facilitate the restoration of open and inclusive discourse that is the cornerstone of healthy democracies.”

Both approaches—combating dis- and mis-information and promoting civil discourse—have value, but neither goes deep enough to transform our conversations. That’s neither a prediction nor a judgment; it’s an observation. Those approaches won’t be able to enact significant change because they can’t, no matter how skilled a facilitator or mediator you have. They can’t because they don’t get to the root of the problem.

The fight against mis- and dis-information—a worthy goal—is often based on two flawed assumptions. The first is that definitive answers are known to the disputed points. The second, related to the first, is that the right people to provide those answers can be identified and agreed upon. Both assumptions are themselves often steeped in the Certainty Trap—a resolute unwillingness to recognize the possibility that we might not be right in our beliefs and claims.

To understand the implications of the mis- and dis-information labeling, we need only consider instances like the initial response to claims around Hunter Biden’s laptop or the source of COVID-19. In 2020, several major media outlets dismissed as mis- or dis-information (see [here](#) and [here](#) for examples) the possibility that a laptop of incriminating emails belonged to Hunter Biden. The certainty with which this position was held led to the silencing of anyone who publicly questioned it—so much so that it has been called “the most severe case of pre-

election censorship in modern American political history.” Recent evidence, however, has forced the same outlets who invoked those labels to acknowledge the laptop’s authenticity. Similarly, in early 2020, the suggestion that COVID-19 might have originated in a lab in China was dismissed as groundless fodder for racism and xenophobia. The certainty that led to this reflexive dismissal was walked back just over a year later, but the judgment of the once dissenting voices shouldn’t be forgotten.

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BY ILANA REDSTONE

NEWS

America by Gaslight

When institutions and authority figures present open questions as settled and use coercive power to get their way, the collapse of public trust is a predictable result

BY ILANA REDSTONE

ARTS & LETTERS

The Authority Blob

A Tablet Roundtable about American elites with Angelo Codevilla, Todd Gitlin, Michael Lind, Ilana Redstone, and Wesley Yang

BY DAVID SAMUELS

Nothing about these reactions was inevitable. Rather than falsely demarcating lines between truth and fiction, a smarter and safer response would have been to say something like, “These claims require examination using normal evaluative

criteria. We recognize that our knowledge and understanding will continue to evolve.”

For its part, civil discourse—also a worthy goal—can only succeed when there’s a willingness among the participants to recognize that there’s more than one reasoned way to see a given issue. (This limitation also explains why books that purport to teach how to tackle “difficult” conversations also can’t work.) The Certainty Trap makes this conversation impossible.

For example, some of the biggest controversies today occur over issues of racial and gender identity. On these topics, both approaches—combating mis- and dis-information and focusing on norms of civil discourse—fall short. Let’s say one person holds the following opinion: “I think that people overstate the importance of white privilege.” And another person sees that position as a denial of racism today. Will the promotion of civil discourse convince the person who sees the position as a denial of racism to engage as a moral equal with the one who holds it? Unlikely. And will battlers of mis- and dis-information be able to convince either person that focusing on white privilege is or isn’t the right way forward? Unlikely and, for reasons we’ll go into later, one might even say, impossible.

Instead, breaking out of the Certainty Trap requires recognizing three common and interrelated barriers keeping us within it. These barriers pull us into The Trap and, once we’re in it, they make it hard to break out. The Certainty Trap tells us that there are two possibilities for an opinion we disagree with: ignorance and hateful motives.

However, outside of its walls, a third possibility emerges that can reshape how we engage: One might have principled reasons for the position they hold. And when we refuse to hear or recognize these reasons, we can’t communicate. Sometimes we will find those reasons compelling. Sometimes we won’t. And sometimes, when all we know is the person’s position, we still won’t be able to tell which of these three possibilities drives them. But remaining within the Certainty Trap will always constrain us to the shorter, two-item, list.

So what are the three barriers that tie us to this shorter list? The first is the Settled Question Fallacy—we fall into this when we behave as though certain questions have definitive and clear answers when they, in fact, do not.

If you're unsure how frequently we treat open questions as though they have definitive answers, consider the example of our current discourse on gender, biology, and transgender rights. Insisting an open question is closed was the undertone in a January 2022 statement put out by the Ivy League in support of Lia Thomas, the record-breaking transgender swimmer at the University of Pennsylvania. The league wrote, "Over the past several years, Lia and the University of Pennsylvania have worked with the NCAA to follow all of the appropriate protocols in order to comply with the NCAA policy on transgender athlete participation and compete on the Penn women's swimming and diving team. The Ivy League has adopted and applies the same NCAA policy." The implication is that, because the NCAA (and, by extension, the Ivy League) has a policy, no reasonable questions around fairness remain. But a question isn't closed simply because someone asserts that it is.

The second barrier is the Fallacy of Known Intent—committed when we behave as though we know someone's motives. Consider, for instance, current debates over the application of critical race theory in schools. Those on the political left who insist that racism or a desire to conceal history are the only reasons someone would object to or have concerns about the use of these ideas in schools are pulling from that short, two-item list that exists within the Certainty Trap. The same is true for those on the right who advocate for legislative bans on this set of ideas, asserting that the goal is to indoctrinate students. The Certainty Trap knows no political boundaries.

The third barrier is the Fallacy of Equal Knowledge—this is our mistake when we believe that, if the other person knew what I know (or had my experiences), they would think what I think. This op-ed in the *LA Times*, written by a social psychologist, shows this well. The author writes, "Many Americans have a hard time recognizing the magnitude and persistence of racial inequality because,

psychologically, we resist these truths.” So far, so good, as he points out the importance of being informed. He then follows with, “Unless Americans understand and acknowledge inequality as a fact, we won’t be able to build the political consensus needed for real change.” Here, he’s slipped into the third fallacy. Will getting everyone the same information about the magnitude of racial inequality build the consensus that he is referring to? I submit that it never has and it will not.

To be sure, none of this is to suggest that information has no value nor is it to paint a rosy picture of ignorance. It’s simply to point out that, because we interpret evidence and experiences differently, having the same information still won’t get everyone on the same page.

Recognizing the phenomena I’ve introduced here—the Certainty Trap, the Settled Question Fallacy, the Fallacy of Known Intent, and the Fallacy of Equal Knowledge—can have significant implications. That recognition lets us label behavior and hold others and ourselves accountable for its consequences. For instance, you might imagine saying to someone (or to yourself), “This backlash is the result of the Settled Question Fallacy,” and explaining why, or telling someone that “You don’t get to complain about the culture war without acknowledging your role in it, via perpetuating these fallacies.” Or, “By continuing in this vein, knowing that you’re committing these fallacies and not changing your behavior, you are yourself fueling polarization.”

Understanding these modes of discourse will help us address the many broad questions that swirl in our culture today. The debates over transgender issues are a resonant example, as debates rage about whether trans women should participate in women’s sports, or whether it is right or wrong to give adolescent girls or boys puberty blockers based on what might sometimes be passing gender dysphoria? We don’t know the answers to these questions. And to behave as though we do—to treat people as though the answers are known and obvious and, if they see things

differently, they're denying reality or motivated by hatred and bigotry—is to remain within the Certainty Trap.

Breaking out of this trap provides a path forward based on curiosity and a more precise reflection of what we know about one another. It's a path that can nurture openness and build trust. And ultimately, it's a path that can transform how we communicate with one another in ways that absolutely do not end with political topics. Better solutions, better communication, and more open conversations are within reach, if only we're willing to take them.

Ilana Redstone is a professor of sociology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and a Founding Faculty Fellow at UATX. She is the founder of Diverse Perspectives Consulting and the Faculty Director of The Mill Institute. She is the co-author of *Unassailable Ideas: How Unwritten Rules and Social Media Shape Discourse in American Higher Education* and the creator of the *Beyond Bigots and Snowflakes* video series.

#POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Fwd: New College Foundational Discussion

From: Norman Worthington <nworthington@me.com>

Subject: New College Foundational Discussion

Date: April 27, 2023 at 9:15:31 AM EDT

To: Matthew Spalding <mspaulding@hillsdale.edu>

Matthew,

Good meeting you last evening and I will see you later today at the Presidential Search Committee meeting.

Per our discussion, here are the two articles I mentioned. Both are written, I am told, by a New College graduate.

The first describes the decline in quality of students, enrollment and physical environment that distresses so many of us. The article, interestingly, locates the conversation in the larger context of the challenge facing all liberal arts colleges today:

<https://nathan-a-allen.medium.com/when-lilacs-last-in-the-palm-court-bloomd-d4185dbb474>

This same author wrote a second article that references a document written in 1958, commissioned by a consortium of liberal arts colleges of the day. It's called "The New College Plan" and, based upon what I know about how the college was founded and the experiences of students of the time (a few who continue to reside in Sarasota) it's clear that this document (and possibly related others) were the original inspiration for what's become New College of Florida. Of course, today's New College has drifted quite a distance from this original vision. It may be instructive to refer back to these founding documents as we consider the way forward:

<https://nathan-a-allen.medium.com/how-we-got-here-part-1-1a9313f08d0d>

And the archived original "New College Plan" report:

<https://compass.fivecolleges.edu/object/hampshire:1339>

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