

Bertha Madras was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2024.

In [this video](#), Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Dr. Madras about how high academic standards benefit the disadvantaged and liberate students from ideological control, and the challenges of shared governance in the modern university.

### **Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters**

Hello, I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and I'm interviewing one of our members, Bertha Madras, who is a professor of psychobiology at Harvard and has her home office in McLean Hospital. Bertha, thank you so much for being with us.

### **Bertha Madras, Harvard University**

It's a delight to be with you, the Academy representative.

### **Forster**

Oh, thank you.

My first question is, what are one or two challenges right now to maintaining high intellectual standards in your field?

### **Madras**

Over the past few years, standards have eroded with regard not only to faculty, but also to students. Part of the erosion I would attribute to perhaps a misguided effort to impose equity and diversity in a field where, in fact, merit should be the most important criterion for appointing faculty as well as students. We have lost the way. It is not only injected into biology, into the basic sciences, into medicine, but it's also affected law. It's affected a number of humanities as well. We have to ask the most important questions, and those are, what are diversity and equity supposed to accomplish? What are the foundational principles that promoted this concept within academia? And are there successes and failures that can be attributable to a philosophy whose founding principles may, in fact, be in error and also its outcomes not measured?

### **Forster**

Some of my most rewarding experiences in the classroom have been when I have students who clearly have never been challenged to perform at a high level. I maintain those high standards and help them to improve, and by the end of the semester, they are performing at the level where they need to be. It's so rewarding as an educator to be able to serve people that way.

### **Madras**

It is extremely rewarding. That's why having hard, fast rules with regard to cutoffs on scores and so on is not necessarily the way to go. I can speak from personal experience. Many years ago, I volunteered to teach science in an elementary school because I was appalled at the science curriculum. A teacher came up to me and whispered, don't worry about the METCO students. (These were students that were being bused in from the inner cities into a suburban school.) Don't worry about them because they're not going to make the grade with regard to what you're trying to teach. I looked at this teacher and I said, as I

always do, watch my smoke. I gave them no pass, no quarter in terms of excellence. To her surprise and to the surprise of other teachers, they were performing as well as or better than what one may call privileged suburban children. It was because the expectations were high, including having parents sign off on their homework each week.

**Forster**

The soft bigotry of low expectations is not soft at all. It's a terrible burden.

**Madras**

It's a real bigotry. No adjectives are needed to describe it. Many young people could benefit enormously from having rigorous standards imposed on them from kindergarten all the way through. The problem is that many of them are not privileged to have those standards. It's not a failing of the child. It's not a failing of the teacher. It's a failing of the philosophy of approaches to education that we face currently.

**Forster**

And of educators who don't want to make that investment in helping people succeed.

Well, I could go back and forth with you on that all day. But my next question is probably related, how would you describe the mission of the university, and why is it important?

**Madras**

The most fundamental mission of the university is to train people to think. It is to provide them with analytical skills and tools to examine evidence to arrive at conclusions that are not the conclusions or the perspective of the faculty but are arrived at through an examination of all sides of an issue. That is certainly relevant for the humanities. In the sciences, it is clearly to prepare young people to gather, accumulate, a vast body of knowledge that we have currently in the sciences, and then to be able to use that material to be creative in terms of their approaches to what I call a random dispassionate search for truth.

**Forster**

“Random dispassionate,” that's going to require some pondering. What stands out to me in your description is how we're empowering people and setting them free by giving them a good education. Historically, maintaining traditional standards of excellence has been attacked because that's just maintaining the system as it is, protecting the already powerful. But it strikes me that the better we can educate people, the freer they are to choose their own path in life and to accomplish more doing it.

**Madras**

Precisely. Many universities are becoming orthodox institutions. They're the ones that are becoming entrenched in a way of thinking that is completely antithetical to the original precepts that built universities, which are to educate and, above all, to enable people to think creatively, to weigh evidence, and then to come up with solutions. To think about the meaning of values, but also to accept many different perspectives on them.

**Forster**

Well, carrying forward that optimistic turn, let me ask you my third question. What has pleasantly surprised you in your work in the past five years?

**Madras**

In my own research, I am pleasantly surprised that a number of people have gone against the grain of accepting the conventional wisdoms on certain precepts. For example, let's just talk about substance-use disorders, which is a field I dearly adhere to. A large body within the country has tried very hard to pound against traditional views on substance use. I'm beginning to see pushback against it in the field. The pushback is not based on the morality of substance use, the ethics and so on. The pushback is based primarily and fundamentally on the research that shows the adverse effects. I'm beginning to see, rather than a conventional view, the view that this is the future. The original prohibitions were old-fashioned and so on. I'm beginning to see more and more scientists, physicians, recruited into thinking, forget about labeling this topic. Let us adhere to the rigorous research that's telling us about the harmful effects.

The other most wonderful, surprising thing was the formation of the Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard. This council was formed by an eclectic group of mostly senior faculty. Many of them have endowed chairs, so they are protected and they're willing to be courageous enough to voice their concerns about the direction in which the university is going with regard to orthodox thinking and siloed thinking. This group of faculty came from the medical school, the law school, arts and sciences, humanities, psychology, the business school – just about every faculty was represented. They all joined together and began a dialogue via email, via listserv, on what reforms need to take place to right the ship and to introduce a diversity of opinions, a diversity of viewpoints, and also a debate on what is the purpose of the faculty if it is not to teach people how to think instead of what to think.

**Forster**

We were cheering really hard when we saw the announcement of that council at Harvard. We're very glad to see it happen. It does, as you mentioned, bring us back to basic issues of shared governance and what is the responsibility and the right of the faculty in upholding the mission of the university. Those balances have not always been well struck in the last generation.

**Madras**

The balances have been upset by a number of factors. One is that a power has shifted to some extent onto administrators with certain viewpoints who have been hired. A power has been shifted toward students whose staying power at a university is very short and discreet. Folks come on the campus for four years and they're gone, and yet they can have outside influence on firing faculty, which they have done at Harvard, because they've been offended or they have been triggered by what a faculty member has said. The administrations, in some specific cases, have caved to these vocal minorities. We've seen in polls the number of students who are afraid to speak their mind in class because they're afraid to upset other students or the faculty who have orthodox opinions on certain topics. The Council on Academic Freedom is striving to push back on these trends, to reverse them, to correct the overabundance of control by a single point of view.

**Forster**

When one of those studies came out showing that students are increasingly afraid to say what they really think in the classroom, one commentator said, this is not as much of a problem as you think it is, because the real cause is that these students have grown up in a generation of social media where the smallest thing you say exists forever, and that has just made them all the more cautious in an environment where everybody speaks their mind and it gets them in trouble. When I read that, I said, but that makes it all the more important that the classroom be different from the environment they've been raised in.

**Madras**

The fear of being ostracized by peers or, most important, by the person who holds the power of your grades is overabundant now in universities. We have to balance that out, and I see a movement toward that. Harvard has done an excellent job in the past year or so trying to identify the issues that need correcting, and second, to try to devise strategies to correct those where there is a strong consensus for doing so.

**Forster**

It's incumbent on us to create that classroom that's open to learning.

Bertha, thank you so much for being with us. We really appreciate it.

**Madras**

You're welcome. I hope this was helpful.