

William Howell of Johns Hopkins University 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. Howell about why the "humble audacity" of the university's truth-seeking mission is so challenging to maintain, why we need to invest relationally in the university's community of learning, and how to avoid "ivory tower" isolationism.

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

Hello everybody. I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and I have with me William Howell, who is the dean of the School of Government and Policy at Johns Hopkins University. William, thank you so much for being with us.

### **William Howell, Johns Hopkins University**

Greg, it's delightful to be with you.

### **Forster**

William, how would you describe the mission of the university and why it matters?

### **Howell**

This is a difficult question because universities serve lots of missions. Clark Kerr famously referred to universities as best thought of as "multiversities." They have sports programs with reason. They have health services and mental health services. They have classes that are meant to provide hard skills, but also to open up the imagination of students, all sorts of things.

When it comes to the research that's conducted at universities, here's where I want to put down my money on one thing, which is that universities are in the business, they should be in the business, they have, from their founding, professed to be in the business, of advancing truth and pursuing and building knowledge. You might think that that's rather anodyne and obvious, but it's not, because regularly in the conduct of research and in the teaching of classes, other imperatives begin to weigh on faculty and students that have to do with advancing an agenda of one sort or another, with attending to one injustice or another, with reconstituting a social order of one sort or another. An effort to use research in the service, not of the pursuit of truth, whatever that might be, or the building of knowledge, wherever that might take you, but instead to try to attend to all kinds of very urgent and troubling facts about the world, of which there are plenty. Holding steadfast to those commitments to truth-seeking and knowledge-building is a real challenge, but it is the basic compact between members of a university and the publics that that university serves. We need to do everything we can to hold on to it.

### **Forster**

I've always felt that the university's commitment to truth as its goal puts it in trouble because it looks radical to people who want to be traditional, and it looks traditional to people who want to be radical. And so it satisfies nobody.

## **Howell**

It is at once a humble and yet a completely audacious objective. The add-on, and I don't know exactly where to draw this line, is pursuing truth and also building the knowledge that there are normative considerations that should be subject to all kinds of scrutiny and care and that rightfully fall within the research portfolio of universities. A narrow conception of truth might not accommodate those kinds of endeavors. I want to accommodate those kinds of endeavors. At the same time, I also want to rule out various versions of activist research, wherein the enterprise is put in the service of the realization of changes in the world that are pre-ordained, that are with an eye toward rewarding some folks with whom you're politically allied and trying to push back against others whom you see as political enemies. We can't get caught up in that if we're to be true to the compact that we have with our various publics and that crucially hinges upon our ability to maintain the public trust.

## **Forster**

“Humble audacity” is a great slogan. We should put that on our business cards.

William, what are one or two challenges that you face right now in maintaining high intellectual standards in your field?

## **Howell**

We can point to lots of things. We gestured toward one earlier, the activist research. You could see it as being a kind of compromise of high standards, particularly when it comes to truth-seeking and knowledge-building. I want to point to something much more basic, though, which is that the pursuit of truth and the effort to build knowledge are routinely social activities. We don't do them in isolation. Faculty spend a good deal of time alone. But we try to check our own biases, we try to identify the limits of our claims, as we try to push back against ideas that we have that we're not sure about.

In my own life I routinely depend upon others. Sometimes it's because they have different kinds of expertise than I have. Sometimes it's because they see the world radically differently from the way that I do. When this works really well, it isn't just that I consult with them in the hall, it's that their voices get lodged in my head, which has the effect of sharpening my own thinking, demanding that I go farther than I already have with a particular claim that I'm trying to develop. That's a social activity. In any social activity, we require trust and goodwill and good feelings about the people who are in our community. It's integral. We're social creatures, and we need to like the people with whom we're spending time. It's not that we need to agree but that we need to like them and want to spend time with them, be drawn to them. Social activity with social dimensions.

The institution of tenure requires that after a fixed period of time, having spent years and years with people, we make a hard call on whether or not a person's contributions to knowledge and their efforts to advance the truth are up to the grade. That's an incredibly difficult thing to ask colleagues to do – to see, much less enforce, fixed and hard standards that have to do with academic excellence; to say to somebody with whom you have spent seven years, whom you've learned a lot from, in whose home you've dined and they in yours and with whose professional and social life you have become entangled, that now I'm going to cut you loose. It's a very hard thing to do. That carries over beyond tenure. Our willingness to push each other, our willingness to call each other out in social settings, in settings that

involve our students or involve people who are visiting our universities, are critical so that we uphold those standards. And yet it's really difficult to do.

**Forster**

That community of learning where we really need to be when the hard moments arrive, frays so easily and is so difficult to maintain, not only because of the pressures it's under, but because we need to find the time and energy to invest when we're not teaching or doing research.

**Howell**

That's right. That community of learning has these built-in tensions between our shared desire to uphold high standards and our being social creatures. Our lives, when that community of learning is really vibrant, become entangled. Not just our individual lives, but the lives of our families and our children. To then say, in the service of upholding standards of excellence, I'm going to now vote against tenure, or I'm going to now, in ways that may be awkward or uncomfortable, call you out in a public setting, which we need to do if we're upholding standards, can just be difficult.

**Forster**

You can't just build that community when you need it. It's got to be maintained over time, so it's there.

**Howell**

And richer and sustained, exactly.

**Forster**

You mentioned one of the tensions that we're dealing with, and I want to circle back to it for my last question regarding the mission of the university. One of the things the university tries to do is pursue knowledge for its own sake. Another thing that the university tries to do is make knowledge useful to people in the world. There's a balance to that. Where do you think the university does that well? Where do you think we could stand to improve?

**Howell**

You're right, we have both objectives. Knowledge for knowledge's sake, theory we care about wholly divorced from its immediate implications for the actual world. But then we also live in the actual world, and we want to be engaged with it and speak to it and learn from it. How do we hold both?

The way to think about this is not as a balancing act. We need to build out infrastructure that supports and connects the people who in their individual lives may sit at the frontier, right at the edge between academia and the larger world, and those who sit further within the confines of academia and may be thinking about theory for theory's sake, knowledge for knowledge's sake. How do you connect those people? How do you get to a place where the theorist, upon learning about what's happening at the edge, starts asking new questions? Or starts rethinking a set of suppositions that she might have had about a model that she's writing down? Or shifts her thinking about the implications of a theory that she's developing? Likewise, how do we get to a place where the people who are at the edge of academia and the outside world look to disciplinary knowledge for guidance about how to orient themselves, about

what questions to ask, about what communities to engage, to have a sense about what the stakes are in any particular exchange that they have with people who sit outside of the academy.

We have both of those types of people among academics. Over the course of their careers, people gravitate to the edges and then sometimes retreat and vice versa. Universities have not done a particularly good job at building out that infrastructure that stitches together those relationships. You can't ask those people who do theory really well to also write great op-eds. Figuring out how to meaningfully communicate to the outside world is a skill unto itself. You can't ask those people to invest deeply in theory. But universities could do a much better job of stitching together those relationships so that learning flows and we see the relevance of what's happening either on the interior when we're at the edge or when we're at the interior, the significance of what's happening at the edge for the kind of research that we're undertaking.

### **Forster**

One of the big challenges is to make sure that it's flowing in both directions. Theorists love the idea that practitioners will benefit from theory, but theorists also need to learn from practitioners, see them as having another knowledge base that theorists not only can benefit from but can understand that theory is not good theory if it's not learning from practice.

### **Howell**

I completely agree. We now are building this brand new School of Government and Policy at Johns Hopkins. We're building it from the ground up. Francesca Molinari, a theoretical econometrician, is joining our ranks. She's a first-rate theoretical econometrician who wants to be in an applied setting because she sees the relevance of a whole host of policy debates for informing her understanding of the kinds of problems that she wants to solve that involve a lot of math and a lot of theory. It isn't that her papers are going to be read out in the halls of Congress, but she sees the value of the people who are working in the halls of Congress for shaping the direction of her own research agenda. If we build the school in the way that I hope, the people who sit between her and those who are right at the edge will be enriched by her deep theoretical insights about how to evaluate evidence and solve problems involving statistics.

### **Forster**

Since you and I are both social scientists, I'll highlight the fact that your example shows that the social sciences raise this problem in an especially acute form, but also for that reason, give us the opportunity to develop the model, perhaps in a really helpful way.

### **Howell**

That sounds right to me.

### **Forster**

Yet you and I can agree that the social sciences have something to contribute.

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

**Howell**

Pleasure, Greg.