

Anthony Grafton of Princeton University was awarded a 2025 Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement. In [this video](#), Carlos Eire of Yale University interviews Dr. Grafton about why history matters for everything from politics to the arts, how the radical contraction of humanities study threatens our future knowledge base, and why the character of the university community matters more than its official mission statement.

Carlos Eire, Yale University

Hello, I'm Carlos Eire, T. Lawrason Riggs Professor of History and Religious Studies at Yale University, and today we are chatting with Professor Anthony Grafton, the Henry Putnam Emeritus Professor of History at Princeton University, a leading scholar in early modern studies, a giant in the field and the author of many books. His most recent is *Magus*, a study of how magic was approached as a learned discipline in the early modern period and a very significant contribution to a field that has been attracting more and more interest in the past few decades.

Anthony Grafton, Princeton University

Carlos, thank you for interviewing me.

Eire

It's great to spend time with you. We have some questions designed by the Academy, and you have chosen three. The first of these is, what are some underappreciated ways the work done in your field contributes to human understanding and well-being?

Grafton

It's a big question, and I think you can answer it on several levels. I've always thought that as a teacher of history, my job is not primarily to produce more people like me, scholars, though I have trained a fair number, but it's especially to reach undergraduates, the normal kids, and get them to see that the world has not always been the same. Descartes says in his *Discourse on Method* that all history does is teach you that the past is a different country, and you can learn that by traveling. I've always felt that most Americans, though we have many skills and aptitudes, are not great at learning by traveling about the otherness of other countries. We tend to speak English louder when we're abroad rather than learn languages. We tend to go to museums and do selfies in front of the paintings rather than looking at the paintings. That's a parody, but I think that Americans live inside a vast and powerful empire, a vast and powerful country. Looking outside is not one of our skills.

For me, with undergraduates, my captive audience for my 51 years of teaching, what I really thought I was doing was trying to help them see that these people in the past, though just as human and just as full of emotion and brilliance and energy and vitality as they were, were different in the ways in which they thought, the ways in which they felt, the ways in which they acted. I taught for many years a Western Civ survey, and reports of the death of Western Civ are a bit exaggerated. Nobody ever gave me any worries about teaching Western Civ. Its point was really to show that there was a rather grand tradition that started out in the Near East and in the Aegean and in Italy, parts of which were carried on, that new elements came in from the start. The Greeks learned an enormous amount from their more sophisticated and richer Near Eastern neighbors. Western Europeans could not have done anything like what they did

in the realms of philosophy and even theology without the Arab philosophers and theologians and the Jews whose work they read in Latin.

So, I tried to give students a sense that no civilization is an island. Civilizations always take in and give out. Borders are much looser than they look in retrospect. There are great changes in the way people live, think and work. It seemed to me that that was one of the best things I could do for people. If more Americans got that kind of teaching when they were young, many disasters would have been averted. One that I will recall is our intervention in Iraq and elsewhere a quarter of a century ago. I remember hearing senators say, oh Sunni, Shiite, that doesn't matter anymore. Nobody cares about those things. That was just wrong. My son's best friend was a rifleman in the Sunni Triangle, and he could tell you things about that. Those mistakes are serious mistakes. They're consequential. They have impact on policies. They have impact on people's lives and prosperity and deaths. If every historian who's teaching at a university spends a lot of time and effort on finding ways to teach that lesson, that's a really good thing to do. It's a small benefit to humanity probably, but it's a real one.

Eire

I'm sure you have had the experience that every now and then a former student contacts you and gives you a fairly detailed account of how you have helped them cope with the present.

Grafton

I have had that wonderful experience, and there's nothing like it to hear from a student after 10 or 20 or 30 years and hear that you're still in their mind in a small way and that they remember you and the lessons you taught are still going.

The second underappreciated thing, which is more about our kind of field, is that we teach people to know things that they need to know if they're going to curate and interpret arts, artifacts, technologies. You go to the Brooklyn Museum on a weekend. You go to the new Princeton Museum on a weekend. These places are mobbed with people having a wonderful time looking at extraordinary things, and there are captions that set them in context, that tell things about how they were made, that set them into their worlds. Somebody's got to train the people who do that. Somebody's got to give them that knowledge. It doesn't come out of nowhere. I've taught some curators happily because art historians have taken my undergraduate and graduate courses, and they're really amazing and fantastic people. I've taught a couple of librarians who do this kind of work in another way. That's a forgotten good that people who teach the history of the ancient world or the medieval or the early modern world do, which is also really important judging from the number of people who enjoy seeing the kinds of things that we tell, we teach curators how to look at and how to present. I'm proud of that too, and I'm always happy when I visit a museum and a former student of mine is a curator, and there's a bunch of those.

Eire

It is amazing how the thread remains unbroken, and it passes through the work that you have done and other historians, me too. The thread is constant, linking us to the past and keeping us as a culture or civilization from having amnesia.

Grafton

Which could easily happen. But I went to one of the previews of the great Raphael exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum, and it was wonderful to see how jammed it was on a freezing day, and how many people were there, including a bunch of art historians, but also lots and lots of people who were just there because they're Met members and they could go to a preview. They were having a glorious time and being informed and being illuminated by these extraordinary things. The Met show really centers on Raphael's drawings, and it shows that he's a much more technical, geometrical, precise draftsman than I, in my ignorance, had any idea. You see him differently after seeing these objects and seeing them so well presented, and that's a huge experience that I hope we can keep on providing because it's a way in which the worlds that we study remain relevant.

Eire

Which brings us to the next question because this is not easy to do. What do you see as the one or two of the most important challenges right now for maintaining high intellectual standards in your field?

Grafton

There are multiple challenges. One is simply the challenge of maintaining some kind of succession. Graduate programs are being cut back pretty sharply in the humanities. Even at the wealthiest places like Yale and Princeton, numbers are lower than they were, at least at Princeton, and they're not going to get higher. Any appreciation of the past, which is going to be profound, rests on skills.

I'm worried about whether those skills are going to continue to be taught, whether the languages will continue to be taught. I'm old enough that, when I went to high school, if you were on the college track in the Northeast, you did a few years of French and at an old-fashioned school, you did at least a few years of Latin, too. That meant that you learned grammar because you didn't learn grammar in an English class even then, but you learned what a subject was and what an object was. You learned how to read a bit of another language. That's a skill that people are paying less and less attention to. You can put a passage into DeepL and get a coherent and basically accurate translation. Why do you need to know how to do it yourself? If you're going to talk to these people in the past, which is one of the things we try to do, as Machiavelli did in his study where the ancients came and talked to him and he asked them questions. I've always felt I was doing the same thing with the people in his period that I study, asking them questions. But the only way you can do that is if you're reading them in the languages that they wrote in, that they spoke. That's just not a priority anymore.

Some of the best teaching, the most creative teaching is being done totally outside the university by institutions like Paideia, which carries on Father Reginald Foster's wonderful way of teaching active Latin. But it's not good to be totally reliant on the outside world. I had a student, now a very good professor, who had never studied a word of Latin before coming to Princeton. She took Turbo Latin, taught by Robert Castor, one of the greatest philologists in America, and got a year in a term. The next year she took second-year Latin with Denis Feeney, another of the greatest Latinists in America. She wrote a 300-page senior thesis based on unpublished Latin texts, manuscripts.

Now, not everybody's going to get that far, but it ought to be possible for someone like her to start at college or even start later than college and really get the training they need. But that's really not easy.

You can see this with, in many cases, the elimination of language departments or the elimination of graduate training in languages. I was an intellectual historian. I did a fair amount of classics, and I felt having a little bit of literary training and reading literary and philosophical texts was really important for me. Many of my students have done that with French texts or Italian texts or Neo-Latin texts. That's going to become harder and harder. So that worries me. That's one problem.

A second is the general discouragement that people are expressing about these fields. There's a set of memes out in the world that all the scholarship in these fields is political, none of the scholarship is of any value. There is too much politicized scholarship. I don't think any sensible person can deny that. But there are also many real scholars who are trying to help people read languages and read texts and find out things about them and who don't go into that with any kind of presumption about what they're going to find. This cloud of negative rhetoric that hangs over these pursuits is doing a lot of harm and makes it very hard for students to dedicate themselves to these fields.

I've had the wonderful chance to work at Princeton with many East Asian students because I'm interested in the history of books. They do reading with me on what Western books are like. I've done that for the ancient world, the Middle Ages, my own period. They're wonderful students. But more and more, the students we get doing that are Chinese. It's really difficult for an American who comes to college and finds, my goodness, this is fascinating, to get the support they need to learn that language, to learn Chinese. They also have to learn Japanese really, really well. They still do it. You still see them. The Chinese students I've taught are so wonderful. I'm certainly not criticizing them. They're amazing. But I do feel as if that was one of the great things about the American university. You could turn up there not knowing anything about your subject, and you could haul yourself up to the point where you could do it at a high level.

Eire

There are many students who have, let's call it a conversion experience once they're exposed to this material. I was always stunned. I taught summer term for many years. Here at Yale, you don't have to be a registered Yale student to go to summer term. I taught a course with the title From Crusades to Enlightenment, which was kind of a mini-Western Civ class. Always, every summer, more than 50 percent of the students who registered in the course were from China. They were not Chinese Americans. They came specifically from China and took this course because they wanted to understand and appreciate Western history much more than they could in China.

Grafton

One of the most brilliant undergraduates I've worked with in many years now was a woman from mainland China who did her BA thesis on Albertus Magnus's understanding of "natural place" and its impact on individuals and communities. She was absolutely fearless. She had very good French and some Greek, but she taught herself Latin to do this. It was really just wonderful to watch her work, the kind of student for whom you open the door and get out of the way.

Eire

It's always a delight to run into people who have this unusual ability to learn languages quickly. Sometimes I have been a little jealous.

Grafton

Me too. I'm not a quick language learner. There's a wonderful papyrologist at ISAW, the NYU Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, Alex Jones. He was interested in math and science and never studied a word of Latin or Greek until he got to college and then became a great classicist and ended up teaching at Toronto and then at NYU. He studies and teaches ancient Mesopotamian and Greek science and does it at the highest philological level. Many of my friends in our field were Catholics and got to Latin that way, like the great John O'Malley, or they were sent to boarding school because they lived in a city and the public schools were not great. But it's particularly great if you can go to college and get that experience. That just feels like a wonderful thing to me, and it's becoming harder and harder.

Eire

So, this brings us to third question on a larger viewpoint. How would you describe what the mission of the university ought to be, and why that is important?

Grafton

Writing mission statements doesn't help very much. One of Parkinson's less well-known laws is that when you build a new headquarters, you know your organization is going downhill. When you start writing mission statements, that's also a point where you probably know you're going downhill. It's important to have a mission. Even the best intentioned and most scholarly and serious citizens of the academy do not have an adequate view of that. For example, the Yale report just out, much of which I admired, failed on a fundamental point. As I recall, it says that the mission of a university is to seek new knowledge and transmit that knowledge to young people and teach them how to do that. I presume, though I don't think it really said so, as a mental discipline for younger people and as an apprenticeship for senior people in graduate school. That seems right as far as it goes, but it leaves out so much.

The main point that the report discussed in relations between students and teachers was grade inflation. And grade inflation is a bad thing. I was very happy when we pushed against it at Princeton and sorry that we stopped. But what really matters and what seems to me vital to that other mission is having a community where both students and faculty have freedom to explore, and where they have freedom to explore some of the time together in a community is very rare in America. We don't have a lot of multigenerational communities in America.

The Yale report completely omitted the fact that that community has been undermined over the last generation or two in multiple ways. Grade inflation contributed because apparently it has made extracurriculars weigh even more heavily with students than they already did as a way of distinguishing themselves and making themselves more attractive on the job market. But that was already happening quite a while ago. I still remember a Phi Beta Kappa meeting when the editor of the *Princetonian* turned out to have made Phi Beta Kappa and everyone said, what did she do? That's impossible. No editor of the *Princetonian* or the *Yale Daily* I'm sure ever makes Phi Beta Kappa because it's such an engrossing and demanding activity. This is not new particularly in these elite schools.

What really matters is offering a kind of teaching that leads to working together, that leads to collaboration, that leads to senior theses that really take shape in a semester or a year-long series of conversations between the professor and the student. I've seen that happen over and over again. But

again, universities have organized themselves in ways that really push against that. The rise of the minor, for example, though it has really good qualities, it also pushes against the kind of specialized knowledge of the major that Princeton used to see as its hallmark with this required senior thesis or senior project. If you think that learning to do research, learning to work as a scholar or a scientist is a really good form of education, then scattering people's energies over multiple subjects is probably not the best way to promote that. Some people will flourish with it, but it does somewhat undermine the system.

Then there is the system of rewards, which is usually summarized in a sentence. Faculty are hired, promoted, given tenure and then given further distinctions for their research. They push and push to get more research distinction at the expense of time in classes and time teaching. Your colleague in the law school, Sam Moyn, says exactly that in an editorial that appeared in the *Times* today. Now, I'm not going to claim my little personal example or yours counters this trend. It's true. But if it's true, that's a desperate problem that universities actually need to think about. If it is really true, and my experience is it *is* really true, that elite universities, private and public, reward people exclusively for their research, that is not the way to foster the kind of teaching that is intricate and dense and serious, and in which grading is just a little part of the relationship.

Eire

Here at Yale, there's an unquestioned assumption that for promotion and tenure, the scholar needs to have reshaped his or her field in some substance-type way, which is a very dangerous slippery slope. Reshaping, refining, changing the paradigms of any field has its dangers, and much can be lost.

Grafton

Much can be lost. Young people should challenge norms. That's a good thing when the young people do it, but they should have the learning to do it in an effective way. That's a problem. They should be doing that in their teaching as well as in their research. It's something that you should be thinking about in both ways. That's not something that any major university that I know about is seeking to promote.

I won a couple of teaching prizes, and I've come to think teaching prizes are a really bad thing. It's a way of recognizing teaching. Teaching is important to us. But in fact, we send people out to lives as teachers without giving them any training, or we give them a three-day institute at our Center for Teaching and Learning, but not much more than that. I agree that we should be giving grades that matter, but we should also be engaging students in a way that matters to them. I don't know if Yale is different, but at Princeton, many more students have a relationship where they're learning from a mentor who pushes them and knows their strengths and weaknesses. They get that in their athletics. They get that if they play in the orchestra. They get that if they sing in the choir. They get it if they dance. Much more than they get it from most of their teachers. It's a little bit of a tragedy. I don't envy those other people. They're great. They're doing their jobs. But we should be doing our version of that job. The university's priorities push us away from that.

Eire

There might be a difference between the sciences and the humanities, too, in terms of this kind of one-on-one mentorship that you're talking about. Humanities probably ranks lowest in this respect.

Grafton

Because in the lab sciences, they're all collaborating. The graduate students are junior collaborators. They work. They're in the lab 18 hours a day. They work together. Then they go play volleyball at midnight. There's even a kind of fun to it, though it's gruelingly hard. We have very little like that.

I've organized a number of collaborative projects with everything from individual students to a group or two, and they've been extremely rewarding. I'm basically still in touch with almost all of the people whom I've done that with. It was really a good thing to do. I have other friends who've done a lot of that. My friend, Jim Hankins is a very severe critic of Harvard and other elite universities and is resigning, retiring from Harvard to teach in Florida. Jim has really taught that way for many years as well. It's been really impressive to see him doing that. A former student of mine, who also teaches at Harvard, is also very engaged in collaborative work with students, which sometimes eventuates in publication or sometimes in innovative teaching.

These are things that as many of us as possible should be doing. They shouldn't be unusual. But nobody's talking about that. The Yale report comes out, and nobody notices that that's missing. The *Times* has an editorial saying, universities are even worse than the Yale report says. We somehow need even more thought than went into that thoughtful report.

Eire

I'm sure you've had similar experiences to mine, which is some of my most memorable teaching experiences have been individual tutorials. It's just amazing, the quantum leap that one makes when teaching one, two, or three students at a time, rather than a classroom full of bodies. It's very different.

Grafton

Both can be great. I taught for many years a small seminar on historiography, mostly for seniors, that would usually have 10 or 12 students. It was quite a self-selected group because just call something "historiography," and that'll keep most people away. But they were wonderful, and they did amazing work. We had wonderful discussions. I really didn't have to do anything but throw out a couple of questions and they would carry it from there. I'm still in touch with many of the students who took that course, and a fair number of them are now academics. A fair number of them aren't but still seem to feel it was a really good experience. Small group teaching is hugely important. University administrators looking for ways to save money use eliminating small classes or eliminating departments that have small classes as a clear strategy.

Eire

There's also the phenomenon of colleges and universities eliminating humanities departments because there's "nothing practical" to be gained from studying the humanities.

Grafton

I don't know. I think this is just a myth. I did some research on the humanities at Princeton which, as you would expect, were decent before World War II, but really expanded afterwards, which was probably true at most places, partly because of emigrés. In Princeton's case, Erwin Panofsky, though

supposedly forbidden to teach, he taught all the time and he was a huge influence on graduate students at Princeton. The emigrés, both those at the university and those at the institute, did a lot.

What really struck me in looking at this was the Americans who came back from World War II, having done things that I can't even imagine, and then studied classics or studied Italian or studied French or comparative literature, saw no better thing to devote their lives to. One of my dear friends at Princeton and a great mentor was Victor Brombert, who was a great Yale professor before he became a great Princeton professor, and who just passed away at a little over 100. Victor was a Ritchie Boy, one of the interrogators of SS prisoners, as he and others proudly said, without ever using physical constraint, who were the best source of intelligence the Allies had. He arrived in France on D-Day. He was left on Omaha Beach. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Now, these guys who are wearing suits and running colleges and talking about practical things, none of them has ever done anything like that, and none of them ever will, I hope. But Victor had some pretty practical experiences before he decided that teaching Dante and Balzac was how he wanted to spend his life, studying them and transmitting them. They had no problem seeing a connection between their experiences and the humanities.

Eire

Actually, they were drawn to the humanities, perhaps in part or mostly because of the horrible things that they had seen. They became physicians of sorts.

Grafton

I like universities now much better than the university that I went to, because there's a very different gender balance, there are very different ethnic balances, it's a much more mixed and interesting population. The last department chair I worked for was female and a wonderful department chair. I like all of that. But there was something a little more open about the university when those men were teaching in it than there is now. There was some residue of those experiences, which has gone and which has helped to make the university more of a hothouse.

Eire

I remember several moments of surprise working alongside these men, I knew nothing about their past. When I learned what it was, I said, oh, my goodness, what a leap. What a contrast.

Thank you very much, Tony.

Grafton

It was a great pleasure to see you close and to talk. Thank you so much.