

Danielle Allen of Harvard University was awarded a 2025 Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement. In [this video](#), Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Dr. Allen about how the university can cultivate truth-seeking qualities in students, why theory needs practice as much as practice needs theory, and the hunger for deeper inquiry that she sees in today's students as they become increasingly alarmed about what social media is doing to them.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and today I'm interviewing Danielle Allen of Harvard University, who was a recipient of the Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement in 2025. Danielle, thank you so much for being with us.

Danielle Allen, Harvard University

Thank you. Glad to be here, Greg. It was an honor to receive the prize, and I'm glad to be in conversation with you.

Forster

Let me ask you my first question. What would you say the mission of the university ought to be, and why is that important?

Allen

I think of the mission of the university as fundamentally boiling down to truth-seeking across all the domains of human inquiry. Now, I want to be clear, truth-seeking takes different shapes in the natural sciences compared to the humanistic sciences. You can test hypotheses in one place. In other places, you have to cultivate good judgment, and there's that question of what does it mean to cultivate good judgment?

Truth-seeking is partly about the creation of knowledge, but it's also about preparing people to be honest interlocutors and to commit themselves to a high standard of truth-seeking. This means preparing students to maintain that set of commitments, and then also serving a function for a society trying to digest and process the hardest questions. It should be possible to get further on them on university campuses than anywhere else. Universities have a responsibility to help the broader society think in a disciplined and honest way about whatever the hardest challenges are that that society faces.

Forster

It can be difficult maintaining a community committed to truth-seeking, but also you mentioned people need to have certain capacities and skills that make them good truth-seekers. They need to have the qualities of a truth-seeker. There's really a complex, multifaceted mission embedded in what you've shared.

Allen

Absolutely. Sometimes I think about it as the need to make sure that you have all the resources and repertoire of a devil's advocate always at your disposal. You have to be comfortable with disagreement. You have to be comfortable with debate. You also honestly have to be comfortable knowing that

sometimes you can't actually resolve the question. You might make an inch of progress, but there will be another mile of perplexity that you discover after that inch of progress. Being able to live with things being unfinished is a part of it too.

I like that iconic figure of the devil's advocate because it captures the kind of habits and practices that should be baked into an intellectual culture that you're always looking for. Who disagrees the most within the spread of work on this question? What's the best-faith version of their argument? What are my best arguments in relationship to it? That kind of triangulated engagement seems to me necessary for keeping the engine of truth-seeking always constantly moving forward in a healthy way.

Forster

One thing that you've highlighted is that we want to be pursuing truth for its own sake essentially because we want to know, but also we want truth to be useful in the world. That sets up my next question, which is, in what ways do you think the university is doing a good job holding together that tension of seeking truth for its own sake, but also making truth useful to the world around us? And in what ways do we need to get better at that?

Allen

Those are great questions. Those are the questions that universities are wrestling with right now, Greg, to be honest. A lot of disciplines have developed a set of questions and concerns internal to the discipline itself. Sometimes, just as anything can happen with any community, you can become very focused on your inward debates and perplexities, and you can begin to lose track of the original source of the questions of your discipline in broader human concerns.

Universities often have the job of trying to reconnect high degrees of specialization with a broader sense of human concerns. At the end of the day, we are pursuing truth-seeking to have sturdier answers to the "how shall I live?" and "how shall we live?" questions. Academic disciplines seem to move quite far from those core questions. That's the hard challenge: how do we always bring it back to the "how shall I live?" and "how shall we live?" set of questions?

Forster

Right. Theory keeps practice honest, but also in another way, practice keeps theory honest.

Allen

Exactly. Yes. Theory and practice need each other. We human beings are endowed with this incredible capacity to be knowledge-seekers and truth-seekers. This is not just so that we can live on an island by ourselves like Robinson Crusoe. It's a part of our equipment as social beings in the Aristotelian sense.

Forster

Because we are not brains in jars.

This is my favorite question to ask. What has pleasantly surprised you in your work in the last five years?

Allen

I've been really surprised and pleased, I would honestly say, in the last two years, by how hungry students are for deeper intellectual engagement. Students are highly aware that in their high school life and even in what colleges have become in recent years, they are more often given fragments and broken-up pieces. They're not invited to read whole books, for example, they're always getting excerpts of things or little activities and this and that. I'm seeing a real appetite for sustained engagement with continuous arcs of argument. That is such a relief to see. As a teacher, I'm trying to figure out how to be more responsive to that, how to fulfill that more thoroughly for my students.

Forster

It makes me wonder if the social media environment has caused people to live in bubbles that are *so* narrow that they really begin to feel it. It would be nice to think that, as the bubble gets narrower, people do, in fact, begin to feel constrained. I don't know if that aligns with what you've observed.

Allen

I think so. I had an interesting dinner with first-year students a couple of years ago. It was still early in the year for them. We just talked about anything that was meant to be informal. There were probably about 20 students there. At the end of the conversation, I asked them to go around and share what about our current world gave them the greatest concern. All but one person named social media. That was super-encouraging because here was this group of 18-, 19-year-olds, and they all had this very powerful diagnosis of the kind of imposition, tax on their attention, tax on their spiritual resources and the like coming from social media. It struck me that if they agree that completely on the problem, then we are bound as a society to achieve a solution for it, because they will find the path to a solution. These kinds of moments with students have been pleasantly surprising in recent years.

Forster

That's so encouraging, especially when you think about the dystopian visions of the 20th century centered on technology, like *1984* or *Brave New World*. The one common factor is the people in those novels aren't aware that their mental worlds are being manipulated and controlled, and they don't hunger for a larger mental world. So if people are, in fact, bucking at the constraints, so to speak, that's a very encouraging sign.

Allen

It is, exactly. The human spirit is kicking against the current constraints.

Forster

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

Allen

My pleasure. That was fun, Greg. Thank you so much.