

FT Magazine US society

## The reopening of the American mind

Why Harlan Crow, Paul Marshall and others are funding schools affiliated with Bari Weiss and Jordan Peterson

Jemima Kelly OCTOBER 26 2023

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It is a humid August day on the Greek island of Samos. Cicadas are making their repetitive racket, the Aegean Sea is sparkling in the afternoon sunshine and I am halfway up a vertical rock face clinging on to a rope for dear life.

“But you must climb,” the owner of a café had told me when I said I wanted to get to Pythagoras’s Cave. He’d looked dubiously at my leather skirt, tank top and polyester sandals.

There is no going back now. I have committed to the ascent and so has Stephen Blackwood, a prominent scholar of the Roman philosopher Boethius. I thought we were going to be speaking at Blackwood’s hotel and dressed accordingly. But instead we hopped into a lime-green jeep and drove up to the eastern slope of Mount Kerkis, so that I could see the ancient grotto in which the first man to call himself a philosopher is said to have lived.

Admittedly, the rock face itself is not very high — about 20ft — but the drop on either side is steep and not only am I badly dressed, I am not good with heights. My phone, stuffed into my bra, is recording:

Me: “I’m not sure about this, Stephen.”

Blackwood: “You’re OK.”

Me: “You think I’m OK?”

I let go of the rope with my left hand so that I can reach for a bit of rock above me but my nerves start to give way.

Me: “I have, like, a little bit of vertigo.”

Blackwood: “Pull yourself with your left hand. That’s it. And then grab the rope, and move your foot a little further to the left.”

Me: “I’m not sure I have insurance for this.”

Blackwood begins to scale the cliff to my rescue. “At this point I can catch you,” he says, to reassure me. This only makes me feel worse because I’m not confident that he can. And because I’m suddenly aware of his view. A vision of Bridget Jones, reporting for *Sit Up Britain* and sliding down a fireman’s pole towards the camera flashes in my mind. Sheer embarrassment drives me the rest of the way. Blackwood follows.

He seems unfazed. “Pythagoras was interested in the order of the cosmos and the way in which things in music and in numbers seem to tell us something about the nature of the world and how those are also somehow in us,” he muses, sauntering over to a precipitous point with spectacular views. “That, in a sense, is deeply connected to what Ralston College is about, discovering what you really are in relation to what really is.”

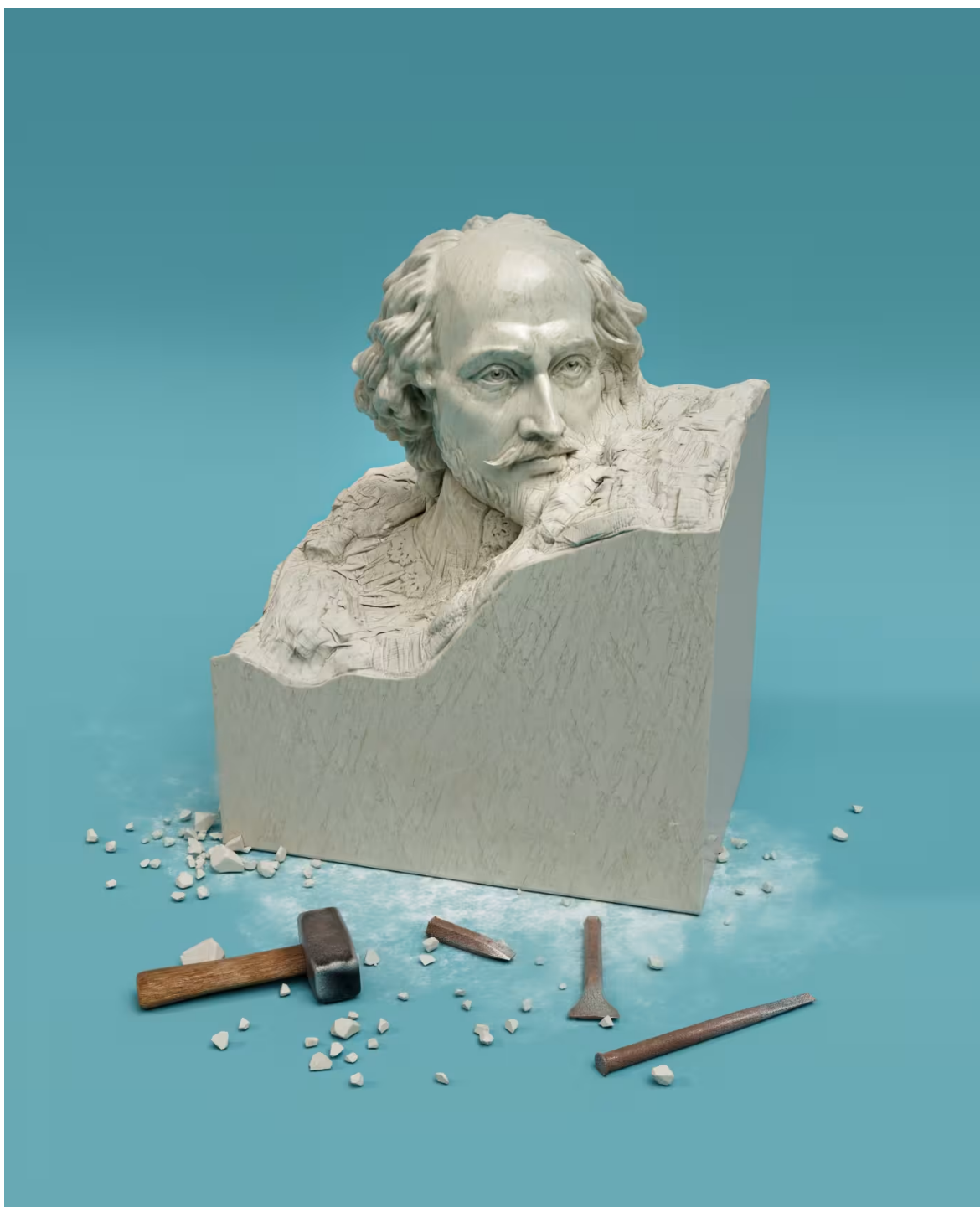
We have reached the mouth of the cave. Presumably answers await inside. I came to find out what Blackwood is trying to achieve with Ralston, the college he has spent more than a decade setting up. It’s an example of a new type of “anti-cancel culture” university, whose backers are united in the view that American education is defective. Earlier in the summer, I had been to Texas to see the most well-funded and biggest of these projects. Later, I would encounter the crassest.

Their critique is perhaps best laid out in 2018’s *The Coddling of the American Mind* by [Jonathan Haidt](#) and Greg Lukianoff. The book’s title is a reference of conservative philosopher Allan Bloom’s 1987 best-seller, which argued “moral relativism’ was spoiling college and continued a long tradition of American conservatives decrying the degenerative effect of academia. Nowadays, the critique tends to go something like this: emotional “safetyism” is being prioritised above proper education; ideological orthodoxy and self-censorship are stifling debate; and diversity and inclusion are overemphasised at the expense of academic rigour. All of which leaves graduates ill-prepared for real life. The liberal “indoctrination” of students has also become an obsession of the political right and is already a campaign issue ahead of next year’s presidential elections.

And yet, conservatives are having more of an impact on US higher education than they have in decades. Earlier this year, Florida governor and Republican presidential hopeful [Ron DeSantis took over](#) the New College of Florida, replacing its board with rightwing allies and prompting one-third of its faculty to leave. Both Florida and Texas have withdrawn funding for diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in higher education. And in June, the US Supreme Court effectively ended affirmative action, banning universities from [considering race in admissions](#). It was an ideological win second only to the overturning of abortion rights last year. In short, these new colleges, which might reject the labels “anti-woke” or even “conservative” but are critical of progressive ideas, come at a moment when you might legitimately ask, why bother?

**My scholastic summer starts in June**, when I wander into the lobby of a 1,600-room Hilton in Dallas. This Hilton has a vibe. It contains not one but two slabs of the Berlin Wall, as well as a six-foot bronze Laughing Buddha. A smiling, kind-looking man in a straw fedora approaches me. He is wearing a white linen shirt, unbuttoned to reveal a gold chain and Greek Orthodox cross. “What a terrible introduction to Texas,” he says, sitting down opposite me. It is currently hotter than 99 per cent of the Earth’s surface here. “This heat — it’s such an awful time to be here.”

Pano Kanelos, 53, is the president of a new college called UATX, which stands for the University of Austin, Texas (not to be confused with the highly regarded University of Texas, Austin, or UT, founded in 1883). UATX can’t officially be called a university, or operate as one, until it has been authorised by the state. Once this happens, it can start taking applications for the first undergraduate class of 100 students for autumn 2024.



The college will be, as critics have pointed out, unaccredited. Kanelos explains that, for any new institution, this cannot change until it grants its first degrees. After that, an authorised third party can vouch for its academic integrity. Because they will be taking a risk, the first undergraduates will not pay tuition. Kanelos says the fees should eventually be about what a public university charges out-of-state students, currently about \$30,000 a year.

UATX was announced in November 2021 as being “dedicated to the fearless pursuit of truth”, on former New York Times journalist Bari Weiss’s Substack. Weiss, 39, is widely disliked among US liberals. Although she is only one of the college’s board of trustees, “Bari Weiss’s anti-cancel-culture university” (Vanity Fair) was panned as a “fake” (The Guardian) and an “epic clown show” (Nation writer Jeet Heer, posting on X), among other things.

Kanelos, who grew up in Chicago reading at the back of his parents’ Greek diner, is no culture warrior or free-speech absolutist. He comes across as nuanced, undogmatic. He chose to leave a plum job as president of a respected liberal arts university, St John’s College in Maryland, to co-found UATX. “My motivation here is really simple,” he says. “The world is coming apart at the seams. We live in a time of a kind of ambient nihilism. The only response is to build and create.”

UATX comes at a time when hundreds of American colleges are being forced to merge or to close: 585 in the six years up to the 2020-21 academic year, according to the US National Center for Education Statistics. The number of applicants at many colleges is falling and the so-called enrolment cliff — due in 2025, when the US college-age population will start to drop — is fast approaching.

**Why get one of Jordan Peterson’s Degrees? ‘Because otherwise you’re going to be a useless, resentful, bitter, pointless lump’**

Still, UATX has managed to raise nearly \$200mn from more than 2,400 donors. Thirty-two of those gave more than \$1mn. That probably has something to do with the people involved. Many trustees and advisers — Richard Dawkins, Niall Ferguson, Arthur Brooks, Jonathan Haidt, Larry Summers — are celebrity academics with large followings. One co-founder is Joe Lonsdale, a venture capitalist and a

longtime associate of Peter Thiel’s. Guest lecturers include billionaire Marc Andreessen, who came to speak at Forbidden Courses, UATX’s summer programme. (The college declined to say whether Andreessen is a donor.)

Although UATX has been described as conservative, Kanelos insists it is “non-political”. “If you’re going to have institutions that are foundationally committed to the discovery, transmission and preservation of knowledge, their operating system has to be a liberal one,” he says. “But commitment to those principles doesn’t necessarily line up with politically liberal” — he air quotes — “or conservative today. There are people on the right who are illiberal and people on the left who are illiberal.”

Harvard professor Steven Pinker is not convinced. He agreed to be on UATX's advisory board, but stood down a week after the announcement, having been mislabelled as a founding faculty member. "I was getting all these calls from reporters asking if I'd be splitting my time between Harvard and Austin and I was, like, no, this is one of about 50 advisory boards that I'm on," he says. "You know, a lot of them are window-dressing. I'm on their letterhead, but I don't really do anything."

Although he shares concerns about academic freedom and viewpoint diversity, Pinker felt UATX was too reactionary. "It seemed to be organised not around a coherent vision for higher education, in which you could rethink every detail, but rather as a kind of a politically incorrect university with a faculty of the cancelled," he says. "Just rounding up people who've been persecuted, however unjust it has been to them, that does not yield a coherent curriculum."

It is true that many of the college's founding faculty fellows and trustees — Kathleen Stock, Dorian Abbot, Peter Boghossian — are academics who were pushed out of jobs or censored in some way for their views. Kanelos counters this is not the case for those who are being hired as permanent staff members. "We purposefully invited [Stock and Boghossian] to participate because we thought it was important for us to learn from them what the tripwires were in higher education around cancelling, because we didn't want to be an institution that would cancel."

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**The next morning, I arrive at a neoclassical business** campus called Old Parkland in Dallas. It is designed in the Jeffersonian style, with red-brick buildings, portico entrances and lots of busts: Adam Smith, John Locke, the Greek goddess Eos. This campus, where UATX's Forbidden Courses programme takes place, is owned by Harlan Crow, the billionaire Texas developer and Republican megadonor. Earlier this year, it emerged he had been [funding lavish vacations](#) for Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas. Crow, whose company is headquartered at Old Parkland, also owns the Hilton where I met Kanelos and where the students are staying.

Crow gave half a million dollars to UATX because, "well, almost all [the founders] are friends of mine", he explains in a soft Texas drawl, chewing on a piece of Nicorette. "The university system in America is broken. We just gotta work with the highest standards of civic morality to bring them back to a place where they aren't" — he pauses — "indoctrination camps."

If that is the case, Forbidden Courses might be thought of as a kind of summer camp for contrarians. The programme runs for two weeks; tuition and accommodation are free. This year, 109 students are taking part. (The application process involves answering various essay questions, such as "What is one contrarian or unpopular view you hold?")

The naming of the programme was not so much about “forbidden” subjects, Kanelos explains, but about the approach. Students are encouraged to ask the kind of questions they might be afraid to in other contexts, and “every idea or opinion must be heard”, with the proviso it is backed by evidence. On offer this week: “Racial Inequality in America” with Brown economist Glenn Loury and “Conservatives & Reactionaries” with Columbia political scientist Mark Lilla. There are also courses on “The Invasion of Ideology into Evolutionary Biology” and “The Battle of the Sexes”.

I roam around the campus speaking to about 20 students, who come from all over the US, as well as Canada and Europe. Many of them say the best thing about being here is they don’t need to self-censor. “I don’t have to go through mental gymnastics,” says one. “Even if you disagree, the disagreement is productive. You don’t feel that you said something horrible.”



From left: author, psychologist and Peterson Academy co-founder Jordan Peterson; UATX trustee Bari Weiss; author and historian Niall Ferguson, who also serves as a UATX trustee and adviser © Getty Images/Bloomberg

Many of the students use terms like “unaffiliated” to describe their politics. A few call themselves “classical liberal”, some “conservative”, a couple “libertarian”. Only one calls herself a “leftist”. I hear a lot of stories about the ways in which they feel they’ve been punished or ostracised for expressing views that don’t conform at their colleges. (Most are partway through degrees.)

I am the first journalist to be allowed inside UATX. My initial request to visit was denied. Eventually, I agreed that I wouldn’t attend seminars, where debate among students takes place. One of the main criticisms in *The Coddling of the American Mind* is that US colleges are being turned into “safe spaces”. It strikes me that I am visiting a series of safe spaces of a different kind at these new colleges too.

That evening, it is time for guest lectures. First, there’s a Q&A with Winston Marshall, the pony-tailed former banjoist of British folk-rock band Mumford & Sons. Marshall quit the group in 2021 after getting into hot water, some might say cancelled, for praising a book that criticised antifa. “It wasn’t just one tweet that got me in trouble. It was 10 years of being in an industry where saying the wrong thing would get you in trouble,” he tells the captivated students. “I can actually speak freely now.”

He is also the son of Paul Marshall, a hedge fund tycoon who owns the news commentary site UnHerd and co-owns cable channel GB News. [Kathleen Stock](#), who was effectively forced out of her job as a philosophy professor at the University of Sussex and labelled a transphobe because of her views, is next. She opens by saying: “I’ve had some tough gigs in my time, but I’ve never literally followed a rock star.” The students laugh. The biggest laugh, though, comes when a young man asks a question and introduces himself by noting that his “pronouns are he/him”.

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**UATX recently secured a lease on about 30,000 sq ft** of space on the top floor of the Scarbrough Building right in the heart of downtown Austin. The Scarbrough is sandwiched between a steakhouse and a taco shop on a corner of Sixth Street, near the most raucous part known as “Dirty Sixth”. Podcaster Joe Rogan recently opened a comedy club here, where phones are confiscated at the entrance so you can’t try to get any of the acts cancelled. Austin “is probably the most dynamic city in the United States today”, Kanelos told me.

It’s not as if the Texas capital doesn’t already have any top-notch colleges. UT is a short walk away. It was ranked 52nd in the world in the 2024 Times Higher Education rankings. UATX sees itself competing with UT. “It’s really, really hard to name a university,” Kanelos said, when I asked about the name. It also probably doesn’t hurt that Austin is where co-founder Lonsdale lives, or that it has become a tech hub. The city is now reportedly home to 14 billionaires, including Elon Musk.

In three or four years, Kanelos imagines the university having its own “bespoke campus”, but this will be where the first undergraduates are taught. I am met by Jacob Howland, a philosopher and the college provost, who takes me up to the top floor.

It is still being renovated, but the aesthetic is industrial-chic co-working space: exposed brick walls, large uncovered pipes, pendant lights. Howland, 63, was previously a professor at the University of Tulsa. He is also dean of UATX’s Intellectual Foundations programme, which will comprise the first two years of the BA curriculum. “It’ll be courses like ‘Chaos and Civilisation’ and ‘The Beginnings of Politics’. It will be very broad,” Howland explains.

Will they be trying to “decolonise the curriculum” or deliberately include readings not written by dead white men? “Well sure,” he says, citing works by Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright. “These are essential to understanding the great mistakes that we have made in the United States. But look” — he becomes more animated — “we are interested in culture as such, not just western culture. But whatever it is, it should be of enduring importance. Let me just say, and you can write this down, I think it’s insane that you can get a degree in English literature without reading Shakespeare. Why wouldn’t you read unquestionably the greatest author in the English language to get a degree in English literature? That’s got nothing to do with decolonising the curriculum, it’s just stupid.”

One thing Kanelos and Howland seem particularly excited about is something that UATX is calling the “Polaris Project”, in which students create, build or innovate something with the goal of meeting “a pressing human need”, in parallel to their studies. “We don’t want to feed into the perception . . . that universities are not contributing to the common good in any substantial way,” Howland says. “We have to show that being liberally educated is possible at universities today, and that it can make things better, not worse.”

Nothing about this sounds objectionable — or especially revolutionary. Many American colleges and universities run similar programmes. MIT, Stanford, Harvard and many more are famous for incubating world-changing companies, with or without a formal code name. UT’s Texas Innovation Center nearby has fostered groundbreaking companies ranging from robotics to pharmaceuticals. In the end, UATX seems less like a PR stunt than just a regular university. Then Howland says: “What’s crazy is that we’ve drawn so much heat. In this very large field, why are we such a threat? Why can’t we exist too?”

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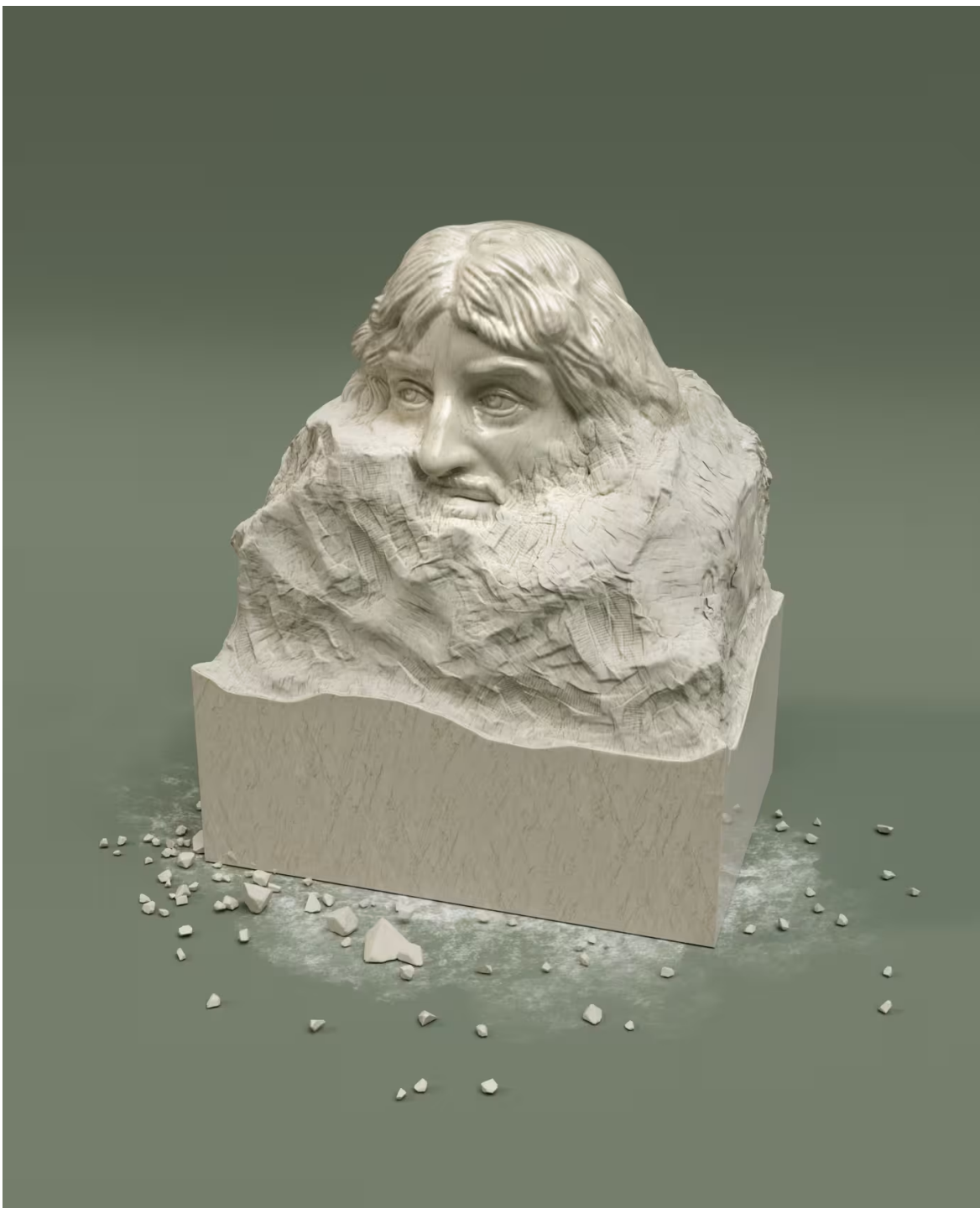
**When I land at Samos Airport**, I am greeted by Michael Hurley, a fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge, who looks very much like a British person who has spent a couple of weeks on a Greek island: pale linens, brown leather sandals, a touch of sunburn. Hurley is a professor of English and theology and also serves as the external academic dean at Ralston, where he teaches during the summer.

Like UATX, Ralston — the non-profit college dreamt up by Blackwood — is not accredited, but expects to be within several years. It is, however, authorised to grant degrees in the state of Georgia, where it is based. Ralston’s ambition isn’t to produce the next tech billionaire; it aims “to play a role in the renewal of the conditions for human flourishing”. So far, it offers only a one-year masters in humanities. Tuition is also currently free, as is room and board, valued at \$60,000.

Hurley drives me along winding coastal roads towards Marathokampos, close to where 24 Ralston students are spending two months in Greece before returning to the college’s main campus in Savannah. Hurley is discussing the current state of higher education. “When my students tell me they worry about what they can and can’t say, I say to them, ‘Look, you live in an unbelievably exciting time to be at university.’” A car hurtles past us around a blind corner. “When I was at university, ideas often felt merely abstract. But we live in a moment now when ideas obviously really matter.”

The next morning, I walk into a room with French windows looking out on the Aegean. The class is packed around a few long tables, scattered with textbooks and water bottles bearing Ralston’s emblem, assigned by the College of Arms in England. It has two mottos: *Animus crescat* (Let your mind thrive) and *Sermo liber vita ipsa* (Free speech is life itself).





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Joseph Conlon, director of the Greek programme, is pointing at a painting projected on to a whiteboard. He makes a joke, at which the whole class erupts into laughter. This would not be very remarkable were it not for the fact that the joke is in ancient Greek, which the students have been learning for less than three weeks. They take turns reading out passages, some fluently, and sing a poem written by Sappho of Lesbos, before spilling out into the midday heat. “It’s almost like the ghost of Sappho is conjured up in the room, and we’re communicating directly with her,” Conlon says to me after class, unintentionally echoing the brochures of American liberal arts colleges boasting of their study-abroad programmes. “It is something magical.”

Conlon, 34, says people tend to take one of two approaches to the past, both of which are mistaken. “The first is the rejection of the past and the addiction to progress. The second is the conservative way, in which we put the past on a pedestal. But there is a third way to interact with the past, and it’s most elegantly expressed by the humanist scholars of the Renaissance,” he says. “We should develop a friendly rivalry with the ancient thinkers.”

The longer I talk to him, the harder it is to restrain myself from telling Conlon that he is the spitting image of an actor who plays a wealthy honeymooner in season one of *The White Lotus*, and I finally give up trying. “I wouldn’t know, because I don’t watch films or television,” he says politely. “If you read anything written in the last 500 years, you’re risking your time. The jury is out over whether Shakespeare is important,” he says, without a hint of jocularly. “I do sometimes ask myself: is anything worth reading after Homer? Even Plato might be too decadent.”

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**Blackwood has been working on Ralston** since 2010. He is passionate and, at times, defensive. Unlike UATX, Ralston pre-selected students for me to talk to. They are studious, if intense and extremely on-message. “It’s this invitation into love, an invitation to a movement, joining an ongoing conversation, even an ancient conversation, with friends both living and ancient,” a blonde girl with big blue eyes says to me over lunch. Later, Mari Otsu, a 25-year-old Japanese-Hawaiian artist, tells me she was “desperately lonely” while she was studying at New York University, when she “realised that [she] was in the matrix”. I ask her what she means. “My whole life felt like some version of performing. Whether it was needing to write a paper with a slight ideological bent or signing up for an internship but you needed to write a diversity statement,” she says. “Which has nothing to do with my skill in painting, or my merit in any way.”

The day before our excursion up to Pythagoras’s Cave, I sit down with Blackwood outside his hotel. A gentle breeze is blowing in from the sea. Blackwood, 47, is a man who obviously cares about aesthetics. He wears a dark blue linen shirt, Under a cream linen suit, a pair of tan loafers and tortoiseshell glasses. He twizzles a Blackwing pencil in his fingers while we talk, taking down his own notes when I ask him a particularly difficult question.

I ask about his vision for Ralston. “We’re seeking to provide something transformative,” he says after a long pause. “It’s an opening, more than anything it has to do with enabling, giving students the tools to actualise their own potential.” Blackwood insists that, like UATX, Ralston is non-political. “People understand we’re not about certain kinds of nonsense, we really aren’t going to be ideological, and we’re also not going to be cowed into saying, ‘Oh, my goodness, I’m so offended!’” — he flaps his hands in the air. “No.” This vision almost never came to fruition. Blackwood struggled to raise money, until his friend [Jordan Peterson](#) got involved. (He declined to comment on this article.)

Peterson, a Canadian psychologist, professor and bestselling author, might be the most famous public intellectual in the world. He is certainly the most notorious. Since coming to prominence in 2016, he has increasingly veered towards deliberate provocation. But Peterson’s star power helped open doors for Blackwood.

## **It's insane you can get a Literature degree without reading Shakespeare. That's not decolonising the curriculum**

Jacob Howland, UATX dean

At a London dinner in late 2021 at the Garrick Club, Peterson introduced him to Paul Marshall. The event took place during Peterson's visit to the UK to give a lecture at Cambridge university at the invitation of divinity professor James Orr, who is also a fellow at Ralston. Hurley, Marshall's son Winston and Douglas Hedley, another Cambridge theologian and member of Ralston's board of visitors, were there too.

Paul Marshall eventually became one of Ralston's main financial backers, but Blackwood declines to tell me how much he has given. Since then, the college has raised about \$45mn in all.

In September, I arrive at the headquarters of Marshall Wace, the \$63bn hedge fund that Marshall runs from Sloane Street in London. A pair of huge wooden elephants from India guard the entrance. Behind them, an unlit Diptyque candle is placed on a glass coffee table next to an artificial plant and a copy of the Financial Times, not the Telegraph, for which Marshall is [readying a bid](#). I'm shown to an airy room, and Marshall appears with his trademark crop of reddish spiked hair, dressed head-to-toe in various shades of blue.

Ralston is not the first school Marshall has given to. He set up The Marshall Institute for Philanthropy and Social Entrepreneurship at the London School of Economics in 2015 with a £30mn donation, and funds a London theological college, St Mellitus, that now trains about 30 per cent of Britain's clergy. "It's very rare that you find somebody with such a strong vision and passion and dedication," Marshall says of Blackwood. He "had been waiting and waiting, and all he needed was the money", he adds, settling down on a green velvet sofa. "I get on with him and work with him extremely well and with Jordan extremely well. We completely see . . . the world in the same way." Peterson is Ralston's chancellor.

Marshall explains that, if he believes an existing institution still has enough that is good in it, he will donate. But, "I prefer to do things from scratch which are going to be big institutions than just give money to something that already exists," he says. "It's kind of a legacy, I suppose."

Ralston is at pains to emphasise the ceremonial nature of Peterson's role and to point out that it is not some kind of "Peterson University". One of those already exists, or will soon. Along with his 31-year-old daughter Mikhaila Fuller, Peterson has co-founded an online university, dubbed Peterson Academy, to teach students "how to think, not what to think".

I talk to Fuller via video chat. She is dialling in from the house she has just moved into in Scottsdale, Arizona, with her new husband and her six-year-old daughter. She is camera-ready, with perfectly tousled blonde hair and flawless make-up. As well as being Peterson Academy's CEO, Fuller hosts a podcast and is an ambassador for the Lion Diet — a meat-only regime which her dad also swears by. Her diet consists of a New York striploin steak for breakfast, a New York striploin steak for lunch and then a New York striploin steak for dinner. Sometimes she allows herself some soup. What's in it? "Oh, it's just pressure-cooked meat," she says cheerfully. "It's kind of just mushy steak."

Fuller turns to how the academy will work: professors deliver eight, hour-long lectures on subjects they are passionate about. These will be available to stream for \$40 a month, similar to what's offered by the likes of MasterClass and BBC Maestro. Some professors have already filmed courses: James Orr on Plato; Oxford theologian Nigel Biggar on colonialism; as well as Peterson.

Because the academy is a for-profit enterprise, professors will be paid an initial fee, plus a share of revenue, depending on how many students they attract. How much, Fuller won't say. The seed money, about \$3mn, came from her and Peterson.

Students who want a Peterson Academy "general education degree" — unaccredited — will have to watch 90 eight-hour-long courses. In a promo video, Peterson explains that the reason to get one is "because otherwise you're going to be a useless, resentful, bitter, pointless, counterproductive lump". The contrast with the language at Ralston about human flourishing or the common good at UATX couldn't be more stark. Yet the Peterson Academy was born out of similar frustrations. In fact, it was founded a month after UATX was announced, right around the time of the Garrick Club dinner.

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**When I asked myself later what I'd learnt this summer**, it occurred to me it wasn't an accident these findings coincided in December 2021. In hindsight, that seems to have been a high-water mark for the so-called culture wars. And it was a particularly fraught time in academia. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, a non-profit that tracks attempts to sanction scholars, counted 213 such incidents on American campuses in 2021. The figure dropped to 149 in 2022 and is on track to drop again this year.

There is also a fairly rich American tradition of founding education institutions at moments of intellectual and actual dislocation, including Dartmouth College and Stanford University to name only two. Something permanent, at least hopefully, in times of change.

Then again, Fuller had told me that, if you really wanted, you could cram the entirety of the Peterson Academy in four months. "It is a lot like YouTube," she told me. "I also think that people can go on YouTube and learn as much as they could in a university." Peterson Academy didn't have an official launch date, but it would definitely be in November, she said, adding: "I don't wanna get wrapped up in Black Friday sales."

*Jemima Kelly is an FT columnist*