

Can the New University of Austin Revive the Culture of Inquiry in Higher Education?

Its founders seek to build a scholarly home for pluralism without creating a haven for the “anti-woke”

SOCRATES, WHO SAID “All I know is that I know nothing,” is a role model for Pano Kanelos, president of the new University of Austin. Socrates never stopped asking questions, even when the Athenian elite charged him with impiety and corrupting the youth of the city-state.

“Socrates was very disagreeable,” says Michael Shellenberger, who will teach about politics, censorship, and free speech at the private university. “People hated him so much they decided he had to die.”

The University of Austin, which will admit its first class of 100 undergraduates in fall 2024, hopes to create a “pluralistic community” devoted to “argument and inquiry,” says Kanelos, a Shakespeare scholar who headed St. John’s College in Maryland, which is known for its “great books” curriculum.

“It’s easier to build something new” than to change existing institutions, says Shellenberger. The author of *San Fransicko* and *Apocalypse Never*, he started on “the extreme left” but became a “hard to classify” pronuclear environmentalist. “The moment is right,” he says.

One might say the moment is perfect. The rich have revolted: “Pissed-off billionaires” and miffed millionaires are pledging not to give any more money to Harvard, Penn, Dartmouth, and other elite universities. They’re urging wealthy friends to close their checkbooks, too.

While most of these disenchanted alumni hope to return their alma maters to their original academic mission, others want to start fresh. What if there were a new university with no DEI administrators, no tenured professors, no dorms named after “problematic” donors of yore, no baggage?

A “heterodox” group including historian Niall Ferguson, writer Bari Weiss, biologist Heather Heying, and entrepreneur

Joe Lonsdale came up with the idea for a new kind of university during the pandemic. Among advisers and potential faculty are social psychologist Jonathan Haidt; economists Glenn Loury, Tyler Cowen, and Deirdre McCloskey; writer and activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali; playwright David Mamet; columnist Sohrab Ahmari; writer and social critic Caitlin Flanagan; philosophers Peter Boghossian and Kathleen Stock; and legal scholar and activist Nadine Strossen.

Many on the left see the University of Austin as a reactionary political enterprise or perhaps *The Revenge of the Canceled*. “Everyone is trying to drag us into the culture war,” says Kanelos. He’s determined to resist. He doesn’t want to run an “anti-woke” university or establish a haven for conservatives or libertarians or Christians or . . . well, anyone.

University of Austin students, who will be chosen on the basis of test scores, grades, and a willingness to take a chance on something new, will not be offered intellectual comfort.

“True learning is uncomfortable,” says Shellenberger. “If you’re comfortable, you’re probably not learning.”

The University of Austin raised \$230 million in two years from 2,600 donors, including 113 who gave six- to eight-figure gifts, according to Kanelos, putting the university’s developers way

ahead of their fundraising goals.

Since the start of the Ivy donor revolt, “we’ve seen a shift in funding” from established universities to alternatives, says Kanelos. “Someone who gives us \$10 million isn’t giving to their alma mater.”

Thanks to its donors, UATX will offer four tuition-free years to its “founding class” of 100 undergraduates. About 2,500 students have applied.

For subsequent classes, Kanelos hopes tuition will be

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By JOANNE JACOBS



Socrates never stopped asking questions, even unto his execution. The University of Austin is following suit with what all hope is a better fate.

\$32,000—half of what Harvard charges.

He hopes to launch a lean, efficient, teaching-centric institution. There will be no leafy campus, no quad or bell tower, and, of course, no football team.

The new university is renting space in a historic downtown landmark, the Scarbrough Building, which once housed a department store.

Students will live downtown in shared apartments—they'll do their own cooking—and shuttle to their classes. They're expected to start their own clubs and activities.

While teaching will be face-to-face, most administrative and support jobs will be outsourced to a hub in Guatemala to keep costs down.

The University of Austin is authorized to grant degrees by the state of Texas and has applied for accreditation. It had to

file 1,800 pages of documents to start the accreditation cycle, which takes five to seven years (see “A New Hope for Higher Education,” *features*, page 40). Across the country, a would-be university must define its mission, submit a financial plan, and show that it can fulfill it. A new university must also explain how it will assess its success, delineate its governance plan, and describe its admissions criteria, facilities, and so on.

Until the university is fully accredited, which won't happen until the first class graduates, students won't be eligible for federal or state financial aid, such as Pell Grants for lower-income students. That makes it hard for a new university to recruit students—unless it has generous donors to fund financial aid.

The University of Austin will not admit students based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status. That sort of diversity is not a goal. The university wants “intellectual pluralism,” creativity,

leadership, and “commitment to our principles” of inquiry, says Kanelos. And students must be prepared for academic rigor as shown by their high school grades, class rank, and test scores.

The University of Austin has tested its appeal by offering a summer program it calls Forbidden Courses—so named “because higher education has made it difficult to inquire openly into vexing questions with honesty and without fear of shame,” according to the UATX website. Kanelos says that the program has drawn young people with diverse ideas and backgrounds.

In their first two years, University of Austin undergraduates will take interdisciplinary “intellectual foundations” courses in philosophy, history, literature, quantitative reasoning, and science.

The program is not unlike the great-books curriculum at St. John’s, says Kanelos. But St. John’s is all great books for four years. In the second two years at the University of Austin, students will choose a focal area of study and work on “applying knowledge to solve broad-based problems.” He hopes students will work on projects with local think tanks, companies, and civic and governmental groups.

As the home of Texas’s flagship university, the state capitol, and a thriving tech sector, Austin offers a lot of learning opportunities.

If all goes well, UATX will enroll 200 students in the second year and will get to 1,000 students in four years, Kanelos says. “Then we’ll decide where to go from there.”

Small University, Big Impact?

The University of Austin can’t change the nation’s academic “monoculture” on its own, but it can be an “extraordinarily significant” first step, says Frederick Hess, education policy director at the American Enterprise Institute. “It proves what’s possible, plants a flag, and provides a welcoming, scholarly home for influential heterodox scholars.”

One of the founders, Niall Ferguson, a senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, explained in *National Affairs* how the new university’s constitution aims to protect freedom to learn and freedom to teach.

He proposed a tripartite division of powers with the university president as the executive, the board of trustees as the legislative branch, and an independent judicial panel appointed to protect academic freedom, free speech, and other rights.

Professors will not be offered tenure, Ferguson writes. “We believe this no longer protects academic freedom but merely creates perverse incentives. In many cases, it breeds conformism before the award of tenure and indolence after it.”

The University of Austin will have no faculty senate, he adds. “We do not believe the most skilled employees at an institution should play the part of legislature—a role that

properly belongs to the board of trustees.”

In addition, the criteria for admission, graduation, hiring, and promotion are “strictly without regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, or religious faith.”

The university will not take positions on political issues, concludes Ferguson, who will join the faculty.

Fifteen to 20 professors will be selected from almost 1,000 applications, says Curtis Guilbot, the chief operations officer. “The quality of faculty applicants has been exceptional.”

Among the hires announced are economists Robert Topel and Kevin M. Murphy from the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business and Morgan Marietta, who resigned as chair of the political science department at the

University of Texas at Arlington after he was told not to schedule events without prior approval (a discussion he led on Israel and Palestine was disrupted by pro-Palestinian demonstrators).

The University of Austin is not the only new academic venture in town. Elon Musk, who moved to Texas in 2020, plans to spend \$100 million to create a K–12 school in Austin focused on math, science, and engineering and, eventually, start a university.

“He’s not giving the money to us,” said Kanelos in a December 2023 interview. “Just as well.” Kanelos no doubt

suspects that it’s hard to stay independent when you get too close to a multi-billionaire.

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A Difficult Undertaking

Starting a new college is a daunting enterprise. Just ask Stanley Fish, who was recently involved in launching Ralston College in Savannah. “It took about a decade of fundraising and planning and gift-giving,” Fish said in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* interview.

Ralston hopes to “inspire a movement of intellectual freedom and courage,” wrote Stephen Blackwood, the president, in a 2021 article in *The Federalist*. “Ralston does not seek to be the conservative David to the leftist Goliath. Our goal is education, not indoctrination.”

But so far, Ralston, which is seeking accreditation, offers only a one-year master’s in liberal arts.

The University of Austin has larger ambitions, more financial support, and excellent timing. The zeitgeist is a-changing. It’s likely to recruit students and faculty, teach courses, award degrees, and win accreditation. But will it be seen as a place of discussion, debate, and inquiry—or just “anti-woke?”

Joanne Jacobs is a freelance education writer and blogger (joannejacobs.com) based in California.