



MFI STUDENT BRIEFS

Menard Family Initiative Brief Economic Articles


How can the free exchange of ideas improve knowledge and learning in our society?

PREPARED BY

*Menard Family Initiative
University of Wisconsin-
La Crosse*

EDITED BY

*Adam Hoffer, PhD
Matthew Style*

UW
**MENARD FAMILY
INITIATIVE**

How can the free exchange of ideas improve knowledge and learning in our society?

edited by Adam Hoffer, Ph.D., and Matthew Style

cover art by Paige Schumacker, UWL Digital Media Studies & Design Minor

Table of Contents

Mixed Feelings about Mixed Economies <i>by Josh Bourget</i>	2
The Independent Mind <i>by Amberly Roeck</i>	14
Challenging Change <i>by Delanie Johnson</i>	17
Environments <i>by Emily Van De Hey</i>	21
Knowledge and Learning <i>by Sophia Mendoza</i>	23
Looking and Seeing <i>by Carlisle Mead</i>	27

Mixed Feelings about Mixed Economies

Josh Bourget

“The best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market” (Healy). Two centuries ago, Supreme Court Justice Holmes introduced the idea of viewing ideas using the basic principles of economics. The only way to decipher a bad idea from a good idea, as with businesses, is to test it in the market. Given that this fundamental principle is true, it is puzzling to see a free society with more information than ever becoming more irrational, a truth I have experienced firsthand. While the complete deregulation of ideas can stunt learning and knowledge, the free exchange of ideas is essential to innovation, breaking down the barriers to learning, and preventing irrationality from obstructing reality.

When an individual learns new information, that information can be applied to the individual’s unique set of knowledge and perspectives that have been acquired through lifelong learning. After the new information and the individual’s unique perspective collide, new ideas are formed in the individual’s mind that, if the individual is a participant in a marketplace of ideas, are then shared with other individuals. If these ideas are realized in physical goods or services, these goods and services can be shared as well. This constant ping pong effect results in constantly increasing knowledge and learning in society. The invention of the X-Ray is a perfect microcosm of this effect. In 1895, Wilhelm Röntgen accidentally exposed his hand to a mysterious ray that showed shadows of his bones on a nearby screen. Röntgen freely shared his discovery around the world, and when other individuals learned about the invention, they had more

knowledge to apply to their own lives. When the idea collided with the unique perspective of medical professionals, they had new ideas of how they could use X-Rays to detect diseases, breast cancer, and broken bones (“The stories”). Although most of the ideas exchanged in society are not as monumental as the X-Ray, realizations, and ideas are constantly being exchanged in a free marketplace of ideas.

Historically speaking, learning and knowledge improve when obstacles to the free exchange of ideas are removed. The Renaissance, for example, was modern society’s first jump towards a vastly educated society. Before this “rebirth” of secular thought and art, the church exclusively allowed religious information to be taught. Although it would take hundreds of years for society to separate church and state affairs, The Renaissance released the church’s firm grasp on information, allowing “learning to spread quickly throughout Europe” (“Renaissance”). Whenever learning and knowledge have been obstructed in history, governments or religions have typically been the culprits. In contemporary society, however, the obstacles to learning and knowledge are relatively new.

While in my Political Theory 251 class, I debated with students who identified as socialists and libertarians. Their positions challenged my deeply held belief that maintaining a mixed economy is vital for human progress. Two decades ago, my belief encompassed most Americans (see fig. 1). As depicted, the political divide between Americans remained consistent and small from 1994 to 2004. Mysteriously, starting in 2011, the political divide in America began to radically grow (see fig. 2). This divide is alarmingly seen in scientific matters as well as social matters; 78 percent of Democrats believe global warming is caused by human activity while only 24 percent of

Republicans agree (Ghosh). While there are many sources of these disparities, the biggest source is the congested exchange of ideas. The vast collection of human ideas and scientific findings is available to everyone through the internet, but most of this information is inadvertently lost in its journey from the internet to the human mind through two industrial machines: social media algorithms and for-profit mass media. As explained by Ian Bremmer, a foreign affairs columnist for Time, social media algorithms are “actively designed to capture more ad revenues and attention, often achieved by promoting extremist and misleading content,” and mass media has “over time fragmented into more and more niche offerings until consumers could “enjoy” only those viewpoints that reinforced their own” (Bremmer). As a result, many Americans do not consistently receive competing beliefs and are driven to more extreme and irrational ideas. This effect can be illustrated by a lack of competition in the physical market economy. If, for example, Apple had no competitors, a halt to innovation and regression in the quality of the phone would be inevitable. When this situation is translated to a marketplace of ideas, the product, the phone, would be replaced by an idea, such as economic theory, and the company, Apple, would be replaced by a distinct belief, such as socialism. If Americans believe in socialism or libertarianism and do not receive competing beliefs, they will cease to innovate intellectually and will become entrenched in their primitive beliefs. Subsequently, when confronted with opposing beliefs, instead of reacting with interest, these Americans will react with anger at the perceived absurdity of the opposing belief. This phenomenon explains the unfavorable opinions shown in figure 3 and the reason I was unsuccessful in changing the minds of my socialist and libertarian classmates.

Figure 1:

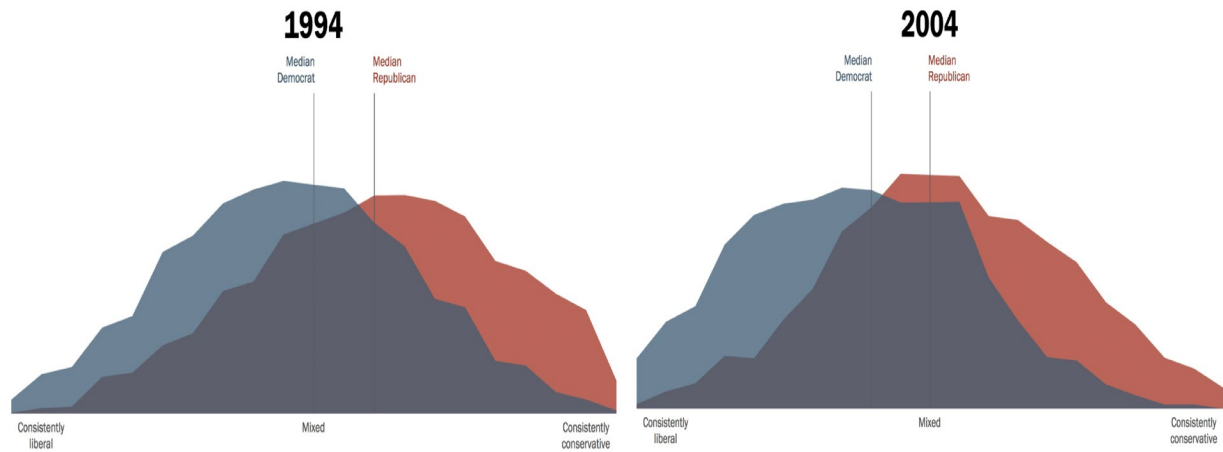


Figure 2:

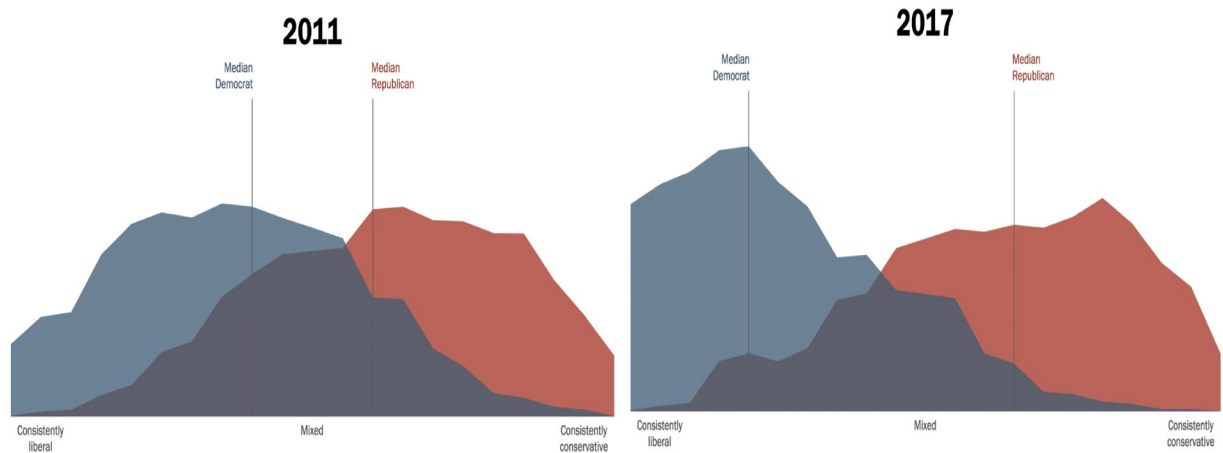
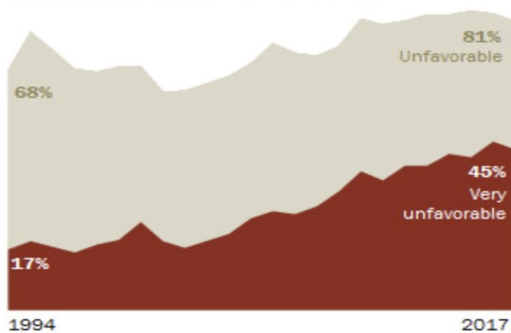
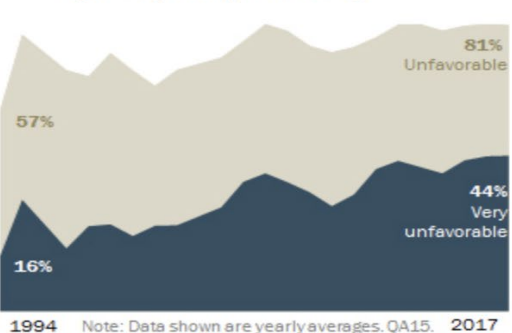


Figure 3:

% of Republicans and Republican leaners who have a _____ opinion of the Democratic Party



% of Democrats and Democratic leaners who have a _____ opinion of the Republican Party



Note: Data shown are yearly averages. QA15. 2017 Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017.

Although economists typically recognize three categories of resources, land, labor, and capital, one could also view information as a limited resource. The principal dilemma in economics is how we can best manage our scarce resources. If “scarce resources” is replaced with information, the sentence becomes “how we can best manage our information.” We do not best manage our information by surrendering it to capitalist machines. Consider the following thought experiment. Imagine each parcel of information floating around in society as an apple ready to be picked. When the harvester collects the crop, the best apples are picked first because the harvester will receive the most money in exchange. Picking the bad apples would be foolish as the harvester would receive almost nothing in exchange. Information is a different kind of commodity, however, and some “bad apples” of information make the harvester, or the media company, more money. Consuming a bad apple gives the consumer terrible nutrients and possibly even food poisoning. Similarly, consuming bad information gives the consumer terrible nutrients in the form of thoughts, ideas, and examples and can lead to the poisoning of the mind. After media companies give customers enough “bad apples” of information, they will likely engage in extremism and encourage polarization in society. Accordingly, information must not be seen as a capitalist commodity but as essential for society such as schools, roads, bridges, and the military. Society needs reliable knowledge, but there is no financial incentive for businesses to provide it. In this societal situation, the government usually provides the necessary altruistic measures. Therein lies the problem, however, as stating the government must regulate information sets off alarms in all American minds. Fortunately, there is another solution: individualism.

Contrary to a popular contemporary narrative, and even a contention alluded to recently in this essay, social media, and for-profit mass media companies are not the root cause of the rising polarization and extremism in America. Many people want to blame biased media, but the truth is America was built on biased media. The New York Post was created in 1801 to promote the Federalists' agenda and to attack Anti-Federalists. "Biased news" was invented by Horace Greely, founder of the New York Tribune, when he gave opinion writing its own page in 1841 ("A Short"). Ultimately, the individual is responsible for allowing extremist views to permeate the brain and choosing to be hostile to fellow Americans. The individual is what the Enlightenment, which birthed America, is about. As defined, "(the Enlightenment) A European intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries emphasizing reason and individualism rather than tradition" ("Enlightenment"). The American government was predicated on the belief that the individual is a capable, rational actor when accountable to other people. If people are not checked and balanced, a human with too much power will become a tyrant. When allowed to be lazy, a human will be lazy. When given the chance to make a lot of money, greed will cause a human to do anything to succeed in those endeavors. For this reason, the founding fathers created checks and balances, a federalist government system, and, most importantly, democratic elections to ensure leaders stay rational. The flaw in this system is exposed, however, when the people become irrational because, naturally, irrational people will not elect rational leaders. Fortunately, there is a third sector of society that checks the people.

The health of the "civil society," or the third sector of society, has been and will be, the key to American learning and sharing of knowledge. Civil society comprises

altruistic organizations that provide support, community, and understanding to individuals and can range anywhere from robust families, churches, and sports leagues to large universities, nonprofit organizations, and labor unions (Ingram). These associations are full of diversity, differing ideologies, and, most importantly, love. It is difficult for liberals to hate conservatives if they play basketball, pray, or volunteer with them. When Alexis de Tocqueville, a French writer, visited America, he observed that “Americans of all ages, conditions and all dispositions constantly unite together ... to hold fetes, found seminaries, build inns, construct churches, distributes books, dispatch missionaries to the antipodes ... establish hospitals, prisons, schools,” and “to highlight a truth or develop an opinion by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association.” Based on these observations, Tocqueville remarked “the only way opinions and ideas can be renewed, hearts enlarged, and human minds developed is through the reciprocal influence of men upon each other.” With the decline in civil society (see fig. 4-7) leading to the decline in “the reciprocal influence of men upon each other,” loneliness is spreading rapidly across American society (see fig. 8). According to Alexander Sherer, a writer for UC Berkeley, isolation is associated with “a minor but cruel distortion of reality. They are simultaneously hyper-aware of social queues and more likely to misinterpret those queues negatively,” leading to an increased susceptibility to irrational and extremist views such as “far-right ideology” (Sherer). Only when coupled with this isolation, do social media algorithms and for-profit news media cause polarization and extremism to arise.

Figure 4:

Figure 1. Percent of adults who have informal interactions with neighbors a few times a month or more

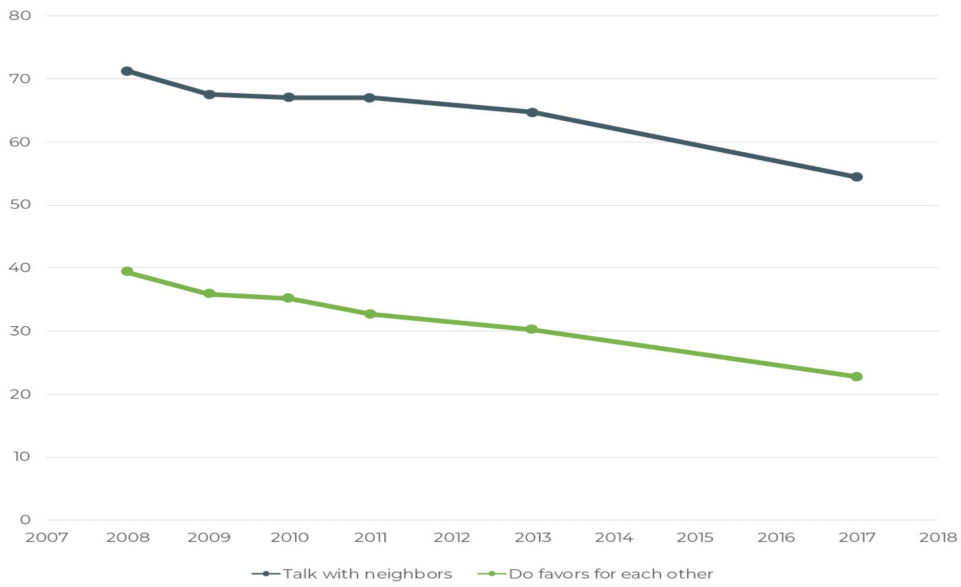


Figure 5:

Figure 3. Percent of adults who agree that “most people can be trusted,” by educational attainment

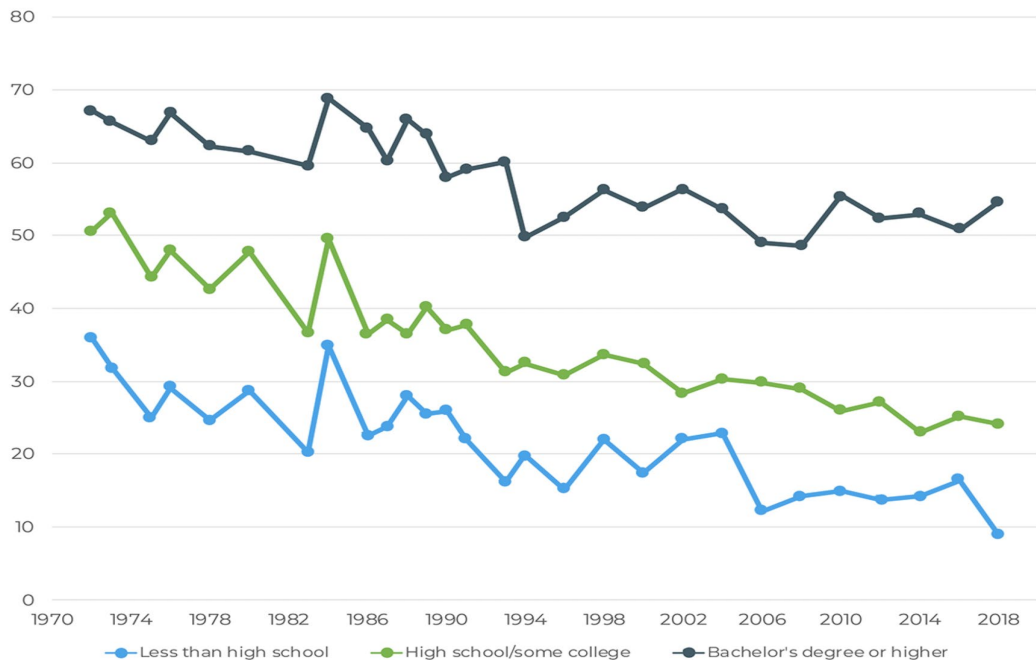


Figure 6:

Figure 4. Religious attendance among U.S. adults

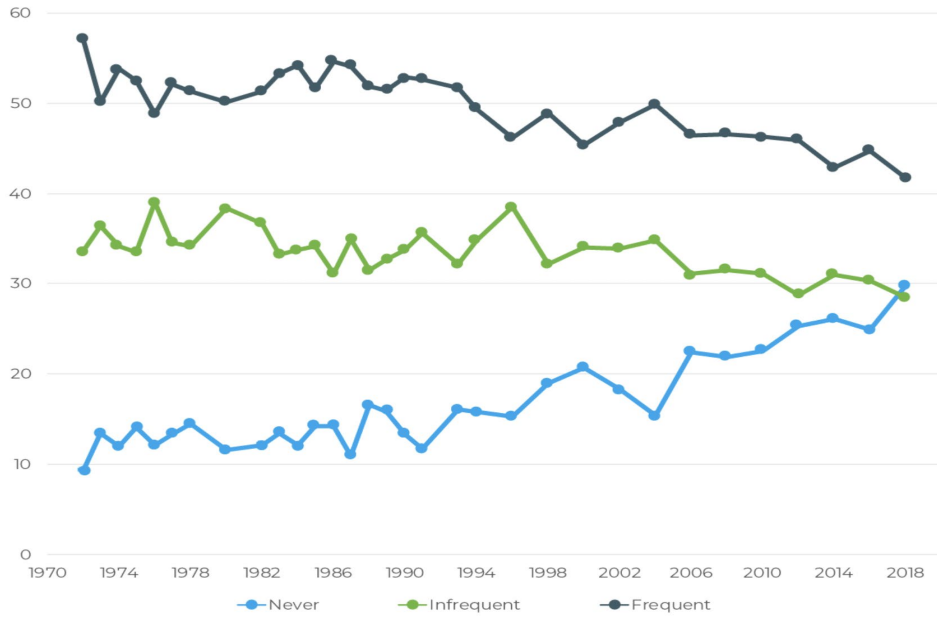


Figure 7:

Figure 8. Percent of adults who are members of at least one voluntary association, by educational attainment

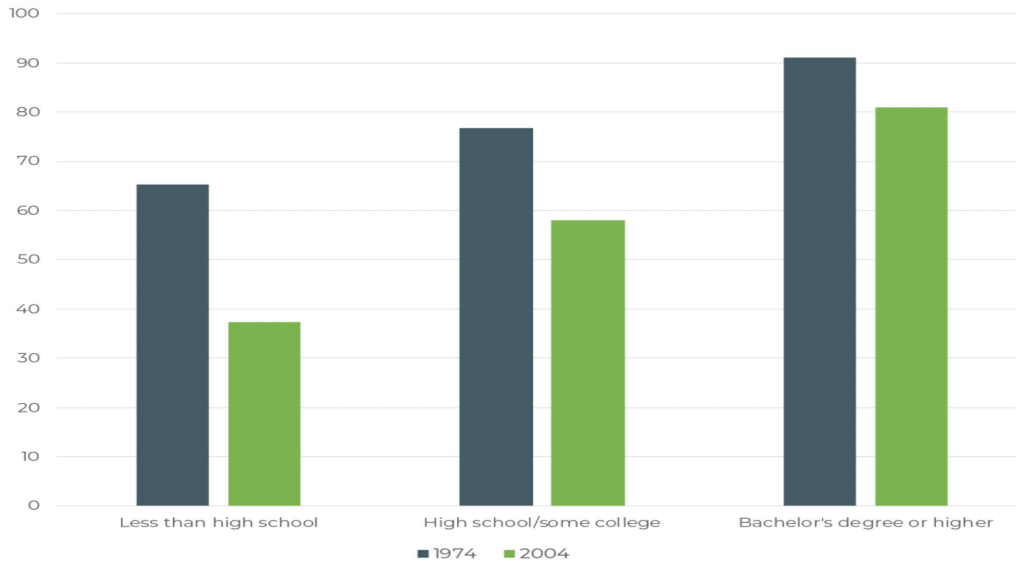


Figure 8:



Undoubtedly, teaching Americans the importance of civil society will be difficult, but it is essential to maintaining the benefits of a marketplace of freely exchanged ideas. Innovation relies on a national and global marketplace of ideas, and learning requires a miniature marketplace for everyone where individuals constantly consider new ideas that compete to create new knowledge or change old knowledge and beliefs. In tandem with these free marketplaces, society needs a strong civil society to continue learning and prevent irrationality. Without the free exchange of ideas, society will become a desolate communist society. On the other hand, without individual regulation in democratic governments which empower the individual, society will become irrational chaos. After all, “it is the talk of the bourgeoisie and not the smoke of the factory that leads to economic growth” (The interplay).

Works Cited

- Fig. 1. Fig 2. Fig 3. Ghosh, Iman. “Charts: America's Political Divide, 1994–2017.” *Visual Capitalist*, 25 Sept. 2019, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/charts-americas-political-divide-1994-2017/>.
- “The Interplay of Free Speech & Economic Growth.” *CASS - Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies*, <https://casstt.com/post/the-interplay-of-free-speech-economic-growth/283>.
- Healy, Thomas. “The Unlikely Birth of Free Speech.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Nov. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/09/opinion/free-speech-holmes-supreme-court.html>.
- Bremmer, Ian. “Why Is America so Divided Today?” *Time*, Time, 16 Jan. 2021, <https://time.com/5929978/the-u-s-capitol-riot-was-years-in-the-making-heres-why-america-is-so-divided/>.
- “Renaissance Causes and Effects.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Renaissance-Causes-and-Effects>.
- “The Stories behind 20 Inventions That Changed the World.” *Mental Floss*, Mental Floss, 20 Sept. 2021, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/648542/inventions-changed-world>.
- “A Short History of Opinion Journalism.” *A Short History of Opinion Journalism* | *Stony Brook Center for News Literacy*, <https://digitalresource.center/content/short-history-opinion-journalism>.
- “Enlightenment: Meaning & Definition for UK English.” *Lexico Dictionaries* | *English*, Lexico Dictionaries, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/enlightenment>.

Ingram, George. "Civil Society: An Essential Ingredient of Development." *Brookings*, Brookings, 9 Mar. 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/04/06/civil-society-an-essential-ingredient-of-development>.

Stid, Daniel, and Daniel Stid is director of the Madison Initiative at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. He oversees the foundation's eight-year. "Civil Society and the Foundations of Democratic Citizenship (SSIR)." *Stanford Social Innovation Review: Informing and Inspiring Leaders of Social Change*, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/civil_society_and_the_foundation_of_democratic_citizenship.

Fig 4. Fig 5. Fig 6. Fig 7. Committee, United States Joint Economic. "The Space between: Renewing the American Tradition of Civil Society." *The Space Between: Renewing the American Tradition of Civil Society - The Space Between: Renewing the American Tradition of Civil Society - United States Joint Economic Committee*, 18 Dec. 2019, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/analysis?ID=78A35E07-4C86-44A2-8480-BE0DB8CB104E>.

Fig 8. *Bizjournals.com*, <https://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/news/2021/01/15/why-loneliness-in-america-is-rising.html>.

Sherer, Alexander. *America the Lonely: Social Isolation, Public Health, and ...* <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2021/03/25/america-the-lonely-social-isolation-public-health-and-right-wing-populism/>.

The Independent Mind

Amberly Roeck

All human beings grow up under the influence of others, the influence of teachers, media, and peers. If lucky, children grow up in a loving household with values, beliefs, and opinions passed along to them by their parents. During childhood and adolescence, cognitive introspection is predominantly formed through listening and watching others. Minors are taught to listen to adults, follow rules, to think the same as their elders. This is how I grew up. I followed the rules, listened to my parents, practiced the same values as my teachers, and held the same opinions as to the caregivers in my life. Transitioning from childhood to adolescence, my values and opinions evolved from those of my caregivers to those of my friends. During my adolescent years, the need to be independent of my parents led to deeper conformity with my peers. This resulted in the continuation of the inability to think for me.

Before attending the university my thoughts, values, and beliefs matched those of others. The immense allure to conform to friends during my adolescence years blocked my ability to question other people's opinions, disagree with their thoughts, and express my thinking. Conforming to others is a natural process of growing up. The feeling of belonging overpowers one's autonomy. As a teen, I can remember feeling anxious about what others had thought about me if I did not conform to the norm, whether it was a certain hairstyle, fashion, or the "right" group of friends. At one point in high school, I would wake up two hours before school started just to make sure that my hair and clothes would look exactly how I wanted. Once at school, every single one of my peers

would be dressed almost the same, that was how I knew I had successfully done my job of getting ready for school. Never once at that age did it cross my mind that being independent of others was a powerful trait to have. It was not until I started college that I began to think freely.

The years from eighteen to twenty-five have been (deemed) “emerging adulthood,” a stage in the lifespan of human development. (Lazzaro M.C)¹ During these years most young adults attend some form of higher education institution, whether that would be a trade school, two-year year school, or four-year university. Emerging adulthood is a time to explore identity, autonomy, and independence. This is a time in life when mistakes are supposed to happen, when one’s opinions are questioned, and when personal values are challenged. Thinking back to my very first day of college sitting in a classroom surrounded by other freshmen, I remember feeling an overwhelming sense of opportunity. The opportunity to learn from professors, fellow peers, and experiences inside and outside of the classroom. The feeling of opportunity to think autonomously and to be free from conforming thoughts had finally terminated the craving I had felt during my years of adolescence to speak my mind. I could finally be free. I was free to form my own opinions, re-examine the values my superiors had passed along to me, and argue my ideas on topics I had disagreed with. From day one of sitting in a college classroom I knew that I could be my own person and create my own thoughts as a young intellectual scholar.

¹Lazzro, Julie M.C. *Lifespan Development*. E-Book, Published Pressbooks, 2020.

Higher education teaches students how to think critically. Regardless of the area being studied, students learn how to think independently, debate questions that arise from challenges, and look inside themselves to understand their values and beliefs. In the university setting, students can discover and learn who they are, how they want to think, and how to be valuable contributors to society. The free exchange of ideas is an invaluable part of a successful society. Education is a tool that can never be taken away; once education is pursued it will remain. Those who attend a higher education institution learn how to share opinions and share ideas that enrich the lives of all. The free exchange of ideas creates a world of compassion, resilience, and the desire to pursue one's dreams.

Before attending a higher education institution, I believed that the only way I could be accepted in society was to think like others, dress like others, and be like others. The need to conform outweighed any type of independent thought I had. After attending a higher education institution, I now know that being a valuable contributor to society requires autonomy to think freely. My deeply held value of conforming to others has been replaced by the freedom to think independently, the ability to listen to others' opinions while continually questioning my own beliefs, and the desire to contribute to society by engaging in the free exchange of ideas. Being a young scholar in the higher education system, I learned that independent thought is the most imperative tool for successful accomplishments. It allows for individual choice, establishes one's own opinions, and validates that people are the source of their actions. I am a major advocate for higher education and a believer that one can change from confirmative thinking to independent thinking, just as I did.

Challenging Change

Delanie Johnson

Coming to college is a big change. Students are coming from many different parts of the world. They are leaving the comfort of their home, their community, for a new town, with new people, a new school, and sometimes even new beliefs. I came from Waukesha, WI. In the last few years, Waukesha, WI has been known for a few things. #1. The Waukesha Christmas Parade. #2. The ‘Slender Man’ Attack. #3. The school district that briefly denied free lunch for students. Living in Waukesha, WI has not been too glamorous.

Being from Waukesha, WI has shaped my views and beliefs. I went through many different harmful experiences, going along with the different decisions that were being made for residents. I never really felt like I had a say. I always felt like I never knew enough to speak up, that my voice wasn’t important, and that no one was listening to me, to begin with. Although I wanted to use my voice, it just never felt like enough. It never felt like I could hold my opinion, that it was easier to agree with others than it was to say my piece. It felt easier to back down, to stay quiet. It felt easier to agree, to move on. Nothing could change with just my opinion.

At the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, my beliefs have been challenged multiple times. The most important one is the way I value my voice.

It was interesting to be here for the first time. In my first year, I was still quiet. There wasn’t much for me to say, there wasn’t much for me to do, I still felt like politics

did not need to involve me. My privilege allowed me to stay out of politics until my junior year of college.

My first class that challenged my voice was Sexual Health Promotion taught by the wonderful Dr. Keely Rees. As someone who came from a conservative town, it was interesting to hear how someone could talk about sex freely, without any worry or shame. In this class, not only was our voice asked for, but it was also respected. Going into this class with an open mind was one of our ground rules. This meant that when I would walk into class, I tried my best to always leave my judgment at the door, to leave my current, overwhelming thoughts, at the door. To me, this meant that I could present my thoughts, and others could present theirs and we could learn from each other. I could see a new point of view; I can see a different understanding; I can understand someone else's background.

In October 2021, a UWL student experienced sexual assault by other peers who also attend UWL. This was an eye-opener. In the next class with Dr. Rees, we addressed the current situation that was happening on our campus. When hearing everyone's stories, experiences, and reactions to the event that had happened to our peers, something inside me knew I needed to do something. I knew we needed to shine a light on this situation, I knew we couldn't let this happen again. But how was Delanie supposed to do this? My voice doesn't mean much.

I talked to Dr. Rees, who challenged my inner beliefs and has taught me the biggest lesson of all at UWL. She looked at me and told me about the domino effect. That one domino falling can influence all the rest. She told me about the importance of

my voice, and how I need to stand up for what I believe in. She gave me the confidence to demand change. To be a leader. To start the conversation.

In our sexual health class, I told my peers that something needed to be done. That we cannot let our students continue to get hurt. That we need to address the sexual assault on this campus, and we need to fight for change. If the individual who was assaulted did not feel like they had a voice, who was going to try to give it to them?

Our class decided it was our time to shine a light. We decided as a group that we will host a Sexual Assault Survivors March and we will take back the ramp. So that is what we did. We teamed up with the many different organizations on campus, we made signs, banners, and balloon arches. We got our peers, and about 200 of them showed up to march with us.

By shining a light on my fears and beliefs, I was able to make such a difference in this world and campus. And that all came from individuals around me who were able to offer a different perspective on life and ideas.

Being able to share and challenge inner beliefs and ideas, can change the way that individuals truly see the world. Being stagnant in our ideas, we as people will not grow. The free exchange of ideas allows individuals to share different wisdom that they have studied or even experienced on their own. With their development of ideas and our open-minded listening, we need to grow and change our minds based on the different and new information that we may learn. By learning from each other, we can see different sides and perceptions we never thought we would see and makes a difference in our outlook on life.

In my case, being able to challenge my thoughts and ideas came with a whole new set of rewards and growth. And I am a better person for that. I was used to my beliefs at home. I knew I didn't agree with them, but I didn't think I had a place in politics. Until I got the UWL.

Environments

Emily Van De Hey

Living on campus during the pandemic and the 2020 presidential election was difficult to manage. Many people made their beliefs and ideas known. However, it was the uncomfortable living environment that made it tiresome. Many refused to listen to others, as they only thought their reasoning was right. I lost a friend because she did not understand my political beliefs even though she never wanted to hear my logic. Living in a confined space and being unable to leave made conflict and discussions arduous to avoid. I believe free exchange of ideas should be allowed and invited among everyone; however, I think it is important how it is stated and for everyone to listen.

Making thought-out statements is important when expressing ideas with others who have differing opinions. If someone is not careful and offends the other, the other person will no longer listen and be open to your ideas. Last year, I felt some people around campus did not have supporting reasons for their beliefs. Yet, people would get into arguments. Someone was wearing a Trump hat, and it started a disagreement outside of the Whitney food center. This environment made it difficult to share my thoughts, as I knew it would get nowhere. However, if everyone invited differing opinions, people would have been more knowledgeable about the topic and could have formed a stronger understanding and opinion. It is important when someone suggests an idea that people are listening with an open mind and ask questions after.

Listening may seem very easy, but it is very critical. My friend and I knew we had different opinions about the election, so we decided that we would never talk about it. I did not want to lose her, so I thought refraining from our thoughts was the best idea. However, during the last election and being on campus, it was difficult to avoid when we were with each other. I noticed she stopped texting me and started posting her beliefs all over social media. I ignored the posts because she had the right to share them until she posted that she could no longer be friends with people affiliated with a different political party. This changed the election for me. Everyone became very divided. I did not text her after this because I could not see how she made the election more important than our friendship. I hope real friends would allow me to believe what I want without them casting judgment. I do not expect my friends to have the same beliefs as me, but I think having a respectful environment and being able to listen if I need to is essential. Through this all, I did find friends that were caring and respectful. I found out my dorm roommate and I had differing voting preferences, yet this did not impact our relationship. I learned more about why she voted the way she did, which was helpful to consider before making my decision.

As a result, I hope when the next biggest controversial topic is discussed frequently on campus, people can be more open and inviting to everyone's opinions. I believe this will allow everyone to become more knowledgeable in the topic because then they will better understand both sides. Consequently, people will make the most informed, knowledgeable decisions. This can be started by ensuring that someone has surrounded themselves with an honest and respectful environment and by having supportive friends.

Knowledge and Learning

Sophia Mendoza

They say diversity is the way to success in society in our current world. Ever since moving countries at the age of thirteen, I have had many of my deeply held ideas, and beliefs challenged the more I live new experiences.

Being a part of La-Crosse's 3.36% population of Hispanic or Latino students has led to many of the opportunities I have received. Before beginning my life in the United States and moving here from Mexico, I never knew being a part of a minority group would come with benefits. I primarily began to realize this as I made my way through college. Without hesitation, the faculty and staff at my university made me feel comfortable and gave me the resources I needed before even beginning my first semester at UWL. Having an office just for those like me at my university put an image in my head that we, minorities, are unique and, in a way, "better" than the rest. Because being bilingual and having on your resume that you are a part of a multicultural student organization looks good, and not all get to do this. Of course, we all have a background story of the many challenges our parents and us faced when migrating to the United States and dealing with culture shock and a language barrier.

A month ago, this deeply held belief that I was peculiar to those around me, being bilingual and having lived in a different country half of my life, was challenged. I have always believed that being bilingual can open many doors, achievement-related and knowledge-related. For example, it allows me to know double the words that a monolingual individual does. I understand and can listen to double the number of songs

and movies and have double the book options to choose from. However, most do not think about the lifestyle, culture, and people knowledge you gain. I never knew this idea of myself that I had created could be challenged, considering my previous experiences at school and my day-to-day life.

Not soon upon arrival in Frankfurt, Germany, for my semester abroad did I realize the idea I had of my stay here was unlike what I expected. As soon as my roommate opened the front door to allow me inside, I saw the truth of Frankfurt's internationality. My roommates from France, India, and Germany have demonstrated this. I have met and become friends with people from France, South Korea, Mexico, South Africa, Spain, Brazil, Denmark, Chile, Portugal, Morocco, Bangladesh, and more within the first month of my stay here. For the first time in my life, I was not the only minority. Living in the U.S., I was the only one of my friends who spoke a second language and whose English was a second language. If I measured myself compared to these incredible individuals regarding multicultural knowledge, I would be at the bottom of the roster. All the people I have met here can speak at least three languages fluently. It was then that I realized I was not as "unique" as I had thought my entire stay in Wisconsin; I just had to see the world from an unfamiliar perspective.

Although I am in Germany, I have spoken more Spanish here this week than I ever have in a month back in the U.S. This is an example of how languages can allow you to communicate with other individuals who, in this case, prefer Spanish over English. I can be engaged in Spanish-led conversations between individuals from Mexico, Spain, France, Chile, and Portugal. Now, imagine being trilingual and the endless opportunities it would generate.

Riding the tram back to my apartment one night after having dinner in the city center, I came across an individual who reinforced this new realization. My friend and I laughed at my face mask being crooked when this man sitting across from us began laughing. We soon realized he spoke English and could understand us. The conversation did not take long to initiate, which started by sharing where we were from and why Frankfurt had brought us here. He shared he was from Nigeria and had lived in many countries and was now working a new job in Frankfurt. He emphasized his willingness to meet new people and learn new languages and cultures. He stated that "the more languages you know, the more people you will meet and get to know... and the easier it will get to continue learning more". Although his English was not perfect, I understood his meaningful thought processes.

Through my own experience, I have seen the way people behave when they are knowledgeable and willing to learn compared to when they are not. Usually, those restricted from learning and sticking to their own beliefs and current knowledge tend to be less open-minded. Although there are many traits someone in this category may lack, being open-minded and bridging cultural gaps are the most important. These characteristics can allow one to have a completely distinct perspective on the world and their own life. Once I began traveling and had to communicate with others whose first language was different from mine, I noticed I became more thoughtful of others, more patient, and more willing to learn. My desire to know more about where the new people I am constantly meeting come from, their history, and past experiences have become noticeable. This has led to my perceptive mindset regarding other cultures I did not

previously know and has allowed me to become a better listener and speaker to others who do not speak perfect English or Spanish.

Although I am American and Mexican, I had plenty more to learn when arriving to study abroad. I was used to a comfortable lifestyle and had not changed that routine in years. Being exposed to a new place and having to cohabit with individuals distinct from yourself has been the ultimate test. My roommates and I have learned many new things solely from sharing a home. We share our experiences and, therefore, ideas with each other, which makes us smarter. As a result, our brains are more developed and mature regarding diversity. This knowledge will forever allow us to succeed in our future lives, whether at a job, traveling, or collaborating with new individuals. These experiences show how the free exchange of ideas can improve knowledge and learning in our society.

There is so much more outside what I am today that I want to become and achieve. I am now learning German and plan to become trilingual by the end of my stay here in Germany. Speaking German in a German-speaking country will open new doors for me and unlock previously unknown ideas I will forever carry with me. Although the deeply held belief I initially had of myself that I was as cultural as possible was proven incorrect, I aspire to let others know my story. I know that there is much more for the community I surround myself with, back at home, to learn and discover. I plan to share everything I experienced and learned with all my friends and family as authentic as can be.

Looking and Seeing

Carlisle Mead

"The question is not what you look at, but what you see." This quote by Henry David Thoreau, an American philosopher from the 1800s, defined my perspective on minorities within the US when I entered college. It means that one must ignore looks to understand a person on a deeper level—or so I thought.

Growing up a female with three sisters in a community that did not always see girls as a blessing showed me at an early age how harmful other people's belief can be to someone. For example, my uncle told my father that he was not a real man until he had sons. While my dad loves having girls, this accusation has stayed with him for decades because no matter what he said, this unfair opinion could not be changed. This one statement created a wedge between him and my uncle that they both struggle with even today.

When I was 12 years old, I watched my oldest sister graduate from high school, creating a role model for me to eventually follow. However, despite her being a strong candidate, an amazing speechwriter, and a performer, the graduation ceremony denied her the opportunity to give her class commencement speech because there was a boy who also wanted to do it. I remember her crying, and both my parents fighting the decision, but nothing changed. The only impact of fighting the decision was that several people refused to talk to my family afterward, which in our tight-knit community was very hurtful. When I graduated high school, several years later and after significant changes to the community, I believed that girls had a fair chance to give our

commencement speeches. However, despite having a classmate who competed internationally at speech contests, once again, a boy was chosen. However, I did not attempt to fight the decision. I was furious, but I had already learned that being furious did not change anything. I desperately wanted someone to acknowledge that just because we were girls did not mean that we had less ability or validity, so Thoreau's quote spoke to me. Instead of wanting to be viewed the way society views females, I wanted someone to see me for my confidence, skills, and value.

I then applied my desire to everyone who struggles with bias. Because of my own experiences, I believed that all minority groups and people should be treated the way I wanted to be treated; ignoring our differences so that people can each be equally valued.

It was only after I entered college that I heard the term for this; colorblind. Colorblindness is an ideology of treating everyone equally regardless of race, culture, or differences. My very first class within my major discussed this topic extensively, and it was here that I began to question my interpretation of Thoreau's statement. My professor in this class was female, as well as Hispanic. She told the class several of her own experiences, and one of them was very similar to my own. However, she responded differently than I did. She had a pride in her sex and culture that I did not. Because of this pride, she wanted to be both looked at *as well as* seen. This was one of the first times that I understood that just because I wanted something, it did not mean that everyone else would react the same way.

Through the class, I explored more about colorblindness and my ideas. Colorblindness seems like a positive thing, valuing every person equally without bias.

However, we discussed how if a person is only seen, but their race, sex, culture, or ability is not acknowledged, it invalidates a part of them. A part of them is not being seen in a philosophy that seeks to see a person for who they are. Being female is a cornerstone of who I am, and without it, are people seeing me? Because this class challenged me with this thought, I began to change my beliefs, coming to understand Thoreau, to instead be saying one must both look and see a person.

This was all done because the classroom was set up to encourage open conversation among equals, including the professor. The professor shared her experiences, but she did not expect everyone to agree or have the same reaction to the experience. She allowed us time to formulate our own opinions and share them. This is unlike high school classes, which often do not allow students time to create their own opinions or freely exchange their thoughts with one another. Because of this, students enter college or the workforce with limited interactions with ideas outside their own.

When I decided to go to a public university, I remember people telling me that the college would “indoctrinate” me. However, in a college classroom, I had more opportunities to share my ideas and listen to other people than I ever had before. I learned about people and groups that I have never heard of and interacted with people who had experiences I could never imagine. Because of this, I have naturally changed my beliefs and opinions. Therefore, I learned that for free exchange, there must be opportunities.

Arguably, however, free speech and opinion are available to anyone with the internet, and students like me, are especially active online. If you want to say something, there are multiple platforms and people to listen to anything you might want to say.

Social media connects people from all over the world. For example, I have friends in Japan, China, and the UAE. I have been able to stay in contact with friends from high school, whom I have not seen in years. There are so many opportunities to interact and engage with people because of modern advancements.

However, we still see a deepening divide between people because of differing opinions. In the US, this can especially be seen in the increasing divide between political parties. According to Pew Research Center, every current issue is almost completely polarized among Republicans and Democrats (Dimock and White, 2020)². What is interesting about this research is that depending on the narrative you listen to, the reasons behind this are different. For example, Republicans tend to believe that the issue is due to the indoctrination of young people and loss of common morals among people, while Democrats claim that the issue is because of growing White supremacy among Republicans. Both agree though, that one contributing factor is Confirmation Bias, which is people's tendency to only listen to opinions that they already agree with.

We see then, that with modern technology, free exchange is possible and easy, but people are still growing apart. The internet and social media make this much easier because we can stay in touch with those people we agree with and are not pressured to go out and listen to other beliefs. This is the issue with the free exchange of ideas today. It is not that we cannot speak and listen, but that society does not want to. It was only after I went to college and took a required course that I was exposed to new ideas.

²Dimock, M., and Wike, R., (2020). "America is exceptional in the nature of its political divide," *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>.

Therefore, the exchange of ideas must become a goal of individuals so that our knowledge can be improved, and we can all learn. This is the true issue that Americans face today and one that does not have an easy solution.

Free exchange of ideas can help reduce the gap between political parties, create closer relationships among people, and bring about new perspectives to individuals. However, we must first overcome our proclivity, to only listen to our own opinions before a true, free exchange of ideas, is possible.

About the Editors

Adam Hoffer, PhD

Dr. Hoffer is the Director of the Menard Family Midwest Initiative for Economic Engagement and Research and an associate professor of economics at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. He earned his undergraduate degree from Washington & Jefferson College and his Ph.D. from West Virginia University. Dr. Hoffer is the coeditor of the edited volumes *For Your Own Good: Taxes, Paternalism, and Fiscal Discrimination in the Twenty-First Century* and *Regulation*. His academic research has been published in journals such as *The Southern Economic Journal*, the *Journal of Sports Economics*, and *Journal of Economic Education*.



Matthew Style

Matthew is a Researcher at the Menard Family Midwest Initiative for Economic Engagement and Research at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. He earned his undergraduate degree in Economics from James Madison University and his MA in Economics from George Mason University. At the center he leads the student discussion groups surrounding current event economic topics and has been conducting research looking into the political consequences of industry concentration in various United States counties as well as examining the migration patterns of workers moving from state to state.



About the Center

About the Menard Family Initiative

The Menard Family Midwest Initiative for Economic Engagement and Research (MFI) was established in 2019 by a gift from the Menard Family. MFI's mission is to engage participants in economics through experimental research and enriching, interactive experiences to ultimately discover answers to our social, economic, political, and legal challenges. The MFI provides UWL students more opportunity to learn economics through hands-on experiences and community engagement. Through research and engagement, the Initiative's work highlights effective solutions and helps advance positive change.

Research and Engagement Areas

- Regulation
- Tax and Budget Policy
- Economic Opportunity
- Sports Economics
- Innovation
- Political Economy
- Behavioral Economics

Visit us at <https://www.uwlax.edu/center/menard-family-initiative/> to stay up to date with all that is going on with the center.