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Transcript

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Hello, and welcome to our Oxford Student Voz, a podcast by the Oxford Student Union where we bring together students and the people shaping the university to ask questions, share ideas, and imagine the future of Oxford together. My name is Wanto T Wanto. I'm the President for Postgraduate at the Oxford Student Union. This series was developed from my office to strengthen the connection between university leadership and the student union, ensuring that student voices remain central to Oxford governance and community life. Through these conversations, we aim to open up the dialogue between students and decision-makers, helping everyone better understand how the university works and how we can be able to work together to improve it. Today's episode, Traditions, integrity, and student voice, safeguarding Oxford academic community, explore one of the oldest and most respected institutions within the university. I'm talking about the Proctor's office. I'm honored today to be joined by Dr. Grant Tapsia, a fellow of Lily Margaret Hall, Associate Professor in the Faculty of History, and this year's Junior Porter of the University of Oxford. Always thank you of service to Oxford, Dr. Tapsiel has held several leadership roles, including Vice Principal, Dean of Degrees, and Chair of the Faculty of History Committee for Library Provision and Strategy. His work reflects a deep commitment to academic integrity and fairness, and his value ensures that he sits at the heart of Oxford's mission. Dr. Tapsiel, thank you for joining us today. The Porter office plays such a vital role in upholding the principles that define Oxford, yet it is one of many students often hear about. And I'm so excited to be able to start this conversation with you. How are you today? How are you feeling in this weather?

Grant Tapsell

It's a pleasure to be here. I was just saying to you a few minutes ago, I'm not sure that many of my predecessors in the medieval period would have imagined that one of their successors would be sitting doing a podcast one day, but here I am.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

I mean, I probably would say it's the growth of intergenerational conversation, new wave of modernity. But it's such a privilege, to be honest. I was saying to my friends

today that I'm going to put this in my resume that I had a privilege to host a podcast with the porter at the University of Oxford.

Grant Tapsell

Well, hopefully you won't step out of line and I'll have to discipline you at any stage in the discussion.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Obviously, I know the rules and regulations, so I'm going to stay in tight. But it's very, very, very much exciting in terms of the various issues that we look to be able to talk about. the first and most critical issue I want to talk about is your experience. You know, just a student who is interested in understanding who Dr. Tacio is. What would you say?

Grant Tapsell

In general terms or as Proctor.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

I would say maybe we could probably integrate general terms and then come to Porter.

Grant Tapsell

Well, in general terms, I'm an Oxford educated person. I was an undergraduate here in the 90s at Lady Margaret Hall at LMH, where I came back as a fellow in 2011. So I've been back in the system for about 15 years. I spent time elsewhere in Cambridge and in St Andrews as well. So I've been employed at the three oldest universities in the English-speaking world, which has been a huge privilege. And For the last nine to 10 months, I've been LMH's proctor, and that's only the third proctor that's ever come from my college. So it's a particular privilege to represent LMH in the broader university.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

That's very impressive. And there's a very key word that you staged on which I want us to be able to look directly. The title proctor immediately involved also a deep sense of tradition, God, formality, and the centuries of governance. which is what I've been privileged to see in most of the committees that I share with you. Yet, there are few who truly grasp what the portal office does or what it matters to the daily lives. And I'm very much interested in having an understanding, maybe as a historian, we might have a lot of rich knowledge in terms of what is the portal office.

Grant Tapsell

The proctors themselves are an ancient part of the university. Your millions of listeners can't see me as we're talking, but if they could see me, they'd see that I'm sitting here in very traditional garb, black suit, white shirt, white bow tie, white academic bands,

looking very much as proctors have for a very long time. And proctors date back to at least the very early 13th century in Oxford. They have always been connected with student discipline on the one hand and with university governance on the other. And in pre-modern times that was very, very hands-on. So proctors would patrol the streets at night looking for unruly academic behaviour as the wantos of the day reeled out of pubs or engaged in other forms of illicit activity or to disarm them in the streets to take away unauthorised weaponry from them and fined them for those kind of things. It was a very hands-on policing kind of role and they were very prominent in university governance as well, particularly debates in congregation. And over the years, proctors got into a lot of trouble. Henry IV imprisoned proctors in the Tower of London. In the 1640s, parliamentary committees grilled the proctors of the University of Oxford because Oxford was a great royalist establishment at the time. So we've always been scrutinised by various people, both inside and outside the university. These days, the proctor's office, which you referred to a minute ago, is much bigger than just the two proctors. There are always 2 proctors. and very importantly a third person called the assessor whose role is also perhaps not widely understood or as understood as it should be in the university. And the three of us run an office with, as it were, a permanent civil service of about 12 staff undertaking a lot of the main administrative and investigatory work upon which we can then make various forms of decision. And also we oversee the assistant proctor's office and the proctor's officers. So the bowler hats that you will see around, particularly the students around and about exams, we oversee those. And in our ceremonial activity, we're also supported by the Bedells and the University Verger. So again, from a student point of view, matriculation, graduation, those kind of formal occasions, the proctor's are leading a much broader team and being supported by a broader team of other people.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Wow, that's a very impressive draw down. And I mean, ultimately, the historical nature about it is very fascinating. I wouldn't have anticipated that brought us back in the AHP where we'd get in trouble, which is very fascinating. In our Oxford identity, built over centuries of tradition, the university also faces the constant pressure to involve students now studying hybrid classroom. We have now set digital assessment, which is live through social media as well. At the same time, the proctors are guidance of rules, fairness, and ethical framework, just as you just lay out. And this has guided generations of Oxford students. How do you personally navigate that tension between preserving long-standing custom and addressing the new realities of student life and academic practice, especially from looking at your knowledge of the time in the past and the current?

Grant Tapsell

I suppose one way of answering that question would be to challenge juxtaposing tradition on the one hand and contemporary challenges on the other, as if they're distinct and different. And you could instead say that there are a number of timeless things that proctors are concerned with. And you were starting to gesture towards those, things to do with academic integrity, maintaining the fairness of systems, ensuring that we have a rules-based approach which is regularly and fairly applied rather than arbitrary justice. And that's really ultimately what the proctors are about, trying to maintain the system as a whole. We're not representing a particular constituency, whether that's the central university admin, whether that's the colleges, whether that's academic staff, whether that's students. We're supposed to be responsible for maintaining the best interests of the institution as a whole, a very tough thing to try and do.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Especially with the complexity in governance.

Grant Tapsell

Absolutely, absolutely, which is the kind of thing you only fully appreciate when you're doing this kind of job and sitting on so many committees around and about the place. So it's really about trying to maintain the rules and the regulations in a fair and equally applied way. That's what we're most interested in.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Sure. And it's very interesting in terms of your academic perspective of leadership. You have an incredible background, as I just lay out in the introduction. You spent many years as an academic historian and a tutor and a college leader. And in your role now, in the most prestigious role, serving as a proctor at the university. How does your scholarly and administrative experience inform their approach to the role of GM Proctor? And how do you translate this into academic insight and into regulatory leadership?

Grant Tapsell

Well, it's extremely flattering that you figure all of this in terms of a prestigious role in the glittering academic past. I'm not sure I recognize either of those descriptors, but it is very important who the proctors are and what they represent. So 1 shorthand for what we are is, if you like, average dons in the quad who are brought into the central university and are giving that kind of perspective. So very often in a committee meeting, I think it's important to have someone at the teaching and research coalface saying, that doesn't really make sense, or have we got the balance of spending right? Why aren't we talking more about these kind of priorities rather than those kind of priorities? And to be able to say those things without dire fear of retribution. We are very

independent. We have to be able to criticise things. It is about scrutiny, and quite often that means you're somewhat unpopular. But it is a one year job. You come in, you do it as honestly and fairly and independently as you can.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Sure.

Grant Tapsell

And then you disappear in a puff of smoke and go back to your teaching and research and your college and whatever subject you work on. And I think that's a wonderful tradition and hopefully something that the university will maintain for hundreds more years to come.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Yeah. And it's true. I've always loved the sound of the world, unless if you want to be unpopular, which is very interesting. This comes with a lot of demand, especially in terms of the role you hold and the responsibility and the ethical principles as well. From a student, as a student representative, in my role as president for postgraduate, we frequently engage with the proctor office, especially around committees. I've had the privilege to be with you in as many committees as possible, in council, in education, so many. Those exchanges review how crucial collaboration is between university authorities and the student union. Students are often seen as the first where procedure feel opaque and outdated. And when partnership works well, it is shaped with reform and strengthened as well. From your perspective, how can this relationship between the proctor office and student leader evolve? And how might the Student Union and Commonwealth play a greater role in promoting integrity and fairness?

Grant Tapsell

There's quite a lot there. He pauses hesitantly before offering any thoughts. As now to your cost, and as I know to my cost, there are a huge number of committees across the university. It's a very complicated system and structure, and aspects of that can be frustrating. As a proctor, most weeks during full term, I'll be reading many, many hundreds of pages of papers, usually several 100 pages each evening, preparing for the next day. And sometimes one's tempted to throw hands up in the air and say, this is just too unwieldy. There's a degree of repetition between committees. There's this problem, there's that problem. But overall, I think I'm relatively positive about this because it is highly consultative. It is bringing in a lot of voices, including the voices of the proctors and of the student union as well, which in a more centralised and inverted commas, rational or lean structure, might not be heard in quite the same way. So I think some of that committee work is the price we pay for having quite a representative, complex institution that protects the rights of lots of different people. In terms of how that's to be

strengthened going forwards, which I think was the latter part of your question. Well, that's a difficult one. As you know better than anybody else, the student union's been through a process of organisational change and internal reform and renewal.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Sure.

Grant Tapsell

And I think it's probably too early to say too much about how that's panning out. I mean, in a minute, I'd be interested in hearing your views on that and how it's actually working. I think as Proctor, we hear different kinds of things about this. So on the positive side, As things weren't going very well in the student union a couple of years ago and the system now seems rather better and calmer and to be involving more people. And we see the four of you of the permanent student sam's going out around the committees and sharing the burden in very effective ways. And that's great. This sort of conference, the common rooms kind of approach that's been adopted. On the other hand, sometimes we hear sceptical voices. How is that adding value above and beyond groups of JCR presidents or MCR presidents? What is that particular new layer actually doing? And like much else in Oxford, we'll see in time as institutions bed in. So I think I would be cautious to say we should do A, B, or C going forwards because we're still seeing how the new system works out.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

True. And I definitely agree in terms of the transformation reform. I mean, ultimately, what we've seen over the period of time is seeing how our culture work. And I think the Common Room provide a very comprehensive engagement for students, especially with our new procedure where students can own their own motion and they can be able to present their own motion for change. And as president for postgraduate, we also have effective layers like the MCR where we made twice a term in MCR press comp to incorporate MCR president views on how governance should go. And then I do think the governance, the complexity also in terms of different layers of university and collegiate structure creates a very fascinating engagement process in Oxford. And it brings me down to a very interesting question as well, which is centered around transparency and support. Obviously, transparency is extremely essential for trust. What are in academic appeal in disciplinary hearing? The student need to feel the pressure is feared and it's also human. Could you share how your office is working to make this system clearer, more accessible, and supportive, particularly around those navigating them for the first time, and who would just want to see how the process, maybe an informed perspective to add to that response also would be how is the procedure of, you know, ensuring ethical integrity and fairness or disciplinary measure with the portal office?

Grant Tapsell

Gosh, you ask huge questions. This is a tough podcast to come on. Well, going back to that complexity word, yes, of course, being a collegiate university raises a lot of specific issues. I love being a fellow of a college. I think the collegiate ideal is a wonderful one that we have to maintain and it's all of our responsibility to allow future generations to enjoy the collegiate experience that we all enjoy now and our predecessors have enjoyed for a long time. But it's obviously true that different colleges have different levels of resource and there's a good deal of discussion going on around the university, both amongst academic staff and amongst students, about different aspects of that. Insofar as how the Proctor's Office fits into things, As you will know, if there are disputes between students at the same college, then it's primarily an internal matter. And as far as discipline goes, college deans are the key players within that system. And once a term, the proctors meet with the collectivity of the deans of degrees to discuss issues affecting one or both sides. I think that's a good thing, maintaining those kind of central and local connections. Insofar as how students interact with the proctor's office and what they experience there, well, do some research. I think there's a huge amount of information on the university website about what we do and with whom to liaise. And we are relevant to students in a number of ways. So one of those is to do with academic discipline. Another is non-academic discipline, which is a growing and increasingly complex part of our business. You'll be aware that the university statute, Statute 11, that affects student conduct changed recently. So there's huge amounts of work on both of those sides. And then we're also relevant to students in two other ways. One is thinking about clubs and societies, the registration and regulation of university clubs. And the other, coming back to that third person in the team I mentioned earlier, the assessor. So not the two proctors, but the assessor. And the three of us work together very, very closely as a team. The assessor's job is overwhelmingly to think about issues of student welfare. And as you will know, he chairs a number of committees to that effect. And oversees the distribution of quite a lot of money within the university system as well. So issues of discipline, issues of clubs, issues of welfare and funding, and there's a good deal of readily accessible online material to help you access different parts of that.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Yeah. It's a very interesting understanding that I also found very resourceful for me as well. And it comes back to engagement. For many students, the proper office only becomes visible during moments of stress and appeal and complaint or academic review. So the limited contact with the office seems distant or disciplinary rather than protective for some students who may have that view. What do you think students' most perception of misunderstanding about the portal office role and how might the office communicate more effectively to help students see it as an ally in fairness rather

than simply an authority figure. And this is, because if you mention the portal office, obviously there is a nuanced kind of view about it. It's just only view for disciplinary, but there are a lot of productive aspects that a lot of students don't know about the portal office. Now, I'll be very excited to see how can we be able to change the perception and make the Porto office to become an ally for students.

Grant Tapsell

Well, it would be lovely if we were carried around the streets by cheering throngs and thanked for our hard labors, but let's stick to attainable goals, I think. I agree. I think for most students, when you hear proctors, you sort of clutch the table in fear and think, well, I hope I never really directly encounter them. And there is an inevitable disciplinary function. That's partly what we're for, is to clamp down on various forms of bad behaviour. And that should be in the interests of the vast majority of students. It's for everyone's benefit that we clamp down on poor behaviour, or efforts to undermine the integrity of various forms of assessment, whether for undergraduate students or postgraduate students. So we are trying to uphold the best of the whole community. Now that's often a hard argument to make and you're looking sceptically at me across the table as I say this even now. What else can be done? I think perhaps two things to highlight. One is, and it's something that proctors have talked about for several years, but it still doesn't seem to be registering with a lot of people, is that the proctors are actually bound to oversee and facilitate lawful protest, just to talk about one area of what we do. And actually that's not being taken up. People don't approach us to discuss those matters and therefore sometimes one ends up in the position of having to flick into a more disciplinary mode because things have been done inappropriately or excessively. So we could be about facilitating lawful protest on the one hand. And secondly, on the other, I mentioned a few minutes ago the changes to Statute 11, the statute governing student conduct. And within that, many of the biggest changes have been to do with harassment and various forms of sexual misconduct. And the university has been very committed to a greater role in investigating various forms of harassment. The Proctor's Office includes several expert caseworkers, former members of the police force, specialists in this area of investigation who can now go out and in a very sensitive and expert way investigate allegations around even very sensitive issues. And again, I think that's something which is only slowly percolating through our very complex collegiate university. such that more and more people will find out that there is an ave for address for a number of problems and issues in the proctor's office. And at the moment, they still perhaps don't fully appreciate that. But over time, they will. That's just two instances.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Very interesting. And there's something also really incredible that I probably will also look to see your perspective is the transition into AI. and which across most of the

committees we sit across, this is one of the fundamental conversations we have. And I know you have an opinion specifically on that as well. What is your viewpoint on the transition of AI in terms of the present and futuristic outlook from the issue of fairness, equity, and academic competence as well?

Grant Tapsell

It's A gigantic issue. It's an issue that I think the university is rather playing catch-up with and I wish some of the discussions which are now happening at pace, as people like to say, had happened at pace several years ago. There are a number of working groups that have already reported or are now starting. So we've had a year-long working group on AI and summative assessment, so thinking about formally assessed work. There's another one now on AI and formative assessments. There's one on AI and admissions. There's one on AI and governance. These things are springing up. And something that we as proctors are concerned about is to try and link these different working groups together and ensure that there is a consistency of approach. I think the AI issue can be very polarizing. So those who are sceptical or critical or worried, and I'm one of them, can easily be pigeonholed as Luddites. Oh, you'd have been against, you know, ATMs, you'd have been against all forms of technology. We'd be living in the dark ages if people like you were in charge. On the other hand, it's easy to caricature the people who are very keen as sort of techno fantasists. And in reality, of course, it's much more nuanced and complicated than that. But I think as the AI working group on summative assessment reported, it is throwing fundamental challenges at the university about how we assess students' work formally, thinking about their degrees, thinking about the integrity of the system, thinking that we can actually trust what is being presented as students' own work. And I'll be honest, which is probably an unwise thing to do on a podcast, and say that as a working academic in a college, I rather buried my head in the sand or simply blithely hoped that everyone was behaving in an honest and straightforward manner. Going into the proctor's office, I obviously had to start dealing with this from a disciplinary point of view and appreciating that people of your generation are simply a million miles ahead of most academics in many subjects, particularly across the university. So it's a huge challenge. How can we capture the best of this new technology in terms of assisting human beings to do certain things more efficiently, more rapidly, more extensively perhaps, but not in the course of doing that, surrender human judgment or descend into various forms of dishonesty. And that's the crux of the challenge. And certainly when I go back to being a college tutor, on the 19th of March, I finish on the 18th of March this year, 2026. I will be very, very firm with my own students about the need to think, do I really want to become very reliant on this technology? If it's about shortcuts, if it's about de-skilling myself, if it's about lessening my ability to do certain things. And I think some of the scientific studies are already posing questions about the impact on cognition and human independence at its starkest level. So I'm hopeful that some of these working groups that I've described are

going to start helping us to put in place firmer and clearer policies going forward. At the moment, I think the technology has slightly run ahead of the capacity to regulate it. And we're in a liminal phase now where we're all trying to catch up.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

And it brings us back to a very interesting question. You have had a long involvement with Oxford Libraries and Achiever Systems. In these spaces are ongoing, rapid transformation. The rising digital database and now artificial intelligence present both promise and risks to scholarship. As someone deeply familiar with how knowledge is stored and authenticated, how do you see libraries and archives adapting to protect academic standards while embracing innovation? And what my good stewardship of knowledge look like in this new age.

Grant Tapsell

Another vast question, another huge thing to discuss. I am passionate about Oxford's libraries. I was fellow librarian of my college. I've chaired the history faculty clips, the library committee there, and been on the divisional committee as well. I think the librarians collectively really were the heroes of the COVID era. Oxford couldn't have carried on functioning in terms of teaching and research at that time without all the work that the librarians did. Not sure they ever received enough credit for that, but it was absolutely fundamental for the university, both students and staff, that they did all that work. I think the Oxford Library system is one of the greatest in the world. A little bit complicated, perhaps, at first blush for students coming into the system. Colleges, faculties, the Bodleian itself, divisional libraries increasingly as well. But overall, it is an astonishingly wonderful system built up over centuries. And I think the university could do more to support it. Oxford's libraries are running on a fraction of the resources of other great universities around the world and I hope that we can recognise that, celebrate that and support them even better in the years ahead. You were asking about technology as well. I am someone who still likes to read physical books as objects and I think it's quite good for taking information in actually to be using a physical book and to be taking physical notes. rather than just peering at stuff on the screen. I appreciate from many of my students that I'm a bit of a granddad in this respect. Granddad technology, they always hurl criticisms at me for this. But the libraries are great places to work. I'm not denying the value of electronic resources. As a scholar, day-to-day, I couldn't live without them. the kind of particularly digitised primary sources from the 16th and 17th centuries that I use all the time. It's great to have this stuff, but I don't think we should neglect the physical holdings of the libraries and the buildings in which they're held. And I think if we do, future generations will scorn us. How stable are some of these electronic platforms? How durable is quite a lot of the material that's there? compared to the books on the shelves. One of the most interesting things I've done as proctor was to go down to the book storage facility in Swindon. Who knew that going to

Swindon was so interesting? But there's a vast warehouse down there with millions of items stored now. The trucks bringing them in every day for us to read in the central libraries here in Oxford. And that was fascinating, seeing the scale of that enterprise and how brilliantly well it's been managed.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

You mentioned one thing which probably will bring us to a closing. You're primarily leaving office in March, which is, again, an unprecedented accomplishment with the system. I realized that it would take how many years to be able to come back to your college for a protest election? Is it going to be 20, 30 years?

Grant Tapsell

It's A 13-year schedule, but that includes the assessorship, three jobs, 39 colleges. So actually, LMH's next election will be an assessor, and we won't elect an LMH proctor again until 2050.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Which makes it extremely prestigious. I mean, you don't, you usually don't like me to say prestigious, but it's a privilege of a lifetime. And it's also historically, one of the most longest lasting office in Oxford as well. Which come back to, the distinct aspect of your legacy, which I will obviously love to hear you reflect on this year. What will you most likely look to have achieved, specifically in terms of your role and say, yeah, this is what I'm proud of, you know, this is something that I leave back as a giant proto in Oxford. And I don't know if it's a tough question, but I do believe it's a deep reflection as well.

Grant Tapsell

It's a very ancient office, but it's something that an individual only does for one year. And that's one of the weird aspects of it. In March, at the end of Hillary term, you're really thrown in at the deep end. We had more than 70 induction meetings with all kinds of different pro-vice-chancellors and chairs of committees and heads of unit within the institution, heads of division and so on to try and understand more about how the university works. So it is a fast-track education. In the early stages, you're desperately running to try and work out how things operate. then you achieve some kind of state of thinking. You actually broadly understand what's going on. I know that these are the big issues that are being discussed, etc. Towards the end of your time, you feel relatively well informed because you've read 10s of thousands of pages of committee papers and you've sat on everything over the year. And then suddenly you're out the door again. So it is this paradox of an ancient, very long-standing institution that's only occupied very briefly where mayflies within the broader institution. I'm relatively... pessimistic, cynical, sceptical individuals. So when you start talking about achievement, I immediately bribe and think, well, actually, most people are terrible judges of what they

actually do. And in order to sleep at night, they exaggerate their achievements in order to feel better about themselves and so on and so forth. I think I hope I have been an honest, forthright and independent proctor and I'll continue to do so over Hillary's term, my last term, and speak out on things that I really care about. And I think the only legacy I would want is the proctor's role to continue within the institution as a whole, that sense of ordinary academics taking up this kind of role and speaking up for core academic values at the centre. And in that sense, as I say, I hope it's a very durable role that will continue for a long time to come.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

Yeah. I mean, this is not part of the questions, but in terms of reform, will you look to have the portal office being more than one year? If that's something that looks fair, do you think one of the best reforms is to expand the timeline for protests?

Grant Tapsell

In principle, one can see the attractions of that in terms of length of experience. In practice, it would be very difficult. Part of the reason for the rotation around the colleges is to involve all the colleges equally in this very important role at the centre, and if you start extending the time that individual people... hold the office, then they rotate around the university much more slowly. So that would undermine that core goal. And secondly, it is a completely bought out role. I'm totally away from teaching and research apart from a very small number of graduate students I continue to supervise. So in a sense, you're putting everything on hold for a year. That's a big ask. And it would be a commensurately bigger ask to say to someone, well, you're going to do it for two years or three years or however long it would be. So I think it might make it a less attractive job for a lot of people to take up if it was extended. So I think on balance, probably best it stays as it is.

Wantoe T. Wantoe

This has been an incredible conversation. Dr. Topseo, thank you so much for taking this time to share your reflection. and experience with us. It has been an enlightening conversation, also helping us all better understand the purpose and importance of the Porter office, not just as a guardian of tradition, but as a key part of the university evolving commitment to fairness, accountability, and student voice. To our listening us, our Oxford Student Voice is a student-led podcast series by the Oxford Student Union. It was created to bridge the gap between university leadership and the student community, giving students direct access to the people shaping Oxford, present and future. Each episode brings together perspectives from across the university and academic leaders to service directors and student representatives, all working together for the inclusive, transparent, and fair at Oxford. Thank you for listening and stay tuned for our next episode as we continue to explore how dialogue shaped the University of

Oxford and how we can be able to continue learning about the incredible role of the world's most prestigious university. Thank you.