

Cultivating Classical Liberal Thought: Inside the New Cato University

By Joshua Hardman

The stakes for free expression on campus are rising even higher, with partisan rancor and illiberal attitudes at dangerous levels. Cato University prepares students to cut through polarization and advocate for a free society.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHIE DOWNS



Hanan Jannoud (center, white shirt) collaborates with other college students from around the country at one of this summer's Cato University events.

You may remember your first encounter with libertarian ideas—that intellectual lightbulb moment when a parable from Milton Friedman, a passage from F. A. Hayek, or a speech from David Boaz suddenly brought some order to a chaotic world. Creating more of those moments for young people is essential to liberty's future.

That's why Cato University (Cato U) relaunched in 2024, with a new focus on college and graduate students. It is crucial that the intellectually formative years for tomorrow's politicians, business leaders, journalists, academics, and artists are truly collegial. Cato U identifies independent-minded, ambitious college students and supplements their education with both the classical liberal philosophy they might have missed and the kind of civil, exciting,

debate-filled social events they desire with peers.

"Many of the applicants for this summer's three-day experiences shared a sense of deep concern about the current political climate," said Sophia Coyne-Kosnak, Cato's program director of initiatives, who spearheaded Cato U's relaunch. "They are witnessing rising illiberalism on both the right and left, deepening political polarization, and they sense that there's less room for open-minded conversation."

Cato University summer sessions took place before the assassination of Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point USA. For some, this crystallized the problems of political polarization and the rise of violence in response to disagreement.

His killing will likely intensify an on-campus environment in which students



LEFT: Sophia Coyne-Kosnak, program director of initiatives at Cato, speaking at Cato University.



RIGHT: Lamiyass Chen, a sophomore at Colby College, engaging a fellow Cato University attendee in conversation.

are tempted to pick teams, express hate, misrepresent opposing political views, and call for political repression.

But surveys and conversations with the politically diverse Cato U attendees generally show they share a common conviction that free speech, free inquiry, and free association are sacrosanct. That was true whether they came from the Ivy League, small liberal arts colleges, or flagship state schools.

“I am still trying to understand how a kid taught in many ways to stay quiet became an adult convinced that speech is the lifeblood of liberty,” said Andrew Hoover, a recent graduate of Creighton University’s Heider College of Business. “But my next step is to practice what I preach.”

For some students, the importance of free speech is rooted in personal experience. Before moving to the US, Lamiyass Chen, a sophomore at Colby College, used an alternate identity online to circumvent Chinese internet firewalls and expand her intellectual world. Chen also noted that in China, “most people are surprisingly indifferent to politics.”

Hanan Jannoud, a University of Pennsylvania junior from Syria, has also studied in Hong Kong, where she saw people imprisoned for political speech.

So, when discourse on campuses alternates between timidity and rage, these students recognize it, even if the causes are different in America.

“The quality of classroom discussions at UPenn declined in 2024, during my sophomore year,” Jannoud said. “Protests and increasingly heated disagreements about policy decisions made many people more fearful and self-conscious.”

Hoover likened intense discussions on campus to conversations between caricatures, where emotiveness, sloganeering, and insults get attention—with social media being even worse. Dylan Landon, who recently completed a degree in economics at the University of Texas, San Antonio (UTSA), remembers people dropping friendships last year because of their professed voting plans.

These are hardly new phenomena, but things seem to have taken a turn for the worse, with many students afraid to express

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their opinions. In a recent survey of 1,500 college students at Northwestern University and the University of Michigan, more than 80 percent said they misrepresented their views in classwork to echo the perspectives of their professors, according to a study by psychology researchers Forest Romm and Kevin Waldman. Seventy-two percent said they self-censored on politics, and 68 percent on family values.

Recent surveys also indicate a concerning rise in students’ tacit approval of violence to repress speech. For example, the day before Kirk’s assassination, the

Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression published its finding that 34 percent of surveyed students said it is sometimes acceptable to employ violence to stop a campus speech. This attitude increased for students in every ideological category over the last three years.

Some of the Cato U students thankfully tell a complex story about their campus cultures—maybe because they are more headstrong or, as a group, come from more open universities.

“Colby College is very blue, but the teachers do a great job of assigning different perspectives in the curriculum and inviting disagreements in discussions,” Chen said.

“There were a few times I felt hesitant to share my perspective at UTSA, especially on polarizing issues like the wars in Gaza and Ukraine or the 2024 presidential election,” Landon recalled. “But the overall atmosphere was one where people were excited to share ideas and observations.”

Cato U creates events that embody what universities are supposed to be about. Students come to learn about public policy and make new friends who share fundamental views about the importance of free expression and individual liberty.

Coyne-Kosnak sets the tone of Cato U during opening receptions:

Cato University is not just a conference—it’s a conversation, and each of your voices is a vital part of that conversation. . . . At the heart of this program is a moral vision: the idea that every individual has inherent dignity and deserves the freedom to

pursue their own goals, so long as they respect the rights of others. It is a moral commitment to recognize that every human being is the owner of their own life. Only under a system of liberty is this the case.

Landon felt that moral vision permeate his Cato U experience. “The scholars were approachable and genuinely interested in engaging with us,” he said.

It is a vision that prompts the students to be intentional about learning from others. “I focused more on listening during Cato U,” Hoover said. “I was reminded naturally throughout of the limitations of my knowledge. I felt more socially generous.”

Jannoud’s time at Cato U was an especially refreshing departure from her campus experience. “I was struck by how disagreements created space for meaningful debate. Students and speakers challenged one another with respect,” she said. “I seek to create similar spaces on my college campus.”

In addition to presentations about political philosophy and public policy, Cato U equipped Jannoud and her peers with tools to create such spaces. One interactive session, “Making a Convincing Case for Classical Liberalism,” was led by Allan Carey, who directs Cato’s Sphere Education Initiatives for middle and high school teachers.

Cato U is on track to host more than 850 students by next year. Some will become Cato interns, research associates, or even department heads. Others will use this experience in Washington, DC (often their first), to land jobs at other organizations committed to libertarian principles.

The post-conference survey data show that the rest return to their campuses with a measurably more classical liberal outlook: greater confidence in human progress, openness to trade and innovation, and thinking of justice in terms of individual rights. Most of those who arrive with doubts about free speech leave with more liberal values.

For example, more than 10 percent of this summer’s attendees said before the event that students should not be allowed to invite campus speakers whom some view as offensive. At summer’s end, only 2 percent felt that way.

One of the largest shifts in attendees’ public policy views was toward health care, with a roughly 10-percentage-point swing in average favorability toward this sentence: “Health care reform should expand market-based solutions, reduce government involvement, and increase consumer choice.”

This is particularly notable because health care was not one of the main discussion topics at this session, indicating that students were internalizing principles rather than basic facts about discrete topics.

We’ll follow the unique endeavors of all these students. Chen is inviting Cato scholars and guest speakers from Cato U to give lectures at Colby College. She also wants to grow the libertarian club there—as of now, it consists of just her and a nonlibertarian but supportive friend.

Jannoud’s ambition is to enjoy a career implementing economic policies that enforce fiscal discipline, such as debt ceilings tied to revenue forecasts or a



LEFT: Dylan Landon, who recently completed a degree in economics at the University of Texas, San Antonio, was invited to attend part of this year’s events as an alumnus.



RIGHT: Andrew Hoover, a recent graduate of Creighton University’s Heider College of Business, reflects on his experience with fellow attendees.

flexible exchange rate mechanism with built-in fiscal triggers, such as automatic spending cuts if debt-to-GDP ratios exceed a threshold.

Landon just began a master’s program in applied economics at Johns Hopkins. He attended Cato U last year and completed a Cato internship in spring 2025. He also published a piece criticizing the Jones Act in *Reason*.

Hoover, another budding economist or policymaker, will encourage others to read up on Cato, just as every single Cato U survey respondent said they would be “very likely” or “likely” to recommend Cato University to their classmates.

Along with Cato’s other youth-focused initiatives, the goal is to help make libertarian ideas well known and second nature. In his final interview for *Free Society*, David Boaz noted that “since [Hayek and Friedman], there have been a lot of basically libertarian economists who have won the Nobel Prize. Not as prominent generally as Hayek and Friedman, but I think . . . [that] put libertarianism on the map.”

Perhaps names such as Hoover, Chen, Landon, and Jannoud will one day be recognized with similar acclaim in whichever field they enter. Whatever their future holds, every student who attends Cato University helps advance libertarianism’s place in political discourse. ✦

Visit cato.org/student-programs/cato-university to learn about upcoming events, conference programming, and our referral program. We held an event in Boston in October and we are planning more events around the country; the summer 2026 events will again take place in Washington, DC. Past guest speakers include Justin Amash (former US representative from Michigan), Nadine Strossen (former president of the ACLU), and Nico Perrino (executive vice president of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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