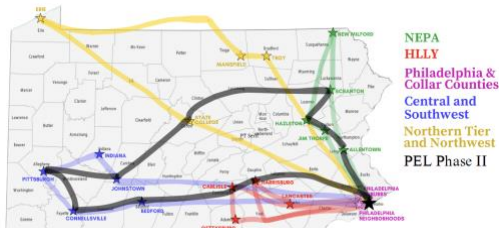


NEWS RELEASE

Political Empathy Lab (PEL) at the University of Pennsylvania Assembles Phase II Research Team

Philadelphia, PA – May 1, 2025



Map of Phase I and Phase II trips across Pennsylvania.

Political Empathy Lab (PEL), funded by the University of Pennsylvania's Office of the Provost and rooted at the SNF Paideia Program, is pleased to announce the launch of Phase II of PEL, a 1-week immersive traveling research experience which begins May 26 through May 30 led by Dr. Lia Howard, a political scientist serving as the Fellows Director of the SNF Paideia Program. Traveling from Philadelphia to Scranton, Harrisburg to Pittsburgh and many towns in between, members of PEL Phase II will travel to some of the same places they visited during summer 2024, Phase I, with new additions to their itinerary. They will use the same strategies of connection while adding to their repertoire of skills to explore the possibility of connecting across political difference through direct practice in Pennsylvania.

Polarization around political and social issues galvanized voters in this last election to advance one interpretation of America against a different version projected by the opposing party. Further, people have strong feelings about what the "story of America" is, has been, and should be. The 2024 election proved to be another demonstration of the fractures among the American people and Pennsylvania, as a swing state, played a pivotal role in determining the outcome of the Presidential election.

Political empathy asks that we apply empathetic skills to US politics, a realm that has not only been markedly polarized, it has reflected extreme disconnection between those who identify differently ideologically because they do not share information or space.

While the summer of 2024 was an interesting time to travel around Pennsylvania, the summer of 2025 will be an opportunity to check back in with local residents and civic and political leaders. It will be important to listen to how Pennsylvanians are thinking about the election after the first 100 days of this new administration. Conversations with Pennsylvanians will reveal how they are perceiving politics at this moment and how they are evaluating the choice for president they made when they cast their vote in November 2024.

PEL's research provides an authentic opportunity to meet fellow residents of Pennsylvania face to face, acknowledging that we experience different lived realities and want to try to better understand each other. Like PEL Phase I, PEL Phase II will visit counties across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania beyond the Philadelphia region over the course of five days. We hope to encounter Pennsylvanians who hold different socio-political views and engage them in conversation grounded in deep listening.

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Dr. Howard says “It will be interesting to revisit communities we visited in 2024 when the state was filled with others polling and canvassing. May of 2025 provides an opportunity to listen to Pennsylvanians during a potentially quieter, more reflective moment when they do not have to make a big choice for national governance in the fall. As we did last summer, we hope that we can learn how to better listen to others with intellectual humility and curiosity, especially around ideologies that differ from our own.” She adds “This trip provides a variety of immersive opportunities to exercise our practices around dialogue.”

This research experience is deliberately not canvassing and not polling, though the team will work with Penn’s Public Opinion and Election Studies (PORES) team to inform their practices. PEL seeks to better understand fellow Pennsylvanians through better conversations with them.

The team will visit such sites as main streets, museums, universities, union workers offices, the Capitol building, historical archives, and environmental and energy spots with solar panels, and many others.

Why did PEL choose PA?

- Pennsylvania is a swing state and an important bellwether for U.S. politics both during and after national elections
- Penn students are able to encounter “the other side” of issues where there may appear to be consensus at Penn
- People who live in Pennsylvania are able to encounter Penn students, especially in communities where there are not many college-aged people
- Pennsylvania has regional variation and both rural, suburban and urban counties providing geographic, social and economic differences that map to those of the U.S. at large
- Pennsylvania is the state in which Penn is located. As an institution, we often discuss our local identity as Philadelphians, but less frequently our identity as Pennsylvanians



Glynn Boltman



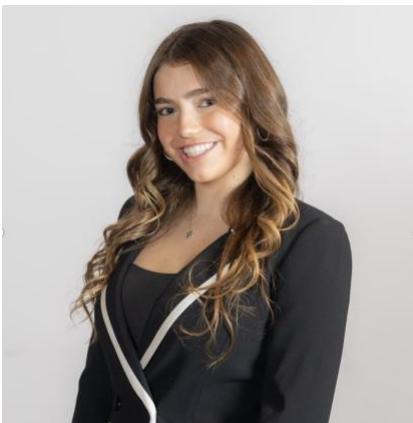
Kaynath Chowdhury

This spring the public is invited to follow Phase II of the project in a number of ways: regular content added to the project’s website (<https://snfpaideia.upenn.edu/initiatives/political-empathy-lab/>); and by activating tools and resources shared for conducting effective dialogue.

The PEL Research Team includes Penn students across a range of disciplines, from Political Science and Philosophy, Legal Studies, and History, to Data Science and Analytics, English and Latin American and Latinx studies. They include:

Glynn Boltman is a junior studying Political Science with minors in Data Science and Analytics and Latin American and Latinx studies. She pursues her interest in these topics through research and debate organizations on campus and is also involved in outdoor education at Penn and in Norristown. Glynn is excited to deepen her ties to Pennsylvania, and for the opportunity to listen to and learn from diverse voices across the state.

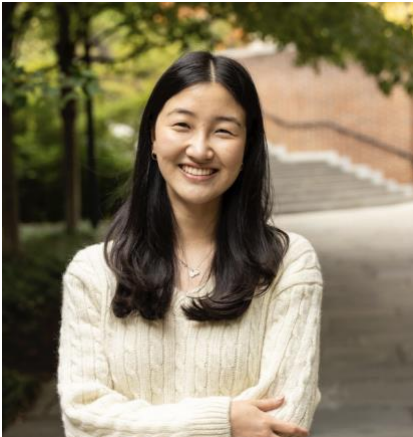
Kaynath Chowdhury is a junior from Sterling Heights, Michigan, studying Political Science with a concentration in International Relations and pursuing minors in Computer Science, Data Science & Analytics, and Legal Studies & History. She is passionate about global justice and inclusive policymaking. On campus, she



Samantha Graines

works at DevLab@Penn, using data to address international development challenges, and conducts research with the Penn Political Science Department, investigating the influence of government-affiliated NGOs in the UN Universal Periodic Review. As a Penn Social Equity & Community Fellow, she supports campus inclusion initiatives and advocates for FGLI students through Penn First and the Greenfield Intercultural Center. Through PEL, she hopes to deepen her understanding of how to engage in authentic conversations across political and ideological divides—conversations that challenge her assumptions and expand her empathy.

Samantha Graines is a sophomore from Chicago, IL, majoring in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, with minors in Legal Studies and History. On campus, she is a writer for the Penn Undergraduate Law Journal and volunteers as a tutor with the West Philadelphia Tutoring Project. Passionate about justice and civic dialogue, Samantha aspires to pursue a career in law. She is thrilled to join the Political Empathy Lab research team, where she hopes to help break down the divisive labels that often separate us. Samantha believes that meaningful change begins with conversations grounded in empathy—seeing others as people first. She values open discourse as a powerful tool for mutual understanding and believes that learning how to engage in conversation thoughtfully is essential to building a more respectful and connected society.



Eunho Jung

Eunho Jung is a junior from Wayne, New Jersey majoring in Political Science with a minor in History. On campus, Eunho is involved with Penn Dems and the Penn Office of Social Equity and Community. After witnessing the turmoil of the 2024 presidential election, she is interested in fostering productive dialogue that can bridge divides within Pennsylvania's communities. Through PEL, she hopes to understand the various perspectives of voters across the ideological spectrum and employ empathy as a guiding tool in our current hyperpolarized political climate.



Rustin Kharrazi

Rustin Kharrazi is a first-year student from Los Angeles, California studying Philosophy, Politics, and Economics and Modern Middle East Studies. As a Persian Jew, he has a deep interest in Middle Eastern politics and civic engagement which he explores in his coursework and organizations including Penn Undergraduate Assembly (UA). He is excited to bring positive energy and spark engaging dialogue with the PEL team and gain a greater understanding of the modern political landscape.

Noah Kocher is a sophomore from Phoenixville, Pennsylvania majoring in English. He was a member of the PEL Phase I cohort over the summer of 2024 and helped to produce the PEL Podcast. He is a class of 2027 SNF Paideia Fellow, and he currently works as a managing editor and as PR Director for *The Penn Review*.



Noah Kocher

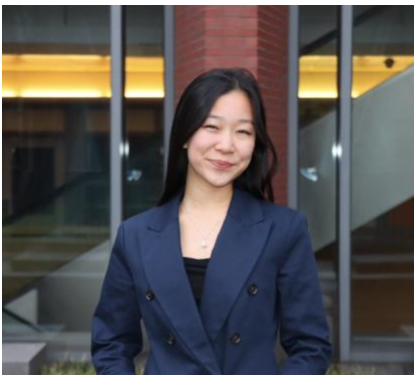
Wesley Liu is a freshman from the San Francisco Bay Area studying Philosophy with a minor in American Public Policy. On campus, he writes for the *Penn Epistle* and *Penn Post* and is an undergraduate fellow for the Collegium Institute. He is passionate about integrating his Christian faith into his study of culturally salient topics such as political polarization. Through PEL, he hopes to explore the real and perceived tensions in our political discourse.

Melody Luo is a junior from Long Island, New York majoring in Political Science and English. At Penn, she can be found preparing for nationwide competitions with her teammates on Penn Mock Trial, working on school projects with the



Wesley Liu

Undergraduate Assembly, and singing with PennYo (Penn's premier Chinese A Cappella Group). Melody is incredibly excited to join the PEL team this May and looks forward to better understanding political nuances throughout Pennsylvania and building bridges across political differences through productive dialogue.



Melody Luo

Dr. Lia Howard is a political scientist who specializes in American politics. As Fellows Director for the SNF Paideia Program, Dr. Howard teaches SNF Paideia designated courses, designs curriculum and programming, and oversees advising and support for 75 undergraduate Fellows across three cohorts. With a team of Penn colleagues, she leads the Penn Commonwealth Engaged Scholars Program, one of Penn's inaugural Draw Down the Lightning Grants. Prior to joining the SNF Paideia Program, Howard served as the executive director of the Philadelphia Commons Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the practice of civic dialogue. She has taught at St. Joseph's University, Villanova University, Eastern University, as well as at the University of Pennsylvania. She is a non-resident senior affiliate at the Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, and a senior fellow at the Robert A. Fox Leadership Program at Penn. Her research interests lie at the intersection of political culture, American political development, education policy, and citizenship. She received her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Pennsylvania where she also received her B.A. in English and French.

Visit the SNF Paideia website (snfpaideia.upenn.edu) to learn more about the Political Empathy project, the related SNF Paideia spring 2026 course, *Political Empathy and Deliberative Democracy*, taught by Dr. Howard., and to listen to the *Political Empathy Lab* podcast, a series of five episodes which follows the Summer 2024 PEL research team across the state, includes their reflections on conversations they had and skills that they learned. You can also listen the SNF Paideia podcast, *The Park*, with episodes dedicated to Political Empathy that lay the groundwork for the project: "Political Empathy: American Conservatism, Its Past, Present and Future", "Political Empathy: Perspectives from Psychology and Urban Studies", and "Political Empathy: Space, Place and Positionality."

Political Empathy Lab gratefully acknowledges funding from the Office of the Provost, and administrative, networking and logistical assistance from the Office of Government and Community Affairs, and Penn's Office of Transportation.



Dr. Lia Howard

About the SNF Paideia Program

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Paideia Program creates and supports opportunities for the Penn community to learn *about* dialogue, *from* dialogue, and *how to* dialogue, towards a goal of individual and societal wellness. Through SNF Paideia-designated courses, a Fellows program, resources, events, and initiatives, the program contributes to the diverse dialogue landscape at Penn.

Encompassing a wide range of practices, SNF Paideia's dialogue work emphasizes intentionality, curiosity, humility, and community as its core values. We encourage meaningful exchange across identities, ideologies, experiences, and histories, and collaborate with many partners across campus and beyond to promote opportunities for students to practice this exchange. Striving to embody the Hellenic concept of *paideia*, or "education of the whole person," SNF Paideia helps students develop the knowledge, skills, ethical frameworks, and experiences necessary to serve their communities as resourceful, engaged citizens.