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LONELY ON THE RIGHT?

By Joseph Reisert

Conservatives regularly complain about the dominance of the political left on American college campuses. They are right that this is a serious problem—for us, for our students, and for the country. But the most vocal critics are wrong about the cause of this liberal ascendancy, which is why their preferred solution, the enactment into law of an Academic Bill of Rights to forbid discrimination against conservatives in hiring and promotion, will not bring about any real improvement.

That professors as a group are to the left of the population as a whole cannot seriously be denied. Several recent studies employing a variety of different methodologies all reach essentially the same result: liberals outnumber conservatives on college faculties by at least five or six to one. The first reaction I usually get when I tell people I'm a Republican and a college professor is bewilderment followed by such questions as: "How is that possible?" (usually from someone on the left who assumes that to be smart and well educated is to be liberal) and "Do they allow that these days?" (from someone on the right who assumes that academic conservatives invariably suffer discrimination).

Although some vocal conservatives complain that liberal faculty members use their classrooms to indoctrinate students and to punish dissenting students by giving them poor grades, my own experience suggests that such incidents are quite rare. In my 20-plus years as a conservative student and teacher at three strongly left-leaning institutions (Princeton, Harvard, and Colby), I have never felt discriminated against. I have only once witnessed an overtly propagandizing classroom presentation, and have I only once heard a student complain about being graded unfairly for not hewing to the professor's party line.

Overt discrimination against conservatives is not a widespread problem, I suspect, because the overwhelming majority of faculty and administrators at places like Colby are, in fact, deeply committed to the ideals of free inquiry and fair treatment for all. Like most other institutions of higher learning in the United States, Colby accepts the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. That statement explicitly affirms the freedom of researchers and teachers to seek the truth and of students freely to pursue the truth. That statement explicitly warns that classroom teachers "should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject."

The dominance of the political left on our campuses poses another danger, which should be much more troubling than the occasional incidents of overt discrimination or indoctrination that from time to time occur. That danger is the ever-increasing cultural marginalization of academia, which threatens intellectual impoverishment to all of us—professors, students, and ordinary citizens alike. There was a time, not that long ago, when leading figures in higher education served as public intellectuals, addressing the vital issues of their day and receiving a respect-



ful hearing from political leaders and the public at large. These days, if a professor from any field outside the hard sciences is being quoted in the media, odds are good that it's for the purpose of ridicule.

Academics are fond of lamenting the decline of the public intellectual, but we too often blame the public for having forsaken us without asking whether it is not we who have forsaken the public. The central problem with academia today is that we overwhelmingly speak professionally only to other academics, who share our sense of what questions are important and our wider range of values and commitments. Academia has continued to move ever further to the cultural and political left not through any overt discrimination against conservatives but through a decades-long process of self-selection. Left-leaning professors tend to address questions that interest them, with the predictable though not intended consequence of inspiring their left-leaning students and leaving their more conservative students indifferent or disenchanted with academia. Is it any surprise that smart young liberals get Ph.D.'s and become liberal professors, while smart young conservatives tend to pursue careers in business or the other professions instead?

I have no doubt that academia will never again become central to American cultural life as long as professors continue to represent such a narrow spectrum of political affiliations and religious beliefs. Nevertheless, our problems cannot be solved by party politics or by legislation and lawsuits.

Instead, those of us in the academy need to do a better job of remembering that the 1940 AAUP Statement on Academic Freedom also commits us to put the common good ahead of personal and institutional advancement. We should, therefore, strive always to speak to a wider audience beyond the inbred confines of academia. To those conservative and religious students who feel marginalized at college, I say: Stop complaining and start studying; become professors, and teach the classes you wish had been offered when you were in college.

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