

## Politicizing Higher Education

Politicizing campuses or the faculty is nothing new, as professors were blacklisted during the McCarthy anti-communism hysteria, and universities were criticized for playing a central role in both the civil rights protests and the opposition to the Vietnam War. Today, there is a new type of campus politicization that mirrors our country's deep divisions. Exemplified by David Horowitz and the Freedom Center, these groups accuse campuses and individual professors of being dangerous leftists with the sole intent of bending the minds of our youth to their belief system.

The reaction of many on campus has been to simply ignore these assaults and continue with our work in the hope that people would see these as politically motivated attacks and not based on truth. But, even if unjustified, the attacks have effects. Recent research by the Pew Research Center, as discussed by Terry W. Hartle (*The Chronical* 7/24/17), suggests that these accusations have indeed changed people's attitudes about higher education. They found that just 36% of Republicans have a favorable view of higher education, compared to 72% of those who identify as Democrats. This is a recent phenomenon because in 2015 a majority of Republicans (54%) had a positive view of higher education.

Why do we have this polarization? At the core of a college education is the belief in logic, reason, and data driven decision-making. Sadly, not all share these values. Opinions backed by little evidence are often given equal time in public debate. The climate deniers are emblematic of this problem.

Another factor at play in the polarization of attitudes about higher education is accusations that college campuses are filled with leftist professors whose mission intention is to indoctrinate students. Following this line of thinking is that hiring committees purposefully discriminate against applicants with more conservative politics. Each of us have spent over a quarter century on college campuses and served on dozens of hiring committees and we have never seen evidence that this takes place. Asking someone's political affiliation would be a violation of our hiring practices.

College professors, as a group, may be slightly more left leaning politically, as outlined by Neil Gross in a recent *LA Times* article (07/24/17), but this is not because of some conspiracy to keep out more conservative thinkers. There is every reason to believe that the ideals and worldview of the professorate mirror those in the hiring pool, which are recently minted PhDs.

A more relevant question would be why is the hiring pool slightly more left leaning? We would argue that professors and most educators share a worldview, which is that one's self worth is not defined by how much money one makes. A doctorate is recognition that the individual reached the highest level in their field and it comes with the commitment to continue to do research and learn more about our world. Very few people get PhDs, and those who do typically have the intelligence to pursue any discipline, including those that make a lot more money than academia. Instead, their passion are topics like medieval history, cognitive psychology, linguistics or math,

in which they, if they are lucky, get a relatively low-paying job at a university around their 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. There is nothing wrong with wanting a job that makes lots of money, but no professor got their PhD because they thought it would make them rich.

This is a worldview that is, admittedly, out of line with the dominant American worldview. As a result, the only way to get more conservatives on campus is to pay the professors a lot more money.

It is unlikely that anyone is going to advocate for doubling all professor salaries, but is it really such a big deal that instructors have a worldview that makes them lean a little to the left? We do not think so. Ask any student if they know the political leanings of their professor and they will not likely know. It is simply not appropriate in most classes, like biology, physics or archaeology, to discuss a professor's political leanings. Even in courses that examine contemporary economic and social inequality, the course will focus on the complex interplay of factors involved rather than attaching blame to a political party. These types of issues are never black and white and one goal of a liberal arts education is to provide the skills to try to unpack the complexities involved.

Our goal is not to bend the minds of our students to a particular belief system. It is, however, our job to encourage and nurture students to think, write, problem solve, communicate and share our curiosity for the wondrous world in which we live.

[http://www.pantagraph.com/news/opinion/columns/guest-commentary-politicizing-higher-education/article\\_0495f26d-4527-51c6-a000-c3b8dfa29c25.html?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_campaign=user-share](http://www.pantagraph.com/news/opinion/columns/guest-commentary-politicizing-higher-education/article_0495f26d-4527-51c6-a000-c3b8dfa29c25.html?utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=user-share)

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