

REAL DIVERSITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Case for Ideological Diversity and the Competition of Ideas

The importance of diversity is widely agreed upon. At The Heritage Foundation, an unabashedly conservative enterprise, diversity is considered a key to the organization's success. The Heritage Foundation staff includes economists and marketing gurus, Ph.D.'s, M.B.A.'s, M.A.'s, and J.D.'s. Some are analytical thinkers; others are holistic thinkers. Edwin Feulner, president of The Heritage Foundation, believes that the diversity of its staff is crucial and relevant to the success of the foundation's efforts. The question he poses for higher education is, "What types of diversity are relevant to the success of the nation's colleges and universities?" Feulner argues that, much like generals often being rightly blamed for planning to fight the last war, academic administrators are also focusing their energies on yesterday's wars. That is, when they discuss "diversity" on campus, too often they are considering racial, and not ideological, diversity.



MISSION CONTROL

- ✘ The open exchange of ideas and diverse opinions is a prerequisite for productive dialogue and essential to a free society.
- ✘ The real problem of diversity in higher education today is ideological, not racial.
- ✘ The domination of the left on college and university campuses undermines the goals of American higher education.
- ✘ The polarization of the academy to the left has delegitimized it in the eyes of much of the public and is the root of anti-intellectualism in our country.

A Diversity Snapshot

There was a time, a few decades ago, when entire public educational systems were closed to students of color; when our colleges were woefully segregated and unrepresentative of America; when students of merit and talent were denied places at universities because of their ethnic background or religion; when “Jewish quotas” artificially preserved an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant predominance in the Ivy League; and when the Harvard Divinity School did not employ a single Roman Catholic. This is a series of facts we cannot deny. It is rightfully studied as a sad part of American history. But that is exactly what it is today—history. These things lie in the past.

After World War II, the GI Bill of Rights gave an entire generation of Americans the opportunity to take control of their lives by enabling them to enroll in and earn degrees from our nation’s finest colleges and universities. This was good for the war veterans, our institutions, and our nation. In the years that followed, while it sometimes took the use of federal troops, the colleges of the American South were integrated, and today they boast robust and enthusiastic populations of African-American students.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the establishment of standardized educational testing did precisely what some elitists, both liberals and conservatives, feared it would do to the Ivy League: standardized testing transformed those colleges from advanced preparatory schools for America’s traditional elites into high-powered research institutions driven almost exclusively by merit, thereby enriching them immeasurably.

The real problem of diversity on campus today has nothing to do with race. If one were to visit academic departments across the United States,

one would find—especially among younger faculty—a “gorgeous mosaic” of racial and ethnic types, worthy of the Roman College of Cardinals. What one would not find—what no one on the right or left would claim you would find—is a diversity of views. Like the College of Cardinals, the residents of academia have signed on to a wide array of consensus views, and those who might dissent have either been excluded or have decided to exclude themselves. They have encountered a spoken or unspoken “creed,” and only those who agree to it (or successfully dissemble) have made their way past the gatekeepers into academia’s inner sanctum, that is, to the invulnerability of tenure.

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Much of American thinking is based upon the notion that truth can only be arrived at through the clash of ideas. This is illustrated in the difference between the American adversarial system of law, in which a prosecution and defense present their cases and attack the flaws in the other side’s case, and the French inquisitorial system of law, in which truth is alleged to come from a single source—a judge who investigates and determines what he or she believes to be the facts.

The fact is that on matters of political philosophy, the elite of the American academy present a grim front of uniformity—an almost religious orthodoxy—that ought to concern thoughtful people on both the right and the left. It is astounding that conservative thought, which is grounded in our nation’s intellectual and political heritage, is overwhelmingly absent from institutions that strive to explore the world of ideas.

This problem is not new. It has existed for several decades in the policy arena. To quote the *Economist* in 1987, “Washington and Westminster no longer go to Harvard and Oxbridge for ideas, but rather to The Heritage Foundation and The Institute of Economic Affairs.”

Evidence of the Lack of Ideological Diversity

In 2005, Stanley Rothman of Smith College examined the politics of more than 1,600 faculty members at nearly 200 colleges and universities. Rothman found that in “all faculty departments, including business and engineering, academics were over five times as likely to be liberals as conservatives.” In fact, he determined that a leftist political viewpoint was almost as important a factor in hiring decisions as were tangible academic achievements, such as publications and awards.

How did left-leaning academics respond to this study? Robert Brandon, chair of the philosophy department at Duke, said: “We try to hire the best, smartest people available. If, as John Stuart Mill said, stupid people are generally conservative, then there are lots of conservatives we will never hire. Mill’s analysis may go some way towards explaining the power of the Republican Party in our society and the relative scarcity of Republicans in academia.” Brandon mangled the John Stuart Mill quote, which actually reads, “.the Conservatives [members of the Conservative Party], as being by the law of their existence the stupidest party.”

It may be inflammatory to make the comparison, but Brandon’s analysis recalls the sort of rationalizations once used to exclude nonwhites and non-Protestants from aca-

democratic appointments and admissions. This attitude underscores the real problem in our nation's colleges and universities. It is not simply that our campuses are overwhelmingly populated by liberals. It is that the entire culture of our institutions has become radically polarized.

Reasons for the Lack of Ideological Diversity

Mark Bauerlein of Emory University recently offered some insights in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about how academia has become so polarized. He notes that most leftist academics are probably not even conscious that they dominate the university, or that they use their power to limit discourse, exclude unbelievers from the fold, and bias classroom discussion. Operating in an environment in which their prejudices have so long been equated with simple decency, and dissent has been so thoroughly demonized, these teachers and administrators really do not understand the nature of the conservative complaint.

Bauerlein points to three interpersonal factors that explain how the narrowing of academic opinion works.

1) *The Common Assumption*. "The assumption is that all the strangers in the room at professional gatherings are liberals..." says Bauerlein. "The assumption proves correct often enough for it to join other forms of trust that enable collegial events. A fellowship is intimated, and members may speak their minds without worrying about justifying basic beliefs or curbing emotions."

Bauerlein argues that this effect stifles conservative voices because "there is no joy in breaking up fellowship feeling, and the awkward pause that accompanies the moment when someone comes out of the conservative closet marks a quarantine that only the institutionally secure are willing to endure."

2) *The False Consensus Effect*. This occurs, Bauerlein notes, "when people think that the collective opinion of their own group matches that of the larger population. If the members of a group reach a consensus and rarely encounter those who dispute it, they tend to believe that everybody thinks the same way." Bauerlein gives as an example the infamous statement of Pauline Kael, columnist for the *New Yorker*: "I don't know how Richard Nixon

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could have won...I don't know anybody who voted for him." No doubt much the same thing was said in faculty lounges across the country after the 2004 election of George W. Bush.

3) *The Law of Group Polarization*. Bauerlein cites University of Chicago political scientist Cass Sunstein, who observed this phenomenon of group behavior. Bauerlein summarizes it so: "When like-minded people deliberate as an organized group, the general opinion shifts toward extreme versions

of their common beliefs." For example, today, the far left does not simply oppose the war in Iraq or the method in which it has been fought, but argues that "Bush lied!" or that our government has been hijacked by neoconservative Israeli loyalists. Bauerlein argues that "those involved lose all sense of the range of legitimate opinion," and thus dissent begins to seem not just mistaken but obscene.

Consequences

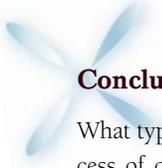
The three factors outlined by Bauerlein have combined to drive the academy to the extreme left. This radical polarization of college campuses has delegitimized the academy in the eyes of much of the public and has cheapened the academic experience.

I would not claim that the delegitimization of the academy threatens the existence of the nation's most selective colleges and universities. For a variety of reasons—largely tied to the fact that a diploma from one of those institutions does and will continue to open vast numbers of doors in the real world—the best and the brightest will continue to flock to those institutions.

There will, however, be consequences. As the radical polarization of the academy continues, greater and greater segments of the population will be turned off from academic life and will be increasingly unlikely to pursue academic careers themselves. Meanwhile, alternative institutions, without political bias, will grow (the University of Phoenix, with its Internet offerings, comes to mind). I would also argue that the polarization of the academy is off-putting to so many Americans that it can be seen as the root of anti-intellectualism in our country.

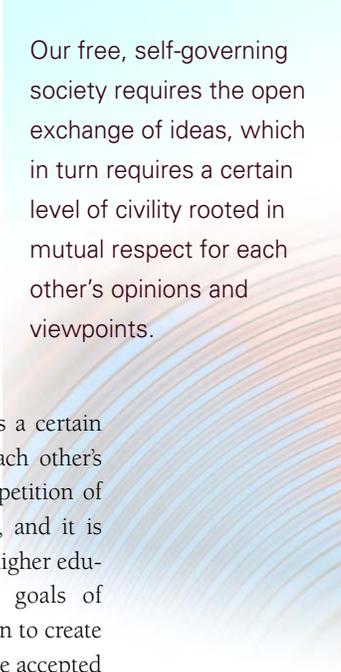
Further, the radical polarization of the academy has cheapened higher education. For example, the lack of prominent voices articulating the Bush doctrine in foreign

relations, the flaws in college affirmative action policies, or the case for reform of government entitlement programs is a result of a lack of diversity of ideas on campus.



Conclusion

What types of diversity are relevant to the success of our nation's colleges and universities? Our free, self-governing society requires the open exchange of ideas, which in turn requires a certain level of civility rooted in mutual respect for each other's opinions and viewpoints. Acceptance of a competition of ideas is a prerequisite for productive dialogue, and it is essential to a free society. Alas, today, America's higher education community actively undermines the goals of American higher education. Action must be taken to create a learning environment in which diverse ideas are accepted and celebrated.



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Edwin Feulner is president of the Heritage Foundation, a Washington, D.C. think tank. His most recent book is *Getting America Right* (2006).