

# Diversifying the Academy: How Conservative Academics Can Thrive in Liberal Academia

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**ABSTRACT** Researchers have long recognized that higher education is dominated by professors whose politics are well to the left of the American political center. The cause and implications of this ideological imbalance have been intensely debated since the 1960s. Although critics of higher education, such as David Horowitz, argue that the political imbalance in academia is largely the result of ideological discrimination, emerging research on the views, values, and experiences of the professoriate tells a more complex story. Despite the relatively small numbers in the academy, the findings suggest that many conservative scholars can succeed in a predominantly liberal environment. Drawing on the latest research, as well as their own personal experience, the authors outline steps that conservative faculty can take to avoid needless political conflict and work happily in a profession largely dominated by the Left.

For an astounding 18 million American college students (NCES 2009), higher education offers everything for everyone, with dozens of majors, programs, certifications, institutes, study abroad opportunities, counselors, sports teams, Olympic swimming pools, rock climbing walls, bike paths, restaurants, and deans and deputy deans of every variety. Parents who send their freshmen off to college can find comfort in knowing that their children will be exposed to all manner of experiences and viewpoints—except conservative or libertarian ideas.

In much of American higher education, conservative professors have long been an endangered species. For example, in the edited volume *The Politically Correct University* (2009), Dan Klein and Charlotta Stern sum up results from numerous surveys showing that even in the most “conservative” disciplines liberals outnumber conservatives by wide margins. Democrats and Marxists outnumber Republicans and libertarians by 3 to 1 in economics, more than 5 to 1 in political science, 10 to 1 or more in history and English, and well over 20 to 1 in sociology and anthropology (Klein

and Stern 2009). Exacerbating the political imbalance further, surveys of college professors reveal that, whereas Democratic faculty hold policy views well to the left of Democrats in the electorate, most Republicans in academia are more moderate than the typical Republican voter (Rothman, Kelly-Woessner, and Woessner 2011). That makes sense because campus conservatives hear frequent counterarguments from their peers—their mainstream colleagues do not. And at elite universities, those with the most impact on the national conversation, conservatives have even less of a presence. As former Harvard president and Clinton and Obama administration economist Larry Summers mused, in Washington he was on “the right half of the left”; at Harvard he makes up “the right half of the right (Jaschik 2007).”

Yet many universities will have none of it. As Victor Davis Hanson points out in *The Politically Correct University* (2009), the well-regarded history department at University of California, Santa Barbara, at one point, offered 62 courses on Chicano studies, but nary a one on the Civil War. In Latin American studies, countless articles document the mendacity of the long-dead Pinochet dictatorship, while remarkably few dissect the still-living Castro dynasty. One wonders why ivory tower intellectuals have done so little to study and disseminate conservative and neoliberal social policy successes on matters such as welfare reform, school choice,

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and New York City's police department crime fighting. Perhaps fearing that criticisms of academia's liberal slant will lead politicians to impose partisan quotas or a kind of ideological affirmative action, many academics deny that colleges and universities *should* host a variety of viewpoints. In one particularly unpersuasive defense of the status quo, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) report *Freedom in the Classroom* (2007) argues that any attempt at ideological diversity inevitably would lead to "equal time" for Communist totalitarianism or Nazi fascism," given the "potentially infinite number of competing perspectives."

For conservatives, libertarians, and neoliberals, this ideological imbalance within the academy makes their participation in higher education all the more important. Notwithstanding the overriding significance that college administrators place on promoting traditional measures of diversity, defined in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation (Rothman, Kelly-

Woessner, and Woessner 2011), in an academic setting, the most important diversity is the wide-ranging assortment of ideas.

Among conservatives, the prevalence of liberals in academia is often attributed to political bias among the professoriate. By this narrative, promotion and hiring committees dominated by left-leaning professors tend to favor candidates who are known to share their liberal views (Rothman, Kelly-Woessner, and Woessner 2011). Given the choice between two similarly qualified sociologists, one who writes critically of the tea party movement, and one who disparages modern environmentalism, even with the best of intentions, a hiring committee made up primarily of liberals will tend to favor the candidate whose research agrees with their ideological disposition.

Given what we know about the psychological tendency to favor arguments that support our preexisting beliefs (Kunda 1990), concerns about political bias in the hiring process may be warranted. As Rothman and Lichter show in *The Politically Correct*

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Rather than circling the wagons, claiming that any effort to ideologically diversify the academy will inevitably lead to curricular chaos or the destruction of academic freedom, universities should carefully consider possible explanations for the absence of conservatives on college campuses (Rothman, Kelly-Woessner, and Woessner 2011). Although the social scientific research may not provide a definitive account of the Left's dominance on college campuses, an emerging body of empirical research provides clues that might encourage young conservatives to seriously consider a career in "liberal" academia.

#### WHY LIBERALS DOMINATE HIGHER EDUCATION

So why are so few conservatives drawn to the academic vocation? Several competing explanations for academia's political imbalance exist ranging from differences in the intellectual quality of job candidates to overt ideological discrimination (Ladd and Lipset 1975). Unfortunately, as is so often the case with a social science controversy, academics tend to line up behind one side or the other, based on personal political preferences rather than a dispassionate examination of the available evidence (Menand 2010). Although scholars in this field have researched varied conclusions about the origin of academia's liberalism, collectively, the findings suggest no single explanation exists for the dearth of conservatives in academia (Rothman, Kelly-Woessner, and Woessner 2011).

Left-leaning scholars often argue that the absence of conservatives in academia reflects the intellectual prowess of liberals generally. In fact, in their chapter in *The Politically Correct University*, Woessner and Kelly-Woessner show that liberal and conservative students report nearly identical grades and similar satisfaction with their overall college experience (2009a). Although some variations in academic success based on self-reported ide-

ology are shown, moderates (rather than the conservatives) are least well-situated to seek a career in academia.

*University*, intriguing evidence suggests that, when controlling for various measures of scholarly merit, socially liberal professors tend to occupy more prestigious posts than do their socially conservative counterparts (Rothman and Lichter 2009). Looking at the same data, Rothman, Kelly-Woessner, and Woessner caution that, although these results are consistent with discrimination, the magnitude of the ideological discrepancy should give conservatives hope. Whatever ideological bias may permeate the promotion and hiring process, a vast majority of the difference in a professor's placement can be explained in terms of his or her publication record (2011). Professors who publish frequently tend to land the more prestigious posts. Although ideology may play a role in a candidate's placement, it would typically occur in borderline cases in which promotion and hiring decisions could, on the merits, go either way. In these cases, when the decision to promote or hire a candidate turns on subjective factors, the dominance of liberalism within academia could work against socially conservative professors (Rothman, Kelly-Woessner, and Woessner 2011). Furthermore, liberal dominance within academia is not confined to disciplines whose research touches on social issues; hence, this raises questions about the underlying cause of liberal dominance in academia. How could ideological bias sideline conservatives in fields such as physics or geology? These fields seldom intersect with traditional Left-Right debates. Although outright discrimination might play a role in some instances, little evidence suggests that liberal dominance in academia is primarily a function of some sort of ideological litmus test. In contrast, as Klein and Stern (2009) find, ideological imbalance, in fact, is strongest in the social sciences and humanities where ideals are more important.

The role that personality and individual preferences play in shaping young peoples' aspirations and ultimate career objectives is often lost in the arguments concerning ideological

imbalance. Whereas conservatives are more apt to pursue careers that are practical, structured, and more financially lucrative, liberals enter college with a greater interest in pursuing a PhD (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009b). Again, in their chapter “Left Pipeline (2009b),” Woessner and Kelly-Woessner note that, for conservative students who place a higher priority on settling down and starting a family, spending from four to six years pursuing a doctoral degree makes pursuing a professorship prohibitively costly. By contrast, liberal students place less emphasis on starting a family and more interest in pursuing scientific research, writing original works, and discovering “a meaningful philosophy of life”—a concept that many conservatives refer to as religion (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009b, 50). Although ideological bias plays a role in barring some conservatives from acquiring professorial positions, differences in the underlying career preferences among college graduates may be the more significant factor in why many young conservatives choose not to obtain a doctoral degree, let alone pursue a career in academia.

### CONSERVATIVES CAN THRIVE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

If the shortage of conservatives on college campuses is a function of social choice, then mitigating the ideological imbalance would not require a complicated top-down solution. Indeed, many of the personal priorities that lure young conservatives into the private sector are compatible with academic life. If better publicized, these benefits might lure more conservatives into academia.

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For example, given conservative students’ emphasis on financial security, they might be surprised to learn that, at the height of the financial crisis in 2009, the Department of Labor (2010) reports that the typical professor earned \$78,000 a year,<sup>1</sup> with the typical political science professors earning just less than \$77,000. Although this is certainly lower than the income of a typical physician (\$173,860) or lawyer (\$129,020), considering the fellowships and assistantships that finance many graduate students’ educations, the relatively light debt burden makes an academic career more financially attractive. Beyond the financial virtues of an academic life, no career path is better suited to family life and raising children, given its limited travel demands, reasonable hours, and scheduling flexibility. Although the run-up to tenure can be stressful, after a professor learns to adapt to the demands of academic life, academia is a family-friendly environment: a disproportionate number of professors serve as soccer coaches and homeroom parents (Drago et al. 2006; Mason and Goulden 2002). For conservatives, that fact alone ought to make academia an attractive alternative.

In light of the many virtues of a career in the academy, most Republican professors are happy in their work. In *The Still Divided Academy: How Competing Visions of Power, Politics, and Diversity*

*Complicate the Mission of Higher Education*, Rothman, Kelly-Woessner, and Woessner, find that when career satisfaction is measured on a seven point scale, 69% of Republican professors report a high degree of job satisfaction (6 or 7), compared to 66% of Democratic faculty. When asked “If you were to begin your career again, would you still want to be a college professor?” 93% of Republican professors answered in the affirmative, compared to 91% of Democratic professors. Even when divided in terms of their social liberalism, the similarities in job satisfaction persist (Rothman, Kelly-Woessner, and Woessner 2011). Socially conservative and socially liberal faculty both express similar levels of job satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> Neither group harbors regrets about their chosen profession.

### NINE KEYS TO SUCCESS

Although Republican (not to mention libertarian and neoliberal) faculty can work and even thrive within the academy, the evidence suggests that they need to do things a little differently to fit in while remaining true to their values. If nonleftists want to be a part of the movement to continue and expand a conservative and classical liberal presence in academia, there are nine keys to success.

#### **First, resist the temptation to reenact the Battle of Peleliu.**

In a World War II encounter that killed or wounded nearly 10,000 American servicemen, the Battle at Peleliu is frequently criticized

by military historians as a costly and somewhat pointless American offensive that did little to secure victory in the overall Pacific campaign (Antill 2003). Whether applied to modern warfare or the “infiltration” of the academy, the lessons of the battle are clear: if conservatives are to make inroads into academia, right-leaning graduate students should avoid diving headlong into needlessly hostile territories that may impede their ability to publish and secure tenure. Because an academic’s success is largely based on his or her record of publication in scholarly journals (Ladd and Lipset 1975), conservatives should bypass impenetrable islands of leftism (e.g., sociology, social work, women’s studies, and ethnic studies) that may be impervious to outside perspectives. The natural sciences are certainly an inviting territory because their major controversies are less likely to involve the most ideologically divisive issues.

For conservatives who are drawn to investigate social and political controversies, political science may provide a haven for dissenting points of view. Like any academic field, a majority of political science professors are either liberals or leftists (Klein and Stern 2005, 2009). Concerned that they may be isolated or even blackballed for their dissenting viewpoints, many right-leaning

political science professors do consciously conceal their underlying political allegiances.<sup>3</sup> Still, unlike philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology, the latest research confirms that a robust enclave of political scientists self-identify as Republicans (Klein and Stern 2009; Ceaser and Maranto 2009). Accordingly, compared to other social scientific disciplines, right-leaning political science professors stand a reasonable chance of working with colleagues who either share their ideological perspective or at the very least are willing to consider alternative points of view.

### **Second, stick to your knitting.**

In academia, like the “real world,” merit really does matter. A good professor, whether on the Left or the Right, should be a good professor. For better or worse, the yardstick of merit is publication. Sad to say, what gets measured is what counts, and we can count publication and citation in ways that we cannot count mentoring undergraduates and improving their writing. If you publish well, you will find a job, and if you publish very well, you may find a very good job (Rothman et al. 2011). Well-published professors, even conservative professors, are a protected class. In some ways, conservatives may have an advantage. Academics prize novelty, and those who are outside the mainstream often have original ideas about what tests to run and how to interpret the data. Indeed our own publishing careers provide examples of how a novel political perspective makes for interesting scholarship.

### **Third, begin with a modest research agenda.**

Conservative academics must quickly come to terms with the challenges of publishing in a world where many of the journal referees approach a topic from a leftist perspective. Given the natural human tendency to more closely scrutinize conclusions that run against the grain of one’s long-held beliefs, blind reviewers often fixate on every imperfection in any research that tends to challenge a left-leaning point of view (Rothman et al. 2011). Accordingly, conservative professors can either steer clear of contentious lines of research early in their career or accept the special burden of navigating a blind review process that may hold their work to a higher standard.

Arguing that liberal reviewers will often subject conservative ideas to more rigorous scrutiny is hardly a criticism of the Left. Any institution dominated by one faction will invariably (and often unintentionally) place special burdens upon the ideological minority (Tierney 2011).

From a practical standpoint, this reality does not preclude conservative scholars from investigating highly contentious political debates on issues such as drug legalization, same sex marriage, or affirmative action. Rather, any newly minted PhD (liberal or conservative) must be ever conscious of the tenure clock. Until an assistant professor has established a publishing record, it is risky to tackle highly controversial societal questions that will, in all likelihood, meet stiff resistance in the peer-review process. After securing tenure, if important scientific questions could benefit from a fresh perspective, there is relatively little risk in attempting to challenge the status quo.

### **Fourth, don’t be a partisan hack.**

Good academics, left or right, prize fairness and objectivity. Because academia tilts left, affecting what a typical professor regards as “objective,” conservative academics need to demonstrate their com-

mitment to Truth rather than a particular ideological viewpoint. Academics must be willing to criticize both Republicans and Democrats on both style and substance, and to do so in a calm and scholarly manner.

To put this point in perspective, imagine the reception that an APSA conference paper would receive if it were given by a George Will as opposed to a Rush Limbaugh. George Will, who famously criticized John McCain for selecting a minimally qualified running mate, Sarah Palin, in his 2008 presidential bid (2008), is well respected for his calm and often bookish commentaries on politics in America. By contrast, Rush Limbaugh is theatrical, abrasive, and often needlessly confrontational in his political commentary. Although they have few substantive disagreements, George Will’s cool, scholarly approach, not to mention his willingness to criticize both liberals and conservatives, makes him far more influential outside of Republican circles.

In arguing that young conservatives ought not to behave like Rush Limbaugh, we aren’t suggesting that academia should be closed to those on the far right of the American political spectrum. Rather, academic conservatives don’t have the luxury of being dogmatic. They bear a special burden to root their arguments in facts and evidence. Recognizing that academia’s leftist majority will sometimes overlook poorly supported arguments that back the liberal position, conservatives’ viewpoints will, in every case, be closely scrutinized. The harsh reality is that, in a profession dominated by the opposition, conservatives must of necessity be first-rate scholars rather than political cheerleaders.

Finally, part and parcel of this commitment to fairness, conservative academics must publicly admit when they are wrong on questions of politics or policy. If a conservative academic’s instincts lead to a policy position that later turns out to be in error, simply acknowledging these missteps goes a long way to bolstering his or her commitment to truth above politics.

### **Fifth, don’t build a conservative ideological enclave.**

Birds of a feather flock together. People are more comfortable around their own kind, so just as there are African American studies programs and women’s studies programs, some people want to build centers for western civilization, which provide safe harbors for conservative and classical liberal views (Johnson 2004). Although an isolated presence on campus is better than none, conservatives should realize that mainstream academics take these places no more seriously than professional athletes view an intramural sports team. To become part of academia, a person has to understand academia, which means that the conservative needs to be mentored by those on the inside (e.g., conventional liberals). Without mainstream knowledge and connections, conservative academics will remain in the academy, but not of it. Having a mentor with whom they disagree helps the conservative to understand political controversies, making him or her a better scholar and broader person. Without engaging with academia on its own terms, the conservative will never be important enough to matter. For better or worse, professors on the margins do not become dean; often, they even fail to win tenure. In this matter, a budding conservative academic should study everything done by the movements promoting ethnic studies and women’s studies—and then do exactly the opposite.

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honest classrooms in which different ideas are permitted, even encouraged. As Rothman and the Woessners point out in *The Still Divided Academy* (2011), most professors are troubled by matters such as how diversity initiatives sometimes conflict with merit. In short, most academics are potential partners more than they are likely combatants. As budding conservatives struggling to succeed in liberal academia, both authors sought help and advice from nonconservative colleagues, all of whom aided in their professional development. Robert Maranto was fortunate to benefit from the council of mentors like Charles Walcott, Eric Uslaner, Kay Knickrehm, and Bob Gest. For Matthew Woessner, colleagues like Carol Nechemias, Steven Peterson, Jeremy Plant, and Harold Shill were instrumental in learning to navigate faculty politics and establishing a research agenda. For both authors, these mentors were liberal in the best sense of the word.

**Sixth, show your hand when the time is right.**

One advantage that conservative academics and gay academics have over African American and female professors is that they

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do not have to disclose their inherent differences on day one. Given the Left's dominance within the academy, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, many right-leaning academics invariably encounter colleagues who have never really gotten to know a genuine conservative, let alone worked with one on a daily basis. If their only knowledge of conservatives comes from leftist documentary films or articles in *The New Yorker*, conservative professors run the risk of being stereotyped as a "typical" right-winger. Often it is difficult to know, in advance, whether a department has experience with diverse viewpoints; therefore when taking a new academic position, conservative academics should often lay low for a while, letting their colleagues get to know them as a person, before diving into politics. It is more difficult to dismiss someone's ideas out of hand after we come to like them as an individual.

It is unfortunate that individuals of any ideological persuasion feel the need to keep a low profile, particularly in a profession that ostensibly values intellectual diversity. However, in a profession where even a small number of political zealots can effectively undermine a scholar in publishing, hiring, and promotions, a degree of caution is probably warranted. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, if the Right is to make inroads into academia's left-leaning culture, young conservative scholars have to reveal their underlying political disposition strategically. Ideally, if the academy becomes more ideologically diverse, fewer academics will need to hide in the political shadows.

**Seventh, if you must battle, be a happy warrior.**

In academia, as in life, people prefer a happy warrior to a gloomy worrier. Conservative academics who enter academia with a chip on their shoulders, blaming every personal slight or setback to political correctness, will not be taken seriously. Even if individ-

uals suspect that they are being mistreated as a result of their status as a political minority, whenever possible, they must give their colleagues the benefit of the doubt. In truth, some proportion of a conservative academic's interpersonal conflict stems from some mistrust or underlying hostility from colleagues who resent their political positions. However, be mindful that every academic encounters problems in their work related to compensation, personality clashes, or bureaucratic ineptitude. Given their status as the political majority, few liberal professors would seriously entertain the notion that their problems were somehow linked to their political beliefs. In this sense, conservatives face a dilemma similar to African Americans or women in the academy. Avoiding a posture of victimization is an important part of thriving within the academy.

**Eighth, don't turn everything into an ideological debate.**

For all the attention given to the plight of conservatives within academia, right-leaning scholars ought to recognize that campus politics often transcends the typical liberal-conservative para-

digm (Ladd and Lipset 1975). In the normal rhythms of campus life, faculty have more immediate concerns than debates over Medicare spending, the deployment of American troops, and gay marriage. Beyond teaching and research, much of a professor's time is consumed in mundane committee work related to the nuts and bolts of faculty governance. Although campus governance does sometimes touch on social controversies, more often, it entails debates over strategic planning, curricular reform, teaching load, and seemingly endless battles with administrators. Recognizing this tenet of academic life, conservatives often find themselves forging alliances with liberals, leftists, and socialists alike. When battling in common cause against a dean over the encroachment of online coursework, most faculty do not really care how a colleague feels about abortion. Accordingly, many of our liberal colleagues adopt a posture similar to that of Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn, "Republicans are the opposition. Administrators are the enemy."<sup>4</sup>

**Finally, keep your bags packed.**

If you find yourself in an intolerable position—and this holds for academics of all stripes—make sure you have the publication record and network to leave for greener pastures. One friend described a fairly poisonous second-tier school as a "publish or stay" college, certainly not where he wanted to grow old. As conservatives and classical liberals know, free markets allow the talented to escape from bad places. Particularly if they are in an ideologically hostile environment, conservatives should make sure that they are market ready.

**CONCLUSION**

For most liberals and conservatives, colleges and universities are great places to work. Although conservatives may face unique

obstacles among the ivory towers, their participation in academic life can strengthen the mission of higher education. Without diverse viewpoints, a classical liberal education is all but impossible.

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### NOTES

1. The figure (\$78,097.94) is based on a weighted average of income and the number of persons employed in each subdivision of postsecondary education as reported in the May 2009 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates United States.
2. Of course, conservatives in the general population express more satisfaction than liberals, so the absence of a gap in academia must be viewed in context (Pew 2006, 5; Gallup 2004).
3. The fear of being punished is hardly irrational as many conservatives have encountered situations where at the mere mention of their political worldview, colleagues reacted negatively. In his *Washington Post* article "As a Republican, I'm on the Fringe" one professor recounts what may be an all too common episode whereby after casually mentioning that he planned to vote for George Bush in the 2000 presidential election, an academic job interview abruptly turned sour (Maranto 2007).
4. The actual Sam Rayburn quote is "Republicans are the opposition. The Senate is the enemy (Bacon 2010)." The quote nicely captures the tendency to fixate on outside institutions as a main source of political conflict rather than a small number of internal dissenters. In academia, as in the Democratically controlled Congress, a small Republican minority is often more of an irritant than a genuine threat.

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