

THOMAS EHRLICH ■ ANNE COLBY

# Political Bias in Undergraduate Education

PERSPECTIVES

UNDER THE BANNER of an “Academic Bill of Rights,” legislation has been introduced in Congress and in seven states to help remedy what the sponsors charge is liberal political bias on college campuses. The bill, which has yet to be approved anywhere, would challenge campuses to adopt voluntarily procedures that the sponsors claim would encourage a diversity of political perspectives among faculty, campus speakers, and student organizations.

We think this particular solution is misguided, but the issue it addresses is real. Leaders at every university agree that educating students in the practice of open-minded inquiry is a key component of undergraduate education, but creating a classroom and wider campus climate that is truly open to multiple perspectives on hot-but-political issues is extremely difficult to accomplish. This is true whether the majority opinion on campus is conservative, as at Pepperdine University, or liberal, as at San Jose State University.

The issue came to a boil not long ago at Duke University. The Duke Conservative Union published an advertisement in the Duke student newspaper listing the political party affiliations of faculty in various humanities and social science disciplines, which showed a preponderance of Democrats. The ad suggested that a university committed to diversity should have a faculty that is more diverse in its politics.

Duke University President Nan Keohane used the ad, and the reactions it triggered, as a “teachable moment.” The Conservative Union, she wrote, “has raised a question that deserves a thoughtful answer. ... No single political perspec-

tive has a monopoly on intelligence, on any topic, and our classrooms are impoverished if the expression of diverse views is discouraged, either by the faculty member or by fellow students. But we are also impoverished if classrooms become sterile forums where only bland views can be expressed and everyone is overly careful not to offend.”

## Controversial issues

We agree. If we are to educate our students for responsible citizenship, we and they can’t steer clear of controversy. Liberal education and the values of the academy are all about the need to seek and consider alternative conceptions, stances, and views and to consider them respectfully. This is the case whether the controversy concerns theoretical and other issues within academic disciplines or positions on public policy, most of which cannot be arrayed along a simple conservative-liberal fault line. If a campus is to commit itself to open inquiry and the exploration of a pluralism of views, it should affirm the many ways in which controversy occurs rather than limiting its focus to the often weary battles between left and right. In many domains, students must learn to think clearly about controversial issues, to form opinions and make a strong case for them, to evaluate the evidence for competing positions, to understand alternative perspectives in their own terms, and to engage with opposing views with civility and a sincerely open mind.

This is difficult to accomplish, perhaps especially when it comes to politics. Unfortunately, in most settings, people with strong political opinions talk almost exclusively to those who agree with them. Campuses should be an exception but generally they are not, so neither students nor faculty are accustomed to communicating across ideological divisions. And

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demonization of the opposition is so thoroughly woven into contemporary American politics that it is no wonder students fear being harshly judged if they speak up for an unpopular view.

In part because of the power of like-minded enclaves, faculty are sometimes unaware of the values and beliefs that are implicit in their approach to a subject. For this reason, they may not raise their assumptions to an explicit level for acknowledgement and examination. This lack of awareness can happen at any point on the political spectrum. Even faculty who want to encourage open debate by drawing out students with minority opinions are sometimes unclear about how best to make a really persuasive case for a view they don't hold. This makes it hard for them to guide students who are struggling to articulate that position.

#### **Open inquiry**

The problem with a legislative approach to ensuring open inquiry is that it casts the issue in negative terms, as a matter of policing the faculty—and the campus more broadly—to stamp out “indoctrination.” Given the complexity and

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ambiguity of both political and academic discourse, this kind of policing would be impossible to implement objectively. And cast in negative terms, the effort itself would be destructive to the goal of civil discourse across ideological boundaries.

By contrast, a positive approach, in which administration, faculty, and students from different political perspectives join together to develop strategies for the positive pursuit of open inquiry, can itself contribute to a climate of openness, respect, and cooperation. This means that faculty and administrative leaders on a campus should be self-conscious in raising the issue of open inquiry—what is it, why is it important, and what should the principle mean in practice?

It is also important to recognize that the challenge of higher education is not merely to encourage open inquiry. The result could then be relativistic students who manage the ambiguity associated with open inquiry by disengaging from its outcomes. The challenge for education is to build character that is open and flexible, intellectually and deliberatively, but decisive and committed when it is time to act.



College of the Holy Cross

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Convocations and other gatherings at the opening of the school year are often useful times to open conversations about these issues. Based on these conversations, the campus might choose to adopt the cluster of norms and abilities around open inquiry and individual commitment as explicit goals and probe more deeply into how they can be pursued. If such goals have already been adopted, their meaning in practice can be reexamined at these times.

Campus leaders should use multiple opportunities to endorse and support these goals. Materials sent to newly admitted students, as one example, should set an expectation that the campus will be a community of discourse, and that students will be exposed to a diversity of opinion about many issues, including political perspectives. The message should be modeled in the range of individuals invited to speak on campus. University officials should work with schools and departments, as well as student groups, to encourage bringing speakers to campus with different perspectives on hot-button public policy disputes, to emphasize the openness of the institution to a spectrum of differing views. Debates between outstanding advocates on different sides of controversial issues can be particularly effective.

In the political domain, speakers should include respected exemplars of open-mindedness and civility who (despite their own convictions at one or another point on the political scale) truly believe that in order to be effective, engaged citizens need to be skilled at communicating and forming alliances with people whose perspectives are different from their own. Invited guests should also include those who exemplify political engagement as cooperative public work within a community, regardless of ideology, or who represent positions and accomplishments that are hard to classify on a simple left/right dimension.

### **Regarding students**

Campus leaders should be in regular touch with a range of student opinions to test whether the campus climate seems to some students to stifle minority political opinions. If so, those leaders should work with students and faculty to ensure that forums are available for the expression of minority views and for thoughtful exploration of multiple points of view. In many parts of the

academy, the role of scholarship is seen to include representing the perspectives of the powerless, those who are out of the economic and political mainstream. Academic freedom protects faculty's right to challenge prevailing authority without

punitive response. Likewise, it is important for academic leaders, including faculty, to protect the academic freedom of students who wish to challenge the prevailing views within their classroom or institution.

Faculty can also do much to promote the value of open-minded inquiry within the classroom. At the very least, they can examine carefully their assignments and what they say in class through the lens of open inquiry as a course goal. One strategy some faculty use is to ask students to conduct research on and present the strongest arguments they can marshal for two or more quite different positions on contentious issues. This requires them to bring a degree of sympathy to positions they do not hold.

Faculty should also pay attention to assessment. Sometimes students believe their academic work has been evaluated based on the political views it expresses, rather than its quality, even when this is not true. For this and other reasons (which concern good teaching more broadly), it is essential to make assessment criteria explicit and to provide as much feedback as possible based on those criteria.

It has become a commonplace to complain about America's polarized political landscape. If the next generation of citizens is to set a different tone, they must experience in college an alternative to the politics of vitriol. □

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