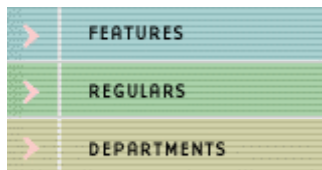




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by David Orland

A [recent poll](#) of Ivy League professors has confirmed what many conservative critics of the American academic scene have long suspected: that our nation's elite universities, for all the hype about "diversity," are in fact more intellectually and politically homogenous than ever. The poll, sponsored by David Horowitz's Center for the Study of Popular Culture (CSPC), discovered a remarkable degree of consensus among university staff on some of the most controversial political issues of the day.

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For example, although only 48 percent of American voters cast their ballots for Democratic Party candidate Al Gore in the last presidential election, fully 84 percent of those in the CSPC survey did so. This liberal bent carried over into their responses to other questions. While less than 20 percent of Americans support the idea of paying reparations for slavery, 40 percent of the academic crowd are in favor of it. Perhaps most telling of all, when asked to identify the best president of the last 40 years, 26 percent of Ivy League respondents chose Bill Clinton. This gave the Arkansas hustler a 9-point lead on the next most favored president (John Kennedy) and fully 22 points on the first ranked Republican (Ronald Reagan).

And yet, if there is a surprise here, it is that the liberal bias discovered by the CSPC poll isn't even more pronounced. For decades now, a steady campaign has been waged against the conservative presence on American campuses. This campaign has taken a number of forms, ranging from unspoken ideological litmus tests in faculty hiring to administrative discouragement of conservative student groups to subtle social and academic pressures to isolate those who dare question left-wing orthodoxies. These efforts have been immensely successful, not least because they are typically carried out as under-the-counter operations, masked from public view by a business-as-usual facade.

That may be changing. Several recent cases suggest that the very possibility of taking a conservative stance is increasingly being written out of college syllabi. It's not just a question of neglect. Failure to acknowledge that there is another side to the debate has long typified academic discussion of politically sensitive topics —

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sexuality, for example, or immigration or affirmative action. What's new is that, thanks to the efforts of a handful of college instructors, assent to left-wing political positions is increasingly becoming an explicit condition of taking their courses at all.

On Jan. 16, 2002, Professor Lynn Weber of the University of South Carolina's (USC) Women Studies Program distributed a syllabus to the students in her seminar. Among other things, the syllabus included a list of "Guidelines for Classroom Discussion." In order to participate in class discussion (20 percent of each student's final grade), the guidelines ruled, students in Professor Weber's class must first "acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist." The guidelines go on to require that prospective students further agree that "we are all systematically taught misinformation about our own group and about members of other groups," that "this is true for members of privileged and oppressed groups," and that students must "agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our groups and other groups."

The class guidelines are very specific. A student who believes the opposite, that the U.S. is a place where anyone, regardless of social background can succeed — will fail.

Quite a mouthful for the first day of class. The problem with all this is not so much that Professor Weber believes that institutionalized "racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression" exist (maybe, maybe not) nor even that "we are all systematically taught misinformation about our own group and about members of other groups" (a judgment from which one must suppose Weber generously exempts herself). The problem is that Weber proposes turning these exquisitely debatable propositions into articles of faith on penalty of a reduced grade. Believe otherwise — or so her syllabus would seem to suggest — and you will suffer the consequences. Needless to say, anyone who would dare present a conservative position on these issues falls into that category.

As Thor Halvorssen, executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE — a Philadelphia-based nonprofit group that fights violations of individual liberty in the American university system) recently told me:

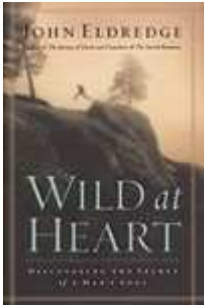
Weber's syllabus manifestly orders the exclusion of any point of view that differs from her own. . . . The class guidelines are very specific. For example, a student who believes the opposite, that the U.S. is a place where anyone, regardless of social background can succeed — will fail. A student who believes this country to be tolerant and contrasts the rights of sexual minorities in the U.S. with the horrific oppression endured by gays and lesbians in Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Iran and China — will fail. A student who puts forward the thesis that there is equal justice under the law and that the U.S. Constitution effectively protects racial minorities from unequal treatment — will fail.

There may be hope yet. Their fear of criticism makes university administrations especially vulnerable to public efforts directed at changing policy.

"It is undeniable," Halvorssen continued, "that many faculty members at colleges and universities are incredibly hostile to points of view that do not fit into a very narrow part of the left of the political spectrum. What is rare is that they express their bigotry in such a blunt and public manner. Writing out an ideological loyalty oath in your syllabus is a gutsy move. On the other hand, it speaks volumes of the intolerant climate at USC that such a syllabus would go by practically unnoticed."

UC Berkeley's Snehal Shingavi, a graduate student instructor in the Department of English and well-known campus militant, recently went even further, explicitly discouraging conservatives from enrolling in his freshman composition course on the "Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance." According to a syllabus distributed by Shingavi (who, incidentally, is not Palestinian) in advance of the course enrollment period, his course "takes as its starting point the right of Palestinians to fight for their own self-determination."

"The brutal Israeli military occupation of Palestine," Shingavi claims, "has



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systematically displaced, killed and maimed millions of Palestinian people. . . . And yet from under the brutal weight of the occupation, Palestinians have produced their own culture and poetry of resistance.”

That’s a lot of “brutality” for someone who, as a freshman composition instructor, is supposed to be on his guard against redundancy. But instructing students in the rudiments of style does not seem to be Shingavi’s first concern. Rather, he appears intent on treating his teaching appointment as a recruiting opportunity for the various left-wing political groups in which he is involved, including Students for Justice in Palestine, the recently banned and even more recently reinstated Berkeley student group that seeks university divestiture from Israel. If Shingavi is to be successful in recruiting newcomers to the cause, his docile students must be protected from those who might challenge the master’s wisdom — not just supporters of Israel but conservatives in general. “Conservative thinkers,” Shingavi’s syllabus not-so-diplomatically puts it, “are encouraged to seek other sections.”

No doubt they will. Even so, such “encouragements” are in patent violation of Berkeley’s Faculty Code of Conduct, which holds that there shall be no “discrimination, including harassment, against a student on political grounds, or for reasons of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, national origin.” For once, the administration is not sitting on its hands. Responding to complaints that Shingavi’s course syllabus discriminates against students on political grounds, UC Berkeley Chancellor Robert Berdahl [committed the administration](#) to ensuring freedom of expression and open access in course enrollment. “There was a failure of oversight on the part of the English Department in reviewing course proposal descriptions for the reading and composition section. . . . This failure is in the process of being addressed.” As readers of [my earlier columns](#) may notice, such “failures of oversight” are well on their way to becoming something of a routine at Berkeley.

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Shingavi, for his part, has denied that his syllabus was meant to exclude anybody. The term “conservative thinkers,” he claims, only refers to those who are “limited or narrow in scope,” not necessarily to those who hold conservative political views. As for the charge that he requires his students to share his attitude to the Palestinian resistance, Shingavi asserts that “if you can’t accept that Palestinians have a right to self-determination, it is impossible to read resistance poetry.” This, like his willful misuse of standard English, is just so much noise to conceal Shingavi’s real intentions. The idea that only pro-Palestinian types can understand pro-Palestinian literature is like saying that only Catholics can appreciate Baroque art. As a principle of aesthetic criticism, it isn’t just wrong; it’s an example of exactly the sort of “limited or narrow” thinking that Shingavi pretends to be against.

What’s exceptional about these two cases is not the naked effort on the part of Weber and Shingavi to exclude conservative opinion from their (publicly financed) classrooms; it’s that they got caught doing so. In fact, Weber and Shingavi are in good company when it comes to treating their academic appointments as political bully pulpits. While these cases may be exceptional from the point of view of the publicity they’ve generated, they are all too characteristic of the day-to-day operations of hundreds of humanities and social science departments around the country. As graduating senior Rory Miller pointed out in [a recent article](#) on the Berkeley controversy: “U.C. Berkeley postures as a haven of free speech and tolerance, but like other so-called liberal campuses across the nation, it is far from that. The unstated rule in effect on campus is that one is free to speak and to be as extreme as one wishes, but only so long as one speaks from the left.”

The fact that so many university faculty are themselves left-wing makes this double standard especially difficult to combat. The “failures of oversight” lamented by Chancellor Berdahl and echoed by his fellow administrators at campuses across the country are in fact not “failures” at all. They’re just what happens when you stack a particular department with ideological fellow-travelers, especially when those fellow-

travelers have, as do so many on the American left today, a troubled relationship with the idea of principle. Confronted with obvious abuses of the Weber/Shingavi variety, most faculty either lack the interest to investigate such cases further or indulgently wink the guilty parties on for political reasons of their own. After all, nobody likes a conservative.


University administrations, for their part, are only too glad to play along. As fearful of additional work as he is of scandal, your average administrator invariably prefers doing nothing to doing something. As Rory Miller remarked in an exchange with the author: "These people [university administrators] take the path of least resistance to outside demands. If protesters are beating their doors down, they'll usually cave just to make them shut up and go away. Same thing with negative outside press."

In this sense, there may be hope yet. Their fear of criticism makes university administrations especially vulnerable to public efforts directed at changing policy. The more often cases of the Weber/Shingavi variety are reported, the more likely that administrators will put pressure on faculties to enforce the rules of conduct of the university and guarantee that our campuses are what they claim to be: places where free inquiry and intellectual liberty take precedence.

A recent case at Arizona State University (ASU) nicely illustrates this point. Earlier this Spring, ASU history professor Peter Iverson, a specialist in Native American history and recipient of a number of distinguished fellowships, announced an upcoming freshman seminar on Navajo History. Like Weber and Shingavi, Iverson sought to exclude certain groups in advance from attending his course. Unlike Weber and Shingavi, the students Iverson sought to exclude were defined by their ancestry, not their politics: "class enrollment is limited to Native American students," Iverson's syllabus tersely announced.

After being informed of this bizarre enrollment requirement by a concerned student, FIRE President Alan Charles Kors addressed a letter of protest to ASU President Lattie F. Coor. "Substitute 'The History of Slavery . . . for U.S. blacks only,'" Kors wrote, "or 'The History of Israel . . . for Jewish-Americans only,' or 'The History of Germany . . . for Aryan-Americans only' in those [course] descriptions to understand how morally inappropriate and dangerous these requirements are. It is truly frightening to imagine a world where universities would segregate topics, education, and, therefore, knowledge on the basis of what they deem 'appropriate' to each race; American universities should be the last institutions to introduce those shameful practices to this new century."

Kors' letter worked. In a recent letter to FIRE, President Coor announced that ASU has eliminated the racial entry requirement from Iverson's course description. Vigilance — and a little bit of well-directed pressure — can go a long way.

"The individuals at USC, Berkeley, and ASU who stood against indoctrination have made a difference," FIRE's Halvorssen remarked. "Unfortunately, individuals too often convince themselves that they are caught up in moments of history that they cannot affect. That history, however, is made by their will and moral choices. There is a moral crisis in higher education. It will not be resolved unless we choose and act to resolve it." 



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