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The PC Academy Debate: Questions not Asked

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After we launched this project exploring intellectual diversity in American higher education, a colleague of the lead editor playfully accused him of wasting time on "that stab-us-in-the-back book" rather than producing ever greater quantities of conventional social science. The remark was a joke, but it hints at the academic culture that led us to undertake this project, a culture in which any departure from the politically correct norm is viewed with suspicion. Our goal in this book is to explore and finally offer remedies to this culture of political correctness, the bugaboo that has most bedeviled American higher education in recent years. We focus on the problem of liberal political orthodoxy in teaching and scholarship and seek to understand how "diversity"—of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, but not of ideas—has become the dominant ideology in higher education.

Charges of a leftist, politically correct environment in academia are nothing new. The famous Bennington College study of the 1930s presented evidence that even in that era, conservative students felt isolated from the larger campus atmosphere. The father of modern American conservatism, William F. Buckley Jr., complained in 1951 that university professors had...
contempt for religion and capitalism, combined with reverence for central planning. More recent heirs to Buckley include Charles J. Sykes, Dinesh D'Souza, and Martin Anderson. Each has savaged colleges and universities for lowering academic standards and fostering political correctness. Nor have all the critics come from the right. Centrist thinkers including Jonathan Rauch and Richard Bernstein have made essentially the same complaints.

More recently, however, political entrepreneurs have turned a generalized complaint into a very specific political movement. The critics of academia, most notably conservative activist David Horowitz, have organized for reform. Horowitz has "outed" the "101 most dangerous professors" who proselytize for their political views in the classroom and has founded the activist group Students for Academic Freedom, which seeks to guarantee equal rights for conservative students and faculty. Proposals outlawing discrimination against conservative faculty and students have been under consideration in at least eighteen states.

Mainstream academics have reacted to the Horowitz critique with denial and condescension: if conservatives are underrepresented in the academy, it is because they lack sufficient motivation or intelligence to survive professional peer review. Many academics seem even to deny that colleges and universities should play host to a variety of viewpoints. For an interesting example, see the American Association of University Professors report Freedom in the Classroom, which argues that any attempt at ideological diversity would inevitably lead to "equal time for Communist totalitarianism or Nazi fascism," given the "potentially infinite number of competing perspectives." Seemingly the AAUP finds Republican doctrines no more (.or less) plausible than those of Hitler and Stalin.

This volume begins from the premise that the response of mainstream academics to charges of political correctness has been empirically suspect and intellectually counterproductive. Substantial anecdotal and quantitative evidence indicates that there is a decided leftist bent to colleges and universities, particularly the most prestigious institutions. Former Harvard president and Clinton treasury secretary Larry Summers has said that in Washington he was "the right half of the left," while at Harvard he found himself "on the right half of the right." Moreover, as several of the following contributions discuss, this political imbalance likely stems from practices within the academy that discourage conservatives from pursuing academic careers.
We do not regard this as an indictment of most college and university faculty and administrators, however. As Daniel Klein and Charlotta Stern show in a later chapter on majoritarian departmental politics, the sort of biases that disadvantage conservatives in academic job markets may be subtle and largely unintentional. Pressures to conform to group norms may have become particularly strong in recent years, given the weak academic job market.\footnote{7}

Such pressures have resulted in colleges and universities that drastically overrepresent the left and far left to the point of marginalizing alternative voices. In the social sciences, where one's ideology plays a far greater role in guiding teaching and research than in the sciences, we have observed the following firsthand:

- A senior professor urges a non-tenure-track political science professor to delete from his resume work on a Republican campaign, speculating that this "blotch" might explain the younger man's failure to land a tenure-track job.

- An undergraduate psychology student, a conservative, says he feels "alone with my views amid a sea of liberal graduate students and professors"—so much so that he doubts his ability to be successful in his chosen profession.

- A graduate student in the social sciences cites the frequency with which psychologists "write or say demeaning things about people with conservative political or religious views" without ever considering the views of their audience.

We maintain that the relative absence of conservative, libertarian, and neoliberal thinkers and thought from the academy is in part caused by discriminatory academic personnel practices. Further, we see this discrimination against conservatives as having four chief costs to academia and society.

First and most importantly, the lack of diversity in academia limits the questions we ask and the phenomena we study, retarding our pursuit of knowledge and our ability to serve society. We know, for instance, that the public had determined by the 1970s that the welfare program AFDC was not working, yet academic sociologists even now adamantly reject that conclusion.
and ostracize those who take it seriously. Charles Murray’s research on the problems caused by out-of-wedlock birth in general and AFDC in particular has influenced public policy—but from outside the academy. Murray is not an academic and could almost certainly not attain an academic position given his views.

Similarly, criminology professors have worked tirelessly to deny the success of the New York City Police Department’s reforms rather than encouraging other cities to adopt like reforms. Despite New York City’s fifteen-year decline in crime continuing through the tenure of three mayors and five police chiefs, criminologists still struggle to attribute increased safety to demographic shifts or even random statistical variation (which seemingly skipped other cities!) rather than to more effective policing. This failure to accept reality costs thousands of lives.

A second, related problem is that limiting “critical” conservative or libertarian thought serves to delegitimize academic expertise and the academy in general among large swaths of voters and policymakers. It thus becomes harder for scholars to contribute effectively to policy debates. Indeed, the development of free-market-oriented think tanks such as those in the State Policy Network in part reflects the erosion of academics’ technical authority. It also becomes harder for citizens to believe in their public universities. As Hanna F. Pitkin has shown, most conceptions of democratic representation suggest that public organizations, including universities, should represent the ideals and demography of citizens. Without a reasonable diversity of political opinion, public institutions of higher learning lose their legitimacy.

A third, a range of insightful critics, including Allan Bloom, Martin Anderson, Josiah Bunting III, C. John Sommerville, and Richard H. Hersh and John Merrow, has questioned whether universities as now constituted serve to make students more capable people and citizens. Indeed, recent studies by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute report that even elite colleges and universities fail to teach students the basic information they need to make good decisions as voters, in matters such as where public money goes. The lack of intellectual diversity on campuses itself harms undergraduates by limiting the depth and range of ideas to which they are exposed. The result is incalculable damage to the life of the mind, as the academy becomes ever more a mere credentials machine. Yet the days of growth without accountability
may be coming to an end; academia is now under increasing scrutiny for permitting lower academic standards, substituting indoctrination for teaching, and raising costs, themes developed in the last section of this book.

Finally, such critics as Martin Anderson and David Lodge argue that our ideological monoculture makes universities intellectually dull places where careerism and profit seeking prevail and the energy of contending ideas is absent. Such matters as the Iraq War and affirmative action are debated in newspapers and in Congress, but not in academia, where a single acceptable view is presumed. Dullness sounds like a minor problem, but in practice it bleeds academia of some of its best and brightest minds, a point made even by such nonconservative thinkers as David M. Ricci and Russell Jacoby.

Although the lack of intellectual diversity in academia clearly has costs, the conservative critiques to date are unlikely to bring about desired changes. For starters, too much of the case suggesting that academia is hostile to conservative ideas has been anecdotal rather than systematic. Moreover, some "conservative" critics of academe appear to be more concerned with ideological balance on campus than with ensuring that higher education is equipped to pursue its intellectual, educational, and social mission.

What the debate needs—and what we offer in this volume—is empirically and historically grounded criticism of academia combined with ideas about how to make academia truer to its social purpose of gaining and disseminating knowledge. We have brought together a group of scholars and practitioners who care deeply about higher education, and who set about systematically answering the following questions: How rare are conservative professors? Why are they so rare? How does this vary by discipline? What are the effects of this political homogeneity on campus? What solutions are available for reforming the PC university?

This book is organized into four sections. Chapters in the first and most empirical section, "Diagnosing the Problem," establish that universities actually do need reform. This section begins with chapters providing the most current and comprehensive statistical analyses of the relative rarity of conservative and libertarian professors. Chapters follow that explore the psychological and sociological mechanisms by which such imbalance comes about; these chapters also consider how and why academia stresses demographic diversity while largely eschewing political diversity.
In "By the Numbers: The Ideological Profile of Professors," Daniel Klein of George Mason University and Charlotta Stern of Stockholm University summarize and critique all important survey research since the 1960s on the ideology, policy views, and voting behavior of humanities and social science faculty. They find that conservatives and libertarians are becoming increasingly rare in academia, outnumbered by liberals and radicals by nearly 3 to 1 in relatively conservative fields like economics, more than 5 to 1 in moderate fields like political science, and 20 to 1 or more in anthropology and sociology.

In "Left Pipeline: Why Conservatives Don't Get Doctorates," Matthew Woessner of Penn State–Harrisburg and April Kelly-Woessner of Elizabeth-town College use a national survey of college and university seniors to show that conservative students are substantially less likely to want to pursue doctorates than similarly situated liberal peers. This is not because they are less intelligent (liberal and conservative students have identical mean GPAs) but because they have different life priorities and career goals. Yet the data also suggest that conservative students lack academic role models, have more distant relationships to faculty, and may have fewer opportunities to do research with their professors, all of which may also affect their decision to pursue graduate education.

That the academic job markets seem to discriminate against conservative PhDs is suggested in "The Vanishing Conservative—Is There a Glass Ceiling?" by Stanley Rothman of Smith College and S. Robert Lichter of George Mason University. They find strong statistical evidence that socially conservative academics must publish more books and articles to get the same jobs as liberal peers. While publication records have the most impact on academic success, it remains the case that conservatives seem to be underplaced within the academic meritocracy, with social conservatism having about a third of the statistical impact on career success as one's publishing record.

The second section, "Diversity in Higher Education," begins with a second piece by Daniel Klein and Charlotta Stern, "Groupthink in Academia: Majoritarian Departmental Politics and the Professional Pyramid." Klein and Stern suggest that anticonservative bias in the academy is likely explained by a psychological phenomenon known as "groupthink." Organizations that can both select members and control members' rewards tend to select and reward those like the original group, so that an initial
laboral academic orientation has led to faculties that are increasingly less ideologically diverse. In developing their groupthink interpretation, Klein and Stern explore how a few especially prestigious departments shape majoritarian thinking in departments across the discipline.

In "The Psychology of Political Correctness in Higher Education," University of Nevada-Reno professor William O'Donohue and Chapman University professor Richard Redding explore the psychological goals and assumptions underlying diversity programs and political correctness. They challenge the assumption that disadvantaged groups suffer harm from certain speech or actions, and that ameliorative interventions are necessary to correct the harm. Drawing on psychological research, they argue that sociopolitical diversity may actually be the most important form of diversity for achieving the stated goals of diversity in higher education.

How demographic diversity came to trump ideological diversity on campus is the subject of "College Conformity 101: Where the Diversity of Ideas Meets the Idea of Diversity," by National Association of Scholars executor director Peter Wood. Wood shows how demographic diversity has come to dominate higher education through its application in faculty hiring, student admissions, curricula, student orientation, residence hall policies, and virtually every other aspect of college life. Wood refers to a "new kind of aristocracy" created by this understanding of diversity, with a hierarchy of privilege based on perceived victimization, but he holds out the hope that inherent tensions in the diversity doctrine, combined with state ballot initiatives outlawing affirmative action, may ultimately chip away at the diversity regime.

Finally, in "The American University: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," James Piereson, president of the William E. Simon Foundation and a former academic, sees the modern university as the product of twentieth-century liberalism, and suggests that the break-up of the foundational assumption of liberalism—free thought—poses the most profound challenge of all to the modern university. He suggests that the nationalization and internationalization of higher education is working to increase political uniformity among faculty, and that the very financial success of universities may insulate them from reform impulses.

In the third section, "Different Disciplines, Same Problem," leading scholars explore how political correctness affects scholarship and teaching
across core liberal arts and social science disciplines. While the AAUP holds that "it is not indoctrination for professors to expect students to comprehend ideas and apply knowledge that is accepted as true within a relevant discipline," these essays illustrate how liberal political biases and agendas color what is accepted and acceptable within a discipline.

In "When Is Diversity Not Diversity: A Brief History of the English Department," University of Virginia professor Paul Cantor shows that literature departments were much more intellectually diverse in the 1950s, when discrete schools of literary study dominated individual campuses and competed with one another in the broader academic universe. Today, a depressing uniformity of approach prevails, as literature departments may study a wider variety of works but generally do so through the narrower lenses of race, class, and gender.

In "Linguistics from the Left: The Truth about Black English That the Academy Doesn't Want You to Know," Manhattan Institute scholar and former University of California, Berkeley professor John McWhorter looks at the study of Black English to show how identity politics has managed to drive linguistics from its original mission, the nonpartisan description and analysis of languages and dialects. Dishonest linguists, McWhorter shows, are influencing elementary educators, and in turn making it harder for struggling black children to learn to read.

The field of history shows a similar dynamic. In "History Upside Down," Hoover Institution scholar Viktor Davis Hanson defines politically correct history as those efforts to use the past to achieve social change in the present. The goal of such history is to indict the West—and the United States in particular—as an inherently pathological oppressor of the "other." Hanson describes numerous examples of such demonization, which increasingly replaces more nuanced and accurate understandings of the past. The resulting weaknesses of modern academic history have left the field ripe for takeover: increasingly, journalists fill the roles previously held by historians.

Political science may be in better shape than history, the next chapter suggests. In "Why Political Science Is Left But Not Quite P.C: Causes of Disunion and Diversity," University of Virginia professor James Ceaser and University of Arkansas professor Robert Maranto demonstrate that political science is less rigidly liberal than many other disciplines. The cause: certain subfields such as constitutional law, traditional political philosophy, political
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...economy, and international relations require skills and attitudes that permit moderates and conservatives to compete effectively for jobs. In addition, the pluralist ideology of American political science argues for tolerance of a range of viewpoints. Nevertheless, roughly 80 percent of political scientists are liberal or progressive, and this limits the sorts of questions those in the field ask.

In the final section, "Needed Reforms," practitioners describe the history of political correctness in universities and outline possible ways to reform academia.

In "The Route to Academic Pluralism," National Association of Scholars president Stephen Balch calls for more active trustees and the creation of centers within universities to explore and represent conservative, traditional liberal, and libertarian perspectives. Such centers now exist at Princeton, Duke, Brown, and other schools. They lay the groundwork for eventually creating intellectually diverse departments, which, through their ability to hire and train, could reopen the academic marketplace to intellectual dissidents.

In "The Role of Alumni and Trustees," Anne Neal of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni argues for the involvement of informed alumni and trustees in overseeing colleges and universities. Alumni and trustees have abdicated their proper role out of deference to faculty and presidents, but they must be willing to articulate their concerns about trends in the academy that threaten its future stature, rather than merely delegate to academics.

In "Openness, Transparency, and Accountability: Fostering Public Trust in Higher Education" former U.S. senator and University of Colorado president Hank Brown, and his colleagues John Cooney and Michael Poliakoff, point out that both America's preeminence in, and public trust of, higher education are eroding. The authors explain that only by adhering to principles of openness, transparency, and accountability can the academy regain public trust. The authors discuss such policies in the context of perceived fiscal mismanagement, political bias, declining academic rigor, and low standards for awarding tenure.

Finally, John Agresto, former National Endowment for the Humanities chairman and former president of St. John's College in New Mexico, explains that PC problems mainly affect the liberal arts, in part for reasons inherent in their very nature. In "To Reform the Politically Correct University, Reform..."
the Liberal Arts," he advocates restoring balance and openness to our colleges and universities by deliberately exploring the vital middle ground between those who see the liberal arts as necessarily in opposition to reigning orthodoxies, and those more libertarian scholars who know that some apparent attempts to smash all idols are actually efforts to substitute a new orthodoxy for the old. In effect, Agresto wants academics to heal themselves by changing the culture of academia from one of smugness to one of seeking.

This volume will not be the last word on the PC university. In particular, we have hardly begun to explore the costs of ideological consensus—to look, that is, at how academia's left-oriented status quo harms students and society. Still, we hope this work will start a dialogue between groups such as the AAUP, which defend that status quo, and critics mainly from the right and center. (In that debate, we trust that civility and data will prevail over passions and interests.) If the empirical evidence this volume offers persuades many well-meaning scholars on the left that higher education really has a PC problem, academia may begin to reform itself from the inside. One thing is near certain: reform will come—only its timing and nature are in doubt.