

How To End Left-Wing Dominance in Higher Education: A Toolkit for Activists and Policy-Makers

Talk given at conference “Academic Freedom Under Threat”, May 9-10, University of Oxford

Dr. Bruce Gilley, Chapter President, Oregon Association of Scholars

1

Let us say that I am an undergraduate at my alma mater here at Oxford, St. Edmund Hall, interested in politics, and in particular the long-standing success of center-right Christian Democrat or conservative parties in post-war Europe. I want to understand the remarkable success of conservative parties and their policy and political choices over the last half century. I have a choice of three tutors or lecturers at the Hall with whom to work: one has a passion for feminism; one is a specialist in Marxism; and the third is focused on post-colonialism. To whom should I turn to understand what is, at least in the realm of electoral politics and governments of Europe, the most salient and basic fact of the last half century? Where will I be guided once I turn to these scholars?

Let me make an informed guess, since I have worked in this discipline for nearly 20 years. First, they will get me to think about how these parties have been supported mainly by big business, patriarchy, and the cruelties of the West, not by genuine public support and a normatively justified legitimacy; secondly, they will elide these center-right parties with far-right movements and ideologies, suggesting that if there is any popular support it is at root based in racism, oppression of women, and other noxious ideas; and third, they will set up a template in which the “natural” governors, namely the center-left and far-left parties, occasionally overcome this structural oppression and “the people” take power, a brief emancipatory period of “true democracy” until the dark forces of repression and patriarchy regroup and the center-right comes back into power.

Is that an education at all? And will I be able to participate and contribute to a pluralistic democratic society upon graduation? It’s not and I won’t. I will be cast adrift the moment I encounter the real world, probably become cynical and politically alienated. I will become much more interested in Pinterest than in Politics.

I don’t think we are in any doubt what the problem is: it is simply that since the 1960s, there has been a whole scale takeover of higher education by the left, often the far left. The harms of the threat are now present and serious – as seen by our eggshells environment on campus and the spread of left-wing academic culture into society as shown by organizations like Google and, less noticed, government departments at every level. Richard Hess at the American Enterprise Institute calls this the “campusization” of Western culture. I know of large government agency in Oregon which recently rejected a highly-qualified candidate because he used the term “Sherpa” to describe advance teams that prepare for meetings and was accused of cultural appropriation.

This has been achieved sometimes through a naked exercise of power but mainly through the cumulative consequences of the academic market in action. The reason therefore I focus on strategies of change is because I think that this is where the questions lie. I will argue that the solution lies, unfortunately, in the use of political power to correct the market failure that is contemporary higher education. All fields of human endeavor require a plurality of viewpoints, especially when a plurality of viewpoints is their very essence.

My concern is left-wing domination. While there are lunatics on the right who launch hate campaigns against left-wing academics, these people are not in higher education or government. It is qualitatively different when the people attacking an academic's work have the institutional authority to shut down viewpoints they agree with and this is mainly the case with those on the left in higher education and government who believe that the academy should be some special zone of left-wing viewpoints.

My concern is “dominance” not “presence” or even “preponderance”. I think that people who gravitate towards the academic life are prone to wanting to rearrange the world according to theory and idea rather than practice and experience, and that disposition naturally finds its way towards left-wing viewpoints.

The diversity of viewpoints that must be reflected in higher education must be roughly those that are found in the society it serves. This is an important point because often when you raise the question of intellectual mono-culture on campus, the left will say “Oh, no, we have a lot of pluralism: we have feminists, environmentalists, Marxists, post-modernists, Nietzscheans, post-colonialists, social democrats, Emersonians, Afrocentrists, and now the latest wave includes whiteness and structural racism scholars, LGBT scholars, anti-ableist scholars, inter-sectionalists, and people like the French scholar who self-identifies as a hippopotamus.¹ Whaddya mean no viewpoint diversity?”

There are limits to the viewpoints that should be in currency, of course, but these need to be broad and wide. If violent and extreme ideas that have fomented mass death are to be forbidden, for instance, then Marxism would not be allowed. That would be absurd however.

That the “activists” in the academy require “activists” to save them from themselves is a rude irony. I use the term “activist” advisedly. Those of us who consider ourselves conservatives generally break out into a rash if called “activists” because it implies the use of coercive and non-traditional methods of change, both of which are to be lamented. I mean simply that those concerned with higher education need to get active and stop thinking that they can make good faith arguments to save the academy.

I have heard the arguments here and from my colleagues in the Heterodox Academy that good old fashioned deliberative democracy and persuasion is needed not blunt action. I wish this were so. Allan Bloom raised the issue in 1987 and many believed that would set the world of higher education back on track. It did not. Building a culture of tolerance for diverse viewpoints has

¹ Florentin Félix Morin, “Ego Hippo: The Subject as Metaphor,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 22:2 (2017), 87-96.

failed. It must be enforced, in the same way that any form of discrimination must in the end, be in part controlled through sanctions.

I take the idea of “market failure” as my template. So this means, we need to consider whether “government failure” would be worse than the market failure. We should not exaggerate the harms of the dark age of higher education because most people can decode their radical professors and once they escape the university their views change or update. But I think the balance of risks has changed. We are at a point where, even for a conservative who worries a lot about unintended consequences, is humble about his ignorance about how systems operate and might be feasibly changed, is skeptical of improving projects, dislikes top-down planning, and prefers gradualism and the status quo, it is worth experimenting cautiously with correcting this market failure.

So, to a few points for action.

Higher Education Freedom Legislation

A university that in any way allows students or other groups to prevent speakers from coming to campus, whether through force or through administrative trick, should be denied benefits from government. So too with attempts to regulate speech on campus or to not recognize student groups outside the dominant ideologies. This especially includes compelled speech codes, such as forcing people to use gender pronouns not consistent with a person’s gender at birth or using euphemisms like “undocumented migrant” instead of “illegal immigrant”.

President Trump’s executive order of March, 2019 is a step in the right direction, especially because all it really does is emphasize that federal agencies that give money to universities need to comply with the law on free speech and that universities need to comply with their own rules on free speech as well. So any university that includes an anti-Israel boycott/divest/sanction provision in its endowment investment policies or other campus policies should be ineligible for federal research grants. It does not – yet – tie student aid or other powerful funding like veterans education to upholding free speech and inquiry. You cannot read that order and say it “politicizes” education. It is modesty incarnate.

But in the end, it does not really touch the core problem, which is the limits on ideas being promoted on campus. It challenges universities and colleges to uphold negative freedoms (like censorship) but it does nothing to advance positive freedoms (like viewpoint diversity). In addition, in the balance of government legislation, you have to put on the other side the constant stream of government mandates that curtail freedom on campus -- cultural competence training, civic engagement requirements, free textbook mandates, trauma-informed sexual assault guidelines, etc.

Administrative Diversity

Left-wing dominance is not just from faculty but from administrators. Evidence from the U.S. shows that not only are administrators far more left-wing as a whole than faculty – liberals outnumber conservatives by 12 to 1 in administration versus 6 to 1 in faculty according to Samuel Abrams -- but they also are far more drawn from the humanities and social sciences than the student body – roughly 3 to 1 ratio. Even those from the sciences and who hold moderate or

centrist views, however, are likely not to challenge the left-wing orthodoxy. But they will not worsen it. So universities should set guidelines on recruitment of administrative staff.

Offices of Diversity and Student Life

Offices of student life and diversity or equity were originally intended as purely administrative organs, to help students navigate services and to enforce relevant laws on discrimination. But they have grown like killer blobs into essentially tuition-funded left-wing activist agencies, pushing all sorts of agendas that are shamelessly left-wing. By radically reducing the size of these bureaucracies, we can both control administrative bloat and lessen the administrative imposition of left-wing viewpoints on the student body. Diversity offices (human rights, equity, inclusion, etc.) in particular in the United States, Canada, and Australia have become real and present dangers to the integrity of a university. They not only act as legislative actors – making up new rules guiding campus behavior – they are also executive – promoting and implementing them – and investigative and judicial – setting up mechanisms that allow students to complain and thus trigger Star Chamber-like inquiries and impose punishments. They should be abolished.

Employment Law

A lot could be achieved on the faculty side simply by enforcing existing employment law. It is illegal in most countries to hire someone on the basis of their gender, race, or religion, among other categories, Yet we know it happens all the time. The solution, alas, is for hiring and promotion to be taken out of the sole hands of the faculty. Also, what is needed is expand the definition of discrimination to include discrimination based on a person's political or social views. This means that hiring and promotion should be forbidden from asking applicants to describe their commitments to diversity, social justice, sustainability, equality and inclusion, or other political or ideological issues. Nor can such issues be raised in interviews. Better protections, perhaps in the form of an employment ombudsman on campus, might work who is able to be present in hiring and promotion to guard against what is in effect political blackballing of candidates.

Academic Neutrality

Left-wing domination in the end is a problem of left-wing faculty preponderance. One way to curtail that is simply to abolish a department that has an explicit left-wing ideological agenda. So all of the grievance studies departments and programs should be ended and those fields of inquiry returned to the relevant disciplines – if you want to study black literature it should be in a department of language and literature or English; if you want to study native America history it should be in a department of history; if you want to study women and politics, it should be in a department of political science. This would also be a double winner because we know from earnings data that grievance studies graduates are the lowest earning among those with university degrees. This is no silver bullet, of course, but like the Executive Order and the abolition of diversity offices, it is an important symbolic or signaling device.

Organization

I head the Oregon chapter of the National Association of Scholars. I first turned to the aid of the National Association of Scholars in 2016 after a “woke mob” of my students accused me of using the wrong gender pronoun for a student in a class. Peter Wood, the NAS president, stood ready

to make the organization's voice heard on the matter, privately to my university at first but publicly if the nonsense carried on. Fortunately it did not. But the experience left me profoundly aware of the importance of solidarity for scholars who still value pluralism and reason in the face of an increasingly intolerant and arrogant Left in the academy. I wanted to do what Peter had done for scholars and scholarship in my home state of Oregon. As a result, we agreed that I would build an Oregon chapter of the NAS.

In any large country, national organizations work best with local chapters. If for no other reason, members of local chapters are more likely to meet and get to know one another – little platoons firing fusillades against the revolutionary armies attacking their positions. In the case of the U.S., much law and policy in higher education is a state matter and thus chapters make even more sense. But the most important role of the chapter is simply to mobilize more people into action on behalf of the organization. Groups like the NAS are effective in direct proportion to the number, breadth, and engagement of their membership. In our Oregon chapter, we have launched initiatives like an annual “campus freedom award” for students in the state that can serve as models for others to follow.

One main lesson I have learned in my three years of heading the chapter, the Oregon Association of Scholars, is that there is a tremendous appetite in the real world for common sense responses to campus lunacy. Well-educated people seek well-educated responses to that lunacy, and a chapter composed to scholars and experts in higher education is well-placed to provide that. The real audience and the real solution to the steady erosion of freedoms and intellectual pluralism in higher education is the educated public. I don't get involved with campus politics at my home institution and I rarely engage my faculty colleagues on the issues that our Oregon Association of Scholars publishes and advocates on. Our audience is instead taxpayers, alumni, donors, policy-makers, university trustees, elected politicians, and the media, in whose hands the resurrection of higher education will take place. In the meantime, the NAS and its local chapters provide not just effective moral support but also stimulating intellectual company in which to wait out the dark ages into which we have descended.

Conclusion

A hundred years ago, the academy was under the dominance of clerics and classicists despite the baleful consequences for education and training. There was a group of reformers who wanted universities to serve the current needs of society better, in their case with more practical courses and more self-directed choices for students. But the Establishment was digging in by attacking the reformers. As Harvard president Charles Eliot wrote in 1907: “This multitudinous tyrannical opinion is even more formidable to one who offends it than the despotic will of a single tyrant or small group of tyrants. It affects the imagination more, because it seems omnipresent, merciless, and irresponsible; and therefore resistance to it requires a rare kind of moral courage.” We need that rare kind of moral courage today to bring the academy out of the death-grip of the left and make it relevant and useful to society again.