



CAMPUS POLITICS AND THE POWER OF THE PURSE

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DON'T GIVE to Harvard! The call went out to 40,000 graduates of Harvard and Radcliffe last November. A group called the Committee for the Equality of Women at Harvard, led by Radcliffe alumnae, was inaugurating a boycott of the university's \$2 billion capital campaign. Their gripe: Harvard's failure to tenure a sufficient number of female professors.

The committee had tactfully asked Harvard for more than a year to improve its 11 percent tenure rate for women. Women make up 23 percent of tenured professors nationwide, and Harvard's record seemed embarrassingly inadequate. So when speaking softly failed, they resorted to the big stick that politicized alums around the country have lately been using: the power of the purse.

So potential donors have been asked to omit the words "Harvard University" from their checks and instead write in "The Harvard Women Faculty Fund." The committee will hold these donations in escrow until it gets the university's attention. Money, after all, talks -- no less to university administrators than to anyone else.

Those heartened by the resolve of the Radcliffe alumnae might not endorse some insurgent graduates of Washington, D.C.'s own Trinity College. There, a small but vocal group called the Trinity Alumnae Action Committee is gunning for the college's president, Patricia McGuire, for reasons that sound anything but feminist.

Though not all of their complaints are political, their general thrust is that McGuire has liberalized the campus -- that she has diluted the college's Catholic identity, for example, by closing the campus chapel, once the site of daily mass, to all but occasional events, and instituted an academically flaccid feminist curriculum. "They're making it a temple of political correctness," says Elizabeth Collins Kaming, a New York attorney and Trinity alumna who is leading the rebellion.

Like the Radcliffe group, their strategy has been to snap shut their wallets in the hope of wrenching concessions from a cash-strapped administration. The university insists donations are proceeding apace; Kaming says she thinks officials are starting to feel the pinch.

The new assault of alumni activism seems to be coming predominantly from the right. Alumni activists with a progressive agenda, like the Radcliffe women, are the exception; as Kaming's comment suggests, most rally to fight the bogeyman of political correctness.

The most prominent of these new groups is the **National Alumni Forum**, which kicked off last March with backing from such well-known figures as ex-National Endowment for the Humanities chief Lynne Cheney, Sens. Joseph Lieberman and Hank Brown, and neoconservative professors Donald Kagan of Yale and James Q. Wilson of UCLA. The group has worked hand-in-hand not only with the Trinity cadre but also with alumni at Dartmouth College (over issues of representation on the board of trustees), Hamilton College (over fraternities). Washington College in Chestertown, Md. (over selecting a new president), and elsewhere.

One of the Forum's most ambitious plans is to establish a "triad," as president Jerry Martin calls it, of at least one student, professor and alumnus at each affiliated college. These triads will keep alumni apprised of troubling developments, from the quashing of a Great Books course to the overzealous prosecution of a student who has made politically incorrect comments. Alumni, brandishing their economic power, can then spring into action.

Sensitive to charges that withholding funds could injure the cherished institutions they're trying to save, Forum officials maintain they're not planning boycotts. Rather, they're exploring ways alumni can target their donations -- as Texas oil billionaire Lee Bass tried to do (unsuccessfully) when he gave \$20 million for a Western Civilization course at Yale.

Another conservative alumni group, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which dates back to the late '50s, has long helped bankroll conservative newspapers on college campuses. In recent years, it has expanded its activities, working with disgruntled alumni at Washington and Lee and Stanford universities, and assisting a campaign at Converse College that led to the resignation of the school's president.

Then there is the grassroots campaign of Ivy Leaguers for Freedom. Founded in 1993 as Women for Freedom by Houston businesswoman Larisa Vanov, a Wellesley College alumna who felt that her alma mater was increasingly in thrall to radical feminists, Ivy Leaguers for Freedom now has Cornell, Princeton and Dartmouth chapters, and focuses on bringing speakers to debate hot issues, from affirmative action to "Queer Theory."

What all of these groups, left or right, have in common is the belief that, abandoned to their own devices, colleges and universities cannot be trusted. Alumni involvement, it is argued, will check the dangerous impulses of the current custodians of their beloved alma maters.

But few of the voices of the debate have questioned whether alumni involvement at all -- regardless of its political orientation -- will serve the best interests of higher education. For several reasons, there is cause to suspect otherwise.

For one thing, trends in scholarship change, often rapidly. Universities that don't keep abreast of the latest ideas -- whether in science, economics or literary theory -- will founder. As any scholar knows, neglecting what's current can quickly render you obsolete.

Most alumni, on the other hand, lose contact with the academy as time passes. The press only attends to individual campuses when controversies erupt, and frequently fails to tell the whole, or even the correct, story. (The Bass incident at Yale, for example, provoked outrage from those who assumed Yale had become hostile to teaching the classics; in fact, the bungling of the gift turned more on matters of budget and implementation.)

Most alumni are not in a position to judge what should and shouldn't be taught. Is a banker from the class of 1950, for instance, fit to pass judgment on whether students should use a structuralist or new historicist approach to analyzing literature? Would he be doing his alma mater a favor by tearing up a fat check because they're teaching something called deconstructionism, which he's told is vaguely Marxist and therefore dangerous?

Probably not, and a few alumni activists are aware they should tread lightly. University of Pennsylvania history professor Alan Charles Kors, a **National Alumni Forum** member, says alumni should not interfere in decisions about the curriculum, where the faculty should always hold sway. He encourages intervention only when measures such as speech codes threaten academic freedom.

A second reason to refrain from attaching strings to gifts is that alumni can also be shackled by cultural values that belong to another age. When Ripon College in Wisconsin changed the name of its sports teams from the Red Men to the Red Hawks, progressive opinion on campus held it was about time to bury the old racist moniker. But annoyed former athletes balked and withheld money, punishing the financially pressed liberal arts school.

Finally, alumni should think twice about exercising the power of the purse because of its inherently undemocratic implications. If universities are whipped into responding only to those who pony up money, power will accrue disproportionately to the wealthy. "It's a

relatively small number of people who are able to make significant gifts," explains David Morgan, vice president of the Council for Aid to Education. "Your typical alumni gift-giver is not going to carry a lot of weight."

Twenty-five years ago, Yale University experienced a memorable battle with its alumni. In 1970, when a member of the Black Panther Party was on trial for murder in New Haven, Yale served as a center of student protests nationwide. Having learned from the failures of other administrators, Yale President Kingman Brewster opened up the campus to the protesters, sparing the university any lasting damage.

Except from the alumni. Many tried to punish Brewster -- who had also, not coincidentally, overseen Yale's move from admitting large numbers of alumni children to a more meritocratic system -- by ceasing to give their annual checks. The late writer John Hersey, then master of a Yale college, addressed them in his book *Letter to the Alumni*: "You bitter few who have stopped giving to Yale have probably done more harm to the University in a few months than all the extremist students succeeded in doing in five years (very little).... Do you really mean to destroy what is at this moment the finest center of humane thought in the United States?"

Today's alumni and alumnae, whether pressing for more female professors or more Great Books at their beloved alma maters, would do well to reflect upon Hersey's wisdom. No doubt many of these activists are moved by the valorous goal of bettering the education of their successors at these various schools. But before calling for a boycott or targeted donations, they should ask whether in some instances the better part of valor is not in fact discretion.

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