

Los Angeles Times

The Left Loses College Kids

January 28, 2005

By Brian C. Anderson

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Throughout 2003 and into 2004, a surge of protests roiled American campuses. You probably think the kids were agitating against war in Iraq, right? Well, no.

Students at UCLA, Michigan and many other schools were sponsoring bake sales to protest ... affirmative action.

For white students and faculty, a cookie cost (depending on the school) \$1; blacks and Latinos could buy one for a lot less. The principle, the protesters observed, was the same one governing university admission practices: treating people differently based on race.

The protests shocked the mainstream press, but to close observers of the American college scene, they came as no surprise. For decades, conservative critics have bemoaned academe's monolithically liberal culture. But the left's long dominion over the university — the last place on Earth that the left's power would break up, conservatives believed — is showing its first signs of weakening.

The change isn't coming from the faculty lounges and administrative offices but from self-organizing right-of-center students themselves. Never has the right flourished among college kids as it does today. The number of College Republicans, for instance, has almost tripled, from 400 or so campus chapters six years ago to 1,148 today, with 120,000-plus members (compared with the College Democrats' 900 or so chapters and 100,000 members).

Other conservative organizations, ranging from gun clubs (Harvard's has more than 100 students blasting away) to impudent anti-PC newspapers and magazines, are budding at schools everywhere — even at Berkeley, crucible of the '60s student left.

The bustle reflects a general rightward shift in college students' views. In 1995, reports UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, 66% of freshmen wanted the wealthy to pay higher taxes. Today, only 50% do. Support for abortion stood at two-thirds of students in the early '90s; now it's just over half. A late-2003 Harvard Institute of Politics study found that college students had moved to the right of the overall population, with 31% identifying themselves as Republicans, 27% as Democrats and the rest independent or unaffiliated.

One reason that conservative ideas are taking on greater allure for students is that the authorities say they're verboten. Currently, faculty Democrats outnumber Republicans by at least 7 to 1 (in humanities and the social sciences), according to Daniel Klein of Santa Clara University and Charlotta Stern, a Swedish sociologist.

"There's a natural and healthy tendency among students to question the piety of their teachers," notes Alan Kors, a University of Pennsylvania history professor.

Katherine Ernst, a recent NYU grad, confirms the point. Ernst already leaned right when she arrived on campus. But the left-wing propagandizing of her professors made her conservatism rock-solid.

"One professor, right after Sept. 11, gave a terrorist-sympathy speech that went, you know: 'Oil, oil, oil, they're poor, we take advantage of them, it's really complicated, blah, blah, blah,'" Ernst says acidly. "How could anybody exposed to this kind of stuff not become a raging right-winger?"

The leftism that so angers these students includes the "hey ho, Western civ has got to go" theories that inform college courses from coast to coast. A student, conservative or otherwise, who doesn't buy into the West-is-the-worst line can "have an awful time of it," Harvard junior Jordan Hyldenn says.

Some conservative students keep their real views to themselves and parrot the "correct" line, fearing that otherwise they'll get a low grade. One earnest Princeton freshman, for instance, had to write a paper on same-sex marriage, which

he opposes, for a constitutional law course taught by a pro-gay-marriage professor. "I radically altered my position to make it more in line with what my professor's beliefs are," he says.

An American Council of Trustees and Alumni survey finds that half of all students — not just conservatives — at the top 50 colleges say profs frequently inject their political views into courses, and almost one-third think they have to agree with those views to get a good grade.

Several national organizations are trying to fight the left-wing bias on campus. Perhaps most significant is Students for Academic Freedom, founded in 2003 by David Horowitz and already boasting 130 campus chapters. Its key initiative is a campaign for an "Academic Bill of Rights," which enjoins universities not to deny tenure or fail to hire teachers solely because of their conservative politics, and to ensure that teachers keep their classes from becoming left-wing propaganda sessions. Legislation enacting variations of the bill is on the move in 19 states.

Conservatives still have a long, long way to go. The professorate remains a solidly left-wing body, more likely to assign Barbara Ehrenreich than Milton Friedman, Michel Foucault than Michael Oakeshott, and nothing is going to change that soon.

Nevertheless, the left's iron hold on academe is beginning to loosen. Anyone who cares about the education of our children — and the future political discourse of our country — can only cheer.