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3/7/05

Professors and politics

The culture wars are back. In the past few months, University of Colorado Prof. Ward Churchill was bumped from a speaking engagement at Hamilton College for calling 9/11 victims "little Eichmanns," Columbia University was inundated with complaints of anti-Israel bias, and a Florida community college was condemned for banning Christian students from showing *The Passion of the Christ*. Conservatives are in full-throated fury over what they say is a lack of "intellectual diversity" on campus--and they say they have the numbers to prove it.

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A recent poll sponsored by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a right-leaning group, found that 49 percent of students at the top 50 schools said professors frequently comment on politics in class. More than 1 in 5 complained about instructors who create a classroom environment hostile to certain political or social

views.

Last fall, Daniel Klein, a libertarian economics professor at Santa Clara University, released a survey of 1,000 professors, which found that those identifying as Democrats outnumbered their Republican counterparts by at least 8 to 1 in the humanities and social sciences--more than double the ratio of the early 1970s. And unreleased data show that Democrats were more likely to hold the same ideological positions--in favor of laws restricting gun ownership, for example. Republicans, meanwhile, often diverged from their party's line. "This is more than just some evidence that there's this tremendous lopsidedness in academia--this is conclusive proof," says Klein.

Off limits. Mark Bauerlein, a professor of English at Emory University, agrees. "On campuses,

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conservative opinion doesn't qualify as respectable inquiry," he writes in a November issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Some subjects--affirmative action, abortion--are just not open to debate. This intellectual cliquishness, says Bauerlein, a political conservative, has blinded many faculty members to differing views.

But how to break the impasse? One conservative group has an unconservative solution: more government oversight. The Center for the Study of Popular Culture is urging states to pass an "Academic Bill of Rights," which spells out principles that would guide everything from tenure to class reading lists. The bill is being considered in 19 states.

That's too heavy-handed, says Roger Bowen, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors. "I'm not saying liberal bias doesn't exist. I would never say that." But the answer, if there is one, is a subtler, on-campus approach, he and others say. "We need to encourage major leaders, college presidents and deans, to lead by example," says Bauerlein--to emphasize the importance of diverse reading lists, to encourage lively debate. The stakes, after all, are high: "If something doesn't change," says Bauerlein, "then the university will become simply a more marginal place." -Justin Ewers

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