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Political Bias on Campus

TO THE EDITOR:

Faced with steadily mounting evidence that the elite colleges really are politically one-sided and that students are feeling pressure to conform to their professors' political views (see, for example, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni's latest opinion survey of students at www.goacta.org), Lionel Lewis contends in the [January-February issue](#) that it doesn't matter, because college has no impact. He tells us (without a single citation) that "[r]esearch spanning six decades has shown that the effect of college on the attitudes, values, religiosity, and political views of students, on elite campuses and elsewhere, is almost nil."

Aside from the fact that this unsubstantiated claim defies common understanding as well as common sense, it is a lame defense of the absence of intellectual diversity on campus. Whether or not they are converted to their professors' politics, students are entitled to a classroom open to a range of views and to campus speaking events that present differing positions on matters of controversy. Exposure to both sides of an issue is the essence of a sound education.

Even if Lewis were correct about the effect of college on attitudes and values, that would not diminish one bit the responsibility of colleges and universities to provide classroom and campus environments that are intellectually honest, open, and fair minded.

ANNE D. NEAL

President

American Council of Trustees and Alumni

LIONEL LEWIS RESPONDS:

Anne Neal insists that "elite colleges are politically one-sided," and that there is an "absence of intellectual diversity" on American campuses. These assertions are inconsistent with my findings, and I know of no objective research that would indicate either is true, nor of any "steadily mounting evidence." She suggests that we look at her Web site for the results of a survey for evidence supporting her views. What one finds there is a document titled "Survey Reveals Pervasive Political Pressure in the Classroom," and subtitled "Students: 49 Percent Report Professors Preach Rather Than Teach."

First, no item in the survey mentions "political pressure in the classroom." Second, the items ask about campuses, but inferences are drawn about professors or courses. If students are reporting on their campuses, conclusions cannot logically be drawn about their courses or professors; they are reporting their perceptions, not their experiences. In brief, the conclusions in the report distort the survey results, which tell us nothing about the percentage of students who have had professors who are injecting politics into the classroom.

That my conclusions about the effects of college "def[y]" what Neal believes is a "common understanding" does not make them any less true. To be sure, some learning occurs in college. During college, some students change; some do not. Some measured change may be due to maturation or to other factors extraneous to the curriculum. Most of those who do change do not change much. The immediate effects are small; the lasting effects are smaller. These summary statements are supported by two studies (one in the late 1930s and the other in the early 1960s) under the direction of social psychologist Theodore Newcomb on the effects of the Bennington College community on the attitudes of students, by political scientist Philip Jacob's 1957 survey of the impact of college teaching (*Changing Values in College*), the 1969 synthesis of research in the field (*The Impact of College on Students*) by Theodore Newcomb

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and sociologist Kenneth Feldman, and economist Howard Bowen's 1977 volume (*Investment in Learning*). The statistical analysis and many tables in a 1991 study by educational psychologist Ernest Pascarella and higher education researcher Ernest Terenzini (*How College Affects Students*) further support my conclusions.

Active Learning

TO THE EDITOR:

As the unnamed assistant professor who was the apparent impetus for, and target of, Kevin Mattson's article in the January-February issue, "[Why 'Active Learning' Can Be Perilous to the Profession](#)," I feel compelled to respond.

First, Mattson should have done his homework (rather than rely on secondary sources) before he labeled my class and teaching techniques as "scary." First-hand information was readily available—our offices share a building and my class is taught on our campus. Had he visited me or my class, he would have learned that my method of teaching is hardly frightening. Most days, I post questions to help students maneuver the readings. The next day, I draw students' names, ask them to read their answers, elaborate on what they wrote, and illustrate concepts using examples from personal experiences and observations. This is how my students "do" engaged learning.

Second, Mattson turns several phrases with the obvious intent to disparage my skill as a professional. He states that I "run" and "scurry around the classroom." I am not a child nor a rodent, thus I do neither. He goes on to describe me as an "intellectual Phil Donahue." Is it because I use a microphone and demand student responses that Mattson needs to reduce me to an icon of pop culture?

Third, I was not manipulated into teaching this course. I asked to teach it—and I continue to request it, because I like it, and I'm good at it. More-over, my teaching load is reduced when I teach the large section—hardly a case of exploitation.

Further, while I share Mattson's concern about ever-increasing class sizes, I do not believe that attempts to engage students in large classes are the inherent equivalent of academic Armageddon. Finally, I would argue that there is ample room for a plethora of teaching styles. I have adopted and implemented a style of teaching that (1) works exceptionally well for me and my students, and (2) has nothing to do with exploitation. Mattson argues that "new professors" need working conditions that enable them to do their jobs. As a new professor, I have encountered few difficulties, despite those few individuals who feel compelled to belittle those of us who do not teach as they do. In a nutshell, without ever talking with me, Mattson used my class and my style of teaching as a scare tactic—hardly the stuff of good academic writing.

DEBORAH THORNE
(Sociology and Anthropology)
Ohio University

TO THE EDITOR:

Thank you to [Kevin Mattson](#) for raising a number of points that should be discussed more widely. I once chatted with one of our senior graduate students who, in order to pump up her c.v., had accepted a teaching assignment from a neighboring university. When I asked her how she was doing, she poured out a litany of complaints and frustrations similar to those of most instructors of large classes. No matter what she tried, no matter what assistance she obtained from our university's "excellence in teaching" office, nothing seemed to reach her students. They were bored and uninterested, mistrustful of her expertise in the topic, and indignant at her methods of evaluation. She was using all available resources, some of them quite imaginative, to make the class more interesting, but it didn't have any effect on the students: they simply wanted to know what they needed to know to get a good mark in the course, preferably with the least amount of effort.

Later that very day, the monthly bulletin of our teaching resources office landed in my mailbox. I opened it to find a feature article accompanied by a photograph of the graduate student I had been speaking to earlier. Interestingly, the theme of the article was how this new instructor had decided to develop her course in concert with the teaching resources office, and how they had worked together to create a course that would stimulate and challenge the students. The result? Well, in contrast to what the instructor had told me, this article claimed that her "classroom is abuzz with student discussion, questioning, and sharing—not always a common sight in a class of a hundred plus at 8:30 in the morning." It went on to describe how her creative use of various "activities" "excited" the students, as shown by

their "enthusiasm" for the activities.

Whenever we read of the so-called successes of active learning principles in large classrooms, I think our response should be, "Show me the money." If I'm to believe that active learning is the panacea it's claimed to be, I'll need to see some research results with clearly articulated endpoints and rational methodology—not a hyped-up personal tribute.

GLENN WARD
(Health Studies and Gerontology)
University of Waterloo

TO THE EDITOR:

I was puzzled by the cynical tone of Kevin Mattson's ominously titled article, "[Why 'Active Learning' Can Be Perilous to the Profession](#)." After reading the article, I was still unclear as to how active learning could be perilous. Obviously, active learning can be difficult to put into practice, and at times poorly executed—but (insert scary music here) . . . perilous?

In his article, Mattson belittles a professor, whom he condescendingly refers to as "an intellectual Phil Donahue," for using a microphone in a lecture hall to give students opportunities for comments and questions. Mattson asserts this example provides a "scary insight into the future of college teaching." And the "scary" part is? Sadly, Mattson further trivializes and misrepresents active learning as making "classes as entertaining as video games," and taking "students out for coffee." Given the references he cites, it is surprising that his depiction of active learning is so shallow.

Intended or not, Mattson comes off sounding embittered, entrenched in his teaching style, and threatened by active learning. If you read only Mattson's jaded article, you might think that those promoting and implementing active learning are snake-oil salesmen or naïve, touchy-feely professors oblivious to the practical realities of rigorous teaching. The silly photographs in the article further stereotype the teacher who employs active learning as some sort of game-show host.

While I acknowledge the logistical difficulties inherent in implementing active learning in behemoth-sized classes, I have little sympathy for Mattson's general attitude toward active learning. Are some active learning strategies unrealistic in some classes? Absolutely. Are there certain topics that are less conducive to active learning techniques? Absolutely. Does this mean that active learning is, as Mattson characterizes it, an idealistic sham perpetuated by Pollyannaish administrators and workshop facilitators? Absolutely not. Fortunately, Mattson concedes that in terms of active learning, "there are some good ideas" out there. Some? I would argue that there are indeed more than "some."

Although I agree that institutions endorsing active learning must provide environments conducive to it (for example, smaller class sizes), this point is easily lost in the "helpless professor" persona adopted by Mattson. In laying the blame for not implementing active learning at the feet of administrators, Mattson absolves himself of responsibility for active learning while encouraging a passive, victimized orientation with regard to active learning among the professoriate. Now *that's* perilous.

DAN SEGRIST
(Psychology)
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

TO THE EDITOR:

I was dismayed by the [article on active learning](#) in the January-February issue, which ridicules active learning without bothering to figure out what it is. The accompanying pictures, presumably inserted by the editors, are even worse, as they appear to support the article's assertion that there's nothing here to take seriously. While *Academe* isn't a peer-reviewed journal, the editors have done us a disservice by failing to insist that the author acknowledge the large body of serious literature on the topic.

"Active engagement" goes well beyond entertaining students, is not restricted to large lectures, and most definitely has nothing to do with taking students out for coffee. Its basic tenet is that students learn better by doing than by watching and listening. Any attempt to portray active engagement as bad must first address the substantial documentation to the contrary. To cite just one piece of evidence in its favor, mathematics professor Michael Freeman of the University of Kentucky documented a full letter grade improvement among students participating in a math program that

involves collaborative learning. (See <http://www.ms.uky.edu/~freeman/mathexcel.html>.)

I am a research mathematician by training and am obsessive to the point of paranoia about administrative interference. I pride myself on being an excellent traditional lecturer and didn't see much reason to change. Several years ago, I nevertheless experimented with some "active engagement" ideas. My amazement at how much better my students seemed to master second-year calculus led me to organize a national effort to share this approach with others, effectively putting my traditional research on hold for several years. (See <http://www.math.oregonstate.edu/bridge>.) While I continue to be skeptical of many aspects of educational research, there's no longer any doubt in my mind that some form of active engagement would dramatically improve most traditional lectures.

Active engagement should not be used as an excuse to keep class sizes inappropriately large. Care must be taken to compensate instructors appropriately for any additional burden. On the other hand, students deserve the best we can offer them. If that requires some additional effort on our part, well, that's part of our job. By all means, let's discuss which curricula and teaching methods are best. But avoiding that discussion is throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

TEVIAN DRAY
(Mathematics)
Oregon State University

KEVIN MATTSON RESPONDS:

First to my colleague Deborah Thorne. I never suggested she was wrong to teach the way she does. I suggested it was problematic how the provost of our university promoted her teaching style for others to emulate. To clarify for Dan Segrist, who somehow heard a musical score while reading my article, this is what I found troubling: the words of the reporter that my colleague "defeated the large classroom . . . simply, it seems, by caring." And the words of our ex-provost about class size not relating to active learning.

I had an exchange with Thorne in a public meeting of the AAUP, and I wrote in the article that she had "expressed reservations about" the story's "message." So, in fact, I had heard from her on this issue. Again, my concern was less about her style and more about the way the administration promoted her technique as part of a "general education" program—which, I should mention, went down to defeat recently in our Faculty Senate. When Thorne suggests that how she teaches is "hardly a case of exploitation," fine. But she can't deny what was being pro-moted in that article. And, yes, to my other readers, I've read the literature on active learning, both its academically rigorous and slightly more goofy renditions, and I've yet to find any good ideas about how to deal with larger class sizes in any of it.

Segrist suggests I'm "entrenched" in my "teaching style." (Has someone written a promotional piece about my own teaching I'm unaware of?) He also suggests I play a persona of a "helpless professor." And to that I say, turn down that "scary music," dude, and go back and read the article.

Classroom Culture

TO THE EDITOR:

In reference to [Susan Ostrov Weisser's discussion of classroom culture](#) in the January-February issue, imagining that "it's all about personal opinion" is not a new feature of college student life. Re-search on students' intellectual development during college by psychologist William Perry and his colleagues (1970) and by psychologists Blythe Clinchy and Claire Zimmerman (1981) shows that this kind of thinking has been with us since at least the 1950s. "It's my opinion and I'm entitled to it" seems to be a necessary, if maddening, stage on the way to a more complex epistemology marked by the student's ability to think about her own thought and, in Clinchy and Zimmerman's words, "to construct one's own knowledge with the responsibility to construct it in a careful, contextual fashion."

For me, the crucial point of the developmental literature is that the student is a meaning maker like me, whether I like it or not. She is not thinking as she does just to irritate me with her stubbornness. Her epistemology is somehow bound up with her personal integrity. Dialogue is what eventually enables the student to move beyond the solipsism of expressing what she feels. If saying, "Hmm, interesting" can get the dialogue started, then I'm willing to say it. In teaching literature and writing, we are always able to go back to the text and hold students responsible to it, knowing that the text will not support just any old interpretation. If the student and I succeed in communicating and form some kind of productive teaching-learning relationship mediated by the text the student reads or writes, then we may come to

shared understandings by the end of the semester. There are never any guarantees, but when everything works, these understandings have more standing than mere opinion and do not come off as impositions of authority.

LOWRY PEI
(English)
Simmons College

TO THE EDITOR:

[Susan Ostrov Weisser](#) has neatly pinned the dilemmas of contemporary teaching, showing how major assumptions of higher education have been destroyed by academe's own postmodern ideology, student-centered learning, and cultural attacks on authority. All this, coupled to the "managed education" enforced by administrations that follow corporate models and link pay to performance, more or less mediated by student evaluations, forces many to choose between integrity and intellectual values on the one hand and remuneration and tenure on the other. My experience is that I betray a minority of real learners by accommodating the consumers. How did this come about? Surely, it's the administrators, whose goal is managing where none is needed and growing their salaries, not learning. Weisser showed me that I am not alone. Thank you. Her article, together with "[Personal Philosophies of Teaching](#)" by Daniel Pratt made for a hot issue.

ANTHONY FRIEDMANN
(Communication)
Mount Ida College

TO THE EDITOR:

One solution to the problem Susan Ostrov Weisser describes in her article is to hold students to generally accepted standards of rhetoric. In my first-year Great Books class at the University of Virginia, for example, I devote the two opening sessions to the art of interpretive question framing and argumentation (for eventual responses). Thereafter, I require the students to develop original questions that address their ex-perience of each successive work's problems of form and meaning. The students critique and revise their questions (often in consultation with peers or me) to improve clarity, specificity, open-endedness, discussibility, breadth of interest, and doubt. Their equally original responses—which we debate in class—are schematic, consisting of claims, grounds, warrants, and qualifications, plus answers to possible objections. This phase of their work is evaluated for compliance with such criteria as accuracy, completeness, coherence, clarity, and relevance. As discussion leader, I seek to keep the level of discourse as high as possible and to introduce the class to critical pluralism as a way of dealing with the ambiguity of works and the range of potentially valid approaches to it.

Resistance to the format is rare, enrollments high, attendance usually 100 percent, class discussion free of solipsism and facile relativism. In their evaluations, students state that the approach validates their curiosity and opinion as points of departure, while drawing upon (and enhancing) both to develop a personal culture and broadly transferable ways of reasoning and communication, especially in collective problem solving.

Needless to say, I do not claim that this is a panacea, though it is more effective than any other method I have tried in a career-long effort to reconcile the personal and the disciplinary.

DAVID LEE RUBIN
(French), emeritus
University of Virginia

Intelligent Design

TO THE EDITOR:

[Barbara Forrest and Glenn Branch](#) misleadingly depict my appointment at Baylor and my academic work on intelligent design in the January-February issue. They falsely imply that I was sought after by the Baylor administration and hired autocratically as part of some conspiracy to turn Baylor into an academic enclave for intelligent design. Until my on-campus interview in February 2003, I had never met or spoken to a Baylor administrator. That interview occurred while I was on the faculty at Princeton as a James Madison Fellow, five months after I had applied for the Baylor post in response to a national advertisement.

The authors state that twenty-nine descendants of my department's namesake (J.M. Dawson) requested that Baylor remove me from my post. They don't mention the support for me from my provost, department chair, department colleagues, and numerous professors from around the world, some of whom disagree with my views. One of them, Kent Greenawalt of Columbia Law School, was so aghast at the Dawsons' use of a quote of his to hurt my appointment that he wrote a letter to my chair condemning it.

I argue that it is constitutionally permissible to teach intelligent design in public schools, which is the conclusion of the thesis I wrote in 2001 as part of my M.J.S. degree at the Washington University School of Law. It was published as a book in 2003, and various portions of it appeared in articles in *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, *San Diego Law Review*, and *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics, and Public Policy*. I'm not an intelligent design advocate, and I *don't think* it should be required in public schools. I do think, however, that some intelligent design arguments raise important questions about philosophical materialism and the nature of science that should be taken seriously and may indeed have a place for discussion in public school classrooms. Academic liberty knows no metaphysical litmus test, whether it's religious or irreligious, or proposed by Jerry Falwell or Barbara Forrest.

Although I stand by my work on intelligent design and public education, it is only a recent interest of mine. I had already established myself with scores of articles and many books in the areas of ethics, religion, and politics. In fact, my monograph on abortion is cited several times in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on that subject.

In my opinion, Forrest and Branch are blacklists whose witch-hunt tactics should be shunned, and not published, by *Academe*.

FRANCIS J. BECKWITH
Associate Director, J. M. Dawson Institute for Church-State Studies
Baylor University

TO THE EDITOR:

I am writing in response to [the article](#) in the January-February issue by Forrest and Branch. In this article, my hiring at Baylor University is portrayed as being part of a grand conspiracy by the administration to pursue a secret intelligent design agenda, casting aspersions on my academic qualifications and on the administration's integrity. What is particularly galling is that the authors never bothered to contact me or my department head or dean to inquire about this matter.

Why was I hired at Baylor? Maybe it was because I am very academically qualified to help build an outstanding graduate program in engineering that will be synergistic with our under-graduate program. During my eight years at the Colorado School of Mines and twenty-four years at Texas A&M University, I published 140 refereed articles and book chapters, secured \$4.5 million in external research funding, served as department head at TAMU, and received five local and one national research awards and two teaching awards. I am an elected fellow of the American Society for Materials and the American Scientific Affiliation.

During my interview at Baylor University, there was no discussion of my work in intelligent design. I spent most of my time in the School of Engineering, giving a seminar and visiting with *all* of the school's professors. I was told that the recommendation of my hiring was supported unanimously by the faculty in the school. The focus of my work since joining the school has been to begin to develop excellent master's programs and secure external funding to support them, which I have done.

Let me be very clear that I have done and will continue to do work in the areas of intelligent design, cosmology, and the origin of life. However, it is a blatant lie to pretend that my hiring was in any way connected to this extracurricular interest of mine as a "member of the Wedge," whatever that means. I am a fellow of the Discovery Institute in recognition of my work in the origin of life, not as a functionary in some fantasy conspiracy theory. This McCarthyism by Forrest and Branch has no place in the academy or in a publication by the AAUP, which is supposed to be a champion of academic freedom.

WALTER BRADLEY

(Engineering)
Baylor University

Reality Television

TO THE EDITOR:

Melissa Gregory, in "[Extreme Academia](#)" in the January-February issue, missed one program that Hollywood could also find in the academic world: *Survivor-Academia*. In it, thousands of part-time faculty try to survive for a semester on low pay and few benefits, isolated from their more secure, full-time colleagues. The winner(s) would receive two classes to teach (under the same conditions) for the following semester. Oops, that already exists.

ANNE D. JORDAN
(English), Adjunct
Eastern Connecticut State University

Three-Year Degree

TO THE EDITOR:

An [article in the Nota Bene section of the January-February issue](#) describes how European countries are cooperating to establish a common university framework, to be based, among other things, on three-year bachelor's degrees. The article goes on to say that this could cause problems for students with such degrees who wish to come to the United States for graduate school, because their qualifications will not match those who have taken "the standard four-year U. S. undergraduate degree." This is a mind-boggling equation of quantity with quality!

Surely it is well known that, because of the generally poor standard of U.S. high schooling, many American undergraduates spend two years taking courses that would simply not be offered in European universities. Such matters as algebra and calculus, basic writing skills, and elementary foreign language competency are all expected of university entrants in Europe, and therefore European university courses begin at what U.S. colleges call the 300 level.

Perhaps the warning needs to go the other way: European admissions officers need to know that many students with a U. S. undergraduate degree have really taken only a two-year course at what they understand by university level.

PAUL LLOYD
Center for Innovation in Assessment
Indiana University



