

Diversity of everything but ideas

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MARK 2005 as the year that the dirty little secret of higher education became part of the public conversation. Most of us on college campuses have long known that there is little intellectual diversity in higher education, especially when it comes to political ideas. But we learned to live with it as part of the artificial bubble that characterizes much of campus life.

Consider these recent challenges to the leftward lean of thinking on college campuses:

-- Moderate U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander -- a former university president and one-time Secretary of Education -- told the Commission on the Future of Higher Education that the greatest threat to broader public support and increased funding for higher education is a "growing political one-sidedness which has infected most campuses."

-- The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, in its recent report "Intellectual Diversity: Time for Action," said "the most serious challenge for higher education today is the lack of intellectual diversity."

-- Earlier this year, the broad-based American Council on Education issued a statement, supported by 30 higher education organizations, acknowledging the growing concern about "intellectual pluralism" and the "free exchange of ideas" on campuses.

Yes, people are now standing up to say that higher education, which has pioneered in every other kind of diversity -- ethnic, gender, same-sex benefits -- lacks diversity in the very heart of its mission: the development and transmission of ideas.

A liberal arts education has become politically liberal. The evidence of political one-sidedness on campus is strong, but not really new. Critics point to a survey by three scholars published earlier this year in *The Forum* showing that 72 percent of professors consider themselves liberal while only 15 percent say they are conservative. In the liberal arts, as opposed to hard sciences, the numbers are even more imbalanced. Studies of political party affiliations of Stanford and UC Berkeley faculty show registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by 8 or 10 to 1. While disturbing, this kind of data isn't really new.

What seems to be new is a perception by students that professorial political opinions are now very much a part of the classroom, even in a course on Chaucer or biology. Professors once took pride in disguising their own views and making the classroom an objective laboratory of ideas. Now, some argue, in a postmodern world where everything is political, how can politics not be engaged in the classroom? As a result, a survey of students at 50 top universities showed that nearly half the students feel faculty use the classroom to present their personal political views, and that political discussions seem "totally one-sided."

The academy should take such concerns seriously because a lack of intellectual diversity undercuts the fundamental purpose of liberal arts education: to stretch and grow students through exposure to a wide range of disciplines and ideas. Marketing one political ideology to students throughout their four years of study, as happens on many campuses, not only leads to less intellectual creativity and policy innovation, but it continues to isolate an academic class in its "ivory tower." No wonder, then, that Sen. Alexander warns that Congress will be less and less interested in supporting a venture that leads to greater political divisiveness in the name of higher education.

So what is to be done to promote greater intellectual diversity on campuses? It won't be easy, given that tenure protects professors' jobs and academic freedom is used to defend almost whatever they choose to say. Still, there is plenty that can be done to broaden the range of ideas on campus.

Trustees and administrators should undertake a study of the diversity of thought on their own campuses. One way to balance what is presented in the classroom is to invite a greater diversity of outside speakers, or part-time adjunct faculty. Deans should look at the syllabus for courses to see if a range of ideas is presented in the readings and engage faculty on the issue. It doesn't violate academic freedom to have a conversation about a professor's reading list. As one of my bosses correctly said to me, "You have academic freedom to write what you want and I have freedom to say what I want about what you write." Intellectual diversity should be part of student course evaluations, and should be reviewed at the highest levels.

On the seal of my alma mater are the words, "Let the winds of freedom blow." We should remember that the winds of freedom blow right and center, as well as left, and that, in the academic world of ideas, diversity of thought may be the most important kind of diversity of all.

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