

CATHY YOUNG

Balancing views on campus

The Boston Globe

By Cathy Young | November 27, 2006

DIVERSITY in higher education was a major topic of discussion at a recent conference in Cambridge. The focus, however, was not on the familiar concept of diversity as a desirable mix of races, genders, and ethnic groups. Rather, participants deplored the lack of intellectual and political diversity on college campuses.

The National Organization of Scholars, which held the conference Nov. 17-19, emerged in the late 1980s in response to "political correctness" in the academy. The group is widely perceived as conservative, much to the consternation of some members who are liberal Democrats but are put off by the prevailing orthodoxy in the universities. One star speaker at the event was Boston-based lawyer Harvey Silverglate, a liberal champion of civil liberties, who noted that many statements that would be considered normal, if debatable, expressions of opinion anywhere else are regarded as discriminatory on college campuses.

Numerous studies confirm that most college faculty lean left, especially in the more prestigious institutions. At a time when political discourse in American society in general has shifted noticeably to the right, some people wonder why an academy that tilts left is a problem: The universities, they argue, are islands in a sea of conservatism. But no academic institution can thrive on uniformity; liberalism itself can turn illiberal when isolated from different ideas. What's more, the marginalization of right-of-center ideas in the academy may have a lot to do with modern conservatism's transformation into a caricature of itself.

That marginalization is evident. Some academic programs, particularly in such areas as women's studies, education, and social work, explicitly push for left-leaning social change. On one panel, Brooklyn College historian Robert Johnson offered a striking example of intellectual uniformity. He noted that, according to its website, the University of Michigan history department has 26 full-time professors teaching American history. Eleven of them focus on race and ethnicity in America, while another nine specialize in women's history. There are no military or diplomatic historians.

To what extent this imbalance penalizes alternative viewpoints is hard to establish. In a recent survey by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni at 50 top colleges and universities, nearly half of students said the presentation of contemporary political issues and controversies in classes, campus panels, and lecture series was too one-sided, and nearly a third felt they had to agree with a professor's political views in order to get good grades. On many campuses, there is a general sense that you have to be a liberal to fit in. In a post-conference interview, Johnson said that the problem was not so much retaliation against students with dissenting opinions as "one-sided instruction to students that don't have the educational or intellectual background to detect the bias and challenge a professor's viewpoint."

Some conservatives advocate legislative interference as a solution. Activist David Horowitz has been pushing for an "Academic Bill of Rights" that would not only protect dissenting students from classroom retaliation but also guarantee the inclusion of balanced viewpoints in the curriculum. This effort has gone nowhere.

In his talk at the conference, Johnson took a dim view of such efforts. Given conservative support for including "intelligent design" in the biology curriculum, he noted, a mandate of "balance" in teaching could be used to smuggle creationism into science classrooms at public universities. Yet he also outlined legislative remedies that could work: Fund programs that would expose students to ideas currently neglected or marginalized in the academy; conduct oversight hearings on the lack of intellectual diversity on campuses; abolish speech codes that often result in suppressing politically incorrect opinions on race, gender, and sexuality within college courses.

When stifled on campuses, right-of-center ideas don't just go away. These days, they are expressed -- in pungent manner -- on talk radio, and in overtly political journalism and publishing. Such outlets have increased in prominence, and universities have lost influence over American politics. When intellectual life is seen as a bastion of the left, conservatism devolves from intellectual giants like the late Milton Friedman to intellectual thugs like Ann Coulter -- with dangerous consequences for the political climate.

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