

AEI Presentation of Anne D. Neal
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There have been countless stories of political pressure in the classroom; bias against conservatives; faculty hostile to viewpoints other than their own. In addition, there have been a variety of surveys of the political affiliations of academics – starting with the American Enterprise diversity report in 2002 and now this study by Professor Klein. All of these anecdotes and studies suggest a politically one-sided academy.

When confronted with these findings, what did the higher education establishment do? Did it conduct its own surveys to see if the claims were valid? Did it try to determine whether the education of the students was being impaired? Did it affirm academe's commitment to the robust exchange of ideas? No, it offered the classic institutional dodge: deny the facts and attack the accuser.

When the National Association of Scholars issued Dr. Klein's study, Mr. Bowen called the study "wrongheaded" and, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, stated that political affiliations of professors are of little consequence in the classroom.

John Millsaps, a spokesman for the University of Georgia, told the *Chronicle* that "we have no evidence to suggest that students are being intimidated by professors as regards students' freedom to express their opinions and beliefs."

Newell Stultz, former chair of the political science department at Brown, told the media that "on both sides of the equation, there's quite a lot of tolerance for people who have different points of view."

Geoff Nunberg at the University of Pennsylvania, claimed that "these studies assume an inescapable connection between having a point of view and having a bias; ... That's a

convenient assumption for people . . . particularly if they want to take it as a justification for trumping up the evidence for their own side.”

When confronted with evidence of the imbalance, assistant professor of political science David Kimball at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, said: “My view of academic freedom is that instructors are free to discuss what they want and students are free not to listen.” Kimball added that any concerns about indoctrination were overblown. “We are all adults and it implies that students are dumb and that they accept whatever a professor says.”

An article in the latest edition of the AAUP magazine, *Academe* (“The Academic Elite Goes to Washington and to War,” *Academe*, January-February), seems to concede that political pressure exists, but claims that it makes no difference. Lionel Lewis contends that it doesn’t matter whether elite colleges are politically one-sided because college has no impact. Without citing a single source, Lewis says that “research 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.”

That brings us to why we are here today. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni wanted to move beyond anecdote. We didn’t want to accept whatever a professor says. We sought to test the claim that politics was not affecting the classroom by asking those with direct experience in the classroom and no reason to misrepresent.

We therefore commissioned the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut to undertake a scientific survey of undergraduates in the top 50 colleges and universities as listed by *U.S. News and World Report*. These include Ivy League schools like Harvard and Princeton, small liberal arts colleges like Williams and Swarthmore, as well as large and small public institutions, such as University of California-Berkeley and the University of Virginia. CSRA's telephone survey had 658 respondents and an error rate of plus or minus four.

What did the survey look at? For starters, we were interested in finding out whether in fact professors introduce politics into the classroom. It goes without saying that faculty members are hired for their expertise, and are expected to instruct students on the subject of their expertise. If they are teaching biology, they should be talking about biology. If they are teaching Medieval English literature, we expect them to be lecturing on Chaucer not Condoleezza Rice.

What did we find? 49% of the students at the top 50 colleges and universities say professors frequently injected political comments into their courses, even if they had nothing to do with the subject.

We next turned to the atmosphere in the college classroom. Did students, many of whom were exposed to these subjects for the first time, feel free to raise concerns and question assumptions? Did students feel free to make up their own minds without feeling pressured to agree with their professors?

The answer we got was not encouraging. Almost one-third – 29% – felt they had to agree with the professor’s political views to get a good grade.

We also wanted to explore whether students were being exposed to the competing arguments about central issues of the day. Were book lists balanced and comprehensive; did students hear both sides, rather than just one side, of an argument?

Again, the response was disheartening. 48% reported campus presentations on political issues that seemed “totally one-sided.”

46% said professors “used the classroom to present their personal political views.”

42% faulted reading assignments for presenting only one side of a controversial issue.

In short, according to those with first-hand knowledge, in the college classroom today, many professors are preaching rather than teaching.

Our findings are particularly noteworthy when we look at the characteristics of the respondents. First of all, the students voicing concerns are not a small minority. Nearly half of the students surveyed reported abuses. Secondly, although self-described conservative students complained in higher numbers, a majority of the respondents consider themselves liberals or radicals. Third, only 10% of the respondents were majoring in political science or government, where you would properly expect discussion of present day electoral politics and current events. The majority of the students surveyed majored in subjects like biology, engineering, and psychology – subjects that have nothing to do with politics.

Based on these findings, one simply cannot claim any more that faculty are not importing politics in the classroom in a way that affects students' ability to learn.

And this should trouble all of us.

Our title today is “A Liberal Education” – obviously a double entendre. But, applying first principles here, what we are dealing with today is the frightful undermining of what we call a liberal education.

If, as our survey makes clear, students are not being given an inclusive look at the issues they are studying; if students are not being introduced to both sides – or even multiple sides – on controversial issues of the day; if, due to lack of exposure to a significant diversity of scholarly standpoints, students are not being equipped to understand the intricate tangle of values, personalities and institutional arrangements that drive the world, then higher education is failing at its mission of providing a firm foundation for the next generation.

Now, of course, as president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, I can't leave this topic without addressing the appropriate responses to this problem. The first and best response, of course, when academic freedom is involved, is for faculty themselves to ensure a robust exchange of ideas in the classroom. But, in a situation such as the one we are discussing today, where it is clear that faculty and administrators are not, it is then up to the trustees to step in.

The concept of academic freedom does not mean that – for faculty members – anything goes. Indeed, the seminal statement of academic freedom, the American Association of University Professors' 1915 Declaration of Principles, could not be more clear that intellectual diversity is at the very heart of the academic enterprise. Let me quote verbatim:

The university teacher, in giving instruction upon controversial matters, while he is under no obligation to hide his own opinion under a mountain of equivocal verbiage, should, if he is fit for his position, be a person of a fair and judicial mind; he should, in dealing with such subjects, set forth justly without suppression or innuendo, the divergent opinions of other investigators; he should cause his students to become familiar with the best published expressions of the great historic types of doctrine upon the questions at issue; and he should, above all, remember that his business is not to provide his students with ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves, and to provide them access to those materials which they need if they are to think intelligently. [underscoring mine]

But let me interrupt myself here. This statement by the AAUP was issued in 1915. It is a superb statement, but, when I last looked, nowhere to be found on the AAUP website. It has entirely disappeared. It is, shall we say, representative of the historic AAUP, the responsible defender of academic freedom.

Today, this concept of academic freedom is out of favor with contemporary educators. The principle of the disinterested search for the truth has been supplanted by a conception that views every issue in terms of power and politics.

And this, I fear, is the perspective that has taken hold at AAUP – what I would refer to as the current AAUP.

The historic AAUP was right; responsible academic freedom involves not only the professor's prerogatives, but also the student's freedom to learn and the professor's attendant obligation to teach rather than preach. That is what ACTA supports.

It is this goal that we believe AAUP should re-affirm; and this is the goal we believe boards of trustees – working through their presidents – must articulate and ensure. The higher education establishment should seek ways to protect academic freedom while guaranteeing in college classrooms across the country an atmosphere of openness, fairness and free exchange. When that occurs, then we can call it a true *liberal* education.