

Have Campuses Become Ideological Echo Chambers? Not Necessarily

By Katherine Mangan SEPTEMBER 22, 2019

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In between the stands of lavender lemonade and heirloom tomatoes, eight students from Linn-Benton Community College and Oregon State University were striking up conversations with strangers.

Democrats seeking to better understand the views of their Republican neighbors, atheists wanting to know why others believed in God. Students seeking not to win arguments, but to hear what others had to say.

The scene that unfolded on a recent Saturday morning at a farmers market in Corvallis, Ore., stands in stark contrast to the image of politically indoctrinated college students trapped in ideological echo chambers. That stereotype is contradicted by a closer look at what's actually happening across higher education.

There is no question that, generally speaking, professors lean left, and conservative students often feel marginalized. It's true that invited speakers, most of them right of center, have been shouted down by students who feel threatened by their messages. But step outside the handful of elite campuses where the most highly publicized clashes have occurred, often around the same speakers, and the reality of viewpoint diversity in academe is more complex.

Linn-Benton, in Albany, Ore., is the kind of ideologically diverse place that flies under the radar when debates rage over political correctness. There, thanks to the efforts of a student Civil Discourse Club and its faculty supporters, conversations across differences are happening.

Mark Urista, who teaches communication and advises the group, refers to the institution as "Red County-Blue County Community College." The college straddles a deeply conservative county dominated by agriculture and manufacturing, and an equally progressive county that's home to Oregon State University. In the 2016

presidential election, 60 percent of Linn County's voters went for President Trump, 32 percent for Hillary Clinton. In adjacent Benton County, it was the reverse, with 62 percent voting for Clinton, 29 percent for Trump.

That split is reflected in the student body. A recent survey showed that 27 percent of Linn-Benton students identified with the Democratic Party and 24 percent with Republicans. An equal share consider themselves independent. Given the 9-percent response rate to the survey, it's hard to draw any firm conclusions, but Urista said it seems like a fair representation of the diverse views he hears. "Our campus is an ideal laboratory," he said, for efforts to promote civil discourse.

Conflicting Conclusions

The Linn-Benton club is one such effort. But again, the actual state of higher education's ideological diversity remains up for debate. Not everyone is convinced that interventions are needed to encourage people to talk civilly to one another or to allow conservative students to speak freely. And even some right-leaning researchers who set out to uncover biases have reported finding little evidence of liberal indoctrination. Numerous polls have offered conflicting conclusions, with findings that can be spun to either support or refute the stereotype.

In 2017, a Gallup/Knight Foundation poll found that 61 percent of respondents said the campus climate prevents some people from saying what they believe for fear of offending someone — up from 54 percent the year before. But 69 percent also said that in general, conservatives could freely share their opinions, while 92 percent said liberals could.

While the Trump administration has emboldened some conservatives, along with white supremacists and other extremists, to speak up, it has made others fear being associated with a president who has engendered such intense animosity.

"We've heard so many claims coming out of the administration that make people bristle," said Debra Mashek, executive director of Heterodox Academy, a consortium of scholars that promotes viewpoint diversity, open inquiry, and constructive disagreement in higher education. "Some people feel if you're advocating for viewpoint diversity, you're advocating for those ideas."

In the same vein, conservative and moderate students and scholars can feel suppressed on campuses where they're greatly outnumbered, Mashek said. They might, for instance, feel uncomfortable questioning the prevalence of microaggressions, comments, or actions that subtly or unintentionally show prejudice toward marginalized people.

Some professors have learned that "there are certain questions you shouldn't ask because people might assume ill intent or that you're not that smart," she said.

When hot-button issues come up, conservative students, too, are often "sitting on the sidelines," Mashek said. "They're concerned they'll be hung out to dry by other students or that professors will treat them unfairly."

But research released this year challenged the idea that professors grade conservative students more harshly. A study of more than 7,000 students around the country who started college in 2009 found that, on a four-point scale, the most conservative students earned grades about a tenth of a point lower than those of the most liberal students.

"To the degree that ideological biases exist, they have very modest impacts," wrote Robert Maranto, a co-author of the report and a professor in the department of education reform at the University of Arkansas.

The study's conclusions have been used by both liberals and conservatives to support existing biases, he said. Those who lean right found validation in the finding that liberal students did, in fact, receive slightly higher grades in college even if their high-school grades were slightly lower. Those from the left zeroed in on the conclusion that any tiny differences could be due in part to college classes, which often value creativity more than conformity, an emphasis they say plays to the strengths of more-liberal students.

There is no question that left-leaning faculty members far outnumber those from the right, Maranto said. But while the professoriate may lack ideological diversity, there's respect for such diversity in the classroom, he concluded.

He's more concerned about the kind of research that's conducted when professors and publications are more interested in, say, the study of civil rights than the study of religion, or the role of Black Lives Matter rather than in policing practices that reduce homicide rates. All, he said, are important topics, but not all get equal airing when conservatives are far outnumbered in the professoriate.

Maranto and another co-author, who describe themselves as right-of-center political scientists, stress that more nuance is needed in discussions about ideological imbalances. "My concern is that as the right overplays the plight of conservatives in higher education, they're going to discourage people from the right from either going to college or seeking advanced degrees," said the co-author, Matthew C. Woessner, an associate professor of political science and public policy at Pennsylvania State

University at Harrisburg. The effect, he said, would be to make the leftward tilt of academe even more prominent.

What's more, threats to free speech come from the left and the right.

Sanford J. Ungar, president emeritus of Goucher College and director of the Free Speech Project at Georgetown University, describes the case of Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, an assistant professor of African American studies at Princeton University, who said she had received death threats after referring to President Trump, in a commencement address at Hampshire College, as a "racist, sexist megalomaniac." She had to cancel further speaking events after her remarks circulated through conservative media sites and reached Fox News.

"There's this stereotype of half-crazed liberal professors and snowflake students squelching conservative thought," Ungar said, arguing that it's time to dismiss "this image of zombie students walking around having been brainwashed and unable to stand up for themselves."

When a provocative speaker — think Milo Yiannopoulos or Ann Coulter — comes to campus and everything goes smoothly, or two campus groups on opposite ends of the political spectrum team up for a community-service program, it's not likely to make headlines. But when a professor is injured during a protest over a conservative speaker, or border-patrol officers are shouted off campus by students objecting to their presence, and social media are there to capture it, the news can go viral.

Out of Division, an Opportunity

The seeds for the Civil Discourse Club at Linn-Benton were sown when a sexually explicit art exhibit opened in a busy campus hall. Some viewed the exhibit, which showed two men engaged in sexual acts, through the lens of freedom of expression. Others found the artwork deeply offensive and inappropriate for a public campus. As the rhetoric intensified, the complaints became personal.

Students who opposed the exhibit's graphic nature were afraid of being called homophobic if they objected, so many kept quiet, said Anthony Lusardi, then a student in Urista's class. "People in their tribes were talking about the art piece but not talking to each other," he said. "Nothing constructive was coming out of this."

But in those divisions among students, Urista saw an opportunity. He invited the conversation into his classroom, instructing students to prepare arguments on both sides of the debate. Lusardi and another student, Brandon Calhoun, found the exercise

so helpful that they staged a public debate with arguments they had researched for and against the artwork.

One of the club's first acts was to post, on a whiteboard in a busy campus hall, a question designed to stimulate debate. Students scrawled anonymous comments, and one of the club advisers periodically policed the board to erase those deemed too offensive. These students were willing to talk across their differences. They just needed a venue.

Those kinds of open conversations may have been more likely to happen at a community college. Students there are typically politically diverse, and they're more likely to be juggling jobs and families, said Samuel J. Abrams, a professor of politics at Sarah Lawrence College and a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. So cultural debates that rage at some institutions don't always reach the same pitch.

"Students who are older, many of them immigrants, who are looking to move to four-year schools — they don't have the time or interest to be debating these issues," he said. Viewpoint homogeneity "is still a huge problem," he said, "but it's not as absolute as what people would think."

Last year, Abrams surveyed about 900 administrators at a range of campuses, from open-access to elite. His study found that less-selective colleges have more ideological diversity among their administrators and are more likely to be in Republican-voting districts.

Over all, Abrams' survey found what he considered to be alarming political disparities: Liberal administrators outnumber conservative ones by a ratio of 12 to 1. But in his data, the biggest gap between liberals and conservatives existed at elite colleges. Like his home institution, Sarah Lawrence.

When Abrams published his findings in a *New York Times* column, he called out what he considered ideologically lopsided programs at Sarah Lawrence that focused on topics like "liberation spaces on campus, Black Lives Matter, and justice for women as well as for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and allied people."

He urged freshmen "not to accept unthinkingly what your campus administrators are telling you." He added that "their ideological imbalance, coupled with their agenda-setting power, threatens the free and open exchange of ideas, which is precisely what we need to protect in higher education in these politically polarized times."

The backlash was immediate. Abrams' office door was vandalized with profanity and messages urging him to leave. "More faculty signed on to documents demanding that I leave than those who stood up on my right to do this research," he said.

While Abrams has argued that, generally speaking, both college students and faculty members are more open-minded than news reports give them credit for, he said that isn't always the case in elite Northeast colleges like Sarah Lawrence. There, he contends, small numbers of activist students and faculty critics are egged on by "activist administrators" from offices like the dean of students.

Sarah Lawrence's president, Cristle Collins Judd, said that while the actions of those who vandalized Abrams' door were "unacceptable," the emotional response should be considered in the context of the world in which traditional-age college students have grown up.

"Most of our students were born post 9/11 and have lived their whole school lives in a time of school shootings and lockdown culture," she said in an interview. "They've seen an explosion of polarized social media and pretty rancorous politics. For some of our students, questions about identity become very personal."

Abrams "has every right, and the full support of the college, to pursue and publish this work," she wrote in a message to the campus. She added that his piece "made claims that many on our campus understandably found not only controversial, but insulting, and even personally intimidating, for which the proper response is vigorous and informed debate and criticism." Nevertheless, she wrote, vandalism and intimidating threats should not be tolerated.

Achieving Viewpoint Diversity

Experts might disagree over whether lack of ideological diversity is a big problem in higher education. But some still believe that colleges should make intentional efforts, like Linn-Benton's Civil Discourse Club, to ensure they support a diverse range of views.

Mashek, of the Heterodox Academy, said the focus needs to be broader than ideological diversity. Viewpoint diversity, she said, can be achieved by bringing together people from different backgrounds, like those who grew up in urban and rural communities, religious and atheist, rich and poor.

Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University, has been recruiting military veterans as well as minority and low-income students to enroll. That "adds to the mix

of views" on a campus where many professors, especially in the social sciences, may unintentionally emphasize more-liberal positions, he told *The Chronicle* last year.

"We can't just rely on championing free speech as if it's an open market and everybody will show up," Roth said. "We have to overcome implicit bias by actively seeking people with different points of view."

In a book published last month, *Safe-Enough Spaces: A Pragmatist's Approach to Inclusion, Free Speech, and Political Correctness on College Campuses* (Yale University Press), Roth argues that colleges that make diverse students feel included and respected enable them "to be open to ideas and perspectives so that the differences they encounter are educative."

"A campus should be a safe-enough place to explore difference — to have one's way of thinking tested, not just protected," he wrote.

It's a sentiment with which few would argue, even as they debate the extent to which their campuses are already there.

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