

Introduction

Our aim in this study is to examine whether there is political or ideological bias in American higher education. We want to evaluate the criticisms of universities for being too left or liberal and to undertake the task in a systematic, fair-minded, and nonpartisan fashion. We know that we cannot fully answer all of the questions surrounding this topic, but we hope at least to chart the terrain sensibly. By making a convincing start, we hope that other scholars can develop the subject further. More answers will emerge as colleagues (and citizens) debate the issues, and, of course, there will be no final answers on some of the broadest questions. It is also important, as part of the inquiry, to discuss how universities *should* address what we call the civic education and citizenship issue—that is, what should colleges and universities be doing to prepare students better for effective citizenship in our democracy. This concern broadly relates to the teaching of political philosophy, values, rule of law, professional ethics, and what it means to be a citizen, matters that call for reasoned argument but do not lend themselves to scientific truth.

We represent in our study team a broad range of the political spectrum, from Republican to Democratic to a shade of Green, although it is probable that none of us would qualify as among the most fervent of partisans. If we could manage to achieve a measure of agreement among ourselves, we hoped to be able to provide research results that our fellow citizens and our academic colleagues of all political persuasions might find useful and worthy of consideration.

Because the topic is difficult, we chose to approach the task through a variety of methodologies and angles of vision. We examined carefully previous studies to identify what has been proven and not proven and what new approaches might be fruitfully pursued. We sought to avoid mere eclecticism and anecdote, although we have not been afraid to draw on the “tacit” knowledge we have gained through long experience in the trenches as teachers, administrators, and policy analysts.

The subject of faculty political attitudes and ideology has been much studied and written about, in systematic and less systematic ways, since at least the 1950s by scholars from a number of disciplines. We make no pretense that we can fully resolve the contradictions, the inconsistencies, and differing interpretations found in previous studies. Achieving convincing methods of studying the topic entails not only the challenge of gathering data but also the challenge of drawing sensible conclusions and interpretations once we have agreed on the “facts.” But we are convinced, and believe that our colleagues and fellow citizens will come to share our belief, that it is possible to discuss the issues civilly and, in the process, to achieve a deeper understanding of how the universities can serve society. Our overall finding, it is only fair to tell the reader up-front, is that we do not find evidence of rampant bias in the universities or of liberal bias in the conventional meaning of the term. We find evidence of an “antipolitical” bias in much of what the modern research universities do. That is to say, most professors, like most Americans, have an aversion to politics and find ways to avoid thinking seriously about politics and political issues. There is a tendency to take refuge in forms of specialized and “objective” knowledge, which is thought to be a more lofty intellectual endeavor than trying to cope with the muddy normative issues of politics. There may also be a kind of reflexive utopianism in the thinking—or non-thinking—that professors bring to political matters. Professors are not always aware of the political and philosophical assumptions concealed in their thinking. In this sense, we argue, the universities are not permeated with politics; in fact, they do not have enough political awareness or the right kind of political engagement.

The alleged negative effects of too much politics are not in evidence when one looks at the universities. Professors, even conservative professors, do not generally think that they are discriminated against in hiring (according to the responses to our survey questionnaire). Nor do they believe that they are biased in the classroom. This is perhaps not surprising since nobody likes to think he or she behaves unprofessionally. If professors were the only ones to think that they are not biased in the classroom, we might be inclined to worry that they are uncritical and not conscious of their own faults. But we found that students

also do not believe that their professors are biased to any significant degree, although conservative students are more likely to think their professors are somewhat more biased than liberal students do. Moreover, a state legislative inquiry—the most extensive of its kind in the nation—found, as we detail in chapter 7, that bias is “rare” in the state’s public colleges and universities. Taken together, the weight of the evidence seems convincing to us.

Then why has there been such concern about political bias, and why do some Americans continue to believe strongly that professors are biased? We answer this question in several ways, first by showing how various activists have used the idea of bias as a political tactic. According to activists and interest groups on the political right, radicals have taken over the universities and use them as a base to launch attacks on mainstream values. And activists and interest groups that we identify as politically left have created their own bogeyman in depicting a right-wing conspiracy to subvert academic freedom and bring universities to heel. These individuals and groups have needed each other to rally their own forces. But this rhetorical combat has come to reflect a kind of shadowboxing among activists, but there are real differences in cultural perspectives.

We start the study by setting the modern American university in its proper historical context. That is, we briefly trace the evolution of the American university from a predominant role as transmitter of cultural values to teachers, ministers, and other professional classes to the emergence of the modern research university in the period after the Civil War and the early part of the twentieth century. The modern university has its origins in (a) the evolution of some of the older colonial and postcolonial colleges, (b) the institutions created under the land grant legislation adopted during the Civil War and subsequent federal legislation, and (c) the entirely new institutions made possible by the vast new wealth and philanthropy of the Gilded Age. Americans borrowed from German conceptions to form the new entity of the research university. We also cover the emergence of tenure as a protection against presidents and trustees who widely and freely fired professors for speaking out on topics such as socialism, unionism, and pacifism. And we sketch the many changes affecting the universities as the country moved first to an era of mass higher education after World War II and then to the eclectic and global university of today.

The universe of postsecondary education in the United States is a complex one, including 4,200 two- and four-year degree-granting institutions, of which 1,700 are public and 2,500 are private (in addition, some 2,150 more nondegree-granting schools also qualify for federal student aid). Of the 1,700 public institutions, 1,100 are two-year colleges, which enroll half of all fresh-

men. Of the 2,500 independent private institutions, some 1,600 are four-year, not-for-profit colleges (and an additional 300 are four-year, for-profit institutions). About 20 percent of undergraduates are enrolled in private institutions. An interesting feature of our system is that we have 900 religiously affiliated institutions enrolling about 1.5 million of the 15 million undergraduate students in all of postsecondary education. A few of the religiously affiliated institutions are universities, but most are four-year colleges. The religiously affiliated schools are largely Christian, of which about 225 are Roman Catholic, more than 100 are bible colleges, more than 150 are seminaries, about 150 other schools combine faith and civic missions, and 150 others have become more secular and are scarcely distinguishable from the nonreligious colleges. Congress has exempted these religious institutions from the application of nondiscrimination laws regarding the hiring of faculty members, so such schools are allowed to hire only Christians, only Jews (or no Jews), or only members of their own particular denomination.

Our concern in this study is primarily with the PhD-granting universities that are research intensive—that is, the universities receiving most of the federal research funds and granting the largest share of the graduate and four-year undergraduate degrees. In some sense, these institutions serve as the flagship institutions of the entire higher education system. The most elite of the more than 200 institutions granting the doctoral degree are the sixty-four universities belonging to the Association of American Universities (AAU).

Our work includes a national survey conducted in 2007 from a unique random sample provided by the Center for Survey Research of the University of Virginia and distributed via e-mail and the World Wide Web. We include our survey instrument and our focus group design as part of the methodological appendix. While our random sample includes in its universe all undergraduate institutions in the country, we focus primarily on the research-intensive universities, especially those in the AAU, plus a number of other, less research-intensive universities (and to a degree our analysis also applies to the select four-year liberal arts colleges). Seventeen of the AAU universities are listed among the top twenty universities in the world, according to a recent survey (and thirty-five are in the top fifty). Since the charge is that the elite universities are dominated by a liberal and secular ideology, we look mainly at those institutions. Also, since it is primarily at these institutions that faculty receive their graduate degrees, bias at these institutions, if it does exist, would have an impact beyond their campuses. As it turns out, the assumption that the research universities harbor the most liberal faculty members is wrong since recent studies have shown that the select liberal arts colleges and the less

research-intensive universities have a slightly higher percentage of the more liberal professors on their faculties than do the major research universities.

The major research universities attract the most publicity, often unfavorable, about episodes of alleged bias, but this may reflect the fact that there is *more*, rather than less, contention and debate on these elite campuses than on the other campuses. The intense media attention that has focused on the major universities may reflect in some part the perspectives and the “master narrative” brought by the media to their scrutiny of the universities. Populist critics who attack universities often find the elite schools the more tempting targets. The fact that universities are uncomfortable with bad publicity is understandable and certainly part of the reason why they are chary about genuine political debate. The nuances of an academic debate do not always translate into the rough and tumble of real politics.

The vocabulary for discussing the issues that concern us is itself worthy of study, because words such as *bias*, *political*, and *ideology*, not to mention the terms *liberal* or *conservative*, create confusion and often obscure meaning. Anything political connotes *partisan* to many Americans who dislike politics to begin with, and the term *bias* creates an impression that universities engage in improper partisan activities. But if *political* is understood to refer to our shared understandings and institutions and to the public good, the public philosophy implied by the American Constitution, including the rights and obligations of citizenship, the relevance of the framers’ civic republican tradition for the contemporary scene, and other broad issues of common concern—as we think it should—then clearly political debate belongs in the universities and, indeed, should be encouraged and considered a vital part of what universities are *for*. And to have a view, viewpoint, approach, or interpretation of an event—and to bring such views to one’s classroom—is not to impose bias on one’s students, but to teach. Students expect their professors to profess, to expound on the subject, and are savvy enough to know when they are being stimulated, their minds are being stretched, or when, and if, they are being bamboozled. In chapter 8, we take up and develop these themes further.

Focusing on the major universities, however, leaves out of our consideration most of the institutions that self-identify as conservative or religious. A special kind of ideological and religious orientation exists on such campuses and gives them a clear sense of purpose that is rarely found in the large heterogeneous research universities. For example, Brigham Young University, which according to the Carnegie Corporation classification system is among the nation’s important research universities, gives preference to Mormons in hiring in accord with the university’s mission. We do not suggest that there is anything

improper with a religious institution preferring an avowedly religious individual for its faculty, but a complete picture of faculty bias in the nation's universities would have to include this consideration. It is little known outside of the academy, and sometimes even within it, that higher education is one of the few remaining job markets where an applicant can be turned away from a job for being an atheist or for being (or not being) Jewish, even though universities now operate within a complicated framework of affirmative action laws and regulations that outlaw other kinds of discrimination.¹

Another aspect of this study is the curriculum. If higher education has begun to reflect the cultural disputes in the broader society (or has played a part in igniting those disputes), the divide between universities that teach science as a secular discipline and those few that teach creationism or intelligent design is a stark example. Whether secular universities can or should teach courses about the role of religion in society, and how or whether they can do so without advocating particular religions, is a serious issue that should be debated inside and outside the universities. This is a matter that merits further research and reflection, but we have made only passing reference to the topic here. As in other aspects of our study, we hope to stimulate debate, discussion, and research on the many issues we touch on but cannot fully resolve.

For the purposes of this study, we focus on three areas where, presumably, if bias of a political nature is to be found, it will show up most importantly. Hence we focus mainly on three areas: classroom behavior, hiring and personnel decisions, and the general intellectual climate at the elite institutions, knowing full well how difficult it is to get an accurate perspective on these issues. Definitive answers, especially findings that would meet the highest standards of scientific rigor, are very difficult to come by, and we are often forced to settle for assessments and judgments of a more qualitative nature. Despite the difficulties and uncertainties, we think our findings, preliminary and provisional though they may be, are more than suggestive, and, indeed, we gain confidence in our conclusions because they are supported by a number of quite different methods of analysis. We therefore are confident that we have called attention to issues of importance and presented some clear findings.

Overall, to our surprise, we found that, far from being saturated in politics, the universities generally have all but ignored what used to be called civics and civic education. Universities *should be* the home of lively and civilized political debate, and all too often, for a host of reasons, professors ignore political debate and have little or no interest in the basics of the constitutional order, in political philosophy, and in the ethical dimensions of the professions

or of democratic society. We believe that these topics should be a part of every undergraduate curriculum.

Thus we believe that universities should in some sense return to a role that they played more than a century ago, namely, that of educating students for citizenship in our democratic society. We make no pretense that this will be an easy task or that we know exactly how the universities should revise their undergraduate and professional school curricula to accommodate and encourage a new focus on the values of civic awareness and democratic citizenship. But we offer various suggestions to this effect in chapter 9. The obstacles to achieving such a goal will be formidable, for students and professors have struck a comfortable bargain in which students pursue vocationalism and professors pursue their specialized research interests, while both neglect important elements of a liberal education.

Many vital issues confront the modern university, but political bias is not one of them, if by this we mean that professors are engaged in an effort to indoctrinate their students according to some political ideology. Nor do we find a suffocating uniformity that pervades all departments, schools, and programs across the complex, sprawling, and heterogeneous modern university. Departments, schools, and programs are more likely to pursue their own specialized paths, down the many byways of knowledge and buffeted by the many distractions that pull students and professors into their distinct specialties and subspecialties. We are trying to refocus attention on what is common in the educational experience and how the universities can help to prepare their students for democratic citizenship. We hope our readers will find our arguments worthy of their consideration.