

“Academia and its Contribution to Political Polarization”

By Matilda Devlin

The rising political polarization in the United States shows to be a prominent, growing, and dysfunctional problem. News outlets have acquired an “Us versus Them” mentality, with social media consequently amplifying it. Personal relationships are being destroyed or ignored, while tribalism between the two political parties obstructs any constructive discourse that may otherwise occur. The reasons for this increased political tension are unquestionably multifaceted. Political polarization is a cycle to which both parties contribute. This cycle is especially apparent when examining educational institutions, settings where universities especially are increasingly viewed as patrons of the left. As educational pillars for future generations, higher education institutions are responsible for preparing young adults for the real world. The lack of political diversity on college campuses aids the polarization cycle as opposing research and ideas are underrepresented, thus harming both the development of critical thinking and perceptions of the real world.

In regards to researchers, scholars, professors, and academics, viewpoint diversity is essential. Confirmation bias is universal and unescapable, even for those who claim awareness of their own biases. Universities are supposed to be places where confirmation biases are checked and balanced through the peer-review process. A community of scholars with varying viewpoints is imperative for effective challenging against confirmation bias. In recent decades the ratio of professors holding liberal over conservative beliefs has increased dramatically, especially in the liberal arts and humanities domain and even more so at top institutions. *The Harvard Crimson's* annual spring faculty survey from 2022 shows that more than 80% of surveyed Harvard faculty identify as either “very liberal” or “liberal,” while only 1% identify as conservative (Xu, 2022). The increasing dramatic concentration of left-identifying professors results in negative consequences for scholarly research as well as for the students. When a field lacks political diversity, researchers gravitate toward research questions that generally align with their shared interests while being more critical of questions that do not align with those interests. Moreover, the amount of academic research and literature being produced sways left. Thus, confirmation bias in academia is not being effectively reviewed and challenged. This then affects the students, who are consequently exposed to less opposing research, ideas, and opinions, thus stunting their critical thinking abilities and contributing to an inaccurate perception of Republicans and much of the United States in which polarization is fueled.

Aligning with university faculty, the majority of university students also lean politically left therefore further hindering viewpoint diversity on campus. Students are often not exposed to dissenting ideas from faculty or fellow students, which is fundamental for the successful and well-rounded development of critical thinking. Although exposure may occur through media and other domains, this differentiates from exposure in an academic setting. Moreover,

students become further solidified and polarized in their political opinions from this lack of exposure while also less capable of accurately understanding different worldviews. *The Guardian* suggests just this in a discussion on “the education effect,” which showed that “highly educated Republicans were no more accurate in their ideas about Democratic opinion than poorly educated Republicans,” but for Democrats, “the more educated a Democrat is, according to the study, the less he or she understands the Republican worldview” (Hochschild, 2019). Polarization, in part, results from a lack of understanding which differentiates from disagreement. Dissenting opinions then become misconstrued or misread due to the lack of understanding, and in certain environments, threats of violence rather than dialect, as demonstrated in several campus protests that have occurred in recent years. The protests at Evergreen State College are a prime example of this idea, where Professor Brett Weinstein spoke out against the modification of the campus tradition “Day of Absence,” which allowed individuals of color to take a day of absence so that their importance and contribution could be felt at the university. The modification entailed telling white students that they should not come to campus that day, inciting Weinstein, an identified far-left liberal, to email in response, “On a college campus, one's right to speak -- or to be -- must never be based on skin color”(Jaschik, 2018). Protests then erupted with students labeling Weinstein as a “racist” and “white supremacist” while refusing to listen to his defense, opinion, or engage in conversation. Gaining national attention, Weinstein sued the school and made an appearance on Fox News, then inspiring far-right conservatives to harass the Evergreen students, continuing the cycle of political polarization, hate, and separation.

It comes into question whether or not the Evergreen students would have been more open to hearing from Weinstein if given prior exposure to dissenting opinions in their academic environment. Students automatically expected the school to support them in their efforts to remove Weinstein and any other “opposers” from campus culture. When the school did, it reinforced the belief that aggressive removal is the solution to dissenting opinions rather than dialogue or dialect. Evergreen State College is just one example of several where universities not only lack viewpoint diversity but encourage destructive, unproductive reactions when a different opinion is shared. This polarizes young adult university students under the name of “safety-ism” rather than building their resilience and critical thinking abilities.

Being raised by conservatives, I have appreciated my experience at the two American liberal arts schools I have attended. Undoubtedly, I have been exposed to ideas I otherwise would not have been. Whether I agree with them or not, I have had the opportunity to consider and decide what I believe and why so, rather than experiencing an education of unchallenged ideologies. It is discouraging that in top institutions, many students do not share my experience. The more I witness hostility and relationship destruction due to political affiliations, the more I yearn for the highest levels of education to encourage political diversity, dialogue, and understanding. Once viewpoint diversity can be appreciated and implemented in our

institutions and education, society may learn to become less polarized and more productive.
Indoctrinate depolarization.

Work Cited

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