

Why Conservatives Don't Become Professors

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The academic Left needs to seek ideological diversity.

Give Nicholas Kristof credit. He really is trying to persuade liberal academics to be more welcoming toward conservatives. Twice within the last month Kristof has raised the issue in the pages of the New York Times, arguing that academic liberals have become “the illiberal ones” by marginalizing conservatives within the academy. In his latest, he even wrote that the disdainful attitude he has perceived toward Evangelical Christians “feels to me like bigotry.”

At moments like these, there is some temptation to sneer and shout, “Welcome to the world!” We shouldn’t. This was a significant gesture. A liberal New York Times columnist just used the b-word to refer to liberal academics. More amazing still, the purported targets of this bigotry are conservative Christians. That’s brave. If I had read such a piece in graduate school, I would have raced out to buy a copy of the paper so I could tape the column to my fridge.

Is it true? Clearly it is true that conservatives are dramatically underrepresented in the academy, particularly in the humanities. As Kristof notes, it is easier in many disciplines to find a self-described Marxist than to find a Republican. (And in fact, the numbers aren’t close. About 18 percent of social scientists self-identify as Marxists, whereas Republicans represent 7 to 9 percent.) That raises two further questions. Why has this happened? And is it a problem?

It is a problem, first and foremost because liberal intolerance adds to the insularity that is already undermining scholarship. When everyone in a scholarly community thinks in similar ways, echo chambers start to form, and sloppy studies or arguments are accepted with insufficient scrutiny. We’ve seen some appalling examples of that blindness in recent years. Of course, whenever this point is raised, somebody races to point out that ideological diversity is not the same as political diversity. We want a scholarly community to include a stimulating range of perspectives, but party affiliation may not tell us whether that goal has been achieved. The Democratic-party platform says nothing specific about the proper interpretation of Plato’s Symposium. That’s true, but let’s not miss the forest for the trees. We have good reasons to think that our universities are suffering from insularity and groupthink. At the same time, we can see that religious and politically conservative perspectives are dramatically underrepresented. Are these things connected? I think they are.

Of course, there are further reasons to favor an academic environment that is more welcoming to conservatives. It’s healthy for undergraduate students to encounter a broad range of perspectives in their college years. Pervasive bias also undermines the Academy’s influence. Americans start to disregard scholarly work when they correctly perceive that most mainstream institutions have established political and moral perspectives that are wildly out of sync with their own. It detracts from the university’s credibility when its faculty is so obviously out of sync with the American mainstream. Finally, in a politically divided nation, it’s just not fair to use public funds to finance institutions that function to a large degree as partisan intellectual strongholds and indoctrination centers. If universities hope to retain public support through years of painful budget-balancing, they should make more effort to avoid such obvious bias.

This leads us to the question of the hour: Why aren’t there more conservatives in academia? One reason is fairly obvious: open prejudice. When a significant share of faculty admit that they would be less likely to hire someone they knew to be conservative or Evangelical, it’s not shocking to find that those groups are underrepresented in the academy.

Discrimination in hiring isn’t the whole story, though. Responding to Kristof’s piece, sociologist Neil Gross argued that “a larger reason why there aren’t so many conservatives in higher education has to do with self-selection, which is to say that one generally doesn’t find an equal number of PhD candidates applying in the academic job market.” In other words, job applicants, like professors themselves, tend to be disproportionately liberal. This is especially the case in the social sciences.

To his credit, Gross mostly dismisses theories that hold conservatives to be naturally stupid or intellectually uncurious. (He admits, however, that these theories have a non-trivial following among liberal faculty.) Instead, he tentatively supports the theory, that in our society, it's just become normal to think of universities as comfortable places for liberals. He writes:

During the progressive era [there were] big fights over the meaning of academic freedom, as a small number of very left-leaning social scientists found themselves in big public tussles with university trustees over their calls to break up big capital. I think it has resulted in a show that academia was a hospitable place for people with liberal-leaning views.

That social definition of what it meant to be a professor spread and became established. Increasingly, liberal students who were academically talented said, Hey, this is a professional career I can really see myself being in, and conservative students didn't. For me, that is what the driver of this is.

As a conservative and erstwhile academic, I find this quite exasperating. Gross seems to be making a good-faith attempt to understand the phenomenon. But even though substantial numbers of faculty openly admit to harboring prejudice against conservatives and traditional religion, he doesn't think prejudice is the real problem. Job applicants are disproportionately liberal. From that, we can see that conservatives are simply choosing not to pursue academic careers. Departments then have little choice but to hire liberals.

That makes sense until we recall that in order to apply credibly for an academic job, one must first be ensconced within the academy for at least seven or eight years. First comes college, and then a master's-level degree may be needed to secure a spot in a competitive doctoral program. (Of course, conservatives could be screened out at any of these stages.) After that, you need to spend three or four years trying to impress the professors in your graduate program before you have any chance of securing an academic job. These may very well be the same professors who openly admitted on a recent survey that they probably wouldn't hire you if they knew you were, say, a religious conservative. So yes! Lingering stereotypes from 1960s labor disputes, as Gross suggests, are probably the main thing driving conservatives from the academy! That's absolutely plausible.

I don't wish to sound bitter, because I greatly enjoyed my years in academic philosophy, and I didn't encounter as much open disdain as some might suppose. Most professors and colleagues were at least polite about my politics and faith, and some were conscientiously respectful. (I have a particularly touching memory of a liberal atheist professor insisting on hiring a substitute for me, at his own expense, so that I could attend my Good Friday service.) I still have many liberal academic friends who do seem to want their departments to be welcoming to religious traditionalists and conservatives. Partly for that reason, I am less despairing about the future of the academy than many of my conservative colleagues are.

Nevertheless, I find that most liberal academics (even of goodwill) tend to be unrealistic about the potential for traditionalists and conservatives to succeed in their departments. Even when people are nice about it, religious conservatives in the academy are very well aware that they are freaks. That's a serious problem from the perspective of professional development, because success in the academy isn't just a matter of jumping through the right hoops. You need to find like-minded people and persuade them to induct you into their conversations. How do you do that if you're an ideological Martian from the get-go?

Even if people are friendly, they aren't likely to pick you for their team if your entire perspective seems radically strange to them. The academic job market is punishing already, so you really need those enthusiastic friends and mentors if you are to have a shot at climbing the crag. I think many conservatives and traditionalists spend their early years of graduate school furiously searching for a way to insert themselves into ongoing scholarly conversations without selling out half of the things that they really believe. Is it surprising that some give up before they get to the job-application phase? That many assess the situation a bit earlier, and pursue other careers? Or that some go in as conservatives but no longer self-identify that way by the time they hit the market? Liberals have spent years preaching the importance of "diversity."

They have a huge, color-coordinated file full of strategies for giving a boost to disadvantaged groups. It's time to consider whether there's anything in that file that might help traditionalists and conservatives.

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