



A Lack of Ideological Diversity is Killing Social Research

Without more conservative views in the academy, lawmakers will increasingly ignore and even defund the field, says Musa al-Gharbi

Beginning in the late 18th century, post-secondary education was restructured across Europe—in part under the auspices of accelerating the transition to an envisioned rational and secular age.¹ In order to enroll the broadest swath of the public in this enterprise, institutions and curricula were rendered more accessible, inclusive, and professionally-oriented. At the time, Nietzsche condemned² the “ubiquitous encouragement of everyone’s so-called ‘individual personality’” and the growing trend to curb “serious and unrelenting critical habits and opinions” at universities—discerning as astutely in his own time as Jonathan Haidt today that the use of educational institutions for promoting a particular social vision is

fundamentally incompatible with the pursuit of the truth wherever it leads.³

Yet across Western societies, and especially in elite circles, the 18th Century faith persists that a proliferation of education, science, and technology will help usher in a more rational and secular age⁴—one governed by expertise, and defined by worldwide peace and prosperity.⁵ Among adherents of this vision, universities are held in particularly high regard, as incubators of that better tomorrow—where our best and brightest hone the character, skills and knowledge to solve the world’s ills in an environment that promotes reasoned and civil debate, the free exchange of ideas, and an unflinching commitment to truth.

However, contemporary research in the cognitive and behavioral sciences suggests a much bleaker picture:⁶

For instance, rather than serving as an objective base upon which agreements can be built, evoking scientific studies or statistics in the context of socio-political arguments tends to further polarize interlocutors.⁷ Both conservatives *and* progressives politicize science and evaluate its findings on an ideological basis: exaggerating conclusions when convenient while findings ways to ignore, discredit, defund or suppress research which seems to threaten one's identity or perceived interests.⁸ Rather than contributing to open-mindedness or intellectual humility, greater cognitive sophistication or knowledge often renders people *less* flexible in their beliefs by enhancing their abilities to critique and dismiss challenges, or advance counter-arguments, regardless of "the facts"—thereby exacerbating people's natural inclinations towards motivated reasoning.⁹

That is, if one wanted to create an environment which actually *promoted* closed-mindedness, dogmatism and polarization, contemporary research suggests the following prescription: consolidate societies' most intelligent, knowledgeable and charismatic people, at a time in their lives when their identities are just taking shape (which increases the perceived urgency of protecting and validating said identities¹⁰), and place them in a competitive environment focused largely (and increasingly) on the sciences.¹¹ In a word: universities.¹²

Perhaps then, it should not be surprising that the long leftward trajectory of U.S. institutions of higher learning seems to have culminated with conservative faculty, students and perspectives almost completely absent from many fields,¹³ while dissent from progressive ideology is met with increasing sanctions and scandal¹⁴—from which even historical figures are not immune.¹⁵

However one may feel about these developments from a moral or political point of view, they are harmful for the practice and

profession of science—especially for the social and behavioral sciences.

A Threat to Research Integrity

One of the primary reasons universities seek to recruit faculty and students from gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, economic and other minority groups is to enhance viewpoint diversity; the idea is that integrating the unique life experiences, influences and perspectives of under-represented populations can enrich learning for all students, strengthen research, and spur innovation.¹⁶

In other words, it is cognitive and ideological variation which *gives substance* to other forms of diversity on campus.¹⁷ The work of trying to understand, accommodate, contest or reconcile across different languages, cultures, disciplines, perceived interests and priorities, while often frustrating and exhausting, is precisely how the benefits of diversity are realized.¹⁸ Substantive diversity *will* generate contradictions and conflicts, it *will* challenge people and make them uncomfortable—both those from majority *and* minority groups—but it will ultimately produce stronger research and better scholars.

On the other hand, too much cognitive and ideological homogeneity in a field creates a host of epistemological problems: methodological weaknesses, gaps in research, errors and problematic assumptions can be overlooked because the results of a study comport with what reviewers *want* to believe or already believe¹⁹ (contributing to the reproducibility crisis which is especially pronounced in the social and behavioral sciences²⁰). Important lines of study are never even undertaken because antecedent commitments blind researchers to their value.²¹ Research which seems to threaten or undermine the prevailing consensus is often subject to unfair scrutiny in the peer-review process, making it difficult to publish and disseminate the findings.²²

Institutionalized bias adversely and unjustly affects careers as well:

when students perceive ideological differences between themselves and their professors, they tend to provide lower ratings in course evaluations. These evaluations have come to matter a great deal for the employment and advancement prospects of junior and adjunct faculty.²³ Defying a department's prevailing ideological consensus can also harm scholars with regards to committee deliberations on hiring and promotion.²⁴ As a result, conservatives often feel compelled to conceal their political leanings and limit their exploration of controversial topics unless and until they receive tenure.²⁵ This wait often proves indefinite: overall less than a third of America's college and university faculty are tenured.²⁶ For aspiring social researchers who actively avoid the most pressing issues of the day, the rate is likely much lower.

The Urgency of Reform

While exhibiting conservative inclinations may be harmful *within* academic circles, the perceived leftward bias of many fields of study has limited the utility and application of social research *outside* of the university.

Republicans control the Presidency, House, and Senate; they dominate state legislatures and governorships nationwide.²⁷ But given that more than 90% of sociology faculty lean progressive, there is virtually no incentive for conservative lawmakers to consult sociological research when crafting policies. They turn largely to economists instead, whose field more closely approaches political parity (exhibiting a mere 4:1 progressive bias²⁸). And increasingly, Republican policymakers circumvent academics, academic research, and academic institutions altogether in favor of think-tanks, which have become repositories for those right-leaning intellectuals alienated from the ivory towers.²⁹

Meanwhile, to the extent that universities are not only portrayed as, but in fact *are*, populated overwhelmingly by progressives³⁰—and nearly exclusively produce research and scholars

reflecting these commitments—conservatives have every incentive to not only ignore social research, but to defund it. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the leftward trend within U.S. institutions of higher learning has been met by aggressive Republican-led campaigns to slash government support of post-secondary education (especially for the humanities and social sciences) along with declining contributions from wealthy donors.³¹ Meanwhile, private universities designed to explicitly promote conservative ideologies are seeing a surge in donations and enrollments.³²

To make matters worse, the ideological and cultural climates of many U.S. universities are radically out of step with the broader American society, contributing to declining public confidence in institutions of higher learning and the growing inability of social researchers to relate to ordinary people³³—which undermines their capacity to understand phenomena, predict trends, or craft effective interventions.³⁴

In other words, the ideological homogeneity of contemporary academic institutions—especially in fields related to the humanities or social and behavioral sciences—serves to broaden the disconnect between the ivory towers and the rest of society, between theory and practice, research and application. It poses an existential threat to the integrity, credibility, utility (or even the continued viability) of social research. Academics, and social researchers in particular, must better engage with conservative thought, appeal to conservative policymakers, and reach out to a public which tends to be far more conservative than they are.

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