Real Diversities in Higher Education

The Case for Ideological Diversity and the Competition of Ideas

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY is widely agreed upon. At The Heritage Foundation, an unabashedly conservative enterprise, diversity is considered a key to the organization’s success. The Heritage Foundation staff includes economists and marketing gurus, Ph.D.’s, M.B.A.’s, M.A.’s, and J.D.’s. Some are analytical thinkers; others are holistic thinkers. Edwin Feulner, president of The Heritage Foundation, believes that the diversity of its staff is crucial and relevant to the success of the foundation’s efforts. The question he poses for higher education is, “What types of diversity are relevant to the success of the nation’s colleges and universities?” Feulner argues that, much like generals often being rightly blamed for planning to fight the last war, academic administrators are also focusing their energies on yesterday’s wars. That is, when they discuss “diversity” on campus, too often they are considering racial, and not ideological, diversity.

A Diversity Snapshot

There was a time, a few decades ago, when entire public educational systems were closed to students of color; when our colleges were woefully segregated and unrepresentative of America; when students of merit and talent were denied places at universities because of their ethnic background or religion; when “Jewish quotas” artificially preserved an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant predominance in the Ivy League; and when the Harvard Divinity School did not employ a single Roman Catholic. This is a series of facts we cannot deny. It is rightfully studied as a sad part of American history. But that is exactly what it is today—history. These things lie in the past.

After World War II, the GI Bill of Rights gave an entire generation of Americans the opportunity to take control of their lives by enabling them to enroll in and earn degrees from our nation’s finest colleges and universities. This was good for the war veterans,
It is astounding that conservative thought, which is grounded in our nation’s intellectual and political heritage, is overwhelmingly absent from institutions that strive to explore the world of ideas.
these teachers and administrators really do not understand the nature of the conservative complaint.

Bauerlein points to three interpersonal factors that explain how the narrowing of academic opinion works:

1) The Common Assumption. "The assumption is that all the strangers in the room at professional gatherings are liberals…" says Bauerlein. "The assumption proves correct often enough for it to join other forms of trust that enable collegial events. A fellowship is intimated, and members may speak their minds without worrying about justifying basic beliefs or curbing emotions."

Bauerlein argues that this effect stifles conservative voices because "there is no joy in breaking up fellowship feeling, and the awkward pause that accompanies the moment when someone comes out of the conservative closet marks a quarantine that only the institutionally secure are willing to endure."

2) The False Consensus Effect. This occurs, Bauerlein notes, "when people think that the collective opinion of their own group matches that of the larger population. If the members of a group reach a consensus and rarely encounter those who dispute it, they tend to believe that everybody thinks the same way." Bauerlein gives as an example the infamous statement of Pauline Kael, columnist for the *New Yorker*: "I don’t know how Richard Nixon could have won… I don’t know anybody who voted for him." No doubt much the same thing was said in faculty lounges across the country after the 2004 election of George W. Bush.

3) The Law of Group Polarization. Bauerlein cites University of Chicago political scientist Cass Sunstein, who observed this phenomenon of group behavior. Bauerlein summarizes it so: "When like-minded people deliberate as an organized group, the general opinion shifts toward extreme versions of their common beliefs." For example, today, the far left does not simply oppose the war in Iraq or the method in which it has been fought, but argues that "Bush lied!" or that our government has been hijacked by neoconservative Israeli loyalists. Bauerlein argues that "those involved lose all sense of the range of legitimate opinion," and thus dissent begins to seem not just mistaken but obscene.

**Consequences**

The three factors outlined by Bauerlein have combined to drive the academy to the extreme left. This radical polarization of college campuses has delegitimized the academy in the eyes of much of the public and has cheapened the academic experience.

I would not claim that the deligitimization of the academy threatens the existence of the nation’s most selective colleges and universities. For a variety of reasons—largely tied to the fact that a diploma from one of those institutions does and will continue to open vast numbers of doors in the real world—the best and the brightest will continue to flock to those institutions.

There will, however, be consequences. As the radical polarization of the academy continues, greater and greater segments of the population will be turned off from academic life and will be increasingly unlikely to pursue academic careers themselves. Meanwhile, alternative institutions, without political bias, will grow (the University of Phoenix, with its Internet offerings, comes to mind). I would also argue that the polarization of the academy is off-putting to so many Americans that it can be seen as the root of anti-intellectualism in our country.

Further, the radical polarization of the academy has cheapened higher education. For example, the lack of prominent voices articulating the Bush doctrine in foreign relations, the flaws in college affirmative action policies, or the case for reform of government entitlement programs is a result of a lack of diversity of ideas on campus.

**Conclusion**

What types of diversity are relevant to the success of our nation’s colleges and universities? Our free, self-governing society requires the open exchange of ideas, which in turn requires a certain level of civility rooted in mutual respect for each other’s opinions and viewpoints. Acceptance of a competition of ideas is a prerequisite for productive dialogue, and it is essential to a free society. Alas, today, America’s higher education community actively undermines the goals of American higher education. Action must be taken to create a learning environment in which diverse ideas are accepted and celebrated.