

How California's Colleges Indoctrinate Students

WSJ wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303816504577312361540817878

March 30, 2012

By Peter Berkowitz

Updated March 30, 2012 7:21 pm ET

The politicization of higher education by activist professors and compliant university administrators deprives students of the opportunity to acquire knowledge and refine their minds. It also erodes the nation's civic cohesion and its ability to preserve the institutions that undergird democracy in America.

So argues "A Crisis of Competence: The Corrupting Effect of Political Activism in the University of California," a new report by the California Association of Scholars, a division of the National Association of Scholars (NAS). The report is addressed to the Regents of the University of California, which has ultimate responsibility for governing the UC system, but the pathologies it diagnoses prevail throughout the country.

The analysis begins from a nonpolitical fact: Numerous studies of both the UC system and of higher education nationwide demonstrate that students who graduate from college are increasingly ignorant of history and literature. They are unfamiliar with the principles of American constitutional government. And they are bereft of the skills necessary to comprehend serious books and effectively marshal evidence and argument in written work.

This decline in the quality of education coincides with a profound transformation of the college curriculum. None of the nine general campuses in the UC system requires students to study the history and institutions of the United States. None requires students to study Western civilization, and on seven of the nine UC campuses, including Berkeley, a survey course in Western civilization is not even offered. In several English departments one can graduate without taking a course in Shakespeare. In many political science departments majors need not take a course in American politics.

Moreover, the evidence suggests that the hollowing of the curriculum stems from too many professors' preference for promoting a partisan political agenda.

National studies by Stanley Rothman in 1999, and by Neil Gross and Solon Simmons in 2007, have shown that universities' leftward tilt has become severe. And a 2005 study by Daniel Klein and Andrew Western in *Academic Questions* (a NAS publication) shows this is certainly true in California. For example, Democrats outnumbered Republicans four to one on University of California, Berkeley, professional school faculties; in the social sciences the ratio was approximately 21 to one.

The same 2005 study revealed that the Berkeley sociology department faculty was home to 17 Democrats and no Republicans. The political science department included 28 Democrats and two Republicans. The English department had 29 Democrats and one Republican; and the history department had 31 Democrats and one Republican.

While political affiliation alone need not carry classroom implications, the overwhelmingly left-leaning faculty openly declare the inculcation of progressive political ideas their pedagogical priority. As "A Crisis of Competence" notes, "a recent study by UCLA's prestigious Higher Education Research Institute found that more faculty now believe that they should teach their students to be agents of social change than believe that it is important to teach them the classics of Western civilization."

Some university programs tout their political presuppositions and objectives openly. The mission statements of the Women's Studies program at UCLA prejudices the issues by declaring that it proceeds from "the perspectives of those whose participation has been traditionally distorted, omitted, neglected, or denied." And the Critical Race Studies program at the UCLA School of law announces that its aim is to "transform racial justice advocacy."

Even the august American Association of University Professors—which in 1915 and 1940 published classic statements explaining that the aim of academic freedom was not to indoctrinate but to equip students to think for themselves—has sided with the politicized professoriate.

In 1915, the AAUP affirmed that in teaching controversial subjects a professor should "set forth justly without suppression or innuendo the divergent opinions of other investigators; he should cause his students to become familiar with the best published expressions of the great historic types of doctrine upon the questions at issue."

However, in recent statements on academic freedom in 2007 and 2011, the AAUP has undermined its almost century-old strictures against proselytizing. Its new position is that restricting professors to the use of relevant materials and obliging them to provide a reasonably comprehensive treatment of the subject represent unworkable requirements because relevance and comprehensiveness can themselves be controversial.

On the boundaries, they can be—like anything else. However, it is wrong to dismiss professors' duty to avoid introducing into classroom discussion opinions extraneous to the subject and to provide a well-rounded treatment of the matter under consideration. That opens the classroom to whatever professors wish to talk about. And in all too many cases what they wish to talk about in the classroom is the need to transform America in a progressive direction. Last year the leadership of AAUP officially endorsed the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Excluding from the curriculum those ideas that depart from the progressive agenda implicitly teaches students that conservative ideas are contemptible and unworthy of discussion. This exclusion, the California report points out, also harms progressives for the reason John Stuart Mill elaborated in his famous 1859 essay, "On Liberty": "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that."

The removal of partisan advocacy from the classroom would have long-term political benefits. Liberal education equips students with intellectual skills valued by the marketplace. It prepares citizens to discharge civic responsibilities in an informed and deliberate manner. It fosters a common culture by revealing that much serious disagreement between progressives and conservatives revolves around differing interpretations of how to fulfill America's promise of individual freedom and equality.

It is certainly true that not all progressive professors intrude their politics into the classroom, but a culture of politicization has developed on campus in which department chairs and deans treat its occurrence as routine. "UC administrators," the California report sadly concludes, "far from performing their role as the university's quality control mechanism, now routinely function as the enablers, protectors, and even apologists for the politicized university and its degraded scholarly and educational standards."

In California, this is more than a failure of their duty as educators. It is also a violation of the law. Article IX, Section 9, of the California state constitution provides that "The university shall be entirely independent of all political or sectarian influence and kept free therefrom."

It is incumbent upon the UC Board of Regents, not to mention the governing bodies of other institutions of higher education across the country, to begin the long and arduous work of depoliticizing our universities and renewing liberal education.

Mr. Berkowitz is a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and a member of the National Association of Scholars board of directors. "A Crisis of Competence" is posted at www.nas.org/images/documents/A_Crisis_of_Competence.pdf.