

# Creating an Ivory Tower Welcoming to Conservatives

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Rasmussen Reports

## COMMENTARY



AP Photo/Steven Senne, File

The crisis of higher education imposes severe, if indirect and long-term, costs on the country. The harms it inflicts on conservatives in particular are direct and immediate.

All students and the nation at large pay the price when universities replace transmission of knowledge and cultivation of inquiring minds as their primary purpose with reproduction of ideology and the formation of like-minded political activists. Contemporary undergraduate education inculcates contempt for the traditions that formed Western civilization and nourish the American constitutional order. It exploits the curriculum to promulgate progressive conceptions of social justice; perpetuates ignorance of constitutional, military, economic, and intellectual history; curtails free speech and discussion; establishes kangaroo courts that presume guilt, disregard relevant evidence, and allocate rights on the basis of sex;

and assembles faculties in the social sciences and even more so in the humanities that are overwhelmingly and sometimes exclusively of the left. The result is a heightening of partisan self-righteousness and an impoverishment of public discourse.

Conservative students and faculty pay an additional, and more personal, price. Conservative undergraduates witness the routine ridicule of their convictions and casual derision of their ideas. Those in the social sciences and humanities who are not dissuaded from attending graduate school learn to survive in many cases by concealing their views, playing the game, and redirecting their inquiries to safe and accepted lines of research. Conservative graduate students who decline to hide their opinions while nevertheless managing to obtain PhDs face dismal job prospects. Untenured conservative professors confront unwritten but rigorously enforced tests of methodological and political soundness. The few conservative scholars who obtain tenure must grapple with marginalization in their departments, disciplines, and the wider university community.

Conservatives outside the academy have sought to counter the pervasive bias within it. Right-leaning foundations offer fellowships to support graduate students and faculty who research topics such as limited government, free markets, statesmanship, and national security. These foundations sponsor speakers to bring conservative perspectives to campus and establish chairs for visiting professors to teach courses on conservative thought. In some cases – the outstanding examples are Harvard’s Program on Constitutional Government and Princeton’s James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions – conservatives have built centers within universities to consolidate their offerings.

Meanwhile, The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) and Heterodox Academy – neither is a conservative organization – have led the battle for free speech on campus.

And a growing number of summer programs, mostly affiliated with conservative think tanks and foundations, feature rigorous study of Western civilization and the American constitutional tradition – study of the sort our colleges and universities long ago shunted to the side (if they did not abandon it completely).

These conservative initiatives are “wholly welcome and sorely needed,” write Frederick M. Hess and Brendan Bell in the winter issue of *National Affairs*, but “are hamstrung by the reality that they operate as isolated outposts within largely uninviting institutions.” Although such undertakings provide limited sanctuary for scholarly iconoclasts and dissenters from campus orthodoxy, the authors argue, conservative reforms “lack the infrastructure, critical mass, or organizational muscle to do much more than that.”

In “An Ivory Tower of Our Own,” Hess and Bell put forward a bold proposal to establish a haven for conservative students and faculty while cultivating the intellectual diversity that nurtures liberal education. “What is needed, then, is a place where serious scholars can have

the space to pursue questions and subjects that don't fit the progressive orthodoxy at today's most prestigious institutions of higher learning," they assert. "We need an incubator where promising young intellectuals could pursue their research without being forced to conform to the prevailing ideology, and where they can find the scaffolding — employment, funding, networks, and publication outlets — to enable them to achieve independent viability."

The authors' ambition is nothing less than to build from scratch a top-tier university "whose mission is to provide an unapologetically hospitable environment for scholarship that is marginalized in academe today." Because of higher education's severe one-sidedness, "the marginal impact of even a single university charged with such a mission could be outsized in the academy, popular culture, and public discourse — and the impact of multiple such institutions could be enormous."

The author's new ivory tower would "be oriented by an intellectual mission rather than an ideological agenda," even as "its board, leadership, bylaws, culture, and norms" would welcome — but not require — "right-leaning views and values." Hess and Bell contend that a university friendly to the conservative spirit — by which they generally mean a commitment to preserving the modern tradition of freedom out of which both constitutional democracy in America and liberal education arose — advances liberal education's larger purposes. A conservative university that cherishes intellectual diversity would diversify and elevate higher education.

Hess, who is director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, and Bell, who is program manager of AEI education policy studies, understand the magnitude of the challenge. They also put it in perspective. Throughout much of the country's history, they point out, the creation of new colleges and universities was a fairly commonplace event. "The second half of the 19th century represents an extraordinary high-water mark, with private philanthropy founding 11 universities today ranked among the nation's top 20," they note. These schools included Stanford University and the University of Chicago.

Founding colleges and universities has fallen out of fashion, but Americans give phenomenal sums to existing ones. "Industry sources estimate that about \$44 billion was donated to higher education in 2017 alone," report Hess and Bell. "The top 20 fundraising institutions raised more than \$12 billion." Instead of perpetuating a progressive education establishment, the authors maintain, conservative philanthropists would do better to found a university that offers an invigorating alternative.

Hess and Bell sketch a business model — including the acquisition of land, the construction of buildings, the hiring of faculty and administration, and outlays for operation costs — to guide the project. For a cost of \$3 billion to \$3.4 billion, the authors conclude, conservatives could create a self-sustaining, world-class university in less than two decades.

They overlook several substantial difficulties. For example, the leading higher-education accreditation agencies impose intrusive and far-reaching requirements concerning student affirmative action and faculty gender and race that have a tendency to yield intellectual conformity. The creation of a university friendly to conservatives hinges on the creation of a new accrediting agency that recognizes the centrality of the free and robust exchange of ideas to the life of the university.

By the authors' own account, higher education has suppressed the spirit of liberal education and largely purged conservative scholars. Where will the faculty and administration be found to staff the authors' new university?

And when it comes to the culture wars, most conservative donors — like most progressive donors — are inclined to give money in order to prevail in the political arena rather than to enable professors and students to follow the argument wherever it may lead. Reconciling sectarian convictions with that devotion to intellectual rigor and the pursuit of truth essential to liberal education is possible and desirable for a university founded by and for conservatives — as it is for Catholic universities and Quaker colleges. It is also in all cases a delicate balancing act.

These difficulties must be considered in light of the costs of inaction. The harms inflicted on conservatives in particular and on the nation in general by the contemporary crisis of higher education make the creation of a conservative-friendly university embodying the spirit of liberal education an enticing prospect for promoting the public interest.

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