

Roots of and Remedies to America's Illiberal Education

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COMMENTARY

In mid-June, Lawrence D. Bobo – Harvard University dean of the social sciences, professor of social sciences, and professor of sociology – published a Harvard Crimson op-ed that reinforced well-founded suspicions that powerful university administrators favor restricting speech with which they disagree. Understanding the roots of the academy's censorious spirit and devising remedies are crucial to furnishing an education that suits students' rights and responsibilities in a free and democratic nation.

In "[Faculty Speech Must Have Limits](#)," Bobo posed two questions: "Is it outside the bounds of acceptable professional conduct for a faculty member to excoriate University leadership, faculty, staff, or students with the intent to arouse external intervention into University business? And does the broad publication of such views cross a line into sanctionable violations of professional conduct?"

Dean Bobo's chilling answers – "Yes it is and yes it does" – dismayed friends of free speech at Harvard and beyond.

Speech must operate within well-recognized outer limits such as harassment, defamation, true threats, and incitement to immediate violence. Since when, though, does the intensity and persuasiveness of faculty criticism of their institutions determine the permissibility of expression at universities, which are supposedly devoted to preserving, discovering, and disseminating knowledge and driven by robust exchange of opinion?

As dean of the social sciences, moreover, Bobo exercises considerable power: to set salaries; to hire, retain, and tenure faculty; to shape scholarly agendas and curricular priorities. Who in the social sciences among job candidates, faculty vying for promotion, or tenured faculty seeking raises and research opportunities will now risk openly criticizing the Harvard administration?

In a June 25 email to social science colleagues, Bobo sought to calm the storm he created. “First, I would like to make clear that the op-ed represents my own views as an individual member of the faculty and is in no way intended as a policy statement of our Division, or of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences,” he wrote. “And further, in my role as dean, I am bound by our policies and governance structures. I am not empowered to, nor would I seek to, act outside of those policies or structures on issues of speech.”

Really?

What faculty member will believe that a senior university administrator who publicly condemns professors’ public criticism of university policy – and the free-speech guarantees that protect such criticism – will uphold professors’ right to criticize university governance? In his email to social science faculty, Bobo asserts, “I respect and value our longstanding policies that establish free expression as uniquely important to the FAS as a community committed to reason and rational discourse.” But his contention in his op-ed that severe criticism of Harvard that rouses people off campus to press for institutional reforms deserves university sanction says the opposite.

Bobo’s hypocrisy is of a piece with that of former Harvard President Claudine Gay. As dean of Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Gay, working with Bobo, entrenched at Harvard hard-left norms and diversity, equity, and inclusion practices that, among other consequences, treated microaggressions – innocuous utterances that may be experienced as demeaning by select minorities – as dire transgressions. Their authoritarian policies helped Harvard come in dead-last for free-speech protection among 248 institutions of higher education ranked by The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. Nevertheless, in testifying before Congress last December, Gay presented herself as a near free-speech absolutist. She implausibly suggested that owing to Harvard’s resolute commitment to free expression, determining whether calling for the genocide of the Jewish people violated Harvard’s code of conduct depended on the context and not on how calls for the genocide of their people may be experienced by the Jewish minority on campus.

Judging by their policies as well as their equivocations under fire, Bobo and Gay suppose that speech that complies with their progressive agenda should be staunchly protected and speech that diverges from it should be disciplined. That view is anathema to liberty of thought and discussion and is poisonous to liberal education. Since the post-Oct. 7 outbreak on elite campuses – prominent among them Harvard – of anti-Israel agitation and harassment of Jewish students, the broader public has noticed the debasement of American higher education, long apparent to those paying attention.

In ["Beyond Academic Sectarianism,"](#) in the current issue of National Affairs, my friend Steven Teles argues that "the public's impression that American higher education has grown increasingly closed minded is undeniably correct." A political science professor at Johns Hopkins University and a senior fellow at the Niskanen Center – as well as an old-fashioned and high-minded liberal – Teles sees a crucial manifestation of university closed-mindedness in the dearth of conservative professors, and he explores measures to make universities more welcoming to them.

His observations corroborate the data, which indicate that outside of economics, fewer than 10% of social science and humanities faculty are conservatives. "At my own university," Teles writes, "I would be hard-pressed to name a single tenured professor in the social sciences and humanities who is openly right of center in any reasonable understanding of the term." So pronounced is universities' subordination of teaching and scholarship to progressive social activism that he fears for the future of "liberal institutionalists," that is, professors like himself "who believe universities should be places of intellectual pluralism and adhere to the traditional academic norms of merit and free inquiry." Teles, however, gives his camp too much credit since, as campus attacks on free speech mounted over the decades, many liberals remained silent while conservatives conspicuously championed intellectual pluralism, scholarly merit, and free inquiry.

To account for the drastic underrepresentation of conservatives among faculty, Teles turns to social-science theorizing and findings. A healthy skepticism is warranted, however, because, as he himself observes, the left dominates the field.

Teles begins with what he regards as the less adequate explanations. He reports that "some evidence" suggests discrimination against conservatives by faculty hiring committees "but not much," although he does not consider that progressive political science may have done a poor job of examining its own biases. He rightly rejects "group-attribute-based theories of conservative underrepresentation" which, drawing on the vulgar stereotype that conservatives are less intelligent and less willing to question inherited opinions, posit that they lack the qualities to gain academic employment. He offers a theory according to which conservatives' false perception of discrimination drives them away from academic life despite the indications sprinkled throughout his article that conservative perceptions of discrimination are accurate, not least the fear he himself expresses that staunch liberals such as himself are next in line to be "excluded" from universities.

Teles' preferred theory for the paucity of conservative professors is the "disparate impact" that stems from "facially neutral factors." He identifies two. Overwhelmingly progressive universities tend to omit from their scholarship and teaching "the subjects that conservatives are typically most interested in – religion, the classics, civil society, war, the military, etc." And universities create a progressive "cultural ethos" that alienates conservatives.

Teles is right about "disparate impact," but he wrongly describes the factors involved as "facially neutral"; they are decidedly hostile to the fundamental imperatives of liberal education. To leverage the curriculum and harness faculty research to advance progressive visions of social justice, the progressive majority demotes and quarantines study of such matters as religion, the classics, civil society, war, the military, etc. – domains of knowledge essential to understanding human affairs. Meanwhile, the dominant cultural ethos on elite campuses cracks down on speech and discourages inquiry that deviates from or takes exception to the progressive political agenda.

Teles urges universities to hire more conservatives because putting their opinions in the mix advances higher education's proper mission. He calls on fellow old-fashioned liberals to "be explicit in arguing that moderates and conservatives would enrich their intellectual communities – that they would be valued for what they could bring to the university's intellectual pursuits." He asks liberals like himself "at top research universities to offer positions in subjects that are disproportionately appealing to right-leaning scholars." And he advises the remaining liberals among professors to "think about putting pressure on the non-academic departments of the university, such as student life, that are in many cases even more ideologically narrow than academic departments." He does not ask, however, why his fellow liberals have largely thus far failed to act.

Teles' salutary aspiration to promote intellectual diversity requires a crucial caveat. American universities should not embrace hiring based on candidates' political views. Instead, they should find faculty members capable of fashioning and teaching a curriculum that introduces the moral and political principles on which America is based; the basic ideas, institutions, and events of Western civilization; and the leading features of other civilizations. Such a faculty and curriculum would foster civility and toleration by teaching mastery of facts, exploring clashing arguments, and encouraging vigorous discussions.

Such a faculty and such a curriculum would also remedy the censorious spirit that prevails on elite campuses by furnishing an education appropriate to students' rights and responsibilities in a free and democratic nation.

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