

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Saving Higher Education From Itself

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Some problems, like a fallen tree limb breaking a window, are evident from the moment they occur. But others, like termites undermining a building's structural supports, may not be exposed until the damage is catastrophic. The problems afflicting American higher education are more like termites.

Throughout the last decade, the public has come to sense that something is wrong in academia. Gallup found that between 2015 and 2023, the percent of adults with a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education fell from 57% to 36%. Many who had lost confidence had their suspicions confirmed by campus reactions to Hamas's massacre and kidnapping of Israelis in October of last year. On-campus celebrations of mass rape and murder exposed a deep rot at the heart of the academy more conclusively and dramatically than hundreds of books or papers ever could.

Just as revealing were universities' responses to this outpouring of support for Hamas. The same campus leaders who had spent years abandoning commitments to free speech in the name of safe spaces, trigger warnings, and microaggressions when it came to race and gender suddenly claimed to be free-speech stalwarts when the topic was the genocide of Jews.

While the collapse in confidence in our institutions of higher education is fully justified, academia can be saved — and it's up to the right to do it. To pursue this rescue mission, we need to explore how we ended up where we are, identify the strategies we might pursue, and choose the one that is most likely to succeed.

LEFTWARD DRIFT

People disagree over when the left began to dominate academia, but regardless of when it started, our scholarly class sat firmly on the left by the late 1980s — and has been moving further left ever since. As AEI's Samuel Abrams and Carleton College's Amna Khalid document:

In 1989-1990, when [the Higher Education Research Institute, or HERI] first fielded this survey, 42% of faculty identified as being on the left, 40% were moderate, and another 18% were on the right....Almost three decades later in 2016-2017, HERI found that 60% of the faculty identified as either far left or liberal compared to just 12% being conservative or far right.

In other words, in the early 1990s, for every professor on the right, there were two professors on the left. By 2016, the imbalance was five to one. While this significant leftward shift certainly put the right on the defensive, it was not yet an existential threat for three reasons.

First, many left-leaning faculty members and administrators remained committed defenders of Enlightenment concepts like reason, objectivity, tolerance, freedom of speech, and free inquiry. Although they themselves identified with the left, they tolerated the right and — in theory, if not always in practice — evaluated ideas from the right based on the same standards of logic and evidence they applied to others. In such environments, parity between left and right was not required for the right's ideas to receive a (relatively) fair hearing; enough left-leaning faculty members treated those ideas as legitimate topics of inquiry that it prevented academic departments from being reduced to left-wing echo chambers.

Second, the ideological balance in academic fields didn't matter much because most fields afforded little opportunity for ideologically biased teaching. It didn't matter if a biology professor was a die-hard leftist outside of school because within the four walls of the classroom, he taught biology.

Third, academic departments tended to be siloed from one another: The sociology department had little say in what went on in the economics department, and vice versa. If right-leaning faculty in one department were to have gone virtually extinct (as they have in sociology, where there are now 44 registered Democrats for every registered Republican), that scholarly field would suffer, but any damage from the ideological monoculture would remain relatively self-contained.

THE BEACHHEAD STRATEGY

Given an environment characterized by a general leftward drift mitigated by tolerance for a right-leaning presence, the right's best strategy was to establish and maintain beachheads within academia. The biggest successes came with the establishment of explicitly right-leaning colleges (e.g., Hillsdale and Grove City) and independent right-leaning centers within otherwise left-leaning universities (e.g., the Hoover Institution at Stanford University). I played a small part in this effort while working for the Charles G. Koch Foundation to help set up and finance independent centers at colleges across the country. Not all of these centers leaned right — but some did.

The beachhead strategy's successes were threefold. First, these institutions ensured that right-leaning ideas would not be entirely snuffed out in academia. No matter how unbalanced the rest of higher education became, the beachheads would ensure that any eventual revival of right-leaning thought would not have to start from scratch. Second, these beachheads allowed right-leaning scholars to continue to improve, update, and refine ideas, helping ensure they would not become stale or obsolete. And third, the beachheads helped educate and train the next generation of right-leaning and right-tolerant scholars to pass on the torch to future generations.

While this strategy kept right-leaning thought in academia alive, conservative scholarship was often on life support. The beachheads were never supposed to be the only places where right-leaning ideas were developed, discussed, and debated; they were (and are) too rare and too small to influence higher education as a whole. The faculty involved in the beachheads probably number in the thousands, with students in the tens of thousands. Given the size of American

academia (1.5 million faculty members and 19 million students), these numbers are a drop in the bucket.

The beachhead strategy's influence was most significant among unaffiliated faculty and students. Even though relatively few people worked at, say, the Hoover Institution, the ideas developed or refined there filtered out to the rest of the academy. But such diffusion relies on there being a sufficient pool of unaffiliated faculty members who are not reflexively hostile to right-leaning ideas. When there is ideological balance among faculty members — or even when the left-right balance among the faculty is two to one (as it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s) — right-leaning ideas can spread to other scholars and institutions. Once the ideological balance tilts to five to one, as it had by 2016, such dispersion is severely impaired. By the time the balance reaches sociology's 40-plus to one (and likely long before then), virtually no spread will occur because there is no receptive audience for the right's ideas. At that point, the imbalance among faculty members is so extreme as to leave the right-leaning scholars at beachheads shouting into a void.

THE REVOLUTION

Right-leaning leaders in higher education needed a new strategy. But before they could settle on a different approach, a revolution swept through academia.

Starting around 2011, the rise of the social-justice movement dramatically altered the trajectory and pace of academia's leftward march. What was once a gradual drift became a sharp lurch, differing from earlier trends in both scope and scale.

One of the most significant of these changes concerned faculty hiring. At most American colleges, existing faculty members choose new faculty hires. When ideological balance exists among faculty members, neither side is likely to impose ideological litmus tests against its opponent because the other side could retaliate in kind. If there is an ideological imbalance, however, one side can discriminate with impunity.

Take a field like social psychology, which has a Democrat-to-Republican ratio of 14:1. If a Republican were to apply to become a member of the department's faculty, his odds of facing a search committee composed entirely of Democrats would be around 70%. One might hope that existing faculty members would not abuse their power to discriminate against ideological foes; alas, that is not the world we live in. As researchers Yoel Inbar and Joris Lammers found, 82% of liberal social psychologists "admitted that they would be at least a little bit prejudiced against a conservative candidate" applying for a faculty job.

The last decade saw these discriminatory practices grow more common — and more likely to be practiced in the open. Bias against right-leaning individuals used to occur behind closed doors or within the subconscious of hiring-committee members; now some universities explicitly impose ideological litmus tests on potential hires.

One egregious example comes from the University of California, Berkeley, which granted veto power over faculty candidates to its diversity, equity, and inclusion administrators. After the school's faculty-hiring committees identified a total of 893 qualified applicants for various open

positions, those administrators vetoed 679 of them — over three-quarters of the applicant pool — for not agreeing enthusiastically enough with progressive shibboleths regarding diversity.

Not all colleges are using explicit litmus tests in hiring, but such tests are shockingly common. Even colleges in deep red areas like Texas Tech in Lubbock use them (though the university ceased doing so after being exposed). Many red states are now banning their use at public colleges.

The Berkeley example illustrates another recent change that virtually guarantees that right-leaning scholars won't be found on many campuses. Under the old model, each department conducted its own faculty hiring, with little opportunity for other departments or the central administration to weigh in. Today, administrators on many campuses enjoy veto power over applicants in all departments, allowing them to control faculty hiring throughout the university.

Conservatives aren't the only *personae non gratae* among hiring-committee members: When 76% of applicants are disqualified because of ideological thought-crime, plenty of centrists and left-leaning applicants suffer, too. Many centrists and liberals remained silent as conservatives were eliminated from the faculty over the past several decades; now they are suffering a similar fate without anyone left to defend them.

This revolution has extended into the classroom, in some cases replacing education with indoctrination. Mark Goldblatt, a recently retired professor who taught at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, relayed a disturbing firsthand account of this shift in *Quillette*.

Before he retired, Goldblatt sat on the institute's curriculum committee. One of the proposed courses that he and the other committee members were asked to review was an LGBT-focused sociology course, submitted by a newly hired faculty member. Goldblatt liked the idea, but he "noticed an apparently minor, easily correctable issue" in the course description: The proposal sought, as a desired learning outcome, "greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ perspectives and rights" among students. He expressed his misgiving to his colleague, explaining that as instructors at a state university, "[o]ur mission is to pursue, ascertain, and disseminate objective truth, and to equip our students to do the same. Given that mission, I don't think we can list a learning outcome that requires students' assent on a matter of personal morality." Recalling his colleague's response, he wrote:

[S]he became apoplectic; so angry, in fact, that she had difficulty getting out her first sentence. "I can't believe people still think that way!" she spluttered. "Queer Theory has deconstructed objectivity!"...I let the matter drop. The course was approved without revision....And that is how my college got into the business of winning converts.

That moment haunts me...not only because faculty on the state payroll have deliberately crossed the critical line from pursuing the truth to professing The Way, but also because the Enlightenment sensibility that finds such mission creep objectionable seems to be passing from the scene.

Not all college classes have seen their educational purpose similarly hijacked, but too many have. We can no longer rely on a biology professor to teach biology. If biology and social-justice

doctrine clash, students may well learn the social-justice doctrine instead — especially as those who dissent are purged from the profession.

To this talent drain is added a disturbing reallocation of scientific energies to topics of ideological obsession. Cato's Ryan Bourne writes that at the premier economics conference in 2023,

of all the panel, paper, and plenary sessions, there were 69 featuring at least one paper that focused on gender issues...and 65 looking at some aspect of racial issues. Most of the public would probably argue that inflation is the acute economic issue of our time. So, how many sessions featured papers on inflation? Just 23.

An ideologically discriminatory faculty-hiring process, the victory of indoctrination over education, the distortion of the scientific process: These trends have combined to severely undermine higher education's historical purpose. No longer do colleges seek to preserve, discover, and disseminate knowledge. Rather, many focus on advancing their particular vision of social justice.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

"When formerly disinterested institutions decide to transform themselves into partisan actors," writes AEI's Max Eden, "a political response is necessary and proper." So what should our response be to the left's capture of academia?

Four possible strategies exist, the first of which is to do nothing — which isn't as crazy as it sounds. Even if most Americans are too afraid to speak up, the vast majority perceive the new orthodoxy's absurdities. Perhaps it would be better to let social-justice supporters keep demonstrating the flaws in their worldview than to make martyrs of them. After all, the "Defund the Police" movement collapsed not because it was beaten in the political arena, but because its champions got their way in many places, resulting in crime surges that exposed how misguided their views are.

Consider, too, the disastrous testimony by the presidents of three leading universities on their campuses' responses to Hamas's attack on Israel last fall. All three cited the First Amendment as grounds for refusing to say that calling for the genocide of Jews would violate their institutions' codes of conduct. Had they truly been devoted to protecting free speech, they would have been on principled and defensible grounds. But these colleges had spent years punishing, censoring, and purging students and faculty members in the name of diversity, equity, and inclusion. A decade of hunting for dog whistles and launching bias-response teams left them with no room to plausibly play the free-speech card. Their barefaced hypocrisy did more to undermine public trust in higher education than anything outsiders could have done.

Vanquishing cultural revolutionaries in higher education, therefore, might be accomplished by simply leaving these colleges to their own devices and broadcasting the results. When applying this strategy, the revolution will either flame out (there is some evidence this may be happening already) or undermine public confidence in and support for higher education.

The main problem with this strategy is that, even if it is successful, it allows our institutions of higher education to continue to degrade in the near term. Given the useful functions these institutions serve for society — prominent among them preserving, discovering, and disseminating knowledge — passively watching while they implode would be a mistake, at least until there are suitable replacements.

A second strategy would keep the faculty blacklisting, indoctrination masquerading as education, and administrators' distortion of science, but apply all of these tools *against* the social-justice crowd rather than in its favor.

Ironically, the ideas of today's campus activists justify such pushback. The worldview now ascendant in academia seeks to dismantle systems that entrench unjust power dynamics. Progressive activists typically apply this lens to race and gender, but if we take a step back, we can see similarities to conservative opinions in higher education. Hiring discrimination against right-leaning professors naturally entrenches a self-replicating leftist echo chamber among the faculty. In turn, this systemic bias reverberates into all the fields dominated by the college educated, creating and perpetuating an unjust power imbalance between left and right across society. To remedy the injustices perpetrated by the ivory tower's social-justice "settler-colonists" (to use the trendy term), the right must "decolonize" campuses. And as we have been told: "The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination."

Some object that a counterrevolution of this sort would politicize education. This objection runs up against a difficulty: Academic revolutionaries have *already* made campuses political. As journalist Graeme Wood explains, critics "have accused [Christopher] Rufo of trying 'to turn [New College of Florida] into a space of extremist indoctrination' — as if a campus with a de facto ideological test for employment is not already political." Those on the right need not fear that their opponents would turn these methods against them in the future because that's been happening for years. "From a conservative perspective," observes political scientist Keith Whittington, "there is little to fear from breaking down the norm that keeps politics out of universities....[T]hat norm is already gone....If power switches sides in the Florida statehouse, the worst that can happen from a conservative perspective is that things go back to the way they are."

Even if one accepts these rationales, there are still two strong reasons why the right should not pursue this strategy. First, purging ideas and those that promote them is antithetical to the *telos* (purpose) and *ethos* (guiding beliefs) of higher education. The left has been doing this to the right for decades, and the practice has been not only wrong on moral grounds, but damaging to the functioning and integrity of higher education. As the University of Chicago's Kalven Committee wrote in its landmark 1967 report, a university "cannot take collective action on the issues of the day without endangering the conditions for its existence and effectiveness. There is no mechanism by which it can reach a collective position without inhibiting that full freedom of dissent on which it thrives." Within higher education, the appropriate response to a bad idea is not censorship, but critique. A university that suppresses or purges heretics is no longer a university.

Second, the counterrevolutionary coalition is too small to have any hope of success. Effective opposition to academic revolutionaries will require a big tent that includes people on the left who oppose suppression of the right as well as people on the right who oppose suppression of the left. An anti-woke counterrevolution risks losing the support of both.

Consider the recent fights over free speech. Anti-free-speech leftists face a broad coalition composed of people on both the left and the right who support free speech on principle, as well as illiberal conservatives who support free speech for now given their minority status but would oppose it for progressives if they gained a majority. Although such a coalition is broad, it could easily be splintered by real or perceived attempts to use the far left's weapons against the left. The right cannot afford such a splintering if it wants to stop the campus revolution from advancing further. Accordingly, the right needs to limit its goals.

Another potential strategy is to (somehow) revert to the state of higher education prior to the last decade's sweeping changes. While this might make sense in other circumstances, it is not a viable strategy for the right today. The left dominated higher education before the recent revolution — which is one of the main reasons why radical ideologues encountered so little resistance within academia. Moreover, the fact that existing faculty members choose whom to hire means that there exists no self-correcting mechanism for reestablishing balance among the faculty: So long as radical professors ensconced in universities continue to hire ideological clones of themselves, any attempts to revert to some prior state of affairs will fail.

The bottom line is that while activists have consolidated the left's ideological hegemony in recent years, the right was sliding toward extinction on campuses before the revolution began. Reverting to the *status quo ante*, therefore, would be akin to abandoning academia altogether.

BUILDING SOMETHING NEW

Dismissing the previous three strategies means that the right's only viable strategy for saving academia is to build something new. Doing so will require thinking carefully about *what* to build, *where* to build, and *how* to build.

In determining *what* to build, campus reformers must begin by acknowledging that domination is not the goal. The right will never replicate the left's hegemony in academia — nor should it try. Dominance by the right would impair the preservation, discovery, and dissemination of knowledge, just as the left's dominance has in recent decades.

Though separated from our predicament by centuries, the end of the wars between European Catholics and Protestants in the 17th century furnishes a useful metaphor for what campus reformers' objective should be. As Martin Gurri writes in [*The Revolt of the Public*](#):

If an educated person of that era were transported to the present, his first question would be "Who won — Catholics or Protestants?" For us the question has no meaning. Both sides endured. Neither won. Something different evolved.

That should be the outcome the right seeks in higher education: Stymie the revolution, but don't replace it with a counterrevolution that simply reverses the victims and the perpetrators. The goal

is not to convert the university from a "woke" indoctrination factory into an "anti-woke" indoctrination factory, but to ensure that the best ideas from across the ideological spectrum get a fair hearing and gain non-coerced acceptance as they may. That cannot be accomplished amid mutual attempts at suppression. As *National Review* editor Ramesh Ponnuru puts it, "the goal should be to have more viewpoints, not fewer, represented on campus."

Robert Maranto and Michael Mills — both among the co-founders of the new Society for Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Sciences — provide a useful example of what such an outcome could look like in education. They describe a bitter debate among Belgians about whether their state-run schools would be secular or Catholic. The two camps fought through elections, protests, and school boycotts for more than half a century, until

the early twentieth century, [when] Belgians finally opted for state-funded school choice, enabling parents to choose the schools that best fit their values. The Netherlands reached the same compromise in the same era, in what became known as the 1917 "Pacification" of the school struggle. Today Belgium and the Netherlands host publicly funded educational free markets, with high-quality secular, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim schools serving culturally diverse populations that peacefully coexist.

Coexistence is the goal. As naïve as it may sound amid our education wars, it's neither inevitable nor desirable that one side will win a total victory.

Another consideration is *where* to build. Alternatives to and replacements for higher-education institutions should certainly be encouraged. However, these experiments are unlikely to grow quickly enough or to a sufficient scale to replace more established institutions in the near term. New initiatives like the University of Austin are promising, but even if they prove successful, they are relatively miniscule. In light of this reality, the primary focus should be on reforming existing universities.

But how can the right do so in such an inhospitable environment? There are at least four keys to the success of this new strategy, the first of which is to establish new independent schools within universities to ensure diversity of thought is adequately represented.

While certain university operations (e.g., registrar, admissions, and student services) are conducted across the entire institution, each academic department was once an island unto itself. The social-justice revolution broke with this tradition by allowing administrators to impose ideological hiring filters on every academic department.

To restore universities' siloed structure, reformers must establish schools for marginalized viewpoints that are independent of administrators and existing faculty. Such schools would provide interdisciplinary homes for scholars in many different fields. The goal would not be to establish an "anti-woke" sociology department to compete with the existing sociology department, but rather to establish an alternative that will step in to compete wherever native departments are suppressing other viewpoints.

If a campus lacks for conservative voices, the new school should have a conservative mission. If it lacks for progressive voices, the school should have a progressive mission. Over time, multiple

such schools should be established. The goal wouldn't be to move every campus to the right or to the left, but to prevent ideological uniformity (and, in turn, indoctrination). Some campuses will lean right, some will lean left, but a diversity of thought will be present in each. As Jacob Howland from the University of Austin observes, "in a university, all sides of every contested question deserve a hearing."

Second, the new school can offer any classes required for graduation or degree attainment. A big problem with the right's beachhead strategy was that it was too easy for the university to quarantine the beachhead. The beachhead's classes usually weren't required for graduation, and establishing new minors and majors, which typically requires the approval of the faculty senate (dominated by the social-justice left) and the accreditors (also dominated by the social-justice left) was an arduous process. Even if new majors or minors were approved, relatively few students would opt in.

The result was that on many campuses, the beachheads were little more than self-selected isolation chambers. They were better than nothing, but not enough. In contrast, social-justice leftists were often able to get their courses added to the requirements for graduation (or capture existing mandatory classes), meaning that while students were *allowed* to take "non-woke" classes, they were often *required* to take "woke" classes.

The solution is to ensure students have choices for required courses. Suppose the English department is abusing its monopoly on a required course to push social-justice ideology. The new school could offer sections of those courses free from indoctrination. No one would be forced to take any of these classes, but could instead choose from among them — and a well-rounded education may very well require taking some courses from each category.

Third, to prevent sabotage of the new school, funding needs to follow the students. Even if the new school is authorized to offer courses, it can't do so if it doesn't have funding to hire faculty to teach those courses. To provide funding without favor or prejudice, the new school should receive funds in proportion to the number of students that choose its courses. If other departments are paid per student credit hour, the new school should be, too — and at the same rate for the same classes. The key principle is to provide students with choices, and then to let their choices dictate the allocation of funding, rather than stacking the deck by providing abundant funding for radical leftists while financially starving others.

Finally, faculty members must be selected by the school without interference. The self-replicating nature of faculty hiring is a major stumbling block for those on the right seeking to reclaim a place in academia. If you set up a new school with a right-leaning vision but let the sociology department control faculty hiring, you'll end up with just another leftist-dominated sociology department. Thus, as Eric Kaufmann writes, "it is vital that these centres control tenure lines...with full independence from the rest of the university."

One way to accomplish this would be for new schools to recruit a group of right-leaning faculty tenured elsewhere and then to continue using the typical faculty hiring process, this time with conservative voices present. The main problem with this approach is that it reallocates and concentrates right-leaning faculty members, often removing one of the few right-leaning voices

from another institution. A better approach would be to select the initial faculty by committees composed of faculty members sympathetic to the mission of the new school — drawn from faculty at other universities if need be. Once a critical mass of initial faculty is reached, the standard internal faculty-hiring process could take over.

The four solutions offered here cover the most important design requirements, but they are not meant to be exhaustive, nor will every strategy work for every campus. Hostility from the university administration and existing faculty should be assumed, and efforts to undermine the new school should be counteracted. For example, administrators could attempt to sabotage the new school by only letting it offer classes at, say, 5 p.m. on Fridays at a remote and run-down off-campus facility. At selective colleges, admissions staff could weed out social-justice skeptics, which would then shrink enrollments in and the budget of the new school. Or the new school could be required to use more expensive tenure-track faculty than the rest of the college, limiting the number of courses it could offer for any given budget. These and any other methods used to impair the new school will need to be identified and remedied. The goal of campus reformers should be to ensure a level playing field between the new school and the rest of the university.

A NEW TWIST ON AN OLD STRATEGY

The approach outlined above has the potential to succeed by modifying the old beachhead model. It keeps the common beachhead strategy of ensuring faculty hiring is controlled solely by the new school, but it adds two crucial new features.

First, it ensures that the school can offer any class that is required for graduation. This will prevent the faculty senate or accreditor from placing artificial constraints on the school by limiting which majors, minors, or classes it can offer. Second, it ensures sufficient funding to meet student demand. Since the new school's funding will change in direct proportion to its success in attracting students, growth and shrinkage will be determined by student choices, not a political process.

This approach, in combination with the strategies already being pursued on some campuses, gives the right a sporting chance to restore and renew American higher education.