

DISCOURSE

The Right's Old Strategy for Higher Education Isn't Working. This One Would.

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Historically, the mission of higher education was to preserve, discover and disseminate the truth. While many professors still strive to do so, too many colleges have abandoned this mission, instead seeking to promote social justice narratives. The folly and contradictions inherent in this new mission for higher education have reached absurd heights. Some of these, like the campus celebrations of Hamas' recent massacre and mutilation of Israelis, are well publicized. But others receive far less attention.

Consider universities' distorted approach to truth-seeking, exposed by Harvard professor Roland Fryer, one of the country's leading economists. Among other "thoughtcrimes," Fryer's research found that Black civilians were not more likely than non-Blacks to be shot by white police officers (though they were more likely to have nonshooting force used upon them). Since this inconvenient truth went against the narrative of racist white cops hunting Black bodies, his colleagues at Harvard encouraged him not to publish the findings. He was later severely punished by the university, supposedly for unrelated matters.

To the extent that the right has a higher education strategy at all, it was designed for a different problem—namely, the leftward drift of the academy. As Samuel J. Abrams and Amna Khalid have documented, in the late 1980s, the left outnumbered the right two to one. By the mid-2010s, the imbalance had increased to five to one. While this imbalance led to many problems, it wasn't an existential threat (to the right or to higher education) because many left-leaning professors were still committed to the pursuit of truth, which requires tolerance of and engagement with ideas from the right.

But with many colleges abandoning the pursuit of truth altogether, conservatives who care about the future of higher education need a new strategy—one that can succeed in restoring and then preserving the value of higher education.

Coexist

In the past, given that colleges were drifting leftward but still tolerated a conservative presence, the right pursued a beachhead strategy, seeking to establish and maintain right-leaning outposts and colleges within academia. The strategy wasn't a total failure: Some highly regarded right-leaning colleges, such as Hillsdale and Grove City, were established. Additionally, right-leaning centers were established at some left-leaning universities, such as the Hoover Institution at Stanford. I personally had a small role in this effort, working for the Charles G. Koch Foundation

for years to help establish and finance independent centers at many colleges. Not all of these centers were right-leaning (to this day, I have no idea of the ideological preferences of some of the scholars I helped support, nor do I care), but some were.

The limited success of this beachhead strategy was based on tolerance from institutions dominated by the left, but now that they've forsaken the pursuit of truth as their mission, this tolerance has all but vanished from many campuses. While tolerance for a right-leaning presence on campus was essential for a college pursuing the truth, such a presence is actively counterproductive for a college whose mission is now promoting leftist views of the world.

What should be done? The best response from the right depends on the ultimate goal.

Some on the right argue that the appropriate response is to use the left's tools against progressives: applying faculty purges and blacklisting, backing a system of indoctrination cloaked as education and distorting and muzzling science to favor the right instead of the left. This would be a mistake because the pursuit of truth cannot occur in an environment where some ideas are verboten. As I wrote recently in *National Affairs*, "A university that suppresses or purges heretics is no longer a university."

Replacing campuses that are intolerant of the right with campuses that are intolerant of the left would just lead us down a different path to the same destination—the destruction of what makes higher education worthwhile.

Since dominance is not desirable (or achievable), the goal is *coexistence*. Fortunately, history provides many examples of coexistence within education. Robert Maranto and Michael Mills detail one from the last century:

For over a half-century, Belgians fought over whether their schools would be state run and secular, or state funded but mainly Catholic. The two sides battled through elections, protests, and massive school boycotts. By the early twentieth century, 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 therefore a win-win. It ensures that more than one side is represented on campus (which improves the quality of both teaching and research) while also reducing conflict among competing ideologies since none are engaged in an existential struggle of life and death.

The ICEHE Approach

How then can coexistence be brought into institutions where faculty and administrators will be actively opposed? To overcome this resistance, the right's new strategy needs to focus on **ICEHE**: independence, competition for required courses, equitable funding, hiring freedom and an even playing field.

Independence: Many years ago, University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins said a college is “a series of separate schools and departments held together by a central heating system.” This collage of largely independent islands has been lost to a political monoculture, but it can be brought back by establishing new independent centers with a goal of ensuring that currently marginalized viewpoints are represented. Campuses should have many such centers, ensuring that progressive, conservative, libertarian and any other schools of thought with a critical mass are available to be grappled with in academia.

Competition for required courses: One of the main problems with the old beachhead strategy was that the beachhead was easily quarantined. Its courses weren’t required for graduation. Establishing new majors or minors takes years (and requires the approval of ideologically hostile faculty, administrators and accreditors), and such specialties appeal only to a small subset of students. Thus, even when present on campus, a beachhead had little effect on the rest of the campus.

To remedy this problem, the independent centers should be authorized to offer any class that satisfies a graduation requirement. The goal isn’t to duplicate each existing department, but to ensure there is a safety valve to guard against indoctrination if a department has been hijacked by ideologues. If the biology department is teaching biology, great. But if it only teaches a distorted version of biology, then independent schools could step in and offer alternative versions of these courses and do so without requiring the approval of the biology department or administrators.

Equitable funding: There is little point in having an independent school if it doesn’t have enough funding to hire faculty to research and teach. To ensure sufficient funding, the new independent school should be funded in the same manner and to the same extent as the rest of the university.

Hiring freedom: One of the toughest obstacles to reversing higher education’s ideological monoculture is faculty hiring. Relying on faculty is the only reasonably reliable method of selecting new faculty because they are the only ones capable of evaluating the merit of applicants. But the existing faculty have allowed, and in many cases driven, the intolerance for the right, so they cannot now be relied upon to choose tolerance especially considering that many of those they’ve hired (who will now sit on hiring committees) are even more intolerant of conservatives. To circumvent this predicament, the new independent school needs to be able to hire faculty without interference from existing faculty, relying on faculty from other campuses aligned with the mission to assist on hiring committees as needed. As politics professor Eric Kaufmann writes, “It is vital that these centres control tenure lines ... with full independence from the rest of the university.”

Even playing field: There are countless ways that a hostile university leadership or faculty could try to sabotage an independent center. For example, the center’s courses could be scheduled at the worst times in the worst facilities, or the admissions staff could discriminate against conservative-leaning students by denying them admission. These, and any other sabotage attempts, will need to be monitored and remedied as they arise. The goal is to ensure a level playing field between the new center and the rest of the university and then let student interest determine the size of the new center.

The various components of the ICEHE strategy are not new—they have been utilized in higher education for years. But no other approach uses all the components at the same time. The Hoover Institution is independent and has hiring freedom, for one, but it does not teach any classes and must do its own fundraising. Other centers do teach classes but rely on discretionary funding from the college, which limits their independence and ability to hire.

Combining all the components would dramatically increase their effect. Just as people struggling with their weight are much more likely to succeed if they combine exercise, changes to their diet and medication rather than just utilizing one of those, so too would a college employing all five components of the ICEHE strategy increase its chances of restoring and maintaining a healthy learning and research environment.

Trustees and regents at all types of universities can implement the ICEHE strategy, and state legislatures should require public institutions to implement the strategy as a condition of continued funding. Higher education is severely ill, perhaps terminally. But the right can and should step in to save it, and the ICEHE strategy provides a blueprint for how to do so.

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