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The Collegiate Conservative Counter-Revolution

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Everyone knows that American college campuses are predominantly liberal, progressive, and disenchanted with many traditional American values. The faculty, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, are overwhelmingly Democrats, with fewer than five percent of, say, sociologists, declaring themselves conservative or Republican. Campus protesters often disrupt conservative or libertarian speakers such as Heather McDonald or Charles Murray.

Yet I am less concerned about this than some conservative friends, because I also see a substantial and even vibrant movement promoting traditional or conservative values on college campuses. This movement takes at least four forms: entire schools where conservative or traditional values dominate campus life, national organizations promoting conservative ideas, foundations which support conservative or libertarian enclaves on campus, and non-university think tanks and research centers which provide conservative analysis of the world outside the traditional Ivory Tower.

Some schools promote strong religious values of a traditional nature, such as heterosexual marriage, aversion to abortion and divorce, and such virtues as honesty, thriftiness, hard work, kindness, and concern for the less fortunate—to use a Christian expression: faith, hope, and charity. Some of these schools are Catholic such as Florida's Ave Maria University or, in a perhaps less vigorous form, Saint Vincent College in Pennsylvania; others are of other Christian traditions, such as Utah's Brigham Young University or Patrick Henry College in Virginia. Famous is Hillsdale College in Michigan, which refuses to accept federal funds in any form. Additionally, there are some non-religiously associated schools promoting classical liberal learning through emphasizing the "great books," such as Saint John's in both Maryland and New Mexico. The Ludwig von Mises Institute promotes libertarian economic thinking from its home on the edge of the Auburn University campus.

Second, national campus organizations have grown with a conservative or libertarian perspective that attract student adherents across the land. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute has student societies on over 80 campuses. It places summer interns with important media organizations, offers graduate fellowships to promising students with a non-leftist orientation, etc. It is an effective group: Hobart and William Smith Colleges banned it from campus this year because of fear that it "may cause stress to the student body." Can't disturb their progressive minds with uncomfortable thoughts!

Especially noteworthy has been the extraordinary growth of Turning Point USA, an organization founded by a teenage Charlie Kirk just seven years ago. I attended their meeting last month in West Palm Beach, where I was astonished to see roughly five thousand young persons hear conservative icons from Sean Hannity to President Trump speak on a variety of contemporary topics.

Organizations like the Charles Koch and Bradley foundations have long promoted conservative values on campuses. Koch, for example, has funded study centers, research agendas, seminars and the like throughout the nation, including, for example, the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. Similarly, the Liberty Fund annually holds scores of short seminars for faculty at locations all over the country on an extraordinary variety of topics appealing to conservatives and libertarians.

Lastly, another approach to promoting learning and research is to avoid colleges and universities altogether. Although there were a few liberal (Brookings Institution) and conservative (Hoover Institution at Stanford) “think tanks” dating back many decades, since the 1970’s there has been an explosion of conservative and libertarian oriented research centers. Some are national in scope (e.g., Cato Institute, American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, Heartland Institute, Independent Institute), while many others focus on a single state, such as Ohio’s Buckeye Institute or the Texas Public Policy Foundation. The groups mostly belong to a national organization, the State Policy Network, that has frequent meetings drawing hundreds of scholars, public relations experts, and others.

While I strongly dislike intolerance towards opposing views that sometimes leads to outright suppression of speakers, the vast diversity of America and the ability of academic entrepreneurs to find new ways of offering alternative perspectives makes me think that collegiate suppression of views is not too effective in a broader sense. Moreover, colleges are hurting themselves, I suspect: the two million student decline in enrollments since 2011 may be at least partly attributable to people being fed up with the antics at some colleges that seem antithetical to the goals of universities serving as havens for wide-ranging, unfettered discussion of ideas.