

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

What Is 'Indoctrination,' Anyway?

Bringing politics into the classroom isn't necessarily wrong.



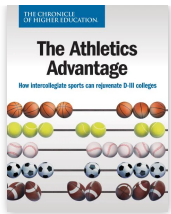
By *Julie A. Reuben*

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Charges that American colleges indoctrinate their students with liberal dogma have been around for decades. So why hasn't higher education done anything to address them? From conservatives' perspective, the answer is straightforward — progressives have taken control, and their aim is indoctrination. Others might cite more mundane causes that infect all established endeavors: arrogance, indifference, and satisfaction with the status quo.

While there may be some truth in those explanations, the main cause of inaction is a lack of clear solutions. When we look more deeply at the evidence, we see that proposed correctives create their own set of problems.

When critics say that faculty members are indoctrinating students, they point to instructors who explicitly share their political views, typically in courses related to race, gender, or other charged topics. Critics believe that faculty members who share their political views do so to make their students adopt those views. Until the end of the 1960s, hiding one's politics was a strong professional norm among college faculty members. The foundational documents of the American Association of University Professors called on faculty members to present all sides of disputed issues and suggested that fairness required professors to remain impartial.



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But some faculty members are upfront about their politics precisely to *avoid* indoctrination. In the 1960s and '70s, a younger generation of scholars began to challenge the presumption that maintaining apparent neutrality avoids indoctrination. They analyzed widely accepted scholarship to show that it contained implicit assumptions that shaped its conclusions. They maintained that students were being taught political positions presented as neutral facts. They argued that those political messages were more powerful for being hidden. Successful indoctrination, they noted, is not likely to be obvious.

They pushed for a different norm in teaching: transparency. They argued that students would be better able to critically assess what they were taught when professors were transparent about their own beliefs. Furthermore, they believed their political convictions were supported by scholarship, and maintained that modeling for students how they had come to their conclusions was pedagogically appropriate.

Since faculty members' views inevitably shaped what was taught, wasn't it more responsible to share those views? If professors teaching fiscal policy believed research showed that low tax rates were the best public policy, that would inevitably come through in teaching. Shouldn't the professors show students how they had concluded that low tax rates were better than high ones?

Wouldn't students be better equipped to evaluate what they were learning if they knew their professors' views?

Professors who share their political views claim that students do not have to agree with them; they insist that students can draw their own conclusions. Of course, critics

may question whether students in fact become more aware of potential bias when they know their professors' views, or whether they genuinely feel free to question them. Those are important empirical questions. Recent surveys on student self-censorship show that most students don't fear their professors will punish them for expressing unpopular views. But that does not answer the deeper pedagogical question. Frankly, we just do not know how faculty members' sharing or concealing their views affects students' learning or contributes to the development of critical thinking and independent judgment.

We do know faculty members who are more upfront about their political views and/or teach contested political topics are more vulnerable to the charge of indoctrination. Research that I and a former graduate student, Bryan McAllister Grande, did to compare two general-education programs in the post-World War II period demonstrates that dynamic. There was a strong interest at the time in preparing college students to be democratic citizens; many general-education programs adopted that as a primary aim. Two main models emerged: One was primarily historical and relied heavily on philosophical texts; the other was primarily contemporary and used a variety of reading materials, including newspapers, social-science research and theory, novels, and popular nonfiction.

We looked carefully at two colleges that used different approaches, Harvard and Dartmouth. Dartmouth, which took the contemporary approach, wanted students to become independent, thoughtful, engaged citizens, and believed the best way to accomplish that was to engage with current political debates. Harvard shared that goal but approached it historically, not through current events and contemporary texts. When describing his methods to other teachers, a Harvard instructor was clear about his political purpose: He structured the topics and readings to lead his students to an appreciation of liberty. But only the Dartmouth course was criticized as indoctrination. Indeed, attacks on the course from conservative newspapers and complaints from faculty members and students were so severe that Dartmouth was forced to change the course. But the epithet "indoctrination" was better suited to the

Harvard course, which had been designed for students to feel as if they had discovered the political lessons of the past themselves — even as their professor planted them there.

In other words, what gets called “indoctrination” may not be, and what seems “nonpolitical” may be overtly political. Colleges could respond to charges of indoctrination by removing the courses that are vulnerable to the accusation. That may happen in states where conservative politicians are trying to interfere in public higher education. But that would be irresponsible. It would remove many excellent courses, and would probably leave many weak courses intact. If we believe that one purpose of higher education is to prepare citizens, then we need to better understand which practices and courses do that.

Charges of indoctrination frequently concern course content, particularly in the social sciences and humanities but also in the natural sciences that relate to climate change and human biology. In those fields, students are often introduced to positions that have become associated with liberal politics, such as that structural racism exists or that climate change is caused by human activity. Conservatives can say that students are being taught liberal dogma, but professors are teaching the results of the research in their fields. In those fields, professors cannot responsibly achieve “political balance” because conservatives have opted out of the process of academic inquiry.

Take the recent controversy over *The New York Times*’s 1619 Project. Because it was based on scholarship, professional historians could engage with it seriously, including debating some of its specific claims as well as its overarching interpretation. The same cannot be said of the Trump administration’s 1776 Report, which lacked sufficient scholarly substance even to be debated. No professor could responsibly use the 1776 Report in the classroom. If conservatives deny or ignore large areas of established academic knowledge, their views will not be represented in college courses.

It is important that colleges do not, in the name of political balance, teach discredited views. As Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway have documented in *Merchants of Doubt*, a few scientists, backed by big donors and motivated by politics, have used discredited science to undermine attempts to address global warming. Colleges have an obligation to prevent that kind of deliberate misinformation. Balancing that with their obligation to protect open inquiry so knowledge can advance is difficult. I don't pretend that colleges are optimally managing those tensions, but the solution is not, in the name of political inclusion, to teach views that have no merit.

It is in fact true that the overwhelming majority of the professoriate is liberal. Serious research has been devoted to trying to understand why American college faculty members are more liberal than the population. The balance of evidence suggests conservatives are self-selecting out of academe. A century ago, American professors would have leaned conservative, but beginning in the Depression the balance began to shift. It's difficult to discern whether conservatives abandoned academe or academe rejected conservatism. It doesn't really matter. The question is what to do about it.

Some people, such as Jonathan Zimmerman at the University of Pennsylvania, have called for affirmative action for conservatives. But academic freedom prohibits religious or political tests for faculty members. Our modern conception of academic freedom was forged to protect academe from both the clergy and the state. In the old days, the religious hold on higher education was so strong that the University of Michigan allocated faculty positions in proportion to the religious affiliations of the state's population. If it needed a math professor, for instance, the university would find a Baptist who could teach math, whether or not the person was the best candidate.

The educators who built the modern American university argued instead that faculty members should be appointed based on their academic qualifications, not their religious or political beliefs. When a few professors were fired from church-sponsored

colleges for defending evolutionary theory, religious tests became seen as the main enemy of academic freedom. When the AAUP was formed, it reaffirmed that religious and political tests undermined academic freedom. Hiring faculty members because they are politically conservative would be a regression to a time when ideological tests governed faculty appointments.

But the current situation, in which a large portion of the population feels estranged from higher education, is dangerous. All of the obvious responses to the alleged problem of indoctrination — preventing faculty members from sharing their political views, changing the content of courses to include conservative views, and intentionally hiring conservative professors — violate important academic norms and may lead to less-effective teaching and greater intellectual confusion. Colleges have appropriately ignored those suggestions.

So should colleges simply ignore the charges that they are indoctrinating students?

No. Such charges do point to weaknesses in our current academic culture. If we look to higher education to prepare citizens, then we need to be clear about the characteristics of citizenship we are trying to develop and design our efforts accordingly. More broadly, we need more research about effective college teaching and more efforts to ensure that college professors teach well and ethically. We need more attention to what constitutes academically rigorous course work in all academic subjects and more attention to ensuring consistent quality across the curriculum. That can't be imposed externally or through bureaucratic accounting. It must be built up as part of faculty culture across institutions and reinforced by field-based professional associations.

The most basic tenet of academic research is that open inquiry combined with rigorous research methods will lead to intellectual progress. The assumption is that ideas will be tested, proposed, challenged, refined, tested, challenged, rejected,

replaced, tested, accepted, challenged again, and so on, leading to more reliable knowledge. That is the ideal; it does not always work as claimed. It can be distorted intentionally and unconsciously.

One way it is distorted is when researchers are blind to false assumptions that shape their findings. In the first half of the 20th century, Black intellectuals saw how white researchers' racial assumptions distorted the knowledge they produced. So they conducted their own research, which was widely ignored until the civil-rights movement started to attract the attention of mainstream academe, and gradually scholars began to reassess basic tenets in their fields. Women, Indigenous scholars, and immigrant groups have similarly challenged, and improved, what we know.

It may be that political conformity is distorting our current research. We should take that possibility seriously and do what we can to address it. As a first step, academic journals could sponsor round tables on important subjects that include conservative researchers, so that their critiques can be taken seriously. Departments might organize faculty seminars to consider what perspectives are being ignored. Perhaps we should promote scholarly norms that encourage researchers to be explicit about the assumptions that guide their work and to envision how different core assumptions might alter their research. That could be part of a larger reckoning with other serious problems, such as the replication crisis and the distortions created by funding sources. All of that would mean overhauling some of the incentives that influence research today.

The conservative attack on higher education distorts the evidence that it uses to support its charges of indoctrination. Nevertheless, it might still force us to address some real problems. That could be this unsettling moment's silver lining.

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