

We Asked for It

**The politicization of research, hiring,
and teaching made professors sitting
ducks.**

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By *Michael W. Clune* November 18, 2024

Over the past 10 years, I have watched in horror as academe set itself up for the existential crisis that has now arrived. Starting around 2014, many disciplines — including my own, English — changed their mission. Professors began to see the traditional values and methods of their fields — such as the careful

weighing of evidence and the commitment to shared standards of reasoned argument — as complicit in histories of oppression. As a result, many professors and fields began to reframe their work as a kind of political activism.

In reading articles and book manuscripts for peer review, or in reviewing files when conducting faculty job searches, I found that nearly every scholar now justifies their work in political terms. This interpretation of a novel or poem, that historical intervention, is valuable because it will contribute to the achievement of progressive political goals. Nor was this change limited to the humanities. Venerable scientific journals — such as *Nature* — now explicitly endorse political candidates; computer-science and math departments present their work as advancing social justice. Claims in academic arguments are routinely judged in terms of their likely political effects.

The costs of explicitly tying the academic enterprise to partisan politics in a democracy were eminently foreseeable and are now coming into sharp focus. [Public opinion](#) of higher education is at an all-time low. The incoming Trump administration plans to use the accreditation process to end the politicization of higher education — and to tax and fine institutions up to “100 percent” of their endowment. I believe these threats are serious because of a simple political calculation of my own: If Trump announced that he was taxing wealthy endowments down to zero, the majority of Americans would stand up and cheer.

This crisis comes at a time in which colleges are ill-equipped to mount a defense. How did this happen?

Let's take a closer look at why the identification of academic politics with partisan politics is so wrongheaded. I am not interested here in questioning the validity of the political positions staked out by academics over the past decade — on race, immigration, biological sex, Covid, or Donald Trump. Even if one wholeheartedly agrees with every faculty-lounge political opinion, there are still very good reasons to be skeptical about making such opinions the basis of one's academic work.

The first is that, while academics have real expertise in their disciplines, we have no special expertise when it comes to political judgment. I am an English professor. I know about the history of literature, the practice of close reading, and the dynamics of literary judgment. No one should treat my opinion on any political matter as more authoritative than that of any other person. The spectacle of English professors pontificating to their captive classroom audiences on the evils of capitalism, the correct way to deal with climate change, or the fascist tendencies of their political opponents is simply an abuse of power.

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The second problem with thinking of a professor's work in explicitly political terms is that professors are terrible at politics. This is especially true of professors at elite colleges. Professors who — like myself — work in institutions that pride themselves on rejecting 70 to 95 percent of their applicants, and whose students overwhelmingly come from the upper reaches of the income spectrum, are simply not in the best position to serve as spokespeople for left-wing egalitarian values.

As someone who was raised in a working-class, immigrant family, academe first appeared to me as a world in which everyone's views seemed calculated to distinguish themselves from the working class. This is bad enough when those views concern art or esoteric

anthropology theories. But when they concern everyday morality and partisan politics, the results are truly perverse. In return for their tuition, students are given the faculty's high-class political opinions as a form of cultural capital. Thus the public perceives these opinions — on defunding the police, or viewing biological sex as a social construction, or Israel as absolute evil — as markers in a status game. Far from advancing their opinions, professors in fact function to invalidate these views for the majority of Americans who never had the opportunity to attend elite institutions but who are constantly stigmatized for their low-class opinions by the lucky graduates.

Far from representing a powerful avant-garde leading the way to political change, the politicized class of professors is a serious political liability to any party that it supports. The hierarchical structure of academe, and the role it plays in class stratification, clings to every professor's political pronouncement like a revolting odor. My guess is that the successful Democrats of the future will seek to distance themselves as far as possible from the bespoke jargon and pedantic tone that has constituted the professoriate's signal contribution to Democratic politics. Nothing would so efficiently invalidate conservative views with working-class Americans than if every elite college professor was replaced by a double who conceived of their work in terms of activism for right-wing ideas. Professors are bad at politics, and politicized professors are bad for their own politics.

If we have a political role by virtue of our jobs, that role derives from dedicated practice in the disciplines in which we are experts. Teaching students how to weigh evidence, giving them the capacity to follow a mathematical proof, disciplining their tendency to project their own values onto the object of study — these practices may not have the direct and immediate political payoff that has been the professoriate's reigning delusion over the past decade. But they have two overwhelming advantages.

First, a chemist, or an art historian, really does possess authority in their subject of expertise. They can show us things we couldn't learn on our own. This genuine authority is the basis for the university's claim to public respect and support.

Second, the dissemination of academic values regarding evidence and reasoned debate can have powerful indirect effects. I have argued, for instance, that even so apparently

apolitical a practice as teaching students to appreciate great literature can act as a bulwark against the reduction of all values to consumer preference. The scientific and humanistic education of an informed citizenry may not in itself solve climate change or end xenophobia, but it can contribute to these goals in ways both dramatic and subtle. In any case, such a political role is the only one that is both sustainable in a democracy and compatible with our professional status as researchers and educators.

It would be wrong to place the blame for the university's current dire straits entirely on the shoulders of activist professors. While virtually all professors (I include myself) have surrendered, to at least some degree, to the pressure to justify our work in political terms — whether in grant applications, book proposals, or department statements about political topics — in many cases the core of our work has continued to be the pursuit of knowledge. The primary responsibility for the university's abject vulnerability to looming political interference of the most heavy-handed kind falls on administrators. Their job is to support academic work and communicate its benefits. Yet they seem perversely committed to identifying academe as closely as possible with political projects.

The most obvious example is the routine proclamations from university presidents and deans on every conceivable political issue. In response to events such as the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the murder of George Floyd in 2020, administrators broadcast identifiably partisan views as representative of the university as a whole. This trend has mercifully diminished in the wake of the disastrous House of Representatives [hearings on antisemitism](#) that led to the dismissal of Harvard president Claudine Gay and others. But the conception of the university as a vehicle for carrying out specific political ends continues in less visible ways.

For instance, recent years have seen a proliferation of high-level administrators given the task of instituting what amounts to a “shadow curriculum” of student and faculty training, the content of which is the explicit transmission and enforcement of controversial political views about race, gender, sexuality, and power. Even more unsettling has been the cloud of unknowing that has descended over the political imperatives governing faculty and administrative hiring practices.

I will give an example from my own work as chair of several faculty search committees over the past two years. At a mandatory training session, I was told by the university's diversity officer that I was to use candidates' diversity statements as a means of ascertaining candidates' racial identity. Yet at another training session, I was told that I was *not* to base hiring decisions on knowledge of candidates' racial identity.

Chairing a search-committee meeting in which faculty members were openly discussing candidates' race, I wondered aloud if what we were doing was illegal. I then received a stern email from the diversity dean telling me that it was unacceptable to raise the question of the legality of the university's practices. I then asked what those practices were. How, in fact, does the university want us to take account of race? I never received a reply.

When I did meet with the dean, my questions were repeatedly turned aside by references to our "shared values." But what are these values? What links the work of a professor who conceives of her job as climate activism, to a student-orientation leader teaching that the term "illegal immigration" is a microaggression, to the search committee deciding that this person from a minority group is a good candidate while that one is not? The thread is a shared commitment to a particular brand of partisan politics. If this is truly what the university stands for, if these are our values, then when we are called before our elected representatives to answer for ourselves, what can we say? Colleges have no compelling justification for their existence to give when the opposing political party comes into power. We have nothing to say to the half of America who doesn't share our politics.

I believe administrators and professors should articulate a different set of shared values, stemming from our demonstrated expertise and commitment to high standards of evidence and argument. This expertise and this commitment are the grounds of the academic freedom by which we claim to pursue knowledge without fear of political pressure.

The good news is that these values animate what most professors, in most disciplines, do every day. The bad news is that the time to share this news with the nation is rapidly running out.

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