



Can Higher Education Be Reformed?

While the world worries about the Wuhan coronavirus, the crisis in higher education continues. Is “crisis” too strong a word for what is occurring within our universities and colleges today? If we are failing to educate our young, prepare them for the future and create a healthy citizenry, then crisis is the right word. There can be no doubt that institutions of higher education have become hotbeds of leftist thought and activism. Every university is stuffed with left-wing professors, upper administrators from deans through presidents, and social justice warriors embedded in student life and a labyrinth of bureaucracies.

The censorship of conservative speakers and students on many college campuses has drawn most of the public’s attention. The problems run much deeper, though. Free speech is suppressed for the few conservative faculty members who do not go along with the party line about social justice, gender diversity, or identity politics. Faculty hiring has become increasingly slanted toward hiring “activist scholars,” ensuring deeper ranks of tenured radicals.

Today’s typical college administrator knows that the way to climb the academic ladder is by making “opportunity hires” (minority appointments) and supporting programs to promote gender, ethnic, racial and environmental justice. The key to academic success today, be it as a professor, administrator or staff member, is not to make waves by insisting that academic standards, objective truth and the right to dissent be upheld.

Let’s review the extent of the crisis, before addressing the first steps to clean the Augean stables of higher education in America.

Suppression of Campus Speech

The shutdown of outside conservative speakers has led some state legislatures to enact legislation to ensure intellectual diversity on campuses.¹ Arizona enacted such a law requiring public universities to submit annual reports, ensure strict free speech standards, and require intellectual diversity in invited outside speakers.²

Whether government oversight and regulations will actually address the problems of free speech on campus is questionable. Many outside speakers are invited by academic units. These speakers reflect the general left-wing bias of faculty. State regulations insisting on intellectual diversity will not address the majority of outside speakers—those invited by departments and programs.

Furthermore, deciding what exactly is intellectual diversity is not as easy as it might appear. For example, having a Never Trumper Republican speaker, visiting professor, or faculty appointment might fall into some general category of intellectual diversity, even though such a speaker or faculty colleague might be welcomed by far-left professors. Libertarians, too, can easily fit into a left-wing academic climate. Though usually classified as right-wing, a good libertarian will support open borders, abortion rights, absolute gender equality, a shrunken military, drug legalization and criminal justice reform. Such views are welcomed in academia today.

Alongside the hostility to free speech on campus is the problem with what has been happening in the classroom for several decades, as was pointed out by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (1987). Bloom criticized the moral and cultural relativism fashionable in academia and the dismissal of inherited sources of wisdom. Bloom’s book is as insightful today as it was 33 years ago.³

The suppression of free speech on college campuses is on full display when student mobs shout down guest speakers on campuses including UC Berkeley, UCLA, Middlebury College, Claremont McKenna College, Evergreen State College and many more. Worse, faculty have found themselves harassed, intimidated or reprimanded by colleagues and administrators when they have expressed legitimate academic concerns against the party line.

In 2017 Bruce Gilley, a political science professor at Portland State University, published the article “The Case for Colonialism” in the *Third World Quarterly*, an academic journal. He

argued that colonialism was bad, but the human costs of a century of anti-colonial regimes and politics were enormous.⁴ Gilley's essay was thought-provoking. Nevertheless, faculty outrage erupted. A petition of 10,000 faculty members demanded that the article be withdrawn. Fifteen members of the editorial board resigned. The editor received death threats. In the end Gilley agreed to withdraw the article.

Vicious Reactions in Academe

The Gilley episode was far from the only example of mob intimidation of academic free speech. Amy Wax, a University of Pennsylvania law professor, came under attack when she co-authored an article with a University of San Diego law professor, "Paying the Price for Breakdown of the Country's Bourgeois Culture," in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (August 9, 2017). In response, 33 of Wax's law school colleagues—half of the faculty—wrote an open letter accusing her of racism, white supremacy and hate speech. This was followed by another letter from 54 graduate students and Penn alumni denouncing her. In response, the dean of the law school told Wax that she would be removed from teaching the introductory course for first-year law students, even though students had responded enthusiastically to her class.

A similar episode took place at the Duke Divinity School around the same time when a faculty member, Paul Griffiths, refused to participate in a racial sensitivity training workshop, "Faculty Diversity and Inclusion," proposed by Anthea Portier-Young. The invitation for this workshop proclaimed that "racism is a fierce, ever present, challenging force" embodied within the university and the Duke Divinity School.

Griffiths responded by emailing colleagues that the workshop reflected a built-in bias. He wrote, "Events of this sort are definitely anti-intellectual. (Re)training of intellectuals by bureaucrats and apparatchiks have a long and ignoble history."⁵ Such exercises express illiberal and totalitarian tendencies within the academy, he argued. He immediately came under attack. The dean of the divinity school, Elaine Heath, accused Griffiths of "racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry." Just to ensure that everyone knew where she stood, the dean sent her reprimand of Griffiths to the entire divinity faculty.

At the University of Chicago, a 52-year-old associate professor of history, Rachel Fulton Brown, a recent convert to Roman Catholicism, found herself in hot water in 2017 for refusing to equate the Middle Ages with white supremacy.⁶ The issue arose when Brown responded to a former University of Chicago graduate student and Vassar College history professor who had openly attacked Brown for defending Christendom during the Middle Ages and refusing to label the period as white supremacist. Brown brought great authority to the subject as author of the 752-page *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (2002).

In her lengthy reply to the attack on her, Brown pointed to the beauties of the period produced by a Christian faith, defended the Crusades and defended her Catholic faith. Her response was measured and extraordinarily erudite. This did not deter 1,265 medieval studies faculty members from signing a petition condemning white supremacy and accusing Brown of racism. Petitions circulated calling for the University of Chicago to fire Brown, even though she was a tenured professor. The University of Chicago, to its credit, declared that Brown, a recognized and award-winning scholar, had academic freedom to express her views.

These incidents of academic suppression of free speech and academic freedom gained national attention and led to commendable pushback from some college presidents. Less noticed is the chilling effect on right-leaning professors. What faculty member would dare jeopardize a career and arouse colleagues' animosity by refusing to participate in a racial and gender sensitivity training session or online program now required at most universities and colleges? How many faculty members dare make an argument that courses in humanities and social sciences are focused too much on "race and gender" or oppression, to the disregard of other important issues?

Tenured Radicals

The problem is that American university faculties are decidedly left-wing—not just liberal—and things are even worse than they might appear from a superficial glance at faculty political affiliations.⁷ Survey after survey reveal that Republicans are few and far between within most major universities and colleges.⁸ There is an accelerating shift toward the left in academia.

This shift is not toward liberalism but radicalism. In a 2016 study conducted by Neil Gross and Solon Simmons of the self-identified ideology of faculty at 929 schools, they asked each faculty member to self-identify as very liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, middle-of-the road, slightly conservative, conservative or very conservative.⁹ **Liberals in total outnumbered conservatives by 5 to 1** (44.1 percent to 9.2). Their figures reveal that those faculty who proclaimed themselves in the political center actually hew more to the left, while those who claimed to be rock-solid conservatives were closer to being moderates. In fact, those who said they were "slightly liberal" were twice as far to the left of center as those solid conservatives were to the right. To be more precise, their data show that only 9 percent of their sample were conservative (mildly so) and **over half of their sample were placed on the far left.**¹⁰

Moreover, this shift to the left among faculty has accelerated in the last 20 years. This is a clear indication that younger faculty trend more left and that left-wing faculty are hiring

their own in terms of ideological stripe. The result is greater and greater ideological uniformity. This is apparent in one recent study by social scientist Mitchell Langbert, who looked at tenure-track faculty in 51 of the top colleges in the *U.S. News and World Report* ranking.¹¹ He found that nearly 40 percent of these colleges had exactly *no Republicans on their entire faculties*. Not a single Republican faculty member—zero. Furthermore, nearly 70 percent of the academic departments had zero Republicans. In short, these colleges are one-party states.

Some academic departments demand statements of support for their narrow “diversity” goals from job applicants or reveal their ideological hiring bias even more brazenly in their job postings. For example, the Department of Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in January posted an invitation for applications for a tenure-track position in “queer migrations. Research may focus on trans/queer geographies, immigration and migration, racialization, decoloniality. . . .”¹²

Is it any wonder that in this academic climate college students are coming out as self-declared socialists and social justice warriors? In the classroom students will hear capitalism, national pride, Christian faith and Western civilization derided and blamed for every bad thing in the world. The indoctrination extends beyond the classroom, beginning with freshman orientation, which in most colleges focuses on racial and gender sensitivity training. In these training programs, white maleness and “privilege” are of special concern. After orientation, most college students will find a campus environment that has “safe spaces,” a green environment that warns of climate change, features de-gendered bathrooms, and offers special counseling sessions to students shocked by the election of Donald Trump.

What Students Aren’t Learning

The real question is what kind of education are these students receiving? We know it’s not much in the way of the humanities and social sciences. In most humanities and social science courses students are not going to encounter great literature, the beauties of Western art, patriotic heroes or transcendent values. But this is not the worst of it.

While more young people are going to college, fewer are graduating with the basic skills to understand a table describing the relationship between blood pressure and physical activity.¹³ In a national study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2005, the percentage of college graduates able to read, understand and analyze a short prose text declined by 11 points from a previous sample in 1992. For more complex and longer documents the decline was sharper, 14 points. Even graduate students

showed a decline. To put these figures into perspective, only 31 percent of college graduates were classified as proficient. This is to say that only a third of college graduates could read a complex book and understand it.

This study was conducted nearly 15 years ago. We can presume that things have not improved since. Experts looking at the results of this study were uncertain of the cause of the steady decline in literacy proficiency. They need not have looked too deeply for an explanation. Many college classes today do not require students to read much.

Old-fashioned textbooks are out, even in most introductory classes. Full-length books are not assigned either. Fifty years ago students might be assigned a couple of scholarly monographs, a textbook, and perhaps even a novel in a humanities or social science course. Not now, when professors rely on a few online sources for required reading and PowerPoint software to convey lecture material in simplistic bullet points. In fact, it is considered “old school” for a professor to even lecture in many courses.

The literacy problem has other causes—social media, K-12 education, poor parenting and an array of other cultural issues. Whatever the causes, higher education is training a workforce that is not prepared for a world of data analysis and critical thinking.

The Way Forward

The problems within higher education are immense and defy easy solution. Warren Treadgold, a history professor at Saint Louis University, argued in *The University We Need* (2018) that colleges and universities as they currently exist cannot be reformed. He calls for the creation of a world-class national university funded by the federal government to set new standards in higher education. He calls also for a national tenure review commission to review all tenure and promotions within higher education. Whatever the merits of these proposals, they are not going to become reality.

John M. Ellis, an emeritus professor of German literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, offers more realistic solutions. He calls for alumni to **stop giving to monolithically leftist universities** and let administrators know why. He wants the public to see what is happening in the schools where they are sending their children. In addition, **state legislatures should apply budgetary pressure on public institutions** of higher learning to reform and to hire more intellectually diverse faculties. Ellis maintains that draconian measures need to be applied to dismantle the radical faculty regime.

These measures can be attained. Alumni, parents, legislators and the public can exert power. **Federal support of bloated universities should be curtailed** as well. Student loans and unnecessary federal grants have allowed university faculties and

administrations to pursue a leftist agenda and miseducate our younger generation. Affirmative action hiring and admission programs foster leftism on campus and should be challenged.

At the same time, boards of regents or trustees, under pressure, can **appoint university presidents who will clean house**, replacing upper administration officials and deans with new faces charged with ensuring more intellectually diverse faculty appointments and promotions. **Mitch Daniels, the former governor of Indiana who serves as president of Purdue University, presents a model of strong leadership, cutting administrative bloat, holding tuition steady for nine consecutive years, and standing up for free speech, civics education and intellectual diversity on campus.**

The Wuhan coronavirus will eventually abate. The flu season will end. Meanwhile the viruses within our universities continue to infect our children, politics, economy and culture. Real reform begins in a democracy with an aroused public.

- 1 <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/09/16/states-passing-laws-protect-college-students-free-speech>.
- 2 <https://www.ballardspahr.com/alertspublications/legalalerts/2018-05-04-arizona-passes-new-law-to-bolster-campus-free-speech>.
- 3 Other books of the period include Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990); Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991); and John L. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (1989).
- 4 This episode is described in full detail in John M. Ellis, *The Breakdown of Higher Education: How It Happened, the Damage It Does and What Can Be Done* (New York, 2020).
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
- 6 <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/06/in-the-academic-sandbox>.
- 7 For the origins of campus leftism, see <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/the-roots-of-campus-leftism>.
- 8 Brad Richardson, "Liberal Professors Outnumber Conservatives Nearly 12 to 1, Study Finds," *Washington Times*, October 6, 2016.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 27-30.

Mindszenty Report Reprints

CHINA: A SICK NATION. Not only is China sick with the epidemic of the COVID-19 virus; it is culturally sick with intensifying repression of Christians, Muslims and Buddhists. Persecution of Catholics has worsened since the China's 2018 secret accord with the Vatican. Ask for 3/20

THE TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC REVIVAL IN BRAZIL. A Brazilian journalism student offers an inspiring report on the renewal of traditional Catholicism in Brazil, aided by some dedicated priests and many new lay-founded Catholic cultural centers. Ask for 2/20

10 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

12 Quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2020.

13 Lois Romano, "Literacy of College Graduates Is on Decline; Survey's Finding of a Drop in Reading Proficiency Is Inexplicable, Experts Say," *Washington Post*, December 25, 2005. Also discussed in John M. Ellis, *The Breakdown of Higher Education*, pp. 100-104.

The Most Important Person on Earth is a Mother



The Most Important Person on earth is a mother. She cannot claim the honor of having built Notre Dame Cathedral. She need not. She has built something more magnificent than any cathedral—a dwelling for an immortal soul, the tiny perfection of her baby's body ... The angels have not been blessed with such a grace. They cannot share in God's creative miracle to bring new saints to Heaven. Only a human mother can. Mothers are closer to God the Creator than any other creature; God joins forces with mothers in

performing this act of creation ... What on God's good earth is more glorious than this: to be a mother?

— *Venerable Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty*

Order a supply of colorful cards with the beautiful pro-life message. Insert with your letters, bills; give out at church and meetings. Cost includes postage:

20 cards	\$ 8.00	100 cards	\$15.00
50 cards	\$10.00	500 cards	\$50.00
		1,000 cards	\$95.00

The Mother card is available in Spanish at the same cost as English above.

The Mindszenty Report is published monthly by

Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation

7800 Bonhomme Ave.

St. Louis, MO 63105

Phone 314-727-6279 Fax 314-727-5897

Subscription rate: \$25 per year

Outside the U.S.A. \$35

The Mindszenty Report is not copyrighted, and subscribers are invited to have it printed in their local newspapers.

Contributions to the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

web site: www.mindszenty.org
orders.inquiries@mindszenty.org