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A-Section

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The Charlotte Observer

Here's why academia skews left

Bright students with conservative bent face tough future in teaching

DAVID BROOKS
New York Times

Most good universities have at least one conservative professor on campus. When, for example, some group at Harvard wants to hold a panel discussion on some political matter, it can bring out the political theorist Harvey Mansfield to hold up the rightward end. At Princeton it's Robert George. At Yale it's Donald Kagan.

Those dissenters lead interesting lives. But there's one circumstance that causes true anguish: When a bright conservative student comes to them and says he or she is thinking about pursuing an academic career in the humanities or social sciences.

"This is one of the most difficult things," says Alan Kors, a rare conservative at Penn. "One is desperate to see people of independent mind willing to enter the academic world. On the other hand, it is simply the case they will be entering hostile and discriminatory territory."

"Here's what I'm thinking when an outstanding kid comes in," says George, of Princeton. "If the kid applies to one of the top graduate schools, he's likely to be not admitted. Say he gets past that first screen. He's going to face pressure to conform, or he'll be the victim of discrimination. It's a lot harder to hide then, than it was as an undergrad."

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"But say he gets through. He's going to run into intense discrimination trying to find a job. But say he lands a tenure track job. He'll run into even more intense discrimination because the establishment gets more concerned the closer you get to the golden ring. By the time you come up for tenure, you're in your mid-30s with a spouse and a couple of kids. It's the worst time to be uncertain about your career. Can I really take the responsibility of advising a kid to take these kinds of risks?"

The most common advice conservative students get is to keep their views in the closet. Will Inboden was working on his master's degree in American history at Yale when a liberal professor pulled him aside after class and said, "You're one of the best students I've got, and you could have an outstanding career. But I have to caution you: Hiring committees are loath to hire political conservatives. You've got to be really quiet."

Conservative professors emphasize that most discrimination is not conscious. A person who voted for President Bush may be viewed as an oddity, but the main problem in finding a job is that the sort of subjects a conservative is likely to investigate - - say, diplomatic or military history -- do not excite hiring committees. Professors are interested in the subjects they are already pursuing, and in a horrible job market it is easy to toss out applications from people who are doing something different.

As a result, faculties skew overwhelmingly to the left. Students often have no contact with adult conservatives, and many develop cartoonish impressions of how 40 percent of the country thinks. Hundreds of conservatives with Ph.D.s end up working in Republican administrations, in think tanks and at magazines, often with some regrets. "Teaching is this really splendid thing. It would be great to teach Plato's `Republic,'" says Gary Rosen, a Harvard Ph.D. who works at Commentary magazine.

Despite all this, George advises his best and toughest students to go ahead. "We need to send our best soldiers into battle, even though we're going to lose a few," he says. "I hate to tell kids they shouldn't take risks, they shouldn't go

for their dreams."

Others say it is possible to have a satisfying career and do good work if you learn not to fly straight into the prevailing ideology. "Conservatives are people who teach the value of prudence but are incapable of exercising any," says Mark Lilla, a politically unclassifiable professor at the University of Chicago.

And Jacob T. Levy, a libertarian also at Chicago, says some conservatives exaggerate the level of hostility they face. Some politicized humanities departments may be closed to them, he concedes, but professors in other fields are open to argument.

If it were my kid, I'd say go to graduate school -- read the books you want to read. Then go to Washington, where you won't feel embattled because you'll exchange ideas with liberals and others in a more intellectually diverse setting. You'll probably end up doing more good.

A few days ago the professors at Harvard's government department reviewed the placement records of last year's doctoral students. Two had not been able to find academic jobs, both of them Mansfield's students. "Well," Mansfield quipped, "I guess they'll have to go to Washington and run the country."

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