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from the October 08, 2002 edition

Faulty Faculty Diversity

America's colleges and universities are witnessing an unusual display of political diversity these days. Dozens of professors and school administrators have put their names on petitions related to Israel's treatment of Palestinians – or on statements opposed to such petitions.

Specifically, the debate is focused on a signature campaign that asks universities to sell stocks in companies doing business in Israel. (See story.) What's unusual is not the debate itself but that so many professors have been prompted to speak out publicly. And more important, that so many of those scholars are taking opposing positions.

Such a balance of ideological and political diversity is all too rare within higher education. While colleges seek more ethnic and racial diversity among students, when it comes to political diversity in faculty, most teachers noticeably tilt to the left.

That's the conclusion from a study of political-party affiliation of scholars who teach humanities at 21 big-name universities. Conducted for a conservative think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, the study combed local voter-registration records to discover that an overwhelming portion of teachers are, surprise, Democrats. Another finding: 84 percent of them voted for Al Gore in the 2000 election.

The study puts hard numbers to a stereotype about campus faculty. The question is: Does the liberal tilt make a difference?

Most college students are just forming their political perspectives.

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Does a teacher's political leanings influence the way a class is taught?

A campus watchdog group called the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has challenged universities for allowing some teachers to discriminate against students for their political beliefs or ethnic backgrounds. The cases are relatively few in number, but still troubling.

In most such cases, the American Association of University Professors rightly defends the academic freedom of faculty. But still, in its stated professional standards, the group advises scholars to "remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution."

Perhaps Democrats are just naturally drawn to teaching, and colleges can't do much about it. But if political diversity is as important to higher education as ethnic or racial diversity, colleges should look at their criteria for hiring teachers beyond just academic qualifications. Once teachers are hired, their freedom of speech must be defended. But colleges can also defend the need of students to hear a diversity of views from teachers.

In the meantime, U.S. News magazine might consider adding a new category – faculty political diversity – to its yearly college rankings.

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