

STORY TOOLS

- » [E-MAIL STORY TO A FRIEND](#)
- » [PRINT-FRIENDLY VERSION](#)

OTHER STORIES

- » [Thousands step in to help others](#)
- » [Motorcyclists with E-ZPass to get Thruway discount](#)
- » [Guard unit wins praise; fallen comrade honored](#)
- » [No kid is an island at school](#)

On campus, students fight to be right

Conservatives complain they face oppression from professors, peers, but more are speaking out

By **KENNETH AARON**, Staff writer

First published: Sunday, May 1, 2005

SARATOGA SPRINGS -- Last month at Skidmore College, a group of students planned a "Coming Out Day."

The students weren't celebrating their sexuality, but their conservativeness. They belonged to the Young Republican Assembly.

While the group wound up changing the name of the event because some students took offense, their decision to tag such a right-wing event with a moniker often associated with the left was no coincidence. The conservative movement on college campuses today is characterized by its adoption of concepts that the left has relied on for years. Now, when young Republicans speak out, they call for tolerance, diversity and equality - tenets that they say have been denied them by their peers and professors.

"Students feel like they can't speak up," said Drew Farrell, president of the Skidmore group.

Even so, they're speaking out more often these days.

At the University at Albany, two members of a conservative student group sued the school after they couldn't get funding from student government. They argue the slight was politically driven and the process unconstitutionally stacked against them.

At Siena College, a conservative, religiously active junior who said he was suspended from campus after being found guilty of harassing another student groused of anti-Christian oppression at the school -- which was founded by Franciscan friars. His protest was loud enough that a Virginia group that bankrolls conservative student publications gave him \$500 to start his own.

Such tactics are picking up steam elsewhere as well. Its most visible fruit, perhaps, is a so-called Academic Bill of Rights championed by David Horowitz, a one-time lefty firebrand turned righty firebrand. The bill, versions of which are being considered by more than 20 states and which the SUNY system might consider, would require campuses to be mindful of "fostering a plurality of methodologies and perspectives" among faculty and "promote intellectual pluralism."

Horowitz, who came to Skidmore last month at the behest of Farrell's group, acknowledges that his use of such concepts is a conscious strategic choice.

"I spent 25 years on the left," he said. "No conservative besides an ex-leftist,



Spe
Pres
pop
CFY

Aut
Lia |
Sale

RNs
Day:
wee

HSE
Luz
leac

Prir
Sen
High
resu
15..

Aud
Lool
plac

Pro
Prog
We
an..

>> A

>> A

probably, would have thought up this plan."

The notion of a conservative movement on college campuses is nothing new. Yes, most professors tend to lean left -- a study published in an online journal in March indicated indicated 72 percent of them identify themselves as liberal, and 15 percent say they're conservative. But it's not like conservatives have never tried to make their presence known in academia. "Republicans in college" is a man-bites-dog story that recurs every few years.

What is different, some say, is the intensity of their demand for recognition and acceptance.

"I would say they're not under greater fire than they were, say, five years ago," said David French, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a non-partisan civil liberties group based in Philadelphia. "You're more cognizant of it because they've decided to start fighting back."

French's group has testified in lawsuits and battled for people on both sides of the political aisle. It defended University of Colorado Professor Ward Churchill's rights to espouse controversial views on 9/11, for example. But the growth industry has come from conservatives who think their toes are being stepped on, he said. Last year, the group received 500 complaints. This year, he expects more than 600.

Not all of those complaints are legitimate; many come from students who simply don't like their professors' points of view, he said.

The drumbeat against the left steams Bill Scheuerman, president of United University Professions, who said the movement has "taken the language of diversity and then they turn that upside down."

Many of the complainants simply don't want to hear opinions different from their own in class and put the same label on all professors, Scheuerman said.

"If you're a Democrat, you're a radical, and if you're radical, you don't teach, you preach," he said.

But many of the conservative students do have a point, French said. "In our experience, 80 to 85 percent of the actual acts of censorship, actual abuses of civil liberties, come from the left," he said.

One of his group's latest campaigns is defending conservative students who want to hold campus bake sales that advertise one price to minority students and a more expensive price to white students -- a way of making their point that affirmative action discriminates against whites. Some campuses have tried to sanction the events.

At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Ken Girardin, head of the school's College Republicans, said events such as the bake sale have inspired others to launch their own left-styled activist events.

"All of a sudden you have the conservatives being the revolutionaries," he said. "The ideas do help. It's a lot easier to draw positive energy to mobilize people in support of something rather than against it."

Part of the reason many conservative students say they're quick to rally around typically liberal rallying points is that they've grown up with them and believe in them.

"The whole point is diversity," said Steve Bierfeldt, the Siena College junior who was suspended from school for charges he said included aggravated harassment. Bierfeldt said he repeatedly crossed paths with a woman who objected to his proselytizing. During his time away from school, he was flown to a panel discussion in Virginia, sponsored by the Leadership Institute, at which he hobnobbed with other conservative agitators.

Janet Gianopoulos, a Siena spokeswoman, declined to discuss Bierfeldt on privacy grounds, but said that the school "does not discriminate based on beliefs."

Farrell, from Skidmore, said the group doesn't consider the new line of attack entirely tactically driven.

"Part of it is not even being strategic, it's the truth," he said. "We do feel like we're treated differently."

One member of the Young Republican Assembly, Tom Qualtere, said he was motivated to increase his protestations by a Skidmore professor who referred to the group as the "Future Fascists of America."

The professor said his remarks were taken out of context. But Qualtere said he was "furious" over the comment. "That was like a wake-up call for us," he said.

Skidmore officials hardly got in the way of the Conservative Challenge Week. They not only provided \$4,000 to help the group get speakers, but also publicized the events. And school president Philip Glotzbach met with Horowitz before his speech.

Still, some students said it would be hard for anybody to admit conservative tendencies on campus.

"They definitely get a hard time," said Alison Marts, a Skidmore senior who considers herself liberal. "They are definitely painted with a broad brush."

One woman who approached Qualtere and Farrell during the re-named "Proud to be a Conservative Day" said "I thought there were only liberals on this campus."

"It's just nice to have a different point of view," said Jill Meritt, a freshman.

Farrell, who is considering law school, said he didn't expect to change anybody's political leanings as a result of the week, but hoped to convince some to open their minds to something different.

"A lot of the students here have images of Republicans in their heads that aren't true," he said.

50% off Times Union home delivery. [Subscribe today!](#)
