
What Your Professors Won't Tell You: Why Diversity Stops at the Classroom Door

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The following is adapted from a speech, in April, by Katherine A. Kersten at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Ms. Kersten, who serves as American Experiment's distinguished senior fellow for cultural studies, holds a law degree from the University of Minnesota, an M.B.A. from Yale, and a bachelor's degree in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame—from which she recently received the Family Life Exemplar Award for 2003. She and her husband, Mark Johnson, a lawyer, have four children; the oldest, Will, is a sophomore at St. Olaf.

Remember when you began applying for college? You got an avalanche of glossy brochures in your mailbox. Each brochure featured smiling students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Each one promised that at the campus in question, you would find a critical ingredient of education: a diversity that would enrich your life and expand your horizons.

St. Olaf's Web site makes a typical claim. "What makes us learn, what makes us better, what makes us think?" it asks. The answer is predictable. "Dif-

ferent people from and with different backgrounds. That's diversity."

What do colleges really mean by diversity? As the brochures suggest, they generally mean external characteristics: skin color and ethnic background that supposedly make you different, in very important, if ambiguous ways, from your classmates. If you're black, for example, you're assumed to be somehow crucially different from your white roommate—even if you both graduated from Edina High School.

This isn't real diversity, and many students sense it—especially people who've traveled to places that have truly different cultures: India, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, or even France. In America there's really one overarching culture in which all citizens participate, though the experience of various demographic groups may differ in relatively minor ways. Today, however, for complex reasons, colleges magnify these small differences into cultural gulfs that are thought important enough to feature on the covers of recruiting brochures.

But there is one kind of diversity that is actually central to both a liberal education and a flourishing free society. That's intellectual diversity: the diversity of ideas, of philosophical perspectives, of ways of looking at and understanding the world. Unfortunately, the last place to look for this kind of diversity is at American colleges and universities. Today, you can generally find a wider spectrum of opinion in any bowling alley or fast-food restaurant than in the faculty lounges of a typical American university.

Unfortunately, over the last several decades, American colleges and universities have become intellectual monoliths. Their faculties, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, are now dominated by the political left. Why is this important? Because today, at most colleges, America's best and brightest young people are generally getting only one side of the story on a host of issues. Too often, professors seek to proselytize students, or indoctrinate them through one-sided syllabi

and topic selection. As a result, in subjects like political science, sociology, history, and literature, you and your fellow college students are likely to be encouraged to view the world (and America in particular) through the ideological prism of race, class, and gender.

You're likely to learn, for instance, that women make seventy-six cents on the dollar compared to men—and never hear this false statement contradicted. In literature, you're likely to have a tough time finding a course on eighteenth-century British poets—some of literature's greatest geniuses—but an easy time finding a course on women writers of secondary importance. You'll have a hard time finding a faculty adviser for a pro-life organization, and you'll almost certainly have to sit through a commencement speech by a political liberal.

A number of studies have confirmed how pervasive intellectual conformity is in American higher education. Recently, for example, the California-based Center for the Study of Popular Culture searched primary voting registration records to determine the party affiliations of faculty at a broad cross-section of colleges and universities. Here's a sample of what they found:

- Brown University was typical. There, 95 percent of professors whose party affiliations could be found were Democrats and only 5 percent were Republicans. Brown's entire liberal arts faculty included only three Republicans.

- At the University of California-Santa Barbara, 97 percent of faculty whose party registrations could be established were Democrats.
- At the University of New Mexico, 89 percent were Democrats and 4 percent were Greens.
- At the University of Colorado in Boulder, 94 percent of liberal arts faculty who registered a party affiliation were Democrats, and only 4 percent were Republicans. Yet Colorado is a Republican state. Its governor and senators are Republican, as are four of its six congressional representatives. Colorado citizens are being taxed to support a university where their own political and philosophical views are barely represented.

Is there intellectual diversity at St. Olaf? From what I've seen, not much. For example, at a forum in March on the war in Iraq, where faculty were supposed to take pro and con positions, the St. Olaf college newspaper reported that not one professor could be found to represent the pro-war side. Around the same time, the college president, Chris Thomforde, was lending his prestige to student anti-war protests by sitting with students as they blocked the cafeteria stairs.

Here's another example. In April, St. Olaf hosted a conference entitled "Sexuality and Spirituality and the Church." Apparently, every one of the speakers was an advocate of gay marriage. Did anyone represent the mainstream position, and point out that

homes with a mom and dad are best for kids? Why not?

Here's yet another example. Earlier this year, St. Olaf sponsored a three-day conference entitled "Globalization and Social Responsibility: Resistance to Injustice." Presenters were heavily skewed to the left, and I understand that students in some classes were required to attend several sessions. Did any speaker at the conference explain that so-called sweatshops can actually benefit Third-World peoples? Why not?

Sometimes St. Olaf students find it hard to escape a left/liberal perspective even in their dorm rooms. I know students who get a steady stream of e-mails on controversial issues from one or more professors. Nearly all these e-mails are messages or articles advocating left/liberal positions.

Last fall, I drove down to St. Olaf several times during the weeks leading up to the election. On these trips, I noticed what seemed to be a bright line between the homes and farms along Highway 19, on the one hand, and the Northfield city limits on the other. Most of the campaign yard signs along the highway read "Pawlenty," "Coleman," and "Kline." But when I crossed into Northfield, things changed dramatically. The signs there read "Moe," "Wellstone," and "Luther." On November 8, the people of Minnesota elected Tim Pawlenty and Norm Coleman—both Republicans—as this state's governor and senator. They also elected a Republican state House of Representatives, and a state Senate that is three seats short of a Republican majority. Did the people of Minnesota vote this

way because they are foolish? Or did they have reasons that might be worth exploring? Shouldn't St. Olaf have a significant number of faculty members who share the political views of Minnesota's majority, so they can guide students in exploring those reasons?

All of this raises an obvious question: why are so many college professors on the left/liberal side of the political spectrum? Some observers claim that professors tend to be liberal because they're smarter and better educated than other people—which proves, they say, that the liberal position is correct.

Is this right? Not at all. In my view, there are two fundamental reasons for the ideological imbalance that pervades most American campuses.

First, political conservatives often face many obstacles if they seek to become a professor in a discipline like history, English, or sociology. Conservatives may find it tough to get accepted into a doctoral program, especially at a prestigious institution. Once accepted, they may struggle to find a thesis adviser. (I have a friend who attended graduate school in history at a large public university, and had to hide his political leanings for years in order to make it through the program.)

When conservatives finally get their degree, they may have trouble landing a job. Moreover, they may find it difficult to get tenure, and next to impossible to win a position of real influence—for example, to get appointed to their department's hiring committee.

Many conservatives, of course, don't even think about going into college teaching because they have no desire to live and work in an unwelcoming social environment. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where I worked as an administrator in the 1980s, I was surrounded by faculty who frequently made loud, mocking comments about Ronald Reagan. A faculty member who didn't share their views simply couldn't be part of the club.

Clearly, centrists and conservatives are not likely to feel at home on many college campuses. But there's another, more profound reason that few conservatives join college faculties: the matter of mindset.

Intellectuals, especially in the humanities and social sciences, tend to be drawn to a particular vision of how the world works. This vision is common to many members of the so-called knowledge class—a group that includes academics, journalists, psychologists, non-profit staff people, mainline church pastors, social workers, and members of what are loosely termed the helping professions.

Thomas Sowell, a scholar at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, has written a book that sheds light on the mindset in question. His book—one of the most insightful I've read—is *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*.

Sowell starts his book with an observation: one of the curious things about political opinions, he notes, is how often the same people line up on opposite sides of different, unrelated

issues. The issues may range from military spending to drug laws to tax policy. Yet time and again, the same familiar faces can be found glaring at each other from opposite sides of the political fence. Why?

The reason, Sowell suggests, is that the people glaring across the aisle approach issues from very different starting points, or visions of reality. These visions, in turn, spring from different assumptions about human nature. Sowell identifies two primary visions, which he calls the **constrained** and the **unconstrained** vision. The constrained vision correlates roughly with political conservatism, and the unconstrained with political liberalism.

What distinguishes these two visions? Generally speaking, the constrained vision—political conservatism—holds that human beings are fundamentally flawed. Though human beings have many potential good qualities, they also have a permanent tendency toward selfishness and violence. This means that crime, war, and social dysfunction will always be with us.

People who hold the constrained vision believe that human beings can improve society, for example, by structuring institutions that create incentives for constructive behavior, like a democratic government with checks and balances or a free market system. But such people are convinced that we will never be able to completely solve social problems like crime and war. Because of inherent human limitations, even our most effective social policies will always involve trade-offs, and never solutions.

The unconstrained vision—political liberalism—starts from a very different view of human nature. It sees human beings as malleable and perfectible, that is, continually improvable. The unconstrained vision holds that, with proper guidance and education, people can be brought to do the right things for the right reasons.

The unconstrained vision holds that social problems are primarily due—not to human limitations like selfishness—but to unjust or imperfectly designed social institutions. Two hundred years ago, the philosopher Rousseau summed up the unconstrained view in this way: “Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains.” The unconstrained vision maintains that if we have good intentions and sufficient commitment, we can—over time—actually solve social problems like poverty or war.

The constrained and unconstrained visions differ in another important way. The constrained vision sees the world as very complex, and views individual human beings—no matter how smart—as having limited intellectual capacities. As a result of these limitations, even if a plan for social reform seems brilliant in the abstract, it may not succeed in the real world. (The real world is always more complex than human beings can grasp.) In fact, such a reform plan might produce **unintended** consequences, which could actually make the problem in question worse.

The unconstrained vision takes a very different view of human beings’ intellectual abilities, and their related ability to engineer change. It holds

that smart people have the capacity to bring about the social changes they desire, if only they embrace the proper goals and have the proper motivation and commitment.

Paul Wellstone is a good example of a politician with the unconstrained vision. If you had asked Wellstone why we have poverty in our affluent society, he would probably have given this answer: because the people in power don't yet care enough to end it. People like Wellstone generally believe that to end poverty, we need to do two things. First, we must have the right intentions—we must embrace the goals of social justice and equality of results. Second, we must adopt expansive government programs, including strong affirmative action policies; more money for urban schools and affordable housing; government-run health care; and tax and welfare policies that redistribute wealth “fairly” from rich to poor.

Because of the differing assumptions I've just discussed, people who hold the constrained and unconstrained visions are generally guided by different criteria in formulating public policy. Liberals tend to see the intentions of policy-makers as decisive—what's crucial is caring, compassion, and commitment to institutional change. Conservatives, on the other hand, see real world consequences as decisive.

Here, for example, is how a person with the constrained vision might respond to Paul Wellstone: it's nice that you care so much about the poor. But if you try to help poor people—say, single teen mothers—by giving them

generous welfare payments without encouraging them to act responsibly and change patterns of self-destructive behavior, you're likely to hurt them in the long run. Unintentionally, you will foster a long-term culture of dependence that will lock future generations into poverty.

Notice a very important point. People with the constrained and unconstrained visions don't usually disagree about goals. Both groups, for example, would like to increase prosperity and reduce crime. What they disagree on is how to achieve those goals.

Now, in trying to understand the ideological imbalance on college campuses, it's important to recognize that for at least the last fifty years, intellectuals have been drawn in large numbers to the unconstrained vision. Why is this?

For one thing, intellectuals are idea people. They tend to like theories, that is, abstract explanations of complex social phenomena. In addition, they tend to value a certain kind of knowledge—articulated rationality—which is at the center of the unconstrained vision, with its ambitious designs for social reform.

Ordinary people—the sort of people who run small businesses or work for fire departments—tend to give equal or greater value to a different sort of knowledge. It's often called common sense. Common sense is knowledge that comes from experience and tradition. It is transmitted socially in largely unarticulated forms, and embodied in behavior, sentiments, and habits that have developed over generations.

The famous conservative William Buckley once captured the difference between the two forms of knowledge—articulated knowledge and common sense—when he said he'd rather be governed by the first 500 names in the Boston telephone directory than by the Harvard faculty.

Today, many intellectuals are drawn—not only to the unconstrained vision—but to a related phenomenon: the adversary culture that grew up in the 1960s. The adversary culture is a subculture made up of people who tend to feel alienated or estranged from mainstream American society. As a result, they are hypercritical of it, and constantly find fault with it. You know the sort of people I mean: if you say one good thing about this country, they inevitably start in about slavery or World War II-era Japanese-American internment camps.

Why are so many intellectuals attracted to the adversary culture? In my view, there are three fundamental reasons. First, individuals who hold the unconstrained worldview are likely to have extremely high expectations of people and society. In other words, they're likely to have utopian tendencies. When their society and fellow citizens fall short of these expectations, they're likely to be disappointed, and to become fuller and fuller of righteous indignation.

But there's another reason intellectuals are attracted to the adversary culture, and it has to do with power. Let's say you're a very smart sociology or political science professor. You have studied for years, you know all the the-

ories, and you think you know what's wrong with society and how to achieve the reforms that would make things more truly just and equal. But do you get to fix things? No. Who does? Whom do the people give power to? George W. Bush! A guy (you suspect) who probably hasn't read a book in years. A guy whose vocabulary is probably half the size of yours, a guy who says "nucular." Or worse yet, Ronald Reagan gets to be president. He's a Hollywood actor, and you have a Ph.D. from Princeton!

And who else does America reward with money and power? Business people! The kind of people who make Cheerios or run Victoria's Secret stores. Here's my point: many intellectuals believe that this society does not properly value or reward them, and as a result, they often harbor resentment toward the system.

There's a final reason that intellectuals tend to be drawn to the adversary culture. For many intellectuals today, the adversary culture has actually become a kind of secular religion. Think about it. Over the past century, institutional religion has declined markedly as a force in American life, especially among intellectuals. This has left a giant hole.

The fact is, most people need what religion provides—among other things, a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction in life. For some intellectuals, the adversary culture has come to fill this hole. It offers a sense of meaning, and a purpose—social justice—to which one can dedicate one's life. Like a religion, it also sets out a model of virtue: the "car-

ing,” compassion, and commitment that lie at the center of the unconstrained vision. The adversary culture offers something in short supply in our atomized world: a sense of belonging, of participation in a cohesive community. It provides a ready-made community of political activism, a fellowship, and a rationale for collective action.

Have you ever participated in a protest march? If you have, you know this sense of belonging, the visceral feeling of connectedness, of passion in a common cause. It can be very seductive.

Here's another important point. The adversary culture gives people all these quasi-religious rewards without requiring them to sacrifice anything. It allows them to feel righteous simply by wearing a black armband, or shouting slogans with the crowd (“No blood for oil!”) or sitting on the cafeteria stairs with signs demanding peace. When you do these things, you show the people on the sidelines how much you care (demonstrating, of course, that you're “better” than they are). It's all so easy. You don't have to do the hard, self-sacrificial things that traditional religion requires, like dying to self, keeping your promises, and striving for humility.

If you want to see the adversary culture in its religious guise, walk into almost any women's studies classroom and open a book. Over and over, as feminist writers describe their first encounter with radical feminism, you'll hear the language of epiphany, of being born again. Listen to the well-known activist Vivian Gornick on her conversion to feminism: “The feminist

insight—that women are as real as men—went into me like a laser beam. It shed light and warmth. It healed and explained. It told me who I was in the world as I experienced the world.” And here's Gloria Steinem, reflecting on her first encounter with feminism: “The scales fell from my eyes; I walked out of a dark room into the light.”

Radical feminism offers women a fellowship of the anointed. It's called the “sisterhood.” This form of feminism also has a devil: the patriarchy. Feminist writers like Susan Faludi, author of the best-selling *Backlash*, write of the patriarchy in satanic terms. (Faludi portrays the patriarchy as “whispering” in women's ears, and “cajoling” them into acting against their own interests.) Radical feminism also has its heretics: women like me. A number of years ago, feminist professors at a University of Minnesota women's studies conference told me that I was an agent of the patriarchy and a victim of false consciousness. I could never teach in their program, they said, because I wasn't a real woman.

When you see that the adversary culture can function as a kind of secular religion, several otherwise puzzling things become clear. First, you understand why people like radical feminists hold onto their vision with such passion. You also grasp why they greatly exaggerate the oppression that women face in American society.

In addition, you understand why many feminists refuse to accept evidence that contradicts their claims. Take the false statistics that feminist writers have been circulating for years.

Feminists often claim, for example, that one in four college women have been victims of rape or attempted rape, and that 30 percent of women's emergency room visits are for injuries suffered from domestic violence. These claims—and many more like them—have been soundly and repeatedly discredited, but radical feminists just keep repeating them. Why? Because feminism of this kind is not about the pursuit of truth. It's about the creation of a cause, a righteous crusade, a reason for being, a fellowship. Exaggerated claims like the ones I have mentioned are necessary to instill in followers an apocalyptic sense of urgency and significance, and a motive for collective action.

When you understand the adversary culture as a secular religion, you grasp something else as well. That's the source of the intolerance that grips many campuses today: the intolerance called political correctness. The adversary culture, with its unconstrained worldview, holds that people who disagree with it are not just wrong-headed. They are, in a sense, bad people, because they do not have the right intentions. Do you oppose the left's anti-poverty program? Then you don't care about the poor or social justice, or you're greedy. Are you in favor of the war in Iraq? Then you only care about oil, or dominating the world as an American imperialist. On many campuses, this intolerance for divergent (that is, heretical) views is a principal reason that diversity stops at the classroom door.

Here's a final point about the adversary culture's attraction for some of

today's college professors. To understand it, you had to have grown up when I did. I was at Carleton in 1969 and 1970, when Paul Wellstone was just beginning his career there. As a result of this experience, I can tell you personally that many of today's more radical professors are reliving the thrills of their youth. They're reliving the heady days of the Vietnam War—when they were rebelling against authority, when they were most alive.

Life at Carleton in the spring of 1970 was a utopian's dream. There were endless student meetings, the kind where you all sit in a circle so that no one feels more powerful than anyone else. Leaders of Carleton's anti-war movement called for volunteers to store caches of food "for when the revolution comes." They also solicited volunteers to contract viruses. These idealistic young people were then to walk through draft offices and post offices, spread disease and shut down the government. It was all so much more fun than Chemistry 101! In the spring of 1970, you could feel great about yourself for showing your commitment to love and peace, but you had no real responsibility. You didn't have to come up with solutions to complex, real world problems, where difficult trade-offs were inevitable.

When the Vietnam War ended in the early '70s, it quickly became clear that the protest movement had not really been about the war, but about **ourselves**. When the draft ended, the protests ended. When the boat people began flooding out of Vietnam by the thousands, with horrifying stories to

tell, few young people cared. They had moved on—quite a few to graduate school and a career in college teaching.

I want to close with a couple of quotes from a recent *New York Times* article. The headline reads “With Current War, Professors Protest, As Students Debate.” The article is about how much more liberal today’s professors are than the bulk of their students.

The article reports on a protest at Amherst College, where—shortly before the Iraq war began—forty professors paraded into the dining hall waving antiwar signs. Many students were vocally annoyed. Some accused the professors of behaving inappropriately, of “not knowing their place.” One student put it this way, “It seems the professors are more vehement than the students. There comes a point

when you wonder are you fostering a discussion or are you promoting an opinion you want students to embrace or even parrot?”

According to the article, many professors were dismayed by the students’ failure to follow their lead. “There’s a second when I hear them,” says one prof, “and my heart just falls.” And here’s Martha Saxton, an Amherst professor of women’s studies: “We used to like to offend people. We loved being bad, in the sense that we were making a statement. Why is there no joy now?”

Why does diversity stop at the classroom door? If you want a two-word answer, it’s “my generation.” And I’m afraid that true diversity may not return to college classrooms until my generation fades away. ■