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The great myth of campus socialism

Going to college doesn't turn students into Marxists. If anything, it tends to make them more skeptical of redistributing wealth.

By **Bryan Schonfeld and Sam Winter-Levy** Updated February 24, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



Attending Harvard or similar institutions might not make students as liberal as conservatives fear. CRAIG F. WALKER

On Jan. 27, David Bullard, a Republican state senator from Oklahoma, filed a bill to curb the alleged influence of Marxists in the state's public education system. "Teachers overstep their boundaries trying to indoctrinate students with socialism," he [declared](#). The bill called for an "education that does not endorse, favor or promote socialism, communism, Marxism or anti-American bias." Other states are considering similar legislation. On Feb. 9, the Iowa [state Senate](#) began debating a bill that would survey state university employees to determine their political affiliations. Prominent Republican politicians like Senator Josh Hawley, meanwhile, have long [criticized](#) college professors for displaying insufficient patriotism.

These are the latest salvos in the long culture war between conservatives and educational institutions. Conservative criticisms of the perceived left-wing bias of higher education have included William F. Buckley's "God and Man at Yale" (1951)

and Dinesh D'Souza's "Illiberal Education" (1991). But in recent years, as the Democrats have increasingly become the party of the highly educated, Republican antagonism toward colleges and universities has reached new peaks. Today, nearly [three-quarters](#) of Republicans and those who lean Republican say higher education is headed in the wrong direction. And 59 percent of Republicans [believe](#) colleges and universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country, a figure that has grown significantly in the past four years.

It's true that university professors are overwhelmingly liberal. Nearly 40 percent of elite liberal arts colleges have [zero registered Republican professors](#). Among the University of California, Berkeley, faculty, Democrats outnumber Republicans 9 to 1, and according to one study of 11 [universities in California](#), Democrats outnumber Republicans by 44 to 1 in sociology departments. Nationwide, in the field of [social psychology](#), the ratio of researchers who identify as liberal to those who identify as conservative is roughly 14 to 1 — a skew that social scientists are increasingly aware could lead to [blind spots or biases](#) in research.

It's also true that Americans with university degrees tend to hold much more liberal positions than those without. A 2015 Pew Research Center [survey](#), for example, found that 24 percent of Americans with a university degree held consistently liberal positions on a range of issues, up from 5 percent two decades ago. Among Americans without a degree, just 5 percent held such liberal views. And that gap has only widened since then.



But university education may not be responsible for these left-wing political views. People with liberal values may simply be more likely to go to college in the first place. In fact, the best evidence [suggests](#) that professors' political views do not rub off on their students. If anything, going to college seems to make many students more

economically conservative.

In one of the most rigorous recent [studies](#) on the topic, the political scientists Tali Mendelberg, Katherine T. McCabe, and Adam Thal examined the political attitudes of nearly 65,000 students at 359 public and private colleges that varied in location, size, student demographics, and selectivity. The researchers tracked the students over time and interviewed them repeatedly. On average, these college students became no more economically liberal over the course of their four-year degrees. In fact, students whose parents came from the top 10 percent of the income distribution — who accounted for nearly half of the students surveyed — became more economically conservative over the course of their four-year degrees. This was especially true for affluent students at schools with wealthier student bodies.

Mendelberg, McCabe, and Thal traced these changes to the influence of wealthy peers. When students are surrounded by rich classmates, the researchers [argue](#), they imbibe “social routines and norms that take affluence for granted and convey that it is a good thing.” That general atmosphere encourages students — and affluent students in particular — to favor more conservative economic policies. Students at affluent schools who were very socially engaged, such as those who reported socializing more than 20 hours a week or who belonged to a fraternity or sorority, were especially likely to become more skeptical of wealth redistribution and more interested in personal financial gain over the course of their college careers.

These findings reflect a broader phenomenon: the prevalence of wealth on college campuses, especially elite ones. [Research](#) by a team of economists headed by Harvard professor Raj Chetty [shows](#) that children from families in the top 1 percent of earners are a staggering 77 times more likely to attend elite colleges and universities than children whose parents fall in the bottom 20 percent. More than three dozen American colleges, including five in the Ivy League, boast more students from families in the top 1 percent than from the bottom 60 percent. And although some colleges have started to enroll [more students](#) who qualify for Pell Grants — a federal program for low-income students — the size of the award has not kept pace with rising tuition costs. So long as student bodies at many of America’s most elite colleges remain overwhelmingly affluent, the effects the researchers documented are likely to hold. Their work underscores something that both liberals and conservatives can appreciate: College is a uniquely formative time — if not necessarily in ways that line up neatly with prevailing political narratives.

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