

# Conservatives in the Academy

## A mission statement.

MARCH 5, 2019 BY [JONATHAN MARKS](#)



The Higher Education Research Institute just released the results of its 2016-17 Faculty Survey, which reached “20,771 full-time undergraduate teaching faculty members at 143 four-year colleges and universities.”

It will come as no surprise to learn that college faculty skew to the left, as they have since the survey was first administered in the late 1980s. Those who identify as conservative and the very small number who identify as far-right are just 12.1 percent of the population. They barely outnumber the 11.5 percent of faculty who describe themselves as far-left. Perhaps more strikingly, if you add up the “middle of the road” conservatives and those on the hard right, they are still greatly outnumbered by the far-left-liberal contingent by 59.8 to 40.2 percent.

Those who think that faculties are more liberal than they were in decades past aren’t imagining things. In the 1989-90 survey, 18.2 percent of college faculty identified as conservative or far-right. 40.2 percent considered themselves moderates. It was a mirror image of today’s political environment in the academy: moderate, conservative, and far-right educators outnumbered the far-left-liberal contingent 58.4 to 41.7 percent.

There is scant evidence the left-liberal faculty actively indoctrinate undergraduate students, but 80.2 percent of professors believe it is their job to “encourage students to become agents of social change.” Among the faculty in non-STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics)

fields, a striking 42.9 percent *strongly* agree that it's their job to encourage students to effect social change.

The good news is that at most colleges and universities, conservatives are probably numerous enough to be heard. Conservative professors make up a higher percentage of faculty than do African-American professors (4.1 percent) or gay and lesbian professors (3.8 percent). Most of those conservative faculty members are probably not in highly politicized fields, like sociology. If, however, more of us were willing to speak up, we could at the very least let undergraduates see that there are still conservative intellectuals.

Of course, in an atmosphere in which it is easier to praise Che Guevara than any Republican president of the past several decades, few conservatives are likely to step forward. The conceit of *Passing on the Right*, an excellent book by John A. Shields and Joshua M. Dunn, is that some conservatives fear the professional consequences of "coming out."

Faculty members and administrations could do more to encourage them. I published a review that book in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Coddled on Campus" in the thick of the protests that were sweeping college campuses in 2015 and 2016, and I was worried about a backlash. Sure enough, I received a call from an administrator the next day. But as it turned out, the call was an invitation to address a discussion group for college staff, which I gladly accepted. I doubt very many in the group agreed with me, but I felt proud to work at a college in which such a discussion centered not at all on ideological posing and entirely, instead, on how best to teach our students.

That is probably not the norm. Just ask Samuel Abrams of Sarah Lawrence College, whose office was vandalized after he published an op-ed about the leftward tilt of student affairs administrators. According to Abrams, the president of the college accused him of creating a hostile working environment and, without saying so explicitly, suggested that "he might be better off leaving the school."

Nonetheless, as Abrams's research suggests, the ideological make-up of colleges and universities varies a great deal. Abrams's 2014 survey found that New England campuses had a 28-to-one ratio of liberal to conservative faculty. Administrators on such campuses may need uncommon courage to create an atmosphere in which conservatives see few risks in speaking up. Nationally, where Abrams found only a six-to-one ratio, less courage is needed.

Affirmative action for conservative professors is neither in the cards nor would it be desirable. But much can be accomplished by the administrators and faculty who are willing to muster a little courage. They can create an atmosphere in which conservatives feel confident about articulating their views, which should be subject to the same degree of scrutiny as anyone else's.