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Diversity at Duke? Conservatives Need Not Apply

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The Duke Conservative Union, a student group mobilized to advocate conservative views on the Duke University campus, recently caused quite a stir on campus when the group released an open letter addressed to President Nannerl O. Keohane, published as an advertisement in the independent campus newspaper. The article cited President Keohane's comment at the time of her inauguration as Duke's president: "My message is straight forward: Diversity is an important value that must be nurtured and used in higher education." The Union's ad then went on to challenge the university president on her commitment to diversity.

"We would hope, then, that your earnest regard for 'diversity' would be apparent on your own campus," the students wrote. "This does not, however, appear to be the case. The following information regarding the political party registrations of Duke faculty members might be of interest in your pursuit of your noble goal of 'diversity'."

That statement was followed by a chart listing the political party affiliation of tenured faculty in select Duke academic departments. The students had identified party affiliation by using registration records available to the public. Their chart revealed that of the deans serving schools of Duke University, nine were registered Democrats and only one was registered as a Republican. In the Department of Art History, faculty included fourteen Democrats, one unaffiliated, and no Republicans. What about the Department of Cultural Anthropology? The chart revealed eleven Democrats, two unaffiliated, and no Republicans. English? The department includes eighteen Democrats, one unaffiliated, and a single Republican. The Department of History included thirty-two Democrats, four unaffiliated and no Republicans. Literature, philosophy, and sociology, combined to total thirty-two Democrats, nine unaffiliated, and no Republicans. The only department with more than one Republican was the Department of Political Science which claimed twenty-six Democrats, one unaffiliated, and six Republicans. Apparently, "diversity" at Duke University means diversity for Democrats.

The question posed by the Duke Conservative Union was straightforward: "Is this 'diversity'?" All too soon, it was revealed that "diversity" was not to include conservative viewpoints, at least according to many Duke professors and officials.

President Keohane released an official statement responding to the advertisement. She congratulated the Duke Conservative Union for raising "a question that deserves a thoughtful answer." Nonetheless, she denied that the political affiliation of faculty has anything meaningful to do with intellectual diversity on her campus. "For me, the question is not the personal political views of members of our faculty or their party affiliation, it's the quality of their scholarship and the strength of their teaching, which includes ensuring that classrooms are open to diverse, often contrary, views."

In reality, that response says almost nothing. She just avoided the question at hand and the evidence provided by the Duke Conservative Union. How can a serious administrator or academic leader deny that political party affiliation has

anything to do with intellectual diversity? Just imagine what would happen if the statistics were reversed!

In the aftermath of the advertisement and the initial university response, Provost Peter Lange hosted a panel to explore the interplay of politics and academic freedom. Most of the panelists dismissed the figures on party affiliation as irrelevant and uninteresting. David Adcock, Duke's University Counsel, condescendingly characterized the data on party affiliation as "almost trivial and certainly banal." Amazingly enough, Adcock went on to say, "Republican, Democrat is...well it's a public record. But it's not any meaningful measure of political ideology. One cannot equate conservatism with the Republican Party or the Republican Party with conservatism."

While other panelists shared Adcock's dismissal of the data, most disagreed with his assertion that Republican does not generally mean conservative. Law professor William Van Alstyne insisted that the university should never consider party affiliation in hiring decisions. A former president of the ultra-liberal American Association of University Professors, Van Alstyne argued that the data on political affiliation was essentially meaningless.

The only Republican on the panel, political science chairman Michael Munger, argued that the Duke Conservative Union had made an effective and important point in publishing the data. He quoted a faculty colleague as arguing that "asking history to hire a conservative is exactly like asking biology to hire a Creationist—someone who denies evolution." The logic of Duke's liberal faculty, Munger explained, is as follows: "Being conservative is by definition not intellectually respectable. Conservatives are simply not qualified." As Munger insisted, "The problem is not too many Democrats, the problem is too few Republicans to be able to say it is an ideology-blind process. There is no other explanation for the overwhelming disparity."

Munger's point was that ideology and political bias are the only possible explanations for the radical disparity. What else can explain such a disparity in party affiliation and such an unapologetic commitment to Democratic dominance on the faculty?

In a shocking statement, Robert Brandon, chair of the philosophy department, set the issue clearly: "We try to hire the best, smartest people available. If, as John Stuart Mill said, stupid people are generally conservative, then there are lots of conservatives we will never hire." Did you get that? According to the chairmen of the philosophy department at Duke University, conservative people are generally stupid and stupid people are generally conservative. How's that for intellectual sophistication, a commitment to diversity, and tolerance for diverse political perspectives?

Brandon went on to comment, "Mill's analysis may go some way towards explaining the power of the Republican Party in our society and the relative scarcity of Republicans in academia. Players in the NBA tend to be taller than average. There's a good reason for this. Members of academia tend to be a bit smarter than average. There's a good reason for this too."

In a subsequent statement, Brandon argued that he had meant for his point to be taken humorously. Yet, he went on to make the same essential point all over again. "There is a statistical association between the qualities that make for good academics and those that lead the left-wing political views. Said another way, a larger proportion of academics are likely to be liberal, but certainly not all, and this may also vary by field and subfield because of the nature of knowledge, learning and the advancement of knowledge in that field." Conservatives, he argues, are about indoctrination, not education.

That last point is especially worthy of note as the liberals never admit their own efforts at indoctrination. Professor Munger did not let this point pass, and he related a statement made by a fellow department chair to the effect that "the function of Duke was to rid conservative students of their hypocrisies." In other words, many Duke University professors see the task of liberalizing their students as the very essence of their personal and professional responsibilities.

All this goes a long way towards explaining why Duke has become a base for leftist political views. The chairman of Duke's literature department is an avowed communist, and the university has become a haven for leftist ideologists.

Many at Duke are proud of this distinction. Professor emeritus Lawrence Evans wrote an infamous letter to the Raleigh News and Observer almost two years ago, acknowledging an "insufficient diversity of political affiliation among university faculty." As Evans acknowledged, poll numbers show Republicans to be a small minority among professors. "Rightly so," countered Evans.

“In seeking faculty, universities look for people who can analyze and discuss matters of some complexity, who are unafraid to challenge the wisdom of simple solutions and who have a sense of social responsibility toward those who cannot buy influence,” Evans asserted. “Such people tend to be put off by a political party dominated by those who believe dogmatically in the infallibility of the marketplace as a solution to all economic problems, or else in the infallibility of scripture as a guide to morality.”

Just in case we missed the point, Evans went for the kill: “In short, universities want people of some depth, subtlety and intelligence. People like that usually vote for the Democrats. So what?”

The Wall Street Journal reports that posters have recently appeared on the campus of Saint Lawrence University in New York. The posters read, “Republicans: The Other White Meat.” Hostility towards conservatives—identified here by affiliation with the Republican Party—is routine on many campuses. The Journal reported that the Stanford University faculty includes 151 professors aligned with left-wing parties [such as the Democrats and Greens] and only 17 were identified as either Republicans or Libertarians. A review of Ivy League academics determined that eighty-four percent had voted for Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election, while only nine percent voted for George Bush and six percent cast their ballots for Ralph Nader. As National Review staff writer John J. Miller concluded, “Apparently the term liberal arts is just another way of saying conservatives need not apply.”

College and university campuses are among the most important fronts in the culture war, and these incidents underline the reality that conservative viewpoints—and conservative professors—are simply not welcome on many of the nation’s leading campuses, where faculty and administrators hypocritically claim academic freedom, intellectual diversity, and freedom from intellectual bias as hallmarks of their professionalism. Hats off to the Duke Conservative Union for proving that the university’s claims about diversity are nothing more than window dressing for liberal worldviews.

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