Can we support academic freedom and the right to criticize academic activists?

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Josh Berdeaux · 3 days ago

Back in the 1960's this would not be much of a discussions given most of the support for various political & social movements came from the academic environments around the country. Contemporary issues, e.g. climate change for example, seem to be less personal than say the civil rights social movement of the 60's, but they are just as important to the welfare of our social systems and speak to the very foundational ideas of the Constitutional elements of a healthy democracy.

One idea is about policies and so-call academic freedom, free speech or even speech codes, etc. for professors and students who use their official affiliations to give credibility to their personal, political convictions within the world of politics. Should professors, for example, who sign a controversial petition or letter supporting the assessment and condemnation by the EPA of a controversial resource project such as the Pebble Mine controversy here in Alaska or the more national controversy of the Keystone XL project be subjected to retaliation or other reprisals by the universities or pressures by state governments or even the federal governments agencies or certain types of legislation such as the PATRIOT Act of 2001 or the corporate supported political representatives?

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Joel Kovarsky · 2 days ago

Much to the chagrin of past academics, it is not clear that the SCOTUS has ever answered this or that the Constitution defends the right of "academic freedom" under the first amendment. Some thought that the 2010 Virginia case of Jefferson v. Cuccinelli might help to answer this, but it likely did no such thing, because the case was argued under the Virginia fraud statute. There was an interesting discussion in

Slate, by Dahlia Lithwick and Richard Schragger, subtitled "Does the Constitution really protect a right to "academic freedom"?" http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2010/06/jefferson_v_cuccinelli.single.... . Many petitions supporting the concept were signed in this case. From the article discussion:

"...What precisely is "academic freedom," and why would the Constitution protect it? Who can assert "academic freedom"—individual faculty members or the university as a whole? What is the scope of the right, and does it apply to faculty at state universities or those who receive government grants? The Supreme Court has never really answered these questions. *UVA v. Cuccinelli* would be a good time to do so—if the case ever gets that far...

The Virginia fraud statute is clearly the wrong vehicle for prosecuting science, and it's likely a court will deem the subpoena invalid before anyone gets near the big issue of academic freedom. That's too bad. Because a judicial decision in this case could finally clarify that basic scholarly inquiry is at the core of the First Amendment..."

Looking at a summary of the decision (http://law.justia.com/cases/virginia/supreme-court/2012/102359.html) it appears that Lithwick and Schragger were accurate, and we do not know what "academic freedom" is, at least in a constitutional sense.

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+ Comment

Joel Kovarsky · 2 days ago

I also found a more recent discussion, by Vikram David Amar and Alan Brownstein, concerning the case of Demers v. Austin heard before the 9th circuit: http://verdict.justia.com/2013/09/13/precisely-how-much-academic-freedom-should-does-the-first-amend... . They do note the following:

"Let us begin by explaining why we think there is a strong case to be made that university professors deserve First Amendment protection for at least some of what they say and do, even when they do it on the government's dime and pursuant to their public-employment duties. It is always dangerous to identify certain classes of public employees who should enjoy more free speech rights than others, but we think that a distinctive protection for professors can be derived from a functional analysis of the jobs that universities are supposed to play in modern society..."

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+ Comment

Anonymous · 2 days ago

I would differentiate between two types of academics,

- Academics that work in STEM fields, where the "ultimate test" is whether theories are verified by

either logical proofs (mathematics) or empirical experiments (the rest).

- All other academics which are basically political ideologues.

I do think that these political ideologues should be treated as such when it comes to academic policy. Meaning, that it should be OK from a legal standpoint to consider "party affiliation" or the political bias of their work, be it in academic papers or op-eds in general publications, when making tenure decisions. To a certain degree, this already happens since most non STEM fields are dominated by liberals, but at least that would make the process more transparent for everyone involved, including those who send their kids to Yale to have them brainwashed by these academics.

Of course, all of them should be treated as "citizens" who have a right to express their political point of view, just as people who work for private businesses have said right, but I do not think that there should be an extra protection for political ideology, beyond what already exists in the private sector, for any academics.

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Josh Berdeaux · 2 days ago

I am sure I will be criticized for making the following general statements, but my experience and academic background leads me to generalizations at times.

“Academics that work in STEM[1] fields, where the "ultimate test" is whether theories are verified by either logical proofs (mathematics) or empirical experiments (the rest).”

STEM folks tend to be more right-hemisphere orientated and as such as a very different mind-set, i.e. tend to be multidimensional thinkers than “All other academics which are basically political ideologues.” Which I think tends to be more left-hemisphere oriented, i.e. linier thinkers. My personal orientation is being a right-brain thinker and I operate multidimensionally in my thinking.

Therefore, I agree with your generalized division of the sides of academia.

Next you state: “I do think that these political ideologues should be treated as such when it comes to academic policy. Meaning, that it should be OK from a legal standpoint to consider "party affiliation" or the political bias of their work, be it in academic papers or op-eds in general publications, when making tenure decisions.”

It would seem that this is a logical extension of a person’s mind-set and thinking processes. But then I would question why there is not the same legal treatment of the political bias in their work in the courses they teach, e.g. when a student does not agree with the particular ideologues which bleed through the professor’s teachings and grading style. For example I

had a Chinese instructor once that told the class that Americans do not understand their own culture. A bit bold on his part, but then I do not think he understood American Culture as well as it thought he did and this was in a Sustainability course which should have had some STEM elements complementing the course material?

“To a certain degree, this already happens since most non STEM fields are dominated by liberals,”

I guess we are saying that a “liberal” is the opposite of a “conservative” here for simplicity? My problem has always been trying to draw that line between the two sides of the politics to determine what the parameters are for each. But I think we have had three presidents which are Yale graduates and a First Lady, i.e. the Clintons and of course George Bush.

I am sure you know that Old McDonald was a bad speller if your watch the Geico commercials, but did you know on the Yale campus in April 1775 classes are suspended when news of the Concord battle arrives. Ebenezer Huntington[2], a senior, asks for permission to join the gathering troops around Boston. He is denied release, but goes anyway being the first Yale student to enter the Continental Army and his political affiliation was Federalist. I do not know if Federalist were Liberals or conservatives.

But, even back then Yale has a foot-print to the Constitutions later birth. :-)

“Of course, all of them should be treated as "citizens" who have a right to express their political point of view, just as people who work for private businesses have said right, but I do not think that there should be an extra protection for political ideology, beyond what already exists in the private sector, for any academics.”

That is a good comparison and agrees there should be equal rights under the law. Unfortunately our courts have recorded for us there is not equal protection under the law. Personally, I am not sure which I am or if I am both since I seem to have some characteristics of each. The dilemma is whether I am a liberal-conservative or a conservative-liberal? But I do know I tend to be a STEM with a bit of each in my studies, but in this case I think I lean more toward math.

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[1] Fields of study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

[2] Later an officer in the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War, and afterwards United States Representative from Connecticut.

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Anonymous · 2 days ago

It seems we are on the same page here.

During my stay at Stanford as graduate student, I always saw those in non STEM fields as money wasters. And that is "literally" a fact. STEM professors are expected to get money from research grants while non STEM professors get funded mostly from Stanford's endowment. For the most part, non STEM professors tend to be trouble makers, always advancing their own political pet project and seeing their role as the brainwashers of the next generation.

By contrast, in STEM fields, like the one I got my PhD in, the professors see themselves as training the next generation of scientists and technologists, They polish your analytical mind, plain and simple.

From where I stand, I would fire all the humanities professors and would leave only those who teach things that are useful. In fact, that was Leland Stanford's own desire for the university he founded.

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Anonymous · 2 days ago

Anonymous, you might wish to check again on Leland Stanford's vision. Here's a snippet about the founding of the university from this page at stanford.edu :

"The Leland Stanford Junior University was founded in 1885 by California Senator Leland Stanford and his wife, Jane, in memory of their only child, Leland Jr., who died of typhoid fever at 15. After his 1884 death, the Stanfords determined that they would use their wealth to do something for “other people’s” children.

"They decided to create a university, one that, from the outset, was untraditional: coeducational in a time when most private universities were all-male; nondenominational when most were associated with a religious organization; and avowedly practical, producing '**cultured** and useful citizens' when most were concerned only with the former. **The Founding Grant states the university’s objective is 'to qualify its students for personal success, and direct usefulness in life' and its purpose 'to promote the public welfare by exercising an influence in behalf of humanity and civilization.'"** (Emphasis mine.)

Better not fire all those humanities professors after all.

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Josh Berdeaux · 2 days ago

Anonymous, the page numbers looked very close. Stanford, excellent school. I had Keith Devin for a math course.

“For the most part, non-STEM professors tend to be trouble makers, always advancing their own political pet project and seeing their role as the brainwashers of the next generation.”

I follow school litigation and complaints as kind of an interest because of the decline of quality in Higher-Ed, and K-12 also. My contribution to society is being a disability advocate volunteer for students with disabilities. There does seem to be a pattern with non-STEM’s getting more than their share of law-suits and complaints. I feel confidant saying that administrators with non-STEM credentials seem to get their share of litigation also. Different mind-set for non-STEM's.

I am not sure if it is due to not having practical work experience in the real world or in their fields rather than just going through school and on into teaching seem to be the most insecure when it comes to being challenged by others, particularly students that are smarter than the instructor. When my dad went through school students and professors had dialogue. He has STEM majors in engineering and taught math courses (well science also since he once taught courses in biology) and the technologies also. So he is a 100% STEM. I kind of patterned some of my educational adventures after his pattern of learning. In one of his former lives (he is 70 now and is still going to school) he was an engineer for Marathon Oil Corp. He has expressed his ideas on doctorates, said he had fun getting his but times where different then.

I have seen some real ego issues floating around universities since I started college. But they do seem to be related to the specialty field of the owner. I think what bothers me most is the double standard for the due process for professors and students. This becomes very clear when the student has a disability which requires some form of accommodation from their school.

One of the reasons I am taking this course is to get a different look at the Constitution. I had one Constitution course as an under grad as part of some law courses. But this one has a different orientation to it which is more in my style of thinking, i.e. kind of out-of-the-box.

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Anonymous · 2 days ago

Josh,

I think that the main difference between STEM and non STEM fields is that STEM fields deal with absolute truth. You cannot "spin" the law of gravity or accuse G, the gravitational constant, of being discriminatory for not being a different number. It is what it is. Even in engineering, where there is more creativity since the goal is to build stuff vs just studying it, what a good "engineering concept" is can be generally well defined. As a student in a STEM field, your goal is to learn from the best and hopefully come up with some good ideas of your own. Even what "peer review" means is different. Take the well known example of Andrew Wiles' proof of Fermat's Last Theorem. The conjecture itself was well defined. The question was whether the proof provided by Andrew Wiles was correct from a mathematical deduction point of view. In fact, the first proof he provided was wrong.

In non STEM fields, all is opinion. And since postmodernism/deconstruction, things have only gotten worse. Thus, a "good idea" is whatever the squeakiest voice says it is. In physics, "hypothetical entities" like super symmetry particles are only interesting if you can show they exist, otherwise, not so much. In Constitutional Law, a US Supreme Court justice can invent a "right to abortion" out of nowhere and all he needs to do is to convince other justices that said right is real.

The same is true of contributors to knowledge. Nobody can accuse physics of being racist just because most (if not all) of its major contributors are white dudes. In non STEM fields, if a given area is dominated by white dudes, it is automatically called "racist" and "affirmative action" remedies are immediately sought.

As a result, non STEM scholars (both professors and students) tend to be nastier and more unsufferable. This is not to say that there isn't a lot of ego going on in STEM fields, but your ego, sooner or later, will have to face the laws of nature which are deterministic and unchangeable :D.

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Josh Berdeaux · a day ago

Good response and interesting thoughts. One in particular got my thoughts moving, i.e. “You cannot "spin" the law of gravity or accuse G, the gravitational constant, of being discriminatory for not being a different number.” As to “absolute truth”, this seems to me to be a relative concept , much like time, rather than an absolute.

Well actually G can be discriminatory as to results due time[1] not being constant. Therefore, we can say that if G is not adjusted for the variation of time not being constant then G would not be constant.

“Gravitational Constant (G) that is proportional to the radius of the observable universe that increases with time. A time-varying G implies that calculations of the properties of very distant astronomical objects using a constant G need to be corrected. The theory indicates that only a finite value of gravity is possible so that singularities with infinite density and infinite gravity cannot occur in nature.”

See the entire article; Time Variation in the Gravitational Constant for the rest of the details.

As to STEM’s, it is like democrats and republicans, it really depends on which side you are on.

I have degrees from both STEM’s and non-STEM’s fields, but favor the STEM side of my personality as it makes my brain more comfortable when thinking.

[1] See Einstein’s Theory of Relatively.

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Anonymous · a day ago

Josh,

You are getting confused. There might be ways to write equations that result with an "effective G" that is time varying, but G itself is not. In fact, it is not the only such constant in the universe. I don't want to get off topic but the basis of the https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropic_principle is the fine tuning of the universe with these constants. They are what they are, something that upsets many atheist scientists, but if they want fame they need admit that their value is what it is :D.

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Josh Berdeaux · 14 hours ago

Anonymous: “You are getting confused. There might be ways to write equations that result with an "effective G" that is time varying, but G itself is not. In fact, it is not the only such constant in the universe.”

Ok, I am going to pull out the relativity card to make my point. I understand what you are

saying, but do not agree with your proposition as to the universal constants.

A physical constant is a physical quantity that is generally believed to be both universal in nature and “constant in time.” We know time is not constant

Planck’s gravitational constant, denoted by letter *G*, is an empirical[1] physical constant involved in the calculation(s) of gravitational force between two bodies.

In the empiricist view, one can only claim to have knowledge when one has a ”true belief” based on empirical evidence.

In the science view , empirical evidence is required for a hypothesis to gain acceptance in the scientific community. Normally, this validation is achieved by the scientific method of hypothesis commitment, experimental design, peer review, adversarial review, reproduction of results, conference presentation and journal publication.

Planck’s quantities are in review within the science community in which these folks are working on the formation of a variant of extended special relativity[2] that takes into consideration the existence of “limiting” relativistically invariant quantities[3]. They have hypothesized that, according to the classical gravitation theory, it can be generalized on the basis of the postulate of the gravitation constant being a limiting and invariant quantity while preserving Einstein’s postulates of special relativity.

[1] a source of knowledge acquired by means of observation or experimentation

[2] It shows the possibility of excluding unphysical predictions of relativity theories by the use of the concept of the maximum velocity of the observed motion of objects. It proposes a model of a vacuum-like medium with a kinematical property of relativistically invariant rest.

[3] Planck quantities (parameters) are considered as fundamental physical constants related to the structure of the medium.

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+ Comment

Tony Breecher · 2 days ago

The study of law is a study of the Humanities. Just pointing out an irony...
I would quite disagree that only STEM is of value, or that *every* professor seeks to brainwash their students with political ideology. Having degrees in both History and Religious Studies as well as a JD, I've seen quite a lot of professors in my day. Certainly some were better than others, but it was, in my experience, quite rare for a professor to be so engrossed in their political beliefs that it bled through the material into the classroom. Indeed, I could not now reflect on the professors that I had and tell you for certain what their politics were. Indeed, I was surprised, as a member of the Federalist Society in Law School, who the faculty advisors were for the club, and what their political leanings were because it never came up or came across in class. Generally, we were too busy learning what judges said the law is, versus what the professor thought the law should be. Maybe I got lucky, but the odds are against mere luck being at play here; though, as a STEM person, I would think that would be obvious to you. I'm just saying, I would caution a bit more restraint against the use of gross overgeneralizations and straw-man argumentation.

Just for one more example: I would point out that most of the Framers were lawyers, who had extensive academic training in the Humanities. If your postulate that the Humanities is useless (which is the contrapositive implication of your final sentence) were true, then it would logically follow that what the Framers did in creating the Constitution, could not have been the result of their useless education in the humanities. Yet, when one reads the Federalist Papers, it is replete with historical analyses of every prior democratic and republican government known to European history. Simply put, their acumen for crafting the Constitution was based heavily on the weaknesses they perceived in historical examples. I would say they got quite a lot of use from their education in the Humanities.

Finally, to the OP: The First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech. According to the case law on the subject, Political Speech is one of the most protected forms of speech. Therefore, it should be the case that Academics may exercise their right to freely express their political points of view in their capacity as private citizens. When an academic of any stripe is at his lectern teaching a class, he has a job to do. It would be inappropriate for the professor to begin complaining about Obamacare or the USA PATRIOT Act, or why Roe v. Wade was rightly or wrongly decided. Time, Place and Manner restrictions on speech may be imposed, and will only be held to the Rational Basis test, so long as they are reasonable and content-neutral. A professor still has to be effective at his job, and therefore should not use his lectern as a pullpit because it would be bad for the students and the University for the professor to waste time in such a way. On the other hand, if the State University tries to impose a content-based restriction on speech, the Strict Scrutiny test will usually function to destroy it.

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Anonymous · 2 days ago

Law is a bit of a strange animal. There is the "piratical aspect of it" and then there is the "activist aspect of it".

The practical aspect is not STEM but it comes close since it requires a great degree of analytical thinking as to how things are supposed to be (written law) and how things have turned out to be (case law) so that you can predict how things might turn out in a given legal case.

As for the activist aspect of it, in the most controversial issues, it boils down to the ideology of the judges, not to some "clear cut result that can be unequivocally derived from written law and case law". Scalia said in his famous debate with Breyer that the reason he writes such detailed opinions even when he loses is not to convince the public, which only gets a headline in the best case, but to leave a written legacy to convince future students of the court who might later become federal judges themselves.

So, law is more of a professional school, along the lines of medicine and business. In fact, the JD degree is not considered an academic degree but a professional one. Still, when you go to law school, for the most controversial matters, you are getting indoctrination of some sort, there is no question about that.

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Tony Breecher · 2 days ago

But there is a very real question about that, given that the overwhelming majority of law students have already fixed their ideologies by the time they reach grad school. For the most part, those who remain impressionable tend to be either the most analytical or the most naïve. The truly analytical ones can be swayed by good and convincing evidence; and the naïve ones can't tell the difference between good evidence and bad so they either vascilate like a windsock or adopt a belief they find aesthetically pleasing and hold it with extreme recalcitrance. Place these personality types on a spectrum and it becomes apparent why such variability exists among individuals.

Still, I still find it to be an unsupportable assertion that all Humanities are useless and should not be taught. As stated earlier, the Framers seem to have found much utility in them; as have others.

Additionally, I find disagreement with the interpretation that all Humanities studies are based entirely on subjective opinions. Indeed, STEM fields of expertise permiate the disciplines of Archaeology, Anthropology and History, as well as many others. The disciplines of Dendrochronology and radioactive decay dating firmly establish sequences of events and shed a great deal of light on questions like causality. Additionally, historians and archaeologists frequently use DNA sequencing to determine the true nature of previously unknown or mysterious pathogens, like those that devastated the population of the Western Roman Empire. Surely you could not be ignorant of these kinds of hard data which underlie such disciplines, given how well-versed you are in STEM.

Indeed, I would hypothesize that STEM has a great weakness: students, graduates, teachers and professionals tend to see the world in a rather binary way. All things either work, or not; are right or wrong; are certain or chaotic. Those who are trained in the most predictable and deterministic STEM field often have trouble with ideas that traverse a spectrum; and the more, overlapping spectral variables in a system, the more difficult it becomes for a deterministic and/or binary mind to appropriately analyze the system. This observation is

certainly not true of all STEM trained people; but it illustrates how a supplemental education in humanities can help to counterbalance false senses of certainty and determinism that can sometimes be more troublesome than beneficial.

This is certainly less true of those who have studied Quantum Mechanics, given the inherent nature and thorough permiation of the Uncertainty Principle, as well as the odd kinds of phenomena like Superposition, and the lingering issues like reconciling the descriptions of gravity's behavior in Quantum versus Relativity. Not everything scales properly across the entire spectrum, and to compensate, we sometimes have to improvise with less-than-perfect solutions.

See, my take on the discussion is that much of what has been said is rather oversimplified. Certainly, I have seen quite a few bad teachers, but I think a big part of the problem is how grossly underpaid teachers are, given that their profession requires a master's degree, else penalties are imposed. Simply put, there is not enough money to attract the kind of talent that such a profession requires. Perhaps it explains part of the STEM bias on this discussion board to note that STEM teachers may be better because they are better paid than Humanities teachers, and therefore, the schools can attract better talent.

That said, my biggest problem with this discussion is how much generalization has been done about how STEM and non-STEM people behave in society. Ironically, I am seeing people who claim to be trained in STEM, but seem to be practicing Sociology, while simultaneously doing so in the complete absence of appropriate evidence. There are no large, scientific, properly controlled statistical surveys; no controlled laboratory tests involving proplem-solving experiments or cognitive-behavioral analysis; not even a single fMRI to describe what brain structures are behaving differently between these two, alternatively trained populations. All that has been presented is some anecdotal evidence and a whole slew of bald, conclusory, borderline paranoid statements that 'our kids are getting politically brainwashed in school!'

This kind of dialogue is unworthy of people who have been trained in STEM. Even for engineers!

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Josh Berdeaux · a day ago

"…as a STEM person, I would think that would be obvious to you. I'm just saying, I would caution a bit more restraint against the use of gross overgeneralizations and straw-man argumentation."

I provided my disclaimer in my first sentence knowing I would be criticized for my generalities.

Our political orientations are just one part of our mind-set, yet being a part of it, there is some influence whether overt or not and it still is there and part of how we present our thinking.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · a day ago

I never said that humanities are useless (although indeed, I believe that most that passes for scholarship in the humanities is, like this https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal_affair); my point is that humanities, not being based on absolute truth, resolve their controversial issues by voting while in STEM fields, voting might give you political power now (political in the sense of "academic politics") but ridicule tomorrow if the result voting produces is wrong. The most famous example of "voting being wrong" is of course geocentrism. "Consensus" is not part of the scientific method, regardless that some in the humanities (who themselves are used to it) think it is. Science is about coming up with laws (theories if you will), making testable falsifiable experiments, and confirming or refuting those theories by the result of the experiments.

With respect to carbon dating, that onto itself is not really humanities. The question "how old item X is" is scientific. What is not scientific are theories of historians about the meaning of this or that historical event in the "larger scheme of things". I like politics and history a lot (I am a news junkie) but in terms of actual knowledge, I think that the humanities professors are usually political ideologues whose job is to brainwash the next generation of leaders (BTW, that goes for both conservative and liberal humanities scholars). They should be recognized for what they are.

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Tony Breecher · a day ago

Joel, I can't say that disclaiming is a perfect method of avoiding criticism; indeed, flagging that you're about to say something that is a generalization may invite criticism from those who are not fans of it, and who may see generalizations as damaging to the conversation. That said, your comments were not the ones I take the most issue with, if that makes you feel better.

Anonymous, I realize it's hard to be tell you all apart, given that you use the same moniker, but earlier, you or one of your brethren said this:
"From where I stand, I would fire all the humanities professors and would leave only those who teach things that are useful."

If firing the humanities professors would leave only those who mteach something useful, the obvious contrapositive is that humanities are not useful. I disagree, and have supported my disagreement with examples that have not been discussed, let alone refuted. That said, if the above anonymous isn't the same anonymous who posted that statement, then I suppose I will let the point go; but it should be an object lesson in why using an anonymous method of commentary is problematic. Perhaps if you declared a pseudonym for yourself that you began

your messages with. Might I suggest 'Publius'?

To address another statement:
"...but in terms of actual knowledge, I think that the humanities professors are usually political ideologues whose job is to brainwash the next generation of leaders (BTW, that goes for both conservative and liberal humanities scholars)."

While I appreciate your even-handedness with regard to political viewpoint, I still believe it is an unsupportable (or, at least, unsupported), conclusory statement. The very idea that, somehow, all humanities professors are attempting to 'brainwash' anybody is absurd and reflects that same paranoid viewpoint I mentioned in my last post. If you're going to say such things, I strongly suggest you back them up with some sort of evidence. I mean, you harshly criticize the humanities for a lack of intellectual rigor, but then you claim they're all political ideologues whose goals and careers are centered around indoctrination without offering a shred of evidence to support the conclusion!

It is an extraordinary claim, and extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. Please supply some.

Additionally, the Hoax you sited was tied to a non-peer-reviewed journal. The overwhelming majority of historical and social journals are peer reviewed, just like the ones for STEM fields. Furthermore, if you're going to condemn an entire set of intellectual fields for a single hoax being perpetrated against one journal, then what would you say if it were shown that a hoax or two had been perpetrated against it? Like The Bogdanov Affair, 2002.

It is as patently false to think of the humanities as rife with hoaxes and false information as it is to think of STEM as being immune from the same. Perhaps if were more than a hobbyist in your interest in history, you would have a better understanding of how much intellectual rigor and scientific process are integral parts of the vanguard of the community. Peer review is an extant feature of most of the historical journals, and theories about the relationships between events are debated constantly by people with great command of logic and source data. It is inappropriate to make such negative generalizations about an entire set of fields; especially given that among the sciences represented by the S in STEM are soft sciences like psychology and medicine, where the systems being described by the work are so complex that a great many foundational aspects of our understanding are still unsettled and in an active state of research. It is not true of all STEM disciplines that there is as much certainty as Physicists have with the Gravitational Constant. But such missing nuance are a predictable outcome of gross overgeneralizations.

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Joel Kovarsky · a day ago

Tony,

That was Josh, not Joel (if I understand your intent).

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Tony Breecher · a day ago

So it was. Sorry about that. Must have got to typing too fast! Lol!

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 21 hours ago

Tony,

"peer review" means different things in different contexts. In Constitutional law, the ultimate "peer review" are the SCOTUS decisions which are, on the most controversial issues, ideological. The same is true in the humanities so called "peer review". A bunch of professors vote on whether something like postmodernism is great. If you convince enough "peers", it is "great". If you don't, it is not.

In STEM, "peer review" is only meant to check whether the scientific method was followed (case of empirical sciences) or that the rules of mathematical deduction were followed. There is also an aspect of claims of "novelty" and relevance with several examples that where correct papers on the scientific aspect being rejected for publication because of a perceived "lack of relevance". This is where the nature of science kicks in. If the idea is truly good, being rejected for "lack of relevance" only dooms the reviewer not the idea. A classic example is http://www.math.byu.edu/~jeffh/publications/papers/kalman-siam.pdf which was originally rejected by "peers". Now it is used everywhere because it delivers results.

"According to Grewal and Andrews [14, Chapter 1], Kalman's second paper [24] was actually rejected by an electrical engineering journal, since, as one of the referees put it, "it cannot possibly be true." However, with the help of Stanley F. Schmidt at the NASA Ames Research Center, the Kalman filter ultimately gained acceptance as it was used successfully in the navigation systems for the Apollo missions, as well as several subsequent NASA projects and a number of military defense systems; see [32, 14] for details.
Today the Kalman family of state estimation methods, which includes the Kalman filter and its many variations, are the de facto standard for state estimation. At the time of this writing, there have been over 6000 patents awarded in the U.S. on applications or processes involving the Kalman filter. In academia, its influence is no less noteworthy. According to Google Scholar, the phrase "Kalman filter" is found in over 100,000 academic papers. In addition, Kalman's original paper [22] is reported to have over 7500 academic citations. Indeed, the last 50 years have seen phenomenal growth in the variety of applications of the Kalman filter."

Simply put, no "humanities scholarship" can be tested against nature or against "empirical testing". This is a fact, and you can spin the Bogdanov affair all day long or begin insulting as every liberal that preceded you did when faced with the facts. I don't care, at the end of the day, "peer review" cannot make humans fly without planes or similar devices :-). However,

"peer review" can invent abortion rights or gay marriage rights.

0 · flag

Tony Breecher · 20 hours ago

Anonymous, I'll get back to the rest of your post in a little bit, but first I'd like to know: am I to assume that the various points you left unaddressed are conceded?

-1 · flag

Anonymous · 19 hours ago

What points???

0 · flag

Anonymous · 19 hours ago

Maybe your were referring to this,

"especially given that among the sciences represented by the S in STEM are soft sciences like psychology and medicine, where the systems being described by the work are so complex that a great many foundational aspects of our understanding are still unsettled and in an active state of research. It is not true of all STEM disciplines that there is as much certainty as Physicists have with the Gravitational Constant. But such missing nuance are a predictable outcome of gross overgeneralizations."

I would not put psychology, and other soft sciences as economics, in the same bag as medicine which is for the most part scientific. The well known phenomenon known as https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physics_envy pervades the soft sciences.

Because hard science has been so successful, there is a creepy tendency among non hard scientists to misuse the word "science" as if appropriating its name would give their disciplines the rigor required to be more scientific.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. And I am happy it doesn't work that way in fact. There are areas of life that are not scientific, more prominently the arts. What is "good art" depends on personal taste and the historical context. The same is true of politics, religion, etc. The poster example of so called "soft science" that I do not consider to be hard science is economics. There was a joke long time ago in which some economist is given the problem of predicting the growth of a herd of cows. The economist, after looking at all the data and hypotheses, begins his discussion "let's suppose each cow is a sphere!" . You get the idea :D. Economists are right 50 % of the time, which makes their predictions rather useless (which is not to say that all economics is useless, not at all but I do not consider economics to be an S that deserves to be included in the STEM fields). Microeconomics is the area of economics that resembles hard science the most. Unfortunately, it is usually of little predictive

value, with game theory being one of those few microeconomics ideas that results in good predictions even in practice.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Josh Berdeaux · 18 hours ago

Tony: “STEM fields of expertise permiate the disciplines of Archaeology, Anthropology and History, as well as many others. The disciplines of Dendrochronology and radioactive decay dating firmly establish sequences of events and shed a great deal of light on questions like causality.”

This, for me, is the very bases for the degradation of higher education. The fact that everything has reach the level of specialization that we have to made divisions among the various fields offered in in higher –Ed.

“This observation is certainly not true of all STEM trained people; but it illustrates how a supplemental education in humanities can help to counterbalance false senses of certainty and determinism that can sometimes be more troublesome than beneficial.”

This is a good point and at the core of some of the issues within higher-Ed. I think we have reached a point when interdisciplinary studies need to be put back into the educational system as a norm, just for the very reasons you mentioned. I think each discipline loses the benefits of other disciplines regardless of the field. For example I learned about chaos theory in math and some science courses, but have use it more in business and environmental issues than in physics. Had I not had the STEM studies integration with my humanities disciplines then I would have missed some valuable tools, such as chaos theory, from my STEM training which few people in the business or sustainable development areas use. The problem is most people do not have a clue what I am talking about unless they have been exposed to at least some basic learning in chaos theory. When people ask me what chaos-theory is I just tell them that “dynamic systems show no discernible regularity,” and most seem to get it without taking a math course. Actually I use that phrase rather than chaos theory as it makes it simple and I do not have to explain anything. But, if anyone is interested here is a source to learn about it “Chaos: An Introduction to Dynamical Systems” and I think most everything is a dynamic system is some respect anyhow.

Having said this, as a group, it seems to me that the humanities have more whinny people that STEM's do, i.e. different mind-set.

But then my comments above are related to my personal experience in education and as a disability advocate, not so much in the real world of work and association just as my

environment during my life influences my mind-set. I think we started this discussion in relation to education as to the generalized statement toward the Humanities. For me to change my mind would be to have the opposite experience in higher-ED. long enough to change it and I think blending the fields of study for students would help facilitate a new environment in education.

We still judge people by the letters after their names. How many people put “Dr.” in front of their names on almost everything they do to let the world know they have one and these “types” seem to be the real issue in higher-Ed. And I think this is part of the root in the original posting.

Coursera, for example, is a blending of educational theories, modes & models of delivery, for those few in the world of learning that values learning for the fun & benefit of learning rather than developing bragging rights because of some degree from a certain university. We have our pick of some of the best minds and universities in the world, and it is all free to everyone who wants to learn.

This course I find it contributing more to my understanding, not only of the history of the Constitution, but the value of the Constitution to our society in America and now to the world. I did not get these benefits the last time I took a Constitution course as an undergraduate. What law courses I have had that associates with the Constitution, I did not get the value benefits to our society, or the injustices within the legal structure, but did get a good idea how we use it in the court systems, legislative bodies, and discrimination at the various levels of our social system.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Tony Breecher · 4 hours ago

Anonymous, when you say things like this it really illustrates how little you understand the scholarship of the humanities:
"Simply put, no "humanities scholarship" can be tested against nature or against "empirical testing". This is a fact, and you can spin the Bogdanov affair all day long or begin insulting as every liberal that preceded you did when faced with the facts. I don't care, at the end of the day, "peer review" cannot make humans fly without planes or similar devices :-). However, "peer review" can invent abortion rights or gay marriage rights."

The fact is that much historical work uses scientific methodology to firmly establish, to highest

degree of reliability possible, facts about specific times, places and events. Dating methods are the obvious example I brought up earlier, and DNA sequencing to identify pathogens which have had profound effects on various societies; not just Y. pestis from the black death, but also specific strains of microorganisms in Egyptian beer mash that produced antibiotics. That's right: recent scholarship has revealed that ancient Egyptian beer contained antibiotics; enough antibiotics, in fact, to leave detectable levels of them in the bones of mummies! But all of this technical precision, and use of STEM techniques is somehow incapable of altering your opinion.

The fact that certain observations made by those who practice Humanities scholarship are testable and objectively measurable against nature should indicate that you may be misusing the words "this is a fact" as quoted above. As is the case among even the hard sciences, there are facts and theories. Facts are the observable, repeatable outcomes of experimentation; theories are descriptions of the interrelationships that exist among known facts. When you condemn the humanities for being arbitrary and using bad scholarly techniques, it seems like what you are criticizing is the shifting landscape among competing theories that are attempting to explain how the known historical facts resulted in the macroscopic changes observed in a given society. Societies are chaotic structures in that the number of variables at work in the system far exceed the number of variables known. As is true with all chaotic systems, the degree to which such systems can be accurately described comes with a relatively high margin of error, lessened only increased data. But that is not the same as saying that humanities scholars don't know what they're talking about, or that the entire set of fields is useless.

As for "spinning" the Bogdanov Affair, I only brought it up to illustrate that no set of disciplines is fraud-proof; which is a condition that you seemed to think was important. Personally, I don't find one fraud in a-million-plus articles of solid scholarship to be of sufficient statistical significance to bother worrying about. But then, I'm not trying to discredit STEM, nor to give special consideration to the humanities. All I have ever been trying to do is to illustrate that the humanities are not a set of arbitrary, useless, capricious fields, which was your original position.

As for your bit about airplanes, I assume you mean to say that STEM builds useful things like airplanes and the humanities does not. I will certainly grant you that the humanities does not build airplanes, but as this is the third time I am having to point out that the skill of the Framers in drafting our Constitution was largely gained through their study of history, natural philosophy and political philosophy. Therefore, I'm going to go ahead and point out, as clearly as I can, that the Humanities built our Constitution. As useless as our government may seem, the Constitution itself is quite a useful and well designed thing.

As for your whole "peer review" thing, you might want to grab a dictionary and look up the meaning of the word 'peer.' By definition, the Supreme Court of the United States has no peer in our system of government. That's what makes them Supreme. The justices may be peers to one another; but the entity that is the Court has no peer.

Proper Peer Review means that the ideas of experts are reviewed, *in an open forum*, by other experts. Refereeing is not an 'open forum,' it's one set of eyes; and a single set of eyes can make mistakes, which I suppose was the point of your tangent about Kalman.

And finally, I feel it is a bit obvious, but will point out anyway, that preceding a statement about the inappropriate use of insults with the derogatory use of the word "liberal" is quite ironic and hypocritical. If you want to have a debate, do it right. Bring facts that support your position and be prepared to discuss them with as much logic and dispassion as possible. It seems obvious from your final sentence that you're angry at "liberals" and "abortion rights" and "gay marriage rights", but those topics are not under debate right now; nor do I have a desire to discuss them. This is not about that; this is about the need for you to support your assertions qbout the humanities with the best evidence and logic you can muster.

↑ -1 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 3 hours ago

Tony,

You keep mixing apples an oranges. The question about "how old is this object" or how the DNA of this living organism relates to the DNA of this fossil is 100% scientific. A historian does not make said determinations. Those determinations are made by scientists. Historians worry about things like who historical even X fits into their own "invented theories" about the great scheme of things.

With respect to planes (or cars), it's not about building "stuff", it's more that if you pretend that the acceleration due to gravity is 6 m/s^2 instead of 9.8 m/s^2 (the value that is determined by nature), your plane/car will crash. That's the point. How do we know that the acceleration due to gravity is 9.8 m/s^2? Because we have millions of cars driving and thousands of planes flying everyday built on that assumption. Either g= 9.8 m/s^2 or nature is tricking us to believe it is.

Humanities scholars can invent all kinds of theories, there is no way to test them against some "objective reality". And the prime examples is the "living constitution" doctrine. The US Supreme justices only have to test "abortion rights" or "gay marriage rights" against the politics of their own "peers". That's what I meant. The workings of the US Supreme court is a prime example of how "peer review" works in the humanities. Judicial theories are not tested against some hard reality but against their own peers ideology.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Tony Breecher · 3 hours ago

If I'm mixing apples and oranges, it for the purpose of illustrating that the Humanities are a mixed set of fields; and the 100% scientific process of accurate dating, etc., means that any proposed theory has an objective sequence of events that it *must* account for. Those dates and facts *are* the objective reality against which historical descriptions are measured. You

try to characterize these disciplines as a free-for-all where every crackpot theory is accorded equal status with those that epitomize academic rigor, and it is simply not true.

Additially, while you seem to be great fan of the constancy of gravity, I reiterate that not all scientific disciplines are so deterministic. Neuroscience is one such discipline. Also, Quantum Mechanics is not deterministic; it is probabilistic. Certain systems can only be measured within a range of variability. This does not mean that the differing degrees of precision render the various disciplines useless. Is it not a common maxim, borne out by the experiences of many societies, that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes?

Finally, "living Constitution doctrine" is not a historical description, it is an informal tool used by judges to apply a ~240 year-old document to the case before them. Just because you're angry with the Supreme Court doesn't mean Historians have the same luxury as the Nine to say what history is. The law is far more malliable than history because the former sets social policy for the future, while the latter attempts to describe the past. Comparing the two is as unequivocally invalid as conflating Economics with Physics; past with future; description with prognosis.

↑ -1 ↓ · flag

Joel Kovarsky · 3 hours ago

I think that many arguments regarding absolute truth in science miss very substantive issues concerning the values of ignorance and questioning in almost all scientific disciplines. See: *IGNORANCE How It Drives Science* by Stuart Firestein, Oxford University Press, 2012. Any number of varied reviews can be found, but for many lay-people one of Firestein's intriguing assertions is that "facts" are something of an afterthought for many scientists. They are driven more by the questions themselves. The book is not intended to probe attempted distinctions in terms of competing visions of the nature of scientific truth.

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 3 hours ago

"Additially, while you seem to be great fan of the constancy of gravity, I reiterate that not all scientific disciplines are so deterministic. Neuroscience is one such discipline. Also, Quantum Mechanics is not deterministic; it is probabilistic. Certain systems can only be measured within a range of variability. This does not mean that the differing degrees of precision render the various disciplines useless. Is it not a common maxim, borne out by the experiences of many societies, that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes?"

The n-th humanities guy who fails to understand quantum mechanics. The basis of quantum mechanics might be probabilistic but its predictions are not. In fact, quantum theory is used to design computer chips that have billions of transistors with a degree of precision that is mind boggling. Or this theory http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantum_electrodynamics , based in part on quantum theory, which is one of the most precise theories of physics . No wonder the

Sokal affair happened :D.

Hard science derives its prestige from its predictive power. If you don't have this predictive power, you can use the word "science" all day long, you are not scientific. Maybe some day some of these disciplines will (although disciplines like economics have attempted to be "scientific" for several centuries without much success) but they will have to produce results. The word "science" is used by soft disciplines with the sole purpose of legitimizing themselves. The phenomenon is known as http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physics_envy .

The other issue that you seem to have a problem understanding is that I am not saying that all non STEM disciplines are useless. I am saying that they should be understood for what they are. And things like political bias, that have no role in STEM disciplines, should be recognized as something that enters the equation.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Tony Breecher · 2 hours ago

Look, so long as you are no longer going to advocate firing all humanities teachers because the humanities are useless and serve only as the pulpit for political ideologues, I'll leave the inaccuracies of your previous post alone. I have a great deal of respect for the STEM disciplines, but their success doesn't make all other things failures.

↑ -1 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · an hour ago

I would certainly advocate firing "most of them", those who promote political ideology under the disguise of being "scholars" in fields like anthropology, women studies, sociology, psychology and the like. These fields are pure rubbish.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Tony Breecher · an hour ago

What political ideology do you feel these four feels advocate?

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 40 minutes ago

All four, in one way or another, try to portray the "correct" human experience which happens to be the "human experience" promoted by the liberal left. I have detailed examples of each that I can provide, but let's take the most obvious, "women studies". Are you going to say with a straight face that the main job in that field is NOT to promote feminism as understood by the liberal left? Where does somebody like Sarah Palin or Michelle Bachmann fit in the average garbage that is taught at "women studies" departments?

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 19 minutes ago

>Where does somebody like Sarah Palin or Michelle Bachmann fit in the average garbage that is taught at "women studies" departments?

Aw, that's cute. You are looking out for your heroines. Don't worry, they have a place in the garbage that is spewed by Fox News.

-1 · flag

Anonymous · 7 minutes ago

red herring anon, address the question. "Women studies" is all about teaching women to be liberal feminists.

It might have never crossed your mind that many women might not be interested in being liberal feminists, even though some surveys show that the average conservative woman that doesn't buy that nonsense is happier than the average liberal woman who does http://townhall.com/tipsheet/cortneyobrien/2013/12/28/are-conservative-women-happier-than-liberal-wo... .

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+ Comment

Joel Kovarsky · a day ago

The idea of science as "absolute truth" is not recent. It is a belief system, an assertion of its own orthodoxy. That does not mean it is not a justifiable subject for debate. Many scientists themselves would make no such assertion, and the insistence itself is framed as a philosophical construct that cannot be "proven." In terms of modern medicine, it is science and it is filled with politics. You can find published arguments going back centuries, but in terms of the Founders, you cannot look at Jefferson--with his intense belief in science--and think that he would reason in these absolute terms. It would be contrary to everything he did with the Univ. of Virginia. It is easier to accept science as a search for truth, that the questions are at least as important as the answers, that there have been numerous stumbles along the way--unless you have some notion of science as an abstraction, not tied to millennia of history and human searching. There are also people who assert absolute truth in the spiritual realm--harder for most of us now, in Western cultures, to accept.

What is being argued, to some extent, ties to very old conversations about "logical positivism." I have no idea how to parse free speech on college campuses, or in other public arenas. The idea of professing a belief in an acronym (STEM) as substantive justification for greater "freedom" strikes me as problematic. In constitutional terms, it would almost immediately violate the principle of equal protection.

0 · flag

Anonymous · a day ago

Joel,

It is a belief system but it is fundamental to everything STEM does. I can certainly not prove to you that the law of gravity is not going to change in the following 10 minutes, however, the belief that it is immutable makes possible the design of cars, planes, and probes that go beyond the limits of the Solar System (http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/). These things require that the laws of physics are the same everywhere. So far, every experiment confirms this assumption.

With this said, I don't know what you are talking about in your last paragraph. What I said is that all scholars, regardless of their STEM or non STEM status deserve exactly the same level of free speech protection , which should be the same as those who work for the private sector. In other words, I don't see scholars deserving "extra protection". I also said that scholars in the humanities should be understood as the political ideologues they are and that things like "party affiliation" or "political ideology of their work" should be considered in hiring decisions. In fact, that is precisely what happens at think tanks (both of liberal and conservative persuasions). The humanities departments at most universities have become liberal think tanks, yet we need to pretend that they are not.

Again, I love transparency. The more transparency the better. This is why I think that US Supreme Court justices should be elected and why I believe what I just said about scholars at the humanities.

0 · flag

Joel Kovarsky · a day ago

I will not get into the ideas of "logical positivism" here. There are enormous problems with any assertion of absolute truth. The question--"What is Truth?"--could easily be the subject of another course: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth/ . The same could be said about ideas of justice: http://www.justiceharvard.org/ .

I do see that you advocate free speech for all, but the level of "priesthood" you want to give to those in STEM fields does not recognize their own human tendencies, and appears to separate the "idea" of STEM from the every day realities of how science has developed over the centuries of human existence. As to the denunciation of liberal demons being one of the pillars of your existence, that is your decision.

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Anonymous · a day ago

Joel,

You keep misstating my positions. Where did I say that, first amendment wise, STEM scholars deserve higher protections? I said that all scholars should have exactly the same protections, but not higher than what they already are in the private sector. I also said that scholars in non STEM fields should be hired based on their ideology, thus you can have "a living constitution" version of Constitutional Law (this class), and a "strict originalism" version. All that explicitly and transparently stated. I don't see where the problem lies. Students can then decide which one they take, or even if they take both.

This attitude of liberals to pretend that their point of view is "objective" while other points of view are biased is what I have referred to many times. That academia leans left is not disputed http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/24/education/edl-24notebook-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 . What differentiates STEM fields from non STEM fields is that politics in a STEM class are irrelevant. In a non STEM field, politics bias everything that is taught in class.

To give you an example. 3 years ago a retired Stanford professor (who is quite famous in Computer Science for his contributions) made some controversial political remarks to an Iranian applicant http://www.stanforddaily.com/2011/01/10/professor-comes-under-fire-for-alleged-anti-iranian-e-mail/ . The University said that he is free to say whatever he wants but that his view is his and his alone. Calls for Stanford to discipline him went nowhere. It was the right thing to do.

Now, imagine a Middle East Studies professor making the same remarks. They would have a completely different effect. Jeffrey Ullman might dislike all things Iranian, yet that doesn't alter how computers work. A professor on Middle East Studies that dislikes Iran will certainly teach things very differently than a professor who loves Iran teaching exactly the same topic.

This is so obvious that I do not understand your rant, really.

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Joel Kovarsky · a day ago

I did not say that you wanted to give greater speech freedoms to the group: "I do see that you advocate free speech for all..." Your remark, "the attitude of liberals is to pretend..." speaks for itself.

0 · flag

Anonymous · a day ago

Joel,

You have made several contradictory statements in this thread that are there for everybody to see.

It is impossible to argue against the fact that liberals dominate academia in general and non STEM in particular from the party affiliation statistics. To say that this point of view is not going to bias what they teach in those areas where the bias is material is to be too Kumbaya-ish for my taste.

Pragmatism requires this reality to be recognized.

0 · flag

Joel Kovarsky · a day ago

You are talking about separate things. I have not contested that liberals are more prevalent in academic circles. What I have said is that your dislike of liberals appears a pillar of your life. I do not respect that attitude any more than blanket hatred of "conservatives," however one chooses to define the group.

0 · flag

Anonymous · a day ago

Not mixing, because at the same time you somehow maintain that this "political bias" doesn't cloud the "objectivity" of what non STEM scholars teach, something that cannot be maintained with a straight face. The conflict of interest is so obvious that it boggles my mind that people deny it.

The point is that while political bias is irrelevant when it comes to teaching in pure STEM fields, it has a great deal of impact in non STEM fields.

In fact, the only STEM field that has been lately contaminated by political ideology, clean energy, has turned out to be a complete failure on every metric: economic or technological. So called "clean energy" is being abandoned by engineering schools precisely because it is lacking results even though it has all the political backing of the world. At the end of the day, professors in STEM fields do not like to trade short term "political influence" with being a footnote in the history of technology. The dream of every STEM professional is to be the next https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Shannon , https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_von_Neumann or https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Turing not some guy popular among contemporary politicians. On the economic front, they look at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Terman for inspiration not any of the people who have served in the Obama Administration, including https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steven_Chu , whose tenure at DOE was deemed a failure.

↑ -1 ↓ · flag

Joel Kovarsky · 16 hours ago

1. I would be curious as to how you defend the idea that clean energy is being abandoned en-mass by engineering schools, not in terms of supplying a couple of examples of dropped programs, but an overall abandonment for reasons other than generally declining budgets. Having completed a recent course on (politically charged) issues of climate change (Univ. of Melbourne via Coursera), it looked like projects were gradually developing, although there remained serious problems with numerous options, such as nuclear power, and large solar electric grids facing difficulties with distribution and storage. Cleaner fuels are being developed (some of those are coming from the private sector, not the universities)--not that coal will be abandoned any time soon. Some ideas thought economically unfeasible in the past have resurfaced as cheaper methods evolve (solar is becoming one of those). It is difficult to dissociate politics from many of these discussions. And expecting rapid progress on an international scale faces all sorts of impediments. In the US private industry may develop some projects faster than the universities.

2. The political bias that you discuss is there, on many campuses, but for those that study the issue, some of the reasons and effects are rather surprising. One recent work getting a good bit of attention on the left and right is Neil Gross' *Why Are Professors Liberal and Why Do Conservatives Care?* (Harvard University Press, 2013). Various editorials and reviews from politically diverse publications have all noted some of the findings with raised eyebrows: http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/forbidden-city_707668.html?page=2 and http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/04/higher-education-liberal-research-indoctrination . There is a self-selection effect, with conservatives tending to gravitate away from the ivory tower and liberals gravitating towards it. The bias can be related to self-selection, not necessarily discrimination and brain-washing. You had mentioned Jonathan Haidt (not that everyone agrees with his analyses), so the tribal natures of various institutions are apparent: the military and clergy tend to be much more conservative. Hence liberals flock to universities, and tend to stay there. There appears to be no simple solution to this, and the trends started some time ago, along with leftward shifts within the ranks of college educated voters, something that was not seen during the Regan years: http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/the-politics-of-going-to-college/?_php=true&_type=... .(In 1984 Regan then held the support of 2/3 of college educated voters. By 2008 that had disappeared.) From the *Weekly Standard* link above:

"Gross's thesis sounds plausible, and the data support it. It leaves conservative critics with a disarming irony, though: The more critics expose liberal indoctrination and intolerance, the more they reinforce the image of academia that makes young conservatives shun it. As Gross puts it, "Decades of antiprofessorial rhetoric have made academia seem an even less desirable home for young conservatives than it would otherwise be." When Bill O'Reilly and

John Stossel discussed affirmative action for conservative professors, as they did this past December, did they believe that it would inspire more 22-year-olds on the right to apply for graduate study in Princeton's English department, which tells prospective students that "we offer a wide range of theoretical specializations in fields such as feminist theory, gender studies, psychoanalysis, Marxism, New Historicism, environmental studies, political and social theory, and cultural studies"?"

3. Discussing medicine is difficult, given the importance of both basic science, public health, and social functions. The past several decades have had numerous examples of well-established recommendations being overturned. And there have been substantive arguments over varied elements of clinical trial design, not to mention all sorts of unrest on the political side (due to issues with health care delivery systems). The whole idea of peer review is quite diverse and complex (http://www.nature.com/nature/peerreview/debate/). There has been increased emphasis on teaching elements of the humanities within medical schools (http://www.springer.com/new+%26+forthcoming+titles+%28default%29/journal/10912). US medical students are recently trending more liberal: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1829428/ . There may be some political trending in terms of subspecialty selections and attitudes towards evolving health care systems (particularly evident as older physicians retire or change working relationships: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/30/health/policy/30docs.html?pagewanted=all). Some attitudinal changes may be following the trends since since the Regan years.

4. In terms of "academic freedom," whatever that is and whatever it becomes, it should be politically neutral. That may not help the circumstances discussed here. Can we criticize academics of all political stripes: absolutely.

↑ **-1** ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 15 hours ago

1. Two data points, first an Op-Ed that was published in the IEEE flagship general purpose magazine spectrum http://spectrum.ieee.org/energy/renewables/a-skeptic-looks-at-alternative-energy/0 in 2012. Second, this Forbes analysis on an recent 60 minutes story in the clean tech bubble http://www.forbes.com/sites/michaellynch/2014/01/15/the-cleantech-

bubble-according-to-60-minutes/ . Pretty clear that the intelligentsia is moving away from it.

2. I do not disagree with what you say, but it is academia's loss. The notion that only liberals are capable of producing good science is disproved by the fact that the best mathematicians and physicists of all time are disproportionately Christian and would have been labelled as "conservative" without a doubt. I am not talking about some random Nobel Prize winner that nobody recognizes but of people like Isaac Newton, Schrodinger or Kurt Godel. The exodus of conservatives from academia has is 50-50 responsibility of the liberals that kick conservatives out and those conservatives who have perpetuated the idea that academia is for leftists. It takes both sides to make peace. I don't see liberal academics anytime soon acknowledging their fault just as I don't see Hollywood become more conservative friendly anytime soon either.

3. I am not discounting the influence of pharmaceutical companies in medical recommendations, such as http://healthland.time.com/2013/11/20/should-i-take-a-statin-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-cho... but it is the same type of corruption coming from the liberal elites on clean energy. Overtime, these corruptions get corrected because by their very nature, if they are wrong, people get sicker as a result. In other words, the "empirical verification" of medical recommendations are the indicators with respect to the different diseases. So there is a way of "self correction" that is absent when academics vote "postmodernism" or "deconstruction" as the "correct" points of view.

4. I agree but there should not be any "extra protection" for academics either. That might be the discrepancy here. I do not think that academics should have extra protections with respect to those already afforded to private citizens in general. In the private sector, people are free to be political, but their employers are also free to fire people for any reason. I think that the same should be true in academia. In cases like Jeffrey Ullman's, where his value as academic is completely orthogonal to politics, Stanford didn't care about his controversial remarks. But I think that Stanford would have been within its right to discipline him if assuaging the Iranian community would have taken precedence. Why? Because Jeffrey Ullman, and people of his caliber, would always find a different university willing to hire them if Stanford suddenly decided that politics is material to Computer Science.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Joel Kovarsky · 9 hours ago

As far as point no. 1, even that IEEE editorial said it takes years. That was in fact my own-take away from the class, i.e. that much of this would be slow, both because of science and technology bits and the politics. But there is a great deal going on out there, with using less contaminating fuel sources and more. Solar has become more feasible for some, and there may be significant changes that can be expanded to scale with respect to wind. None of us knows, but it might happen, in some areas, more quickly than than Mr. Smil thinks. Money

will be involved whatever goes on in science or politics. There is little point here in getting into a myriad of articles talking about innovative and surprising uses of clean energy technologies. As to economic bubbles, they come and go, from tulips to real estate to clean energy. And yes, we will be using fossil fuels for a long time. Some of the comments to Mr. Smil's piece were interesting as well, and there is much more complexity to the whole issue than outlined in that single piece or the 60 minutes segment: https://mitei.mit.edu/ .

The idea that only liberals can produce good science is a foolish construct, but most people I knew (during my days in the lab and beyond) did not think much about politics at work. So this ties to the issue in no. 3, that it does take both camps to fix things, and that this will not be rapid. Some of the national political demographic shifts are undoubtedly due to shifts within Republican ranks, and many of all political stripes have wondered whether Regan could have managed politically in today's Republican party (particularly in presidential primaries). Hence there may be quite substantive reasons why national elections are getting much tougher for our modern batch of Republican candidates.

I am very reluctant to start describing individual cases that happen to offend and may be decided in ways that many of us think unreasonable. That does not mean that one should be casual about the process, but if the political world of academe were reversed, you can bet the same sorts of things would happen from the other end of the spectrum. People discriminate. As to your idea that private employers should be able to fire anyone, anytime, for any reason--we part company and that will not be reconciled.

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Joel Kovarsky · 8 hours ago

Another perspective: "Rethinking the Plight of Conservatives in Higher Education Findings that run against the grain of assumptions" by Matthew Woessner: http://www.aaup.org/article/rethinking-plight-conservatives-higher-education .

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

+ Comment

Anonymous · 20 hours ago

Anonymous poster who said>the main difference between STEM and non STEM fields is that STEM fields deal with absolute truth.

Absolute truth? Absolute nonsense! Once again Anon takes a small sample that supports his/her view and generalizes from there.

STEM deals with absolutes? Try telling that to people who call themselves 'creation scientists'.

-1 · flag

Anonymous · 19 hours ago

"Creation science" is a misnomer. What they defend is is philosophical point of view,. not a scientific one.
One with which which I agree too, BTW, the universe was created.

But that is perfectly compatible with my acceptance of evolution, although I think that the whole evolution controversy is overblown. In its current status, evolution is not very interesting since it has no predictive value whatsoever. I would be much more worried if the laws of physics were mutable and I had no guarantees that the next time I take a plane, said plane will fly because of some change in the law of gravity that makes Newton's equations invalid.

1 · flag

Anonymous · 17 hours ago

Well, it's a good thing we have people like you with such clear bright absolute lines of distinction between what is science and what is not. Looking forward to seeing you receive a Nobel Prize for something. Say Literature? Anonymously, of course.

All hail the all-knowing Anon!

-1 · flag

+ Comment

Carol A. Kichen · 7 hours ago

I would be interested in thoughts on an article I read this morning. The subtitle of the article is "Let's give up on academic freedom in favor of justice". It was written by a senior at Harvard who is a columnist for the Harvard Crimson. She believes that free speech on campus should be abolished and professors with dissenting views should be fired. "...radical leftism is the only permissible political philosophy and the First Amendment is a barrier preventing modern colleges from fulfilling their proper role as indoctrination camps". She believes that "universities should stop guaranteeing professors and students the right to hold controversial views and pursue research that challenges liberalism". "If our university community opposes racism, sexism, and heterosexism, why should we put up with research that counters our goals?"

1 · flag

Joel Kovarsky · 7 hours ago

For those who want to see it, the intentionally provocative article is here: http://www.thecrimson.com/column/the-red-line/article/2014/2/18/academic-freedom-justice/?page=singl...# . Personally, I think the premise is more than a little whacky and wonder how much this was done as a provocateur, as opposed to serious intent to implement? That said, what is justice and who gets to decide: http://www.justiceharvard.org/ ? I am guessing that Sandel's view would be bit more nuanced.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Carol A. Kichen · 6 hours ago

I hope that is all that it is. Unfortunately, similar articles have been written by students at other institutions.

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Joel Kovarsky · 5 hours ago

Yes, they have. One was at Swarthmore. All of us--conservative or liberal--should be concerned about what appear to be the intolerant views expressed. I understand the Harvard piece was partly related to contentious issues surrounding the boycott of Israel's academic institutions, but the idea of developing a singular view of "justice" around that sort of issue is at least as problematic. Perhaps, in this sense, "free speech" works: views are put out in the open, and can be addressed. I would be curious to see follow-up comments to some of those pieces you note.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Tony Breecher · 4 hours ago

It seems rather unnecessary, I think, to institutionalize the kind of moral retribution that her article so thoroughly documents as being a natural, popular reaction. If anything, it seems like the University should try to maintain neutrality in the face of overwhelming emotionality so that it can ensure things don't get out of hand.

Additionally, I'd like to borrow a paragraph from Justice Brandeis's concurring opinion in Whitney v. California:

Those who won our independence by revolution were not cowards. They did not fear political change. They did not exalt order at the cost of liberty. To courageous, self-reliant men, with confidence in the power of free and fearless reasoning applied through the processes of popular government, no danger flowing from speech can be deemed clear and present unless the incidence of the evil apprehended is so imminent that it may befall before there is opportunity for full discussion. ***If there be time to expose through discussion the***

falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence. *Only an emergency can justify repression. Such must be the rule if authority is to be reconciled with freedom.* ***[n4]*** *Such, in my opinion, is the command of the Constitution. It is therefore always open to Americans to challenge a law abridging free speech and assembly by showing that there was no emergency justifying it.*

This statement, even though it is found in a nonbinding concurrence, was so eloquently stated that it has informed much of First Amendment jurisprudence in the decades since it was published.

I have to say: I'm quite a fan of the ideas this passage embodies, myself!

0 · flag

+ Comment

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