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Headline: Affirmative Action, But Make It Conservative

Subhead: An old liberal idea might just be the solution to a new conservative problem.

Tags:


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Article Body

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There is a war between Trump and Columbia—at least, that’s what most Columbia students would like you to believe. They tend to frame the current fight with the Trump administration as just that—nothing more than a fight with Trump. It’s an easy story to tell, because it portrays such tensions as a one-off political squabble. For many, that narrative is far preferable to reality: Universities like Columbia have lost the trust, and subsequently gained the resentment of half the country. Trump isn’t the root of this hostility so much as he is the loudest expression of it.

The evidence is conclusive: Columbia is indisputably dominated by liberals. A recent [survey](#) by the non-partisan Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) found that conservatives at Columbia are outnumbered five to one by liberals. The discrepancy is even greater for faculty, where for every one registered Republican, there are 30 registered Democrats. During the 2024 election, University leaders, including trustees and deans, donated a total of \$1,193,600 to Kamala Harris’ campaign and \$0 to the Trump campaign.

This political tilt has severely damaged free speech acceptance. Columbia ranked dead last (tied with Harvard) for speech climate in this year's FIRE study, with students reporting a discomfort expressing ideas and a tendency to self-censor if they felt their opinions didn't align with the majority. Columbia's overwhelming liberal tilt not only isolates conservatives, but also contradicts the University's [stated values](#) of fostering viewpoint diversity and promoting spirited debate.

Since universities like Columbia rely heavily on public funding—and the politics of the wider American public differ radically from the politics of the University—this devotion to liberalism has become untenable. After all, why should conservatives want to devote significant tax dollars to institutions that don't represent them? While the Trump funding cuts might be the most drastic recent expression of conservative animosity towards universities, this hatred has been building up for decades and is certainly not a sentiment held exclusively by the current administration.

If universities want to quell the Trump administration's (and half the country's) growing anger, adhering to Trump's proposed policy changes will likely not be enough. Even if Columbia were to ban masks, limit extreme protest activity, and take drastic efforts to curb antisemitism, the institution would still fail to represent the millions of conservative voices whose tax money they rely on.

The first step in addressing this issue is to understand what's causing universities to lean so heavily to the left. Some suggest that this phenomenon is due to academia's inherent appeal to liberal thinkers. They [argue](#) that professorship and other academic jobs are unpopular among conservatives, who naturally are more attracted to jobs in the private sector. While there is some merit to this characterization, it is largely used to sidestep the fundamental problem: Academia has become a hostile environment for conservatives.

There is ample evidence that ideological discrimination contributes greatly to the scarcity of conservatives in academia. Notably, faculty across American universities openly [admit](#) they would favor liberal job candidates over equally qualified conservatives. Because academia's gatekeepers (most notably search committees, and department chairs) are predominantly liberal, there is a tendency to select new hires who "fit" the prevailing ideological mold. For example, in the Harvard Crimson's 2022 [annual survey of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences](#), only 25 percent of respondents said they would support hiring more conservative professors to increase viewpoint diversity, while an additional 31 percent actively opposed such efforts.

These results are disturbing. It is concerning enough that many academics are willing to discriminate against conservatives in the hiring process, but *openly admitting* such biases suggests that discrimination has become an accepted norm within higher education. The examples above are overt forms of discrimination, but they are likely less common. More often, discrimination against conservatives occurs more subtly. For instance, universities institute DEI initiatives that either select against conservatives or outright discourage them from applying.

Before the Trump administration pressured them to change their hiring practices, Columbia's Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action [mandated](#) hiring committees to use an evaluation rubric that valued DEI factors as equal to research ability, and more important than teaching ability. Candidates were awarded up to 50 points, with 15 points devoted to both DEI and research, and only ten points devoted to teaching. Five points were awarded to candidates for simply confirming their goal of advancing DEI "at Columbia and within their field, through their research, teaching, and service."

Harvard had faculty applicants across departments answer [questions](#) such as "How does your research engage with and advance the well-being of socially marginalized communities?", and "Do you know how the following operate in the academy: implicit bias, different forms of privilege, (settler-)colonialism, systemic and interpersonal racism, homophobia, heteropatriarchy, and ableism?"

While these mandatory questions may appear innocuous, they are designed to coerce adherence to progressive orthodoxy. Just as asking questions about an applicant's patriotism or probing their opinions on capitalism would have an undertone of gauging their conservatism, DEI questions function as an ideological tool to gauge their liberalism.

Given the implicit bias against conservatives at universities like Columbia, it's clear that addressing the problem will require decisive action. One solution to the conservative problem is a tool elite universities have been massive proponents of for decades: affirmative action.

Even using the words "affirmative action" and "conservatives" in the same sentence might sound blasphemous. Conservatives and liberals alike may bristle at the thought of employing such a system—conservatives, because they have been active opponents of

affirmative action, and liberals because it would seem ludicrous to repurpose a tool designed to aid minorities for the sake of benefitting conservatives.

However, a more thoughtful analysis reveals that affirmative action might be exactly just what's needed to correct decades of anti-conservative prejudice. The policy was initially designed to eliminate biases in the college admissions process and produce a less hostile campus environment by increasing admissions rates for historically excluded groups. Proponents reasoned that this approach would rectify admission committee biases, increase racial diversity, and gradually foster a more inclusive college environment.

Importantly, affirmative action was not merely a charitable tool for marginalized groups. Rather, it was a pragmatic solution to the inefficiencies caused by systemic discrimination. After all, by discriminating against certain groups, a university misses out on potential talent.

Liberal students need not fear political indoctrination. Fostering spaces for conservatives and liberals to interact with each other's viewpoints not only makes liberals more conservative—it also makes conservatives more liberal. Expanding the conservative presence on campus, then, cultivates the best of both traditions. Dismantling harmful political echo chambers on college campuses might even have a [long-term effect](#) on political polarization across the country.

By diversifying its political climate, Columbia can also better prepare students for the real world. Students (especially those coming from liberal cities) should not have to wait until they graduate college to have meaningful encounters with conservatives. Hearing other perspectives will enable students to have a better understanding of the political makeup of the country and the issues that matter to populations they might not otherwise encounter.

Incorporating more conservatives into the campus community could also mark the beginning of rebuilding conservative trust in academia. A recent Gallup [survey](#) indicated that trust in academia across the country is at an all time low. The greatest shift over time occurred among Republicans, with 50 percent saying they have very little to no trust in higher education, a drastic shift compared to only a few years ago.

Among conservatives, distrust in higher education has also manifested as skepticism in the research produced by these institutions. A [study](#) by the University of Amsterdam

found that conservatives have a deep distrust in science and scientific research. Since conservatives feel actively excluded from academia, they naturally are skeptical of its products. This has serious consequences, especially when it comes to climate and vaccine research.

Some universities are already taking steps to increase the conservative presence in their institutions. Johns Hopkins recently [announced](#) a partnership with the American Enterprise Institute (a center-right think tank) aimed at “inject[ing] some ideological diversity into the university.” This program will bring conservative and heterodox thinkers to campus in various capacities. Even Harvard—where less than one percent of faculty members identify as conservative—is making [efforts](#) to increase its ideological diversity. These novel programs signify a new brand of “ideological affirmative action” emerging in the academic world.

Taking efforts to increase the conservative presence on college campuses should not be controversial. If universities are serious about their roles as bastions of free speech and facilitating important debates across the political spectrum, ensuring that conservatives have a place on campus should be a no-brainer.

Universities—and the country at large—have much to gain from political diversification. The remaining question is if these institutions are prepared to recognize that maintaining their current liberal skew is both untenable and anti-intellectual. Diversifying Columbia’s political makeup would give our institution the chance to reaffirm its core values: intellectual freedom, genuine tolerance of differing views, and a campus culture where competing perspectives sharpen rather than silence one another.