

Harvard Faculty Don't Want Dissonance

By: Samuel J. Abrams
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“More than 80% of Surveyed Harvard Faculty Identify as liberal” is a recent headline in the Harvard Crimson, Harvard University’s undergraduate student newspaper. The article prompted the usual flutter of commentary in both traditional and social media about the completely lopsided ideological distribution of faculty at Harvard and in higher education more generally.

The newspaper conducted a fairly imperfect and incomplete survey of Harvard faculty which nonetheless captured the point that more than 80% of Harvard instructors in its Arts and Sciences division characterize their political leanings as “liberal” or “very liberal.” About four in 10 faculty (37%) describe their ideological position as “very liberal” — which is an 8% jump from the Crimson’s survey last year. Just over 1% of respondents stated they are “conservative,” and no respondents identified as “very conservative.”

While the completely skewed distribution of arts and sciences faculty at Harvard and in higher education is an issue, the *Crimson* found something in their faculty survey that is far

more of a concern but was not widely covered in the press or by many commentators.

While it would be far better for students, the research and writing enterprise, and viewpoint diversity if the ideological leanings of faculty were more even, it is worth remembering that many of the problems among student life and campus culture come from the administrative class on campus who is omnipresent and regrettably sets the tone and terms of discourse both in and outside classrooms on campus. Moreover, it is also the case that professors can have a particular lean but teach and represent a wide variety of views and foster environments with meaningful differences and discussion. I certainly had such experiences in my years as a student at Harvard. I had the pleasure of taking several truly wonderful policy-based courses with world-renowned, left-of-center professors who still absolutely cared about viewpoint diversity, the open exchange of ideas, and the ability to question, debate, and have dialogue.

As a professor myself, I am keenly aware of the need to balance views and perspectives, and I try to present a plethora of views and approaches in my own courses. Sadly, I am almost two decades out of Harvard and a significant number of my former teachers have retired and have been replaced with left-of-center activist-scholar faculty members who see their teaching and research as ideologically informed by the goal of having social impact both at Harvard and nationwide. Nonetheless, it remains the case that many faculty truly believe in the goal of balanced teaching and promote discussion.

The bigger issue in the *Crimson* piece — and what scares me — is that the survey found that many faculty have a true lack of

interest in promoting and increasing viewpoint diversity among their colleagues. This anti-intellectual posture is unbecoming of faculty who are supposed to be disciplinary leaders, for they are all well aware of the fact that diversity of thought and disagreement makes ideas and theory better, which is the keystone of America's higher education system.

The *Crimson* reports that, "When asked whether they would support increasing ideological diversity among faculty by hiring more conservative-leaning professors, only a quarter of respondents were in support." The paper further reports that "31% opposed hiring conservative professors to increase ideological diversity, while 44% of respondents said that they neither supported or opposed it."

Although the *Crimson* did not release more description here, exploring ideas and disseminating those ideas via teaching and research is a primary goal of the higher education enterprise. Harvard — like many other institutions — needs real intellectual and viewpoint diversity in order to ensure ideas can be broadly and deeply explored.

Harvard and other institutions alike certainly do not need to be exact socio-political mirrors of society. But with this clear ideological bias front and center, Harvard's imbalanced faculty should strive to be role models of how vigorous debate leads to progress and innovation and welcome ideological diversity. They should pause and ask themselves why there are so few conservatives on campus and what can be done to welcome those with diverse views. Sadly, it appears that faculty would

rather just allow more homophily to develop on campus, trying to live the life of the mind in a tedious echo chamber.

I consider myself deeply fortunate to have learned from many great thinkers at Harvard who were on the left and the right of the ideological spectrum. Trying to reconcile their various ideas was thrilling. Regrettably, based on the attitudes of the arts and sciences faculty at Harvard today, some of those minds like James Q. Wilson, Nathan Glazer, and Seymour Martin Lipset would probably not have been welcomed in Cambridge today.

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