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Op-Ed

UC problem: When academics are advocates

University of California campuses are tilting to the left as radical activism overtakes scholarly knowledge.



Students walk past the library at UC Berkeley. According to a report by the California Assn. of Scholars, the University of California supports overwhelmingly liberal academia that stifles dissent. (Los Angeles Times / April 6, 2012)

By John M. Ellis and Charles L. Gesheker

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Political advocacy corrupts academic institutions. Why? Because the mind-set of a genuine academic teacher is in every important respect the opposite of a political activist's. Academic teachers want to promote independent thought and analytical skills; political activists want conformity. The one fosters intellectual curiosity and encourages opposing viewpoints; the latter seeks to shut it down.

This vital distinction is well understood. In California, the state Constitution contains this unambiguous statement: "The university shall be entirely independent of all political or sectarian influence and kept free therefrom." Yet despite that, a bias to the left is now accepted as a routine part of a University of California education. That's the finding of a recent study by our organization, the California Assn. of Scholars.

Perhaps this is not surprising given that the tilt to the left among college faculty members has been growing nationwide for several decades. At [UC Berkeley](#), the ratio of [Democrats](#) to [Republicans](#) even in the hard sciences had grown to 10 to 1 in 2004, many times what it was 30 years ago, according to a study by Daniel Klein and Andrew Western. In the humanities and social sciences the ratios were 17 to 1 and 21 to 1, respectively.

The visible signs of activism at work are shocking. Why should the mission statement of the sociology department at UC Santa Cruz claim that a "just, free and equal society" may require "fundamental social change"? Sociology classes should help students understand how societies work, but at Santa Cruz, the mission seems to be enlisting students in activism.

Or consider the course description for UC Merced's History 131, which proposes that students study "the way in which the U.S. has aggressively expanded its role on the world stage."

It is a fact that the importance of the United States on the world stage has steadily increased since its founding. It's certainly worth investigating how that happened, and the question of aggressive intent would be one factor to consider against others. But that cannot happen when the only important question has been preempted in the course description.

The catalog description of [UC Santa Barbara](#)'s Feminist Studies 230 reads like a parody, offering the "experiences of women of color, both within the U.S. and globally, with interlocking systems of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia/transphobia, ableism and colonialism."

These tendentious descriptions are reflected in what many students say about their UC education. "Ten weeks of anti-capitalist, anti-globalization rhetoric," said one UC Santa Barbara sociology student about his class.

Even in science classes, the political bias seems unavoidable. A student in Berkeley's Computer Science 61AC wrote, "How does a statement like 'Nothing Saddam has done could be any worse than what [George Bush](#) has done' find its way into a computer science lecture?"

UC administrators protest that these are isolated examples, but research shows they are not. A recent study found that at UC Berkeley and [UCLA](#), 49% of students reported that they had had a course on a controversial subject where the readings were completely one-sided. This is a deeply and dangerously politicized system.

Real academics would consider a department of political science, or of sociology, that lacks one-half of the spectrum of ideas as incompetent. Today's campus proselytizers think it's just fine for the objective they have in mind, which is not educational but ideological.

Where are the high-paid UC administrators expected to exercise quality control? At a recent meeting at the Chico Chamber of Commerce, one of us asked UC President Mark Yudof for his views on classroom politicization. Yudof admitted that it aggravated him. "Professors are there to educate," he said, "not to rouse the troops for a cause."

If he felt this way, he was asked, why wouldn't he say so in a memo to his campus chancellors, telling them to take appropriate action? Somewhat shaken, Yudof could only say: "I could do that. I don't know that it would do much good."

But surely what he meant is that he didn't want to kick that hornet's nest. Taxpayers are annoyed by excessive salaries for administrators; they ought to be even more annoyed at how little they do to earn those salaries.

As the cost of a college education skyrockets, quality sinks. Numerous studies show that an alarming proportion of recent college graduates have not learned to reason, to write, or to read complex material, and know little about American history and our political and socioeconomic institutions.

That happens when radical activism replaces academic knowledge in campus classrooms. The politicized university is an intellectually bankrupt one.

John M. Ellis and Charles L. Gesheker are president and chairman, respectively, of the California Assn. of Scholars. The report they refer to can be found at http://www.nas.org/images/documents/A_Crisis_of_Competence.pdf.

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