

January 2005

What Elephant? The Challenge of Political: Pluralism in the Academy

Corin E. Blanchard

Joy Pehlke

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Blanchard, C. E., & Pehlke, J. (2005). What Elephant? The Challenge of Political: Pluralism in the Academy. *The Vermont Connection*, 26(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol26/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at UVM ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Vermont Connection by an authorized editor of UVM ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uvm.edu.

What Elephant? The Challenge of Political Pluralism in the Academy

Corin E. Blanchard & Joy Pehlke

Does displaying one's political affiliation in the workplace present a moral dilemma for educators striving to be true pluralists? Two recent graduates of the Higher Education & Student Affairs Administration program at The University of Vermont pose challenging questions to practitioners regarding the intersection of pluralism and political affiliation, highlighting the oft-assumed understanding that to be pluralistic one must be liberal minded. Higher education faculty and administrators, who are overwhelmingly self-identified liberals, risk marginalizing conservative students and colleagues and thwarting opportunities for dialogue around the complexities of the political climate in the academy and beyond. This article examines the paradox of political pluralism and considers the role of advocacy in creating a safe environment for liberals and conservatives alike.

Freire reminds us that education is a political activity, and that any serious political activity is educational. (Torres, 1998, p. 1)

Institutions of higher education are alternately criticized as bastions of liberalism and praised as gardens of pluralism. Ultimately, however, both advocates and antagonists of the academy can agree on one thing: institutions of higher education are strikingly liberal in policy and practice. In the past year, at least seven U.S. institutions of higher education have become defendants in lawsuits pursued by conservative students “who basically feel they’re targets for getting their minds dry-cleaned to think the right way” (Marklein, 2003, p. 2). These students and the administrators who support them express feelings of marginalization and invalidation, indicating a need to examine campus climates for political difference.

In a study released by Harvard’s Institute of Politics in November 2003, 38% of students identified as Independents, 27% as Democrats, and 31% as Republicans (Marklein, 2003). This breakdown of political affiliation among students stands in marked contrast to the political identities of faculty and administrators in academia as referenced by the 2004 report of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture entitled “Political Bias in the Administrations and Faculties of 32 Elite Colleges and Universities,” which reflected an unambiguous lean toward the liberal end of the political spectrum (Horowitz & Lehrer, 2004). In addition, according to a January 2002 article in the Washington Times, “Eighty-four percent of professors voted Al Gore for president in the 2000 election; only 9 percent voted for George W. Bush. While 57 percent of professors are self-identified Democrats, only 3 percent identify themselves as Republicans” (Shapiro, 2004, p. 5).

While a correlation between candidate vote distribution and political affiliation cannot be absolutely drawn, the data could be indicative of a trend toward liberal voting on campuses in the United States of America (U.S.A). More striking is the prevalence of political controversies reported in local or school newspapers across the country, such as the recent dispute at San Francisco State University (SFSU) following the November 2004 Presidential Election, discussed later in further detail (Kaplan, 2004), or the controversies over curriculum and policies at such schools as the University of California, Berkeley; University of Minnesota, Twin Cities; and University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa (Marklein, 2003). Such tensions on university campuses collectively reflect increasing polarization within our institutional communities along political lines. What happens when students, faculty, and administrators of diverse political affiliation coexist on campus? Concern about the ability of students to succeed in adverse climates is not new, but the growing opposition to liberal indoctrination throughout U.S. campuses raises harder-to-tackle questions that reveal paradox and inconsistency in the practice of inclusion.

Higher Education: Breeding Liberals?

The spectrum of ideas [in academia] extends only from the left to the far left. (Shapiro, 2004, p. xvii)

Corin E. Blanchard is originally from Minnesota, having moved to Vermont to obtain her Masters in higher education and student affairs administration from UVM in 2004. She is currently working for the Department of Residential Life at UVM as the Coordinator of Community and Leadership Development.

Joy Pehlke graduated from the Higher Education & Student Affairs (HESA) masters degree program at UVM in 2004. She is currently employed at the University of California, Santa Cruz as the Assistant College Programs Coordinator for sister colleges, College Eight and Oakes.

Throughout U.S. higher education, liberals and conservatives argue relentlessly over who is at more of a disadvantage, particularly throughout curriculum and in classrooms. As Fish (2004) observed in his article *'Intellectual Diversity': The Trojan Horse of a Dark Design*, "The line between the political and the academic is at times difficult to discern . . . the trick is to keep analysis from sliding into advocacy" (p. B13). Avoiding the slippery slope that leads to advocacy of particular political agendas, whether within or outside the classroom, is a challenge that professionals in education must expect to face and take seriously. While Stanley Fish, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, may not think that it is his job as an academic and a scholar to "produce citizens for a pluralistic society," (p. B13) many student affairs professionals believe this is an element of their role on campus. Professionalism becomes particularly problematic once student affairs practitioners acknowledge the tendency to link pluralism and liberalism. Is liberalism equal to pluralism? If so, ought student affairs administrators acknowledge their educational efforts as political indoctrination? If not, can student affairs professionals practice true pluralism while professing, teaching, and modeling political agendas that indicate otherwise?

Student affairs practitioners, otherwise known as outside-the-classroom educators, strive to support student success in institutional environments of constant upheaval by advocating for marginalized and underrepresented students. In the student affairs profession, the principles of pluralism and social justice define who exists on the margins and when advocacy is necessary or expected. Professional preparation programs, development opportunities, publications, and positions are increasingly focused on values of inclusion and a vehement opposition to the family of "-isms": racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and ethnocentrism. These social constructions prevent students from truly functioning--or functioning truly--in our diverse world.

Recent campus issues across the nation demonstrate the precarious safety and security of students who affiliate with conservative viewpoints. In November 2004 at SFSU the College Republican (CR) Club planned peaceful and unobtrusive member recruitment following George Bush's reelection and encountered a large group gathered in opposition such that "police officers were forced to surround the CR's table . . . in order to protect the conservative students' safety" (Kaplan, 2004). In cases of verbal assault or physical threat, it is clear that advocacy is necessary to ensure safety; in situations where conservative students experience or perceive hostile environments, the kinds of support needed, justified, and available are far less apparent. This is increasingly important as the College Republican National Committee (n.d.) has reported that in the past few years [College Republican] membership has tripled, with now more than 120,000 members and 1,148 chapters nationwide.

The challenge to professionals who advocate for pluralism remains: how can pluralism incorporate a genuine conservative voice? Furthermore, how can it not? Student affairs administrators must examine where they stand in their personal and professional lives and if their solidly held values and beliefs are as much a fundamentalism as the agendas they typically reject. Conservative members of the academic community would likely agree that the link between pluralism and liberalism is a fundamentalism of sorts, especially given the false assumption that one must be liberal to be pluralistic.

The newly-recognized fundamentalism of social justice in U.S. higher education dictates a model of inclusion and exclusion, the rhetoric of which hinges on values irreconcilable with some political, moral, and spiritual perspectives, and often blatantly ignores political affiliation. Shapiro (2004) noted, "Truth itself is a casualty as the result of a disturbing trend in academia to fully embrace postmodern moral relativism. How can ideas flowing from traditional values receive a proper airing when the prevailing dogma emphatically rejects moral absolutes?" (p. xii). Shapiro, a self-identified conservative undergraduate student, offers a pointed conservative criticism of the academy. From a more liberal perspective, in *Official Knowledge*, Apple (2000) observed, "Anger . . . is a marvelous motivator to keep going . . . in a time when critical educational work is under attack from the Right" (p. vii). Both Shapiro and Apple declared their respective posts in terminology reminiscent of moral warfare: casualties and attacks characterize the banter, which echoes back and forth of disenfranchisement.

Clearly, conservatism and liberalism are at war on our campuses. Post-secondary faculty have a responsibility to critically examine how their practices and policies impact conservative campus communities and student success in the midst of heightened political conflict. What is the role of student affairs practitioners amidst the phenomenon of "liberalization?" Who defines the margins and identifies what groups hover on those margins? How do our own political agendas intersect with, attract, and repel students and colleagues at our respective institutions? Professional integrity demands a critical examination of how we realize the rhetoric of inclusion across political difference in the midst of personally charged affiliations.

Caught in the Act: Revealing Pluralistic Paradox

Student affairs practitioners ought to critically examine application of the principles of pluralism and their ability to adhere to such principles in professional roles. The paradox of pluralism--inclusion as long as your perspective is all-inclusive--is a point of contention where personal affiliations (particularly political identity) grate against professional obligations. Horowitz (2004) contended:

We do not go to our doctors' offices and expect to see partisan propaganda posted on the doors, or go to hospital operating rooms and expect to hear political lectures from our surgeons. The same should be true of our classrooms and professors, yet it is not. (p. B12)

Should the same be true of student affairs professionals' offices, meeting rooms, and interactions with students? These questions form the crux of paradoxical pluralism. Do we risk marginalizing students and colleagues who do not share a passion for pluralism by outward advocacy of our personal political views? Or do we insulate ourselves with moral relativism by hiding our political convictions and risk closing the door on fruitful, diverse professional practice and policy?

The paradox of pluralism, more simply stated is: You advocate for cultural and intellectual pluralism, therefore you are a true pluralist. Yet, what about those who believe true pluralism is not the way, the truth, or the purpose of education? How do you advocate for them? More to the point, would you want to? Thus, are you truly a "true" pluralist?

Struggles with pluralism's potential contradictions in principle and practice are demonstrated in the following narratives by each of the authors. These stories are summaries and characterizations of two people's experiences working through pluralism in their professional endeavors.

Author A: Building and Breaking Walls

"Both liberals and conservatives should remember that there is no book worth reading that is not somehow partial to something, and that there is no education worth having that does not involve exposure to partialities other than one's own" (O'Conner, 2003, p. B20). A few years ago, I taught an interdisciplinary seminar that allowed first-year students to grapple with real life issues outside the context of their typical intellectual pursuits at a research institution. Each week dealt with different topics ranging from multicultural dialogue to drugs and alcohol on campus. I believed, at the time, that the course offered a sound interdisciplinary framework for an introduction to the university.

As an instructor for the course, I made the assumption that most of my students perceived the purpose of the course as I did: an opportunity to discuss the realities of college life and the interplay between one's past and one's evolving future as a college student. My students and I took seriously our collective ground rules for discussion and questioning, and each week I attempted to create a classroom environment that encouraged multiple perspectives. Yet, I was almost immediately met with a lone cynic in the back of my classroom.

This particular student questioned the boundaries of the course and challenged me to assess the liberal slant interwoven in the course's overall purpose. He felt strongly that he was being indoctrinated to liberalism. *What is he talking about?* I thought to myself. Is a liberal agenda a form of indoctrination? He then explained it to me in a powerful journal entry:

I fully recognize that Liberal America is founded (and runs upon) the concept that it's agreeable to disagree, as long as you keep your weird viewpoints to yourself (or in this case, speak about them as if they were not as important to you as you know they are) . . . Pros: this is a way to get normally opinionated people to talk about sensitive stuff that personally they might hate or disagree with. . . Con: when you get down to it, most people will only cling more vehemently to their own likely unfounded viewpoints even in light of being completely disproved or shown to be illogical. Of course, getting past this is a rather large step, requiring that most people let go of their irrational acquisitions of fear, religion, deviance, and probably a lot of hope. (Anonymous student's quote, personal communication, Winter 2001).

This piece of writing sparked an "a-ha" moment in my career as a student affairs professional. I had somehow fallen into the trap of believing that my openness to multiple perspectives was vast and inclusive, while all along, I had been

shutting out everyone who did not see progressive politics as a true purpose of education. I am still endlessly grateful for that particular student who helped me to refocus the true meaning of pluralism. I had been challenged to see and accept that even an interdisciplinary first-year course encouraging critical thinking could still be operating through biased thought and curricular intent. I had shut someone out without intending to, and I am still learning how to avoid doing so in my work today.

Case in point, on “National Coming Out Day” this October, I rummaged through my t-shirt drawer to find my “Marriage for All” shirt that depicts three different couples holding hands: a man and a woman, two women, and two men. It was not until I started thinking about writing this article that I began to consider the true consequences of wearing that shirt on campus, to work, and among the students who work for me in the programming office. The message splayed across my chest surely sent a clear religio-political message for all to see. While I work at a particularly liberal-minded campus, I had to question who I was turning away. What religio-politically conservative colleague or student would feel comfortable divulging his/her political thoughts and perspectives to me? Moreover, and perhaps even more important to me, would they feel comfortable coming to me about anything at all, knowing that our core political beliefs sit on different ends of the spectrum? Was I unintentionally constructing a wall between myself and those students (and colleagues) whose beliefs may not align with my own?

Author B: Re-Seeing Truth

Two homemade signs have graced my office wall since February 2004: “The only Bush I trust is my own” and “My vagina says ‘No more bloodshed!’” Clearly, I do not support President George W. Bush or the war in Iraq he so vehemently pursued. As a student affairs professional at a mid-sized public university, I typically feel comfortable owning my perspectives and outing myself as a liberal throughout my professional endeavors. Whether in meetings, trainings, or team builders, endorsements of liberal politicians, pedagogies, theories, social mores, and rhetoric are commonplace. Indeed, I have deliberately chosen a professional field where liberalism makes itself at home. Why, then, are these two signs hung between the shelving unit and my office radiator in a space that can only be read when seated at my desk? The answer is simple: a student made me do it.

While pursuing my master’s degree in student affairs administration, I advised a group of volunteer student leaders. After my first year, one student expressed interest in running for the executive board position of President, which meant a close working relationship with me. How exciting! There was one little catch for me: she was a staunch Republican. *What would that look like?* I wondered. I could hardly bite my tongue (and often did not!) during meetings where she served as a community representative.

True to my values of ongoing education and personal growth, I strongly encouraged her to run for election, knowing it would be a challenge for us both. She did so uncontested. My anxiety grew and my mind flooded with concern: how could I support someone whose values were so different from mine? How could I instill my own values of responsible leadership in her, knowing that some contradicted her view of the world?

Throughout my yearlong advising experience with this student, I learned more than I could have imagined. She was not only bright and articulate, but thoughtful, critical, and thorough. A realization struck me: I was in the mindset that her success as a student leader was contingent on imbuing her with my values, goals, and ideas. Time and again, she taught me that there is more than one perspective on issues, and those who hold these differing truths can coexist despite their complete lack of political commonality.

Like countless other political liberals with whom I have interacted, I was operating under the clear conviction that the principles and beliefs of liberalism and pluralism are truths that all people would profess given the right context and concerted critical thought. I learned, however, as Fish (2004) observed, “fashioning citizens for a pluralistic society has nothing to do with the pursuit of truth” (p. B13). When has my insistence that my politics are the truth prevented me from learning opportunities and enabled me to underestimate people? Where does my political truth intersect with others and whom have I shut out? When is it right to set aside my truth to create an environment where myriad truths unlike my own can be expressed and valued? Can I practice inclusion of those whose values and views exclude me?

The questions posed in these narrative reflections are left intentionally unanswered, as they are precisely the questions with which student affairs professionals ought to grapple regarding political pluralism. Both authors have found

themselves caught in the act of paradoxical pluralism in professional capacities, asking questions that reveal their own inconsistencies and biases as educators.

The Problem of Professional Pluralism

Voter registration shows that liberal orthodoxy now has a professional import. Conservatives and liberals square off in public, but on campuses, conservative opinion doesn't qualify as respectable inquiry. You won't often find vouchers discussed in education schools or patriotism argued in American studies . . . A political variable has been added, whereby conservative assumptions expel their holders from the academic market. A wall insulates the academic left from ideas and writings on the right. (Bauerlein, 2004, p. B6)

The above passage from *The Chronicle Review* relates directly to a brief quote from *Politics by Other Means* (Bromwich, 1992) in which the author discussed what it means to be a "professional" in higher education: "But in the current usage of the academy, *aprofessional* is someone who is proud of belonging to an opinion-community, and *professionalism* is a deliberate refinement of the attitudes which make for mutual subjection within that community" (p. xv).

The idea of being a professional pluralist is the crux of the issues here raised. Bromwich made a critical point: there is a pluralism prerequisite for a vast array of faculty and administrative positions in higher education. For student affairs practitioners and faculty alike, the following questions are paramount:

1. Can you be a truly pluralistic professional if the academy necessitates a pluralism prerequisite?
2. Would you be going against your professional ethics and code of conduct if, after coming to the realization that pluralism contains this paradox, you continue to call yourselves pluralists?
3. Furthermore, would it matter? Do you have to advocate for a particular position (in this case, a conservative political view) to be practicing true pluralism? Are most pluralists truly willing to genuinely include and engage the conservative voice on campus without motives of conversion, or do they simultaneously cringe at the mere idea?

These questions lead to the overwhelming conclusion that pluralism is utopic. It is difficult to espouse practical applications for how liberal-minded student affairs professionals might be allies for conservative students and colleagues on campus simply because pluralism does not allow for the intolerant strands of conservatism without going against its own moral code.

Liberal orthodoxy is not just a political outlook; it's a professional one. Rarely is its content discussed. The ordinary evolution of opinion expounding your beliefs in conversation, testing them in debate, reading books that confirm or refute them--is lacking, and what should remain arguable settles into surety. With so many in harmony, and with those who agree joined also in a guild membership, liberal beliefs become academic manners. (Bauerlein, 2004, p. B6)

Bauerlein (2004, November 12) drew attention to an essential dilemma: the academy and the professionals that constitute it have become so steeped in the commonality of liberal perspective that engagement with variant perspectives is nearly absent. Higher education administrators and faculty are therefore largely insulated and isolated from conservative perspectives in the very institutions that exist for the free exchange of thought. Just as growth through discomfort is touted throughout multicultural curriculum, so should comfortably liberal faculty and administrators step into the conservative culture of student organizations, professional guilds, and political gatherings to complicate and inform their perspective on political difference.

Another dangerous element in the academy which defeats the goal of truly pluralistic interaction among politically diverse faculty and staff is what Bauerlein (2004) characterized as protocol in the academy: "The first protocol of academic society might be called the *Common Assumption*. The assumption is that all the strangers in the room at professional gatherings are liberals" (p. B6).

Assumptions are the primary barrier to true engagement among differing truths or worldviews. Indeed, if faculty and staff within the academy operate under the Common Assumption, students become quickly adept at functioning under

the same protocols. How do faculty and staff contribute to an academic environment that is assumed to be politically homogeneous? What implications does this have for student learning, safety, growth, and conflict?

Bauerlein (2004) illuminated an equally detrimental environmental factor professionals frequently witness and often enact that helps complicate the notion of professional pluralism:

After Nixon crushed McGovern in the 1972 election, the film critic Pauline Kael made a remark that has become a touchstone among conservatives. "I don't know how Richard Nixon could have won," she marveled. "*I don't know anybody who voted for him.*" While the second sentence indicates the sheltered habitat of the Manhattan intellectual, the first signifies what social scientists call the *False Consensus Effect*. That effect occurs when people think that the collective opinion of their own group matches that of the larger population. If the members of a group reach a consensus and rarely encounter those who dispute it, they tend to believe that everybody thinks the same way. (p. B6)

Considering both common assumptions and the false consensus effect, student affairs professionals and their colleagues in U.S. higher education would benefit from a heightened awareness of when they are contributing to the perpetuation of an exclusive perspective, however liberal in intent. Taking ownership when political perspective or affiliation impacts professional endeavors is highly encouraged, regardless of whether one can safely assume they are surrounded by compatriots.

The recent national U.S. election jarred institutions of higher education across the country, drawing attention to the reality that academic professionals are, in fact, members of a liberal orthodoxy. Student affairs practitioners in particular function in a liberal bubble, operating under the conviction that the liberal idea of pluralism, while utopic, is right. Not only is social justice via pluralism considered right, but it is professed to offer the means to a better world for all members of the human race. This belief is grounded in personal moral codes, which get tangled up in professional life. Again, here is the crux of the paradox of pluralism: How can one be pluralistic if they are convinced their position is right, particularly when it bumps up against conservative students' and colleagues' views of the world?

Conclusion

How can liberal academic professionals remain true to their moral (and thus political) codes while avoiding dismissal of the voices and perspectives of conservative students and colleagues who already feel shut out on college campuses? How can the academy--perhaps specifically departments of education--begin to address the paradox of pluralism so that we are not functioning in a "hotbed of liberalism?"

The liberal academy has had an extraordinary impact on the political and governmental movements in U.S.A.--from the Civil Rights movement, to the women's movement, to the rising GLBT movement. The academy likely will not change in a fundamental way, nor will those who constitute its professional ranks. Given this, it is imperative that student affairs professionals and faculty recognize the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the pluralistic label and identity to better serve all members of the campus community in policy and practice.

The authors believe it is important for practitioners to remain mindful of the impact political affiliations have on their abilities to support students and learning environments, particularly as we tend to get caught up in our very powerful (and important) agendas, yet forget to consider whom we might be shutting out or turning off. One of the true tenets of pluralism is creating environments that invite and value multiple perspectives. To deliberately seek out opinions that are completely different from our own, however, requires taking that tenet to a deeper level. Pluralistic practice of integrity, must necessarily include conservatism.

Apple (2000) observed, "Educational policy and practice are not simply technical issues, but are inherently political and valuative. They involve competing definitions of ethics and social justice. And they require our very best thought" (p. xii). Student affairs professionals must continue to give political pluralism their very best thought and very best practice.

References

Apple, M. W. (2000). *Official knowledge: Democratic education in a conservative age*. New York: Routledge.

Bauerlein, M. (2004, November 12). Liberal groupthink is anti-intellectual. [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle Review*, 50(23), B13.

Bromwich, D. (1992). *Politics by other means: Higher education and group thinking*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

College Republican National Committee. (n.d.). Retrieved November 10, 2004, from <http://www.crncc.org/default1.asp>

Fish, S. (2004, February 13). 'Intellectual diversity': The trojan horse of a dark design [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle Review*, 50(23), B13.

Freire, P. (1998). *Politics and education*. Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center.

Horowitz, D., & Lehrer, E. (n.d.). Political bias in the administrations and faculties of 32 elite colleges and universities-- Executive summary. Retrieved December 14, 2004, from <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Content/read.asp?ID=55>

Horowitz, D. (2004, February 13). In defense of intellectual diversity. [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle Review*, 50(23), B12.

Kaplan, L. (2004, November 8). Jihad at San Francisco State. Retrieved November 21, 2004, from <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=15855>

Marklein, M. B. (2003, November 3). On campus: Free speech for you but not for me? *USA Today*. Retrieved November 11, 2004, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-11-02-free-speech-cover_x.htm

O'Conner, E. (2003, September 5). Misreading what reading is for. [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle Review*, 50(2), B20.

Shapiro, B. (2004). *Brainwashed: How universities indoctrinate America's youth*. Nashville, TN: WND Books.