

## Doctrinal Candidates

IT'S BEEN ALL THE RAGE in the mainstream media lately: several studies have supposedly disproved the notion that academia presents a lopsided, left-wing worldview to students. Perhaps the most thorough of these new works is *Closed Minds? Politics and Ideology in American Universities*. It does indeed rebut

**Closed Minds?  
Politics and Ideology in  
American Universities**

By Bruce L. R. Smith,  
Jeremy D. Mayer, and  
A. Lee Fritschler  
(BROOKINGS INSTITUTION PRESS,  
278 PAGES, \$32.95)

**Reviewed by  
Robert VerBruggen**

a few of the criticisms conservatives tend to level at the ivory tower, but it's far from the thorough debunking its three authors (George Mason University's Bruce L. R. Smith, Jeremy D. Mayer, and A. Lee Fritschler) and their publicists present it as.

Certainly, there are plenty of excesses in the conservative critique, and the authors' jobs would be easy if the only goal were to

pick this low-hanging fruit. Some pundits say or imply that nearly all professors rant in class, share political opinions on topics unrelated to the subject matter at hand, and give conservatives bad grades just for not being liberals. Some college conservatives take these assumptions to heart, and won't even "come out" with their views; this is a shame, and more the fault of right-wing attackers than of left-wing professors.

Fortunately, while *Closed Minds?* addresses these harsher allegations—it briefly and cogently summarizes pretty much every aspect of the conservative critique—it does not dwell on them. For the most part, it's a response to the more intelligent criticisms.

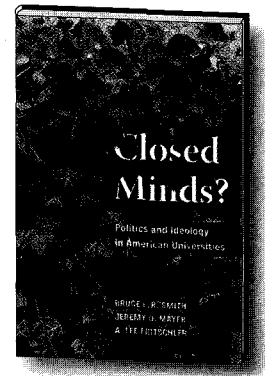
Those criticisms go something like this: relative to the general population, college professors lean far to the left politically. They tend to hire fellow liberals, maybe out of discrimination. In the classroom, most professors make a genuine effort to see past their own perspectives and present topics in a balanced manner, but even these good professors' worldviews frequently come through, and a substantial minority are far less careful. Some make subtle jabs at conservatives and conservative ideas. Others preach outright, especially in the numerous entire departments, such as "gender studies," that exist only to satisfy liberal demands. In rare cases, outright indoctrination occurs—along the lines of showing *Fahrenheit 9/11* in a biology class, or grading based on ideology rather than quality of work.

Because students tend to be more liberal leaving college than they were going in, it's reasonable to conclude all this has some effect on them.

*Closed Minds?* verifies much of this. For example, the authors' survey confirmed that a solid majority of college professors identify as liberal. Also, profs overwhelmingly see themselves as "honest broker[s] among all competing views," though there's no telling as to how they define what an "honest broker" does. (Does an honest broker exclude ideas he sees as "beyond the pale," and do liberal professors tend to see conservative ideas that way?)

The book pokes some deep holes in other conservative arguments, though. Whatever hiring discrimination takes place, no one within the academy seems to notice it—even conservative professors tend not to think it happens. Also, research has shown that most students don't change their political views during college; while those who do change tend to drift leftward, this mirrors the trend seen among non-college-attendees as well.

That last finding is an especially hard blow to conservatives; one of their biggest reasons for criticizing the academy is that professors successfully "indoctrinate" impressionable students. But it's far from the *only* reason. For example, such bias can make conservative students uncomfortable, especially in the cases when professors mock their views, and it fails to present students (of all political persuasions) with the best of conservative thought. In a country where conservative ideas have led to countless policy innovations, it's important for tomorrow's leaders to understand where right-wingers are coming from.



TO TRULY DISCREDIT THE RIGHT, then, the authors can't just show that liberal bias isn't harmful; they have to demonstrate that liberal bias doesn't even exist to any great degree. Here's where they stumble significantly. Basically, the authors' survey revealed a significant amount of liberal bias on the part of professors, but they pretend it didn't.

For example, the authors write that "most professors did not, in fact, admit to informing students how they feel about most political issues." This is a

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ludicrous argument, because few serious conservatives thought that “most” professors were problematic to begin with.

In fact, the table the authors provide of their survey results is rather disturbing. More than a quarter of professors admit telling students how they feel about political issues; 45 percent of respondents said their students could “probably guess who I voted for in 2004”; 57 percent of respondents said they did *not* “try to keep students guessing about my opinions about most issues.” That’s what’s called “bias.”

Even more troubling is the fact that 61 percent of the authors’ survey respondents said that “politics seldom comes up in my classroom, because of the nature of the things I teach.” Look at the above numbers again in light of this fact, and only two conclusions are possible: political bias is very common in fields where political topics are relevant, and fairly rare elsewhere; or it’s not at all uncommon, but far from pervasive, in the entire system. The former seems more likely—in this college graduate’s experience, most professorial ranting at least takes place in the context of a related discussion—but neither contradicts the conservative critique in the slightest.

Also, bear in mind that these numbers only reflect what professors say about themselves. The stats can’t reflect unintentional bias.

After presenting their data in such a skewed fashion, the authors come to one of the most bizarre conclusions in recent memory: there isn’t enough politics on college campuses. Most professors shy away from practical politics in favor of theory and the abstract, and “genuine” political debate is rare. Colleges are no longer fulfilling their duty to provide a civic education.

Today’s colleges do seem to teach less civics than their predecessors did, but the authors don’t consider that it’s high schools, not colleges, that should handle this. After all, a lot of voters don’t even go to college. Also, why on earth should adult students of fields other than politics have to sit through lectures and take tests on the topic, if they don’t want to?

In the end, though, the value in *Closed Minds?* outweighs these problems. The authors shed light, always through their numbers and sometimes with their prose, on an important topic in American discourse. It’s a worthwhile read for anyone interested in the topic. Just keep a grain of salt handy. ❄

# The Slaughterhouse

## Huffing and Puffing

**L**AST TIME WE SAW ARIANNA (July/August 2008), she was having a hard time trying to “focus.” This time around, no such luck. In fact, she is happy to showcase her sexual linguistics. In one of the excerpts from her blogging featured in this volume, she warns her gal readers of the dangers that await those of them who deprive themselves of sleep: “So do yourself a favor and go to sleep right after sex. Or before sex. Or instead of sex. Just not during sex.”

In another, she plays sexual politics to mock one of her progressive targets: “Wouldn’t it be delicious if the female orgasm were the thing that tips the scales in favor of the Intelligent Design crowd? It

would make for a great closing argument. “The female orgasm is so complex and strange, it could only have come from God.” At this rate she’ll soon be writing for Bill Maher, who as it happens is also showcased as a Huffington Post blogger. Here’s Maher spilling the extent of his knowledge:

Republican sex scandals are getting to be like Iraqi car bombings. By the time you hear about one, there’s been another. Ted Haggard, Mark Foley, Bob Allen, Vitter, Craig... It’s like Clue, only the answer is always “A Republican...in the washroom...with his cock.”

Larry Craig, to be fair, has female admirers at the HuffPost as well, as in this from one Hilary

**The Huffington Post Complete Guide to Blogging**

By the Editors of the Huffington Post  
(SIMON & SCHUSTER, 230 PAGES, \$15)

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