



Professors and Their Politics

Gross, Neil, and Simmons, Solon, eds.
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014

Book Review

Tags: higher education | politics and teaching | professoriate

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This edited volume addresses the common assumption that professors have overwhelmingly liberal or radical political views and that they have significant biases against conservative thought. Grounded in both quantitative and qualitative research, the editors suggest that the common stereotype of academic culture as hostile to political worldviews that do not fall on the leftwing of a continuum does not stand up to the scrutiny of data. Instead, their eleven chapter, method-rich book reveals the political and social thought of most individual members of the academy is, indeed, typically progressive, but that the effect of these individual worldviews on the collective environment of higher education is more nuanced. Moreover, the standard notion that so-called liberal professors discriminate against conservatives because they are conservatives does not emerge from the results of any of the contributors' work.

The backdrop for much of the book is an agreement on the part of the editors that American higher education is in crisis. This crisis involves many factors, including finances. Colleges and universities are feeling the effects of a constricting economy. Competition for students is fierce. The need for revenue is great and institutional endowments are shrinking. That some attribute the crisis in higher education to the social thought of the educators in higher education motivated this study to examine the precise nature of higher education's social worldview.

The volume's primary orientation is the sociology of higher education and includes the sociology of intellectuals. A unifying observation is that the professoriate, as well as other elements of the academy, possesses a progressive political worldview. This worldview grows from a number of factors, including but not limited to the social class of those who enter professions in higher education. The current orientation of the academy toward progressive

politics is not new and studies of it are not new, either. Gross and Simmons provide a brief survey of literature exploring the history of political and social views of academics, noting the significant presence of higher education professionals who worked in New Deal related positions in addition to their work in colleges and universities. Their book, focused on the current state of affairs, explores higher education since 2006.

Professors and their Politics has value for all professionals associated with American higher education. The various studies in the book make a case for why progressive values are dominant among those who enter vocations associated with colleges and universities, as well as how these values shape research agendas, hiring practices, and treatment of students. If their conclusions are correct, and the various authors have provided data to support verifiable conclusions, the political life of the academy is a sign of its vitality, not a cause of its crisis, and the vitality of the academy includes more support for diversity of thought, especially among students, than common stereotypes assume. This volume makes an important contribution to understanding the culture of contemporary higher education.

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