

Why Conservatives are Winning the Campus Wars

By Joshua Holland. AlterNet
August 7, 2005

In 1973, when Richard Mellon Scaife and Joseph Coors kicked together some seed money to start the Heritage Foundation, the Democrats held the Senate and had a 50-seat majority in the House. As progressives are starting to understand, the funding, planning, and coordination of the conservative movement has led to tremendous success in elections and government policy. But another arena of ideological competition has gone largely beneath the radar. An asymmetric political war is raging at universities across the country, and once again conservatives are running circles around progressives.

The campus Left, which is still organized for the most part by students and community activists, increasingly finds itself facing off against seasoned conservative strategists. And while progressive student groups are mostly self-funded, by the mid-1990s roughly \$20 million dollars were being pumped into the campus Right annually, according to People for the American Way.

That money and expertise are directed at four distinct goals: training conservative campus activists; supporting right-wing student publications; indoctrinating the next generation of culture warriors; and demonstrating the liberal academic "bias" that justifies many conservatives' reflexive anti-intellectualism.

Morton Blackwell, the treasurer of Paul Weyrich's Free Congress Foundation, understands the value of those efforts. The long-time GOP activist and one-time Reagan advisor has been fighting the campus wars for four decades. Currently, he's president of the [Leadership Institute](#), which trains, supports and does public relations for 213 conservative student groups nationwide. If you want to fight the Left on your campus, the Leadership Institute is one-stop shopping - they'll provide you with conservative guest speakers, help starting a conservative newspaper, and training in how to win campus elections.

Young America's Foundation (YAF), like Heritage, is another shop started in the 1970s with

Scaife seed money. According to Insight magazine, "the Foundation organizes so many programs on so many campuses that it's difficult to find a [young] conservative activist" who hasn't been associated with its activities.

Those include the National Conservative Student Conference, where this year's speakers included ABC News' John Stossel, Alabama's Judge Roy Moore and Reagan era paleo-cons Edwin Meese and Jeanne Kirkpatrick. For the most active student organizers, YAF also has a [rewards program](#)

: if you work really hard "fighting the Left on campus," you can visit the Reagan Ranch for "an immersive 'themed' weekend aimed at getting a chance to live as Reagan did..."

These organizations, along with others like the National Association of Scholars and Students for Academic Freedom, serve as ready sources of materials, skills and support for young conservative activists. What it adds up to is that while progressive students organize around a multitude of specific issues like sweatshop labor or affirmative action, conservatives have launched a coordinated, nationwide movement with a single goal: defeating campus liberalism itself.

The media and the message

One of the bulwarks of that movement has been the creation of a right-wing college media. The effort has been led by YAF's [National Journalism Center](#), which "trains scores of students every year in the skills of press work, and assigns them internships [with] cooperating media locations" like the Washington Times .

The [Intercollegiate Studies Institute](#) (ISI) - founded by William F. Buckley and run by another former Reagan advisor, T. Kenneth Crib, Jr. - is one of the country's leading recipients of conservative funding, according to the [National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy](#)

. In addition to its generous scholarships and research grants for conservatives, ISI funnels cash to over eighty right-wing student publications through its Collegiate Network (CN). A report by People for the American Way quotes the editor-in-chief of the conservative Stanford Review as saying CN staffers "help us form our opinions."

The fruit of these efforts has been a sea change in campus media over the past twenty years. While right-wing publications like Ann Coulter's Cornell Review were once somewhat rare, today nearly every major school in the nation has an active, right-minded student newspaper. The same cannot be said for the Left.

The Backlash comes to campus

To truly understand today's campus conservatives, you have to look past the organizing to the ideology. And that means appreciating the shift from traditional conservatism to the 'backlash' politics of the past few decades. As Thomas Frank [argues](#) in *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, the backlash came about when traditional big-business conservatives, tired of facing the resentment of ordinary working-class Americans, stumbled onto 'wedge' social issues in the 1960s. They found that cultural battles could transform the populist anger of "regular folk" - long directed at "fat-cat" corporate elites - into a new cultural populism aimed at the liberal intelligentsia.

That backlash is as evident on campus today as the diversity upon which it feeds. So while the scholarly roots of conservatism are still a big part of the college movement, it's clear that much of the current focus is on angry, non-debatable cultural conservatism.

That's why YAF has a 'conservative speakers bureau' that sends all kinds of pissed-off culture warriors to campus, including [black conservatives](#) to argue that liberals are "soft racists" and [conservative "feminists"](#) to rail against the "misogynistic" liberalism of "The Vagina Monologues."

But beyond anger, the defining characteristic of cultural populists is that they view themselves as victims of murky forces operating behind the scenes. And just as they'll pass their adulthoods convinced they belong to a silent majority that's repressed by a covertly liberal media, they go through their college days believing a biased faculty is trying to force a hidden lefty agenda down their throats.

In fact, liberal bias in the academy is a fiction based on the same sort of selective analysis used to "prove" bias in the media. While there are certainly plenty of liberal professors, never mentioned are inherently conservative departments like economics, right-leaning frats and

student groups, the influence of campus ROTC or the fact that for every left-leaning Vassar or Oberlin there is an equally conservative Washington and Lee or BYU.

Instead, the focus is on departments like sociology or ethnic and women's studies where there's a lot of progressive thought. In those departments conservatives collect liberal professors' statements, take them out of context and use them to weave a circumstantial case of bias. The goal is not to promote diversity of opinion but to convince people that our nation's universities have been hijacked by, as the title of one book put it, "tenured radicals" who brainwash our youth with their crypto-socialist ideology.

Unfortunately, many students buy into the myth. For a generation raised on the reactionary polemics of Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter, more intellectual brands of conservatism - those based on Hobbes, Hayek and Friedman - are often unrecognizable; they appear solidly centrist to today's backlash youth. And once you're convinced that the university is a virtual liberal re-education camp, then every slight and inconvenience of campus life becomes further proof of the malevolence of the Left. That fits nicely with Thomas Frank's claim that populist ideology isn't built from the ground up with ideas but is a "horizontal" argument - amounting to a never-ending laundry list of petty gripes and grievances.

In that spirit, whenever a liberal professor clashes with a conservative student or an arbitrary rule causes a conservative some inconvenience, the offense is tracked assiduously by professional watchdogs like David Horowitz's Center for the Study of Popular Culture or Daniel Pipes' Campus Watch. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a group founded by Lynne Cheney, issued a report about unpatriotic professors following 9/11, and another group, Accuracy in Academia, made waves in the 1980s when they offered the McCarthyite claim that their "research" showed there to be 10,000 known Communists among university faculties.

Rebels with a cause

Savvy organizers have seized on all that righteous anger and created an appealing image for today's young conservative: rebellious and oddly counter-cultural, courageously fighting the power. They've also co-opted the mocking, confrontational tone of bygone campus radicals in their tactics. So we see stunts like "affirmative-action bake sales" (in which people of different races are charged different prices for cookies) or the announcement of ["whites only" scholarships](#) on campuses across the country.

And since conservatives are now the rebels, they sometimes run afoul of university "speech codes" and get into other trouble. When they do, groups like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and the Center for Individual Rights - both flush with right-wing foundation money - step in with pro-bono legal help and sue on behalf of the aggrieved students. Usually, the suits get thrown out of court or the university immediately settles. But the cases become further "evidence" of the tyranny of the Left and are thus eaten up by the conservative media.

The young conservative's conspiratorial view of liberalism will last a lifetime. That's why progressive leaders have a choice to make: they can continue to leave it to earnest but poorly-networked students to fight it out with a shoe-string budget against a well-lubricated political machine, or they can get in the game and start pushing back.

That means taking a page from the conservative playbook and giving young liberal activists the tools they need to be more effective. Right now, only the College Democrats and a few single-issue groups are doing anything at all on a nationwide basis. The campus Left needs a network that links activists at different schools, and their publications and speaker programs need financial support. Above all, the Left needs a national organization with the training, scholarships, media savvy and "leadership conferences" that the Right has used so effectively.

Only now, more than thirty years after conservatives began planning and organizing for the long haul, are progressives attempting to do the same thing. But unless they bring that long-term vision to the campus wars, the next generation of conservatives will be even more dogmatic and uncompromising than the ones in power today, and they will have won plenty of converts along the way. That should come as a troubling thought to liberals of every generation.

© 2005 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.
View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/19594>