



# PASSING ON THE RIGHT

CONSERVATIVE PROFESSORS  
IN THE PROGRESSIVE UNIVERSITY

JON A. SHIELDS  
JOSHUA M. DUNN SR.

# Passing on the Right

*Conservative Professors  
in the Progressive University*



JON A. SHIELDS  
JOSHUA M. DUNN SR.

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Shields, Jon A., author. | Dunn Sr., Joshua M., author.

Title: Passing on the right : conservative professors in the progressive university /  
Jon A. Shields and Joshua M. Dunn Sr.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, [2016]

Identifiers: LCCN 2015027217 | ISBN 9780199863051 (hardback : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: College teachers—Political activity—United States. | College  
teaching—Political aspects—United States. | Conservatism—United States. | Right and left  
(Political science)

Classification: LCC LB2331.72 .S55 2016 | DDC 378.1/25—dc23 LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015027217>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2  
Printed by Sheridan, USA

*To my mother, Bonnie, for her love and life itself—JAS*

*To my children, Joshua, Benjamin, Elizabeth, and Evangeline  
(aka, Banjo)—JMD*

## Acknowledgments

WRITING A BOOK about professors for a largely academic readership is a daunting task. Nearly everyone believes that they are experts on the subject, and not without some justification. Others wonder why anyone would write a book about professors, especially given all the important and less familiar subjects outside our domain. Studying professors, however, is a far less lonely and obscure endeavor than it would have been just a decade ago, thanks to the work of a handful of scholars. They revived interest in a subject that had been nearly dormant ever since Everett Carl Ladd and Seymour Martin Lipset penned their classic, *The Divided Academy*, in 1975. We therefore owe a special debt to Ethan Fosse, Neil Gross, Daniel Klein, Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, Solon Simmons, Christian Smith, April-Kelly Woessner, Matthew Woessner, and George Yancey, among others. These scholars also deepened our understanding of the modern academy in ways that enriched our book immeasurably.

Others read our manuscript in full and offered thoughtful suggestions. They include Gerard Alexander, Brian Balogh, Mark Blitz, Jonathan Imber, Joshua Muravchik, Stephanie Muravchik, Bonnie Shields, Steve Teles, Paul Quirk, and Jonathan Zimmerman. We are also grateful for the insightful comments of three anonymous reviewers at Oxford University Press, as well as the intelligence, cheer, and patience of our editor, Cynthia Read. Thanks as well to our outstanding copy editor, Victoria Danahy, and others who assisted with the production of the book, especially Gina Chung and Sunoj Sankaran.

Fieldwork is a costly enterprise. For this reason we are especially grateful for the generous financial support of the Randolph Foundation, the Earhart Foundation, and the Salvatori Center for the Study of Individual Freedom in the Modern World. Grants from these institutions paid for our travel, transcription services, and sabbatical support. We owe a special

debt to Mark Blitz, the director of the Salvatori Center, for supporting our work in myriad ways.

Fieldwork is also taxing on our subjects, of course. And so we thank the scores of professors who gave so generously of their time and patiently waited for our arrival as we navigated unfamiliar cities and universities. Thanks as well to our outstanding research assistants, Kirstyn Jacobs and Clay Spence.

We also thank our friends for providing needed distractions from the book itself. Shields especially thanks Martha Bayles, Zach Courser, Lenny Fukshansky, Mahindan Kanaratnam, Maxwell Porter, and Peter Skerry. Dunn thanks James Null, Daniel DiSalvo, Joseph Postell, Shep Melnick, and Inhan Kim for their helpful conversations on this project and many others. He owes a special thanks to his late mentor, Martha Derthick, for her invaluable support and advice.

And, finally, we thank our families, especially Stephanie and Kelly, for their love and support. They make everything possible.

# *Contents*

<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction	1
PART I <i>The Politics of Conservative Professors</i>	
1. The Conservative Minority	19
2. The Republican Party and Its Discontents	39
PART II <i>Life in the Progressive University</i>	
3. The Bias Debate	63
4. Closeted Conservatives	83
5. Open Conservatism and Its Challenges	108
6. The Limits of Liberalism	135
PART III <i>Should We Care?</i>	
7. The Consequences of a Progressive Professoriate	165
Epilogue: Affirmative Action for Conservatives?	193
<i>Notes</i>	205
<i>Index</i>	227

## *List of Tables*

1.1	Five Surveys of Professors' Ideology and Partisanship	2
1.2	Academic Institutions of Conservative Professors	13
1.3	Professional Profile of Conservative Professors	14
1.1	Views on Social Issues	23
1.2	Policy Views of Conservative Professors and Republicans in General Population	24
1.3	Party Identification of Conservative Professors	25
2.1	Party Identification of Conservative and Libertarian Professors	54
2.2	Voting History of Conservative and Libertarian Professors	55
4.1	Political Diversity in the Departments of Conservative Professors	99
4.2	Self-Censorship That Is Due to Fear of Colleagues	100
4.3	Professors Who Concealed Their Politics Prior to Tenure by Discipline	102
4.4	Professors Who Concealed Their Politics Prior to Tenure by Age	102
4.5	Fairness of the Hiring Process	104
5.1	Mentoring Conservative Undergraduates	126
6.1	Partisanship in Six Disciplines	137
6.2	Self-Identified Libertarians by Discipline	144
6.3	Support for Same-Sex Marriage by Discipline	144



6.4	Right-Wing Professors in Conservative-Majority Departments	160
7.1	Politics and Teaching	172
7.2	Politics and Research	174
E.1	Hiring Preferences of Conservative Professors	197

## *Introduction*

PROGRESSIVES RULE HIGHER education. Their rule is not absolute. But conservatives are scarcer in academia than in just about any other major profession, including the entertainment industry. Progressives' dominance is especially impressive in those humanistic fields where politics falls close to the subjects of inquiry. Conservatives are so scarce, in fact, that Marxists outnumber them. While less than 10% of social scientists and humanities professors identify themselves as Republicans, nearly 18% of social scientists regard themselves as Marxists, and 25% of sociologists do, too.<sup>1</sup>

The marginality of conservatives cannot be blamed on the 1960s. Although the academy drifted leftward after the 1960s, progressive dominance is long-standing. When Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower easily won the presidency in 1952, a substantial majority of American professors cast their votes for the Democratic candidate, Adlai Stevenson. And prior to national surveys, scattered evidence suggests that academics stood well to the left of most other Americans. In 1939, for example, hundreds of professors signed a manifesto that expressed faith in Soviet communism. During these years the Communist Party was so successful recruiting academics that it became a source of frustration. One report on American communism noted that there was "more rejoicing in [the party's] headquarters over the recruiting of one common laborer than over ten Ph.D.s."<sup>2</sup>

Today scholars argue over the scope and power of leftist radicalism in the professoriate, but none deny the marginality of conservatism. Five major studies with quite different methodological approaches all placed the percentage of Republican professors between 7% and 9% in the social

sciences, and somewhere between 6% and 11% in the humanities. And they all found that the percentage of self-identified conservatives ranges between 5% and 17% in the social sciences and between 4% and 8% in the humanities (see Table I.1). Such consistent results across multiple studies constitute what social scientists call a very robust finding.

The scarcity of conservatives in academia is not simply an interesting curiosity. It is also a source of concern to a growing number of thinkers from across the political spectrum and from varied disciplinary backgrounds. They argue that the presence of a full spectrum of vantage points, including conservative ones, is essential to the health of the social sciences and humanities.<sup>3</sup> Some politicians outside the Republican fold agree. At Harvard's commencement in 2014, Michael Bloomberg told its graduates that while gender and ethnic diversity matters, "a university cannot be great so long as its faculty is politically homogenous."<sup>4</sup>

Table I.1 Five Surveys of Professors' Ideology and Partisanship

	Klein, Stern, & Western*	NAASS**	Cardiff & Klein***	PAP****	Carnegie
Social Sciences					
Republicans	9	7	8	7	NA
Conservatives	NA	8	NA	5	17
Humanities					
Republicans	7	6	9	11	NA
Conservatives	NA	8	NA	4	7

\* Measures voting behavior to assess partisanship rather than self-identification and includes only six disciplines.

\*\* North American Academic Study Survey.

\*\*\* Uses voter registration to assess partisanship.

\*\*\*\* Politics of the American Professoriate Survey.

Sources: Daniel B. Klein, Charlotta Stern, and Andrew Western, "Documenting the One-Party Campus," *Academic Questions* 18(1) 2004-2005: 40-52; Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, "The Vanishing Conservative—Is There a Glass Ceiling?" in Robert Maranto, Richard E. Redding, and Frederick M. Hess, eds., *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope, and Reform* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2009), 60-76; Christopher F. Cardiff and Daniel B. Klein, "Faculty Partisan Affiliation in All Disciplines: A Voter Registration Study," *Critical Review* 17(3-4) 2005: 237-255; Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, "The Social and Political Views of American Professors," Working Paper, 24 September 2007, 1-76; and Daniel B. Klein and Charlotta Stern, "Liberal vs. Conservative Stinks," *Society* 45(6) 2008: 488-495.

And yet this call for more diversity remains a minority view. Most partisans on both sides of the political divide continue to regard academia as an inappropriate career choice for conservatives. The right, in fact, has long steered young conservatives away from academic careers by highlighting the excesses of far-left professors and the trials of their conservative students.<sup>5</sup> Pillorying the university for its liberalism, of course, has been part of the modern right's rhetorical arsenal ever since the 1950s when William Buckley penned *God and Man at Yale*.<sup>6</sup> While such polemics do not generally offer explicit career advice, the implicit message has always been that universities are "unsafe spaces" for conservatives. Those who do not discourage academia altogether urge intellectually inclined conservatives to find refuge in right-wing colleges and think tanks, rather than seek careers in mainstream academia. "Conservatives will unfortunately have to develop their own schools of thought at conservative institutions like Hillsdale College," lamented Ron Radosh, at least "until liberal academia holds out a welcome mat for conservatives."<sup>7</sup>

Progressive professors, meanwhile, seem inclined to offer similar career advice to conservatives, albeit for different reasons. While liberal professors almost certainly think that conservatives are good at some vocations (such as banking or military command), many nonetheless insist that they lack the needed psychological and cognitive traits for high-level academic work, such as creativity and open-mindedness.<sup>8</sup> Conservatives, in this view, are not graced with what the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld influentially called an *academic mind*.<sup>9</sup> And because conservatives do not possess academic minds, many liberals presume their enduring scarcity in academia is a benign consequence of a well-functioning meritocracy. Indeed, liberals increasingly suggest that there are already *too many* conservatives in higher education. Progressives, for example, say that right-wing groups, such as the Koch Foundation, are compromising the university's integrity by paying conservative professors to do their bidding.<sup>10</sup> In this context, liberals wonder why anyone would suggest that the university needs *more* conservative professors.

While many on the right and left conclude that academia is not an appropriate career choice for conservatives, they do so without knowing very much about the right-wing thinkers who are already quietly making a living as professors. Our book corrects that shortcoming by illuminating the hidden world of right-wing professors.<sup>11</sup> We interviewed and surveyed 153 conservative professors in six disciplines in the social sciences and humanities—economics, political science, sociology, history, philosophy,

and literature—at eighty-four universities. We asked them to provide an intellectual biography, one that would give us a rich sense of their politics, intellect, and work life. What we found should prompt conservatives and liberals alike to rethink their views on higher education and the place of conservatives in it.

Conservative academics, for example, generally told us that the academy is far more tolerant than right-wing critics of the progressive university seem to imagine. Many right-wing academics, in fact, actually first began drifting toward conservatism in the academy itself—through their coursework, friendships with right-wing students, and even their research. That so many conservative professors abandoned their liberalism when confronted with new perspectives suggests that their minds are not especially closed ones. And partly because the university is often the cradle of their intellectual and political identities, conservative professors are not a movement of outsiders looking to storm progressives' academic citadel. Most conservatives feel indebted and connected to the university, which is why they have at times been the staunchest and ablest defenders of its traditions.<sup>12</sup> They are thus unlikely to become the academic minions of the Koch brothers.

In fact, many conservative academics feel more at home in the progressive academy than in the Republican Party. This alienation is not because most conservative academics we interviewed are Rockefeller Republicans. In some respects, they are *more conservative* than self-identified Republicans in the general population. Instead, the Republican Party tends to trouble even the most conservative professors because they share with the American founders a small-c conservatism that is sensitized to the dangers of democratic movements. This political orientation inclines conservative professors to look askance at the populism that has shaken up the Republican Party in recent years, especially the Tea Party and its fiery candidates. In contrast to progressive academics, who often celebrate mass movements as necessary antidotes to the inequalitarian tendencies of our economic and political order, and who lament the ways our political regime frustrates progressive revolutions,<sup>13</sup> right-wing professors are usually comforted by the domestication of conservative movements. Their antipopulism also makes them unlikely crusaders for any right-wing organization that lobbies the academy from the outside.

Even if they were more enthusiastic partisans, many conservatives would still feel at home in academia. This is because they are often immersed in research topics, methods, and theoretical perspectives that

they share with their liberal colleagues. Such professors tend to regard themselves as political scientists or economists who happen to be conservatives, rather than conservative political scientists or economists. And this means that conservatives are often tolerated by their progressive peers not because they are repressing their politics in a sharply ideological work environment or even because of the broad-mindedness of liberal academics—they are tolerated because large swaths of the academy itself are not very politicized to begin with.

We do not mean to suggest, however, that conservatives always feel accepted in academia. As a stigmatized minority, many conservatives must manage what sociologist Erving Goffman called a “spoiled” professional identity.<sup>14</sup> That is, they must manage the widespread presupposition that conservatives are unsuited for the life of the mind. They do so by practicing many of the same coping strategies that gays and lesbians have used in the military and other inhospitable work environments.<sup>15</sup> Approximately a third of the conservatives we interviewed, for example, concealed their politics prior to tenure by “passing” as liberals. Such closeted conservatives generally wait until they are tenured before venturing out of the ivory tower’s shadows, a fact that should give pause to those right-wing thinkers who recommend getting rid of tenure.<sup>16</sup> Uncloseted professors, meanwhile, select from a broad range of strategies to navigate the liberal academy. Most decide to challenge their colleagues’ prejudices by practicing conspicuous civility, temperance, and broad-mindedness, but a few opt to be defiant and combative. Others minimize open conflicts by either avoiding liberal peers or by steering clear of politicized disciplines and subfields. As one of our subjects put it, “If you are conservative, there [are] such huge no-go zones.” Some of these zones are large enough to encompass nearly entire disciplines, such as sociology or literature. Thus, unlike those of progressive scholars, conservatives’ decisions to specialize in one field rather than another take place within a relatively constrained set of professional choices.<sup>17</sup>

Academia’s unwelcoming “no-go zones” have been deeply influenced by something like what Christian Smith has called a progressive “spiritual project”—a project that Smith analyzes in the context of his home discipline of sociology, but is embedded in other areas of academia as well. Academics laboring in such spiritualized academic fields, Smith says, are driven by impulses and purposes that are sacred in the Durkheimian sense that they are “hallowed, revered, and honored as beyond questioning or disrespect.” At their deepest levels, therefore, sociology and its related

fields seek more than a disinterested understanding of the social world. The substance of this spiritual project, Smith explains, is committed to “realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents.” It is a radical project, one that seeks systemic, even revolutionary, social change.<sup>18</sup> When conservative professors venture into such spiritualized academic terrain, they often report mistreatment in small and large ways for their intellectual profanity.

The nature of professors’ conservatism matters too, not just their field of study. Devotees of economic conservatism, for example, tend to report much more welcoming work environments than do cultural conservatives. The former were more often exposed to arguments on behalf of their ideals in college, less likely to enter the academic closet, and far less likely to report persecution by their progressive colleagues. Many on the libertarian right found an especially welcoming intellectual home inside economics. Economics, in fact, is the only social science discipline with anything approaching a rough partisan balance between Democrats and Republicans. This anomalous development is partly because economics is also the sole academic discipline with deep roots in the work of a conservative Enlightenment thinker—Adam Smith.

The conservative economists we spoke with even insisted that their discipline has become *more tolerant* of scholars who harbor free-market ideals in recent decades. There are good reasons to trust this assessment. As the progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s brought scores of activist-scholars into fields like sociology, literature, and history, the regulatory experiments of that era helped to revive economists’ traditional appreciation of markets.<sup>19</sup> In the wake of the Great Society, prominent free-market economists were even honored with the Nobel Prize in economics, including Friedrich Hayek in 1974 and Milton Friedman in 1976. And so, as conservative intellectuals were grieving over the radicalization of the humanities, economists were actually drifting rightward toward a neoclassical consensus.

Thus we can tell something like a tale of two conservatives: As the academy became more receptive to the interests and concerns of libertarians, it grew less friendly to traditionalists. These political currents in academia roughly mirrored—and perhaps contributed to—shifts in American public opinion, which liberalized on many social issues, but on few economic ones.<sup>20</sup>

While free-market enthusiasts often find a congenial intellectual home in the discipline of economics, cultural conservatives can find no comparable quarters. Sociology might be cultural conservatives' most natural home, since it is a discipline that takes culture and social institutions such as the family and religion seriously. Yet, as this book will show, outspoken cultural conservatives in sociology confront a life of isolation and persecution. In light of this finding, we must regretfully conclude that cultural conservatives—the defenders of an intellectual tradition with roots in important thinkers from the ancient world (Aristotle) to the Enlightenment (Hume and Burke)—may be wise to stay out of the one discipline that is most singularly devoted to the study of culture. This observation underscores a more general and troubling truth: Conservatives are least welcome in fields where they are most needed.

Despite such problems, our conversations with conservative professors suggest that the right-wing critique of the university is overdrawn. We certainly do not want to minimize the real challenges many conservatives confront in academia. Some of the accounts in this book, after all, are quite troubling, even shocking. But while conservatives contemplating a career in academia—especially those on the cultural right—are certainly well served by knowing the challenges of being a political minority, the many successful conservatives in academia show that they do not have to become debilitating challenges. There is also a long history of out-groups—from Marxists to libertarians—that successfully created their own sizable niches inside the university. The problems that do exist, moreover, will probably not get better until more conservatives enter academia—a development that is inadvertently slowed by right-wing attacks on the university.

While the right's distorted views of the academy are rooted in its isolation from the university, the scarcity of conservatives in academia compels liberal professors to associate conservatism almost entirely with its populist expressions. This is partly why so many liberal professors continue to believe that the *academic mind* is a progressive one and why they especially fear the right-wing populists who attempt to shape the university from outside its walls. Our findings should quiet those anxieties. While a few right-wing professors are combative and many others accept monies from the coffers of right-wing foundations, there is also little reason to suppose that a surge in conservative academics would undermine the mission and integrity of the university, at least not if they resemble the ones already laboring in it.



## *Why Conservatives Matter*

Our book invites partisans on both sides to consider the possibility that conservatives fit better in the university than they suppose. That reconsideration is long overdue, especially since the scarcity of conservatives in academia really does matter, though not for the reasons right-wing critics tend to emphasize. Little evidence, for example, supports the conservative trope that universities are places where impressionable students are routinely indoctrinated by leftist professors.

It is better to think of the teaching problem as a missed opportunity, rather than one of indoctrination. The university is one of the few institutions that could better prepare students for lives as citizens by exposing them to civil and respectful debates. But that sort of example is hard to provide with so few conservatives about. Their absence also limits the exposure of all students to importance perspectives. And it deprives conservative student activists of mentors who might deepen their politics and direct them away from the populist tactics that are increasingly popular in large universities.<sup>21</sup>

Some might suppose that a university dominated by progressives could still achieve these same general ends by introducing their students to a wide spectrum of thinkers. It seems doubtful, however, that liberal professors generally prepare their students for a life as citizens by exposing them to broad range of conservative thinkers, not when so many continue to dismiss conservatism as a symptom of closed minds. Even if there were no such prejudices, many bodies of knowledge are so imbued with progressive politics that it would be easy to overlook the occasional dissonant voice.

Beyond the classroom, the near absence of conservative thinkers in many areas of inquiry undermines knowledge-seeking by making it more difficult for scholars to converge on the best approximation of the truth. This is an inevitable outcome of homogeneity, at least in those research areas where political and moral considerations fall close to the subjects of inquiry. Politically diverse epistemic communities are better at converging on the truth partly because they generate a broader range of research interests and interpretations. Diverse communities are also better because of the tenacious power of “confirmation bias.” This is the tendency of human beings to accept findings and theories that are consistent with their preexisting beliefs. Norms of objectivity in academia cannot adequately check confirmation bias because, as psychologists Philip Tetlock and Gregory