

BECOMING RIGHT

How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives Amy J. Binder & Kate Wood



BECOMING RIGHT

How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives

Amy J. Binder and Kate Wood



Princeton University Press

Princeton and Oxford

Copyright © 2013 by Princeton University Press

Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

In the United Kingdom:

Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW

press.princeton.edu

All Rights Reserved

Binder, Amy J., 1964–

Becoming right : how campuses shape young conservatives / Amy J. Binder and
Kate Wood.

p. cm. — (Princeton studies in cultural sociology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-691-14537-2 (hbk. : alk. paper) 1. Conservatism—United States.

2. College students—Political activity—United States. 3. Education, Higher—
Political aspects—United States. I. Wood, Kate, 1980– II. Title.

JC573.2.U6B53 2013

320.52084'20973—dc23

2012029765

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Sabon and Trade Gothic

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

BECOMING RIGHT

PRINCETON STUDIES IN CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Paul J. DiMaggio, Michèle Lamont, Robert J. Wuthnow, Viviana A. Zelizer, Series Editors

A list of titles in this series appears at the back of the book

To Edward, my love

A.J.B.

To Geoffrey, for everything

K.S.W.

Preface

For more than half a century, critics located in right-leaning think tanks, foundations, and the media have championed the cause of conservative undergraduates, who, they say, suffer on college campuses. In books with such titles as *Freefall of the American University* and *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, conservative critics charge that American higher education has become the playpen of radical faculty who seek to spread their antireligious, big-government, liberal ideas to their young undergraduate charges.¹ In this portrait of the politicized university, middle-of-the-road students complacently absorb their professors' calculated misinformation, liberal students smugly revel in feeling they are on the righteous side of the political divide, and conservative students must decide whether to endure their professors' tirades quietly or give voice to their outrage, running the risk of a poor grade. Administrators, according to the critics, do little to stop the madness.

Universities' abdication of responsibility toward their undergraduates is said to have both academic and social consequences. Academically, faculty are accused of turning their backs on Western-centered liberal arts training in favor of highly tendentious, politically correct curricula housed in the "studies" departments—ethnic studies, queer studies, Latin American studies, women's studies. Sociol-

ogy, political science, and most of the humanities also come under attack, and even the crazy lone math professor who walks barefoot to class (for some reason a popular image) and rages against Republicans and foreign wars becomes a symbol of a widespread problem on American campuses. Socially, conservative critics say, things are no better, and they condemn undergraduate peer culture for being fast, loose, and fueled by drugs and alcohol, behaviors that go largely unchecked by the adults who are supposed to be in charge. In the area of administrative policy, the conservative critique extends to affirmative action in hiring and admissions, which detractors deride as anti-meritocratic and unjust and which, they contend, led in the first place to the vocal populations on today's college campuses claiming victimhood and demanding a left-oriented curriculum. Critics point to administrators' decisions to bar ROTC from campus (a practice some elite universities began after the military implemented Don't Ask, Don't Tell), to institute policies that coddle Muslim student groups, and to turn a blind eye to faculty who clearly and regularly cross the line between "teaching and preaching."² But at the most general level, the critics argue that a hostile political atmosphere exists on campuses that militates against intellectual diversity of opinion and actively promotes only one of the nation's two major political parties.³

To mitigate the effects of what they perceive to be an overwhelmingly liberal environment, conservative organizations have sprung up to help right-leaning students. One such organization, led by David Horowitz, has produced the Academic Bill of Rights to protect students "from the imposition of any orthodoxy of a political, religious or ideological nature," and has established chapters on campuses nationwide "collecting documentation of political abuses in the classroom."⁴ National cosponsored events such as the National Conservative Student Conference introduce thousands of students each year to the celebrities of the Right.⁵ Meantime, organizations such as the Leadership Institute train students in how to "take back your campus" from radical professors, and the Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute encourages "brave young women [to] share their experiences of what it's like to be conservatives on liberal campuses."⁶ More intellectually styled organizations such as the Inter-

collegiate Studies Institute and the Institute for Humane Studies seek to sponsor young conservative journalists and Ivory Tower-bound graduate students through internship programs at such venerable institutions as the *Wall Street Journal*, or through summer seminars at which they can discuss the work of the free market economist Friedrich Hayek or the philosopher of personal liberty Russell Kirk.⁷ Added to this is a proliferation of conservative-funded think tanks on university campuses—the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and the Mercatus Institute at George Mason University are but two of the best known—that serve as centers for conservative thought. According to conservative critics, all of these organizational strategies, from promoting animatedly partisan conferences to sponsoring intellectually invigorating seminars and internships, play a crucial role in minimizing the marginalization that conservative students feel on campus and improve the chances that right-leaning students will remain active in conservative circles.

Yet over the period of time in which these organizations emerged and have flourished, they have attracted little systematic notice. The movement to build a corps of young, ideologically dependable lawyers, journalists, congressional staff, voters, and academics has been a central priority of the political Right, but few have investigated the effort to mobilize right-leaning students on college campuses, or how those students experience their undergraduate lives. While social scientists have given considerable thought to progressive politics at the university level (with examples like Doug McAdam's *Freedom Summer* and Fabio Rojas's *From Black Power to Black Studies*), far too few have looked at the identities and political activities of self-described conservative undergraduates and their sponsors.⁸ Every once in a while journalists—in the place of social scientists—take up the issue and ponder college-age conservatism as a kind of exotica that occurs on university campuses or at national conferences.⁹ And certainly a cottage industry of conservative websites and publishers has directed attention to the phenomenon of conservative student activism.¹⁰ But these anecdotal forays into the conservative student phenomenon are hardly disinterested social scientific studies. Moreover, while recent academic studies have looked at faculty's political

beliefs and behaviors, or have investigated the growing sector of conservative organizations aimed at other strategic goals, the mobilization of conservative *students* has been all but left out of the analysis.¹¹ As a consequence, neither scholars nor university administrators nor parents nor concerned outsiders know whether the accusations leveled against universities—or the organizational tactics designed to counter the problem—resonate with the conservative students on whose behalf critiques are made and solutions created.

As the first book-length study to be conducted on the contemporary campus Right, our research sets out to fill a gap in the public's understanding of the most recent wave of conservative cadre building. In this comparative case study of students at two universities, we look at how conservative undergraduates think and behave politically in different college settings, and how these actions connect to a variety of other political phenomena in the broader U.S. culture. By deciding to study two universities closely—one an elite private university on the East Coast, the other a large public university system in the West—we are able to explore similarities and differences in conservative activism across different campuses. Not content simply to survey undergraduates about their political commitments, we went directly to students and alumni/ae to talk with them personally about their lives before, during, and in some cases after college. We wanted to know whether they felt they were in a political minority at their universities, as the critics contend; whether they were upset about their peers, faculty, and administrators; and what they did about it if they were. We wanted to learn what the turning points had been in their ideological orientations and what forms of conservative activism they engaged in while in college. We were interested in conservative students' career aspirations and their positions on particular political issues. In addition, we asked our interviewees about whom they knew in the larger world of conservative thought and politics, and the degree to which they connected with larger networks that advocated conservative positions. Most intriguingly, we were eager to find out whether there might be something one could call a national way of "acting like a conservative" on college

campuses or whether local circumstances instead created meaningful variation across the universities we studied.

The following pages provide answers to these questions. Although we are careful not to contend that we have described all of the possibilities for conservative action in colleges and universities across America, among our most important discoveries at Eastern Elite University and the campuses in the Western Public system is that while conservative undergraduates across the country may share many of the same political beliefs—they support small government, low taxes, and individual responsibility—the political *styles* students use to express these commitments are highly distinctive on different college and university campuses. Organizational settings matter significantly for how undergraduates come to see themselves as political actors, how they envision responding to their peers and professors on campus, and how they picture the rest of the world and their own futures within it. Because “college” does not denote a single experience or phenomenon (even within the relatively privileged portion of the higher education sector of four-year residential campuses that we investigate here), students on different campuses end up having strikingly divergent approaches to being conservative. These variations are not so much a matter of doctrine as they are one of disposition and tactics, and they reflect both the organizational differences between universities that shape students’ everyday lives and the imagined trajectories that these students project about their lives after college. Although one could not be faulted for imagining that a college-educated conservative student graduating from Eastern Elite University would be more or less like a college-educated conservative graduating from the Western Public system, we have strong evidence that indicates otherwise. Indeed, our findings show that the particular university a student attends has a significant impact on how that student decides to go about being a conservative—if not so much in what he or she believes, then in how he or she expresses those beliefs. These different styles, we contend, are in no small part connected to the styles present in the larger political culture in which we all participate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the result not of two people but of many. Yet before we go on to thank others, we would first like to acknowledge each other in this effort. Amy would like to express genuine gratitude to Kate for bringing her passion and extraordinary talents for research to this study, even while she has been writing a fascinating dissertation of her own about university culture. This has been a true collaboration in every sense of the word—in spirit, shared vision, and just plain hard work. Kate can only begin to thank Amy in just these few words. Working on this project as a graduate student has been both challenging and rewarding, and she has been extremely fortunate over these past several years not only to have had Amy as her co-author but also as a mentor. Every grad student should be so lucky.

It may not be customary to thank our series editor before others on our list, but when that series editor is Paul DiMaggio, the sociologists among our readers will understand why he gets top billing. The man is a marvel in giving constructively critical comments, which pushed our project to the next level. We have learned so much from working with him that it's hard to know what to say besides a simple "thank you." Of course, if we didn't have to worry about house style, that last bit would actually be italicized, underscored, decorated with emoticons, written in ALL CAPS, and followed by a large number of exclamation points.

Several organizations have supported this work. The Spencer Foundation's Small Grants program may have "small" in its name, but its funding in the area of the New Civics initiative sponsored travel, interview transcription, undergraduate research assistance, a bit of graduate student stipend, and even a sliver of sabbatical. Thank you to Susan Dauber and Lauren Jones Young for their interest in and support of the project. The generosity of those at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University has also been a great gift. A good part of the first draft of this book was written in Study 43, but there were other wonderful joys to be had at the center, too, not least the friendships forged or

strengthened with Tori McGeer, Enrique Rodriguez-Alegria, Nancy Whittier, Gary Alan Fine, Joan Barbour, Cynthia Pilch, Iris Litt, Iris Wilson, Tricia Sota, Liz Lambert, Stephen Kosslyn, and Linda Jack. Thanks go as well to the Academic Senate of the University of California–San Diego, which has always provided needed funding at crucial moments, and to UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute for providing access to survey data.

We have great colleagues and dear friends at UC San Diego who have been helpful in so many ways. We see them frequently and learn from them always in enjoyable social settings, but also through the institutionalized auspices of the Sociology Department’s Culture + Society Workshop, the Workshop for the Study of Conservatism and Conservative Movements, and the Inequalities Workshop. Although this list is not exhaustive, we would like to officially thank the faculty members who came to know the work best—Mary Blair-Loy, John Evans, John Skrentny, Jeff Haydu, Robert Horwitz, Tom Medvetz, Isaac Martin, Kwai Ng, and Bud Mehan—as well as previous and current graduate students Michael Haedicke, Stephen Meyers, Michael Evans, Lisa Nunn, Ian Mullins, and Erin Cech. We would also like to thank our research team. Our quantitative analyses benefited tremendously from the work of graduate student Geoffrey Fojtasek. We also received considerable assistance from undergraduates Lindsay McKee DePalma, Lauren Bernadett, Teresa Chu, Adam Kenworthy, Joanne Chen, Adina Bodenstein, and Alice Chao, many of whom are now pursuing or have completed graduate studies of their own. The very smart and savvy administrative staff members in the Department of Sociology have been a great help in budgeting, organizing, and finessing the logistical parts of this project, particularly Stephanie Navrides, Tanya Pohlson, Manny dela Paz, and Susan Taniguchi.

There really isn’t a sufficient way to thank Mitchell Stevens for everything he has added to this research project (and to Amy’s overall life project since graduate school). His is a very special sociological imagination that combines deep knowledge of culture, organizations, higher education, and all manner of other disciplinary concerns. Mitchell is also part of a higher education/education mafia

from which we have gained a great deal and to whose ongoing projects we hope to contribute: Elizabeth Armstrong, Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, Jal Mehta, Steven Brint, Neil Gross, Scott Davies, Michèle Lamont, Pam Walters, among others. Others around the country who have commented on particular aspects of the project deserve thanks as well: Ed Walker, Marc Ventresca, Ann Colby, Bill Damon, Laura Stark, Gary Alan Fine, Chiqui Ramirez, Rory McVeigh, David Meyer, Ronnee Schreiber, and Sarah Willie (although this list is hopelessly incomplete). Nicki Beisel, as always, is in a class by herself.

We have presented portions of the manuscript in progress in many venues, including the departments of sociology at the University of California–Berkeley, the University of California–Irvine, Rice University, the University of British Columbia, and the University of California–San Diego, as well as at Stanford’s Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, the Center for Adolescence, and SCANCOR, and at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association. We thank many interlocutors in each of these forums; their questions and comments have been extremely helpful to us in thinking about our cases and our arguments. We also thank the editors of two volumes in which some of the research described in this book was previously published: Lisa Stulberg and Sharon Weinberg, editors of *Diversity in Education: Toward a More Comprehensive Approach* (Routledge), and Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, editors of *Professors and Their Politics* (Johns Hopkins University Press).

We have benefited greatly from the work of a team of transcribers headed by Loretta Sowers. Our sincere thanks go to Dorothy Tuzzi, a goddess among transcribers, who made opening up every new transcription document an unexpected pleasure. Not satisfied to simply do a marvelous job of transcribing our interviews, she sent commentary, ancillary information (thank you, Internet search engines!), and nuggets of her terrific wisdom. If we couldn’t find any other reason to get back into the field collecting interview data, the anticipation of working with Dorothy again would provide enough incentive.

In addition to Paul DiMaggio and the other Culture Series editors at Princeton University Press (Michèle Lamont, Bob Wuthnow, and Viviana Zelizer), we would like to thank the acquisitions and production staff of the press for their interest in our work, especially Eric Schwartz and Nathan Carr. Thanks, too, to Marjorie Pannell, for her excellent copy editing. Any mistakes or oversights in content are, of course, our own.

Many friends and family members made the process of writing pleasurable. Amy especially thanks Mary Blair-Loy, Marnie and Lew Klein, Rowan Schoales, Elyana Sutin, John Skrentny, Mitchell Stevens, Charles St. Hill, Daniel Blaess, Laxmi deLeo, and the entire Binder clan for their love and support. Lois Binder, the clan's matriarch, is the person who bred the love of politics in her daughter. What a gift! Profound gratitude goes to Edward Hunter, who provides love, comfort, gloriously wide-ranging conversation, yoga buddysim, Manhattans straight up, and gourmet Mexican meals at the Sweet 'n' Drowsy. Kate thanks Richard Buxton, Andrew Hall, Jennifer Moorman, Ariel Dekovic, Allison Roselle, Erin Cech, L.Z. and Y.E., and, of course, all her fellow graduate students at UC San Diego. Bill Hoynes deserves a special note of thanks for his encouragement, mentorship, and steadfast support, without which she would not have pursued an academic career (and so certainly would not be writing this!). Kate also thanks her parents, brother, and in-laws, for bearing with her; Hannah, Josh, and Emmeline Close, for providing support when she needed it most; and Puff, for her cold nose and unconditional love. But her deepest thanks go to Geoff, for being who he is.

Finally, to our interviewees: We thank you so very much for sharing your time and thoughts with us. We hope we have rendered your experiences faithfully.

BECOMING RIGHT

Contents

Preface	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Who Are Conservative Students?	29
Chapter 3: Sponsored Conservatism: The Landscape of National Conservative Organizations	76
Chapter 4: How Conservatives Think about Campus: The Effects of College Reputations, Social Scenes, and Academics on Student Experience	113
Chapter 5: Provoking Liberals and Campaigning for Republicans: Two Conservative Styles at the Western Public Universities	161
Chapter 6: Civilized Discourse, Highbrow Provocation, and a Fuller Embrace of Campaigning: Three Conservative Styles at Eastern Elite University	213
Chapter 7: Conservative Femininity	270
Chapter 8: The Theory behind the Findings: How Studying College Conservatives Extends Our Understanding of Higher Education, Politics, and Culture	309
Notes	327
References	363
Index	381