Censoring Horowitz shows SLU needs diversity of thought

Education • Insulation from opposing views often leads to groupthink on college campuses.

BY ROBERT MARANTO

When St. Louis University invited, and then disinvited conservative activist David Horowitz recently, it marked the latest in a long line of college and university decisions banning speakers and books from the right — but almost never from the left.

As long ago as 1951 when a young William F. Buckley Jr. wrote “God and Man at Yale,” conservatives have complained about professors for contempt for religion, sympathy for socialism and skepticism about the need to combat foreign foes, whether communists during the Cold War or terrorists today.

Still, colleges and universities of Buckley’s day had some ideological balance and more than a little debate. It was not until the 1970s that academia reached an ideological tipping point. As academic deans and college presidents ceded hiring authority to professors, ideological diversity diminished. For all their talk of free thought, once they had the power to pick their colleagues, professors acted just like non-academics and quite naturally hired people just like themselves.

Insulation unique to the ivory tower often turned to groupthink. Corporate executives who keep out new ideas and talented people lose market share to competitors. Government bureaucrats who ignore citizen complaints face congressional hearings. But within the ivory tower, professors can hold dumb ideas for decades with no accountability, so long as they accord with the dumb ideas of their peers. Surrounded by like-minded colleagues, professors become intellectually flabby and increasingly irrelevant.

By the 1990s the results were plain to see. As Daniel Klein and Charlotte Stern document in a book I just edited, in the social sciences and humanities, subjects in which ideology matters, liberals and radicals outnumber conservatives by about 8-1. A survey from 2006 found that even as China, Vietnam and Cuba were leaving central planning behind, a remarkable 17.6 percent of social scientists were self-described Marxists.

Many academic departments do not have a single Republican or conservative Democrat. A friend who teaches at a well-regarded liberal arts college reports that in a mock election in 2008, faculty voted 106 to 2 for Barack Obama over John McCain. (Obama himself would be too moderate to teach in a sociology department, and at Harvard Law School was the conservative choice to edit the Harvard Law Review).

Unfortunately, ideological imbalance harms education, restricting the range of ideas that students are exposed to. It also shapes the research questions that professors ask, limiting their ability to understand social problems. Finally, that lack of ideological diversity within academia undermines respect for professorial expertise. Today, conservatives are apt to distrust any findings coming out of universities, even when, as on such matters as global warming, the liberal professors almost certainly are right.

SLU has always prided itself on its demographic diversity and its inclusion. The university integrated before it had to and accepted women before it was popular to do so. It committed to the Midtown area even when it was one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the nation. Ironically, this respect for inclusion probably led the administration to retract Horowitz’s invitation to speak.

I suspect that well-meaning administrators had heard that the author’s views offended some Muslims and some on the left. Not wanting to anger their friends, the SLU leadership canceled Horowitz.

But if SLU officials had been familiar with conservative analyses of the Middle East, rather than merely radical critiques of those analyses, they would not have censored him. Horowitz may be bombastic, but he is no fool. His views accord with the scholarship of Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, Martin Kramer and others. A single Republican political scientist, assuming that SLU has one, could have told the administration that, perhaps leading to a healthy debate about foreign policy, rather than an unhealthy effort to stop debate about foreign policy.

Unfortunately it was not to be. Instead, a great university looks like a closed-minded censor, giving David Horowitz and others on the right a new cause for fundraising.

As a conservative I can only say, way to go Billikens!

Robert Maranto is the 21st Century Chair in Leadership in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. His most recent book is "The Politically Correct University," published by AEI Press.