

MIKE NICHOLS



What the professors don't want to hear

Conservative students forfeit some of their freedoms to survive in liberal environment

Justin Lemke figured out a way to get a better grade in his journalism class at the University of Wisconsin-Madison last semester: Talk like a liberal.

Dana Dahms wanted to be a teacher but found that her UW education classes were so infused with liberal politics that she had to switch majors.

Devin Gatton, a conservative UW-Milwaukee student, said his dad warned him to keep his positions and ideas to himself and just “write what the teacher wants you to write” in order to get the grades. His dad ought to know; he’s a college professor in northern Wisconsin.

They’re not unusual, these Wisconsin college kids. They speak up outside of class — and relayed their concerns in the preceding story. But in the classroom, they do what many conservative students feel forced to do in order to survive in departments so monolithically liberal that professors confuse political ideology and opinion with academic doctrine.

It’s a fundamental irony: Universities that exist to foster critical and independent thinking often do just the opposite.

Some professors elsewhere in the United States say things aren’t as bad as we think and suggest that conservatives de-escalate their so-called rhetorical war against the progressive university. Two conservative professors, Jon A. Shields and Joshua M. Dunn Sr., chimed in recently in *The Washington Post* that while “right-wing faculty members and ideas are not always treated fairly on college campuses ... right-wing hand-wringing about higher education is overblown.”

Maybe for the small coterie of conservative professors. But what about the students who know the bias of the Intro to Public Policy instructor who invariably asks her students to critique the Republican presidential debates, never the Democratic ones? Or the professor in the first-semester class on — ostensibly, at least — education that focuses on the “Black Lives Matter” movement or the “prison pipeline” instead of, say, how to help a child with special needs or unusual gifts?

“So what?” you might ask. These students see it for what it is. Yes, some — at a cost. The ones who talked to us are unusually

incisive, articulate and forthright. They’re also unusually mature. Many of them came to college with well-formed ideologies.

But what about the kids who are more typical 19-year-olds, the ones who are fundamentally influenced by their college professors because they’re, well, college professors and have doctoral degrees, not to mention grade books. What about the students who aren’t strong enough, mature enough or masochistic enough to stand up to the self-proclaimed Marxist instructing them at UWM?

And what about those who, out of self-preservation, swallow hard and remain quiet in order to get what could turn out to be a deeply unsatisfying degree? You shouldn’t have to give up a part of yourself in exchange for the parchment that the world demands.

It’s not just a problem for conservatives on college campuses. Dahms transferred out of UW’s School of Education. She gave up her dream of being a teacher in order to think for herself. But a lot of her classmates didn’t transfer — and it’s a pretty safe bet that many agreed with the political perspective they heard being spouted every day or came to agree over time. They’re the ones who will

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enter the teaching world themselves — and repeat the cycle because they know no better.

The real tragedy is that in many areas of academia, so much of this is self-perpetuating. Professors, through the tenure process, choose like-minded colleagues. Academics who are conservative learn to avoid certain disciplines such as sociology or education. Dahms’ classmates who stayed in education, meanwhile, eventually will go out into the world with only half a view of it and assiduously attempt to shape the rest of the Earth to their own likeness.

After watching the UW Board of Regents kowtow to professors in recent months, I’m tempted to suggest that they should worry about students for a change — but that wouldn’t be quite fair. The regents do care about students, some of them at least. And they do care about freedom of speech and expression — at least according to the board’s recent statement affirming its commitment to freedom of expression.

The regents’ statement, passed in December, assures everyone that UW institutions have a “commitment to a completely free and open discussion of ideas.”

“Each institution ... has a solemn responsibility not only to promote lively and fearless exploration, deliberation and debate of ideas, but also to protect those freedoms when others attempt to restrict them,” the regents say.

The problem is that when it comes to what actually occurs in too many classrooms, that solemn responsibility is forgotten, and too many students, the conservative ones, are forced to remain silent. I wonder if the regents really understand that.

I’d like to thank Dahms, Gatton and Lemke as well as students Kyle Beesley, Nile Porter, Jake Regner and Matt Sama for having the courage to speak up. I hope other conservatives throughout the UW System will now as well. [WI](#)

Mike Nichols is the president of WPRI.