

Liberal Arts Breeding Liberal Minds?

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College campuses are arguably among the most politically liberal places in the country. It is understandable that liberal arts institutions, places where emphasis is placed on ideas of justice, equality and open-mindedness, would attract liberal-minded students. It seems though, that universities and colleges not only attract liberal-mindedness, but also *breed* it. At many colleges and universities, liberal thinking dominates mainstream thought, making it effectively difficult for conservative-minded students to feel comfortable voicing their opinions. In light of this general understanding, I hypothesized that college students would consider themselves to be more politically liberal overall after they had spent time as a student at a college or university. Affirmation of this hypothesis would suggest that the liberal ambience of academic institutions was repressive to conservative opinions, and in effect that colleges and universities were not satisfactorily promoting intellectual diversity. The testing of a hypothesis that gages students' personal experiences is important in that it is a step towards securing academic freedom. Such testing enables researchers to extract information that is not readily apparent.

It is not necessarily problematic for students, during the course of their college careers, to change their beliefs. After all, amended beliefs often result from education, following in the wake of new knowledge. The trouble lies not in an amendment or maturation in political ideology, but instead in the possibility that such a change is a result of the presentation of unbalanced information; that such transformations came about as a result of the failure of academic

institutions to provide students with academic freedom. Academic freedom values openness and balance in teaching and learning, in turn promoting intellectual diversity, and thus helping a university to achieve its primary goals such as “the pursuit of truth, the discovery of new knowledge through scholarship and research, the study and reasoned criticism of intellectual and cultural traditions, the teaching and general development of students to help them become creative individuals and productive citizens of a pluralistic democracy, and the transmission of knowledge and learning to a society at large”.¹

Method

Working with a number of other survey researchers, each of whom had his own project and hypothesis, to produce and distribute an effective survey, I (and they) were forced to grant minor concessions to collectively compile a survey. As a group, we decided that, although we would prefer the largest sample possible, 1000 survey participants would be sufficient to measure those factors in which we were interested. Furthermore, since many of the researchers involved in the drafting and distribution of the survey were interested in utilizing ‘college education’ as a variable, it would be important to have an equally prominent constant. For this reason, we instructed the survey distribution group, Polimetrix Corporation, to distribute the survey only to those aged 18 through 24, but to divide the sample into two groups of 500; one of college students and graduates and the other of non-college students or graduates. Further, we limited our sample to non-military youth, as we determined the relationship of those on active military duty with the government and civic engagement was, by its very nature, unique, and not representative of the population writ large.

¹ Senate Bill No. 1412, Senator Morrow

The questions we composed appeared in the survey titled *2007 Tisch College National Civic and Political Engagement of Young People Survey*. Polimetrix Corporation administered this survey to 1,000 participants, stratified to ensure exactly half of the respondents were college students. Polimetrix conducted 1,629 interviews with panelists to determine which combination of respondents would most appropriately reflect the demographics determined by the American Community Study conducted by the Census Bureau. 636 of those interviewed were invited on the basis of screenouts from unrelated studies, and the other 993 were found directly from the Polimetrix database. The group was then weighted on the basis of age, race, education, and gender. For Polimetrix panelists, the response rate was 31.2%, while those who were redirected to the study had a response rate of 66.7%.

To evaluate my hypothesis, I examined three questions from the *2007 Tisch College National Civic and Political Engagement of Young People Survey*²:

How would you have described your own personal political orientation at the start of your freshman year in college?

- <5> Conservative
- <4> Moderate leaning conservative
- <3> Moderate
- <2> Moderate leaning liberal
- <1> Liberal
- <0> I don't know

When it comes to most political issues, do you think of yourself as a liberal, moderate, or conservative?

- <5> Conservative
- <4> Moderate leaning conservative
- <3> Moderate
- <2> Moderate leaning liberal
- <1> Liberal
- <0> I don't know

How comfortable do you feel voicing political opinions at your university?

² *2007 Tisch College National Civic and Political Engagement of Young People Survey*, Kent Portney and PS 115 Class, Tufts University

- <5> Very comfortable
- <4> Comfortable
- <3> Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- <2> Uncomfortable
- <1> Very uncomfortable
- <0> I don't know

Expected Results

I anticipated that the survey would yield results indicating that the political ideologies of students would, on average, be more liberal than they were at the start of their freshman year. More explicitly, of the students who change their political ideologies during the course of their college careers, I predicted the majority of the changes to be in the direction of liberality as opposed to the direction of conservatism. I expected, for example, that the survey was more likely to yield results of students who began their college careers as 'conservative' and became 'moderate' or even 'liberal' than of students who began their college careers as 'liberal' and became 'moderate' or 'conservative'. Secondly, I would expect the 'conservative' and 'very conservative' students expressing that they feel uncomfortable voicing their political opinions at their liberal arts institutions to outweigh the 'liberal' and 'very liberal' students who express the same sentiment.

Actual Results

Table 1 presents the main data of the paper. It relates the students' political orientation at the start of their freshman year with their current orientation. The diagonal terms represent the frequency of students whose political orientation has not changed. Terms to the right of the diagonal represent students whose current political orientation is more conservative than in their freshman year. Terms to the left of the diagonal represent students whose current orientation is more liberal than in their freshman year.

Political Orientation Freshman Year

	Liberal	Moderate Leaning Liberal	Moderate	Moderate Leaning Conservative	Conservative	
Current Political Orientation	Liberal	72 75.8%	10 21.3%	2 4.1%	2 6.35%	2 3.1%
	Moderate Leaning Liberal	17 17.9%	20 42.9%	14 28.6%	2 6.3%	1 1.6%
	Moderate	4 4.2%	13 27.7%	22 44.95	8 25.0%	4 6.3%
	Moderate Leaning Conservative	1 1.1%	2 4.3%	7 14.3%	17 53.1%	10 15.6%
	Conservative	1 1.1%	2 4.3%	4 8.2%	3 9.4%	82.47 73.4%

Table 1

Table 1 shows that the students at both extremes of the political spectrum do not seem to change their opinion significantly. Approximately 75% of students who were liberal in their freshman year remain liberal and approximately 73% of those who were conservatives in their freshman year remain conservatives. On the other hand, less than half of students at the center of the political spectrum remain with the same political orientation.

The following graph depicts the degree to which the students who considered their

political orientation at the start of their freshman year to be 'liberal' or 'conservative'. The degree of change in political ideology can be measured by the number of gradations moved in the opposite direction. For example, a student who was a liberal as a freshman and who is currently moderate leaning liberal is considered to have moved one step towards the opposite direction. A student who was a conservative as a freshman but who is currently a liberal is considered to have moved four steps in the opposite direction.

Note that the pattern of ideology change for liberals and conservatives is remarkably similar. Most students seem to remain with their initial orientation, and only a small fraction of students move more than one step in the opposite direction. These results suggest that, if any differential effect of college attendance on political orientation exists, it must be through those students who were initially not at the extremes of the political spectrum.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 1

A t-test comparing the proportion of liberal and conservative students who change political orientation allows us to formally reject the hypothesis that a college education will influence students in the direction of a more liberal political orientation with overwhelming confidence (p-value is equal to approximately .74).

Among students who considered themselves liberal or moderate leaning liberal in their freshman year, about 37% moved to the right of the political spectrum. Among those who considered themselves conservative or moderate leaning conservatives in their freshman year, about 40% moved to the left. Once again, a t-test allows us to reject the hypothesis of a different pattern of change towards the other side of the political spectrum (p-value of approximately .23).

When moderate students are included in these calculations, the evidence is slightly weaker than when we consider only students at the extremes of the political spectrum. Although statistically insignificant, the proportion of students who move towards a more conservative position is smaller than the proportion of students moving towards a more liberal position. This dichotomy suggests that a larger data might make it possible to detect some effect of going to college on the tendency to defend more liberal positions if we obtained a larger data set.

Among students who considered themselves to be 'moderate' in their freshman year, about 33% have moved towards a more liberal position, and 22% have moved towards a more conservative position. Again, we cannot reject the hypothesis that the proportion of students moving in either direction is different but this could be due to the limited number of observations (49 students).

Overall, the results do not support my original hypothesis that a college education influences students to move towards more liberal positions in the political spectrum. The

evidence is particularly strong for students originally located at the extremes of the political spectrum. It could be the case, however, that some evidence for my original hypothesis could be found for students at the center of the political spectrum if a larger data set was used.

Next, I analyze how comfortable students are in voicing their opinion depending on their political orientation in their freshman year and in the current year. Tables 2 and 3 present the data that will be analyzed.

Political Orientation Freshman Year

	Liberal	Moderate leaning Liberal	Moderate	Moderate Leaning Conservative	Conservative
Very Uncomfortable	2 2.3%	0 0%	2 4.3%	1 2.8%	2 3.5%

Comfort Level

Uncomfortable	6 6.8%	5 9.1%	5 10.6%	5 13.9%	5 8.8%
Neither Comfortable nor Uncomfortable	12 13.6%	10 18.2%	7 14.9%	9 25.0%	9 15.8%
Comfortable	27 30.7%	20 36.4%	17 36.2%	15 41.7%	13 22.8%
Very Comfortable	41 46.6%	20 36.4%	16 34.0%	6 16.7%	28 49.1%

Table 2

Once again, the data suggests a strikingly similar pattern for students in the extremes of the political spectrum. About 12.8% of students who were liberal in their freshman year and 12.5% of students who were conservative in their freshman year claimed to be 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' voicing their opinion.

Political Orientation

	Liberal	Moderate leaning Liberal	Moderate	Moderate Leaning Conservative	Conservative	
Comfort Level	Very Uncomfortable	2 2.3%	0 0%	2 4.3%	1 2.8%	2 3.5%
	Uncomfortable	6 6.8%	5 9.1%	5 10.6%	5 13.9%	5 8.8%
	Neither Comfortable nor Uncomfortable	12 13.6%	10 18.2%	7 14.9%	9 25.0%	9 15.8%
	Comfortable	27 30.7%	20 36.4%	17 36.2%	15 41.7%	13 22.8%
	Very Comfortable	41 46.6%	20 36.4%	16 34.0%	6 16.7%	28 49.1%

Table 3

Similarly, about 13.6% of liberal students and 18.4% of conservative students claimed to be 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' voicing their opinion. Applying a t-test, we cannot reject the hypothesis that the proportion of liberal and conservative students who are 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' voicing their opinion are different (the p-value is approximately .98).

The results above do not change when moderates leaning liberal and moderates leaning conservative are included. About 9.3% of students who considered themselves as liberal and moderate leaning towards liberal and 13.5% of those who considered themselves as conservatives and moderate leaning towards conservative in their freshman year claimed to be 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' voicing their opinion. Again, we cannot reject the hypothesis that an equal proportion of liberal and conservative students are 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' voicing their opinion (the p-value of the t-test is approximately .995).

The same result is obtained when we consider the students' current position. We cannot reject that proportion of liberal and moderate leaning towards liberal and conservative students

who consider themselves 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' (12.5% and 16.9%, respectively) are the same. [footnote: The p-value of the t-test is approximately 0.977].]

Critique

Certainly, every survey and questionnaire has its own limitations; be they monetary resources, permissible survey length, difficult question wording or limited sample size. It is the pollster or survey researcher's job to work within the constraints his unique project presents. There are a number of factors that, in light of my hypothesis, weakened this survey, but I recognize that this is not a matter about which to complain, but instead from which to learn. Had I written and distributed this survey purely for my own purposes, I would have stipulated a different sample of respondents.

While the results of this survey, the results that reject my hypothesis, are statistically significant; I believe they are the result, at least in part, of the very small sample size. The most recent United States Census identifies 15.9 million college students in the United States. Our sample size was 1,000. I could not utilize data from each of these 1000 students though because my hypothesis was relevant only to college students, and half of our survey population was made up of non-college students. Immediately, my sample was limited to 500 responses. The survey would have been better suited to my hypothesis' needs if all of the thousand participants were college students. Additionally, although it is likely that there are a disproportionate number of liberal students to conservative students in colleges across the country, it would have been helpful, in terms of evaluating the change in political ideology of the population I was studying, if I could have compared a more significant number of conservative-minded students than answered the questionnaire. It would have been useful if Polimetrix could have divided the sample into two

groups, each of 500, half of which began college with conservative political ideologies, and the other half beginning college with liberal political ideologies.

Another point at which there is room for improvement is the manner in which the survey was delivered. For the purposes of my hypothesis, this survey may have been more successful had it been carried out as a longitudinal study. The assumption inherent in asking students to report what their political ideologies were at the start of freshman year, is that they know what their political ideologies were at the start of freshman year, or even that they are conscious of the fact that their ideologies have changed. Asking students to report their political ideology a year or a few years after the date leaves time to forget, room to interpret, and the possibility of hindsight bias.

One last alteration I would have made were I to redeliver the survey is to have Polimetrix divide the population within the liberal grouping and within the conservative grouping by school region so that I have significant data from schools that, for example, are in the Northeast, in the deep South, in the Midwest and on the West Coast, as I would expect mainstream political ideology to vary with geographic location. For instance, schools in Massachusetts are known to be more politically liberal than schools in Virginia.

Since, at the moment, I do not have the resources to redeliver and administer the survey, the best conclusion I can draw is that the population we sampled does not reflect the patterns I expected to see, for there seems to be little, if any, correlation between the degree to which students feel comfortable voicing their political opinions and their political ideology. Furthermore, as reflected by the survey results, there is little correlation between political orientation at the start of freshman year and the degree to which political ideology changes.