

THE TRIBES THAT HIRE THE PHD

Academic hiring perpetuates ideological outlooks, according to **Daniel Klein**

Think of culture as a system of validation of interpretations and judgments. Within a culture, for validation, people often look to the learned, the eminent scholars. People also look to the institutions of power and permanence. Scholars themselves feel the pull of what seems most powerful and permanent. It's probably in our genes.

In the *Georgetown Public Policy Review*, Robert L. Oprisko, a visiting professor at Butler University, notes that 'eleven schools contribute 50 percent of the political science academics to research-intensive universities in the United States.'¹ More than a hundred political science PhD programs are graduating students who will contest the remaining 50 percent of openings. With fewer jobs in the field and a surplus of PhDs in a tightening market, Oprisko writes:

Many universities are losing the ability to place their own students within academia. The theoretical consequence of such hiring practices is that hiring committees often appear to favor people like themselves rather than candidates from schools like the ones in which they work.

The pattern of placing and hiring new young faculty has implications for the ideological profile within departments. Think of the academic discipline of political science as a tribe. The tribe's settlements are situated laterally, in universities across the country. There is an established hierarchy of prestige among the settlements. Culturally, however, the array has the structure of a pyramid. At the apex of the

pyramid are the most prestigious departments. They produce the most new PhDs and sweep them into positions up and down the pyramid.

Ideological outlooks

What Oprisko finds for political science also holds true for sociology,² law,³ economics⁴ (1, 2), and other disciplines.⁵

Oprisko does not discuss what happens when the thinking of the apex welcomes certain ideological outlooks, notably centrism and left-leaning outlooks, and the lack of other outlooks, such as classical liberalism, libertarianism and conservatism. It is well established that



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the professoriate leans heavily Democratic in politics⁶ and social-democratic in public policy.⁷ It is well established that classical liberals, libertarians and conservatives are quite scarce in most fields. The same pattern of ideology is seen in the products of academic scholarship, including the journals⁸ and the elite presses.⁹

If the apex became solidly centre-and-left, the sweep of the apex will ensure that the whole pyramid goes that way. Of all social groups, the professoriate is one of the most caste-like and prestige-oriented, with the top forming a tribal elite.

Decision-making over personnel is located principally within the department, and the procedure is majoritarian. In ‘Groupthink in Academia,’ Charlotta Stern and I explain that once the apex becomes sufficiently centre-and-left in outlook, departmental majoritarianism and disciplinary prestige sweep the outlook into positions throughout the pyramid.¹⁰

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The apex has leverage

Stern and I had said that since the younger professors had fewer Republican voters, the Democratic bent of the professoriate was likely to grow. Recently, *Inside Higher Ed* reported on the findings of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA—that the leftward tilt of the professoriate continues to grow.¹¹

I do not mean to suggest that at some point in history the apex changed and then transformed the whole pyramid. The lower ranks have never been much different from the upper. The point is that the apex has tremendous leverage, and seeing that helps us understand the cultural system and the current predicament.

If a discipline fell into groupthink, what mechanisms would bring correction? We might think that correction will come from consumer choice and new competition. That’s

the way it works, for example, in the market for waiter services.

Consider a thought experiment. Let’s say you arrive on a planet on which the market for waiters is like our market for academic political scientists. This other-worldly market exhibits the following features:

- Each waiter job is controlled by a collection of other waiters, a Waiter Department.
- Each waiter department spends money with little regard for the preferences of restaurant customers. Indeed, much of the money comes from coercive extractions from extraneous parties.
- There are 200 waiter departments, but they all form an encompassing cultural pyramid. Each waiter department gets whatever prestige and revenue-base it commands principally by adhering to the accustomed standards of the pyramid.
- Each waiter department produces new young waiters, whom it tries to place as high up in the pyramid as possible.
- Non-waiters are deemed unqualified to criticise the standards and practices of the encompassing Waiter club. Outsiders are ignored.
- Waiters at departments at the apex set the tone for the entire pyramid.
- Waiters at the top departments sometimes rub shoulders with political elites and power-holders. Sometimes they are appointed to positions of influence and power. Many aspire to be, or imagine themselves to be, part of society’s governing set. Their governing-set standing depends on playing according to the rules of conventional political culture, particularly the culture of one’s peers.

This waiter market is very different from our real-life waiter market.

The pyramid grows more integrated

In the real-life market for professors, it is hard to see the system as anything but self-reinforcing. Think about an upstart political science department that dared to be different. How would its differentness be validated? What standing could it achieve in relation to the parallel disciplinary pyramid from which it differentiates itself? Where would it place its new PhDs?

Is there any such political science department in the United States today?

Modern technology and communications might empower newcomers in the competition for recognition, prestige, and cultural influence. Perhaps regular people shrug more about Harvard credentials. Perhaps the credibility of academia has declined, including that of the academic elite, and, if so, perhaps it will continue to decline. On the other hand, American society grows more governmentalised, credentialised and academified, trends that might tend to raise the average citizen's regard for academia.

At any rate, modern technology works to make the pyramid itself more integrated. No longer is there much scope for regional difference, or local competing pyramids. Indeed, the pyramid is increasingly not just nationwide but worldwide. The result is less diversity. The integration of the pyramid may be one reason (among others) why there is no Milton Friedman today. Gone are the days of Chicago versus Cambridge.

The dependence on dollars

Even the economics profession seems to be sliding gradually towards the other academic tribes. A 2010 survey of economics professors with 299 respondents includes 17 policy questions. Here I cite just one: Only 49% opposed *increasing* the minimum wage.¹²

The academic system depends on dollars. Argumentation for reducing taxpayer support of higher education has been developed by Jeffrey Miron and Richard Vedder.¹³ Bryan Caplan is working on a book arguing that since education is mostly about signalling, it is crazy to subsidise higher education.

I suggest that to understand the cultural dynamics within academia, one should see a number of key points. First, each discipline is a tribe that imbues members with a strong sense of identity and that has great influence on their thinking, discourse and scholarly activities. For an economist, being an economist is an important part of one's selfhood, and, to validate that selfhood, he or she will cling to the tribe and often scratch and claw for bits of prestige within it. Second, the tribe has a pyramidal structure. Third, the apex of the pyramid has tremendous leverage throughout the pyramid.

Taxpayers may increasingly regard the university as another interest group, like the teachers' unions.

Further, we need to think about academia as it is embedded in the moral and cultural universe, and in history. Around the year 1880, a rising tide of cultural change arose, in part as a reaction to liberalism, and was reflected in a transformation of the Liberal Party in Britain. There was a generational shift against classical liberalism. Later, after World War II, individuals rediscovered classical liberal ideas, and something of an intellectual resurgence took place, represented by such figures as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Today, 50 years after landmark books by Hayek and Friedman, we are seeing that perhaps that wave has had limited success within the deeper, wider tide that came in 120 years ago.

Meanwhile, students and parents will increasingly approach college with eyes wider open. Taxpayers may increasingly regard the university as another interest group, like the teachers' unions. Academic tribes and their hiring patterns matter, and they deserve much more attention, particularly if we want to understand the culture we swim in and its tacit system of validation.

Endnotes

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- 6 Fredrick Hess, Richard Redding, and Robert Maranto, *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope, and Reforms* (AEI Press, 2009).
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- 10 Fredrick Hess, et al. *The Politically Correct University*, as above.
- 11 Scott Jaschik, 'Moving Further to the Left,' *Inside Higher Ed* (24 October 2012).
- 12 Daniel Klein, 'Economics Professors' Voting, Policy Views, Favorite Economists, and Frequent Lack of Consensus,' *Econ Journal Watch* 10:1 (2013), 121. \\uc0\\u8221{} \\i Econ Journal Watch\\i{} 10, no. 1 (2013)
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