

Canadian universities have a viewpoint diversity problem. We should all be worried

Christopher Dummit [asks](#), How can we trust scholarship to give us useful answers if there isn't genuine intellectual debate?



Universities are supposed to be truth-finding hubs – testing ideas, solving problems and asking new questions that others are either too afraid or too busy to ask. But to achieve their purpose they must welcome diverse viewpoints and not stifle dissent. Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that universities are falling short.

The problem is political. Universities have always been liberal places but recent data from the United States shows

that the slight bias of the past has hugely increased. Study after study of professors' political affiliations shows that the professoriate skews strongly to the left. A 2017 study of American professors found that there were 10.5 Democrats to every single Republican. In some disciplines – especially in the social sciences outside of economics – the imbalance is even stronger. In my own field of history that U.S. ratio is 33.5 to 1.0 in favour of the left. And the ratio has been growing ever greater in recent years. We don't have solid recent Canadian data – though a survey from 2000 showed that only five per cent of professors self-identified as Conservative at that time.

Universities are supposed to be truth-finding hubs

Professors – just like everyone else – are subject to confirmation bias. We think alike even when we believe we are impartial. Scholarship is supposed to work by externalizing a critical process through peer review. We contract out our rationality to rival experts who assess our findings. Humans may not be good at detecting the faults in our own reasoning, but we are excellent at finding fault in others – especially those with whom we disagree.

But what happens when scholarly communities don't contain genuinely divergent opinions?

The “grievance studies” hoax this past year gave us an uncomfortable glimpse of what can go wrong with peer review. Three academic outsiders made up over 20 fake papers and submitted them to journals in a series of left-leaning sub-disciplines. The fake articles were written to appeal to the political biases of the field – often in ludicrously exaggerated ways. How best to teach students about “privilege?” Try ranking students in a class according to privilege scores and even chaining white male students on the ground so they can know what it feels like to be oppressed.

Two separate papers cut and pasted sections of Hitler's Mein Kampf but swapped out Hitler's anti-Semitic heroes and enemies for their feminist alternatives. No one noticed.



Wilfrid Laurier University teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd finishes speaking at a rally in support of academic freedom in Waterloo, Ont., on Nov. 24, 2017.

The hoax infuriated many academic insiders – even while others laughed uproariously. But entertainment/frustration value aside the biggest take-away is what happened when the papers were sent to peer review. Not only did the reviewers miss the hoax, they actually pushed the fake authors to be even more outrageously partisan and one-sided.

We should all be concerned by the growth of a university ideological monoculture. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences can help us solve real problems. What counts as progress, and are we achieving it? How big is the problem of racism in this country and how should we solve it? What is the best way to foster economic growth for all? How should we understand the gender wage gap and what should we do about it?

We should all be concerned by the growth of a university ideological monoculture