

I was contacted by a student at the Daily Tar Heel (UNC Chapel Hill student paper) back in December and asked to give my take on the matter. I have copied and pasted my response to her below for you to see. Perhaps it may suggest a theme worth considering as you proceed with your work. At least, you can see my thoughts about it.

In the final analysis, the best thing is to do the one thing that this group would hate the most. Ignore them. Again, I really don't have much to offer to your project. I will focus on writing my next book and keep on doing what I do.

Here is my response to the student inquiry:

I learned of the Professor's Watch list when a colleague from another university contacted me and jokingly said "how dare you teach evidence driven decision making." The course in question was a graduate course in public policy analysis. I teach the basic steps and methods in the policy analysis process. Students are assigned a research project in which they are required to implement these basic policy analysis steps. The instructions for this assignment, which are the basis of my so called transgression, emphasize that opinions have no place in a professional and objective policy analysis. In other words, every conclusion and every recommendation must be supported by data. They must be evidence driven. That, as I perceive it, was interpreted as a "liberal" or anti "conservative" bias.

It is unfortunately not unusual that political partisans and office holders target academics and scholars for criticism. Earlier this year, I published a book (Managing the Climate Crisis) that explored the impacts of climate change and the implications of these for our public discourse and for public policy. This discussion begins, of course, with the science that provides the foundation for understanding risks, vulnerabilities, and problems that need to be assessed and addressed. But climate science, as I am sure you know, is not accepted by everybody outside of the scientific community. Recently, Congressman Joseph Barton, Republican from Texas and Chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, subpoenaed climate researcher Richard Mann and his colleagues asking for the raw data and computer codes from all their research. Barton is one of the leading climate change deniers in congress. Some have interpreted this subpoena to be a part of an effort to intimidate scientists. It raises the disturbing prospect, they say, of politicians opening investigations against any scientists who reach conclusions that do not conform to their ideological beliefs and preferences. Indeed, U.S. Senators throwing snowballs on the Senate floor is all the "evidence" some mental midgets need to prove that climate change is a "hoax."

If scientists and social scientists, evidence driven scholars, are subjected to partisan criticism imagine how much more attack worthy are the philosophers, the historians, the novelists, the poets, and so on. If scientific and empirical work is "political" in the eyes of the discontented ideologue, how much more "political" and unacceptable will be the work of scholars in the humanities?

On one level, this watch list simply confirms the ignorance of the people who have created it. On another level, it confirms that the anti-intellectualism that defines American culture is alive and as strong as ever. On the most important level, intimidating scholars and teachers is a classic case of the "university" being perceived as a threat. Truth be told, the "university" is meant to be a radical institution. It constantly questions the status quo. It never stops exploring and evolving. It is a constant pain to the contented and a source of inspiration to the ever dangerous and threatening dreamer. It asks the questions, does the research, encourages the thinking, and teaches the skills necessary to change the world. It is one of the most vibrant, effective, and necessary institutions for human progress. It is also among the most despised.

Throughout its history, the "university" has been under assault by the political power structure. Those in power in most every society always seek to restrain or control the "university." They want it to reinforce the status quo, not to challenge it. In every society those who govern, and the monied elites who support them, are not comfortable with the "university" as the radical and threatening institution it is meant to be. So they seek to tame the beast, to bend it to their will. This is an old and familiar story. We are in one of the later chapters of that story. Frankly, the "university" is staggering a bit too much under the current assault. This encourages some to accelerate the efforts to intimidate scholars and teachers in the false belief that free thought can be limited and knowledge deemed "dangerous" or "unacceptable" by the ideologue can be prevented. In this context, I am honored to be deemed a threat to the ideologue. But I would hasten to add that I am concerned that such nonsense will delay human progress as it distracts us from what matters most.

Again, good luck in your endeavor. - R.S.

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