



Dec 2

## The Vilification of Higher Education

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In February, Secretary DeVos gave remarks at the 2017 Conservative Political Action Conference on the current state of American education. Not only did she mention declining test scores and dropout rates, but also denounced higher education institutions for harboring bias against Republican students. “The fight against the education establishment extends to you too,” she said to conservative college students. Then, about two months ago, Donald Trump, Jr., delivered the keynote address at a fundraising event for Faulkner University, similarly attacking universities for encouraging liberal favoritism and constricting freedom of speech and thought. And of course, his father isn’t shy about his pride in anti-intellectualism or distaste for intellectual elites. Considering these claims, it’s clear that Trump’s administration caters to a deep distrust of the American higher education system. But why is this anti-intellectualism so appealing to his base of supporters?

As a trend, many conservatives have become increasingly skeptical of the notion that colleges and universities are beneficial to America. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 58 percent of Republicans and right-leaning independents say post-secondary institutions are negatively affecting the country, while 36 percent say they affect the country positively. This is a shockingly recent development, as only a couple of years ago the numbers were nearly exactly reversed--just 37 percent of Republicans in 2015 viewed colleges and universities negatively, compared to 54 percent who viewed them positively. So what happened?

William Jennings Bryan as its progenitors. Historically, populists identify some sort of “other”--sometimes domestic elites, sometimes foreign immigrants--as the source of societal misfortunes. Leaders then argue on behalf those disadvantaged, “true” citizens against this minority as a means of placating their anxieties and garnering their political support.

But while it might be tempting to argue Donald Trump’s anti-intellectual rhetoric is a populist appeal to an economically frustrated middle class, there’s evidence to suggest Trump supporters are more well-off than you might assume. In May, 48 percent of white working-class Americans who reported “good or excellent financial shape” said Trump understands their issues, while those 39 percent in fair or poor financial shape felt he does not. And as it turns out, income as a whole provided a poor explanation for how voters chose between Trump and Clinton in last year’s general election. According to Nate Silver of FiveThirtyEight, education mattered far more than income, as Trump performed better than Clinton in counties with lower percentages of educated voters and completely surpassed his opponent in the 50 least educated counties.

Since the appeal of anti-intellectual rhetoric isn’t necessarily rooted in economic stress, it’s plausible the scapegoat of Trump’s populism is not the wealthy, educated elite, but the culturally diverse elite. A PRRI study claims, “fears about immigrants and cultural displacement were more powerful factors than economic concerns in predicting support for Trump among white working-class voters.”

This isn’t terribly surprising, considering how colleges now strive to emphasize diversity and remain culturally sensitive--just last year, Georgetown University said it would favor descendants of its former slaves in admissions. And it’s nothing new that Republicans are concerned affirmative action policies potentially cripple white Americans’ chances for acceptance, especially as admission rates only become more competitive every year.

More and more, higher education is being equated with diversity, both in the literal demographics of universities and in the policies they seek to support their students. Colleges often promote students’ racial and ethnic heritage by organizing festivals, offering majors in a variety of ethnic studies, and encouraging culturally specific performing arts organizations. Meanwhile, white Republicans seem to “believe that ‘anti-white bias’ is a serious problem in society today,” and evidence shows the issues that ultimately pushed previous Obama voters toward Trump were largely culturally based. It’s curious how an administration concerned with building border walls and declaring travel bans also vehemently demonizes institutions which celebrate racial and cultural diversity. Do Republicans now distrust higher education institutions because they’ve become strong proponents of foreign, non-white cultures?

There are undoubtedly many factors that need to be analyzed to fully understand why Republicans are distrustful of intellectualism, but it's safe to say Trump's rhetoric is not necessarily appealing because of populism's historical reliance on economic anxiety. Instead, we should perhaps consider how Republican views on higher education might coincide with a perceived threat to America's cultural wellbeing.

### *Education*

higher education, economy, us



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