

The Faculty

http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i24/24a00103.htm

From the issue dated February 22, 2008

Conservatives Just Aren't Into Academe, Study Finds

Divergent life choices may explain the dearth of right-wing scholars

By ROBIN WILSON

Harrisburg, Pa.

On Thursday mornings, a half-dozen faculty members from Pennsylvania State University's campus here gather at Kuppy's Diner to talk politics. Like most professors, all of those in the Kuppy's gang are Democrats — all except Matthew Woessner, an assistant professor of public policy.

During a recent Thursday-morning get-together over scrambled eggs and toast, the conversation at Kuppy's focused on the U.S. presidential election. As usual, Mr. Woessner's colleagues were taking shots at him. Why did he originally favor Rudy Giuliani? one of his colleagues wanted to know. "I really want to make sure I have a president who is going to bomb more countries," Mr. Woessner quipped.

It is the kind of over-the-top statement Mr. Woessner is famous for. The young professor relishes the role of conservative contrarian inside the liberal academy, a role that puts him in a distinct minority not only here but in higher education generally. But Mr. Woessner's candid conservatism also sets him squarely at odds with the findings of his own research, which suggests conservatives may just not be well suited to careers in academe.

That research — which Mr. Woessner completed with his wife, April Kelly-Woessner, an associate professor of political science at nearby Elizabethtown College — is some of the first to take a hard, scientific look at the politics of the professoriate. The topic has excited fervent discussion and argument by anecdote, but very little empirical research.

"The idea that professors are liberal has been known since the 50s," says Solon J. Simmons, an assistant professor of conflict analysis and sociology at George Mason University, whose own recent study found that 90 percent of professors called themselves liberal or moderate. "But the Woessners actually have something new here. I think they are some of the first to do this kind of work."

The Woessners have peered into the psyche of conservative undergraduates to find out why so few of them want to earn Ph.D.'s and become professors. Their paper on the topic, "Left Pipeline: Why Conservatives Don't Get Doctorates," is [available online](#) and will be published as part of a book published in August by the American Enterprise Institute.

The Woessners found that liberal students have values and interests that point them to careers in academe, while most conservative students do not.

"The personal priorities of those on the left," the Woessners conclude, "are more compatible with pursuing a Ph.D."

Rush Limbaugh Junkie

Mr. Woessner acknowledges that his own career choice contradicts his research. He is a lifelong Republican who

has been a Rush Limbaugh junkie and watches Fox News. But he says the prospect of a career in academe never seemed foreign.

"I knew academia had a liberal bias," says Mr. Woessner, who earned his Ph.D. in 2001 from Ohio State University. "But it was worth the risk."

Unlike most conservative students whom he and Ms. Kelly-Woessner have studied, he had a deep interest in the scientific method early on. "I used to come home from college and explain Einstein's theory of relativity to my brother and sister," he says.

David Horowitz, the conservative activist, has staged a national campaign for colleges to hire more conservative professors, and he tells stories about right-wing students who have been turned off by hostile leftists in the classroom. He even proposed an "academic bill of rights," which encourages colleges to foster a variety of political beliefs and become more intellectually diverse.

But Mr. Woessner says he never confronted intolerance in the classroom. Even some of his most liberal professors went out of their way to solicit his views.

In fact, Mr. Woessner gets along so well with Democrats that he married one. Ms. Kelly-Woessner teaches a course on women and politics, among others, at Elizabethtown College. She and Mr. Woessner didn't like each other at all when they first met at Ohio State. She even once told her future husband that she could never date a conservative. So when the couple announced their engagement, the director of their graduate program at Ohio State was stunned.

"They really were opposites," says Herbert F. Weisberg, chairman of the political-science department at Ohio State. "They were always debating each other."

The combination, however, turned out to be a boon to the Woessners' work. "Our research is a byproduct of the way Matthew and I interact," says Ms. Kelly-Woessner, who is chairwoman of her department at Elizabethtown. "We disagree, and we know there is only one way to find out which one of us is right and which one is wrong: empirical research."

The couple started studying the politics of the professoriate after September 11, 2001, when they noticed their classrooms becoming more politically charged. "You were on one side or the other after that, and everyone either loved Bush or hated him," says Ms. Kelly-Woessner. "You had to wonder how students were responding when you talked about Bush in the classroom."

The Woessners were surprised to learn that while there had been a lot of debate about politics in the classroom, not much empirical research had been done. "There are questions here, but they're getting lost in the bickering and the political debate," says Ms. Kelly-Woessner.

To find out how students reacted when professors expressed political views, the Woessners distributed questionnaires in 2004 to 1,385 undergraduates in political-science courses at 29 colleges and universities. They asked the students to indicate whether they thought their professors were conservative, moderate, or liberal. And they asked students about the quality of classroom teaching.

What they found was that students who believed their professors had the same politics they did rated a course more highly than students who didn't. The Woessners also found that students were less interested in a course when they believed their professors' political views clashed with their own.

They published their findings in a paper called "My Professor Is a Partisan Hack: How Perceptions of Professors' Political Views Affect Student Course Evaluations," in the July 2006 issue of the American Political Science Association's journal *PS: Political Science & Politics*.

They completed their study just as the Pennsylvania legislature held hearings on Mr. Horowitz's academic bill of rights in the spring of 2006. Mr. Woessner was watching the hearings at home on television when he heard someone testify that politics does not affect classroom learning. So he called up the legislative panel and told an

aide that research he and his wife had completed showed just the opposite. The panel asked the Woessners to testify.

Since their research showed that students were turned off when professors expressed views that were contrary to their own, the Woessners told lawmakers that professors should do their best to present both sides of a political argument and tread lightly when it comes to expressing their own views.

Ms. Kelly-Woessner follows that advice. "My students don't know what I am," she says. "I don't tell them how I vote."

But Mr. Woessner's students know he is a conservative, and he says it would be irresponsible for him to remain "politically invisible" on the Penn State campus here. If he did, "all students would hear is left-wing voices," he says. So Mr. Woessner often appears as the lone conservative in university-sponsored policy debates. And he doesn't hide his allegiances on his Web site, which includes photos of him at the 2001 inauguration of President Bush and of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas holding the Woessners' young son. But in his classroom, he says, he is careful to encourage students whether they agree with him or not.

Even-Handed Research

His colleagues predict Mr. Woessner will have an easy time earning tenure later this academic year, and agree he does a good job of balancing his political views. He is even the faculty adviser to both the College Republicans and the College Democrats. Each December, Mr. Woessner takes a group of students to Washington, to meet with Supreme Court justices and watch the court deliberate.

The evenhandedness of the Woessners' research caught the attention of Robert Maranto, an associate professor of political science at Villanova University who is editing a book for AEI Press to be called "The Politically Correct University." "Their work doesn't fit neatly into either camp," says Mr. Maranto. "It's just good, empirical research."

Mr. Maranto asked the Woessners to contribute a chapter to his book on why conservatives don't pursue doctorates. Typically, he says, there are a few answers to the question. Liberals say conservatives want to make more money than professors earn, while conservatives argue that they get less encouragement from professors than liberal students do. What the Woessners found, though, is that those are not the only reasons. They looked at a 2004 survey of 15,569 college seniors completed by the University of California at Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute. That research showed that while liberal students were more likely than conservative students to have contact with professors outside the classroom and to do research with them, the difference was not enough to explain why so many more liberal students wanted to pursue Ph.D.'s.

Instead the Woessners looked at differences in interests and personality. They found that in a variety of ways, conservative students were less interested than liberals in subject matter that often leads to doctoral degrees, and less interested in doing the kinds of things that professors spend their time doing.

For example, liberal students reported valuing intellectual freedom, creativity, and the chance to write original work and make a theoretical contribution to science. They outnumbered conservative students two to one in the humanities and social sciences — which are among the fields most likely to produce interest in doctoral study. Conservative students, however, put more value on personal achievement and orderliness, and on practical professions, like accounting and computer science, that could earn them lots of money.

The Woessners also found that conservative students put a higher priority than liberal ones on raising a family. That does not always fit well with a career in academe, where people often delay childbearing until after they earn tenure.

The research led the Woessners to conclude that if higher education wants to attract more conservatives to the professoriate, it should smooth the way financially, offering subsidized health insurance and housing for graduate students, and adopting family-friendly policies for professors.

But Mr. Simmons, the assistant professor at George Mason, says that if the Woessners are right, there may not be

an easy solution to the political imbalance in academe. "If it's true that people are self-sorting," he says, "what is to be done?"

A Bipartisan Household

Completing research on the politics of the professoriate has made the Woessners even more attuned to their own views. While their observations are not exactly empirical, both spouses have noticed that running a bipartisan household has had a moderating effect on them both.

Since Mr. Woessner met his wife, he's voted for a Democrat for the first time and given up Rush Limbaugh, who Ms. Kelly-Woessner thought was just plain dumb. Meanwhile, she tolerates Fox News, which they typically record and watch after their two preschool-aged children are asleep.

But while the Woessners have come together in some ways, differences remain. And, as usual, they find that's good for their research. Right now they are trying to answer a question that has been debated nationwide: Do professors indoctrinate students by expressing a political ideology in the classroom? The Woessners surveyed 69 political-science classes in the fall of 2006 and again in the spring of 2007 and asked 1,603 students about their ideology at the beginning and at the end of each course.

Mr. Woessner tends to think students are susceptible to professors' political views and change their opinions, while Ms. Kelly-Woessner thinks college students are fairly set in their own views.

"We're running the data right now," says Mr. Woessner, "and we'll soon know which one of us is right."

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: The Faculty

Volume 54, Issue 24, Page A1

[Copyright](#) © 2008 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Terms of use](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Help](#)