

Fall 10-2-2018

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Recommended Citation

Barlow, Aaron, "Stop disparaging professors. They work for a better America" (2018). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs/314

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Oct 2 · 8 min read

Stop disparaging professors. They work for a better America

Part of the following was initially published by the Houston Chronicle on August 30, 2018.

The professors are coming!

As conservative polemicist David Horowitz would have it, American college teachers long ago became “dangerous academics” who, according to Turning Point USA’s *Professor Watchlist*, “advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.” They have become *prima facie* enemies, to the minds of many Americans, caricatures, easily dismissed today as ideological buffoons advocating discredited leftist solutions to American problems. This egregious and incorrect view of the professoriate was summed up a few years ago by David Swindle for Horowitz’s own *Frontpage Magazine*:

[T]he professor himself is a willing abuser of the academic classroom and traducer of students’ academic freedom. He sets out to indoctrinate students and to recruit them to his political cause. He takes a page from Italian Stalinist Antonio Gramsci’s playbook and sees the university as a “means of cultural production” that must be captured for the revolutionary agenda. He decides that he will utilize his classroom as a political tool. The purpose of his teaching is not to promote an academic inquiry and inculcate an intellectual curiosity and scholarly skepticism. His goal is to to [sic] fix the world by instilling a “progressive” sensibility and perspective in his captive student audience. Hard indoctrination is an entirely conscious choice. It is indoctrination by malice.

The pounding of this conception of professors into American consciousness has been going on for a generation now, and it has become, to too many, accepted wisdom, a truism or even a cliché. This unfortunate blindness to the reality of faculty activities is particularly relevant right now when a professor at the Pacific Graduate School of

Psychology, Christine Blasey Ford, has become the focus of so much attention as a result of what she feels was the ethical necessity of making public her memories of a sexual attack by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. She speaks for all faculty when she says that all she wants to do is be “helpful.”

Rick Cherwitz, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, recently wrote, “Too often academics are accused of being sequestered in the ivory tower, producing insular research read by a handful of people. Scholars have a special duty to use their knowledge and expertise to educate the public, helping them wrestle with controversial issues. Like other citizens, our responsibility is to stand up and speak truth to power.” Sometimes this gets people upset (as it has Horowitz and his followers—and those who wish to rush through the Kavanaugh confirmation) but it remains a critical piece of any thriving democracy. Cherwitz goes on: “My hope is that more citizens and scholars will enter the public sphere. Our democracy depends on this, as does our ability to grow and mature as human beings.” Professors like Cherwitz and Blasey Ford are trying to set an example that others, even those far removed from college campuses, can follow.

Professors need to be part of the public life of the nation and should not be intimidated by sustained and generalized attacks meant to keep them quiet any more than should be victims of sexual assault. Dr. Blasey Ford had to overcome both tacit barriers in order to do what she feels is her duty. She sets an example for us all.

On the other hand, professors need to be mindful of their positions, especially in the face of all of the attacks on them, as holders of public trust. Unfortunately, we don’t always live up to that responsibility. Though attacks on professors from the right are frequently misplaced and overblown, there are still plenty of times when professors do fall short of professional standards. The most recent example of this is a situation now under investigation at John Jay College of the City University of New York. Whatever the truth of the matter may be, the professors involved did not meet the standard of performance that all faculty members should live up to. That should anger their colleagues on campuses everywhere.

Professors *are* active in positive ways in many aspects of American society—sometimes in extremely controversial ways but rarely as

polemicists for any political viewpoint, not in the classroom or in the wider public sphere—and they have been so involved for a very long time. By speaking up, Blasey Ford is adhering to professional norms that are now more than a century old. The John Jay professors, on the other hand, were not only committing what may have been criminal acts but have besmirched the reputations of faculty everywhere and, unthinking, have played into the hands who want to limit professors to narrowly defined roles in the classroom and the laboratory.

It wasn't always the case that professors were seen as negatively as many now see them. As recently as a century ago, people flocked to Chautauquas where professors spoke and argued, where deep implications of the issues of the day were explored under the guidance of people who had dedicated their lives to study and reflection—and to teaching and action in the public sphere. So important were their professional ideals that these were incorporated, at the founding of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1915, into protection of a new concept of professorial engagement, from then on called "academic freedom."

Taking their newly defined responsibilities to heart, professors soon were gladly serving in the administrations of twentieth century American presidents. These academics ranged from University of Texas professor David Houston, who served as Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of Agriculture and then of Treasury, to Harvard's Henry Kissinger, a Secretary of State under Richard Nixon. The list between them, and even since (though there are not so many in the Trump administration), is extensive. The nation long relied on faculty experience, and it still should.

Since the 1960s, however, respect for professors has declined in the United States to the point where, in the minds of many, they are no longer considered fit for public service. Instead their presumed positions as ideologues cut-off from mainstream American viewpoints while espousing old and discredited points of view allows people less well informed on critical issues takes center stage. Better ignored, in the estimation of many, than listened to, professorial comments, today, sometimes seem walled in, the ivory tower becoming not protection but prison. Look, for example, to the question of climate change: It is not the professors who are believed but people with vested interest in the very activities leading to it. Even so, there are still professors directly

involved in the political life of the nation, including U.S. Rep. David Brat, R-Virginia, who went from the Economics Department at Randolph-Macon College to Congress, and U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., who taught at Harvard Law School. Thousands of others are active in politics at state and local levels, and even more lend their expertise to public projects, mostly unheralded but all with tremendous positive impact on the country.

Many professors are also involved, in one way or another, outside of campus but in much less incendiary activities than politics; for all the attacks, they still take seriously their roles as public intellectuals. Some actively promote the arts, others are involved with local planning, while even more work with adult education, in programs for school children and curriculum development on the local public-school level. Some even work to break down the barriers between academia and the commercial world, an unenviable but important task.

Among this last group is Cherwitz, the UT-Austin professor quoted above, the founding director of his university's Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), a twenty-two-year-old project dedicated to melding innovative intellectual and commercial activities. Cherwitz believes we've been making a mistake by dividing the academy from the rest of America and has made it his mission to rectify the situation. The [IE website](#) claims "that intellect is not limited to the academy and entrepreneurship is not restricted to or synonymous with business."

A rhetorician, Cherwitz sees the divide between the university and the rest of America as grounded in language usage. He focuses on business and innovation particularly, but the point he makes can be applied to the United States in general: If we can agree on terminology, many of our other disagreements start to fade. When the barriers that words create fall, the others often can be stepped over easily. This may be an intellectual point, but it applies widely in the public sphere and points to the importance of professorial involvement far beyond campus walls.

The sort of activity Cherwitz exemplifies is critical, too, to the success of our universities. As he says, "faculty have an ethical and professional obligation to educate the public and leverage their knowledge for social good." It is inherent in their profession that professors, in addition to teaching and conducting research, bring their activities from their

ivory-tower ‘sandboxes’ into the broader world. Along with that, faculty need to be making clear to the public what they are involved in, something too many of them are shy about doing.

Cherwitz is far from rare among professors, though faculty activities range widely. North Carolina State University’s Catherine (Cat) Warren, in addition to teaching English, trains dogs—and not just any dogs. She began by training her overactive German shepherd as a “cadaver dog,” one that helps lead authorities to human remains, leading her to write *What the Dog Knows: Scent, Science, and the Amazing Ways Dogs Perceive the World*. Her continuing activity in this realm extends far beyond the NC State English department and makes her a valued part of the wider community.

At Pennsylvania State University, one of the most distinguished members of the faculty, Michael Bérubé, makes sure that he has time to collaborate with his son Jamie on support for those with intellectual disabilities. This work began before publication of his 1996 book *Life As We Know It: A Father, a Family, and an Exceptional Child* and has continued in numerous ways, including a 2017 sequel, *Life as Jamie Knows It: An Exceptional Child Grows Up*, which was written with substantial input from Jamie. Also working as an advocate for people with disabilities is Stephen Kuusisto, a professor at Syracuse university who is not only the author of *Planet of the Blind: A Memoir and Have Dog, Will Travel: A Poet’s Journey* but who has been an active participant himself in the training of guide dogs. Margaret Morganroth Gullette, a Women’s Studies professor at Brandeis University has turned her attention to concerns of the ageing, becoming an advocate for recognition of the societal and personal value of those too often dismissed as people who have “passed their prime.”

Though thousands of other examples could have been picked, these people are mentioned because they all have had some connection with the AAUP (as have I). That’s not really surprising, for the AAUP stipulates that work outside of the academy is an important part of professorial activity. [The 1915 AAUP Declaration of Principles](#), one of the organization’s founding documents, states that this last aspect of faculty work “has perhaps more frequently been the occasion of difficulties and controversies” than the other two (“to promote inquiry and advance the sum of human knowledge... [and] to provide general instruction to the students”). This continues to be the case, as I have

said, with many who attack 'the professors' demanding that they return to teaching and abstract research only. That should never happen, not in a vibrant and growing democracy. Fortunately, it never has, not in the United States (though there have been trying times for academic freedom). The contributions of professors are too broad and too important to be so summarily dismissed or limited.

Professors like Cherwitz and Blasey Ford (and there are thousands upon thousands of them), along with the others mentioned here, continue to work for the betterment of American society, both inside and, importantly, outside of the academy. Most every one of them is willing to discuss what they are doing, even in what can become horrifying circumstances. They also want to break down the barriers that language has built and to solve the country's problems. This is as true of those who work through community colleges as it is for those at prestige institutions.

It is time that we, as a nation, stop disparaging the professors and start talking to them, listening to them and working with them.

