

## Preface

For more than half a century, critics located in right-leaning think tanks, foundations, and the media have championed the cause of conservative undergraduates, who, they say, suffer on college campuses. In books with such titles as *Freefall of the American University* and *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, conservative critics charge that American higher education has become the playpen of radical faculty who seek to spread their antireligious, big-government, liberal ideas to their young undergraduate charges.<sup>1</sup> In this portrait of the politicized university, middle-of-the-road students complacently absorb their professors' calculated misinformation, liberal students smugly revel in feeling they are on the righteous side of the political divide, and conservative students must decide whether to endure their professors' tirades quietly or give voice to their outrage, running the risk of a poor grade. Administrators, according to the critics, do little to stop the madness.

Universities' abdication of responsibility toward their undergraduates is said to have both academic and social consequences. Academically, faculty are accused of turning their backs on Western-centered liberal arts training in favor of highly tendentious, politically correct curricula housed in the "studies" departments—ethnic studies, queer studies, Latin American studies, women's studies. Sociol-

ogy, political science, and most of the humanities also come under attack, and even the crazy lone math professor who walks barefoot to class (for some reason a popular image) and rages against Republicans and foreign wars becomes a symbol of a widespread problem on American campuses. Socially, conservative critics say, things are no better, and they condemn undergraduate peer culture for being fast, loose, and fueled by drugs and alcohol, behaviors that go largely unchecked by the adults who are supposed to be in charge. In the area of administrative policy, the conservative critique extends to affirmative action in hiring and admissions, which detractors deride as anti-meritocratic and unjust and which, they contend, led in the first place to the vocal populations on today's college campuses claiming victimhood and demanding a left-oriented curriculum. Critics point to administrators' decisions to bar ROTC from campus (a practice some elite universities began after the military implemented Don't Ask, Don't Tell), to institute policies that coddle Muslim student groups, and to turn a blind eye to faculty who clearly and regularly cross the line between "teaching and preaching."<sup>2</sup> But at the most general level, the critics argue that a hostile political atmosphere exists on campuses that militates against intellectual diversity of opinion and actively promotes only one of the nation's two major political parties.<sup>3</sup>

To mitigate the effects of what they perceive to be an overwhelmingly liberal environment, conservative organizations have sprung up to help right-leaning students. One such organization, led by David Horowitz, has produced the Academic Bill of Rights to protect students "from the imposition of any orthodoxy of a political, religious or ideological nature," and has established chapters on campuses nationwide "collecting documentation of political abuses in the classroom."<sup>4</sup> National cosponsored events such as the National Conservative Student Conference introduce thousands of students each year to the celebrities of the Right.<sup>5</sup> Meantime, organizations such as the Leadership Institute train students in how to "take back your campus" from radical professors, and the Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute encourages "brave young women [to] share their experiences of what it's like to be conservatives on liberal campuses."<sup>6</sup> More intellectually styled organizations such as the Inter-

collegiate Studies Institute and the Institute for Humane Studies seek to sponsor young conservative journalists and Ivory Tower-bound graduate students through internship programs at such venerable institutions as the *Wall Street Journal*, or through summer seminars at which they can discuss the work of the free market economist Friedrich Hayek or the philosopher of personal liberty Russell Kirk.<sup>7</sup> Added to this is a proliferation of conservative-funded think tanks on university campuses—the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and the Mercatus Institute at George Mason University are but two of the best known—that serve as centers for conservative thought. According to conservative critics, all of these organizational strategies, from promoting animatedly partisan conferences to sponsoring intellectually invigorating seminars and internships, play a crucial role in minimizing the marginalization that conservative students feel on campus and improve the chances that right-leaning students will remain active in conservative circles.

Yet over the period of time in which these organizations emerged and have flourished, they have attracted little systematic notice. The movement to build a corps of young, ideologically dependable lawyers, journalists, congressional staff, voters, and academics has been a central priority of the political Right, but few have investigated the effort to mobilize right-leaning students on college campuses, or how those students experience their undergraduate lives. While social scientists have given considerable thought to progressive politics at the university level (with examples like Doug McAdam's *Freedom Summer* and Fabio Rojas's *From Black Power to Black Studies*), far too few have looked at the identities and political activities of self-described conservative undergraduates and their sponsors.<sup>8</sup> Every once in a while journalists—in the place of social scientists—take up the issue and ponder college-age conservatism as a kind of exotica that occurs on university campuses or at national conferences.<sup>9</sup> And certainly a cottage industry of conservative websites and publishers has directed attention to the phenomenon of conservative student activism.<sup>10</sup> But these anecdotal forays into the conservative student phenomenon are hardly disinterested social scientific studies. Moreover, while recent academic studies have looked at faculty's political

beliefs and behaviors, or have investigated the growing sector of conservative organizations aimed at other strategic goals, the mobilization of conservative *students* has been all but left out of the analysis.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, neither scholars nor university administrators nor parents nor concerned outsiders know whether the accusations leveled against universities—or the organizational tactics designed to counter the problem—resonate with the conservative students on whose behalf critiques are made and solutions created.

As the first book-length study to be conducted on the contemporary campus Right, our research sets out to fill a gap in the public's understanding of the most recent wave of conservative cadre building. In this comparative case study of students at two universities, we look at how conservative undergraduates think and behave politically in different college settings, and how these actions connect to a variety of other political phenomena in the broader U.S. culture. By deciding to study two universities closely—one an elite private university on the East Coast, the other a large public university system in the West—we are able to explore similarities and differences in conservative activism across different campuses. Not content simply to survey undergraduates about their political commitments, we went directly to students and alumni/ae to talk with them personally about their lives before, during, and in some cases after college. We wanted to know whether they felt they were in a political minority at their universities, as the critics contend; whether they were upset about their peers, faculty, and administrators; and what they did about it if they were. We wanted to learn what the turning points had been in their ideological orientations and what forms of conservative activism they engaged in while in college. We were interested in conservative students' career aspirations and their positions on particular political issues. In addition, we asked our interviewees about whom they knew in the larger world of conservative thought and politics, and the degree to which they connected with larger networks that advocated conservative positions. Most intriguingly, we were eager to find out whether there might be something one could call a national way of “acting like a conservative” on college