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“The Professors”

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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.

This wasn’t always the case. Even a century ago, people still flocked to Chautauquas where professors spoke and argued, where deep implications of 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 these professional ideals that they were incorporated, at the founding of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), into protection of this new concept of professorial engagement, “[academic freedom](#).”

Taking their newly defined responsibilities to heart, professors gladly served in the administrations of many twentieth century American presidents. These academics included Texan David Houston, who served as Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of Agriculture and then of Treasury, and Henry Kissinger, a Secretary of State under Richard Nixon.

Since the 1960s, respect for professors has declined in the United States, to the point where, to the minds of many, they are no longer to be considered for public service but are seen as cut-off ideologues espousing old and discredited points of view. Better ignored than listened to, their comments sometimes seem walled in, the ivory tower becoming not protection but prison. Yet there are still professors involved in the life of the nation, including

Representative David Brat, who went from the Economics department at Randolph-Macon College to Congress, and Senator Elizabeth Warren, who taught Law at Harvard. Thousands of others are directly involved in politics at state and local levels and even more lend their expertise to public projects, mostly unheralded.

Faculty activism goes far beyond politics. Most professors are involved outside of campus but in much less incendiary activities than politics, yet they still take their roles as 'public intellectuals' seriously. Some actively promote the arts, others are involved with local planning, while even more work with adult education, programs for school children and curriculum development on the local 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 Richard Cherwitz, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin and founding director of the university's Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE) in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE), 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 it. 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 can often be stepped over easily.

This sort of activity is critical to the success of our universities. As Cherwitz 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.

The 1915 AAUP Declaration states that this last aspect of faculty work "has perhaps more frequently been the occasion of difficulties and controversies" than the other two. This continues to be the case, with many who attack 'the professors' demanding that they return to teaching and abstract research. 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.

Professors like Cherwitz, and there are thousands upon thousands of them, 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. 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 such as UT and Rice. It is time that we, as a nation, stop disparaging the professors and start talking to them and working with them.

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