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[The Chronicle Review](#)
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Presidents Forum

Technology Forum

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Campus Viewpoints

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Chronicle Review

From the issue dated September 9, 2005

FORUM

Religious, Philosophical, and Socioeconomic Diversity

By CAROL M. SWAIN

I have found myself an outsider in a place that values conformity. What makes me an outsider are my roots in the lower class, my strong Christian faith, and my race.

The chill I feel on campus is that of an accomplished woman who, more often than not, finds herself devalued. Navigating a campus is difficult if your path, like mine, is nontraditional. When I first entered college as a high-school dropout with a GED, I encountered professors who warned me that I would not perform as well as other students. I defied their expectations.

Now, as a professor who has five degrees and several prizes under my belt, I find myself an outsider for new reasons. As a born-again Christian since 1999, I have encountered overt and subtle forms of intimidation. Often this takes the form of openly disparaging remarks made by colleagues about the intelligence of believers.

There is hostility directed against anyone who refuses to conform to the prevailing ethos of his or her institution and to the secularized liberal elites who decide who and what has value. I have watched helplessly as bright, conservative students are victimized again and again by faculty members who use the power of grading to push them toward conformity. Those students who fight back usually end up with reduced grade-point averages and fewer opportunities to matriculate at elite professional institutions.

I believe institutions of higher learning can, and should, do better. Many operate in ways that reveal no real desire for diversity or inclusion beyond the visible differences of gender and race. They have little interest in diversifying their faculties in terms of political philosophy or religious beliefs. Instead, the elite institutions, with which I am most familiar, have seemingly decided that they are in sole possession of the intellectual knowledge, values, and insights needed to train future leaders -- and that such knowledge is secular and material. Never mind that the great universities of our nation, from Harvard on down, were in most cases founded by God-fearing men and women with different perspectives from today's.

Institutional leaders should urge faculty and staff members to reject ideological conformism, and they should honor forms of diversity now neglected, including religious, philosophical, and socioeconomic diversity. If universities are to be true to their educational missions, they must cease and desist from their tendencies to exclude. Alas, the recent high-profile focus by activists such as David Horowitz on this longstanding issue is long overdue.

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Volume 52, Issue 3, Page B12

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