Commentary: Do Gradebooks Lean Left? Relationships between Grades and Ideology in American Higher Education

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In this paper, the authors investigate the possibility that students' political ideology (leaning) and views on specific social issues (abortion, affirmative action etc.) predict their grades in college. Evidence of such a link would be consistent with – although not sufficient evidence of - the possibility that holding conservative views has a negative effect on students' college success (perhaps by being downgraded or perceived negatively by instructors for their views).

Although I resonate with the authors about the possibility of this link, I have a variety of concerns with how they have framed the issues, made a case for this link, and analyzed their data. I hope they might consider my suggestions for organization and analysis.

One overarching comment: Although the authors state in the paper that any documented correlations would not provide evidence of the CAUSES of those links, they use unwarranted causal language throughout the paper. For example: p. 2 "this research will investigate whether political ideology AFFECTS student academic outcomes..."; p. 6: "If students' political views coming into college do have an IMPACT on their college success, IMPACTS are modest and apply to issues selectively." Etc.

Introduction: I think the overarching logic that needs to be identified and described is the possibility that conservative students are graded differently (hence college GPA as an outcome) or perceived differently (hence perceptions of belonging or being valued on campus as an outcome) than are liberal students. The authors begin with information on standardized test scores, but that is not the story here and it is distracting (the use of terms like "ideological stereotypes" and "ethnic stereotypes" without exposition is also distracting). Instead, in my view what needs to be developed is how college students' political orientation and attitudes have been measured, and WHY students' views might be associated with their performance and feelings of belonging. For example, if conservative students feel like they are in the minority or actually ARE in the minority on campus, relative to both faculty and other students, that might be tied to feeling less like they belong on their campus. Thus, the authors need to systematically review

evidence of left-leaning faculty and staff; left-leaning student majorities; and concerns from conservative students more than liberal students that they might be down-graded by instructors or socially shunned by other students. A report out of UW System that I was involved with has some of these elements, actually; see section V in particular: https://www.wisconsin.edu/civil-dialogue/download/SurveyReport20230201.pdf. In addition, the authors could develop information from Sam Abrams' and others' reports on political leanings of academic faculty and staff; FIRE reports; Nathan Honeycutt's reports; HxA reports; the Knight Foundation reports; the reports out of U North Carolina, etc.

Theory and Hypotheses: The first half of the first paragraph does not provide the background information for Hypothesis 1, but instead for Hypothesis 3. The information in the first few paragraphs also does not clearly delineate that H1 is about political leaning, and H2 about views on specific issues that are generally tied to political leaning. The authors need to clarify that, perhaps by presenting Hypothesis 1 as containing two predictions – one about political leaning (left to right) and one about political views (liberal to conservative).

Regarding Hypothesis 3, professional majors in some universities include two large disciplines, Business and Education, that arguably operate very differently ideologically. I don't think it is a good idea to lump them together.

Method: I had to search the paper to find the five text anchors for the political leanings (shown in Table 1). It would be helpful is there were detailed in the description of the survey. It would also be useful for the authors to state clearly in the text that they are using political responses from the freshman survey, not the senior survey.

On p. 4 the authors mention being able to measure shifts in political attitudes over time. I didn't find anything more about this. Did I miss it?

I wonder if the authors want to consider limiting their analysis to students who did NOT show a shift in attitudes over the years in college. (My impression from analyses I have seen is that, contrary to what I might have expected, there is not a lot of change during college? But perhaps I am misremembering.)

The Empirical Tests:

I am not sure what the purpose of Table 1 is. The whole idea here, if I understand the introductory logic, is about what happens in college, not what happens from high school to college. As I describe below, I strongly recommend that high school grades be included but as a predictor (to be held constant), not an outcome. I recommend the authors maintain their focus on college as their primary outcome context, with two elements: College graduating GPA, and College graduating feelings of value/belonging. Specifically, my recommendations are as follows:

1. Have ONE measure of political leaning (appears to be a five-point scale, 1=far right to 5=far left). I can't find the explanation for what's going on with Table 2, in having "ideological strength" as well as "ideological position." That is, I can't find an explanation in the paper of how these two variables are different from one another. If they are two variables created from the same five-point scale, that seems redundant.

2. Have ONE measure of views on political issues. This variable would be created from the five

political issues items (omit the political dissent item which is awkward). I recommend the authors add up how many times, of five possible (so a possible range of 0 to 5), that each participant leans somewhat or strongly with the liberal position. There is no need for the authors to analyze each of these specific issues as separate variables – responses are very likely to be interrelated and the authors would benefit from aggregating signal.

So, the political leaning measure would run right to left, and the political issues measure would be a composite score running from conservative to liberal, and the predictions would be that each of these correlates positively with GPA (H1 and H2), particularly for students in humanities and the social sciences (and education) (H3) and particularly for students at elite institutions (H4).

3. Have two primary DVs: College GPA and College Value/Belonging. This second DV would be a composite variable of the five "College Experience" items displayed in Table 5. Again, the authors should aggregate signal in items that are very likely to be interrelated.

4. Run two multiple regression models, one with College GPA regressed on multiple predictor blocks, and one with College Value/Belonging regressed on multiple predictor blocks. In my view, high school grades are not an outcome variable. They are a predictor, like SAT/ACT scores, that need to be held constant in models testing what is happening in college (independent of what happened in high school).

The model for College GPA would look like this (with a parallel model for College Value/Belonging):

Block 1: Individual Achievement History variables: SAT M, SAT V, SAT W, HS Rank or GPA. These variables, as the authors note, account for a substantial among of variance in college performance.

Block 2: Demographic variables: Parental occupations, Incomes, Race, Sex, Parental political view proxies/estimates.

BLOCK 3 is a crucial block: Student self-reported political leaning. Does the addition of this variable in the model account for a statistically significant increase in variance in college GPA? (What is the change in r-squared?) If so, the authors need to explain the data: With every 1 point change in self-reported political leaning, how much and in what direction in raw score units does the senior GPA change?

BLOCK 4 is a crucial block: Student aggregated views on social-political issues. Does the addition of this variable in the model account for a statistically significant increase in variance in college value/belonging? (What is the change in r-squared?) If so, the authors need to explain the data: With every 1 point change in political views, how much and in what direction in raw score units does the senior GPA change?

I hope my comments are useful to the authors.