

The Other Side of the Coin: Extreme-Right Student Activism and the Struggle of Universities to Deal with It

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In an increasingly polarized society, student activism tends also to be more polarized. The debate in higher education, politics, and media focuses on left-wing student activism. But there is a new wave of extreme-right student activism in many countries, infiltrating fraternities, sororities, and other student clubs, which is connected to, and sponsored by, far-right political parties and movements. Universities are struggling with how to deal with this phenomenon.

In an increasingly polarized society, student activism tends also to be more polarized toward the extreme left or right. The clash between extreme-left and -right activists in Lyon, France, resulting in the death of a student affiliated with the extreme right, is a recent illustration of this polarization. Universities struggle to deal with these protests and with pressure from politicians to stop left-wing activism, while extreme-right activism on campuses seems overlooked. Although left-wing student activism is still dominant in most countries, far-right political parties and groups are increasingly more active in sponsoring and recruiting on campuses in France (*Rassemblement National*, RN), Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD), the Netherlands (*Forum for Democracy*, FvD), and elsewhere.

In their contribution to this issue, Philip G. Altbach and Manja Klemenčič state that “while student movements have been generally on the left, this has not always been the case.” These days, in most cases, the debate in higher education, politics, and media focuses on left-wing student activism and on how universities should deal with it. Conversely, conservative student groups have been relatively small and isolated, even feeling uncomfortable in an environment perceived as being more left-wing-oriented.

But there is a new wave of extreme-right student activism in many countries, infiltrating fraternities, sororities, and other student clubs, which is connected to, and sponsored by, far-right political parties and movements. We have seen such a rise in the United States, for instance, through the presence of influencers such as Charlie Kirk (recently assassinated as a result of this polarization) and his organization Turning Point USA. There has also been a radicalization among college Republican organizations, such as the National Federation of College Republicans and College Republicans of America, with many now holding strong nationalist, Christian, and anti-Semitic positions.

According to Binder and Kidder in their 2022 book *The Channels of Student Activism: How the Left and Right are Winning (and Losing) in Campus Politics Today*, there is a difference between the two groups. While right-wing student agendas and activism are stimulated and sponsored by conservative organizations such as Turning Point USA, left-wing student activism finds its drive more from within the university. While right-wing student activism targets campus culture (perceived as too liberal, “woke,” and leftist) and feeds into the nationalist agenda of extreme-right parties and groups outside campus, left-wing student activism has focused on broader societal and political issues, such as the relationships of universities with Israeli partner institutions in the context of the Gaza conflict or the presence of the fossil fuel industry in research, investments, and donations.

This is happening not only in the United States, but also in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and elsewhere. Recent cases in the Netherlands illustrate the rise of far-right activism among students and the struggles of universities as a result.

Far-right Student Activism in the Netherlands

Over the past few years, there have been many occurrences of extreme-right student activism on Dutch campuses. These students are present in booths at introductory events for new students, like other student groups, and universities have no reason to prohibit their presence as long as they comply with general rules. However, at the campuses of Radboud University in Nijmegen and Leiden University, students said their presence made them uncomfortable, in particular their association with anti-Semitic and/or anti-Islamic movements.

Far-right student groups have also become active in university councils, taking advantage of low student voting in the elections for those councils. Groups like the Bold Student Party at Utrecht University and the Free University of Amsterdam, as well as “Liberi Erasmi” at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, are closely related to the FvD, which is actively recruiting students. Students have become candidates for this party in this year’s

municipal elections, and media checking their backgrounds found proof of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and even Nazi sympathies.

Recently, a member of the far-right Greater Netherlands Student Association in Nijmegen was sentenced to two years in prison (with one year suspended) for illegal possession of weapons. The student was associated with extreme far-right movements, using Nazi symbols, and expressing Nazi sympathies. Another recent example is that of a student at the Free University of Amsterdam, affiliated with the Vrijmoedige Studentenpartij (VSP), intimidating and harassing female students and singing Nazi songs. This has raised great concern among staff and students, asking for university intervention.

As mentioned, far-right student groups are an extension of extreme-right political parties and movements flaunting anti-democratic positions. This includes attacks on transgender and minority students and is contrary to the codes of conduct and ethics of the universities—which are considered left-wing and “woke” institutions.

Staying Neutral is No Option

Universities, though, are struggling with how to deal with this phenomenon. Sarah de Lange, a professor of political pluralism at the University of Amsterdam, has argued [elsewhere](#) that

executive boards must clearly indicate prohibited behavior: “Universities have codes of conduct that often mention discrimination as a form of undesirable behavior. These agreements must also be upheld in the representative advisory bodies.”

Easier said than done, apparently: up until now, universities have not reacted against the wave of right-wing presence on their campuses and have instead remained silent.

As mentioned, the Dutch case is not unique. Although there is limited attention on extreme-right student activism, the progress of far-right political parties and movements on campuses across Europe, as well as in the United States and elsewhere, is substantial. It is a manifestation of the polarization in society.

This gives reason for concern. Nazi sympathies, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-internationalization, and hostility against international students create a campus environment that goes against the human and social values of higher education. During the Gaza conflict, universities took severe action against extreme left-wing student activism. They cannot remain silent when far-right students increasingly violate human and academic values in their writings, declarations, and actions on campus.

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