

Moving Further to the Left

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By [Scott Jaschik](#)

Academics, on average, lean to the left. A survey being released today suggests that they are moving even more in that direction.

Among full-time faculty members at four-year colleges and universities, the percentage identifying as "far left" or liberal has increased notably in the last three years, while the percentage identifying in three other political categories has declined. The data come from the University of California at Los Angeles Higher Education Research Institute, which surveys faculty members nationwide every three years on a range of attitudes.

Here are the data for the new survey and the prior survey:

	2010-11	2007-8
Far left	12.4%	8.8%
Liberal	50.3%	47.0%
Middle of the road	25.4%	28.4%
Conservative	11.5%	15.2%
Far right	0.4%	0.7%

Gauging how gradual or abrupt this shift is is complicated because of changes in the UCLA survey's methodology; before 2007-8, the survey included community college faculty members, who have been excluded since. But for those years, examining only four-year college and university faculty members, the numbers are similar to those of 2007-8. Going back further, one can see an evolution away from the center.

In the 1998-9 survey, more than 35 percent of faculty members identified themselves as middle of the road, and less than half (47.5 percent) identified as liberal or far left. In the new data, 62.7 percent identify as liberal or far left. (Most surveys that have included community college faculty members have found them to inhabit political space to the right of faculty members at four-year institutions.)

The new data differ from some recent studies by groups other than the UCLA center that have found that professors (while more likely to lean left than right) in fact were doing so from more of a centrist position. [A major study in 2007](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/10/08/politics), (<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/10/08/politics>) for example, found that professors were more likely to be centrist than liberal, and that many on the left identified themselves as "slightly liberal." (That study and the new one use different scales, making exact comparisons impossible.)

In looking at the new data, there is notable variation by sector. Private research universities are the most left-leaning, with 16.2 percent of faculty members identifying as far left, and 0.1 percent as far right. (If one combines far left and liberal, however, private, four-year, non-religious colleges top private universities, 68.6 percent to 67.7 percent.) The largest conservative contingent can be found at religious, non-Roman Catholic four-year colleges, where 23.0 percent identify as conservative and another 0.6 percent say that they are far right.

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(<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/10/24/new-survey-faculty-activities-and-attitudes>)

Professors' Political Identification, 2010-11, by Sector

	Far left	Liberal	Middle of the Road	Conservative	Far right
Public universities	13.3%	52.4%	24.7%	9.2%	0.3%
Private universities	16.2%	51.5%	22.3%	9.8%	0.1%
Public, 4-year colleges	8.8%	47.1%	28.7%	14.7%	0.7%
Private, 4-year, nonsectarian	14.0%	54.6%	22.6%	8.6%	0.3%
Private, 4-year, Catholic	7.8%	48.0%	30.7%	13.3%	0.3%
Private, 4-year, other religious	7.4%	40.0%	29.1%	23.0%	0.6%

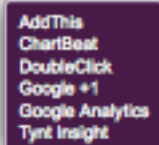
The study found some differences by gender, with women further to the left than men. Among women, 12.6 percent identified as far left and 54.9 percent as liberal. Among men, the figures were 12.2 percent and 47.2 percent, respectively.

When it comes to the three tenure-track ranks, assistant professors were the most likely to be far left, but full professors were more likely than others to be liberal.

Professors' Political Identification, 2010-11, by Tenure Rank

	Far left	Liberal	Middle of the Road	Conservative	Far right
Full professors	11.8%	54.9%	23.4%	9.7%	0.2%

Associate professors	13.8%	50.4%	24.0%	11.5%	0.4%
Assistant professors	13.9%	48.7%	25.9%	11.2%	0.4%



So what do these data mean?

Sylvia Hurtado, professor of education at UCLA and director of the Higher Education Research Institute, said that she didn't know what to make of the surge to the left by faculty members. She said that she suspects age may be a factor, as the full-time professoriate is aging, but said that this is just a theory. Hurtado said that these figures always attract a lot of attention, but she thinks that the emphasis may be misplaced because of a series of studies showing no evidence that left-leaning faculty members are somehow shifting the views of their students or enforcing any kind of political requirement.

Neil Gross, a professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia, has written extensively on faculty political issues. He is the co-author of the [2007 report \(.../news/2007/10/08/politics\)](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/10/08/politics) that found that while professors may lean left, they do so less than is imagined and less uniformly across institution type than is imagined, and that many are in the political middle.

He said that he couldn't be sure why more professors were identifying as far left, but that "during periods of significant economic downturn, and significant rise of inequality, it's not surprising" that such a shift would take place, especially given that in academe, "radicalism is still a live possibility."

Gross said that the "optics" of the data could lead to criticism of higher education. "From the vantage point of some folks, that will make academe look bad. For others, it will make academe look like a place concerned with the country."

Daniel Klein, a professor of economics at George Mason University who has [written extensively about faculty political attitudes](http://www.independent.org/publications/tir/article.asp?a=731), (<http://www.independent.org/publications/tir/article.asp?a=731>) said he was not surprised by the shift to the left. He said that he has seen "tendencies toward uniformity" in disciplines and departments, and that these trends tend to build upon themselves.

Klein said academe should worry about the impact of being further tilted to the left. He said that those in the ideological majority in higher education "shouldn't be so confident in their own outlook" that they don't see the cost of being seen by many as outside the mainstream. "For all the people who are skeptical of the left, and that's a lot of people, they will see academe as this vast apparatus of leftist groupthink."

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