

Are American University Administrators Biased Against Politically Conservative Students? A Correspondence Experiment with Administrators Presiding Over the Establishment of Campus Student Organizations

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Abstract

Conservative critics frequently complain that American universities are biased against political conservatives. To test this claim, university administrators at schools across America are randomly assigned to receive a request for information about establishing a new political organization on campus from a liberal student, a conservative student, or a student with no specified ideology. I find virtually identical rates of response to the liberal and conservative students in the overall sample. In fact, among liberal arts colleges, subjects were significantly *more* likely to respond to the conservative student than the student without a specified ideology. These results suggest that, in the realm of establishing student organizations on campus today, claims of political bias against conservatives may be more myth than reality.

Political conservatives often express dissatisfaction with the leftist orientation and perceived intellectual decline of the American college campus (e.g. d'Souza 1991; Schmidt 2011; Wood 2017; Blackwell 2018). Indeed, a majority of Republican partisans and leaners say that colleges and universities have more of a negative than a positive impact on society (Fingerhut 2017), which is remarkable given that higher education is widely viewed as a vehicle to better jobs and wealth, thus serving as a catalyst for social mobility (Gallup-Lumina Foundation 2014).

What stokes this conservative animus toward college? Numerous conservative critics claim that universities discriminate against conservatives (Schmidt 2011; d'Souza 1991; Kimball 1990). One particular claim of discrimination from the conservative interest group *Campus Reform* is “refusal or long delays in granting conservative student groups recognition as official campus groups, despite the presence of many officially recognized leftist student groups” (Blackwell 2018). Such bias would conflict with norms of academic freedom as well as the history of universities as havens of free political expression. It would also hamper conservative students’ opportunities to develop social capital through campus organizations and exacerbate the polarized decline in trust in institutions of higher education. There could be negative, long-term costs if conservative students’ performance is negatively affected, such as diminished career and academic opportunities beyond college graduation.

Are American universities in fact biased against politically conservative students in their efforts to establish political campus organizations? Or is this charge more of a myth than reality? I test this claim directly with a large-N sample of university administrators in a correspondence experiment. I email American university administrators who preside over the establishment of campus organizations across the country (n=1470), requesting help with getting a new political group established and officially recognized on campus. In one-third of the emails, administrators receive a request to establish a conservative political group; in another third, administrators receive a request to establish a liberal group; in the remaining third, administrators receive a request to establish a political group, with no ideology specified. I use pure random

assignment to assign subjects to experimental conditions and check to ensure equivalence across conditions with balance testing. There should be a strong bias in favor of liberal students and/or against conservative students if there is merit to the complaints of pro-liberal or anti-conservative bias in campus organization formation.

This is not what I find. In fact, the response rates to the liberal and conservative student were nearly identical in the overall sample (66% and 67%, respectively). Strikingly, among schools classified by US News and World Report as National Liberal Arts Colleges, there is a strong bias *in favor* of conservatives. Administrators at these colleges were significantly more likely to respond to the conservative student than the student of unspecified ideology, a significant difference that persisted even after adjusting p-values for multiple comparisons. Far from discriminating against conservatives, administrators at these institutions do the opposite, privileging conservative student requests. This finding could be due to an overcorrection effect, wherein administrators at liberal arts schools, cognizant of the charges that they discriminate against conservatives, pay special attention to this group. This finding could also be due to an overcorrection for perceived past bias, where administrators believe past administrations discriminated against conservatives, and seek to correct this prior bias. As this study is cross-sectional, I do not have over-time leverage to examine this latter possibility. At this single point in time, however, conservatives do not face any significant disadvantage in their efforts to establish new political campus organizations and are in fact privileged at liberal arts colleges.

Before explaining in greater detail how I test these claims, I first review the allegations of anti-conservative discrimination on campus, as well as evidence from previous literature on the veracity of these allegations, and discuss how such discrimination would conflict with university norms of academic freedom as well as the history of universities as havens of political activism. Next, I contextualize the study within theories of social capital and the polarized decline in trust in institutions of higher education.

It is important to note that my study does not directly test whether discrimination

against campus conservatives lowers their social capital or conservatives’ trust in institutions of higher education more broadly. Rather, I review these literatures because they provide crucial context. Discrimination has deleterious ramifications for social capital (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002) and trust in institutions (Schildkraut 2005). The claims of conservative critics of college are thus widely consequential for institutional trust and social capital, as well as the functionality of institutions of higher education.

1 Political Bias on Campus

As Paul Fain notes in *Inside Higher Ed*, “Virtually every day Fox News, Breitbart, and other conservative outlets run critical articles about free speech disputes on college campuses, typically with coverage focused on the perceived liberal orthodoxy and political correctness in higher education” (Fain 2017). The narrative of conservative victimization on campus is nothing new. William F. Buckley Jr., who some consider the father of modern American conservatism, lamented academia’s liberal orientation in the 1950s and ’60s: “The academic community has in it the biggest concentration of alarmists, cranks and extremists this side of the giggle house” (Buckley 1967; 1951). More recently, others have made similar critiques of perceived political correctness run amok and lowered academic standards (Maranto, Redding, and Hess 2009; Sykes 1988; d’Souza 1991; Rauch 1993; McArdle 2017; Vatz 2017).

Claims of anti-conservative discrimination on college campuses are thus quite common; they are also politically influential. Republicans have moved to enact steep budget cuts to higher education at both state and national levels (Fenn 2017; Hermes 2017; Blackford 2018; Office of the Governor of West Virginia 2017). President Trump linked perceived anti-conservative discrimination on campus and Republican attacks on higher education funding in a tweet in which he proposed defunding universities that do not invite conservative speakers to campus, an idea espoused with alacrity in conservative media (Wood 2017): “If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view –NO FEDERAL

FUNDS?”¹

While studies have shown that American college professors are overwhelmingly liberal (Klein and Stern 2009), as are books in social science fields published by Harvard University Press (Gordon and Nilsson 2011), it is unclear whether this ideological lopsidedness results in discriminatory treatment toward conservative students. Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte (2005) find that liberal professors outnumber conservatives by wide margins in every academic field they study. Even among business professors, where the liberal advantage is smallest, 49% are liberal and 39% are conservative (Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005). Gross (2013) concludes this ideological lopsidedness among the professoriate is a result of self-selection: similar to how plumbing is viewed as a man’s work and nursing is viewed as a woman’s work, academia is viewed as the province of liberals. Professors are much more liberal than the general US population (Gross and Simmons 2014). Gross and Simmons (2014) compare the social and political views of the professoriate to those of the general population, and find that 19.7% of professors identify as conservative (compared to 31.9% of the general population), and 62.2% of professors identify as liberal (compared to 23.3% of the general population).

Abrams (2018) shows that university administrators, the subjects in this experiment, are even more disproportionately liberal than professors. Abrams (2018) finds that, among American university administrators, liberals outnumber conservatives by a ratio of 12 to 1. This profound numerical advantage may result in a preference for fellow “in-group” members over those of the “out-group” whereby overwhelmingly liberal administrators are biased in favor of liberal students or against conservatives in the distribution of campus resources like information on establishing a new student organization.

There is evidence that academics discriminate against conservative job candidates or fellow academics (Yancey 2011; Inbar and Lammers 2012), but the few studies that

¹The president’s tweet came after a planned visit by conservative speaker Milo Yiannopoulos to the UC-Berkeley campus was canceled in light of security concerns.

have been conducted on the subject conclude that conservative students face no special disadvantage on campus: they have nearly identical levels of satisfaction with their college experience as liberal students (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009a), and they are not discernibly influenced by their political science professors' ideological leanings (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009b). A recent correspondence experiment found no statistically significant difference in the responsiveness of professors in various academic fields to liberal and conservative prospective students (Fosse, Gross, and Ma 2014).

Discrimination against students of a particular ideology would run counter to long-held norms of academic freedom on college campuses. America's universities adhere to norms of academic freedom for both students and professors (AAUP 2018). These norms have been recognized by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) for over 100 years, as they were enshrined by AAUP in a 1915 statement: "[a]cademic freedom has traditionally had two applications – to the freedom of the teacher and to that of the student" (AAUP 2018). The AAUP acknowledges that ideological discrimination of the kind investigated here is in direct contradiction of these norms (AAUP 2018). Conservative students should not have a harder time trying to establish new student groups simply because they are conservative. My study provides clear, scientific evidence on the question of whether American universities violate their own ostensible norms.

Political discrimination on campus would also conflict with the history of American universities as havens of political activism and free expression. Universities cannot reasonably claim to serve as havens of student political activism if they silence students based on political ideology. Activist subcultures on campus established some universities as hotbeds of political activism in the 1960s (Van Dyke 1998). The tradition of political activism on campus continues today (Pedris 2018). Indeed, campus activism has increased in recent years (Eagan et al. 2015). A team of researchers from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California-Los Angeles found in 2015 that the percent of college students who say they would participate in a protest was at the

highest level recorded since 1967, when researchers began asking this question (Eagan et al. 2015). In other words, the study of campus political activism is more relevant than ever. I test an important issue in this domain: whether university administrators systematically favor one type of political activism over another. If only one side is free to express their views, while the opposing side is not, alleged respect for “freedom of expression” is merely a farce.

2 The Polarized Decline in Trust in Institutions of Higher Education

Among American citizens, sharp partisan divisions exist in evaluations of colleges and universities, with a majority of Democrats saying these institutions have a positive impact on the country, and a majority of Republicans saying the opposite (Fingerhut 2017). In 2017, a solid majority (58%) of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents said colleges and universities have a negative impact on the way things are going in the country (Fingerhut 2017). Just two years earlier, it was the reverse: a majority of these respondents (54%) said these institutions have a positive impact (Fingerhut 2017). Why has Republican trust in colleges and universities declined?

Perceived discrimination against conservatives on campus plays a key role in the polarized decline in trust in institutions of higher education. Republicans who professed low trust in colleges and universities largely cited political concerns in a 2017 Gallup poll (Newport and Busteed 2017). Republicans who distrusted these institutions, in other words, distrusted them because they perceived them as inhospitable to the ideas of conservatives and overly indulgent to the ideas of liberals. By contrast, the smaller number of Democrats who distrusted colleges and universities largely cited financial considerations (Newport and Busteed 2017).

The polarized decline in trust in institutions of higher education mirrors polarized patterns of trust in government (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Pew 2017): those whose party is out of power tend to distrust the government. In colleges and

universities, liberals are thought to be “in power.” Professors are far more likely to identify as liberal than conservative (Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005; Klein and Stern 2009). Among administrators, the numerical liberal advantage is even more pronounced (Abrams 2018). Conservative parents may wonder why they should send their children to liberal campuses to have all their hard ideological training undone (Kimball 1990) and, similarly, why their tax dollars should fund their political rivals (Lu 2017). Thus, while liberals may question the decline of trust in institutions of higher education among conservatives as a negative development, from a conservative perspective, too much trust is gullibility (Rotter 1980).

Similar to the way perceptions of the media as hostile lead to selective exposure and the creation of politically homogenous online spaces (Ladd 2012; Borah, Thorson, and Hwang 2015), conservatives have responded to the left’s control of the American college campus with a “hot new brand in higher education—the conspicuously conservative college” (Wheeler 2017). The creation and proliferation of avowedly conservative colleges allows conservative parents to send their children off to college, safe in the knowledge that their preconceived notions will not be too strenuously tested. Surely the better outcome for the intellectual diversity of college life is not to segregate along political fault lines. Yet the perception of university discrimination against conservatives is so widespread that the rise of conservative-oriented colleges makes perfect sense. I provide some much-needed scientific evidence on the veracity of these perceptions.

3 Social Capital and Campus Conservative Organizations

This research also carries important implications for the development of social capital among the campus conservative community. The term social capital refers to social connections and norms of reciprocity and trust that arise from them, which enable more effective solutions to collective action problems than if each individual had to go it alone (Putnam 2000). I carry on a century-old line of research on social

capital in the context of education by investigating one possible impediment to the development of social capital: university discrimination (Putnam 19 2000; Coleman 1988).²

An impediment to the development of social capital may hinder any of the astounding array of positive outcomes linked to social capital. Such positive outcomes include: more civic engagement (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Putnam 2000; La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 2002), better quality of governance (Knack 2002), support for democracy (Muller and Seligson 1994), better health outcomes (Kawachi 1999; Kennedy, Kawachi, and Brainerd 1998; Kawachi, Kennedy, and Glass 1999), better educational outcomes (Coleman 1988; Goldin and Katz 1998), decreased juvenile delinquency and behavioral issues (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Arls 1997; Parcel and Menaghan 1993; Furstenburg and Hughes 1995), economic development (Fukuyama 1995; Knack and Keefer 1997; Zak and Knack 2001), charitable giving (Brooks 2005), community resilience to natural disasters (Aldrich and Meyer 2015), decreased income inequality (Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner, Prothrow-Stith 1997) and even lower levels of violent crime (Kennedy, Kawachi, Prothrow-Stith, Lochner, and Gupta 1998; Rosenfield, Balmer, and Messner 2001).

Young people in particular are thought to be especially at-risk for having low social capital (Twenge, Campbell, and Carter 2014; Rahn and Transue 2002; Putnam 2000 247-277; Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, and Soutter 2000). I investigate whether the development of social capital among conservative college students faces a threat in the form of discrimination at the hands of institutions of higher education. This research thus fits nicely within the literature on social capital among American youth.

Student organizations have direct bearing on the development of social capital. Face-to-face meetings, such as those offered by campus groups, are critical to the develop-

²The line of research on social capital in the context of education stretches back at least a century to the Progressive Era. Putnam (2000 19) identifies the first use of the term social capital by a Progressive-Era state supervisor of rural West Virginia schools, J.L. Hanifan. Later researchers also studied social capital in the educational environment (Coleman 1988).

ment of social capital (Putnam 2000). Yet organizations with face-to-face meetings are in decline, especially among young people (Putnam 2000). This context underscores the importance of studying potential impediments to this avenue for the development of social capital, such as discrimination.

There is ample evidence that discrimination lowers social capital. Black people are much less trusting in general than white people, and women are marginally less trusting than men (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Uslaner 2002; Smith 2010). Among people of color, those who report more frequent discrimination are even less trusting (blacks: Nunally 2012; Latinos: Levitt 2015). This lower level of trust among groups who have faced discrimination and even less trust among those who report more discrimination suggest discrimination lowers the norms of trust integral to social capital. Scholars agree that discrimination lowers social capital (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; DeMaris & Yang 1994; Brehm and Rahn 1997; Smith 1997; Patterson 1999), as does simply belonging to an “outsider” group, i.e. not the “in-group” (Boldizar and Messick 1988; Tajfel 1970; Tajfel et al. 1971; Jetten, Spears, and Manstead 1996; Gaertner and Insko 2000; Glaeser et al. 2000; Fershtman and Gneezy 2001; Simpson 2007; Barr 2004).

The parallels here between campus conservatives and traditionally marginalized groups are readily apparent. Conservatives are the minority “out-group” on the campus dominated by liberals, and they perceive discrimination on the basis of that out-group status. While obvious differences remain (ideology is a choice; gender, race, and ethnicity are not), complicating any attempt to equate, say, racial discrimination with ideological discrimination, there are clear, negative consequences of perceived discrimination against conservative students on college campuses. Perceived discrimination exacerbates the polarized decline in trust in institutions of higher education (Newport and Busteed 2017). Perceived discrimination also inhibits social capital (e.g. Nunally 2012).

4 Methods and Data

The method I use to investigate allegations of discrimination against conservatives is the correspondence experiment. This method is commonly used to investigate discrimination of various kinds, e.g. racial discrimination in the labor market (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010). In correspondence experiments, researchers mail or email materials such as resumes to subjects.³ The materials are identical in all but the characteristic predicted to cause discrimination, e.g. sex or race. The idea is that if, say, male prospective employees receive more responses than females with the same qualifications, this differential responsiveness constitutes evidence that employers are biased against female prospective employees or in favor of males.

Correspondence experiments are a type of field experiment, which maximizes both internal and external validity. Randomized experiments, such as the one described in this paper, constitute the gold standard of internal validity. We can be sure that the treatment is the cause of differences in the dependent variable by eliminating all other possible causes. Field experiments take place in subjects' natural settings, rather than an artificial laboratory setting, enhancing external validity. Thus, we can be sure the relationships we observe are causal in nature and applicable to the real world.

In this study, I email 1,470 administrators who preside over the establishment of new student campus organizations. I eliminated 71 subjects due to undeliverable or automatic replies, leaving 1,399. I create this dataset based on US News and World Report's 2019 listings of American colleges and universities. Statistical power tests show that these experiments are able to detect even small-sized effects (difference

³Correspondence experiments are closely related to audit experiments. Both correspondence and audit experiments are field experiments that attempt to uncover discrimination. Correspondence experiments use correspondence, like as mail, email, or other methods, such as online job applications, while audit experiments rely on actors known as testers. For example, an audit experiment might send a black and a white tester to various police stations to file a police report in order to uncover racial bias, while a correspondence experiment would email police stations with either a putatively white or a putatively black alias.

= .2) at conventional levels of statistical significance ($\alpha = .05$) with a level of statistical power at .87.⁴

Research assistants from the Department of Political Science’s Research-Intensive Bachelor’s Certificate (RIBC) program at Florida State University first identify the administrators at each of these institutions who are responsible for helping students establish new campus organizations. The assistants identify administrators via appropriate search terms, e.g. “[university name] start a new student group.” The assistants make use of Google and the universities’ own search engines, as well as any information on university websites indicating the appropriate person to contact, which is typically found on the university web-page on student life or engagement. The assistants also record the size (enrollment), endowment, setting (urban, suburban, or rural), geographical region, school type (e.g. regional or liberal arts college), and whether the school is religious (whether or not the school mentions religious terms such as “God” or “faith” in its mission statement).

Then, I randomly assign administrators to one of three conditions: the Liberal Treatment Condition, the Conservative Treatment Condition, or the Control Condition, using pure random assignment. I conduct balance tests to ensure the expectation of equivalence across conditions is met (see Appendix). These administrators receive a request from a student to start a new political student group on campus from either a politically liberal student (the Liberal Treatment Condition), a conservative student (the Conservative Treatment Condition), or a student with no specified ideology (the Control Condition).

Administrators are given one month from the initial request to respond. The dependent variable in this study is a binary indicator of whether the administrator did or did not reply within 30 days, following previous, similar research, which notes the value of this measure is that it is objective (Butler and Broockman 2011 467). The emails were sent February 18-20, 2019 and the response window closed 30 days later, in

⁴This calculation assumes variance equal to that of Fosse, Gross, and Ma (2014), the most similar study to this one, considering the dependent variable of response/ no response.

March 20-22, 2019. Given the 500 email per day limit policy of Gmail, the emails had to be sent across three days. The day on which the emails were sent was randomized with pure random assignment to obviate any potential effects of chronological order.

Conservative critics of academia would hypothesize that administrators will respond more to liberal students than to the students of unspecified ideology, and less to conservative students than to the students of unspecified ideology. I analyze the data with difference of means tests to see if there are any significant differences in responsiveness across experimental conditions. I also analyze the data with multivariate models to see if there are any differences by college characteristics. I expect schools with larger endowments and enrollments to be more responsive, since these institutions have more capacity to handle and process requests.

I measure the independent variables, other than the treatment indicators, by relying on data from US News and World Report's 2019 rankings of American colleges and universities. In all models, I include an indicator of Liberal Treatment Condition and an indicator of Conservative Treatment Condition, comparing the effects of these treatments to the Control Condition, left as the reference category. I use the US News and World Report categorization to record college setting, either urban, suburban, or rural. I use suburban as the reference category in all models with setting. I use US News and World Report data to measure school endowment, ranking, and enrollment.⁵ I use US News and World Report to classify school region as either North, South, Midwest, or West. In some comparisons to follow, I group all schools in the North, Midwest, and West as schools outside the South, and only schools classified as in the South by US News and World Report as Southern schools.⁶ For all schools, I measure school

⁵I broke these figures into deciles in order to preserve subject anonymity and comply with the IRB's requests.

⁶Following the regional classifications of US News and World Report, a school was classified as being in the South if located in any of the following states: Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, or Kentucky.

religiosity by reading the school mission statement. A school's religiosity is coded 1 if its mission statement has any mention of God, Jesus, faith, or similar faith-based vocabulary and 0 otherwise. I rely on the US News and World Report categorizations to determine a school's type (either National University, National Liberal Arts College, Regional University, or Regional College).

If difference of means tests indicate that administrators are significantly more responsive to a liberal student than to student of unspecified ideology, this result will constitute evidence of *pro-liberal bias*. If administrators are significantly less responsive to a conservative student than a student of unspecified ideology, this result will constitute evidence of *anti-conservative bias*. Alternatively, there could be a *pro-conservative bias* (if administrators are significantly more responsive to the conservative student than to the student with no specified ideology) or an *anti-liberal bias* (if administrators are significantly less responsive to the liberal student than to the student with no specified ideology). *Pro-conservative* or *anti-liberal biases* would suggest that university administrators, cognizant of the allegations that they are discriminatory, have overcorrected to the point that they privilege conservative students or disadvantage liberals. If there is no significant difference between the treatment and control groups, but there is a significant difference between the two treatment groups, such a finding would still indicate some bias, although it would be unclear where that bias originates.

The text of the email request appears below. I composed this email with help from my undergraduate students. I had students in my undergraduate Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior course at Florida State University write emails seeking to establish a new student group for bonus points. Six students completed this task. I analyzed the grade level of writing for these emails with Microsoft Word and found the average student wrote at the 12th grade level. I then composed emails that were also at the 12th grade level of writing, so that my requests would have greater external validity. I also capitalized a couple words throughout the emails that do not actually need to be capitalized, a common mistake several of my students made, to enhance external validity even further. I chose the pseudonym Brett Clark, since it has been empirically

demonstrated to elicit a high response rate (Butler and Homola 2017).

Hello,

Some other students and I were hoping to get a [liberal political /conservative political/ political] student group established on campus, and recognized as an official campus organization. We feel there is a Dire need for such an organization on campus, in order for like-minded students to commiserate and build crucial networking, organizational, and oratory skills in a welcoming and inclusive environment.

We expect at least a Dozen regular attendees of our group's meetings, and hope to persuade several more students to join eventually.

Are you the correct person to contact about this? If so, please relay additional information about subsequent steps in getting the organization officially established. If not, could you point me in the right direction?

Thank you.

Brett Clark,

Senior

The email requests come from a Gmail account (brettclark2019@gmail.com), not an official student email. Many colleges and universities have a policy that students should use their official student email account to contact faculty and administrators. A policy of this kind would explain some unresponsiveness, but it would not explain a differential responsiveness across the experimental conditions. It is that difference that is of interest to us here. In other words, random assignment ensures that universities with such a policy have the same chance of being in the Liberal Treatment Condition, the Conservative Treatment Condition, or the Control Condition. Any difference in the way liberals and conservatives are treated cannot be blamed on a student email policy.

5 Results

In the overall sample, response rates in the Liberal and Conservative Treatment Conditions were virtually identical. Sixty-six percent of subjects in the Liberal Treatment Condition replied to the student request to form a new political campus organization, compared to 67% of subjects in the Conservative Treatment Condition. The response rate in both treatment conditions was slightly higher than the 63% response rate observed in the Control Condition, but these differences are not statistically significant. Table 1 below displays the observed response rate across experimental conditions for the overall sample as well as schools of various types.

Table 1: Observed Response Rates, Sample Sizes, and Standard Errors

Sample	Lib.	Contr.	Conserv.	Lib.	Contr.	Conserv.	Lib.	Contr.	Conserv.
	n	n	n	RR	RR	RR	SE	SE	SE
Overall	465	465	469	0.66	0.63	0.67	0.02	0.02	0.02
Liberal Arts	74	64	67	0.51	0.38	0.67	0.06	0.06	0.06
South	126	118	121	0.63	0.66	0.62	0.04	0.04	0.04
Non-South	339	347	348	0.67	0.62	0.69	0.03	0.03	0.02
Religious	147	144	140	0.61	0.58	0.62	0.04	0.04	0.04
Non-Religious	317	317	328	0.68	0.65	0.69	0.03	0.03	0.03
Urban	169	173	186	0.70	0.73	0.68	0.03	0.03	0.03
Rural	117	103	109	0.60	0.62	0.61	0.05	0.05	0.05

Values are sample sizes, observed response rates, and standard errors for colleges with the specified characteristic in the specified experimental condition. For example, for schools outside the South, 67% of subjects in the Liberal Condition replied, compared to 62% in the Control Condition, and 69% in the Conservative Condition. Standard errors are calculated by generating a sampling distribution of 1,000 estimates of the predicted probability of response in each experimental condition for each college type and taking the standard deviation of this sampling distribution.

There are few substantial differences in response rate across experimental conditions. A notable exception, however, is the very large difference in response rates across conditions among schools classified by US News and World Report as National Liberal Arts Colleges. Among these schools, the response rate was 38% in the Control Condition, 51% in the Liberal Condition, and 67% in the Conservative Condition.

Table 2 below displays the results of difference of means tests. There are no statistically significant differences in response across experimental conditions in the overall sample. Among schools classified as National Liberal Arts Colleges and colleges located outside the South, there is a statistically significant bias *in favor* of conservatives. Among these two school types, subjects in the Conservative Condition were significantly more likely to reply than subjects in the Control Condition. After adjusting for multiple comparisons, the p-value for the difference of means test between the Conservative and Control Conditions retains significance in the sample of liberal arts

colleges, but loses significance in the sample of colleges located outside the South. These results are robust to the specific type of test utilized for multiple comparisons.⁷ The significant bias in favor of conservatives among liberal arts colleges is thus not a product of mere chance due to multiple comparisons.

The randomized nature of the experiment does not require controlling for additional covariates when assessing the impact of student ideology on administrative responsiveness. Balance testing (see the Appendix) confirms the expectation of equivalence across experimental conditions in the overall sample. Still, it is interesting to see whether any college covariates predict responsiveness. Table 3 below displays the results of two logistic regression models of the dichotomous measure of administrative response. The first column displays the results of a logit model with only the treatment indicators as independent variables. The second column displays the results of the same model with additional covariates.

Some school characteristics were associated with a significant change in the response rate. Schools with higher enrollment were significantly more likely to reply. Liberal arts colleges were significantly less likely to reply. There are no clear theoretical explanations or expectations about the lower responsiveness from liberal arts schools, but the relationship of enrollment and responsiveness makes sense: larger schools are likely better equipped to process student requests.

Figures 1-3 below show the predicted probability of subject response across experimental conditions with 95% confidence intervals.⁸ Figure 1 displays results for the

⁷The p-value for the difference of means test between the Conservative and Control Conditions, when adjusted for the 24 comparisons shown in Table 2, is 0.00 for the sample of National Liberal Arts Colleges in Bonferroni, Holm, Hochberg, Hommel and FDR tests. For the same test in the sample of colleges located outside the South, the p-value increases to 1 in the Bonferroni and Holm tests, .92 in the Hochberg and Hommel tests, and .48 in the FDR test.

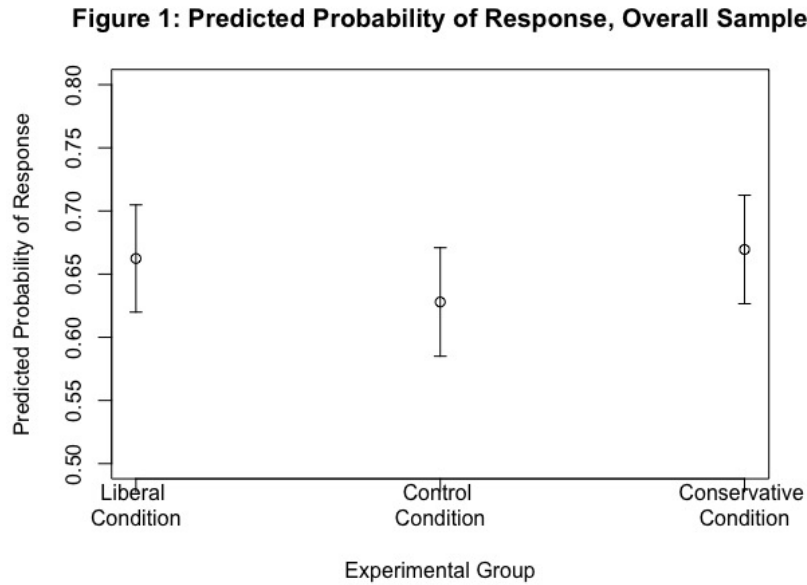
⁸I applied normal-theory confidence intervals. To obtain a sampling distribution, I generated bootstraps with 1,000 estimates of each predicted probability of interest. I calculated the standard error by calculating the standard deviation of the sampling distribution.

Table 1: Difference of Means Results

Test	n	Diff. Means	95% CI	t-statistic	p-value
Liberal-Control, Overall	930	0.03	[−0.03, .10]	1.10	0.27
Conservative-Control, Overall	934	0.04	[−0.02, .10]	1.33	0.18
Liberal-Conservative, Overall	934	−0.01	[−0.07, .05]	−0.23	0.82
Liberal-Control, Liberal Arts	138	0.14	[−0.03, .31]	1.64	0.10
Conservative-Control, Liberal Arts	131	0.30	[0.13, .46]	3.53	0.00
Liberal-Conservative, Liberal Arts	141	−0.16	[−0.32, .00]	−1.92	0.06
Liberal-Control, Religious	291	0.03	[−0.08, .14]	0.50	0.62
Conservative-Control, Religious	284	0.04	[−0.08, .15]	0.65	0.51
Liberal-Conservative, Religious	287	−0.01	[−0.12, .10]	−0.16	0.87
Liberal-Control, NonReligious	634	0.04	[−0.04, .11]	1.01	0.31
Conservative-Control, NonReligious	645	0.04	[−0.03, .12]	1.14	0.25
Liberal-Conservative, NonReligious	645	0.00	[−0.08, .07]	−0.12	0.90
Liberal-Control, Southern	244	−0.03	[−0.15, .09]	−0.43	0.67
Conservative-Control, Southern	239	−0.04	[−0.16, .08]	−0.66	0.51
Liberal-Conservative, Southern	247	0.02	[−0.11, .14]	0.24	0.81
Liberal-Control, NonSouthern	686	0.06	[−0.02, .13]	1.53	0.13
Conservative-Control, NonSouthern	695	0.07	[0.00, .14]	1.94	0.05
Liberal-Conservative, NonSouthern	687	−0.01	[−0.08, .06]	−0.40	0.69
Liberal-Control, Urban	342	−0.03	[−0.13, .07]	−0.61	0.54
Conservative-Control, Urban	359	−0.05	[−0.14, .05]	−0.94	0.35
Liberal-Conservative, Urban	355	0.02	[−0.08, .11]	0.31	0.75
Liberal-Control, Rural	220	−0.02	[−0.15, .11]	−0.35	0.73
Conservative-Control, Rural	212	−0.01	[−0.14, .13]	−0.10	0.92
Liberal-Conservative, Rural	226	−0.02	[−0.15, .11]	−0.25	0.80

Values in the first column display the sample size for the specified test. Values in the second column display the difference of means for the specified test. For example, comparing the Conservative and Control Conditions among National Liberal Arts Colleges, there is a .30 or 30% difference in response rates. The 95% confidence interval surrounding this estimate is .13 (lower bound) to .46 (upper bound). Confidence intervals are normal theory and calculated with a bootstrap method to generate a sampling distribution and the standard error. The t-statistics and p-values reflect the statistical significance or lack thereof for each specified test.

overall sample. There is no statistically or substantively significant difference in the probability of response across experimental conditions in the overall sample.



Values displayed are predicted probabilities of response in the overall sample, calculated with a logistic regression model of subject response as a function of experimental condition. Bars are 95% normal-theory confidence intervals calculated with bootstrapping.

Figure 2 shows the predicted probability of subject response across all three experimental conditions with 95% confidence intervals for liberal arts colleges. These results confirm a substantively and statistically significant bias *in favor* of conservatives as compared to the Control Condition. Among liberal arts colleges, the probability of receiving a response to requests to start a new student group is 29% higher for conservatives than students who do not specify an ideology, and 16% higher for conservatives than liberals. At least among liberal arts colleges, the idea that conservatives face discrimination in their efforts to establish new political campus organizations is exactly backwards. The probability of receiving a response in this sample is .51 in the Liberal Condition, .67 in the Conservative Condition, and .38 in the Control Condition.

While balance tests indicate the experimental conditions are not perfectly balanced in the sample of liberal arts colleges (see the Appendix), the positive, statistically significant effect of being in the Conservative Treatment Condition on responsiveness

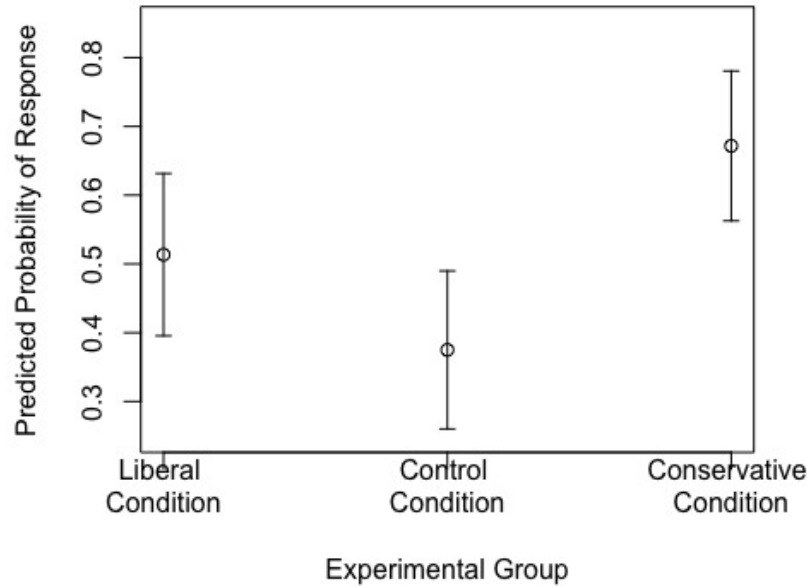
Table 2: Logistic Regression Results

	<i>Dependent Variable:</i>	
	Responsiveness	
	(1)	(2)
Liberal	0.150 (0.137)	0.212 (0.160)
Conservative	0.183 (0.137)	0.343** (0.165)
Urban		0.120 (0.159)
Rural		0.033 (0.176)
Endowment		0.047 (0.042)
Enrollment		0.125*** (0.037)
Ranking		−0.012 (0.033)
South		−0.107 (0.153)
Religious		0.118 (0.162)
Liberal Arts		−0.463* (0.281)
Regional Universities		0.058 (0.241)
Regional Colleges		−0.311 (0.334)
Constant	0.523*** (0.096)	−0.270 (0.537)
Observations	1,399	1,107
Log Likelihood	−901.854	−660.911
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,809.709	1,347.822

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Values displayed are the results of logistic regression models of subject responsiveness. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the subject replied within 30 days and 0 otherwise. The first column displays the results of a model with only treatment indicators as predictors. The second column displays the results of a model with treatment indicators plus covariates for college characteristics.

**Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Response,
National Liberal Arts Colleges**



Values displayed are predicted probabilities of response among National Liberal Arts Colleges, calculated with a logistic regression model of subject response as a function of experimental condition. Bars are 95% normal-theory confidence intervals calculated with bootstrapping.

among schools classified by US News and World Report as National Liberal Arts colleges persists even after controlling for the covariates on which balance tests suggest these experimental conditions are unbalanced, namely region, setting, and religiosity. Table 4 displays the results of a logit model of responsiveness among liberal arts colleges. The coefficient for the Conservative Treatment Condition indicator variable is positive and statistically significant, even after controlling for setting, religiosity, and region. This *pro-conservative bias* reflects a preference for conservative students among university administrators at liberal arts colleges tasked with assisting students in the creation of new campus political organizations. The coefficient for the Liberal Treatment Condition is positive, but it is not close to the conventionally acceptable level of statistical significance. Conservative students are thus uniquely advantaged in their efforts to establish new political organizations at liberal arts colleges.

I replicate the predicted probability analyses for liberal arts colleges while controlling

Table 3: Logistic Regression Results Among National Liberal Arts Colleges

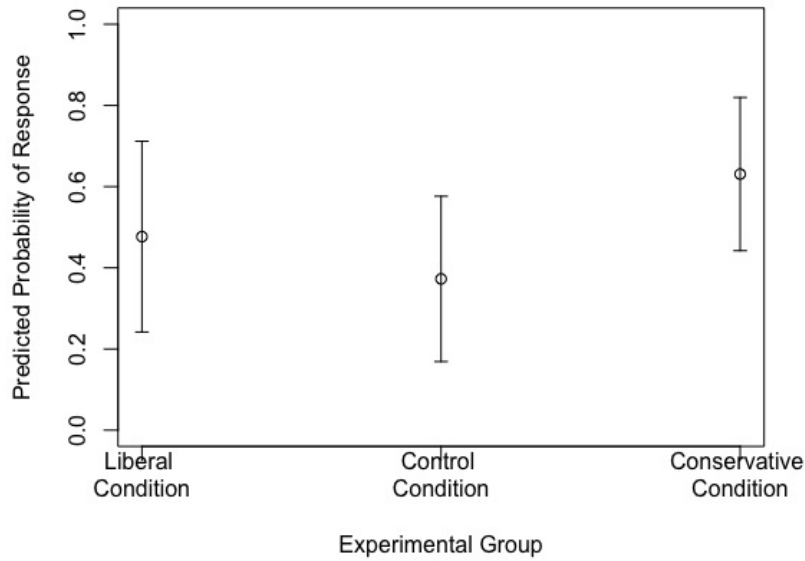
Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	-0.05	0.44	0.90
Conservative	1.06	0.39	0.01
Liberal	0.43	0.37	0.24
Urban	0.22	0.38	0.56
Rural	0.23	0.36	0.51
North	-0.69	0.40	0.09
South	-0.11	0.42	0.78
West	-0.09	0.54	0.87
Religious	-0.72	0.37	0.05

Table 4 displays the results of a logistic regression model of subject response among schools classified by US News and World Report as National Liberal Arts Colleges, excluding undeliverable and automatic replies, controlling for the college characteristics on which balance tests suggest experimental conditions in this sample were unbalanced (n=205). The dependent variable is coded 1 if a subject replied within 30 days and 0 otherwise.

for the college characteristics on which experimental conditions in this sample are not balanced (religiosity, region, and setting). Figure 4 displays the predicted probability of response across experimental conditions for subjects at liberal arts colleges, calculated with the logit model shown in Table 4 and the average case approach.

After controlling for the college characteristics on which the experimental conditions were unbalanced in the sample of liberal arts colleges, the predicted probability of subject response was .63 in the Conservative Treatment Condition, .48 in the Liberal Treatment Condition, and .37 in the Control Condition in this sample. Thus, even after controlling for covariates on which these experimental conditions are unbalanced, the first difference in the predicted probability of response between the Conservative Treatment Condition and the Control Condition is quite large (.26) in this sample. It is not appreciably different from the .29 first difference calculated without controlling for covariates. Thus, university administrators at liberal arts colleges are nearly 30% more likely to reply to a request for help in forming a new student organization from a

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Response, National Liberal Arts Colleges, with Controls



Values displayed are predicted probabilities of response, calculated with a logistic regression model of subject response as a function of experimental condition and controls for region, religiosity, and setting among schools classified by US News and World Report as National Liberal Arts Colleges, using the average case approach. Bars are 95% normal-theory confidence intervals calculated with bootstrapping.

conservative student than a student who does not specify his or her ideology, and 15% more likely to help a conservative than a liberal student, although this latter difference is not statistically significant.

6 Discussion

In contrast to the dominant narrative of conservative victimization on campus, I find that conservative students face no special challenges in establishing campus organizations. The observed response rates from university administrators to requests for information about establishing a new campus organization were virtually identical for liberal and conservative students in the overall sample. If anything, conservatives receive special treatment at some colleges, as reflected in the statistically significant bias in favor of conservatives at schools classified by US News and World Report as

National Liberal Arts Colleges. Among these liberal arts colleges, requests from a conservative student were nearly 30% more likely to receive a response compared to a non-ideological control condition, and 15% more likely to receive a response compared to a liberal student. For these colleges, there is a *pro-conservative bias* as defined by a significantly higher response rate in the Conservative Treatment Condition than the Control Condition.

These results imply that the claims of anti-conservative discrimination common in conservative circles are more myth than reality, at least with respect to the particular request for help in establishing a new political campus organization. My experiment suggests conservatives simply do not face any special disadvantage in this regard, despite ardent claims to the contrary (Blackwell 2018). There may be other types of discrimination against conservative college students, however, so it is best not to close the book on the question of political bias on campus just yet. Some other particular charges that merit our attention are that conservatives are shut out of campus media (Blackwell 2018) and that they are unable to study topics that conform to their ideology, in contrast to liberal students, who are free to study topics that accord with their ideology, such as race and gender bias (Horowitz in Schmidt 2011). There are many claims and anecdotes about these issues, but experimental evidence is necessary to learn about the state of political bias on campus.

Another methodological limitation of this study is that it provides no over-time leverage. It could be the case that there was once bias against conservatives on campus that is no longer present. The significant *pro-conservative bias* among liberal arts colleges could be a kind of overcorrection for perceptions of previous *anti-conservative bias*. This study provides a snapshot of a single point in time, the winter of 2019, finding no bias against conservatives in this time period. Future work could attempt to examine these issues over time, though it would sacrifice the internal validity and ability to rigorously test causal claims central to true experimental methodology if it investigated any bias taking place in the past.

While *perceived* discrimination continues to impede the social trust critical to the de-

velopment of social capital, the good news is that conservatives do not face any *actual* discrimination in attempting to establish political campus groups. Civic organizations with face-to-face meetings, such as the groups studied here, provide valuable opportunities for students to develop their social capital (Putnam 2000). Far from facing discrimination, conservatives are in fact privileged in their efforts to get such groups established on campus at liberal arts colleges and thus do not face any impediments to this opportunity to develop their social capital.

The polarized decline in trust in institutions of higher education centers on the perception of universities as hostile to political conservatism and indulgent to political liberalism. The results of this experiment should at least give pause to critics of higher education who hold such views. When it comes to forming political student groups, conservatives are not disadvantaged. The polarized decline in trust in institutions of higher education should therefore somewhat abate.

While more work is needed to rule out other avenues of discrimination, the results from this experiment suggest that Republican attacks on higher education funding may not have the effect of disproportionately affecting liberal students. In fact, slashing funding for liberal arts colleges may backfire, weakening institutions significantly biased *in favor* of conservative students. Slashing funding for colleges overall may weaken those institutions, but the results discussed here suggest that it would not affect liberal students any more than conservatives, contrary to the received wisdom on this issue.

The results emergent from this experiment contrast sharply with the grim picture of political bias in higher education ubiquitous in conservative media. In contrast to allegations of *anti-conservative bias*, with respect to establishing new student organizations, conservative students do not face any significant disadvantage. Among schools classified by US News and World Report as National Liberal Arts Colleges, conservative students are in fact significantly advantaged in this regard. Conservative media should incorporate this high-quality experimental evidence into their frequent stories on conservative victimization on campus.

This experiment also carries significant implications for the real-world politics of colleges and universities. Charges of bias against conservatives in higher education conflict with the history of universities as havens of political activism and free expression as well as norms of academic freedom. This experiment essentially absolves colleges and universities of any wrongdoing pertaining to political bias in the formation of student political organizations, despite ardent and frequent claims to the contrary.

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8 Appendix

Despite recent criticisms (Mutz 2019), balance tests are often used to demonstrate fulfillment of the expectation of equivalence across experimental conditions. Tables A1-A3 display the results of balance tests for all emails sent in the overall sample ($n = 1,470$). Tables A4-A6 display the results of balance tests for the set of all usable emails (excluding those that were answered by an automated system or came back marked undeliverable) in the overall sample ($n=1399$). No p-value for any coefficient is at .05 or below, suggesting the experimental conditions were balanced on all covariates and equal in expectation in the overall sample. Tables A7-A9 display the results of balance tests for all emails sent in the sample of schools classified as National Liberal Arts Colleges by US News and World Report ($n = 226$). Tables A10-A12 display the results of balance tests for the set of all usable emails (excluding those that were answered by an automated system or came back marked undeliverable) in the sample of schools classified as National Liberal Arts Colleges by US News and World Report ($n = 205$). The dependent variable in each model is coded 1 if the subject was assigned

to the specified condition and 0 otherwise. For example, the dependent variable in the model whose results are reported in Table A1 is scored 1 if the subject was assigned to the Liberal Condition and 0 otherwise.

Table A1: Balance Tests- Liberal Condition, all emails sent-Overall Sample

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	−0.56	0.51	0.27
Urban	−0.16	0.15	0.28
Rural	−0.05	0.17	0.77
Endowment	0.00	0.04	0.99
Enrollment	0.01	0.04	0.83
Ranking	0.02	0.03	0.60
North	−0.18	0.17	0.29
South	−0.12	0.17	0.47
West	−0.25	0.19	0.20
Religious	0.09	0.16	0.57
National Liberal Arts	0.07	0.26	0.78
Regional Universities	−0.01	0.22	0.95
Regional Colleges	−0.24	0.32	0.45

Table A2: Balance Tests- Conservative Condition, all emails sent-Overall Sample

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	−0.56	0.52	0.28
Urban	0.12	0.15	0.44
Rural	0.08	0.17	0.64
Endowment	−0.04	0.04	0.27
Enrollment	0.03	0.04	0.36
Ranking	−0.04	0.03	0.22
North	0.03	0.18	0.89
South	−0.01	0.18	0.94
West	0.11	0.19	0.55
Religious	−0.06	0.16	0.70
National Liberal Arts	0.06	0.27	0.81
Regional Universities	−0.07	0.22	0.76
Regional Colleges	0.22	0.32	0.49

Table A3: Balance Tests- Control Condition, all emails sent-Overall Sample

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	−0.96	0.52	0.06
Urban	0.05	0.15	0.74
Rural	−0.03	0.17	0.88
Endowment	0.04	0.04	0.27
Enrollment	−0.04	0.04	0.25
Ranking	0.02	0.03	0.49
North	0.16	0.17	0.35
South	0.14	0.18	0.42
West	0.14	0.19	0.47
Religious	−0.03	0.16	0.84
National Liberal Arts	−0.14	0.27	0.59
Regional Universities	0.08	0.22	0.72
Regional Colleges	0.01	0.32	0.96

Table A4: Balance Tests- Liberal Condition, automatic replies and undeliverable emails excluded-Overall Sample

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	−0.70	0.52	0.18
Urban	−0.19	0.15	0.22
Rural	−0.04	0.17	0.81
Endowment	0.01	0.04	0.82
Enrollment	0.01	0.04	0.81
Ranking	0.02	0.03	0.44
North	−0.21	0.17	0.23
South	−0.12	0.18	0.49
West	−0.24	0.19	0.22
Religious	0.10	0.16	0.51
National Liberal Arts	0.14	0.27	0.61
Regional Universities	0.06	0.22	0.80
Regional Colleges	−0.16	0.32	0.63

Table A5: Balance Tests- Conservative Condition, automatic replies and undeliverable emails excluded-Overall Sample

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	−0.54	0.53	0.31
Urban	0.15	0.15	0.34
Rural	0.10	0.18	0.58
Endowment	−0.05	0.04	0.20
Enrollment	0.04	0.04	0.30
Ranking	−0.04	0.03	0.23
North	0.02	0.18	0.92
South	−0.05	0.18	0.76
West	0.07	0.19	0.71
Religious	−0.04	0.16	0.82
National Liberal Arts	0.08	0.28	0.76
Regional Universities	−0.05	0.22	0.81
Regional Colleges	0.19	0.32	0.57

Table A6: Balance Tests- Control Condition, automatic replies and undeliverable emails excluded-Overall Sample

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	−0.85	0.53	0.11
Urban	0.05	0.15	0.77
Rural	−0.05	0.18	0.77
Endowment	0.04	0.04	0.29
Enrollment	−0.05	0.04	0.20
Ranking	0.01	0.03	0.67
North	0.20	0.18	0.27
South	0.18	0.18	0.32
West	0.17	0.20	0.38
Religious	−0.07	0.16	0.67
National Liberal Arts	−0.23	0.27	0.40
Regional Universities	0.00	0.22	0.98
Regional Colleges	−0.04	0.33	0.91

Table A7: Balance Tests- Liberal Condition, all emails sent-National Liberal Arts Colleges

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	0.04	1.23	0.97
Urban	-0.67	0.39	0.09
Rural	-0.04	0.36	0.91
Endowment	-0.07	0.11	0.51
Enrollment	0.03	0.11	0.81
Ranking	0.02	0.10	0.87
North	-0.55	0.41	0.18
South	-0.14	0.44	0.75
West	0.12	0.53	0.83
Religious	0.53	0.37	0.15

Table A8: Balance Tests- Conservative Condition, all emails sent-National Liberal Arts Colleges

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	-0.71	1.42	0.62
Urban	0.76	0.40	0.06
Rural	0.42	0.40	0.29
Endowment	-0.01	0.13	0.94
Enrollment	-0.03	0.12	0.79
Ranking	0.08	0.11	0.49
North	-0.24	0.43	0.57
South	-1.03	0.51	0.04
West	-0.35	0.56	0.54
Religious	-1.81	0.53	0.00

Table A9: Balance Tests- Control Condition, all emails sent-National Liberal Arts Colleges

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	-1.88	1.37	0.17
Urban	0.02	0.38	0.96
Rural	-0.40	0.39	0.30
Endowment	0.12	0.13	0.35
Enrollment	-0.01	0.12	0.95
Ranking	-0.08	0.11	0.47
North	0.84	0.45	0.06
South	1.06	0.48	0.03
West	0.23	0.61	0.70
Religious	0.83	0.40	0.04

Table A10: Balance Tests- Liberal Condition, automatic replies and undeliverable emails excluded-Overall Sample

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	-0.16	1.31	0.91
Urban	-0.71	0.42	0.09
Rural	-0.03	0.37	0.93
Endowment	-0.06	0.12	0.59
Enrollment	0.03	0.12	0.80
Ranking	0.03	0.11	0.79
North	-0.50	0.42	0.24
South	-0.19	0.47	0.68
West	0.49	0.57	0.39
Religious	0.73	0.39	0.06

Table A11: Balance Tests- Conservative Condition, automatic replies and undeliverable emails excluded-Overall Sample

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	−0.99	1.53	0.52
Urban	0.98	0.43	0.02
Rural	0.59	0.42	0.16
Endowment	0.01	0.13	0.92
Enrollment	−0.04	0.12	0.76
Ranking	0.09	0.12	0.45
North	−0.24	0.44	0.58
South	−1.02	0.54	0.06
West	−0.70	0.61	0.25
Religious	−1.96	0.59	0.00

Table A12: Balance Tests- Control Condition, automatic replies and undeliverable emails excluded-Overall Sample

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	−1.46	1.46	0.31
Urban	−0.15	0.41	0.72
Rural	−0.56	0.40	0.16
Endowment	0.09	0.13	0.52
Enrollment	0.00	0.13	0.99
Ranking	−0.10	0.11	0.39
North	0.79	0.46	0.09
South	1.10	0.51	0.03
West	0.15	0.66	0.82
Religious	0.68	0.43	0.11