

# Discrimination Against Pro-Lifers in Higher Education? A Preliminary Survey

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THE POPULAR WISDOM, at least among conservative observers of the American university scene, is that “political correctness” reigns supreme. Feminism is a major component of political correctness, and support for abortion rights is often alleged to be one of the integral tenets of feminism. From this, one might assume that academe is an unfriendly place for a pro-lifer.

But the university is also home to academic freedom. There is a strong tradition of respect for free inquiry and the right of individual faculty members to speak out on controversial issues of the day without damage to their careers. When academic freedom meets political correctness, what is the result? How free *are* pro-lifers to take a public position on life issues?

To investigate this question, academics were surveyed over the World-Wide Web in late May and early June 1999. Participants in the survey were gathered by e-mail sent to the University Faculty for Life mailing list, and *via* an announcement on Steve Ertelt’s Pro-Life Infonet, a daily digest of pro-life news sent to thousands of subscribers by e-mail.

Forty-nine academics participated in the survey, a number that is large enough to gain a feel for the magnitude of discrimination, but not large enough to demonstrate statistical significance. About two-thirds of the respondents were UFL members.

## ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE OF DISCRIMINATION

Two respondents to the survey painted a stark picture of discrimination. The first is from a natural scientist at a masters-level institution:

I have been told (by faculty and career advisors) *not* to list my research (on pro-

life topics) in my resumé or CV. I have been told that I was not even allowed to first level interviews for college teaching positions because I had previously listed my pro-life medical and sociological work. I have been told that I would never get a job at certain Catholic and Christian colleges because of my previous pro-life biological, medical, and social research. I have been passed over as a candidate for college teaching positions because I was considered too Catholic (Catholic being equated as being pro-life and antithetical to liberal faculty agendas). I had one interview where I discussed my paper presented on cloning (animal and human scientific aspects) at a Catholic conference and the interviewing faculty were stunned and remarked that they thought Catholics were anti-science and just too pro-life (anti-abortion) to understand the scientific issues surrounding cloning. I never got the job.

The second is from someone at a medical school in a prominent private secular university who felt compelled to resign from her position within two months after responding to the survey:

I have to work in a family medicine clinic where abortions are done *in the clinic*. The nurses have been quite upset (on one occasion a nurse was just about compelled to participate and left the treatment room where the procedure was done in tears, saying she was a murderer). When I protested that this was not an appropriate venue, as we have a nearby surgical center, I was told I could leave the university if I didn't like abortions being done in the room next to those where I see infertility patients. On another occasion, I was told that I could not use my affiliation when I wrote pro-life or other pieces for papers unless these were reviewed for content. A high official in the medical school tried to get me fired (this anecdotally from a reliable source) for pro-life articles I wrote under my maiden name in the *LA Times*.

But were these anecdotes typical of the situation most pro-life academics face? The survey was designed to find out.

#### ATTITUDE OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

The first question investigated the attitude of school administrators toward pro-life views. Results are given in Table 1. As can be seen, the administrations of church-related schools were markedly more sympathetic to pro-life views. Private secular schools did not differ much from public schools, nor was there much difference between denominations of church-related schools.

TABLE 1. HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE THE ATTITUDE OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF YOUR SCHOOL TOWARD PRO-LIFE VIEWS?

	Very Pos.	Posi- tive	Neu- tral	Ten- ding Neg.	Neg- ative	Into- ler- ant	Aver- age.
All schools	3	11	19	6	8	2	2.8
Public	0	1	7	5	6	1	2.1
Private secular	0	0	3	0	1	1	2.0
Church-related	3	10	9	1	1	0	3.5
Protestant	0	2	2	0	0	0	3.5
Catholic	3	7	6	1	1	0	3.6
Other	0	1	1	0	0	0	3.5

Scale: Very positive = 5, Positive = 4, ... , Intolerant = 0

Representative prose responses included these on the negative side:

lack of funding/invitations for any speakers with pro-life views; support for protestors who aggressively interfere with pro-life poster displays; pro-abortion statements by faculty, administration; official invitations of pro-abortion speakers, politicians; funding of abortions by campus medical plans; referrals for abortions by campus doctors, advisors, *etc.*; requirement that student groups who have pro-life speakers provide inordinate amounts of police protection. (From someone at a state university)

The President supports Planned Parenthood as a possible placement center for our students even though it is a major abortion provider. Many administrators, most faculty are publicly pro-choice. The new head of a program here in Community leadership is a minister who is a pro-choice defender and very anti-evangelical Christian and Catholic official teachings. (From someone at a Catholic college)

Those answering “neutral” cited conflicting loyalties of administrators:

The biggest concern of the current administration is the political fallout to the school from my pro-life activities. “Will it harm fundraising or negotiations with

state officials regarding things the school wants,” is the dominant question. (From a professor at secular law school.)

Although I believe most of the administrators are pro-life, they never speak about the issue... there is more of a “silence”.... Once, when I said I would write a letter about a “life” incident, I was told I could write as a person...but not in the name of the college. (From someone at a Catholic college)

Some of the “positive” attitudes came from schools with obvious denominational loyalties. When asked what evidence there was for the positive attitude, our respondents answered this way:

Statements by visiting Church leaders in Devotional assemblies. Pro-life supplement carried in student newspaper. BYU President gave pro-life talk in August 1998 commencement address. Pro-life section to be included in new textbook for course on family values. (From someone at Brigham Young)

Their public statements; my personal knowledge of them; practical help for events in Washington like the annual March for Life, where students get excused from classes to attend the March, hospitality is given in University buildings for out-of-town marchers, *etc.* (From someone at Catholic University of America)

One particular incident was cited by a respondent from a masters-granting Catholic college:

Several years ago, when the pro-life group lost its funding due to an administrative oversight on their own part, the administration provided the year’s funds. The Dean of Students has made every effort to give the group the opportunity to be provocative, as long as they provide an opportunity for dialogue with those who disagree. The school will not allow the establishment of a pro-abortion group, despite repeated requests. The administration has made certain to cut all ties, even purely incidental ones, with groups like Planned Parenthood, so as to avoid any appearance of scandal on this front. (They haven’t been so successful avoiding scandal in other areas, but they’ve been pretty strong about abortion.)

A second question asked about the attitude of the administration or department to the respondent’s own pro-life activities. On this matter there was less difference between church-related and secular schools, though church-related schools were again the more supportive. Table 2

summarizes the responses. We can see that the vast majority of respondents say that the administration has not expressed an opinion on their activities. Here are two representative comments about supportive departments:

TABLE 2. HAS YOUR ADMINISTRATION OR YOUR DEPARTMENT BEEN SUPPORTIVE OR CRITICAL OF YOUR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES?

	Sup- portive	No Opin- ion	Critica l	Avg.
All schools	11	37	1	2.2
Public	1	19	0	2.1
Private secular	0	5	0	2.0
Church-related	10	13	1	2.4
Protestant	1	3	0	2.3
Catholic	8	9	1	2.4
Other	1	1	0	2.5

Scale: Supportive = 3, No opinion = 2, Critical = 1

My department chair has verbally and financially supported pro-life causes in the past. My dean supports the position of the Church against elective abortion and for upholding the sanctity of life. (From someone at a Catholic college)

My department chair has verbally and financially supported pro-life causes in the past. My dean supports the position of the Church against elective abortion and for upholding the sanctity of life. (From someone at a private college)

Surprisingly, only one person said his director was critical of his activities. He said simply, "The assoc. director had made disparaging remarks about Orthodox Catholics." However, it is probably a mistake to assume that the administration and the department speak with a single voice. The above-mentioned law professor commented,

I could mark all three answers to this question, depending upon which administration or which activity. My scholarly writing is generally supported regardless of the topic. My political activities are supported or criticized, depending on the individual in that administration or the manner in which it came to the attention of the administration.

#### COLLEAGUES' ATTITUDES

In addition to the attitudes of superiors, one's colleagues can also have a great influence on how welcome one feels in academia. The survey asked whether respondents' colleagues respected their right to speak out on life issues. It was discovered that they generally do, and it doesn't make much difference whether one is at a secular or a church-related institution. Generally those who say *yes* outnumber those who say *no* two to one. Only two candidates in the whole survey said their colleagues did not respect them. One might observe (though the questions do not correlate exactly) that colleagues might be more supportive than administrators.

TABLE 3. HAVE YOUR COLLEAGUES RESPECTED YOUR RIGHT TO SPEAK OUT ON THESE ISSUES?

	Yes	?	No	Avg.
All schools	31	16	2	2.6
Public	13	6	1	2.6
Private secular	2	2	1	2.2
Church-related	16	8	0	2.7
Protestant	3	1	0	2.8
Catholic	12	6	0	2.7
Other	1	1	0	2.5

Scale: Yes = 3, ? = 2, No = 1

A representative remark came from someone in decision sciences:

They are professional scholars, researchers, and educators in a field that has never been politicized in the way that humanities and social sciences have, and

we all treasure this too much to dare to impose political correctness of any stripe, left, right or sideways.

One of the two people who answered “no” said this:

Faculty at [this college] treated me with disdain and lied to me, when my book came out. I’ve been told by a fellow academic that he would have loved to have me come and speak at his (Catholic) University, but he would be fired if this occurred. (This individual is a tenured faculty member of 28 years at the university.)

#### PRO-LIFE VIEWS AND CAREER PROSPECTS

Another set of questions focused on the effect of pro-life views on an academic career. The first of these questions asked whether the respondent’s own career prospects had been hurt. In general, respondents were about three times as likely to say “no” as “yes” and the affiliation of the university did not matter much.

TABLE 4. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOUR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES HAVE HURT YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER-ADVANCEMENT PROSPECTS?

	Yes	?	No	Avg.
All schools	10	10	29	1.6
Public	3	6	11	1.6
Private secular	2	1	2	2.0
Church-related	5	3	16	1.5
Protestant	1	0	3	1.5
Catholic	4	2	12	1.6
Other	0	1	1	1.5

Scale: Yes = 3, ? = 2, No = 1

That said, it should also be noted that some of those who said “yes” were very sure of their answer. One philosopher remarked

I was in line for a tenure-track position at a Jesuit university before I wrote a pro-life article for a student paper and criticized the administration's decision to allow a pro-abortion student group on campus.

Another at a Jesuit university commented,

A year ago my contract was almost terminated. Among other things, our Faculty Council stated that they were deeply concerned by student reports that I am not “open to the views of others.”

Two of those who did not know cited other factors that made it hard to decide:

I did not achieve the professor rank last year—was told that it was based on my undergraduate teaching evaluations—who knows if there was any bias because I am pro-life—it would all be just speculation.

I do not know, except that perhaps listing so many paper presentations dealing with a pro-life topic makes my resumé look weighted. I think my inability to obtain a full-time position in academia is based on affirmative action policies which discriminate against white heterosexual males.

On the other hand, someone from Catholic University of America wrote, “I have always found support, even when I was arrested outside an abortuary.” The survey also asked for a prose response to the question, “If your career has been hurt, do you believe there is any way you could have spoken out so forcefully without harming it?” The answer was negative. Ten of the twelve responding answered “no.” One of the others said, “Dubious,” and the last said, “I don’t think I’ve spoken out so forcefully.”

The question naturally arises: If it wouldn’t have helped a respondent’s career to speak out less forcefully, would it hurt to speak out *more* forcefully? The survey posed this question, with the results shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5. HOW LIKELY DO YOU BELIEVE IT IS THAT YOUR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES WOULD HURT YOUR CAREER-ADVANCEMENT PROSPECTS IF YOU WERE MORE OUTSPOKEN (WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING INFLAMMATORY OR ILLEGAL)?

Very Likely Neither Un- Very Avg.



	likely		likely		un- likely	
All schools	6	7	14	13	7	2.8
Public	3	3	6	3	4	2.9
Private	2	0	2	1	0	3.6
Church-	1	4	6	9	3	2.6
Protestant	0	1	0	2	1	2.3
Catholic	1	2	5	7	2	2.6
Other	0	1	1	0	0	3.5

Scale: Very likely = 5, ... , Very unlikely = 1

It can be seen that people at non-church related schools thought damage to their careers was slightly more likely than people at church-related schools. Within those two categories, differences between denominations and state affiliation should be discounted because of the small numbers reporting. However, there were two interesting comments on the influence of church affiliation. First, this observation from someone who recently left a Jesuit university for a state university:

My feeling is that I am much more free with respect to pro-life activities at the State university where I now teach than I was at the Catholic universities where I taught for a number of years. (I taught at five such institutions in the past 20 years). Perhaps the size of the school makes a difference, and the fact that here I am viewed as just another oddity (in a large class of other eccentrics). In that sense, it was a relief to leave the world of Catholic higher education so that I could promote Catholic teaching on the value of life. Odd, isn't it?

And this comment from someone at a masters-level Catholic institution:

Since we are a "Catholic" institution, making too much of a stink over a faculty member being pro-life would upset various members of the Board of Directors. But on the other hand, few in the administration are committed to see the culture at the school be pro-Christian or pro-Catholic, so outspoken pro-Christian/Catholic faculty/staff are bothersome. So it is difficult for the administration to be direct about such issues, but not difficult for them to be indirect. It is hard to say for sure, but I do believe that if any damaging decision was done for those reasons, it would be made impossible to prove.

One might conjecture that the danger one perceives in speaking out depends more on the academic discipline than on the type of institution. After all, the right to life is much more controversial in obstetrics/gynecology than in civil engineering, for example. The responses to these two questions were retabulated according to discipline. But still there was little difference in perceived past damage to one's career, as Table 6 shows.

TABLE 6. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOUR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES HAVE HURT YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER-ADVANCEMENT PROSPECTS?

	Yes	?	No	Avg.
All depts.	10	8	29	1.6
Theology	1	1	4	1.5
Humanities	3	4	6	1.8
Soc. science	0	0	4	1.0
Nat. science	2	1	4	1.7
Engineering	1	0	1	2.0
Management	1	0	1	2.0
Professional	0	1	0	2.0
Medical	2	1	2	2.0
Other	0	0	7	1.0

Scale: Yes = 3, ? = 2, No = 1

It is perhaps noteworthy that none of the four social scientists thought their career had been harmed, but the numbers per discipline are too small and the results too mixed to draw any clear conclusions. A somewhat different picture emerges, however, when one asks whether career prospects would be harmed by taking a more public stance (Table 7). The majority of respondents from medical schools think their career would be harmed; this is the only discipline where this is true (the relatively high average in engineering can be dismissed, as it came from only two respondents).

TABLE 7. HOW LIKELY DO YOU BELIEVE IT IS THAT

YOUR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES WOULD HURT YOUR CAREER-ADVANCE-  
MENT PROSPECTS IF YOU WERE MORE OUTSPOKEN  
(WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING INFLAMMATORY OR ILLEGAL)?  
(BY DISCIPLINE)

	Very Likely	Likely	Neither	Un- likely	Very Un- likely	Avg.
All depts.	6	7	14	13	7	2.8
Theology	0	2	1	3	0	2.8
Humanities	2	2	4	3	2	2.9
Soc. science	0	0	3	0	1	2.5
Nat. science	2	1	1	2	1	3.1
Engineering	0	1	1	0	0	3.5
Management	0	0	1	0	1	2.0
Professional	0	0	1	0	0	3.0
Medical	2	1	1	1	0	3.8
Other	0	0	1	4	2	1.9

Scale: Very likely = 5, ... , Very unlikely = 1

One might also wonder if one could minimize career damage by “lying low” within one’s department. To explore this, the results from the first career-damage question were correlated with the results of another question asking whether respondents informed colleagues of their pro-life views. Table 8 shows the results. Those who made an attempt to inform their colleagues tended to report less damage than those who didn’t. It should not be surprising that those who thought it more dangerous to speak out were less likely to have done so. But an alternate interpretation is also possible: the reticence of the respondents to state their own positions may have caused their colleagues to view them in a more negative light, which could itself be damaging to their careers.

TABLE 8. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOUR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES HAVE HURT YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER-ADVANCEMENT PROSPECTS? (BY OUTSPOKENNESS TOWARD COLLEAGUES)

Yes      ?      No      Avg.

All respondents	10	8	29	1.6
I inform all colleagues	4	2	9	1.7
I inform when opportunity	4	4	18	1.5
No attempt to inform them	1	0	1	2.0
No, afraid to inform them	1	1	0	2.5

Scale: Yes = 3, ? = 2, No = 1 *Note:* One respondent didn't answer the question on informing colleagues.

A related question is how making one's views known to *students* affects one's career. The consensus is that it doesn't have much effect (Table 9). Damage to respondents' careers appears to be virtually unrelated to how much effort they invest in informing students of their pro-life views.

TABLE 9. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOUR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES HAVE HURT YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER-ADVANCEMENT PROSPECTS?  
(BY OUTSPOKENNESS TOWARD STUDENTS)

	Yes	?	No	Avg.
All respondents	10	8	29	1.6
I inform all students	3	4	10	1.6
I inform when opportunity	7	2	16	1.6
No attempt to inform	0	2	1	1.7
No, afraid to inform them	—	—	—	—

Scale: Yes = 3, ? = 2, No = 1 *Note:* Two respondents didn't answer the question on informing students.

Another dimension of pro-life identification is the number of pro-life activities someone participates in. The survey asked which activities people had been involved in, activities like participating in marches or demonstrations, writing letters to the editor, working at a crisis-pregnancy center, and so forth. The results suggest that those who are involved in more activities may experience more of an effect on their careers (Table 10). This may be due to bias against prominent pro-lifers, but it may also be due to these activities taking time away from the respondents' careers.

TABLE 10. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOUR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES HAVE HURT YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER-ADVANCEMENT PROSPECTS?  
(BY NUMBER OF PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES PARTICIPATED IN)

# of activities	Yes	?	No	Avg.
At least 5	2	2	4	1.8
3 or 4	3	4	10	1.6
Two	2	2	7	1.5
One	2	0	8	1.4

Scale: Yes = 3, ? = 2, No = 1

Finally, whatever the damage to one's career, the respondent might consider it worthwhile. A nurse from a prominent secular medical school wrote,

I am an orthodox Catholic and pro-life. I am anti-birth control, pro-natural family planning. My views are novel to some and a threat to others. I have been fired from one inconsequential job working at a candy counter in college because of my pro-life activities. A student reporter personally insulted my looks and another threatened our group with violence. ... My career is certainly threatened by being pro-life. But I cannot imagine the evil I would live in leading an apolitical life knowing what I know. Evil is real. I ask God to lead me each day.

#### SUMMARY

This survey is just a first step in exploring whether discrimination against pro-lifers is widespread in academia. The sample is too small to draw any statistical conclusions. Further, there is the possibility of self-selection bias, from the author's attempt to publicize the survey *via* a list-serve message. The author intends to expand the survey to explore this question further. It has established, however, that it is easy to find pro-life academics who believe they have been discriminated against, and who present credible reports of discrimination. It is also true that this number is a rather small minority of the total number of respondents.

Many of the most vivid reports of discrimination came from those fields that have something to do with abortion, notably medical schools and the biological sciences. From this, one might conjecture that pro-

abortion orthodoxy feels itself challenged most seriously from academic experts in these fields. Respondents did feel, however, that academic freedom is an important value, so there was a strong tendency to allow pro-life academics to speak their mind even when their views were unpopular. It is also encouraging that respondents seemed most concerned about the actions of their colleagues, and their colleagues were seen as more respectful of pro-life views than their administrators were.