

## Students

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### Recruiting for the Right

**With money, diligence, and provocative behavior, the Campus Leadership Program has helped conservative groups proliferate**

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Waltham, Mass.

*First in a three-part series on the changing face of student activism on college campuses.*

Ryan J. Sorba stands before a table covered with mini-cupcakes and whoopie pies, calling out to students as they pass. A sign lists the prices: \$6 for customers under 18; \$3 for 19-year-olds; \$1 for 20-year-olds; 25 cents for 21- to 39-year-olds; and free to those 40 and over.

"Don't get screwed by Social Security, support private accounts," says Mr. Sorba, a conservative activist who has come here to Bentley College's Student Union to help recruit new members for a chapter of Students for Saving Social Security.

On the floor beside him stands a poster of a wizened man with a scruffy white beard and a speech balloon that reads, "If my generation had private accounts, maybe I wouldn't have to eat Alpo."

This is the fourth "Social Insecurity Bake Sale" that Mr. Sorba has held since he moved from California to Massachusetts in early September to become the Boston-area recruiter for the Campus Leadership Program, a decade-old venture that sends students and recent graduates to colleges to help conservative students start clubs and publications there.

The program's goal is simple: to establish a conservative beachhead on every college campus in America. Recruiters like Mr. Sorba encourage conservative students to see themselves as the new counterculture, as campus revolutionaries challenging the liberal academic establishment.

The approach appears to be working. The

program's field representatives have helped create 1,060 groups and newspapers on 443 campuses, including eight at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and seven at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Morton C. Blackwell, who founded the program in 1997 as an outgrowth of the Leadership Institute, his conservative training group, describes such gains with glee.

"Before we arrived, some of these places had no conservative presence," he says. "The fact is, we are breaking the leftist monopoly on campus after campus."

### The Vanguard Grows

Efforts to promote conservatism on college campuses are not new. Conservative groups have been asserting themselves at American colleges since at least the early 1950s, when a young William F. Buckley Jr. published the book *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of Academic Freedom*, accusing his alma mater of forcing liberalism on its students. In the 1980s and 90s, conservative organizations like the John M. Olin Foundation gave millions to support like-minded student newspapers and campus groups.

Sending field reps to recruit conservative students is not new, either. The College Republican National Committee began deploying recruiters in the mid-1980s, with help from the Reagan administration. This year it sent 68 of them to recruit, register, and mobilize young Republicans for the midterm elections. A handful of single-issue organizations, including Students for Life of America, an anti-abortion group, are also active campus recruiters.

What is unusual about the Campus Leadership Program is that it creates independent, student-run groups, rather than campus chapters of a national organization. Students set up a group, choose its focus, pick its name, and plan their own activities. The program provides training, materials, and a \$500 "Balance in Media" grant to help students start conservative publications.

The national program does not campaign for political candidates, either, since legally it is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization.

Mr. Blackwell, a former executive director of the College Republican National Committee, began the Campus Leadership Program as a pilot effort in 1997, dispatching one representative to recruit on campuses in the Washington area. As a recruitment aid, he designed a simple poster with pictures of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and the word "Yes" at the top, and pictures of Hillary Clinton and Fidel Castro and the word "No" at the bottom. The field rep started 43 groups in seven mid-Atlantic and Southern states.

By 2005 the program had grown to 27 recruiters and 738 groups. This past fall its size more than doubled, to 60 recruiters, thanks to a \$1-million gift from an anonymous source and bequests from longtime donors. The recruiters, who work for 10 weeks during each semester, each receive a laptop, a \$1,000 food stipend, and \$500 for each group or publication they create. The program reimburses them for travel, lodging, and cellphone costs.

In choosing recruiters, Mr. Blackwell says, the program looks for young people who are solidly conservative and were politically active in college.

Mr. Sorba fit the bill, and then some. A senior at California State University at San Bernardino, he was president of his college's chapter of the College Republicans and founded a Christian-student club that refused to admit gay students and non-Christians. He took the fall semester off from college to serve as a recruiter.

In the spring of 2005, he posted fliers around the San Bernardino campus warning that children could be socialized into homosexuality and that homosexual behavior leads to shorter life spans. The fliers angered some members of his College Republicans chapter — whose founding president is gay — and the vice president asked him to step down as president. He refused.

Mr. Sorba also created a "watch list" of three female professors who, he claimed, discriminated against students on the basis of their political beliefs. The list caused such a stir that the university's president held a forum on free speech, sexual orientation, and tolerance.

### 'A Witch Hunt'

"It was a witch hunt," says Marcia J. Marx, an associate professor of sociology, who says she made the list

because she supported a boycott of a campus Taco Bell over its use of tomatoes picked by mistreated farmworkers.

Nancy E. Rose, a professor of economics, who was also on the list, says she stopped teaching a controversial course called "Perspectives on Gender" after the watch list appeared on fliers plastered around the campus.

"I would have these horrible visions of someone shooting me," she says.

Mr. Sorba is unapologetic. "I raised hell on campus," he says.

As a field representative for the Campus Leadership Program, he has continued to stoke controversy, organizing events like "Illegal Immigrant Tag," in which students receive prizes for "catching" students who have donned orange prison jumpsuits to represent illegal immigrants.

### **Recruiting at Bentley**

The group's bake sale at Bentley is a twist on affirmative-action bake sales, in which students are charged different prices depending on their race. But the concept does not seem to resonate with the Bentley students, many of whom are more intent on socializing or getting to class than on signing the pink petitions that Mr. Sorba plans to mail to members of Congress. Some passers-by say they're too full for a cupcake; others say they don't have any money. (They get a cupcake anyway.)

To lure students to the baked-goods table, Robert Wedinger, a gregarious freshman from New Jersey, calls to classmates by name: "Willie, Willie, you're getting screwed! You're giving away your hard-earned money, and you're getting nothing."

After a while, Mr. Wedinger resorts to bargaining and threats. "What if I chug this water in seven seconds?" he asks one student. "Will you sign the petition?" He tells another, "Jeanine, if you don't sign right now, I'm going to come to your room naked at 4 in the morning."

"Ewww," she responds.

Several students agree to sign the petition in exchange for a T-shirt featuring a screw and the slogan "Don't get screwed." One student starts to sign her name, Martha, but hesitates. "Wait," she says. "I don't mind Social Security. My parents are going to get it."

"Your parents think for you?" Mr. Wedinger asks. "You don't have your own mind?"

"Yeah, I guess so," she says, walking off without signing the petition.

"Don't get screwed," Mr. Sorba calls out after her.

"Hey," he says a moment later, "that would make a good chastity campaign."

The group's Social Security reform campaign is not all slogans. David Finch, a freshman from Bangor, Me., shows students statistics on the ratio of workers to retirees, and Immanuel Gilen, a 17-year-old Belgian sophomore whom the other recruiters consider a genius, delivers the economic argument for privatization.

"If you look at the history of the stock market, the lowest rate of return has been around 4 percent," he says. "The rate of return on the current system for a young worker is only around 2 percent."

By the end of the day, the group has collected 83 signed petitions and 75 cents. A success, Mr. Sorba declares.

## Provoking the Left

Stunts like the bake sale are a specialty of the Campus Leadership Program. A pamphlet titled "CLP 101: Activist Projects for College Conservatives" suggests such events as an Earth Day carwash in which SUV's are washed free, and "Operation Red Star," in which students post red stars on the doors of professors who espouse what the group deems communist principles. (Economics professors who laud Marx or political-science professors who praise Che Guevara are good candidates, the material advises.)

Other events satirize opposing values — "Conservative Coming Out Day" and an "Animal Rights Barbeque." (One suggested sign is "I eat two cows for every one you don't.")

Mr. Blackwell, who oversaw the national youth effort for Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign, leads by example. Two years ago, just before the 2004 Republican convention, he bought pink heart stickers, bandages, and purple nail polish and made "Purple Heart Band-Aids," to mock Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry's war wounds.

The ploys are designed to provoke as much as they are to make a point. "These things are fun," Mr. Blackwell says, "and they really aggravate the left."

And aggravate they do. Recruiters have had their tables knocked over, their posters torn up, even been spit on, he says.

And recently a woman who was recruiting for a group called Caucasian American Men of ASU says she was scratched in a scuffle with an art professor at Arizona State University at Tempe. After the incident, conservative students papered the campus with "Wanted" posters picturing the professor and a colleague.

The program advises conservative students to be provocative, but to ignore provocation from the left. As J.P. DeGance, a former coordinator for "Youth for Jeb Bush," told participants at a Campus Leadership Program training session at the 2006 conference of the Conservative Political Action Committee, "always take the moral high ground."

"When a campus leftist approaches you and calls you a fascist and a Nazi, you disengage," he says. "You say 'Thank you, but the Young Fascist meeting is across the hall.' It's hard to disengage a person you probably want to crack in the head. But you have to."

## Recruiting at Harvard

The day after his visit to Bentley, Mr. Sorba heads to Harvard University to recruit for an anti-abortion group there. It is the first time he has been to the campus. He sets up shop in front of the Science Center, next to a group of students in leotards and tap shoes who are promoting a cabaret. On a table, Mr. Sorba places cards that students can fill out to request refunds of the roughly \$1 of each student's health fee that the activists say pays for abortions.

Morgan Mallory, a freshman member of the cabaret group who is wearing a sparkly gold hat, is one of the first to sign. "I'm pro-choice, but I don't think our tuition dollars should be going to fix other girls' mistakes," she explains.

More students emerge from the student center. "Are you pro-life?" Mr. Sorba asks them. They shake their heads no.

"That's not a good hook," Ms. Mallory advises him. "You should say, 'Do you want to pay for other people's abortions?'" He takes her advice and changes his approach.

As the field rep for the Boston area, Mr. Sorba faces a bigger challenge recruiting students than do his colleagues in the South and West. He chose Massachusetts, he explains, because it was the first state to allow same-sex marriage, and he wanted to educate its residents about what he describes as the dangers of homosexuality.

He had hoped to have finished writing his book, "The Truth Is Finally Coming Out of the Closet: The Born 'Gay' Hoax, the Dangers of Homosexual Behavior, and the Law of Nature," so he could scatter copies of it around Boston, but he is still working on it.

He knows he is fighting an uphill battle in Boston, one of the bluest cities in the country. But his organization is used to uphill battles. Mr. Blackwell describes it as "David versus Goliath."

Liberals, he argues, control college newspapers, journalism departments, speakers' bureaus, and tenure-review boards. He often cites polls showing that the most-conservative students are freshmen and the least conservative are seniors as proof that "left-wing indoctrination is working."

"They have the resources and the positions of power, and we have a matter of fairness and moral indignation about their abuses," he says. "And moral indignation is a very powerful motivator."

### **Liberals Fight Back**

The Campus Leadership Program appeals to some conservative students' sense of isolation, offering them an outlet for their unpopular ideas. "Feeling ostracized?" asks one poster with an image of marching ostriches. "Join the Leadership Institute."

But the fact is that conservatives have been making inroads into academe for decades, at least among students. While liberals outnumber conservatives on many college faculties, students have been slowly shifting rightward, even as young voters continue to favor Democrats.

According to a 2006 study by the University of Maryland's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 26 percent of students now describe themselves as conservative, compared with 24 percent who describe themselves as liberal. Four years ago, those percentages were 21 and 36, respectively.

And conservatives are thriving in some surprising places. At the University of California at Berkeley, the College Republicans now claim more members than the College Democrats.

That is due, in part, to decades of investment by groups like the Leadership Institute. Led by seasoned generals like Mr. Blackwell, these groups have trained an army of activists who have ascended to positions of power in the White House, Congress, and state legislatures. Among the program's graduates are Karl Rove, deputy chief of staff to President Bush; Sen. Mitch McConnell, Republican of Kentucky, the new Senate minority leader; Republican Reps. Mark Souder, of Indiana, and Jo Ann Davis, of Virginia; and some 300 Capitol Hill staff members.

"There is a whole generation of conservatives in their 30s, 40s, and 50s that are the product of this conservative farm team," says David Halperin, senior vice president of the liberal Center for American Progress. "On the progressive side, the leaders are often the same people that founded progressive organizations in the 70s, and that's an imbalance."

To close that gap, left-leaning organizations are fighting back, forming their own groups to train the liberal leaders of the future.

Two years ago, Mr. Halperin's center formed Campus Progress to do just that. In 2006 the program awarded \$120,000 in grants for campus issue campaigns and progressive publications, and it has just started a field program aimed at what the group sees as the country's most conservative campuses, including the College of the Holy Cross, Duke, Florida A&M, and Vanderbilt Universities, and the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Mr. Halperin, director of Campus Progress, says progressive organizations have neglected students for too long, lulled into complacency by the belief that most students are already on their side.

"Conservatives have outhustled us," he acknowledges. "The smart people in the progressive movement understand that we are going to continue to lose ground unless we make a wise investment in new generations."

But the Campus Progress budget of \$1.5-million is dwarfed by the \$40-million that its leaders estimate conservative groups spend on their college programs. The Leadership Institute alone spent \$2.2-million on the Campus Leadership Program in 2005, according to its tax return.

And conservatives show no signs of easing their efforts. This semester Mr. Sorba has returned to his home state, California, to recruit more students for conservative clubs. This month he plans to debate a lawyer from the American Civil Liberties Union on the subject of gay rights. And after graduating, he hopes to use his personal connections to get an internship at a place where conservatism is ascendant: the White House.

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