

Truman Scholarship Testimony

Frederick M. Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies at AEI

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Chairman Owens, Ranking Member Adams, and distinguished members of the Committee:

My name is Rick Hess. I'm a one-time high school teacher, former college professor, and now director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

It's not news that America's most prestigious colleges have long had little room for right-leaning thought. More surprising is that the same can be said of the nation's most prestigious federal scholarship program, one explicitly charged with cultivating a national community of future leaders.

In 1975, Congress established the Truman scholarship to [identify](#) "aspiring leaders at an important inflection point in their development—when they are college juniors—and recognize and reward their commitments to careers in public service." The mission is clear: As the program puts it, "When it comes to cultivating leaders, our diversity is our strength."

Each Truman Scholar receives \$30,000 for graduate studies, access to mentoring opportunities and special programs, and preferential hiring for federal jobs. The program relies primarily on taxpayer funds, from both interest revenue generated by a publicly financed endowment established by Congress and an annual Congressional appropriation. The total program budget is [projected](#) to be \$3,000,000 for fiscal year 2025.

The Truman Foundation makes much of the need to cultivate a diverse, inclusive community of scholars. That commitment is woven into the Truman application materials and selection processes.

And yet, in a divided nation marked by sincere disagreements about the substance of public policy and public service, the Truman scholarship recipients are remarkably uniform in their ideological make-up. Indeed, the Truman appears to have little room for young scholars who lean to the right on the questions of the day.

In 2024, along with AEI's Joe Pitts, I published a [study](#) examining the composition of the Truman scholarship recipients. We examined the biographies for Truman Scholars in the 2021, 2022, and 2023 cohorts to code their research interests. We tracked scholar interest in a dozen prominent issues, selected because their ideological valence is relatively clear. Left-leaning issues were LGBT+ advocacy; racial justice and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); climate and the environment; and immigration rights. Centrist issues were mental health, cybersecurity and technology, national and international security, and sexual violence prevention. And the right-leaning issues were free markets, religious freedom, pro-life advocacy, and gun rights.

I should note that we didn't code interest in issues like poverty relief, homelessness, and criminal justice reform, which can draw interest from left and right alike. If we had coded these issues, though, it's fair to say that the lion's share of students working on them would have been deemed progressive.

So, what were these hand-picked, taxpayer-supported students studying?

Of the 182 Truman scholars selected in 2021, 2022, and 2023, 74 cited interest in at least one of the left-leaning issues, while just six expressed an interest in a right-leaning issue. Many more Truman scholars were focused specifically on DEI or immigrant rights than on the whole array of centrist and conservative issues combined. Just three scholars mentioned an interest in religious freedom. Even a timely, centrist issue like cybersecurity and technology was mentioned by only four scholars.

Moreover, the half-dozen scholars focused on right-leaning issues didn't appear especially ideological. One studied religious freedom while focusing on "protecting women's right to bodily autonomy" and minoring in women's and gender studies. Others studied "alternatives to incarceration" and rural education accessibility. Meanwhile, the mass of students focused on left-leaning issues included a number whose biographies indicated that they had volunteered for progressive causes or worked for Democratic office seekers.

In short, the population of Truman scholars reflect a decided leftward lean and the near-absence of right-leaning thought. This is entirely consistent with the only other attempt I know of to gauge the make-up of the Truman scholars, an annual exercise in transparency conducted by the higher ed watchdog [The College Fix](#). This should raise concerns for a program charged with cultivating future civic leaders who can credibly bridge divides in a distrustful, polarized nation.

What's causing the imbalance? Well, right-leaning students and faculty have reached out to tell me that the process is stacked against them and that they've gotten clear signals that it's not worth wasting their time. On the other hand, left-leaning faculty are used to mentoring applicants, have had good experiences, and know that the program welcomes applicants who reflect their views and values. And, of course, program communications and information sessions tend to send clear (if unintentional) signals about the kinds of interests and research deemed promising.

As one recent Truman finalist told me, "When I interviewed for the scholarship (over Zoom), I was asked a number of politically pointed questions by the committee, including whether I, as a conservative, would condemn Donald Trump." When he shared his experience with the director of his university's honors college, he was told not to worry because, "Students like you don't usually win the Truman."

After the study was published, a former member of the Truman Scholars Association Board reached out to explain that this tilt matters not only for the obvious reasons but because of how it shapes the alumni network and distorts the networks that the program is supposed to cultivate. He told me:

Because the scholars are overwhelmingly progressive, scholars who don't fit that mold tend to disengage. This is especially true when opponents of progressive policies are labeled as racists or bigots . . . Most of the programming at Truman events is aimed at progressive scholars, because they are the majority participating. Even when you want to do bipartisan programming, it is hard because there are almost no engaged Republicans who can be tapped.

In a finding that underscores this state of affairs, *The College Fix* recently [examined](#) Truman winners from 2015 to 2020 and found that 226 out of 357 scholars went on to work in jobs or pursue careers "directly tied to or advancing left-wing beliefs or the Democratic platform."

Meanwhile, the analysis found just four Truman alumni who had worked in GOP politics or for conservative causes. That's a *56-to-1* ratio.

The Truman Foundation's response to all of this has been wholly unsatisfactory. Last year, following the AEI analysis, then-Committee Chair Virginia Foxx wrote to the head of the Truman program expressing concerns about the findings. In response, Terry Babcock-Lumish, the foundation's executive secretary, issued a [defensive reply](#)—marked by ad hominem attacks on the study, the insistence that “most applicants are neither obviously progressive nor obviously conservative”, and that, in any event, it's “needlessly divisive” to imagine that students can be sorted “to one side or another.”

Babcock-Lumish also said, “Truman Scholars selected are reflective of the pool of candidates before us. If students are not nominated or do not apply, we cannot select them.” If that seems unsatisfying from an entity that has touted its commitment to diversity, it should. After all, informed that its scholars represent only half the nation, one might have expected that the Truman leadership would commit itself to doing more to invite and attract promising candidates with heterodox views and values.

What *has* the Truman leadership done to respond to its failure to honor its mission?

Remarkably, it's mostly tried to hide the evidence. The Truman Foundation has scrubbed the bios of past winners from its [website](#), ensuring that no one can replicate the AEI study. [Past press releases](#) of winners are now password-protected. One can view them only via a Truman scholar account. So much for transparency.

And the program didn't issue biographies for this year's winners, either, instead just listing name, major, and degree aspirations. An information lockdown is certainly one response. After all, rather than addressing systematic ideological bias, it may indeed be easier to hide the evidence. But this is a poor solution, as opacity seems ill-suited to a taxpayer-funded scholarship.

There are several steps that should be taken to set things right.

First, there's a need for new leadership in the Truman program. The current leadership has shown itself either unable or unwilling to rise to the challenge. In response to congressional inquiries, the leadership has stonewalled and prevaricated, opting to hide problems rather than fix them.

Second, the Truman program ought to make it a priority to recruit students with diverse interests and perspectives. There's a need to revisit recruitment materials, the recruitment process, alumni programming, and outreach to faculty and institutions. After all, the program holds that, “when it comes to cultivating leaders, our diversity is our strength.” Leaders of participating colleges and universities need to take a hard look at how they publicize opportunities, mentor applicants, or celebrate winners to ensure they're not placing a fat thumb on the scale as to which views and values are welcomed.

Third, it's time to revisit the program's selection process. I've received a remarkable number of missives over the past year from former applicants describing an ideologically freighted interview process. There's a need to examine who is judging applicants, what questions they're asking, and how selections are ultimately made. When it comes to the regional review panels that interview and select scholars, for instance, a rough estimate is that Democrats outnumber their GOP counterparts by four to one. Moreover, several veterans of the process have told me that the Republicans involved tend to be more moderate than their counterparts. Two complementary

shifts are appropriate. First, the interview process should be rigorously apolitical. Second, those involved in the selection process need to be more ideologically heterodox.

Unfortunately, the Truman board has remained silent through years of troubling conduct and has sat on its hands even as Babcock-Lumish has brushed off concerns. What should happen if the board refuses to change its ways?

In that event, it's time to overhaul the board. The president appoints eight of the 13 board members. While board members serve six-year terms, the White House should seek to install a reform-minded majority as rapidly as possible. New appointments would need to be Senate-confirmed. No more than half of the board can be from one political party, but I'm optimistic that recommitting to a more inclusive Truman program is a cause that may find principled adherents on both sides of the aisle.

The Truman program is charged with cultivating future leaders who can offer principled public leadership. The requisite changes won't be easy but they'll be well worth it if they help make Harry S. Truman's venerable legacy a model for the nation in a time of division and distrust. If the Truman Foundation can't or won't address the problems, better for Congress to pull the plug than to continue to subsidize an ideological exercise.