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News

Ivory Tea

December 8, 2010

Critics of the Tea Party movement might think the only college at which the conservative activist group belongs is the virtual [Glenn Beck University](#). But students who have started Tea Party organizations at a number of campuses might beg to differ.

As the midterm elections saw a handful of Tea Party-affiliated candidates vying for major offices, student clubs sprouted this fall at the University of Pennsylvania, West Virginia University, George Mason University, Brandeis University, Lynchburg College, Hampden-Sydney College, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Butte College, and Ohio State University at Newark. This according to [TeaPartyStudents.org](#) -- a website seeking to confederate the student groups under its banner.

The campus groups are small -- in some cases, much smaller than their e-mail lists and Facebook groups might indicate. The group at George Mason, for example, has more than 50 Facebook supporters but only four active members, and may in fact end up dissolving before holding any events, according to founder Nicholas Brightwell, a junior government major who began the group at the recommendation of state Tea Party leaders whom he met while protesting President Obama's health care speech at George Mason last March.

Some campus Tea Partiers have been more active. In October, the University of Pennsylvania group [sponsored a talk by Robert Mansfield](#), a Tea Party conservative who last month lost a bid for Pennsylvania governor. The Penn Tea Partiers have also screened ["Tea Party,"](#) a documentary celebrating the movement, and this week held a debate with the university's Democratic Socialist organization.

Still, the 10 or so active members of the Penn group have had some trouble making themselves visible members of the political scene on campus, says Daniel Chinburg, the group's founder and a graduate student there. When Chinburg founded the group, the head of the Penn Democrats [told the student newspaper](#) that the Tea Party had "no sense of intellectualism" and that she "[didn't] see why that would resonate on an Ivy League campus." Chinburg says he initially tried to arrange a debate with the Democratic group, and when they "wouldn't bite," he and his fellow Tea Partiers held an open, "Debate the Tea Party" event. Only four people showed up. (Monday's debate with the Democratic Socialists was presumably better attended.)

Chinburg says he has considered challenging professors to debate. "I'm sure they're chomping at the bit to show their intellectual prowess against Tea Party members trying to have a debate on their home turf," he says.

Mary-Alice Perdichizzi, a junior at Brandeis University and a leader of the Tea Party group there, says she also heard crickets when she recently proposed a debate on immigration with a handful of campus political groups -- though she says that might be due to finals. Perdichizzi also says the student union finance board has not been helpful in helping the group pay for speakers to come to campus, but she still hopes to hold guest talks and screen ["Free to Choose,"](#) a 1980 PBS television series by free-market economist Milton Friedman, next semester.

None of the student leaders contacted by *Inside Higher Ed* indicated that their groups planned to lobby their own campuses for smaller administrative bodies or lower tuition. However, none ruled it out.

The Tea Party has a [high contingent of college graduates](#) compared to the general population, but it has made some enemies among academics, due to what some consider a tendency to misread Constitutional law and [misappropriate](#) the [legacies](#) of various U.S. historical figures in order to make emotional points about contemporary politics.

But on the campuses where students have started up Tea Party groups, some have found support from faculty members — if not for their ideas, then for the fact that they are interested in talking about them.

At Brandeis, an associate professor of American history, Jerry Cohen, says he e-mailed Perdichizzi and told her that he admired her

courage after he saw she had put up Tea Party fliers. It is healthier for students who disagree with Tea Party principles to actually engage with their fellow students than to whack at straw men, he says.

“Whether it will prove to be a positive presence on campus or not, I think that overwhelmingly -- and notwithstanding the habitual use of the word diversity four times per sentence coming out of the administration -- there’s very little real commitment to intellectual diversity,” Cohen says.

“To the extent that a Republican Party and Democratic Party can have clubs on a campus, I can see no reason not to have a Tea Party on campus,” says William Kline, an assistant professor of liberal and integrative studies at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Kline, who is currently advising TeaPartyStudents.org founder Daniel Oliver on a master’s degree in liberal and integrative studies with a focus on liberty studies, says Tea Party principles are not necessarily at odds with strains of political and economic thought that are taught widely in academe -- particularly the writings of Friedman, John Stuart Mill, and Adam Smith.

“It is a big-tent movement,” he says. “If there are young students who find they are interested in the ideas of what they think limited government should be, well, sure, there’s all kinds of stuff to read about that in the ivory tower.”

The important thing for ivory-tower Tea Partiers to remember, Kline says, is that Glenn Beck -- the conservative talk show host who has styled himself as the movement’s celebrity-in-chief -- didn’t invent the idea of small government. Tea Party students who profess a belief in ideas such as “liberty” and “small government” should be willing to educate themselves on the origins of those ideas and humble themselves upon the writings of their critics, Kline says.

Then again, that goes for everyone.

— **Steve Kolowich**

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