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Right-leaning students claim political bias at NT

Questions arise over whether political beliefs affect grades

by Katy Pickens

While many students feel political discussion in the classroom remains neutral despite partisan tensions, some right-leaning students believe civil discourse in school is not handled fairly.

Because of perceived social pressures from liberal peers and teachers, some conservative students are fearful to contribute to political discussions.

Sophomore Antigone Zervas, member of the Trevian Republican club, agreed and feels prejudice against conservatives in the classroom exists.

"I feel that there is a stigma against people that have different beliefs from the majority. It doesn't produce a healthy environment for everyone to have a discussion," said Zervas. "In school, or this climate in general, we can't have conversations with opposing viewpoints."

Though the majority of students have no issues with how teachers handle controversial topics, discrepancies exist depending on party affiliations. Left-leaning or moderate students found fewer problems with teachers' conduct surrounding civil discourse, while right-leaning students took issue.

Junior Charlotte Cleary who identifies as independent, said "I think my teachers might sometimes have a slight bias towards the democratic side, but they try to be as equal as possible and respect everyone's opinions," Cleary said.

Similarly, junior Daniel Austen,



Zawrazky and members of Republican Club think many of their political beliefs aren't as accepted at NT | Towers

Club Head for the Young Democrats, agreed that the school environment is fair and that teachers approach civil discourse appropriately.

"I think teachers are very good at trying to hide biases and being fair to all students. I feel like it's a really open and safe space," said Austen.

Conservative students, though, were more critical of how teachers had handled political discussion.

"I think NT is a 'safe space' only because people are afraid to talk about their ideas because of their fear of offending someone," said Frank Zawrazky, President of the Trevian Republicans.

Zawrazky described his political beliefs as an occasional "hindrance" to his academic experience.

"My political beliefs have affected my experience in school to the point where certain teachers will take off points for conservative views when it's a very subjective assignment about politics. It's happened to me on more than one more occasion," Zawrazky said.

English teacher Jay Rosenberg felt discussing controversial issues should be an opportunity to encourage critical thinking and growth in

students. He acknowledged that while creating robust dialogue, a teacher's actions can be misunderstood.

"My tendency is to always present a viewpoint that isn't represented by the students. How they interpret that is out of my hands," explained Rosenberg. "Just because a teacher challenges your position in an essay, it doesn't mean that teacher disagrees with you. It means the teacher is trying to get you to think more critically and comprehensively."

Social studies teacher Kerry Hall agreed that it's crucial to make sure students consider a controversial topic from all sides.

When it comes to teachers remaining unbiased, Hall said "I think it's harder these days, but it's a good goal to have."

Political debate in class can often heighten emotions and evoke different reactions from students, but according to Hall, debate generally remains civil.

"Sometimes I'll see eyes rolling during a discussion, but the student making the comment doesn't see the eyes rolling. Most of the time it's a respectful disagreement. In

the classroom I will surely defend someone's right to have a view that's the minority view," said Hall.

In parallel, the 2017 Seminar Day on race sparked debate about political bias in school and whether students are being exposed to multiple perspectives.

However, The NT Neighbors is a community organization of parents whose main focus is, "building community through common sense, free enterprise, and the Golden Rule," and, "vigorous honest discussion on the merits of issues," according to their mission statement.

NT Neighbors board member Jonathan Towers said that this issue of conservative students feeling a lack of acceptance pertains to the educational goals of New Trier.

"We try to look at it as hypothetical college admission officers. Are students being prepared for robust political dialogue in the future?" Towers said. "All students should feel unafraid and safe in whatever their opinion is."

Former candidate for state senate and NT parent Joan Lasonde agreed that creating engaged discussion is critical for the academic and mental

growth of students.

"I have heard that some students are afraid to speak up because then they're called a racist or other things. If there are kids who are afraid to say what they think, I guess NT is not doing enough to promote this dialogue," said Lasonde.

Peter Tragos, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, believes balanced civil discourse is critical.

"We met with several students at the end of last year. They were self-identified conservative thinkers," explained Tragos. "Some expressed concerns. They felt like they were not as heard, not just by teachers but by students."

Tragos explained that the administration expects controversial issues to be age appropriate, serve an educational purpose, be consistent with the curriculum, and present a balanced view per school board policy.

"Presenting difficult issues is important, but it needs to be done in a way that engages and inspires students rather than shutting them down. Our work has been around creating and developing the skills [teachers need] to do this," said Tragos.

While the administration has facilitated discussion among conservative students, Zawrazky encouraged all students to have conversations with those they disagree with.

"We want people to talk with us because that dispels the stigma around conservative viewpoints. Conservatives don't bite," joked Zawrazky. "There has to be open dialogue and there is not enough of that happening."

Girl Up hosts third annual International Seminar Day

Int'l Womens' Day event featured nine acclaimed speakers

by Amelia Jacobson

In honor of International Womens' Day, Girl Up hosted the third annual International Seminar Day on Mar. 8, hoping to inspire female empowerment.

Each seminar featured a different acclaimed speaker. Teachers were given the opportunity to sign up their class to attend, and some students dropped in during their free periods.

Girl Up co-sponsors and English teachers Melissa Raguseo and Jessica Malamuth provided oversight in planning the day, but the Girl Up members chose and scheduled the speakers.

"[The purpose is] to promote the idea of powerful females and women in positions of power and also women in positions we wouldn't normally think of them being in," said Raguseo.

The idea of International Seminar Day began three years ago when Girl Up president at the time, Celia Buckman, proposed hosting the

seminar.

"The reason to bring it to a high school is so that female students can see these women and hopefully get inspired by them and normalize the fact that women are strong," said Raguseo.

Attendance has grown in size each year, requiring a bigger venue.

Each session had at least 100 students in attendance with some reaching up to 200 participants. The first year, the seminars were held in the Scrounge, while this year's event was in McGee Theatre.

Speakers from a diverse career spectrum including a surgeon, a chemical engineer, a product designer, and a sportswriter, were featured throughout the day.

"We tried to get women who are influential in fields that are male-dominated overall," said Malamuth.

Junior Emma Chipman went to see radio host and writer for ESPN, Sarah Spain. Chipman thought the experience of hearing the speaker was a positive one, even if the message was challenging.

"You have to play the game to change the game. Basically, take the pain and be better than everyone else until they have to accept you," said Chipman.

Another speaker was New

Trier Fit Female creator and teacher Kathryn Kalnes, who used her own experiences to initiate a discussion on students' understanding of their own worth and power.

Kalnes hoped that students would take away that they are powerful and they are worth making decisions that are right for them. "They [women] are worth speaking up for. They are worth living a life in which they are in the driver's seat."

The seminar day found support throughout the school faculty and administration. The administration reviewed the speakers to make sure that the speakers were not one-sided and fit the theme of the day.

However, some students, like Sophomore Charlotte Gonikman, thought that a few of the speakers were too political.

"It should be more of a thing that makes you want to be proud of being a woman and appreciate what it means to be a strong woman, rather than how women are oppressed," said Gonikman.

Gonikman believed that the seminar day reached the organizer's goal of spurring conversation and having topics that resonated with the students.

"I think it's really great that New Trier brought in speakers, because it's



Girl Up members spent the last few months orchestrating the event | Raguseo

interesting to listen to what people have to go through to get to where they are," said Gonikman.

Celebrating women's accomplishments in history is an important aspect of International Womens' Day across the world. This was also part of the seminar led by Special Education Coordinator and speaker Pat Savage-Williams, whose presentation was titled "We Stand On Her Shoulders."

"I tried to make space for participants to reflect upon women—both past, and present, who inspired them and how we have benefitted and continue to benefit from the sacrifices of women," said Savage-Williams.

This was Savage-Williams'

second year speaking at the event.

"Schools have a responsibility to teach students to think critically about issues that impact the world in order to prepare them to be responsible citizens in a global society," said Savage-Williams.

Many of the speakers, including Savage-Williams, reflected on the importance of seeking out female mentors in your life. Sophomore Eva Goren attended the seminar led by Sara Kurensky, a board member of Women's March Chicago.

"I think it's good that New Trier provides seminars. What I took away from it was that normal people can make a big impact in our lives, especially women," said Goren.