

## Super Freak U\*

By Malcolm A. Kline

The college where Nobel Prize-winning free market economist Milton Friedman hung his hat for many a decade—the University of Chicago—has had a well-deserved reputation for going against the academic grain that at least dates back to the tenure of its former president Robert Maynard Hutchins (1899-1977) during the Great Depression. By a happy coincidence, the conservative icon and the hero of liberals overlapped.

In the decade that we're in right now, though, UChi is arguably most famous as the workplace of Steven D. Levitt, co-author of *Freakonomics*. A self-described “rogue economist,” Dr. Levitt posits that legalized abortion leads to lower crime rates.

When conservative commentator William J. Bennett attacked this thesis on the air during his radio show, liberal activists and so-called mainstream media outlets successfully characterized the pugnacious pundit as a proponent of the very theory he denounced—Levitt's. Bennett has been keeping a noticeably lower profile since that 2005 broadcast but Levitt's place of employment has flourished.

“Last year was record setting in development as the University raised \$284 million toward the campaign goal of \$2 billion,” UChi Provost Richard P. Saller reported in his annual report for the 2005-2006 academic calendar year. In that same report, he welcomed 26 new faculty members granted tenure upon their arrival, half of them in the liberal arts and social sciences.

An examination of the papers written by this latter cohort, to use a term that is second nature to them, shows that they are more in the mold of the rogue economist who offered a disturbingly racial defense of abortion than the Nobel prize winner who

defended capitalism. This makes UChi, which has historically prided itself on being atypical, look typical of much of academia these days.

As it happens one of Dr. Levitt's tenured colleagues, Kerwin Kofi Charles, got the jump on him in finding hitherto unknown benefits of abortion. Dr. Charles specializes in what he calls "economics of disadvantage."

"We find that adolescents born in states which legalized abortion before national legalization in 1973, during the years when only those states permitted abortion, were much less likely to use drugs than persons from the same birth cohorts born elsewhere," Dr. Charles wrote in a 2002 paper.

At the time, Dr. Charles was at the University of Michigan. He moonlighted at the National Bureau of Economic Research where he wrote "Abortion Legalization and Adolescent Substance Abuse" with Melvin Stephens Jr. of Carnegie Mellon.

"The improvement in the average early life circumstance of children born after abortion legalization supports the idea that there was positive selection (relatively more use by the disadvantaged) of abortion," they write. Some might call that idea morally bankrupt, at best.

"There is a strong *prima facie* case that legalization had a causal effect on crime reduction since the decline in crime began earlier in the five states that liberalized abortion prior to the *Roe* decision," Drs. Charles and Stephens write. In setting down those thoughts, they beat Dr. Levitt's time by three years.

"The estimated effect of having been born in a repeal state in 1974-1976 is zero for all of the use categories," Drs. Charles and Stephens noted. "This result is consistent

with a causal effect of abortion exposure, since all persons from these birth cohorts were exposed to legal abortions *in utero*.”

“Unfortunately, the results for students born during 1978-1980 are not as strong.” In keeping with modern-day academic practice, the authors have devised some impressive-looking algebraic equations to go with their theory.

“Despite the fact that abortion had long been nationally legalized, we find that use of marijuana and for any illicit drug (including marijuana), was higher for persons who happened to be born in repeal states,” they write. “There should have been no difference in use these late years, provided that abortion and fertility behavior had by this time become roughly the same in all states.”

“Reassuringly, these two coefficients are the only ones that are wrong-signed in a statistically significant way.” Incidentally, the authors lump in cigarettes and alcohol in their substance abuse survey, making sure that their product is both academically relevant and politically correct, not that the two categories don’t overlap most of the time these days.

“Overall, the results strongly support the idea that exposure to legalized abortion because of early legalization, was associated with decreased substance use,” the authors assert. “We generally find reduced substance use for adolescents born in repeal states during the period when only they were exposed to legalized abortion, and no difference in use between persons born in repeal states and those born in other states in the time both shortly and several years after nation legalization.” [sic]

“Moreover, this pattern is most sharply evident for the most serious dimension of substance use, and generally not found for those less serious substances which nearly all

adolescents try at some point,” the authors conclude. “This is precisely what we would predict if abortion exposure affected behavior either through the selection or other effects outlined in the Introduction.”

For sheer salaciousness, it is hard to top UChi tenure-winner Jane Dailey’s magnum opus—“Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*.” “This article explores how religion served as a vessel for one particular language crucial to racial segregation in the South: the language of miscegenation,” Dr. Dailey writes. “It was through sex that racial segregation in the South moved from being a local social practice to a part of the divine plan for the world.”

“It was thus through sex that segregation assumed, for the believing Christian, cosmological significance.” And she delivers the goods.

“The notion that the sin committed in the Garden of Eden was sexual in nature stretches back centuries,” Dr. Dailey explains. “By the Middle Ages, rabbinical readings of the Fall commonly considered the serpent a male, since it lusted after Eve.”

“Proslavery apologists in the nineteenth century favored a variant of this theory in which Eve was tempted, not by a snake, but by a pre-Adamite black man (even, in an 1843 version, a ‘Negro gardener’). Needless to say, more than an apple was on offer.”

Gee, could you be more explicit? Dr. Dailey previously taught at Johns Hopkins.

This is what happens when academics try to understand evangelicals through the prism of Ivory Tower values. Not that Catholics fare much better.

UChi historian David Nirenberg, who also migrated from Johns Hopkins, dissected Pope Benedict XVI's much-publicized University of Regensburg speech in an article that appeared in the October 9, 2006 issue of *The New Republic*.

Dr. Nirenberg took issue with the pontiff's quoting a Byzantine emperor on the more violent adherents of Islam. It must be said that Dr. Nirenberg did not react as strongly to the speech as more radical Muslims around the globe did when they burned the Pope in effigy.

"Fortunately, he did not quote the preceding paragraphs of Manuel's treatise, which present Muhammad's teachings as plagiarisms and perversions of Jewish law," Dr. Nirenberg wrote. "But the medieval emperor's claim that Islam is not a rational religion—'To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm'—lies at the heart of the Pope's lecture, and of his vision of the world."

"That vision should be a disturbing one, not only for Muslims but for adherents of other religions as well."

Perhaps not too surprisingly, race relations come in for close examination on this racially conscious campus. "Consider, for example, that most African Americans (71%) believe that they have less opportunity to live a middle class life than European Americans," UChi prof Robert Gooding Williams writes. "Still, close to a third do not believe this!"

"Moreover, some blacks believe that even if racial discrimination still exists, it has ceased to be a serious impediment to racial mobility (John McWhorter is a case in

point).” As you might gather from the last exclamation point, Dr. Gooding-Williams, who previously taught at Northwestern, is not in the McWhorter camp.

To be sure, there are works by newly tenured arrivals at UChi that are noteworthy. For example:

- Political scientist Steven Wilkinson showed how corruption in India’s government has reached epidemic proportions in his essay “Cleansing political institutions”; and
- Economist Samuel Kortum showed the invaluable contribution of venture capital to economic growth.

Wilkinson and Kortum are but two out of 13 new hires, which would give you roughly the proportion of practical research to trendy topics coming out of higher education.

More representative of scholars public and private who have university office hours is, arguably, political scientist William Howell. “Contrary to the prevailing view that federal programs are immortal, we show that program death is commonplace and seek to explain why,” UChi political scientist William Howell and associates claimed.

Yet they found 197 of such allegedly defunct enterprises, or one out of 10 federal programs, by their own estimation. Dr. Howell came to UChi from Harvard.

Perhaps most startling, given the university’s reputation for cutting-edge economic research, is the apparently high regard it has for the work, albeit collaborative, of Christian Leuz, another tenure award winner. In a paper on why firms “go dark” or pull their registrations with the U. S. Securities and Exchange Commission, he and his

colleagues dismiss out of hand the effect that recent federal regulations might have on the American stock market, which half of the country is invested in. “If that were indeed the key driving force, then one would expect firms with lower stock price—a proxy for low value—to benefit more from deregistering given that the cost savings are proportionately higher for such firms,” Leuz and company write.

In the past half decade, hundreds of firms have “gone dark,” they estimate, since Congress passed the Sarbanes-Oxley stock reporting requirements. “Using information on thousands of security deregistrations during the 1998-2003 period, we identify close to 400 firms that have deregistered all their securities so as to suspend reporting to the SEC,” they admit.

What the authors never mention is that during that same time period, according to the Committee on Capital Markets Regulation, “as measured by value of IPOs [initial public offerings], the U. S. share declined from 50 percent in 2000 to 5 percent in 2005.”

As we’ve already seen, when it comes to academic appointments and tenure, colleges and universities practice recycling with a vengeance. Of course, that leaves students on the receiving end of a recycled product as well.

\*with apologies to Rick James.

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