Does attending college make a person more liberal? This is a common question among conservative Americans and many believe that the answer is yes. Amy Binder and Kate Wood’s “Becoming Right: How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives” attempts to tackle this question and investigates how college experiences shape political beliefs, specifically among conservative college students. Binder and Wood surveyed conservative students at two schools in an attempt to determine who typical conservative students are, what their conservative beliefs are, and the impact of campus culture on their identities and political expressions.

The authors compare and contrast typical college experiences between conservative students from two schools: “Eastern Elite”: a highly competitive, private, prestigious, and small school on the East Coast and “Western Flagship”: a large, public school, located in one of the states on the West Coast. Binder and Wood chose these campuses because they have similar academically motivated student bodies, but very different environments and campus life. They found the same types of students tend to be attracted to conservative politics on campuses, “Demographically speaking, whites and males are overrepresented among conservative collegians, both nationally and among our interviewees” (Binder and Wood, 73). Along with a majority of the conservative students being white males, most students came from affluent or middle class backgrounds and practiced some form of Christianity. Although the conservative students at both schools were similar demographically, the authors concluded the two campus environments encouraged very different forms of political expression.
The authors interviewed conservative students at both schools from all across the conservative spectrum. They found students at both campuses tended to have similar beliefs, but differed in the way they practiced their conservative activism. “These patterns suggest that while conservative students may have a steady presence at universities across the country, and that they are also to a large extent ideologically united under a conservative banner across these campuses, students’ political styles, their ways of expressing their conservative ideas, are systematically varied” (Binder and Wood, 5). The authors found that certain behavior may be considered conservatively appropriate at one school may not be at the other. For example at the Eastern Elite school the conservative students were more reserved in their political movements and turned to more intellectual forms of expression. Binder and Wood attributed this to the small size of the campus and the college encouraging all students to feel like a person and not a number. Meanwhile, the students at the Western Flagship took more provocative and confrontational approaches to their political campaigns. The authors suggest students at the Western Flagship take these kinds of actions because of the school’s lack of respect for conservatives, large size, and impersonal feeling. The authors conclude because of the different political environments at both schools,

Eastern Elite students become versed in a more refined style of conservatism. The Western Public system, meanwhile, presents enticing opportunities to students - at least those who have the fortitude to pull it off - to enter a more rough-and-tumble world of conservative politics, to imagine themselves as local pundits or politicians in their future careers, and to think of liberals as adversaries, not future colleagues - in short, to engage in a provocative style (Binder and Wood, 324).

Much has been written about college campuses becoming more and more liberal, however conservatism on college campuses is usually an overlooked subject. Binder and Wood provide excellent insight into the experiences of a conservative college student. They explain that
all conservative students do not hold the same “right sided” beliefs, and are diverse in ideology as well as population. The authors do an excellent job presenting their data and findings in numerous tables and statistics throughout the book. However the constant flood of numbers and data tends to get overwhelming at times. So, keep in mind before reading, this book is more of textbook and political discussion rather than a leisurely read.

Overall this book provides good insight into the life of conservative students on college campuses, and I believe will have a strong impact on the field of American Studies. Since the style in which conservatives display activism on college campuses is not discussed often among scholars, this book provides a new and fresh way to look at politics among college students. With the growing political nature of America it will be interesting to see if more people begin to look at conservative activism at colleges and to see the effects it may have on the nation.