

# Are you forcing your political views on your students?

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It was the 10th or 11th week of semester, a time when I'd gotten to know my students – or at least their names and faces – fairly well. I knew what most of them thought about the topics we'd covered, I knew the sounds of their voices. I knew some of their opinions on climate change, and some of their thinking on genetically modified food.

And so it was pretty odd to see someone new in class that day.

We were covering diversity in science. Looking at why far too many of our professors look, to put it bluntly, like older versions of us. White. Male. Heterosexual. Dashing.

And here was a new face. Was he...angry? Was he threatening? Did his shirt actually say "White Fight"? What does that mean? Was he tweeting what I was saying?

Readers of this website will be well aware that the modern higher education sector is a fraught and contested space.

Growing proportions of the academic workforce are employed in ever more precarious fashion; PhD graduates are produced at volumes scarcely related to [academic jobs](#); elements of the higher education and research world are often perceived to be unwelcoming to anyone not [white or male](#). Among our students, we can see a growing [trend](#) of academic entitlement, a focus on [grades](#) as opposed to learning, and growing political demands over the shape of the curriculum and how the university should [relate to them](#).

Outside the university, we can see a range of forces castigating us for failing to pump out [workforce-ready employees](#), for living with our heads in the clouds, and for trying to indoctrinate our students into our political ideologies.

The sage among you may no doubt stroke your chin and mutter "it was ever thus". But many others might see a university world under growing strain.

Accusations of liberal bias among faculty are nothing new. Since before *God and Man at Yale* – William F. Buckley's 1951 attack on his teachers at Yale – academics have been accused of seeking to indoctrinate students into liberal views. Yet in recent years, ideological differences between faculty and students seem to have taken on a new character. Examples such as the one above, with potentially angry students live-tweeting perceived bias, may be uncommon, but they are not unheard of.

The tone of campus conversations has changed. Partisan divisions we see elsewhere in society seem to have made their way into the classroom. And here's the thing: that strain is compounded by how these trends interact.

In research we've [just published](#), we've found that students' perceptions of ideological bias in the classroom – their thinking that instructors are politically motivated – increase with their academic entitlement and grade orientation. Put simply, as students expect more and more that they should receive high grades regardless of performance, as students consider more and more that grades rather than learning are the purpose of being at university, then they're more and more likely to attribute instructors' behaviour to bias.

Sadly, students who think this way are also more likely to react to this perception. They're more likely to disengage from the classroom experience, or to be disingenuous and parrot the instructors' beliefs back to them. Neither of these behaviours is, of course, conducive to either quality classroom discussion or actual learning.

The worrying trends facing the modern university sector are not likely to go away soon. We're not likely to be able to

magically address cultural issues that have fostered the current atmosphere of academic entitlement, or instantly convert our student cohort into the purely learning-oriented thinkers we might hope to have.

Indeed, these trends are worsened by the system we have helped to create.

Faculty are not rewarded or trained to be quality teachers, and teaching is too often shuffled off to precariously employed (and inadequately trained) teaching assistants faced with large classes. Increasingly diverse student populations may have difficulty identifying with a faculty population that does not look or sound like them. Tenure and promotion requirements encourage faculty to conduct work that is perhaps disconnected from the “real” world, lending credibility to concerns that we live with our heads in the clouds.

Psychological research tells us that if we don’t like another individual or feel that they are different from us, we are more likely to attribute behaviour we view as strange to who they are rather than to situational factors. “My instructor has political biases”, for instance, rather than “my instructor is trying to challenge me because we are in a classroom”. Given all the factors that influence student disengagement, it is no wonder that the classroom that exists between these tensions is full of misperceptions.

But as day-to-day educators, there are things we can do about it. We can work to enculturate our students into the nature and purpose of higher education. Students need to understand that the college classroom should not be a passive experience and that education is a joint venture between the student and the instructor.

We have to be willing, however, to treat this participation with a fair amount of our own patience and understanding, allowing students to have ownership of their own views, while still teaching students to differentiate between fact and opinion. We must challenge students, playing devil’s advocate when necessary, but pious attitudes and needless admonishment on our part will lead to disengagement on theirs. As in most interactions, clear and supportive communication is the foundation of a positive classroom experience.

Politics may currently be an unwelcome and potentially disruptive visitor to the classroom, but it doesn’t need to be that way. If we seek to understand the motivations, values and aspirations of our students – even those with potentially disruptive intent like the late arrival described at the start of this piece – we might be able to soften this problem together.

That’s what education is.

**Will Grant is graduate studies convener in the Australian National Centre for the Public Awareness of Science, at the [Australian National University](#). Darren Linvill is assistant professor in the department of communication at [Clemson University](#).**