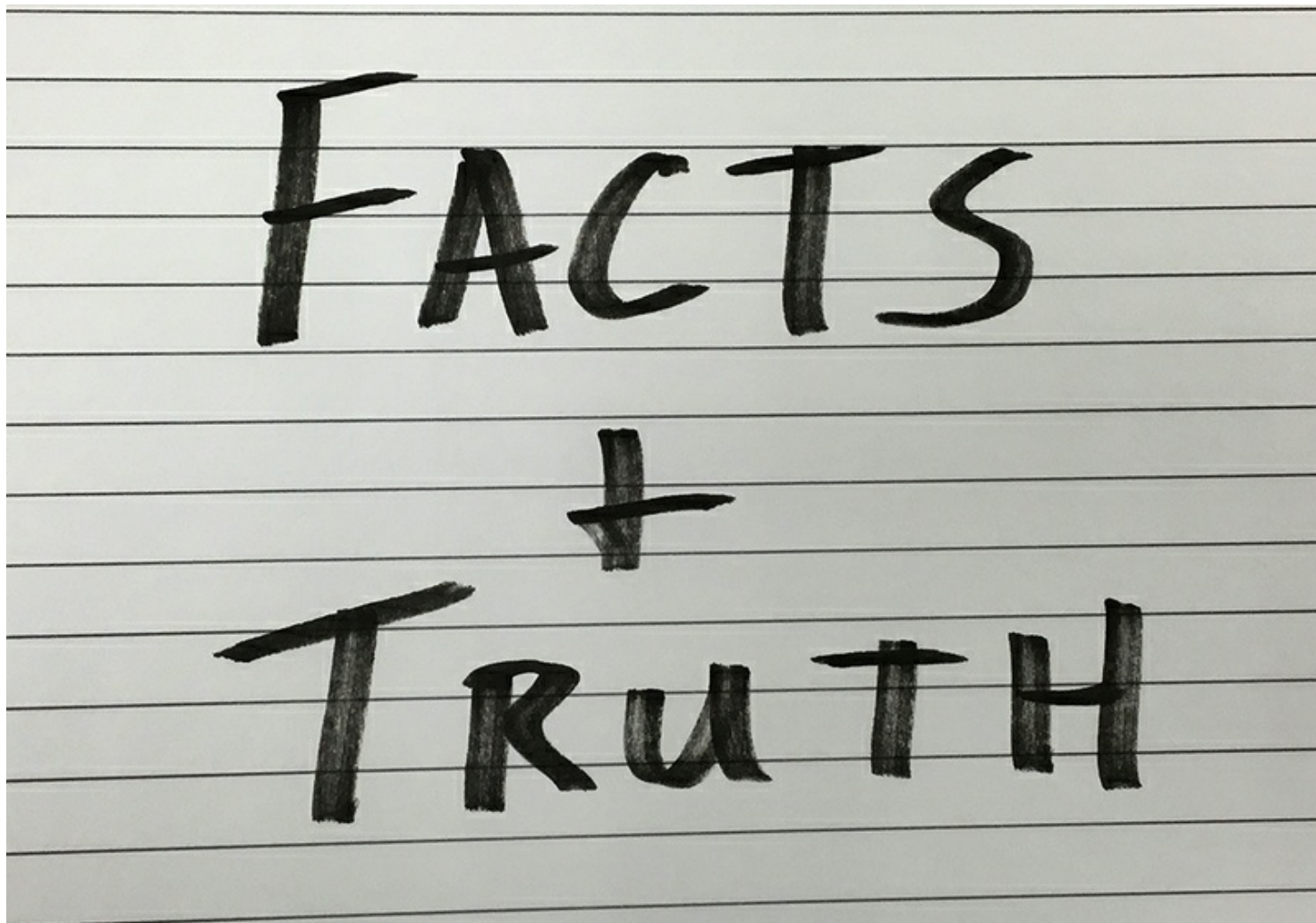


Competing Facts Are a Fact of Life

chroniclevitae.com/news/1727-competing-facts-are-a-fact-of-life



March 8, 2017

With Support From

Image by David Mulder, [creative commons](#)



"Alternative facts" have gotten quite a bad rap lately, which — while understandable — is a shame. Because virtually any argument worthy of the name involves competing sets of facts.

That's why it's an *argument*, not a hug-fest. And to pretend otherwise is actually counterproductive, especially if we want our students to be able to engage in constructive arguments.

Take trial lawyers, for example. To exonerate their clients, defense attorneys often present alternative theories, based on alternative facts, most of which are actually facts. Perhaps the accused can prove he was never at the crime scene, even though his blood was found on the victim. In its deliberations, the jury must weigh these seemingly disparate facts — although what they may really be judging is which lawyer made the better argument. Much the same is true of political debates.

My purpose here is not to weigh in on any particular point of view but merely to point out: (1) In a debate, one camp rarely has all the facts on its side, or even in its possession; and (2) although we often use the words "fact" and

"truth" synonymously, they are not the same thing.

As faculty members, we must be careful lest our students get the false impression that they can go into an argument as the only ones who have "the facts." Such intellectual arrogance leaves them ill-prepared for the rigors of actual debate and sets them up for failure. Instead, no matter how heated the rhetoric becomes, we must persist in the grand liberal-arts tradition of teaching students how to evaluate the validity of various points of view, how to gather data through research, how to analyze that data, and how to counter fact-based arguments with facts and rhetorical strategies of their own.

Our students need to understand: There are myriad ways in which information can be both factual and dead wrong (remember, for example, the parable of the blind men and the elephant). In most serious debates, both sides have actual facts to bolster their arguments. But how those facts are interpreted, how accurate they are, whether they're relevant to the issue at hand, whether they're actually significant, and whether they represent the whole truth — those are all separate questions.

Answering such questions is what scientists, social scientists, and (yes, even) humanists do every day. It's the reason people do research, and the reason peer-reviewed journals exist — so scholars can learn from each other, add to their knowledge, expose faulty hypotheses (their own and others), all while moving toward a better and deeper understanding of the issues under discussion. This is known as progress.

For both us and our students, two things can happen if we honestly examine the other side's arguments rather than simply dismissing them as false because they don't comport with our beliefs. One is that we might end up modifying our views, recognizing that — even if we still disagree — some of what our opponent is saying is actually valid.

The other benefit of understanding our opponents' arguments is that we can then decide how best to counter them.

For example, when I was a department chair, I had to fight every year for my unit's share of scarce resources, including money for new full-time faculty positions. That often meant arguing that my department needed an additional English professor more than the science department needed another biologist. I made my arguments based on data — how many sections we offered, how many were staffed by part-timers, and how many were cancelled because we couldn't find an instructor. Meanwhile, the science chair was making her case in exactly the same way. Neither of us was lying or distorting the data. We both had legitimate needs, along with verifiable facts to support our positions. But if there was only one faculty line for the two of us, the dean had to weigh our competing sets of facts, and make a decision in the best interests of the institution.

More to the point, rhetorically speaking, my success as chair depended in large part on my ability to procure resources for my department. That meant making persuasive, fact-based arguments while recognizing that those with different agendas were also making arguments using other sets of facts.

So, yes, there really is such a thing as alternative facts. Sometimes, as has been noted, they're not really facts but rather lies, distortions, deceptions, or obfuscations. But many times they actually *are* facts, and refusing to acknowledge that does us no good if we want to win the argument, much less arrive at the truth, whether we are in the classroom or in life.