

*Full Length Research Paper*

# A comparison of faculty members' and students' definitions of political bias in the classroom

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**The author conducted an online survey of students and faculty members at a medium-sized, Midwestern, public university to determine whether or not members of both groups would label a professor or instructor as politically biased if he or she engaged in specific behaviors. Overall, the results indicated that students and faculty members define bias similarly, though there are some noteworthy differences.**

**Key words:** Academic bias, college students, faculty members, perceptions.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss whether or not both students and faculty members would label a professor or instructor as politically biased if he or she engaged in specific behaviors in the classroom. While there are a number of recently published books and reports about the existence of a liberal bias in academia (ACTA, 2005; ACTA, 2006; Berube, 2006; Black, 2004; Horowitz, 2006; Horowitz, 2008; Shapiro, 2004; Smith et al., 2008), it is difficult to put forth a definition of academic bias beyond the general idea that faculty members allow their (typically liberal) political beliefs to impact how they lecture, moderate class discussions, and/or grade student's assignments. Authors generally define bias by providing examples, and they then indicate the number of times they or their research participants have witnessed each of these examples.

None of these authors discuss or determine how students and/or faculty members define bias, however, the authors create and apply their own definitions. In fact, I could only locate two sources that provide any indication of how at least some students may define political bias in the classroom. Shapiro (2004) describes the incidents he encountered while earning his undergraduate degree that he classifies as liberal academic bias and Dixon and McCabe (2006) derived survey questions to measure "balanced teaching" from students' postings about their experiences with bias on the website [www.noindoctrination.org](http://www.noindoctrination.org). While these sources address students' perceptions of bias, Shapiro provided only his perspective and Dixon and McCabe did not construct a

more general measure of bias and relied on the small percentage of students who posted complaints. Furthermore, neither source directly addresses how students define political bias, and I was also unable to find any study that addressed the views of faculty members. A study that directly and thoroughly addresses how students and faculty members define bias is needed because, if students and faculty have applied different definitions, any discussions of or debates about academic bias will be plagued by miscommunication and any arguments between students and faculty members (including those that may lead to formal grievances) are unlikely to be resolved to the satisfaction of all involved parties.

One might expect students and faculty members to define academic bias differently because of students' documented resistance to the material presented in their courses, particularly, those in which instructors and professors challenge students' beliefs and/or discuss sex and gender and/or race and ethnicity (Andersen and Miller, 1997; Chaisson, 2004; Hartung, 1990; Kelly-Woessner and Woessner, 2006; Moore, 1997; Neitz, 1985; Turkel, 1986). Some researchers argue this resistance results in part from students having an inaccurate or incomplete understanding of feminism (Hartung, 1990; Moore, 1997; Neitz, 1985; Turkel, 1986) or race and ethnicity (Chaisson, 2004). If students resist and/or do not fully understand the material in their classes, they may interpret some lectures as biased, while faculty members may view this same material as well-supported and central to the discipline. This study provides preliminary

evidence regarding the accuracy of this expectation that faculty member and students will not classify the same behaviors as bias.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for this project came from two on-line surveys conducted during the spring 2007 semester at a medium-sized, Midwestern, public university. I sent e-mails soliciting participation to five thousand randomly selected students and all faculty members. Three days later, every person who had not participated received a reminder e-mail. When data collection finished seven days after the initial e-mail, 232 students (4.7% of the 4,890 with valid e-mail accounts) and 171 faculty members (20.2% of 847) had responded and completed the set of questions addressed in this paper (described below). The respondents who had not completed this set of questions were excluded from the sample and analyses.

While these response rates were low, the samples were fairly representative of their respective populations (Table 1). Although, almost half of the faculty participants (43.9%) identified as liberal, this percentage is close to those provided in other research, which predominantly found that 40 - 60% of college faculty identified as liberal or democratic (Klein et al., 2004/2005; Klein and Western, 2004/2005; Rothman et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2008; Zipp and Fenwick, 2006). In fact, the only substantively and statistically significant differences (which I determined using one-sample z-tests of proportions) were, for the student sample, fewer freshman ( $z = -3.57, p < 0.001$ ), more transfer students ( $z = 14.69, p < 0.001$ ) and fewer men ( $z = -3.90, p < 0.001$ ) in the sample than in the population and for the faculty, more members from the College of Arts and Sciences in the sample than in the population ( $z = 4.59, p < 0.001$ ). While these differences existed, they did not appear to reduce the representativeness of the sample because there were so few of them. Furthermore, there were only a few significant differences between how the student respondents answered the questions about their definitions of bias (described below) and their sex, transfer student status, or class rank and there were no significant differences in how faculty members from different academic colleges answered the questions about their definitions of bias.

As part of the survey, both students and faculty members were asked to indicate whether or not they would classify 26 different behaviors as examples of political bias. These questions appear in Table 2 and had the same response options ("yes, bias," "no, not bias," and "unsure"). The majority of these questions were derived from at least one of three sources. The first was Dixon and McCabe's (2006), which provided two measures of "balance teaching": the extent to which professors (1) present multiple perspectives and (2) invite criticism. The second source was a list of categories provided to students posting accusations of bias on the website [www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org](http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org); students were instructed to use these categories to classify the bias they reported in their posts. This list included: (1) assigning one-sided course readings, (2) discussing controversial issues that were not related to the course, (3) ridiculing certain beliefs, (4) mocking political or religious figures, (5) conducting political activities in class, (6) forcing students to express a particular point of view in assignments and (7) grading students based on their beliefs. The third source was a set of questions included in a 2005 survey conducted by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni to determine how often different behaviors occur in college classrooms. These questions were asked for students to indicate how many of their professors and instructors: (1) discuss their personal beliefs; (2) make comments about political candidates, conservatives, liberals, and/or political issues that were not related to the course; (3) assign readings or give lectures that are one-sided; (4) are intolerant of or hostile to certain points of view and (5) provide better grades to students who agree with their point of view.

The survey also included a question about professors contradicting students' beliefs since this is one reason students object to the content of courses in sociology and related fields (Chaisson, 2004; Hartung, 1990; Kelly-Woessner and Woessner, 2006). In addition, I included questions that addressed: (1) failing to provide evidence to support one's arguments, (2) discussing social institutions and (3) discussing political issues that are relevant to the course because each of these behaviors could be labeled as bias by students, faculty members or members of both groups.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents some of the results from two different sets of Chi-squared tests. The first set compares the percentage of students who selected "yes, bias" or "no, not bias" to the percentage of faculty members who selected "yes, bias" or "no, not bias." The respondents who selected "unsure" were excluded from this set of analyses so, only the respondents with an opinion on the topic were compared. Only the p-values of the Chi-squared tests and the percentages of students and faculty members who selected "yes, bias" to each question are provided in Table 2. The results of this set of analyses suggest that students and faculty members perceive academic bias very similarly. With the exception of two questions (questions 1 and 24), a majority of both groups either did or did not classify each behavior as bias. Furthermore, the observed differences for questions 1 and 24 were not statistically significant. Due to the number of analyses conducted, significance was determined using Bonferroni's correction. The adjusted alpha level, calculated by dividing 0.05 by the number of comparisons (52) was 0.00096.

Given these findings, it would seem unlikely that miscommunication would occur when students and faculty members discuss academic bias. Furthermore, it would appear that faculty members would support students who come forth with claims about bias and that such complaints should be rare because both faculty and students view the same behaviors as bias, though this assumes that faculty members would view such behaviors as problematic and not engage in them. In short, these findings indicate that the rhetoric in some of the sources cited in the introduction may be exaggerated. After all, it seems unlikely that there would be rampant bias if both the "victim" and the "perpetrator" have similar views of what constitutes bias in the classroom. Given this apparent inconsistency, additional research is needed.

Despite the similarities, there were two noteworthy differences between the responses of students and faculty members. First, the results of the Chi-square tests for the questions other than 1 and 24 indicated that faculty members may take a more "extreme" position than students in regards to particular behaviors (Table 2). A significantly larger percentage of faculty members than students selected "yes" for six questions (questions 15, 17, 19, 21, 25 and 26), while a significantly smaller percentage of faculty members than students selected "yes, bias" for four other questions (questions 2, 4, 5 and 22).

**Table 1.** Percentages of selected demographic traits in the sample and population for students and faculty.

	<b>Students</b>		<b>Faculty members</b>	
	<b>% of sample</b>	<b>% of population</b>	<b>% of sample</b>	<b>% of population</b>
<b>Class rank</b>				
Freshman	15.9	26.2	---	---
Sophomore	16.8	18.3	---	---
Junior	30.6	26.1	---	---
Senior	33.2	29.3	---	---
<b>Academic rank</b>				
Instructor	---	---	12.9	22.0
Assistant	---	---	28.1	27.2
Associate	---	---	31.0	24.6
Professor	---	---	22.8	26.2
<b>College</b>				
Arts and Sciences	---	---	46.2	36.8
Business and Technology	---	---	14.6	18.2
Education and Human Services	---	---	25.7	29.4
Fine Arts and Communication	---	---	9.4	14.5
Libraries	---	---	1.8	1.5
International student/faculty member	1.3	2.4	4.1	6.3
Transfer student	44.4	12.5	---	---
Greek-affiliated student	6.9	9.0	---	---
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	39.2	52.0	52.0	59.3
Female	57.8	48.0	42.1	40.7
<b>Race</b>				
White or Caucasian	84.5	82.9	83.6	84.1
Black, African, or African American	3.9	6.9	1.2	3.0
Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander	2.1	1.4	1.8	3.8
Native American or Alaskan Native	0.4	0.2	1.2	1.1
Multiracial	0.4	---	1.8	---
Hispanic/Latino	3.4	3.6	0.6	1.6
<b>Political ideology</b>				
Very liberal	8.6	---	12.3	---
Liberal	17.2	---	31.6	---
Moderate or "Middle of the road"	31.0	---	27.5	---
Conservative	19.4	---	12.9	---
Very conservative	3.0	---	4.1	---
Others	6.5	---	5.8	---

Percentages were calculated using all respondents, including those who did not respond or selected "Do not know/Unsure"; population data were based on the Fall, 2006 enrollment since spring semester data were not available.

The majority of both groups classified the first set of behaviors as bias and the second set as not bias. While these differences indicate that disagreement is possible, it is important to remember that the majority of both groups either did or did not classify a given behavior as

bias. Therefore, any disagreement between students and faculty members regarding whether or not a particular behavior is bias would involve at most a small segment of students and/or faculty members.

While further research is needed to determine why

**Table 2.** Percentage of students and faculty members who selected “yes, bias” and “unsure”.

Question	“Yes, Bias”			“Unsure”		
	Students	Faculty	p-value	Students	Faculty	p-value
1. The professor discusses political or social issues that are not related to the class.	45.2	60.8	0.006	10.0	26.9	<0.001
2. The professor discusses political or social issues that are related to the class.	18.3	5.1	<0.001	5.6	8.8	.216
3. The professor discusses his or her personal political or social views in class.	62.0	59.8	0.704	10.9	27.8	<0.001
4. The professor discusses controversial topics in class.	17.1	3.4	<0.001	8.7	13.0	0.160
5. The professor makes an argument that contradicts your beliefs.	25.2	5.4	<0.001	10.8	12.0	0.720
6. The professor does not provide evidence to support his/her position on a political or social issue.	64.2	80.2	0.003	16.5	30.1	0.001
7. The professor discusses only one side of a political or social issue.	79.9	86.7	0.092	4.8	11.8	0.010
8. The professor does not discuss all sides of a political or social issue.	71.1	61.2	0.058	5.6	24.6	<0.001
9. The professor makes positive statements about the government and/or its policies.	31.2	28.0	0.529	11.6	31.0	<0.001
10. The professor makes negative statements about the government and/or its policies.	42.8	31.0	0.038	12.6	32.2	<0.001
11. The professor makes positive statements about social institutions, like marriage, education or religion.	35.6	32.2	0.532	12.9	28.8	<0.001
12. The professor makes negative statements about social institutions, like marriage, education or religion.	40.6	35.2	0.339	14.7	28.7	0.001
13. The professor makes positive statements about a particular political party or candidate.	51.2	55.6	0.426	6.9	25.7	<0.001
14. The professor makes negative statements about a particular political party or candidate.	53.0	57.0	0.463	5.6	24.3	<0.001
15. The professor encourages students to support a particular political party or candidate.	75.2	92.1	<0.001	6.0	3.5	0.249
16. The professor encourages students to participate in protests and/or acts of disobedience.	56.1	66.2	0.064	13.9	20.5	0.082
17. The professor ignores students who raise alternative points of view about a political or social issue.	76.0	92.1	<0.001	4.7	11.7	0.010
18. The professor criticizes students who raise alternative points of view about a political or social issue.	73.5	84.8	0.010	6.9	11.7	0.098
19. The professor ignores students who question or criticize his/her position on a political or social issue.	76.3	92.5	<0.001	5.2	13.1	0.005
20. The professor criticizes students who question or criticize his/her position on a political or social issue.	72.5	85.5	0.003	5.6	11.6	0.032
21. The professor does not allow certain topics (which are relevant to the course) to be discussed.	70.5	87.3	<0.001	10.0	13.4	0.294
22. The professor assigns readings (including the textbook) that discuss political topics or social issues.	14.2	1.3	<0.001	6.0	8.2	0.401
23. The professor assigns readings (including the textbook) that only address one side of a political or social issue.	66.3	64.3	0.706	10.3	24.6	<0.001
24. The professor assigns readings (including the textbook) that do not address all sides of a political or social issue.	56.5	42.7	0.016	13.4	24.8	0.004
25. The professor gives lower grades (for an assignment or for the course) to students who support a political or social position he/she does not support.	78.8	95.7	<0.001	6.5	4.7	0.445
26. The professor gives lower grades (for an assignment or for the course) to students who criticize a political or social position he/she supports.	78.5	94.9	<0.001	7.4	4.8	0.311

Percentages for “yes, bias” were calculated after respondents who selected “unsure” were removed. Significant results are bolded; d.f = 1 for all tests; Alpha = 0.00096 (0.05/52 tests).

these differences exist, I can provide a possible explanation, namely, the difference in perspective that comes from having a certain status. The

behaviors that faculty members were more likely than students to classify as bias involved encouraging students to support a political candidate,

ignoring students who raise alternative views, not allowing relevant topics to be discussed and grading students based on the positions they do

or do not support. Faculty may be more likely than students to view these behaviors as bias because of training they have undergone and their knowledge of the code of conduct for university employees. For instance, directly endorsing a candidate may violate university guidelines, and some faculty members may classify this behavior as bias for this reason. Similarly, faculty members may be less likely than students to classify discussing controversial issues, contradicting students' beliefs and assigning readings that discuss social issues as bias because some of them believe students need to be exposed to new ideas and challenged in order to understand the course material.

The second difference is provided by the second set of analyses (Table 2). For this set of Chi-squared tests, I combined the respondents who selected "yes, bias" or "no, not bias" into a single category so I could directly compare the percentage of students who did or did not select "unsure" to the percentage of faculty members who did or did not select "unsure." Only the p-values and the percentages of students and faculty members who selected "unsure" are provided in Table 2. For eleven questions (questions 1, 3, 6, 8-14 and 23), a significantly larger percentage of faculty members than students selected "unsure". Faculty members appear to be more hesitant than students to definitively classify these behaviors.

This hesitancy could lead to arguments between students and faculty, particularly when students are likely to define the situation as bias. These results may also be tied to status. The questions on which faculty members and students differ addressed behaviors like discussing personal views or unrelated issues, not providing evidence for or not discussing all sides of an argument, assigning readings that address only one side of an argument and making comments about the government, social institutions and political parties. Faculty members may be more likely to select "unsure" for these questions because they can envision scenarios in which the behavior may and may not be bias. For instance, an instructor may assign a "one-sided" textbook because it is inexpensive, easy to read, and/or the only book that addresses the topic, though the instructor could also select this text because it supports his/her perspective on the topic.

I have briefly mentioned one possible explanation for these findings. Another possible explanation is political ideology. There were only a few significant differences between how liberal, moderate and conservative respondents who answered the questions about their definitions of bias, however, as a result, the definitions of bias are essentially unrelated to ideology. The same can be said for class rank, college and sex because, as mentioned in the sample section, there were no or few significant relationships between these variables and the bias questions. Additional analyses are available upon request.

This study provides insight into how students and faculty members define political bias in the classroom. While the findings reported above are preliminary, they suggest

that students and faculty members appear to have and apply a similar definition of academic bias, which further suggests that members of both groups could discuss this issue without the discussion inevitably being plagued by miscommunication. Members of both groups may still argue with one another, however, because they are more or less likely to view certain behaviors as bias. In order to boost the generalizability of the findings presented above, this study should be replicated at a wide range of institutions after the questions are revised so they are clearer, have a more nuanced set of response options and address a more complete range of behaviors. If the patterns found here are replicated, additional research should be conducted to determine why some faculty members' and students' views vary on certain behaviors and not others, in order to fully ascertain the implications of this data.

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