

# PERSPECTIVES

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## The classroom: a forum for all opinions

Two recent letters to the editor ("Keep your opinions to yourself," ODE, April 2 and "Stand up for conservative views," ODE, April 4) have raised the issue of professors expressing their own biases in the classroom. The letters were both a bit angry, and both mentioned that conservative opinions seem to get the harsh end of the stick at the University. The Emerald editorial board was immediately animated as it discussed this topic, so we decided to write an open letter to professors and a counterpart to students. Our hope is that with some rational thought, we can disarm the reflexive emotional reaction that we all feel when our views are threatened.



Giovanni Salimena Emerald

**D**ear professors,  
 We write this letter with good intentions. We genuinely only want to offer constructive criticism. But every student we know has a war story or two about terribly biased professors or teachers who feel the need to inject unsubstantiated opinions about politics or social issues into their lectures.

The war story goes something like this: In the midst of a lecture, the professor uses a weak segue to make a bitingly sarcastic comment about a controversial or debated topic. The biased remark is presented as the end-all be-all. No opportunity is made to present anyone else's opinion on the matter, and any student who disagrees is cut down with a quick verbal jab, intended not only to silence the offender, but to keep quiet any other dissenters. Students who have information to the contrary are left with no recourse but to stew in their own juices. The student's face turns red, and he or she is unable to continue taking notes effectively. The whole class period is ruined by anger. The best that can be done is for the student to finish the term, write a scathing review and sign it.

We are very upset when we hear these stories. You need to understand that you do not have the only answers in the world, and you are not being paid to add colorful commentary about every topic under the sun. Students pay tuition to learn about a subject. Yes, some subjects will involve hot-button issues and some opinions have better research to back them up and seem more valid than others. But there is a right way and a wrong way to present opinions.

Ideally, a class reading list will involve a range of opinions on an issue. Ideally, that range is balanced with opinions from all sides, whether they are the most valid or not. And then a good professor should certainly present his or her analysis of the subject. Political and social comments, when germane, can be introduced. A professor's opinion can even be presented, as long as opposing views are given air time and students are encouraged to debate the point. And professors should always suggest that students come to office hours and discuss the contested idea at length.

To be fair, most of our experiences have fallen somewhere in the middle. Most professors try to provide support for their opinions (they are, after all, learned professionals who have studied their subject at length), most professors keep their opinionated comments on-topic and most are open to debate. This is great.

We just want to be sure you understand that it is critically important for students to feel that they're represented in the discussion. Even if there is much expert evidence and opinion to the contrary (say they believe the world is flat), the view should be presented with as much support as possible, and if it's considered "wrong," why it's wrong should be discussed, and students shouldn't be ostracized for remaining steadfast in that opinion.

Just remember, if there are views out there that you want to see discredited (for instance, conservatism), you will only be effective if you fight the war with ideas. Cheap late-night-comedian potshots won't win you any adherents and only serve to make the classroom a hostile environment. If your opinion is so correct, you ought to be able to back it up and make a convincing argument for it. Otherwise, maybe you don't have all the answers.

**D**ear students (especially new students),  
 The recent letters to the editor and the above comments directed at professors may make the University seem unfriendly. Be assured, this is really not the case most of the time. There are a few rarities — professors who are known for their unflinching and hostile criticism of certain opinions — but the vast majority of teachers are even-handed or open to debate.

But you shouldn't enroll in college if you think you will be getting an opinion-less, value-free tutoring of just the facts, sir. If you want that, go read a textbook. Actually, we take that back. Even textbooks frame issues with a certain bias and present the facts in a prejudicial manner. Don't fool yourself; the world is full of people who disagree with you, and you're going to have to deal with it. In college, the whole point is to be exposed to a variety of opinions, to have your beliefs challenged, and to learn the process of critical analysis of those beliefs along the way. Stay at home if you want to remain in a bubble of safe conformity.

Professors shouldn't be ignoring or discriminating against you for disagreeing, though. Don't stay quiet. Complain (to the department head, if necessary) if the professor is a worst-case scenario, as described above. Write and sign a scathing review of them. Find out from other students who the bad apples are. As an aside, it would be nice if student government would put together an online resource of professors' reviews, so that students could easily acquire a sense of which teachers are open to all ideas.

The other side of the coin, however, is that you're in college now. You don't have to submit to the tyranny of authority any more. This isn't high school; you're an adult, and you have access to a lot of information. If you think the professor is wrong, find out more. Present evidence to support your claim. If the opinion doesn't rely on facts or research, then strongly express that maybe everyone doesn't see it that way. Everyone's education is improved by this effort.

The time to be meek has passed. Sitting in the back row fuming won't fix anything. In the real world, the opinions with the most emphatic supporters often dominate. Find out all you can, generate an informed opinion and debate it with others. This is how we change the world. Join in.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.

### Letter to the editor

#### The Register-Guard should be a leader

I join many others in urging Tony Baker and the management of The Register-Guard to bargain in good faith with the Eugene Newspaper Guild. Our hometown paper has been in a longtime standoff with its employees. On May 1, the Guild will have been waiting two years for a contract with The Register-Guard. Two years is a long time for working families.

Many Eugene residents take pride in being fortunate enough to have a locally owned newspaper, but what good is that if it is not worker-friendly? Not only has The Register-Guard refused to fairly negotiate with the Guild, but now also with the press-

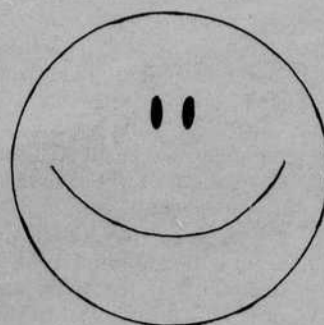
men union. In addition, The Register-Guard must answer to charges of illegal actions from the National Labor Relations Board, and it has to be held accountable for bringing in a negotiator who brags about union bashing.

In its editorial pages, The Register-Guard advises the state of Oregon about what it must do to better assure Oregonians of adequate wages, yet a full half of the Guild job classifications would qualify a family of four for food stamps. I appreciate the continuous effort the Eugene Newspaper Guild has made for these families.

Come on, Register-Guard! Step up to that leadership position you have in our community.

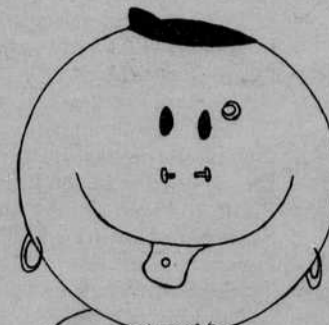
Kitty Piercy  
 Eugene

### Leftfield



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### Frank Silva



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