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Darren Linvill

*Clemson University*, [darrenl@clemson.edu](mailto:darrenl@clemson.edu)

Joseph P. Mazer

*Clemson University*, [jmazer@clemson.edu](mailto:jmazer@clemson.edu)

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The Role of Student Aggressive Communication Traits in the Perception of Instructor  
Ideological Bias in the Classroom

Darren L. Linvill (Ph.D., Clemson University, 2008) and Joseph P. Mazer (Ph.D., Ohio University, 2010) are Assistant Professors in the Department of Communication Studies at Clemson University. Address correspondence to [darrenl@clemson.edu](mailto:darrenl@clemson.edu).

**Abstract**

Research indicates that Americans believe instructor political bias to be a serious problem in the college classroom, as many professors are considered a liberal elite (Gross & Simmons, 2006). In light of scholarship suggesting that characteristics students bring with them to the classroom may influence their perception of instructor communication behaviors (Schrodt, 2003), the present study explores the role student aggressive communication traits play in students' dispositional inferences of their instructors holding an ideological bias and how students react to that inference in the college classroom. Results reveal that students' verbal aggressiveness predicts their *perceptions* of instructor ideological bias, whereas students' argumentativeness predicts their *reactions* to instructor ideological bias. Pedagogical implications and areas for future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* ideological bias, argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, aggressive communication, attribution theory

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A common public perception exists that college professors are a liberal elite. Gross and Simmons (2006) demonstrated how common this perception of academia has become. Their data indicated that 68.2% of 1,000 Americans surveyed felt academia favors professors with liberal social and political views. Of this same sample, 37.5% of participants believed that political bias in the college classroom is a serious problem. Conservative activist David Horowitz (2007b) summarized these views, saying many college professors “behave as political advocates in the classroom, express opinions in a partisan manner on controversial issues irrelevant to the academic subject, and even grade students in a manner designed to enforce their conformity to professorial prejudices” (p. 188). The impact that such views have on national discourse became clear during the 2012 Presidential Republican primary when candidate and former senator Rick Santorum described colleges as liberal “indoctrination centers” and called President Barack Obama a “snob” for supporting access to higher education (Jaschik, 2012, ¶ 2).

Ideology can play a particularly important role in communication classrooms. Horowitz (2007a) named Communication Studies, along with several other humanities and social sciences, as having a mission to instill in its students a particular ideology. Although Horowitz’s views are seen as demagoguery by some communication scholars (Cloud, 2007), it is true that communication classrooms often explore issues that have the potential to expose ideological conflict. Issues presented in the study of communication often raise *ill-structured problems* in class discussion, defined by King and Kitchener (2004) as problems having “two features: that they cannot be defined with a high degree of completeness, and that they cannot be solved with a high degree of certainty” (p. 5). Classes typical to the communication discipline that often

address such *ill-structured problems* include classes in race and gender communication, political communication, intercultural communication, argumentation and debate, and media criticism, among many others.

Despite public perceptions, longitudinal research has not shown that the college experience has an effect on student ideology (Mariani & Hewitt, 2008) or that student ideology has a negative effect on the manner in which instructors grade students' work (Kemmelmeier, Danielson, & Basten, 2005). Professor ideology has been shown, however, to have a negative effect on both student views of their instructors and how students view the classroom experience (Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2008). Referring to student perceptions of ideological bias, Fisler and Foubert (2006) stated, "Students' perspectives on professors and administrators may hinge, at least in part, on how well educators help them become more intellectually mature and how well educators communicate with their students in the process" (pp. 3-4).

### **Attribution Theory**

Instructor ideological bias has not been shown to have a measureable impact on student ideology or student grades (Kemmelmeier, Danielson, & Basten, 2005; Mariani & Hewitt, 2008) only on student perceptions of the classroom experience (Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2008). Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) may be employed as a framework to help us understand these findings and further explore student perceptions. Attribution addresses the processes by which individuals comprehend the causes of others' behavior and events. Heider (1958) explains how individuals understand the causes of new events, arguing these events must "be attributed to one or the other of the contents of the environment. For instance, our subjective environment contains the self and another person and a new event occurs: one of the persons will be held

responsible for it” (p. 296). If an event cannot be explained by situational causes, as in this example, they will be explained by an individual as resulting from internal causes.

Ross’s (1977) fundamental attribution hypothesis is particularly important with respect to students’ perceptions of instructor bias. Also known as the fundamental attribution error or correspondence bias, this concept describes the propensity for individuals to overvalue the consideration of dispositional, personality-based factors when explaining the behavior of others while simultaneously undervaluing the consideration of situational explanations for those same behaviors. Gilbert and Malone (1995) suggest that individuals often draw such dispositional attributions of others’ behavior even when a logical analysis suggests they should not. Gilbert and Malone describe four mechanisms that produce this phenomenon, any or all of which may play a role in student perceptions of instructor bias. These four mechanisms are lack of awareness of situational constraints, unrealistic expectations of behavior, inflated categorizations of behavior, and incomplete corrections of dispositional inferences.

Gilbert and Malone (1995) explain the first mechanism, *lack of awareness of situational constraints*, as those times when situational forces can only be seen as causes for behavior when one is aware such forces exist. Without knowledge of an outside force that outside force cannot play a role in an attribution. Concerning the second mechanism, *unrealistic expectations of behavior*, Gilbert and Malone state, “Observers who are completely aware of the actor’s situation may still have unrealistic expectations about how that situation should affect the actor’s behaviors (e.g., ‘A true liberal would never make a conservative speech’)” (p. 27). The third mechanism, *inflated categorizations of behavior*, addresses the reality that while some behavior is easily categorized, other behavior is ambiguous and requires detailed knowledge of the context to fully understand. Individual expectations of an action are important to this mechanism.

For example, a member of a Baptist church who expects to hear a sermon on Christian morals and is instead surprised by a lecture on the health benefits of bisexuality may perceive that speech as somewhat more liberal (and not somewhat more conservative) than it actually is. (Gilbert & Malone, 1995, p. 29)

Finally, *incomplete corrections of dispositional inferences* occur when individuals draw an initial dispositional inference regarding another individual's behavior and then fail to correct these inferences based on situational information. It seems possible that any of these mechanisms could cause students to incorrectly make a dispositional inference regarding an instructor's behavior, the inference being that the instructor holds an ideological bias.

Attribution theory has previously been used as a lens to explore student attributions of instructor behavior in the classroom. Kelsey, Kearney, Plax, Allen and Ritter (2004) found that when instructors misbehave in the classroom, demonstrating *incompetence*, *offensiveness*, or *indolence* (as defined by Kearny, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991), students are more likely to make dispositional inferences regarding their instructor than they are to attribute the misbehavior to situational or environmental forces. This finding was supported even with instructors who demonstrated high levels of immediacy in their teaching, an attribute which the researchers argue will, more than any other teacher behavior, "provide students with a filter that structures and directs their subsequent perceptions of teacher behaviors" (p. 45).

### **Student Perceptions of Ideological Bias**

Research addressing student perceptions of ideological bias in the university classroom is limited. Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler (2008) began to explore the issue through a series of focus groups and interviews with undergraduate students. Findings indicated that participants did not believe professors were biased or that their campuses lacked a diversity of political views. Smith,

Mayer, and Fritschler's sample population, however, lacked diversity. Participants were identified as "high achievers. . . the students accepted the notion that they were attending college to learn, to be stimulated by their professors, and to have their own views challenged by their professors and their fellow students" (p. 146). These findings may hold true with similar high-achieving students, but their conclusions cannot be broadly applied.

Linville and Havice (2011) interviewed students who self-identified as having an experience with instructor ideological bias. These interviews explored the essence of the students' experience. This research revealed several common themes, both in what students were identifying as ideological bias and how they were reacting to the perception of bias. Perceptions of what students considered to be bias centered on instructors presenting only the instructor's personal view on political issues. It was perceived that instructors who were considered to be biased dismissed views that were contrary to their own and, if students gave opposing views on tests or assignments, biased instructors would assign lower grades to students expressing these views. Linville and Havice reported two common reactions to the perception of bias. First, students chose not to voice their true beliefs, feeling that silence would keep them from negatively standing out to their instructor. Alternately, students chose to be disingenuous and falsely expressed views on assignments or in class discussions that agreed with the instructor. These reactions stemmed in part from the belief that to do otherwise would jeopardize one's grade.

Further research exploring student perceptions of instructor ideological bias supports the suggestion that some perceptions of bias may be individual student attributions. Linville (2011), employing Marcia's (1966) model of identity development, found that individuals more committed in the domains of *vocation*, *religion*, and *politics* are more likely to perceive their

instructors as having an ideological bias in their teaching. Many individuals who are more committed to their values and beliefs in these three domains fall in what Marcia calls identity *foreclosure*, one of four identity statuses central to Marcia's model of identity development. Marcia describes individuals in the *foreclosure* identity development status, saying, "A certain rigidity characterizes his personality; one feels that if he were faced with a situation in which parental values were nonfunctional, he would feel extremely threatened" (p. 552). Linvill (2011) suggested that it is this rigidity that causes individuals to perceive ideological bias, while their peers in alternate identity statuses do not perceive a similar bias.

Similar to findings regarding identity development, scholars have also found a relationship between student cognitive development and perceptions of instructor ideological bias. Linvill and Mazer (2011), employing King and Kitchener's (1994) Reflective Judgment Model, found that individuals who express lower degrees of reflective thinking perceived more instructor ideological bias. Linvill and Mazer pointed out that those students who express less reflective thinking rely heavily on belief and opinion in their thinking. This research proposed that what is viewed by these students as bias may be viewed by students who express greater degrees of reflective thinking as "the instructor purposefully challenging the student with new concepts that can and should be evaluated on their own merit" (Linvill & Mazer, 2011, p. 92).

Research illustrating a possible relationship between student identity and cognitive development to dispositional inferences of instructor ideological bias led the researchers to explore how student communication traits may be related to similar inferences of bias. Students' classroom communication is primarily a function of their individual trait orientations toward communication (Mottet, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006). Research indicates that the communication traits students bring with them to the classroom may influence their perceptions

of instructor communication behaviors (Schrodt, 2003). Instructional communication research, however, has primarily emphasized the influence of instructor communicative traits on students' learning and their perceptions of instructors, resulting in a limited perspective of the influence student traits play in the classroom and a need for further research (Kennedy-Lightsey & Myers, 2009). With these points in mind, in the present study we explored the role student aggressive communication traits play in students' dispositional inferences of their instructors holding an ideological bias and how students react to that inference in the college classroom. A better understanding of these relationships will allow educators to adjust their classroom communication in a way that will empower students to comfortably navigate ill-structured problems.

### **Aggressive Communication Traits**

Aggressive communication consists of four message behaviors—assertiveness, argumentativeness, hostility, and verbal aggressiveness—through which a sender attempts to influence a receiver (Infante, 1987). Given that argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are the primary forms through which aggressive communication has been examined (Infante & Rancer, 1996), substantial research on these constructs exists in the communication literature (Myers, 2003; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006; Schrodt & Finn, 2010). Argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are often conceptualized in contrast to one another, with argumentativeness being a generally constructive trait and verbal aggression being destructive (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994). Infante and Rancer (1982) discuss argumentativeness as a trait “which predisposes the individual in communication situations to advocate positions on controversial issues and to attack verbally the positions which other people take on these issues. The individual perceives this activity as an exciting intellectual challenge . . .” (p. 72). Infante and Wigley (1986)

differentiate verbal aggression from argumentativeness, saying that “Argument involves presenting and defending positions on controversial issues . . . Verbal aggression, on the other hand, denotes attacking the self-concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person’s position on a topic of communication” (p. 61).

Although scholars have examined how instructors’ argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness affect students (Myers, 2003; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006; Schrodt & Finn, 2010), scant attention has been paid to the role of students’ aggressive communication traits in the classroom. A notable exception is Mansson, Myers, and Martin (2011), who found that argumentative students are motivated to communicate with their teachers for relational, participatory, and sycophantic reasons, while verbally aggressive students are motivated to communicate with their instructors for excuse-making and sycophantic reasons. Additional research suggests that verbally aggressive students are likely male (Kinney, Smith, & Donzella, 2001), at-risk for failure (Lippert, Titsworth, & Hunt, 2005), and more likely to perceive their teachers as verbally aggressive (Schrodt, 2003).

Two studies produced findings relevant to a possible relationship between student verbal aggressiveness and perception of instructor ideological bias. Worthington (2005) explored the relationship between listening style preference and verbal aggressiveness. Worthington found an inverse relationship between *people listening* and verbal aggressiveness, as well as *content listening* and verbal aggressiveness. People listeners are more likely to focus on common interests with the speaker. Content listeners, meanwhile, are more likely to focus on evaluation of a message and the speaker’s supporting evidence. According to Worthington, these listeners will “work to withhold evaluation, gathering the facts needed to make an informed judgment” (p. 4). It is reasonable to expect listeners who focus on common interests, rather than differences,

and evaluate messages based off of supporting evidence to perceive less ideological bias in the college classroom.

Schrodt and Wheelless (2001) addressed the relationship between aggressive communication traits and information reception apprehension. Research findings showed that participants with the highest levels of intellectual inflexibility reported being more verbally aggressive. Linvill (2011) has shown that inflexible students are more likely to perceive an instructor ideological bias. Thus, we may also expect verbally aggressive students to attribute ideas expressed by an instructor, which were in conflict with their own beliefs, as instructor ideological bias. In other words, similar to findings by Kelsey et al (2004), we may expect verbally aggressive students to make dispositional inferences regarding their instructors' behaviors rather than explain behaviors through situational or environmental forces, the specific dispositional inference being that their instructor is ideologically biased. Therefore,

H1: Students' verbal aggressiveness will positively predict their perceptions of instructor ideological bias.

Rancer, Baukus, and Infante (1985) explored the relationship between argumentativeness and belief structures regarding arguing among students. Their findings indicated that students with high trait argumentativeness perceived arguing primarily as a learning experience. Students low in trait argumentativeness viewed arguing as disruptive, hostile, or anti-social. Rancer et al. Suggested that these beliefs may inhibit the communication of low argumentative students. Linvill and Havice (2011) described reactions to the perception of ideological bias as the desire to avoid discussion of controversial issues and to not stand out to one's instructor. Given these findings, we would expect that high argumentative students would be more willing to freely discuss their beliefs in class discussion and on assignments, regardless of the instructor's beliefs.

Conversely, low argumentative students will be more likely to avoid expressing their beliefs in class discussion or on assignments in cases where those beliefs differ from the beliefs of their instructor. Therefore,

H2: Students' argumentativeness will negatively predict their reactions (the desire to avoid discussion of controversial issues and to not stand out to one's instructor) to instructor ideological bias.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 226 undergraduate students (45 first-year students, 65 sophomores, 84 juniors, 32 seniors) enrolled in classes at a large southeastern university. The sample consisted of 94 males and 132 females, with an average age of 20.19 years (ranging from 18 to 27 years). The racial/ethnic distribution was primarily Caucasian (91.2%).

### **Procedures and Instrumentation**

All procedures received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. A randomly generated list of 1,000 student email addresses was secured from the university's institutional research office. The randomly selected participants, equally balanced by sex, year in school, and academic college, received an email near the end of the term that requested their participation in a study exploring teacher and student communication. A link in the email directed participants to an online informed consent form, and after indicating consent, they were directed to an online survey (23% response rate). Participants were asked to complete a series of instruments to assess their aggressive communication traits and perceptions of and reactions to instructor ideological bias. At the end of the survey, participants had the option of entering their

email addresses for a chance to win one of four \$20 gift certificates from Amazon.com. These email addresses were removed from the data set before analysis.

*Argumentativeness* was measured using Infante and Rancer's (1982) 20-item Argumentativeness Scale, on which participants report perceptions of their own argumentative behaviors. Ten items were totaled to measure a person's tendency to approach argumentative situations, and 10 items were totaled to assess a tendency to avoid arguments. Infante, Rancer, and Wigley (2011) instructed, "Reverse scoring can be used for the avoidance items, and a single score can be obtained for argumentativeness" (p. 147). Participants responded on a five-point Likert-type scale with options ranging from 5 (*almost always true*) to 1 (*almost never true*). Prior studies reported reliability coefficients of .86 (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011) and .89 (Martin, Anderson, & Thweatt, 1998). In the present study, a coefficient alpha of .92 ( $M = 63.43$ ,  $SD = 13.41$ ) was obtained for the scale.

*Verbal aggressiveness* was measured using Infante and Wigley's (1986) 20-item Verbal Aggressiveness Scale with higher totaled scores indicating greater verbal aggression. On the original instrument participants reported perceptions of their own verbally aggressive behaviors on a five-point Likert-type scale with options ranging from 5 (*almost always true*) to 1 (*almost never true*). However, Beatty, Rudd, and Valencic (1999) concluded that the original scale actually consisted of two dimensions, interpersonal sensitivity and verbal aggressiveness. Following the recommendation of Beatty et al., this study employed the 10-item version of the measure to assess verbal aggressiveness. Previous work using this version of the scale has resulted in a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .83 (Schrodt, 2003). In the present study, a coefficient alpha of .85 ( $M = 21.85$ ,  $SD = 6.99$ ) was obtained for the scale.

Student perceptions of *instructor ideological bias* were measured using Linvill and Havice's (2011) Political Bias in the Classroom Survey (PBCS). The PBCS is a 12-item measure that addresses students' experiences with classroom political bias along two dimensions: the degree to which the students *perceive* instructor political bias in their college classrooms and the degree to which the students *react* to this bias. Rather than asking about particular instructors, the instrument draws on participants' general attitudes regarding faculty. Participants responded on a six-point Likert-type scale with options ranging from 6 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). The *perceptions* scale focuses on what students experience in the classroom and addresses elements of bias, including instructors who dismiss views and ideas from students who disagree with the teacher and instructors who limit class content to conform to their own beliefs. An example item includes: "In my experience, professors present multiple political views when discussing political issues." It should be noted that the PBCS does not differentiate between ideologically liberal or conservative bias. The *reactions* scale focuses on students' perceived need to conform to the beliefs of their instructors, whether in class discussion or through responses on tests and assignments. An example item includes: "When a professor expresses political views that differ from my own, it is difficult for me to contribute to class." Scores were totaled for both scales. Prior research obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .77 for the *perceptions* scale and .78 for the *reactions* scale (Linvill, 2011). In the present study, coefficient alphas for the *perceptions* scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ;  $M = 19.20$ ,  $SD = 5.93$ ) and *reactions* scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ;  $M = 20.83$ ,  $SD = 5.95$ ) were acceptable.

## Results

H1 proposed that students' verbal aggressiveness would positively predict their perceptions of instructor ideological bias. Regression analysis indicated that 11% of the variance

in students' perceptions of instructor ideological bias could be predicted by variance in students' aggressive communication traits,  $F = 11.49 (2, 195), p < .001$ . Analysis of regression coefficients indicated that students' verbal aggressiveness predicted significant variance in their perceptions of instructor ideological bias,  $\beta = .33, t = 4.75, p < .001$ . Students' argumentativeness did not emerge as a significant predictor,  $\beta = -.03, t = -.48, p > .05$ . Thus, H1 was supported.

H2 proposed that students' argumentativeness would negatively predict their reactions to instructor ideological bias. Regression analysis indicated that 14% of the variance in students' reactions to instructor ideological bias could be predicted by variance in students' aggressive communication traits,  $F = 15.78 (2, 195), p < .001$ . Analysis of regression coefficients indicated that students' argumentativeness predicted significant variance in their reactions to instructor ideological bias,  $\beta = -.38, t = -5.61, p < .001$ . Students' verbal aggressiveness did not emerge as a significant predictor,  $\beta = .10, t = 1.60, p > .05$ . Therefore, H2 was supported.

### **Discussion**

In this study we explored the role student aggressive communication traits play in students' dispositional inferences of their instructors holding an ideological bias and how students react to that inference in the college classroom. Results supported both research hypotheses and demonstrated that students who are high in trait verbal aggressiveness are more likely to perceive their instructor as being ideologically biased, while students who are high in trait argumentativeness are less likely to react to the perception of bias by withdrawing from communication or withholding their true beliefs. These findings support previous research indicating that argumentativeness is a generally constructive trait and verbal aggression generally destructive (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994).

The results are supported by previous work related to attribution theory (Kelsey et al., 2004). It seems likely that Ross's (1977) fundamental attribution hypothesis may account for some of these results and that students with greater degrees of trait verbal aggressiveness are more likely to make dispositional inferences regarding instructor actions. Specifically, these students may be more likely to attribute instructor actions to their instructor's ideology. It is possible that any or all of Gilbert and Malone's (1995) four mechanisms may play a role in why these dispositional inferences are made. For instance, *unrealistic expectations of behavior* may take place for a student when an instructor makes an ideological argument simply for the sake of class discussion and not because they adhere to that particular ideology. Such an inference may lead to future errors through the mechanism of *incomplete corrections of dispositional inferences* if the original error in dispositional inference is not corrected.

The findings have important implications for communication classrooms and higher education in general. The perception that higher education has a pervasive liberal bias is common (Gross & Simmons, 2006) and, given current public discourse (Jaschik, 2012), this perception has potentially important ramifications, particularly in terms of funding for public higher education. While this study did not differentiate between ideologically liberal or conservative bias, it does suggest some ways in which the perception can be addressed in the classroom. One specific way to do so is to foster constructive argumentative communication while mitigating the effects of destructive verbally aggressive communication.

Infante (1982) described argumentativeness as a trait "essential to democracy and also to personal growth" (p. 141). This study helps to illustrate the truth of this statement.

Argumentative students are more likely to express their true beliefs and engage directly in class discussion, even if they are uncomfortable with the topic or the instructor. In this way, students

may be more capable of addressing King and Kitchener's "ill-structured problems" (2004, p. 5). Infante (1982) points out that the Communication Studies discipline is uniquely qualified to help train students in argumentative communication. Courses such as debate, argumentation, and public speaking all foster these skills. A related skill discussed by Infante is the ability to discover argument. In order to make an argument on a controversial issue, students must have the ability to first recognize the potential for disagreement. This is a skill that Communication Studies faculty might also consider fostering in themselves with the goal of addressing classroom disagreement in a constructive way, before it is perceived as bias. Infante (1995) also recommend the importance of distinguishing between verbal aggression and argument. Too often ad hominem attacks can pull a discussion off topic. Instructors might teach students to distinguish verbal aggression from argument and help keep class discussion on course while keeping verbal aggression from escalating.

Future research might address how student communication traits interact with other student traits, including communication apprehension and tolerance for disagreement, in the perception of instructor ideological bias. Instructor communication traits might also be explored to ascertain whether or not particular traits lead to greater degrees of student perception of ideological bias, or if students react to perceived bias differently depending on instructor traits. Finally, specific classroom interventions and activities, such as those discussed by Infante (1995), should be developed and tested to help facilitate the process of communicating potentially controversial issues with students with a goal of reducing the perception of instructor bias.

Any research design possesses strengths and limitations, and this study is no exception. Like many classroom communication investigations (e.g., Avtgis & Rancer, 2008; Myers,

Edwards, Wahl, & Martin, 2007), the data reported here are cross-sectional in nature and thus do not warrant strong claims of causation. In addition, these findings provide no basis for conclusions related to instructor ideological bias, students' aggressive communication, and learning over the course of an academic term. Scholars might consider examining this association. Additionally, the sample is relatively homogeneous regarding racial/ethnic identity. Even though our recruitment procedures were not sex-specific in any respect, the sample also contained more women than men. Future research may be focused on various cultural factors to determine how such characteristics might influence students' perceptions of and reactions to instructor ideological bias.

The perception of ideological bias in higher education, and in Communication Studies in particular, cannot be eliminated entirely. There will surely always be instructors who apply their personal ideologies inappropriately or in a partisan fashion. While current research suggests that genuine ideological bias in U.S. higher education may not be as pervasive as some critics suggest (Kimmelmeier, et al, 2005; Mariani & Hewitt, 2008), efforts should still be made to address the perception. The Communication Studies discipline is in a unique position to address the perception of ideological bias in higher education by helping students develop constructive communication skills and apply them to the classroom. To do so will not only improve how critics view higher education, but also teach students to address controversial issues in a communicatively competent and constructive manner.

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