

[The Politics of Professors](#)

Published by [Dean Saitta](#) March 22nd, 2008 in [Prez's Pulpit](#).

by **Dean Saitta**

The following section of a recent [Clarion article](#) about a student roundtable discussion with Chancellor Coombe got my attention:

...One student questioned the chancellor about the university's hiring practices, citing a recent article that stated that most DU professors are liberals.

"We don't hire people based on their political beliefs," said Coombe. "I would say that DU is more balanced than a lot of universities."

Liberal-minded individuals are more often to be found in this profession, said Coombe, but DU hires faculty based on an applicant's "unusual ability to stimulate the minds of our students."

While Coombe believes this is a rare issue on campus, the student found political beliefs to "pervade the classroom environment."

"We believe our faculty members will stay neutral. That's their job," responded Coombe.

After the two-hour discussion, students felt optimistic but cautious about the chancellor's comments...

As well they should. And perhaps faculty should, too. I'm not sure what article about DU faculty liberalism our student is referring to (maybe [this one?](#)), or what his/her evidence is for the pervasiveness of politics in the classroom, but I'm also not entirely comforted by the Chancellor's response. Although we don't (in my experience) hire faculty based on political belief it's pretty clear (again, in my experience) that DU is as much of a liberal echo-chamber as any other university in the country. Not that there's anything wrong with that, if faculty adhere to their obligation to discover and disseminate truth as they see it, and if we make clear to our students that there's a big difference between liberal *bias* and liberal *conviction* (a distinction usefully explored by Michael Berube [here](#)).

It seems to me that our "job" as faculty is to research and teach truth based on well-founded beliefs and convictions, not to stay "neutral" in the garden-variety sense that seems to be operative in the Chancellor's comment. Appeals to neutrality play right into the hands of the more vulgar ideologues among us who have made university and liberal faculty bashing a lucrative and influential cottage industry in this country. They would also seem to contradict the university's widely proclaimed commitment to serve—through teaching, research, and civic partnerships—the public good.

Alternatively, we might endeavor to reach a better understanding with our students about the purpose of a university education, one on which liberal and conservatives can both agree (see, for example, [here](#).) And, we might better distinguish ourselves as an progressive institution dedicated to liberal learning and civic engagement if we got a bit more intentional—as [recently urged](#) by a representative group of DU faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees—about our educational mission and goals.