

WSU News

February 19, 2021

Wichita State professor offers advice on teaching controversial topics

By Sara Ornelas, Marketing Content Strategist

Dr. Neal Allen is no stranger to controversy, nor are his students. In fact, he prides himself on teaching his students to freely engage in civil discourse on highly contentious topics.

Allen, professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at Wichita State University, teaches Law and Political Power and directs the university's [Washington, D.C., and Topeka intern programs](#). He says there's lifelong value in teaching students how to have mature, insightful conversations about contentious topics — particularly when it comes to their future career paths.

"It's good to help students understand that there are a lot of jobs that can connect to politics and a lot of jobs you don't think necessarily connect to politics but do, particularly if you consider office politics," Allen said. "It's not a negative thing to talk about, but something all of us have to deal with."



Dr. Neal Allen

Allen said there are three points instructors should keep in mind about how to serve students in teaching about politically controversial issues.

Policy and procedure

First, Allen said, follow [Wichita State policy](#) and the general principles used in higher education.

"That might sound simple, but it's not when you're talking about issues involving students' political identity," he said.

Allen said Wichita State faculty work to provide a hospitable classroom environment for all students in a way that facilitates their learning and helps them become stronger students and citizens.

“I think we have a positive situation at Wichita State University,” he said. “I think our policies and our practices are pretty well aligned with where we need to be.”

Follow your expertise

It might seem obvious that an instructor should focus on his or her area of expertise, but it’s an imperative part in facilitating conversations and building trustworthiness with students.

“I think the idea of focusing on your expertise is important for individual faculty members because you can orient your class around something that you’re more comfortable with, and students are going to find you to be more credible,” Allen said.

On the other hand, instructors are human, too, and might not have all the answers.

“I think it’s always fine to say, ‘I’m not sure about that, and I’ll have to look that up,’” he said.

Focus on the students

Allen said it’s always key that instructors remember to always keep the student experience at the forefront of any lesson or discussion.

“To be very particularly blunt about it,” he said, “it’s about them and not about you. It’s not about what you as a faculty member have to say, but it’s about what experience students are going to have.”

That doesn’t mean shying away from provocative issues, but faculty members need to be able to pivot if the students’ experience is at risk.

“Anything you’re doing in class at any given time can be abandoned or shut down to prevent a negative environment for students,” Allen said. “If you want to take the risk, even if it’s small one, of talking about politically controversial topics, you should be willing to alter what you’re doing in class to try to manage the environment in class if it gets too complicated.”

Many students are also at an age when they’re growing into their knowledge and expertise as citizens, Allen said. Respecting and listening all viewpoints creates for richer conversations and insights.

“Treating all of our students as having a legitimate interest and concern about politics is usually a good perspective,” he said.