



January 23, 2019

Professor Ken Mayer
201D North Hall
1050 Bascom Mall
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, WI 53706

Dear Professor Mayer,

I recently read the syllabus description for your course, “Political Science 408 the American Presidency,” and was appalled by your politically polarized characterization of the Trump presidency. I am a fierce advocate for academic freedom and it is your right to include such statements in your course syllabi; however, your choice to include such a statement cannot go without criticism and including it is a disservice to your students and the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Placing hyper-partisan value judgements on contemporary actions of the president, as an introduction to a course in a syllabus, has a chilling effect on any future class discourse. Students who identify as Trump supporters will be encouraged to parrot liberal views that you clearly sympathize with or remain silent in an attempt to mask their conservative opinions. Equally disappointing, students who may oppose President Trump will simply be affirmed in their beliefs and not encouraged to academically grow by examining current events through a new lens.

It is unfortunate that students who enrolled in your course expecting to learn about the overall American presidency may now have to choose between dropping the course and taking a course that is a bait and switch, focused instead on a critique of the Trump presidency.

It may have been more appropriate to design a new course with a more accurate title and permit another less biased instructor to teach sections of Political Science 408. Although utilizing current event examples in learning is clearly valuable, the level of focus on the current presidency in a course designed to survey the American presidency seems wholly misguided. For example, teaching this course with such a lens during the Watergate scandal, without any of the historical record and perspective, would have provided students with an incomplete and academically unsound account of the Nixon presidency and its relationship to the function of the office of the president. This lack of perspective is a slap in the face to the sort of academic rigor that should be a central focus at an institution such as UW–Madison.

As a good faith effort to promote a healthy academic exchange of views on campus, I encourage you to invite a member of the Trump administration to speak with your students. I would also appreciate the opportunity to discuss your course with you in person.

Sincerely,

Dave Murphy
Chair, Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities

Enclosure:

University of Wisconsin–Madison. (2019). *Political Science 408: The American Presidency Course Syllabus*. Madison, Wisconsin: Kenneth Mayer.

cc:

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