In thinking back on the traditional stereotypes of the college professor, one imagines all the usual clichés: a man in a tweed jacket, smoking a pipe as he strokes his beard and spouts a set of liberal ideologies that will change the world. While some of these stereotypes hold little to no truth (the pipe-smoking man, for instance), others are more open for debate.

For instance, are most professors liberal? And what, one might add, is meant by liberal?

“The name of our college is the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences,” said Dr. Lowell Gustafson, the Dean of Social Sciences. “The root word of ‘liberal’ is ‘liber,’ meaning free … So we are inherently liberal in the classical sense, in that we educate students on the basis of freedom and liberty.”

Thus, when making the claim that most professors are “liberal,” one has to determine what is meant by this word. Living in America, we are all, in a sense, concerned with freedom, and as senior political science and philosophy major Charles Myers said, “Professors are liberal because Americans are liberal.”

Despite our devotion to freedom, however, the modern connotation of liberalism relates more to a political leaning, along the lines of Democrat vs. Republican. Thus, people today generally identify as either liberal, conservative, or somewhere in between. The goal, then, is to discover if there is an imbalance in professors who self-identify as liberals or conservatives, and if so, why this imbalance exists and what it means for students.
“The image of the liberal professor came out in the ‘60s,” said Dr. John Carvalho, the Philosophy Department Chair. “Professors were standing with students outside universities protesting. So you had this image of professors protesting war and social inequality.”

The idea, then, grew to be more than just image-based as the years progressed. In a 2007-2008 survey conducted by Villanova’s Office of Planning and Research (OPIR), 224 of 263 faculty replied with their political stance, with 10.7% on the “far left,” 48.2% “liberal,” 27.2% “middle of the road,” 13.4% “conservative,” and 1% “far right.” This is in comparison to other U.S. schools, with 9% on the far left, 44.7% liberal, 28.7% middle of the road, 17.2% conservative, and 0.7% far right. (Statistics are based on a small sample of U.S. schools).

Clearly, there is an imbalance in political leaning for professors, even more so in certain departments such as English and sociology, where the ratio can be as great as 30-1, according to the book *The Politically Correct University*. Additionally, in the OPIR statistics, Villanova appears slightly more liberal than the general body of schools. However, there are a number of radically liberal schools that do not even fall into the same spectrum as Villanova.

“Villanova is a more conservative school,” Dr. Carvalho said. “I got my BA at Santa Cruz, and they were radical. We had no grades … we had four weeks at the start of the semester before deciding on our classes. And at Rutgers, the street was blocked off an I couldn’t get to the dorms at one time because students took over the buildings.”

So, it does appear that Villanova’s history is not quite as liberal or radical as other schools across the nation, but there is no arguing the definite imbalance in professors’ political leanings.

In looking for possible reasons for this imbalance, Dr. Colleen Sheehan, a political science professor here at Villanova, said, “Conservative students lack mentors in school, there are fewer opportunities to do research with professors in particular grad schools … and there is some bias in hiring. Some in academia make decisions based on political bias. Many are fair minded. Others are not.”

According to former Villanova professor Robert Maranto, who co-edited a book entitled *The Politically Correct University*, “Professors are just like anybody else. The natural tendency of people in general is to want to hire people just like themselves, so just as corporate executives will often be all white males, professors will tend to be all liberal since people are more comfortable hiring people they agree with.”

In some instances, universities have actually gone so far as to admit not hiring someone due to his or her political beliefs. For instance, Dr. Maranto cites conservative Bradford Wilcox at The University of Virginia, who was turned down for tenure. Afterwards, Wilcox filed an appeal and was granted tenure because, according to Dr. Maranto, “his department actually said that they turned him down because he is a conservative.”

One question that this imbalance in hiring practices raises is whether students are negatively affected. For instance, do professors, then, attempt to push their views onto students, or do they welcome
disagreement? Or, on the other side of the spectrum altogether, do professors push for a level of political correctness, in which open debate and disagreement is brought to a minimum?

Most will agree that total political correctness is not ideal in a college classroom, especially in the political science department.

“Political correctness might not be very correct,” said Dr. Sheehan. “It has its own biases. Professors should be dedicated to their students and to an open pursuit of the truth. Political correctness stymies and stifles one’s education. Students aren’t getting what they deserve in the classroom. It’s a knee-jerk response that has no place in a setting of genuine learning.”

At Villanova, the issue of too much political correctness does not seem to be present, as Myers states, “I have not encountered a single professor who attempted to be politically correct in class.”

In opposition, however, is the idea that a professor may push too hard for his or her own view, creating a classroom full of students with identical ideas. Thankfully, this does not seem to be the case at Villanova either, as Myers continues, “The professors I have had in class … have all acknowledged that attempting to toe any ‘party line’ in class will only result in many students losing respect for them and ceasing to pay attention to what they have to say.”

The goal of professors, liberal or conservative, is to make students think. By the end of one’s undergraduate career, he or she should be able to form an argument and consider objections.

“We don’t want to convince you that what you think is or is not true,” said Dr. Carvalho. “We want you to question what you think is true. You only begin to think when you don’t know what to think.”

While ideally, universities would have a balance of liberal, conservative, and moderate professors, the fact is this does not exist. For a number of reasons, university bias (whether intentional or not) being one, there are many more self-identified liberal professors than otherwise.

In the end, it is a university’s mission to educate its students in a pursuit of truth, and in that mission, there is a responsibility to hire the best professorial candidates out there, regardless of political identity.