

# **Engaging Students in Discussions of Sensitive or Controversial Public Policy Issues**

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**“In 23 years of teaching in higher education, the one predictable certainty is that students are unpredictable.” Dr. Michael W. Popejoy**

- All professors face one of two alternatives as they face each new class, maintain students in their “happy place” or take the road that forces students to confront their preconceived views of the world. The first is far safer, the second is far riskier for the professor’s career (particularly adjuncts).**
- Do we do a disservice to students and to society by avoiding tensions created by challenges to students with a hard wired world view?**
- Also, is it fair for professors to force to their personal political, social, and economic beliefs and world views on to students rather than to lead them to discovering their own beliefs based on their own critical inquiry?**
- “Courage to teach” is more than a cliché; Professors can avoid controversy or actively engage students in the issues critical to the discipline being taught.**

**“...one can identify small groups and individual students whose attitudes carry considerable weight...and educators at all levels should be aware of the intricacies of power.” William H. Schubert**

- An emerging problem in the new marketing era of education is that the student as customer means the customer is always right.**
- “Teachers go out of their way to avoid embarrassing, insulting, overworking, or vexing students.” Robert Grudin**
- “We want and expect far more than ever before...almost everyone seems to feel entitled to all sorts of successes, adventures, and joys right now, without having to make any great sacrifices to get them.” Dr. Bernie Zilbergeld**
- “not all adults are happy about feeling forced to pursue college-level studies and so some approach their situation with resentment.” Dr. Lee Bash**

“Students must pass through a critical self-reflection stage in questioning and examining assumptions, being open to alternative viewpoints, engaging in discourse, weighing evidence, revising assumptions and perspectives, and acting on revisions; and thinking, talking and working in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives.” Dr. Patricia Cranton

- **Key Points**

- **Prepare students for controversial discussions**

- **Syllabus**
- **Opening Lecture on First Day of Classes**
- **Attach a Document on Civility in the Classroom**
- **Reinforce Student Behavior Expectations Immediately Before Engaging in Controversial Topics Where Emotions are Expected to Run High**
- **Reinforce Student Behavior During the Discussion Particularly if the Debate Begins to Overheat**
- **Force Students to Argue the Issue Focused on an Acceptable Model of Social Theory**
- **Close the Debate by Asking if Everyone has had Ample Opportunity to have their Voice Heard**

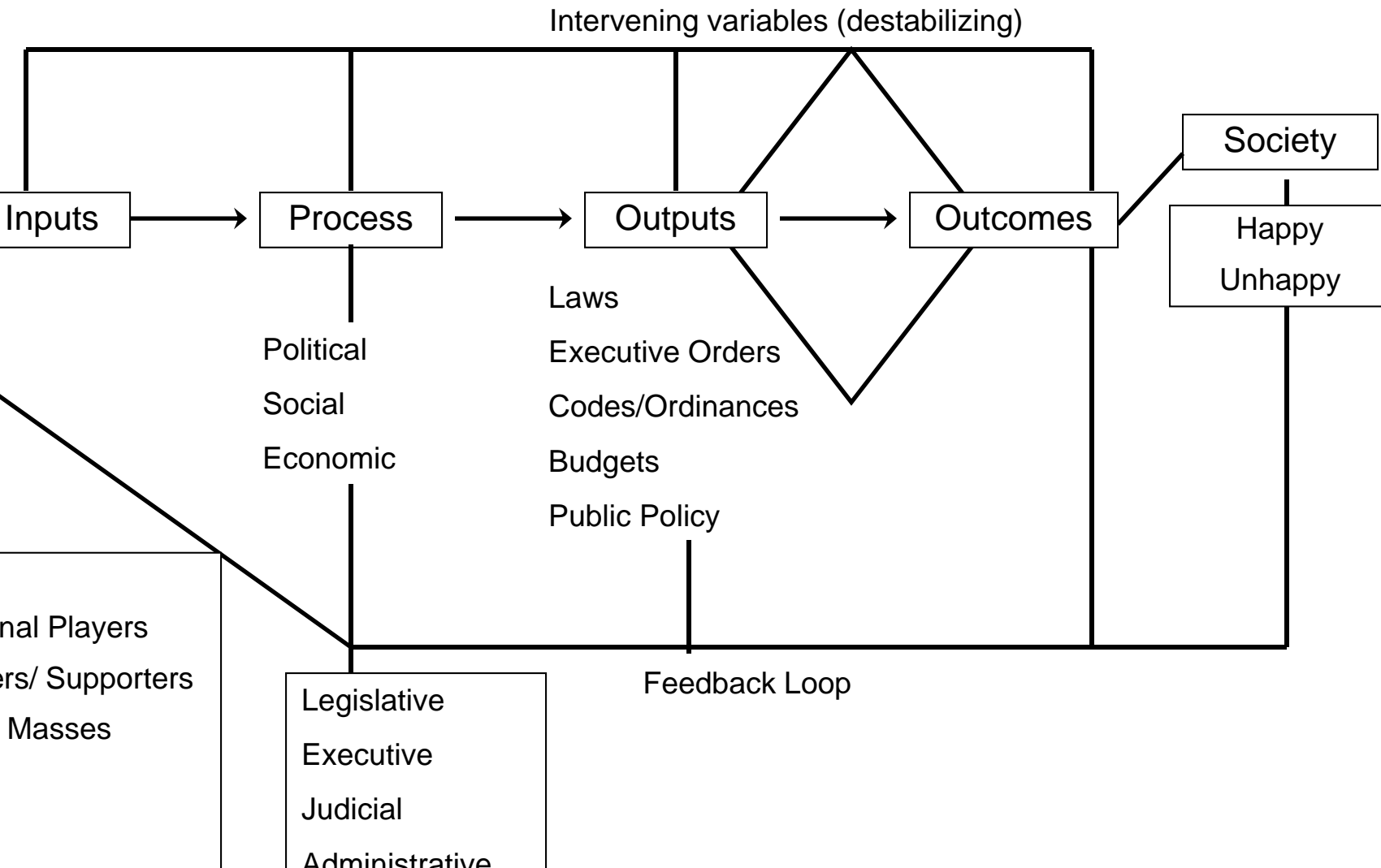
“As a dean, if a student comes in to complain that the professor spent the entire class period wasting time talking about golf, it may be wise to review the syllabus to determine if the assignment that class period was a case study on the golf industry.” Professors should not assume that students understand how government, social, and economic systems actually work.” Dr. Michael W. Popejoy

- **Key Points (Continued)**

- **Use Theoretical Models Appropriate to Political, Social, and Economic Theory in Arguing the Issues (Relevant Systems Models to the Discipline)\***
- **Deflect the Students Away from the Professor to the Model**
- **Do Not Allow Small Groups to Begin a Side Debate Separate from the Entire Class**
- **Only One Person is Allowed to Speak at One Time and the Professor Always Retains the Moderator Role and Can Call a Time Out if Students Begin to Spiral Out of Control (good time for a break to allow for a cooling off period!)**
- **Professors Must Always Protect the Dissenting Opinion**

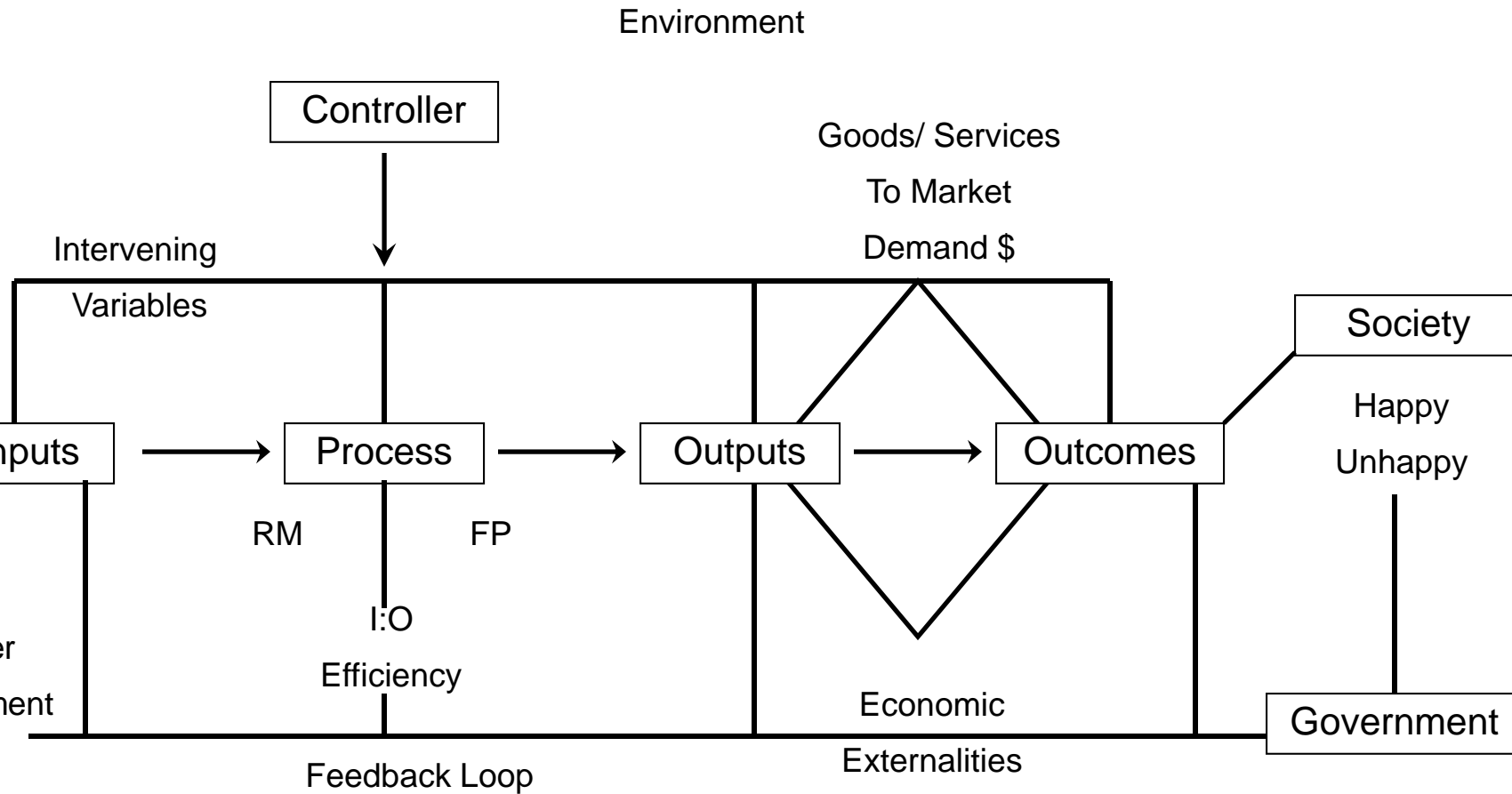
\*See Next Slide for Example of a Theoretical Model

**General Systems Theory Model of Political Systems**  
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# General Systems Theory Model of an Economic System

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# Public Policy Process Agenda Setting Model

## Public Policy Process Agenda Setting Model

Zone of Influence  
Dramatizing Event  
Agenda  
agenda  
Legislation  
Judicial  
Dissatisfaction



# Public Policy Process Agenda Setting Model

Judicial

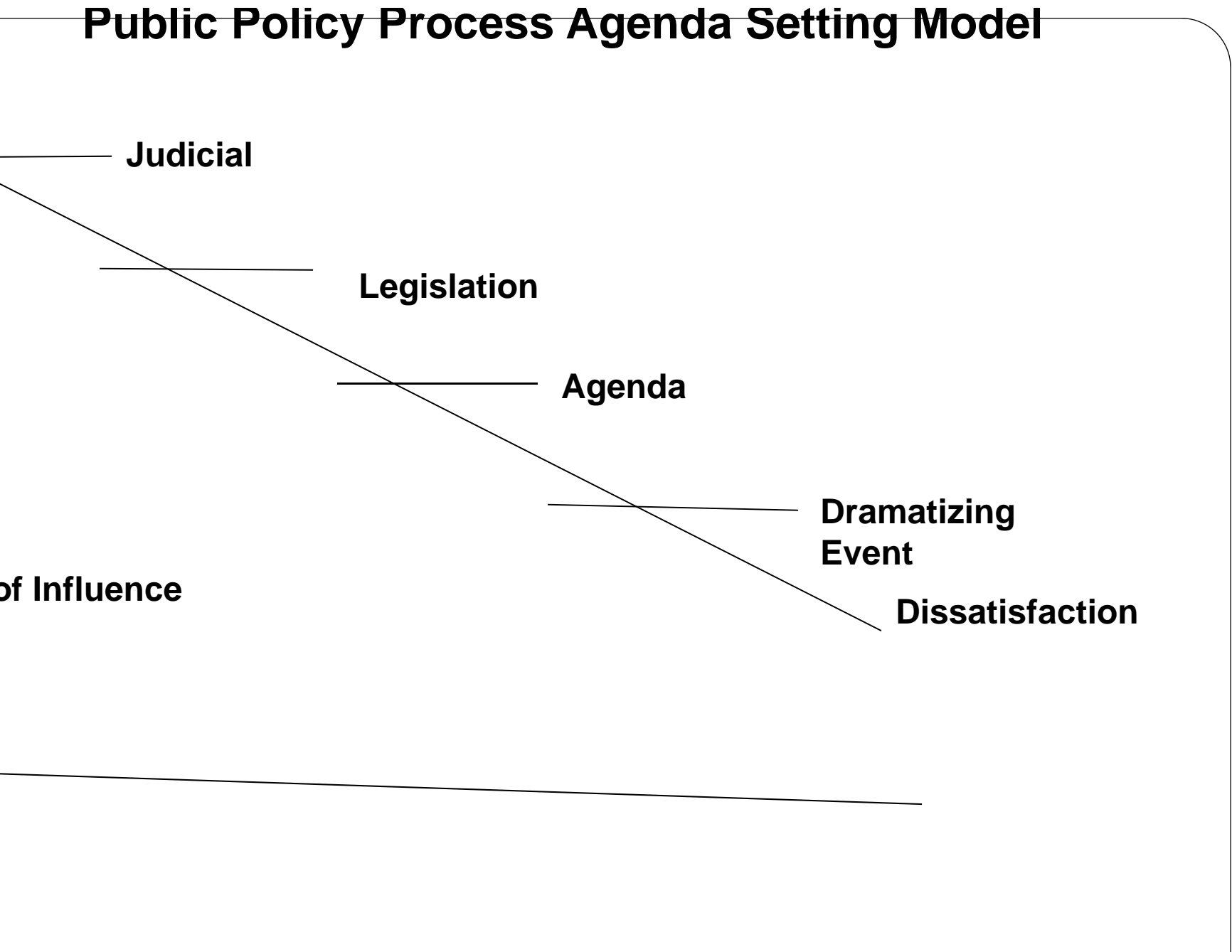
Legislation

Agenda

Dramatizing  
Event

Dissatisfaction

of Influence



**“Political science, like other scientific disciplines, has developed a number of concepts and models to help describe and explain political life. These models are not really competitive in the sense that any one could be judged as the “best.” Each focuses on separate elements of politics and each helps us to understand different things about political life.” Thomas R. Dye**

- **Institutional Model**
- **Process Model**
- **Rational Model**
- **Incremental Model**
- **Group Model**
- **Elite Model**
- **Public Choice Model**
- **Game Theory Model**

**Most public policies are a combination of rational planning, incrementalism, competition among groups, elite preferences, public choice, political processes, and institutional influences.**

**Understanding Public Policy, 12<sup>th</sup> edition**  
**Thomas R. Dye**

- **Chapter One—Policy Analysis: What Governments Do, Why They Do It, and What Difference It Makes**
- **Chapter Two—Models of Politics: Some Help in Thinking About Public Policy**
- **Chapter Three—The Policy Making Process: Decision Making Activities**
  - **Problem Identification and Agenda Setting**
  - **Formulating Policy**
  - **Interest Groups and Policy Making**
  - **Mobilizing Opinion: The Role of the Mass Media**

## Understanding Public Policy, 12<sup>th</sup> edition

Thomas R. Dye (Continued) **“Now the Problems Begin!”**

- **Chapter Four—Criminal Justice**
  - **Crime and Deterrence**
  - **Crime and Gun Control**
  - **The Drug War (Legalize Drugs?)**
  - **Crime and the Courts**
  - **RICO versus Liberty**
  - **Capital Punishment**
  - **Prisons and Correctional Policies (Do They Work?)**
  - **Immigration Policy**
  - **Profiling**

**Understanding Public Policy, 12<sup>th</sup> edition**  
**Thomas R. Dye (Continued)**

- **Chapter Five—Health and Welfare**
  - **Rationality and Irrationality in the Welfare State**
  - **Defining Poverty in America**
  - **Social Security Reform**
  - **Homelessness and Public Policy**
  - **Welfare Reform**
  - **Health Care in America: Access and Cost**
  - **Health Care Reform Strategies**

**Understanding Public Policy, 12<sup>th</sup> edition**  
**Thomas R. Dye (Continued)**

- **Chapter Six—Education**
  - **“No Child Left Behind” Policies**
  - **Project Head Start (Does It Work as Promised?)**
  - **“Diversity” in Higher Education**
- **Chapter Seven—Economic Policy**
  - **Fiscal and Monetary Policy**
  - **“Entitlement Spending”**
  - **Government Debt, Deficits, and Surpluses**
  - **Incrementalism and Government Spending**

**Understanding Public Policy, 12<sup>th</sup> edition**  
**Thomas R. Dye (Continued)**

- **Chapter Eight—Tax Policy**
- **Chapter Nine—Elite-Mass Conflict (Immigration)**
- **Chapter Ten—Environmental Policy**
- **Chapter Eleven—Civil Rights (Affirmative Action?)**
- **Chapter Twelve—American Federalism**
- **Chapter Thirteen—Defense Policy (Middle East?)**
- **Chapter Fourteen—Homeland Security (Security/Liberty)**

**By now the students are breathless, breaking a sweat, losing sleep at night, and probably hate the professor!**

## **In Conclusion**

- **Set Standards Early on Civility in the Classroom and Enforce those Standards consistently**
- **Professors should not preach advocacy or opposition positions on any issues under discussion**
- **Put the Standards in Writing and Reinforce the Standards in Preparing the Class for Controversial Discussions**
- **Maintain Control of the Classroom Atmosphere and Be Sure that Every Voice is Heard During the Debate**
- **Deflect Issues from the Professor by Using Previously Covered Social Theory Models and Discipline Students to Focus Their Responses Within the Framework of the Models**
- **Expect That Even Doing All the Above, Some Students Will Not Like the Class, the Content, or the Professor—and Universities Need to Support Their Professors When the Complaints Come Marching In !**