

What to do when faculty spread conspiracy theories in the classroom

Are your university colleagues superspreaders of misinformation? Here's what to do when fellow academics promote conspiracy theories, and how to safeguard critical thinking – without compromising academic freedom.

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Feature article; Europe



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When we talk about *misinformation* on campus, typically the focus is on how we can “inoculate” students against fake news or help them distinguish scientific evidence from urban myths. But what if the problem lies not with the students but with the educators?

Our research highlights an overlooked problem in higher education: the spread of conspiracy theories by faculty members. When lecturers use their academic authority to promote unfounded claims and conspiratorial thinking, whether in the classroom or on social media, the consequences can ripple outward: student development can stall, institutional credibility can suffer, public trust in science can erode.

The question, then, is not whether to act but how. How can universities respond to this phenomenon without undermining the academic freedom that is central to their purpose?

From critical thinking to critical failure

Deliberate or uncritical dissemination of conspiracy theories does more than confuse students. It strikes at the core mission of higher education: to cultivate evidence-informed reasoning and intellectual independence. When instructors frame fringe beliefs as plausible alternatives to scientific consensus – for instance, by casting doubt on vaccine safety or denying human-driven climate change – they risk turning lectures into (super)spreaders of [misinformation](#).

- [Believe it or not, you can use conspiracy theories as tools for teaching](#)
- [Fake news and disinformation abounds, but what can universities do?](#)
- [How to spot misinformation online](#)

Students often regard faculty as epistemic authorities. In this context, even subtle framing cues can lend legitimacy to false claims. Over time, this can erode students' ability to tell the difference between scientific and pseudoscientific reasoning. Exposure to conspiracy theories without proper scaffolding can weaken the very cognitive immune system that higher education is meant to develop.

The limits of academic freedom

Academic freedom is vital. Scholars must be free to question orthodoxy, test boundaries and explore difficult questions. But as we argue, freedom in academia is not absolute. It carries an expectation of rigour, intellectual humility and respect for evidence.

There are legitimate ways to include conspiracy theories in teaching. They can serve as examples of flawed reasoning or be used to illustrate common manipulation techniques, such as polarisation or scapegoating. When such theories are presented without critique – or worse, as truth – they move from being [pedagogical tools](#) to instruments of indoctrination.

For higher education, this distinction is crucial. Responding to conspiracy theories does not require censorship. But it does require the university and its stakeholders to take the issue seriously and put safeguards in place at micro, meso and macro levels to maintain the integrity of academic inquiry.

What educators and students can do

Preventing the spread of conspiracy theories starts with self-awareness. Faculty members should regularly review their materials, their assumptions and their sources. They might ask: am I modelling the kind of reasoning I want students to develop? Have I unintentionally framed fringe views as legitimate?

One helpful resource is the “baloney detection kit”, a toolbox by Carl Sagan. It encourages individuals to recognise faulty logic, unsupported claims and misleading argumentation – not only in others’ work but also in their own. Professional development in areas such as media literacy, logical fallacies and cognitive biases can help strengthen mental immunity.

When colleagues begin to drift into conspiratorial territory, early, careful and respectful engagement may help. Framing such discussions around shared educational values, like protecting students’ intellectual [autonomy](#), can open the door to honest reflection without creating confrontation and/or false accusations.

Students, too, have a role. They can ask for clarification when claims sound suspect, compare sources or consult with other faculty members. Institutions should ensure students know where to turn, and that reporting structures are accessible and trusted.

What institutions can do

Universities cannot afford to wait for problems to surface. They need proactive policies that strike a balance between academic freedom and academic responsibility. Codes of conduct should make clear that evidence-based teaching is not optional. Reporting channels must be confidential, responsive and non-punitive.

But policy alone is insufficient. Institutions must also build a culture that values epistemic integrity. This includes offering training on misinformation, integrating critical reasoning into curriculum support and publicly reinforcing their commitment to truth-seeking.

When conspiracy theories do emerge in classrooms, leadership must speak clearly. A commitment to pluralism does not mean suspending the distinction between evidence and speculation. Diversity of thought must not come at the expense of epistemic coherence.

Holding the line without closing minds

Faculty who spread conspiracy theories present a real, yet still under-researched, challenge. They force institutions to confront uncomfortable questions about the limits of freedom, the role of trust and the meaning of education itself. The solution is not to shut down debate but to raise its standards. By equipping students and educators with the tools to evaluate claims critically, and by embedding evidence-informed thinking and action habits in institutional

culture, universities can protect both freedom and reason. Because when classrooms become echo chambers, the university loses what makes it matter.

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Additional Links

- The advice above is based on the research paper: Siegel, S. T., Troxler, E., & Daumiller, M. H. (2025). [“We don’t need no thought control”: Dealing with faculty members spreading conspiracy theories](#). *Higher Education*.
- COMPACT Education Group. (2020). [Guide to conspiracy theories](#).
- Sagan, C. (1997). *The demon-haunted world: Science as a candle in the dark*. Ballantine.