

Understanding the Campus Expression Climate

Three-Year Report:
Fall 2019, 2020, and 2021
General Audiences

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campus
expression
survey

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About This Report

In recent years, concern over the state of free speech and open inquiry on college campuses has been increasing. As part of their college experience, students should learn to think critically about important, and sometimes controversial, topics. For this to happen, campuses must welcome and encourage respectful discussion and debate. However, more and more frequently, students and faculty report being silenced — and even feeling threatened — after expressing their perspectives on controversial topics. When censorship and cancellation replace open inquiry and constructive disagreement, the quality of education and research in institutions of higher learning is at stake.

In 2018, Heterodox Academy (HxA) created the Campus Expression Survey (CES) to empirically examine how often and why college students censor their opinions when discussing controversial topics. HxA has administered this survey to more than 1,300 U.S. undergraduate students each of the past three years (i.e., [2019, 2020, and 2021](#)).

In this report, we have combined all three years of data (total $N = 4,310$) to examine how campus climate has changed and/or stayed the same from 2019 until 2021. We focus on variables for which there is data across all three years. Given the widespread impact of the pandemic, we also discuss student responses on COVID-19 questions from fall 2020 and fall 2021.

For details on the analysis and methods, raw data, codebook, and analysis code for this three-year special report, visit heterodoxacademy.org/CES.

Executive Summary

- 1** **From 2019 to 2021, there were noticeable demographic changes** to the composition of college students, including a marked increase in the proportion of students identifying as non binary (0.2% in 2020 to 5.0% in 2021) and transgender (1.4% in 2020 to 4.3% in 2021).
- 2** **Students' reluctance to discuss gender, politics, race, religion, and sexual orientation** was consistently high and increased slightly from 2019 to 2021.
- 3** **The percentage of students who believe the climate on their campus** prevents some people from saying things they believe increased from 54.7% in 2019 to 63.5% in 2021.
- 4** **Students overwhelmingly — and increasingly — agreed** with statements supporting the value of open inquiry and free expression in colleges. For instance, 85.4% of students in 2020, and 87.4% of students in 2021, agreed that colleges should welcome students and professors with many different points of view.
- 5** **Political party played the largest role** in whether students were reluctant to discuss controversial topics. Democrat students were least reluctant to discuss politics, race, gender, and sexual orientation, while Libertarian and Republican students were most reluctant.

Changes in Social and Educational Contexts and the Demographic Composition of College Students

In the three years that this report spans, several major events have affected college student life, and society as a whole, including:

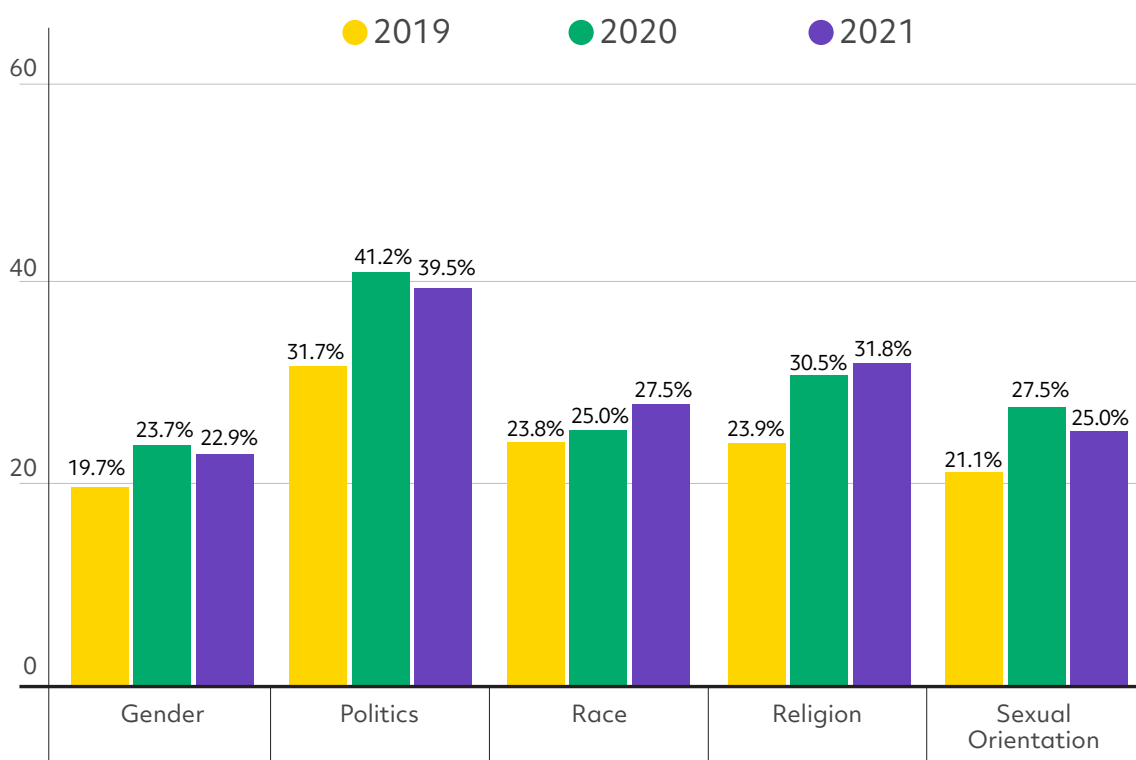
- **The contentious 2020 presidential election**, which took place in November 2020, immediately after we completed data collection for fall 2020.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic**, which began shortly after our fall 2019 data collection ended, and continued to impact higher education through our fall 2020 and fall 2021 data collections.
 - This directly impacted college student academic life in many ways; most notably, participants in our survey reported that only 11% were attending classes fully or primarily in person in fall 2020, compared with 63% in fall 2021.
- **The trend of increasing mental health concerns among college students.**
 - Many national surveys reported increasingly high numbers of depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. Although our survey did not focus on this, we did ask about loneliness: 32% of students reported “often” feeling lonely in fall 2020, compared with 22% in fall 2021.

Against the backdrop of these nationwide changes and events, we also noticed shifts in the demographic makeup of college students in our samples, including:

- A marked increase in the proportion of students identifying as **non binary gender**, from 0.2% in 2020 to 5.0% in 2021
- A marked increase in the proportion of students identifying as **transgender**, from 1.4% in 2020 to 4.3% in 2021
- Slight changes to **political party membership**, with more Independent students and students of “other” political affiliations, and fewer Republican students in recent years
- Slight changes to **religious identification**, with more atheist/agnostic students and fewer Christian students in recent years
- **No notable differences** in other variables such as year in school, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and political ideology

Consistency in Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics

Overall, the percentage of students who expressed reluctance to discuss at least one of the five core controversial topics remained consistently high each year:



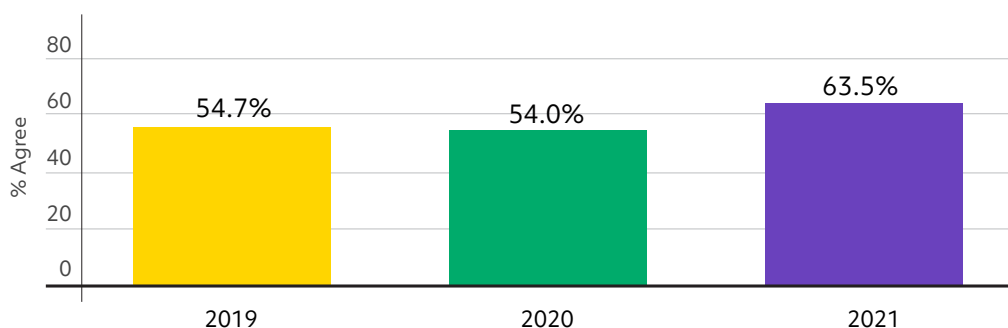
Note: The percentages in the above chart may differ slightly compared with percentages reported in prior years' reports on our website, due to slight differences in how data was weighted in 2019.

This consistency across three separate waves of data collection offers some evidence of the reliability of these findings. There were slight differences in reluctance in the following areas:

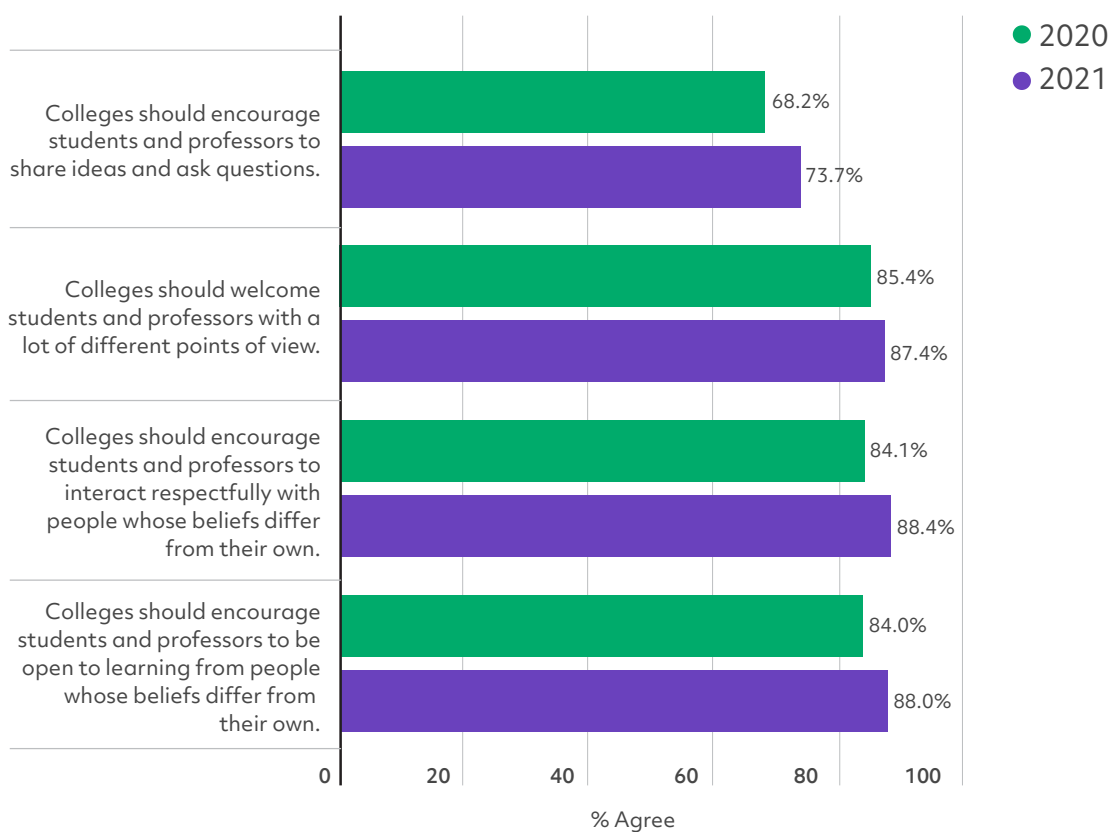
- Reluctance to discuss politics peaked in fall 2020. (Note: this was during the run-up to the 2020 presidential election.)
- There were slight increases in reluctance to discuss race and religion over time.

High Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics Contradicts the Values Students Wish to See

Overall, students increasingly agreed with the statement: "The climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive."

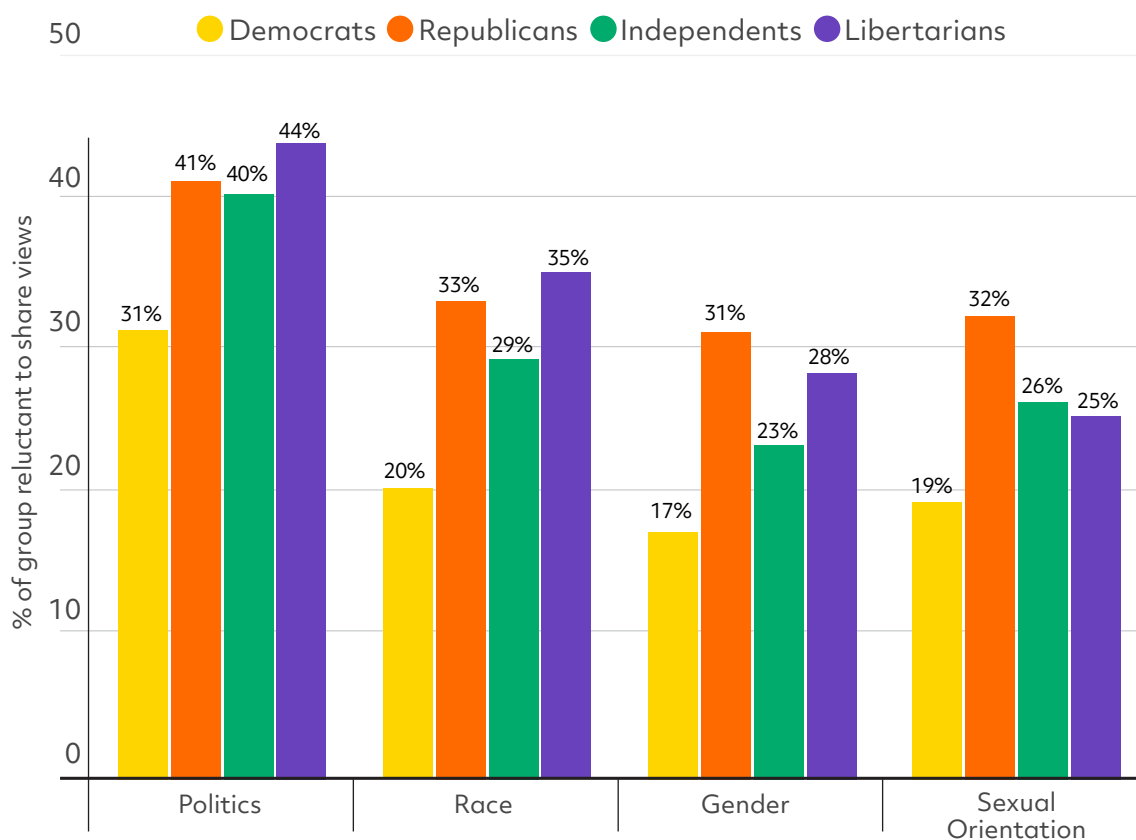


Yet, students overwhelmingly agreed with statements supporting the value of open inquiry and free expression in colleges:



Who was more reluctant to talk about what? Students' political party played the largest role.

In each of the three years, statistical tests consistently revealed that Democrat students were less reluctant to discuss politics, race, gender, and sexual orientation (compared with other political parties).



For ease of interpretation, the graph on this page shows average percentages across each of the three years (statistical tests were conducted on each year separately).

We also examined other demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, religion, gender) and found other consistent effects across all three years. Details on these can be found in our Research Report, available at heterodoxacademy.org/CES.

About Heterodox Academy

Heterodox Academy is a nonpartisan nonprofit that works to improve the quality of research and education by promoting open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement in institutions of higher learning. Our community is made up of more than 5,000 professors, educators, administrators, and students who come from a range of institutions—from large research universities to community colleges. They represent nearly every discipline and are distributed throughout 49 states and across the globe.

Acknowledgments

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The support of our generous donors makes HxA's work possible. If you are interested in making a gift, please visit heterodoxacademy.org/donate or contact dinsmore@heterodoxacademy.org.

