

heterodox academy

Understanding the Campus Expression Climate

FALL 2019

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campus
expression
survey



About Heterodox Academy

Heterodox Academy is a non-partisan, non-profit organization committed to improving research and education in colleges and universities by advancing open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. We advance this mission by increasing public awareness to elevate the importance of these issues on campus; developing tools that professors, administrators, and others can deploy to assess and then improve their campus and disciplinary cultures; publicly recognizing model institutions, groups, and individuals; and cultivating communities of practice among teachers, researchers, and administrators.

[Learn more at heterodoxacademy.org.](https://heterodoxacademy.org)

Supporting documentation is available at heterodoxacademy.org:

Methods and descriptives

Cross-tabs

The following will be available at heterodoxacademy.org by June 1, 2020:

Full data set

Codebook

Data visualization interface

Campus Expression Survey (CES) Administration Manual



“Engagement with people who are broadly diverse, in terms of experience and ideas, is essential for promoting understanding in both senses of that word: knowledge and empathy.”

—NADINE STROSSEN
MEMBER, HETERODOX ACADEMY ADVISORY COUNCIL
FORMER PRESIDENT, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION

Executive Summary

When students sit on the sidelines of their own education—unable or unwilling to share their views on a range of challenging topics—their learning suffers, as does that of their peers. Reports show that some students are reluctant to speak their opinion in the classroom, censoring themselves in discussions. Self-censorship in a university setting is of great concern not only to educators but to the society as a whole, as today's college students are tomorrow's leaders. To better understand this issue, Heterodox Academy surveyed a representative sample of U.S. college students. We asked 1,580 students how reluctant (versus comfortable) they felt in the classroom giving their opinions on politics, race, religion, sexuality, gender, and noncontroversial topics. We also examined the potential consequences that students feared if they spoke openly.

The survey indicated that 58.5% of students were somewhat or very reluctant to give their views on at least one of the five controversial topics. Politics elicited the highest amount of reluctance (32% of the sample being reluctant, with an average reluctance of 24% across topics). Students from different demographic categories were reluctant to speak about different kinds of topics. For example, White students were especially reluctant to give their views on matters related to race. Women were more reluctant to give their views on politics and religion, while men were more reluctant to give their views on gender. Republican students were more reluctant than students who identified with other political groups to give their views on politics, race, sexuality, and gender. We also report reluctance estimates by academic discipline, religion, and geographic location. Importantly, we also found that reluctant students most feared being criticized for their views by other students.

This report offers some context for the national conversation about how and why the expression climate is changing on campus. We conclude by providing specific recommendations for administrators, professors, and students interested in improving the expression climate on campus, with an eye toward supporting students' ability to engage some of the most challenging issues facing Americans today.

The Problem

Open inquiry – the ability to ask questions and share ideas without risk of consequence – sits at the heart of American colleges and universities. In pursuit of the core academic mission of higher education, students and faculty must be able to ask a range of questions and put nuanced ideas into the conversation. A key aspect of this conversation is that diverse people with diverging perspectives come together to evaluate claims, deepen understanding, expose falsehoods, and advance solutions to the world’s toughest problems. Only when new ideas and perspectives are considered can we gain new insights and make progress.

55% *of respondents agreed that the climate on their campus prevents students from saying things they believe*

Campus expression has become a hotly contested issue in recent years. Some media¹ outlets have reported that universities are suffering from an epidemic of speech suppression and political correctness. Other media² outlets have reported there is nothing to worry about, aside from a few isolated incidents. Researchers estimate that 61% of students believe their campus climate prevents people from speaking freely³ and 54% agree they have stopped themselves from sharing an idea or opinion in class.⁴ Heterodox Academy wanted to understand more deeply what topics students are not willing to talk about and why. We created a survey instrument—the Campus Expression Survey (CES) – and commissioned a national survey of university students that provided answers to these questions:

1. *How reluctant are students to give their views on specific topics in a classroom? Specifically, we asked about politics, race, religion, sexuality, gender, and, as a control, noncontroversial topics.*
2. *Which students are most reluctant to give their views?*
3. *What are students afraid will happen if they give their views on controversial topics?*

Survey Method

We surveyed 1,580 college students (ages 18 to 24) across the United States. The sample was stratified by region, race, and gender-based on proportions reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (for region) and previous Gallup-Knight data collections (for race and gender). We asked each student how comfortable or reluctant they were to give their views on six topics: politics, race, religion, sexuality, gender, and noncontroversial topics. If students endorsed any level of reluctance on a topic, they were subsequently asked to report their level of concern for six possible repercussions, listed in Figure 4. For full information regarding our sample, methods, and data analysis, please see Supporting Documentation, available at heterodoxacademy.org.

¹Lindsay, T. (2019, May 31). New Report: Most College Students Agree that Campus Free Speech is Waning. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomlindsay/2019/05/31/new-report-most-college-students-agree-that-campus-free-speech-is-waning/#4507daed1433>.

²Sachs, J. A. (2018, March 16). The ‘campus free speech crisis’ is a myth. Here are the facts. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/03/16/the-campus-free-speech-crisis-is-a-myth-here-are-the-facts/>.

³Jones, J. M. (2018, March 12). More U.S. College Students Say Campus Climate Deters Speech. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/229085/college-students-say-campus-climate-deters-speech.aspx>.

⁴Naughton, K. A. (2017, October). Speaking Freely - What Students Think about Expression at American Colleges. Retrieved from <https://www.thefire.org/research/publications/student-surveys/student-attitudes-free-speech-survey/student-attitudes-free-speech-survey-full-text/>.



Question 1: Which topics elicit self-censorship?

Answer: Politics, Race, and Religion

First, we replicate estimates of similar reports in finding that 55% of college students in our survey strongly or somewhat agree that “the climate on [their] campus prevents people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive.” We drilled deeper by asking about specific topics that students might be reluctant to discuss. Students were most reluctant to give their views on politics, with 32% of all students being very or somewhat reluctant (henceforth called reluctant). This statistic means that approximately 1 of every 3 students may be sitting on the sidelines of classroom learning, hesitant to join conversations about one of the most consequential and universally relevant topics discussed in higher education. Approximately 24% of students were reluctant to give their views on race or religion and approximately 20% were reluctant to give their views on sexuality and gender (see Figure 1).

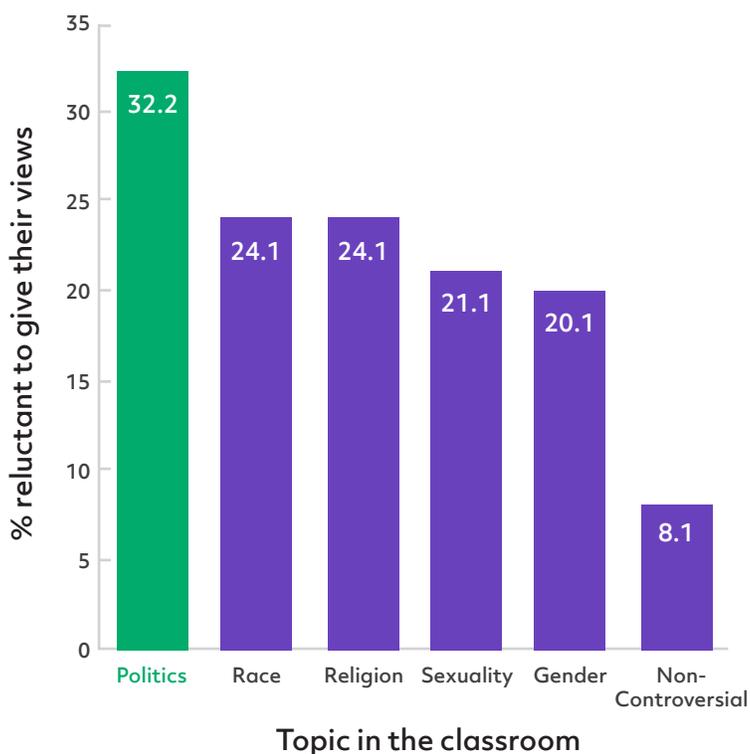


Figure 1. Approximately 1 in 3 students (32%) are very or somewhat reluctant to give their views on politics in classroom discussion

These data support the claim that many students are indeed hesitant to give their opinion in college classrooms. Maybe their reluctance was driven by a lack of interest or knowledge, rather than by fear of a hostile reaction. However, when we compare the average reluctance on the five controversial topics (24%) to reluctance when asked to give their opinion on “noncontroversial topics” (8%), we see a heightened reluctance to discuss the controversial topics. Interestingly, though, classrooms did facilitate student viewpoint expression somewhat: when asked about their comfort discussing controversial topics with a stranger on campus, a large majority (72%) of students were not comfortable doing so.



Question 2: Who is reluctant to give their opinion?

Answer: Depends on the topic

Besides understanding which topics students were reluctant to discuss, we sought to understand which students were not speaking up. Interestingly, most students were reluctant to give their views on just one or two topics; a small number of students were reluctant to talk about all controversial topics (see Figure 2).

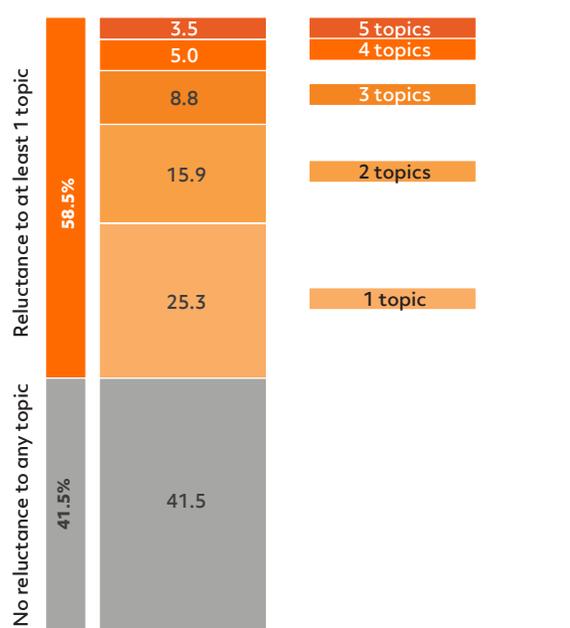


Figure 2. Few students are reluctant to share their views on all controversial topics in classroom discussion

To explore whether certain groups of students were particularly reluctant to discuss certain topics, rates of reluctance across demographic characteristics (e.g., race, religion) were examined. Note that only significant⁵ results are highlighted in this report. For full cross-tabs of all of the data, please see supporting documentation at heterodoxacademy.org.

Regarding gender⁶... Females were more reluctant than males to give their views on politics (37% vs. 26%) and religion (28% vs. 19%). Males were more reluctant than females to give their views on gender (23% vs. 17%).

Regarding race... White students were more reluctant than any other racial group to give their views on race (31% vs. 17% averaged across all races except White).

⁵Significance was determined by chi-squared tests with appropriately powered groups.

⁶In our sample too few participants identified as a transgender or non-binary to draw meaningful conclusions about differences.



Regarding political affiliation... Republican students (ranging from 29 – 37% depending on topic) were more reluctant than Democrats (15 - 27%) or Independents (21 - 31%) to give their views on politics, race, sexuality, and gender. Please see Figure 3.

Regarding university region... Students in the Midwest (30%) were more reluctant than students in any other region (Northeast =21%, South = 23%, West = 23%) to give their views on race. Also, students in the West (30%) were more reluctant to give their views on religion than any other region (Northeast =21%, South = 22%, Midwest = 24%).

Regarding academic area... Students in the arts and education were far more reluctant to give their views on politics (both 42% reluctant) than students in biological science or business (both 34%), or humanities, social science, or engineering (25%, 24%, 23%, respectively).

Regarding religion... Christian students were more reluctant than non-Christian students to give their views on politics (35% vs. 20%). Atheist (37% reluctant) and Agnostic students (28%) were more reluctant to give their views on religion compared to other students (Christian = 19%, Jewish = 30%, Muslim = 12%, Buddhist = 17%, Hindu = 19%).

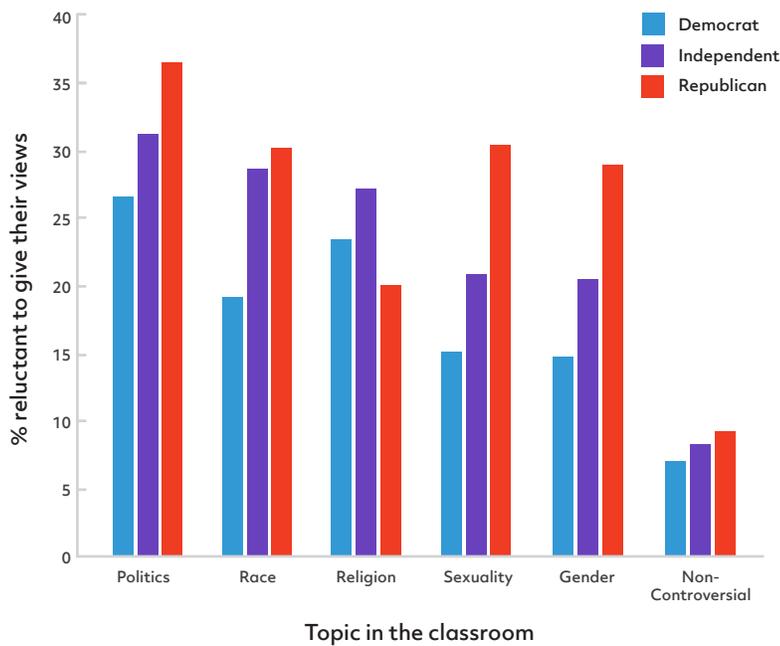


Figure 3. Republican students are more reluctant than other political groups to discuss a number of controversial topics

Question 3: What are students afraid of?

Answer: Each other

If students reported being somewhat or very reluctant to give their views on a controversial topic in the classroom, we followed up with six statements that offer potential reasons for their reluctance, and we asked respondents to indicate how much they agree with each statement. These analyses excluded students who share their views openly on each topic. Figure 4 shows the average frequency with which each reason was endorsed across topics. Although students are most concerned that their fellow students will criticize their views as offensive, professors' reactions are also notably present in the minds of these students.

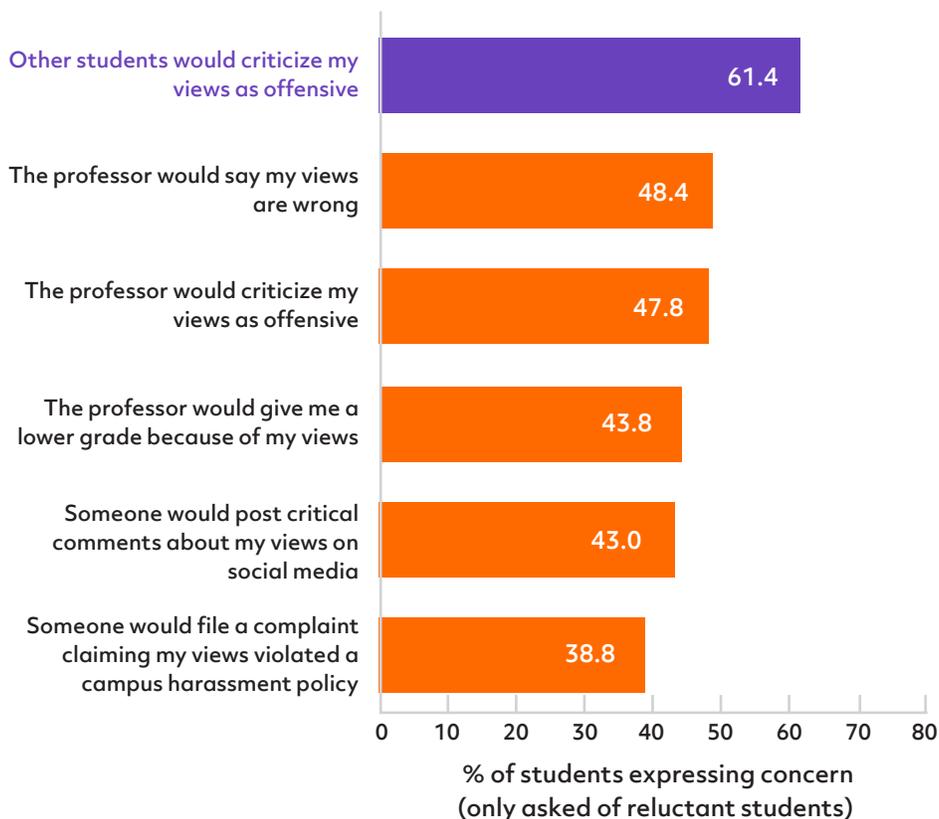


Figure 4. Averaged across controversial topics, students are most concerned that other students would criticize their views as offensive

Three main survey takeaways

1. *Reluctance varied by topic, with politics, race, and religion being particularly fraught.*
2. *Most students were reluctant to give their opinions about at least one controversial topic. Who is reluctant differed by topic and demographic.*
3. *Respondents were most concerned that other students would criticize their views as offensive.*

Given these findings, what is the problem?

The data show that a large number of students do not feel comfortable expressing viewpoints during class discussions about a variety of sensitive topics. This is dangerous for at least two reasons. First, college students are not developing the skill of crafting an opinion in a public setting. The current college population is more conflict-averse than those in the past⁷ and a university classroom could be a place where they could learn the essential democratic skill of constructive disagreement. Second, in an environment that restricts the range of acceptable viewpoints (or, at least, is perceived to do so), students get little practice hearing opinions that differ from their own. They do not hear other students' novel ideas nor discover that their fellow students may reach different conclusions from the same set of facts. They also do not learn that some students may draw on different facts. Research has shown that perspective-taking⁸ can have immense benefits. Students cannot reap those benefits, however, if they never encounter a perspective different from their own.

At a broader societal level, these findings suggest that nuances within important topics are not being examined by the nation's future leaders. How will future politicians and corporate leaders make intelligent choices about policies to address racial and gender disparities, for example, if they have not explored these issues openly and honestly? Democracy is not a way to reach national agreement; it is a way of living together despite our disagreements. College classrooms can and should be advanced training rooms for democracy, especially in our time of rising political polarization.

This report offers some context for the national conversation about how and why the expression climate is changing on campus. We conclude by providing specific recommendations for administrators, professors, and students interested in improving the expression climate on campus, with an eye toward supporting students' ability to engage some of the most challenging issues facing Americans today.

⁷ Twenge, J. M. (2014). *Generation Me - Revised and Updated: Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. Simon and Schuster.

⁸ Hoever, I. J., Van Knippenberg, D., Van Ginkel, W. P., & Barkema, H. G. (2012). "Fostering team creativity: perspective taking as key to unlocking diversity's potential." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97, 982-996.



What to do next?

Heterodox Academy is committed to improving research and education in colleges and universities by advancing open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. We offer free tools on our website for campus administrators, professors, and students who wish to create positive change on their home campus. The following are specific ways to address the concerning findings provided in this report.

Campus Administrators



Administer the Campus Expression Survey at your college. We have an Administration Manual and scoring instructions for anyone's use on our website. Discover what conversations are not taking place on your college campus and then plan events or create taskforces to increase open discussion on this topic.



Include language in faculty job ads that explicitly mentions your campus's appreciation for scholars who approach problems and questions from a range of vantage points. We provide sample language on our website.



Encourage respectful debate by bringing disagreeing speaker pairs to your campus through the Village Square's Respect + Rebellion project.

Professors



Become a member of Heterodox Academy. Membership is free and includes access to member-only events and resources.



Include language in your syllabi that clarifies you want students to share their views. We provide sample syllabus language on our website.



Assign *All Minus One*, an accessible edition of Chapter 2 of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, in your classes. The book is available free on our website.



Model and teach students that some disagreement and even discomfort during a conversation about a controversial topic can be a great learning experience.



Look for institutional service opportunities that provide a vehicle for advancing open inquiry on your campus.

Students



Choose a college that excels in fostering civil and diverse debate.



During your admissions tours, ask questions to discern the expression climate on each campus. Our list of 6 Questions to Ask can help.



Join or start a chapter of BridgeUSA.

Please visit heterodoxacademy.org to browse our always-expanding catalog of tools and resources.

Acknowledgements

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