

Campus Free Expression and Student Self-Silencing: Why Students Don't Feel Comfortable Expressing Their Views

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, U.S. college administrators have faced increasing pressure on campus free expression. Previous research indicated that although students believe a university education should expose them to a variety of political, social and economic viewpoints, many students reported feeling less comfortable discussing controversial issues inside and outside class with professors than talking about them with peers. The purpose of this paper is to better understand why students self-silence and how they navigate increasingly polarized campus climates.

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, U.S. college administrators across the nation faced increasing pressure on campus free expression. Students organized and protested, disinvited speakers, demanded "safe spaces," and advocated for the increased use of "trigger warnings" in their classes (Whittington, 2018). This tense wave of campus expression prompted a coordinated conservative response by the Goldwater Institute, which drafted a model bill on campus free expression in a 2017 report titled, "Campus Free Speech: A Legislative Proposal" (Kurtz, Manley & Butcher, 2017). In it, the Institute lamented the death of free expression on college campuses in the wake of speaker bans, heckler's vetoes, safe spaces, and restrictive speech policies. It also called for faculty and administrators to confront college students with "new ideas, especially ideas with which they disagree." In making a call for renewed action to protect First Amendment ideals on U.S. college campuses, the Institute proposed state legislatures pass a model bill to protect "the embattled minority of conservatives on campus against the 'politically correct' majority."

So far, nearly 20 states have passed some version of the proposal. Because the proposal was largely based on highly publicized media accounts of problems with campus free expression, it's less clear what students themselves think the problem is and how they actually navigate today's polarized campus speech environments. We set out to focus on students' free expression attitudes and behaviors and explore what students say are some of the core problems with free expression on campus. In particular, we were especially interested in how and whether students feel when expressing their views and whether and how they engage in self-silencing when their views differ from others on campus.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper recommends a series of prompts for students and their professors to discuss at the beginning of the semester, including: Exposure to this research as a basis for discussion; the importance of debate in classrooms; issues around expression in the classroom; the use of social media; building trust among peers; and mutually agreed-upon ground rules for discussion in the class.

METHOD

To investigate these issues, we relied on previous research and then conducted a series of interviews with students. In 2018, a published survey of undergraduate students at a major Southeast public university asked about their knowledge of the First Amendment, their support for free expression of unpopular opinions on campus, their experiences with controversial speakers and with controversial speech in the classroom, among other measures. An online survey of 7,000 undergraduate students resulted in 448 valid responses. One of the major findings of that survey was that while students supported campus free expression and believed a university education should expose them to multiple viewpoints, many students reported feeling more comfortable talking to their peers about controversial issues outside class than discussing such issues in class and with their professors. Furthermore, that research reported that conservative students felt less comfortable discussing controversial issues in the classroom than liberal students, and female students felt more comfortable discussing controversial issues in the classroom than did male students. These findings were consistent with another survey conducted by a separate group of researchers (Larson, McNeilly, & Ryan, 2020).

Because it was unclear from the 2018 survey exactly why students were engaging in self-silencing behaviors in the classroom, we conducted more than 40 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students at the same institution in Fall 2019 to find out more about student engagement with controversial topics. We interviewed students in specific demographic groups including African American students, conservative students and religious students, among others. Our interviews have been transcribed, and we are currently reviewing the transcripts to unearth more about student self-silencing. The purpose of this paper is to understand more about why students self-silence and how they navigate increasingly polarized campus climates.

REFERENCES

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FINDINGS

1. First, students are, as always, concerned about how their peers will judge their views, particularly if those views are conservative in nature. Typical of this finding was this student: **"I think the campus allows free speech, but I would say that with students, like, if you say you're Republican, you're going to get crap for it."** Another student remarked: **"...you just feel like you're walking on eggshells all the time now just because you never know what someone else believes, and then you don't want to upset them by taking a different perspective or offending them in any way."**
2. Students expressed concerns that their comments in class would be shared on social media, potentially subjecting them to trolling or harassment online. As one student put it: **"As soon as I walk out of that place, I cannot say anything because ... I will be hunted down on social media and just absolutely trashed on. If I say anything now, that could quite literally destroy any future prospects I have with any jobs, with any significant other I happen to be going with."**
3. Students also self-silenced out of concern that their professors might have different political views and would assess their work harshly or poorly as a result. One student stated: **"If I really believe in something that's like very hard on the conservative side, but I know my professor is more democratic, then I probably wouldn't put all the views that I really think should be true into that paper."** Another student remarked: **"I've had a couple of really good professors in the political science department, but I've also seen the opposite of that, and I've had a couple of professors that have given me work back that I feel like was very unfairly graded because they didn't like what it said not necessarily reflecting of the quality of work per se."**
4. Finally, students' comments reflected a lack of experience debating different viewpoints, particularly different political viewpoints, prior to arriving in college. Typical of this view was this student's remark: **"...if somebody asked me about our political ideals, I'll share them, but I know a lot of times people are scared to share their opinions, so I don't want to be the one shoving my own political ideals down your throat."** Similarly, another student remarked: **"...And so a bunch of people take that the wrong way if I'm not, like, totally on their side, and I just don't want to start an argument. That's the main thing. So, if I'm in a situation where I feel like it's going to go the wrong way, I'll usually just not talk."**