FREE EXPRESSION AND CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SYSTEM

A report by

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Executive Summary

We surveyed students from eight institutions that are part of the University of North Carolina System, to better understand their experiences related to free expression and constructive dialogue. This work builds on a study we conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2019.[1] Here, we consider how that study's conclusions vary across time and place. We also use several new approaches to improve understanding of the climate for campus political engagement. As with the initial research, this new study's design, implementation, analysis, and reporting are entirely faculty-driven.

The report on our 2019 research organized the findings into four central conclusions. The present report revisits these conclusions and reconsiders them with new data, strategies, and contexts. Specifically:

Finding 1: Faculty generally do not push political agendas in class.

We find that, across UNC System institutions, classes rarely focus on the daily give-and-take of campaigning and governing. However, classes more frequently engage with "politics" under a broader definition—controversial topics of public significance. In courses where politics comes up, students generally indicate that their instructor handled political discussions inclusively. Finally, at all but one UNC System institution, most students report no change in their ideological leaning during their university careers. We find little evidence that faculty create a highly politicized atmosphere in UNC System classrooms.

Finding 2: Campuses do not consistently achieve an atmosphere that promotes free expression.

We find that a significant number of students have concerns about stating their sincere political views in class and have self-censored because they were concerned about the potential reactions, especially from peers. Also, while most students think disruptive actions against people who have opposing viewpoints is inappropriate, a significant number of respondents see these actions as appropriate

Finding 3: Students who identify as conservative face distinctive challenges

We find that, at every institution in our study, there a clear ideological divide: self-identified conservatives express free-expression-related concerns at a far higher rate than self-identified liberals. When we consider these data along race and gender lines, differences are much smaller. We also find that self-identified liberal students have stronger preferences for socializing and taking classes with their ingroup than self-identified conservatives do.

Finding 4: Students across the political spectrum want more opportunities to engage with those who think differently

We find remarkably broad support for increasing the availability of conservative speakers. At most campuses, both self-identified liberals and self-identified moderates more often indicated that there are too few conservative speakers on their campus than that there are too few liberal speakers. Similarly, very few respondents think there are too few liberal faculty, but more think there are too few conservative faculty. And finally, while more self-identified conservative students agree with the sentiment that one's institution provides too few opportunities for constructive engagement, a substantial number of self-identified liberal students agree as well.

This report also uses new methods to answer three new, but related research questions:

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[1] Jennifer Larson, Mark McNeilly, and Timothy J. Ryan, "Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill" (released March 2, 2020). Available online at https://fecdsurveyreport.web.unc.edu/

What are students afraid to discuss?

We find racial issues to be the topic that elicits the most student discomfort. However, we also find that students hold opinions back on a *wide* range of political topics for a wide range of reasons. Inspecting students' own accounts of why they held opinions back reveals a mélange of reasons including fear of becoming ostracized from peers, "othering" comments from faculty, and simple imposter syndrome. We find no evidence that the views students hold back run afoul of university policies against harassment or discrimination.

Who is engaged?

We find that students who show higher levels of open-mindedness, who are more likely to consider others' perspectives, and who are more able to describe political groups dispassionately are less likely to be politically engaged. Similarly, students who are more likely to be politically involved have a higher tendency toward closed-mindedness, toward disliking the outgroup, and toward believing negative stereotypes about the outgroup—a pattern that has the potential to lower the appeal of campus political activities.

How can culture be improved?

We find that, while students are generally skeptical of university administration's role in promoting free expression and constructive dialogue on campus, they typically view peers and faculty as contributing positively to the campus culture. For specific political discussions, students are more likely to engage in conversations that focus on agreement, that occur in social settings, that include relatively fewer people, and that build rapport with their conversation partners. Similarly, campus events that emphasize consensus-focused over adversarial conversations are more appealing to students, especially to those students who show higher levels of open-mindedness.

In sum, we recommend that efforts to improve the campus culture for free expression and constructive dialogue be holistic and attentive to the diverse contexts in which students encounter politics. Tangibly, we suggest that the UNC system encourage researchers from member institutions to review these data, conduct their own analyses, and develop campus-specific plans for creating and evaluating their own interventions.

Part 1: Introduction

This report examines how students at University of North Carolina institutions experience politics on campus. We focus on free expression—students' ability to consider, voice, and contest perspectives from across the political spectrum. And equally, we focus on constructive dialogue—the ability to understand many points of view, and to use different perspectives to work toward a better world. These capacities are indispensable to civil society—nowhere more than within institutions that strive to educate the next generation of thinkers, inventors, and leaders.

The results we convey here are a continuation of previous work. In 2019, we surveyed over 1,000 undergraduates at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) and, in 2020, released an extensive report on our findings.[2] While that report generated substantial discussion at UNC-CH and beyond, it was the product of a single time and place. Here, we extend the previous report in three ways. First, we revisit our main conclusions and assess whether they hold up after three years (and a global pandemic). Second, we expand our focus to other institutions within the UNC System—a total of eight that reflect the system's diversity. Third, we employ new tools that help us explore more deeply several of the more provocative patterns that arose in our initial work.

Like our initial work, this report is homegrown. The research was conducted by the investigators, in consultation with partners at each participating institution. It was funded exclusively by a grant from the UNC System office. UNC System staff suggested some substantive areas of focus and encouraged the leadership of several UNC member institutions to participate in the research. But the actual conduct of the research—questionnaire design, analysis of results, and writing of this report—was done solely by the authors and campus partners.

The report is organized into five parts. Following this introduction, Part 2 describes the methods we used to conduct survey research across eight distinct institutions. Then, Part 3 revisits the four main conclusions we arrived at in our 2019 research, examining the extent to which they hold up over time and place. Part 4 moves beyond our 2019 research. Using new techniques, we report results that deepen understanding of challenges to free expression and constructive dialogue in the UNC System. Part 5 discusses our conclusions holistically and makes recommendations for next steps.

We find that UNC System institutions do face challenges concerning their cultures for free expression and constructive dialogue. However, these challenges are far more complex than many popular narratives would lead one to appreciate. Many UNC System students do indeed have significant concerns about expressing political views on campus. These concerns arise disproportionately from students who describe themselves as conservative, but they affect students of nearly all backgrounds. And contra a common narrative that liberal-leaning faculty members attempt to impose their views on the students they teach, we find that students worry about the reactions of their peers more than those of faculty.

We also begin to assess opportunities. Some concerns notwithstanding, students' appetite for constructive political discussion is strong. Unfortunately, our findings show, spheres of political engagement tend to overrepresent individuals with a more one-sided and hostile orientation to politics—which may in turn repel students with a more open-minded stance. We propose that one way to improve campus cultures concerning free expression is to expand who is involved. We suggest that such expansion might be achieved by developing spaces where students can develop trust and rapport, and engage with each other on terms that prioritize consensus building over adversity.

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[2] Larson et al., "Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill," available online at https://fecdsurveyreport.web.unc.edu/.

Part 2: Research Approach

Our research objective was to examine UNC System institutions with an eye toward better understanding the factors that lead to a positive and constructive campus atmosphere, recognizing the challenges different campuses face, and exploring opportunities to improve. The first step in carrying out this objective was to select a slate of institutions for study. We consulted with the UNC System office and settled on a slate of eight institutions (out of sixteen higher education institutions in the System) that reflected the System's diversity. UNC System President Peter Hans wrote a letter to each institution's chancellor presenting an information sheet about planned research (Appendix B) and invited them to participate. All invited institutions agreed to participate in the study.

Table 1: Participating Institutions

Institution	Undergraduate students	Pell recipients	Share Non-White	Brief profile
Appalachian State University	20,641	28%	19%	A master's level degree-granting university
NC Central University	7,953	57	95	One of five historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the UNC system.
UNC-Asheville	3,233	36	26	The only designated liberal arts institution in the UNC system.
UNC-Chapel Hill	19,845	23	44	R1 institution, considered the flagship of the UNC system.
UNC-Charlotte	30,488	35	48	R2 institution
UNC-Greensboro	19,031	48	59	R2 institution
UNC-Pembroke	8,319	49	62	A master's level degree-granting university; historically American Indian university.
UNC-Wilmington	18,031	26	23	R2 institution

Note: Information was compiled from the UNC System Office Dashboard https://myinsight.northcarolina.edu/.

These eight institutions are listed in Table 1. As the table shows, the participants include both larger and smaller schools. Those familiar with the UNC System will recognize them to be geographically dispersed throughout the state and to comprise schools with very different histories, student profiles, and cultures. There are two minority-serving institutions: NC Central University is an historically Black university, and UNC-Pembroke was established to train American Indian teachers and has a high concentration of American Indian students to this day.

The chancellor of each institution approached a faculty or staff member and asked that person to serve as an on-campus liaison for the research project. The campus liaisons, who are listed in Appendix A, served as local points of contact to help work through administrative logistics involved in conducting the research, e.g., filing requests with each institution's registrar for a list of students eligible to invite to the study. Liaisons also played an important role in developing the questionnaire, as described next.

The survey instrument had two components. First, it included a set of questions that were asked at all eight universities. We refer to this component as the *Core content*. The Core content accounted for approximately 80% of the survey's total length. Second, each participating institution had the opportunity to write its own set of questions and present them to respondents from that institution. We call this component,

which comprises the remaining 20% of the survey length, the *Modular content*. All respondents answered questions that were part of the Core. But they answered only their specific institution's modular questions.

Our starting point for the Core content was the questionnaire we fielded in 2019. We revisited each item and decided to retain or discard it, depending on the interest it garnered and its overlap with other potential questions. We also added several new items designed to address limitations and explore more deeply the patterns we previously uncovered. The research team circulated a draft of the Core content to all campus liaisons in September of 2021 to request feedback on ways to improve the instrument and to make sure it would work well at each institution. The liaisons provided abundant helpful feedback, and the Core content was finalized in early December 2021.

The purpose of the Modular content was to give each institution an opportunity to explore issues particular to its own context. The on-campus liaisons took the lead in formulating this content, and they used the opportunity in several ways: for conducting institutional self-assessment, for supporting faculty research interests, and as a pedagogical exercise in classes. Liaisons submitted proposed Modular content to the PI (Timothy Ryan) in November. The PI provided feedback on the proposed questions and helped to integrate them with the Core content but never altered the liaisons' research objectives. Because the Modular content varied across institutions and was more specific in focus, it is not part of this report—with one exception: a survey experiment designed by the PI for inclusion on UNC-CH's Modular content.[3] The project was reviewed and approved by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board in December of 2021.

Fielding the survey began with a pilot launch at UNC-CH on February 2, 2022. The other institutions followed shortly thereafter, on February 5. We sought to accrue 500 complete responses from each participating institution. To ensure we would come as close to this target as possible, invitations were sent in batches, with the number of invitees in each new batch determined by the response rate in previous batches. Table 2 shows the dates of first- and last-recorded responses at each institution. As the table shows, the fielding was largely complete by March 9, although fielding at Appalachian State University continued until April 7.[4] We also collected a racial minority oversample of 244 Black and Latino students at UNC-Charlotte. However, this data collection effort entered the field after the main part of the study was completed, and it is not part of this report.

Table 2: Fielding Dates for Each Institution

Institution	Earliest recorded response	Last recorded response
Appalachian State University	February 7, 2022	April 7, 2022
NC Central University	February 7, 2022	February 23, 2022
UNC-Asheville	February 7, 2022	February 25, 2022
UNC-Chapel Hill	February 2, 2022	March 9, 2022
UNC-Charlotte	February 7, 2022	February 25, 2022
UNC-Greensboro	February 7, 2022	March 9, 2022
UNC-Pembroke	February 7, 2022	February 24, 2022
UNC-Wilmington	February 7, 2022	March 8, 2022

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[3] Because the research team was primarily based at UNC-CH, there was no campus liaison for UNC-CH.
[4] While most participating institutions provided the research team with a list of *all* their enrolled undergraduate students, the Appalachian State University Registrar initially provided only a random sample of 3,000 students (out of more than 20,000 enrolled). This proved to be too few invitees to meet our target of 500 complete responses at Appalachian State. The research team continued to converse with the Registrar to acquire more invitees, and eventually received an additional 3,000 names on March 29. A final batch of invitations was sent to Appalachian State students on April 1, 2022, and survey fielding closed on April 7.

Students selected for the study received an email inviting them to participate in a study on free expression and constructive dialogue (Appendix D). The invitation stated that the research team was investigating "students' experiences encountering and engaging with different viewpoints on campus," and it emphasized that, due to random sampling, the email recipient had the potential to represent the views of dozens of other students at their school. It also offered the respondent a $10 gift certificate to Amazon.com as compensation for time and effort allocated to the survey. Respondents received two reminders about the survey invitation—at approximately 48 and 120 hours after the initial invitation. After one week, an invitee's invitation closed, and they could no longer complete the study.

The $10 gift cards we offered are an important attribute of our research design. When a survey is uncompensated, there is a risk that invitees who are interested in the survey topic will be more likely to respond than others. This risk is particularly acute for a survey that, like ours, centers on charged political topics. Self-selection into the survey pool could cause results to be driven disproportionately by the strongest (and perhaps most aggrieved) views. This concern is particularly acute when a survey itself becomes the focus of public controversy.[5] Incentivizing survey responses does not eliminate this risk, but it does mitigate it significantly. The incentive increases our confidence that we have fairly characterized the full range of views at each institution.

Table 3: Response Rates by Institution

Institution	Complete responses	Invitations sent	Response rate
Appalachian State University	515	6,000	8.6%
NC Central University (NCCU)	169	4,595	3.7
UNC-Asheville (UNC-A)	444	2,530	17.5
UNC-Chapel Hill (UNC-CH)	506	4,598	11.0
UNC-Charlotte (UNC-C)	497	7,651	6.5
UNC-Greensboro (UNC-G)	506	5,260	9.6
UNC-Pembroke (UNC-P)	281	4,986	5.6
UNC-Wilmington (UNC-W)	490	7,550	6.5
Total	3,408	43,170	7.9%

Table 3 shows the number of complete responses per institution, as well as the response rate— defined as the number of complete responses divided by the total number of invitations sent.[6] The net response rate pooling across all institutions was 7.9%.

It bears notice that the response rate at UNC-CH was markedly lower than the rate we observed for our 2019 study at this institution. In 2019, the response rate was 25.95%. But as Table 3 shows, in 2022 it dropped to 11%, even though we used a nearly identical recruitment procedure. We cannot be certain why the rate dropped, but we find three hypotheses plausible. First, the 2019 survey took place at a time when political issues might have been more focal in students' minds. In 2019, the university was enmeshed in a legal controversy over the disposition of a Confederate statue that had been toppled on campus, and student political activism related to this controversy was the subject of regular discussion. This context might have

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[5] In 2021, the Florida legislature adopted a law requiring an annual assessment of viewpoint diversity at public universities in Florida. The resulting survey proved controversial, and the United Faculty of Florida actively discouraged faculty and students from participating. See https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/04/05/florida-union-urges-nonparticipation-ideological-survey.

[6] The analyses we present sometimes include more than the number of complete responses, due to partial responding: individuals who began the questionnaire, but stopped before getting all the way through.

galvanized student interest in a survey on free expression issues. Second, the 2022 survey took place as the campus was gradually loosening up restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many UNC students had spent a year or more receiving purely online instruction, and therefore might have been adverse to spending time answering a computer-based survey. Third, although the compensation was identical across years, the purchasing power of $10 was not. The 2022 survey took place during a time of sharp inflation, and some students simply might have perceived the amount to be less of an enticement than it once was.

It also bears notice that the response rate varied markedly across institutions, from 3.7% at NCCU to 17.5% at UNC-A. UNC-A's high response rate might be related to it being a small liberal arts college. The two minority-serving institutions in the study—NCCU and UNC-P—had the lowest response rates. We can only speculate about the reasons for this pattern, but one possible explanation is that these institutions have a relatively low percentage of students who live on-campus.

While the response rates reported in Table 3 are lower than we expected, most are within the typical range for a modestly incentivized online survey.[7] (In contrast, the nearly 26% response rate we had in our 2019 study was exceptional.) Lower-than expected response rates resulted in us falling noticeably short of our target of 500 complete responses per institution at UNC-A, NCCU, UNC-P. At these institutions, *all* undergraduates on our registrar-provided email lists were invited to participate. But because the institutions themselves are small, fewer than 500 people completed the survey. (We fell slightly short at UNC-C and UNC-W as well but were close enough—three responses short in one case and ten in the other—that we decided the administrative overhead to launch an additional recruitment wave was not justified.) Low response rates are not a *per se* problem for inference as long as the individuals who do respond are reflective of the sampling frame, and as long as researchers accrue a critical mass of respondents within key comparison groups.

Tables C1-C8 in the appendix report sample demographics and compare them to benchmarks within each institution. Our samples generally come close to the benchmarks within each institution. However, our sample somewhat overrepresents women and first-year students. This disparity arises because of higher response rates within these groups.[8] It is possible to probe how such imbalances might bear on a survey's conclusions by conducting subgroup analysis (e.g. comparing first-year students to fourth-year students within a particular institution). When we conduct such analyses, we find generally stable patterns across demographic groups, but we leave a thorough exploration of such trends to future investigators (see Part 5).

Because this research focuses on student political engagement, we are particularly interested in the distribution of political orientations within our sample. To assess political orientations, we examine responses to a measure of political ideology that was included in the survey's Core content: respondents were asked how liberal or conservative they consider themselves to be. There were 7 response options ranging from "Extremely liberal" to "Extremely conservative" (including a neutral midpoint for "Moderate; middle of the road"), plus two additional options for "None of these" and "Haven't thought much about this."[9] We

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[7] By way of comparison, the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment, a high effort survey of university students, had a 13% response rate for its Fall 2021 (American College Health Association. 2022. *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment III: Undergraduate Student Executive Summary Fall 2021*. Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association). This is in line with unsolicited one-off email surveys of students having modest response rates, even if incentivized (see Daikeler, Jessica, Michael Bošnjak, and Katja Lozar Manfreda. 2020. "Web Versus Other Survey Modes: An Updated and Extended Meta-Analysis Comparing Response Rates." Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology 8(3): 513–39.)

[8] We sought to minimize the disparate representation across class years by using stratified sampling. However, we underestimated the extent to which response rates would vary across class year, so some imbalance remains.

[9] This measurement approach is inspired by a Political Science literature suggesting that political ideology is best conceptualized as a social identity. We do not presume that the self-identified liberals or conservatives in our sample subscribe to any particular principles or have any particular slate of policy positions. We only note that they see

categorize individuals who chose one of these last two options—or who skipped the question—as having an undefined ideological identification.

Table 4: Self-described Ideology, by University (column percentages)

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Liberal	57%	41%	67%	59%	47%	53%	30%	45%
Moderate	17	25	11	14	18	17	19	21
Conservative	17	5	8	15	19	10	22	23
Undefined	9	29	13	11	16	21	29	12
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 4 shows, by university, the percentage of respondents who chose each category. Clearly, students who identify as liberal are well represented: they are the largest category at every institution. The other categories are less well represented but still numerous enough to allow for analysis and comparison. (One common threshold for an analytically useful comparison point is 30 cases.) The one exception is at NCCU, where there are only nine self-identified conservatives in our sample. Because summary statistics based on just nine cases have the potential to be misleading, we intentionally omit NCCU conservatives as an analytical category in the tables that follow.

In the United States, racial minorities groups are commonly associated with left-leaning politics. As such, it might strike some as surprising that the proportion of self-identified liberal students is *lowest* at the two minority-serving institutions in our study: NCCU and UNC-P. In fact, this result is entirely consistent with research showing that even though racial minorities (particularly Black Americans) disproportionately support Democratic political candidates, they vary markedly in their ideological self-conceptions.[10]

The conventionally calculated 95% margin of error for our study is plus-or-minus 1.5 percentage points for the pooled sample and 4.4 percentage points within each university (assuming 500 responses). The margin of error will increase for smaller categories (such as liberals within a particular university). Margin of error statistics such as these always characterize uncertainty related to random sampling error. They do not characterize other possible biases, such as self-selection into a study.

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themselves as belonging to the liberal or conservative "teams." See Kinder and Kalmoe, *Neither Liberal Nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public* (Chicago University Press, 2017) for a book-length discussion of the voluminous research on this topic.

[10] See Tasha Philpot, *Conservative but Not Republican: The Paradox of Party Identification and Ideology Among African Americans* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Part 3: 2020 Findings Revisited

As we discuss in Part 1, our 2019 study of UNC-Chapel Hill challenged some of the prevailing narratives about political engagement on a college campus. A primary objective of the current study is to assess how much these conclusions are the product of a single time and place. Was UNC-CH of 2019 unique? Or was it a microcosm of the patterns that exist at exist at other North Carolina public institutions? To answer these questions, we revisit each of our four main conclusions in our 2020 report in turn, paying attention to cross-institutional differences.[11]

Finding 1: Faculty generally do not push political agendas in class.

Our 2020 report contained positive news about how faculty approach politics in their classes. As we summarized our results, "Students say that (when politics come up in class) the majority of their UNC professors do try to discuss both sides of political issues and encourage opinions from across the political spectrum." We supported this conclusion in two ways. First, we examined how commonly students perceived politics to come up in their classes. We found that political discussions were limited to a small proportion of classes. Second, we examined students' perceptions of their instructors' stance toward political disagreement. We found that most survey respondents perceived their instructors to encourage participation from students across the political spectrum.

Methods

We revisit these questions using a survey tool we refer to as the Classroom Sampler. Early in our survey, respondents were asked to list all of the courses that they took in the Fall 2021 semester. They could list up to five courses. (If a student took more than five courses, they were told to list any five.) Then, the survey software randomly chose one of the listed courses for detailed questioning. The advantage of this technique is that it generates a representative cross-section of student experiences, while also allowing us to ask questions that are objective and specific. In contrast, when a survey asks respondents to generalize across a range of experiences (e.g. by asking whether the respondent agrees or disagrees that "Students at my institution are shielded from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable or even deeply offensive"), there is a risk that a small number of memorable episodes will carry exaggerated influence.

For the class that was randomly chosen for detailed questioning, we asked two distinct questions (an improvement over just one in the 2019 survey) about how often politics came up. First, we asked:

> How often did topics that are **directly political** come up in this class? By 'directly political,' we mean the statements and actions of people who hold—or are running for—official governmental positions. Examples of directly political topics would include:
>
> Discussion of a bill pending in the North Carolina legislature
> Discussion of public statements by a candidate running for the United States Congress
> Discussion of Joe Biden's or Donald Trump's policy record

Second, we asked:

> How often did **indirectly political** topics come up in this class? By "indirectly political," we mean almost any controversial topic of public significance. Examples of indirectly political topics would include:

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[11] Here, we have taken the liberty to reword the conclusions to add vigor and clarity. Nevertheless, they correspond to the four main themes discussed in the Executive Summary of our 2020 report.

A discussion of the proper role of religion in society
A discussion of the ethics of eating animal meat
A discussion of race relations in the United States
A discussion of campus policies for masking or vaccination during the Covid pandemic

The response options for both questions were "Never," "A few times throughout the semester," "Perhaps every week or two," "Most class meetings," and "Almost every class meeting."

As might be clear, we sought to ground the respondent's understanding of politics. At first blush, a student who reported frequent political discussions in a biology class might strike some as unusual, and perhaps a sign of political issues intruding where they do not belong. But if the student is referring to conversations about bioethics or the safety of genetically modified food products, these discussions take on very different meaning. We asked two separate questions to better infer what students are referring to when they indicate politics came up in class.

For the chosen class, we additionally asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement, "The course instructor encouraged participation from liberals and conservatives alike." There were five response options ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree," and including a neutral midpoint. The purpose of this question was to gauge respondents' perceptions of their instructor's posture in the classroom. In many college classes, politics can properly be the subject of conversation. The question is intended to assess whether students see their instructor as engaging with such topics in an inclusive way.

Finally, we examined the evolution of students' political views directly. To do so, we asked respondents two questions. First, we asked them to report what their political leanings were "when you first came to [respondent's school]." Second, and on the same screen, we asked them to report their political leanings "as of today." Both questions had a standard set of seven response options ranging from "Extremely liberal" to "Extremely conservative," with a "Moderate; middle of the road" mid-point. And both questions also allowed respondents to report that they were "None of these," or that they "Haven't thought much about this." (The second question is the one we have already used to characterize ideological leanings across our universities in Table 4 above.) Using these two measures, we can construct a measure of ideological change over time. (Or, to be more precise, self-perceptions of the same.)

Analysis

Table 5 summarizes responses to these questions by reporting the percentage of students who report politics coming up at "most class meetings," or more often than that—first for the direct measure, and second for the indirect measure.

Table 5: Percentage of Classes that Talk about Politics in Most Class Meetings

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Directly Political	5%	5%	8%	8%	3%	3%	5%	4%
Indirectly Political	20	16	30	22	13	14	9	17

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of students at each institution who indicate that politics came up in a randomly-chosen class at most class meetings, or more often than that.

The first result that stands out is that, across universities, classes where politics directly comes up are rare: never more than eight percent of the classes chosen for analysis. As is to be expected, we find that indirectly political classes are more common. They range from a low of 9 percent of classes at UNC-P to more than triple that at UNC-A.

Table 6: Percentage Who *Disagree* that "The course instructor encouraged participation from liberals and conservatives alike" (Classes that Touch on Politics), by Self-described Ideology

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Liberals	6%	13%	2%	2%	2%	6%	2%	3%
Moderates	8	8	6	0	7	8	21	6
Conservatives	7	--	11	11	9	16	10	12

Note: Analysis is limited to the 36% of courses for which the respondent said that politics came up in the course more than "never."

Table 6 reports the percentage of respondents who *disagree* with the proposition that their course instructor encouraged participation from liberals and conservatives alike. Because this question is only applicable to courses that engaged in politics in some way, we limit the analysis to instances where the respondent said (in response to the "indirect" political measure described above) that politics came up more than "never." Additionally, we segment the results by the respondent's self-described political orientation: liberal, moderate, or conservative. Because we are examining the percentage of respondents who *disagree* that their instructor was inclusive, most people would agree that low numbers are desirable.

Concerns that one's instructor does not have an inclusive approach to class political discussions are rare. At six out of eight institutions, self-described conservative respondents report somewhat more dissatisfaction than others. This result might be to be expected, given that university faculty are disproportionately liberal. But even among self-described conservatives, the proportion who disagree with the statement never exceeds 16 percent. (And even this result amplifies discontent, since the table excludes class where politics never came up—64% of classes.)

Figure 1: Self-perceptions of Ideological Change Over Time
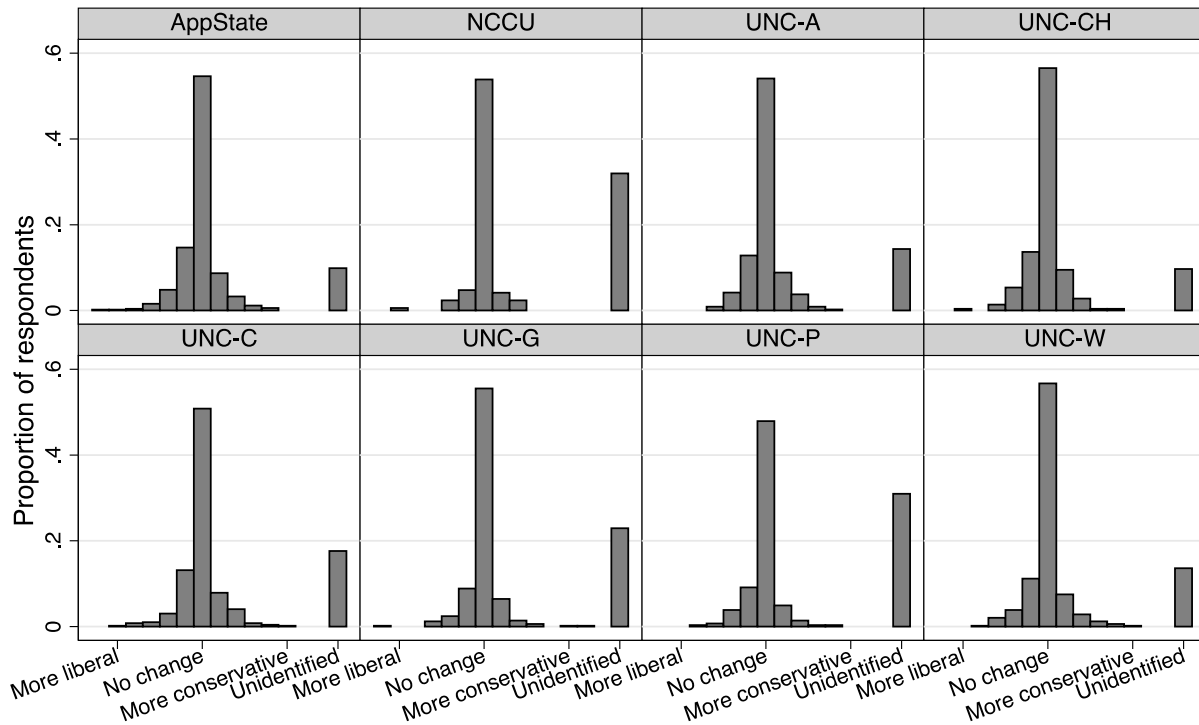
Finally, Figure 1 characterizes how respondents perceive their political leanings to have changed since coming to college. The large spike in the center of each panel represents respondents who perceive their ideological leanings as of today to be the same as when they started college. Bars immediately to the left of each spike represent the proportion respondents who perceive themselves to have become more liberal. (The farther from the center of the figure, the more liberal respondents perceive themselves to have become.) And similarly, bars immediately to the right of the spike represent perceived movement in a conservative direction. Each panel also includes a large spike that stands on its own, above the word "unidentified." These represent respondents who 1) said they were neither liberal nor conservative or 2) said that they hadn't thought much about this, for *either* ideology question (the one focused on the start of college, or the one focused on today). Movement along a left/right continuum is not defined for such respondents, but it is helpful to be aware of how numerous they are.

The story told by Figure 1 is one of *stasis*. At every institution except one (UNC-P), more than half of respondents see themselves as having exactly the same ideological leanings as they did when they arrived at college. When movement exists, it tends to be small in magnitude, with drastic lurches in a liberal or conservative direction vanishingly rare. If one focuses only on the respondents who perceive themselves to have moved, shifts in a liberal direction slightly outnumber shifts in a conservative direction. (Pooling across universities, 590 students perceive themselves to have become more liberal, compared to 401 who perceive themselves to have become more conservative.)

Key points:

- There is little evidence that faculty create a highly politicized atmosphere in UNC System classrooms.
- High proportions of students—both self-identified liberals and conservatives—see course instructors as having an inclusive stance with respect to political discussions.

- Relatively few students perceive themselves to become more liberal or more conservative during college.
- Differences across institutions are small.

Finding 2: Campuses do not consistently achieve an atmosphere that promotes free expression.

Even if university faculty generally have an inclusive posture toward expression issues—as Finding 1 suggests to be the case for the UNC System schools studied—it does not necessarily follow that a culture that promotes free expression has been achieved. This divergence was a theme in our previous report. Across several metrics, we found that students were concerned about expressing their views. Their concerns seemed to focus—contra some caricatures of university culture—less on faculty than on their own peers. Here, we revisit these trends.

Methods

Using the Classroom Sampler tool described in the previous section, we asked several questions about concerns that students might have experienced if they stated a "sincere political view." We asked about three class-focused concerns: that the instructor would have a lower opinion of them, that fellow students would have a lower opinion of them, and that they would get a lower grade. We also asked two questions about how in-class behavior could transfer to outside of class: about someone posting critical comments on social media and about being subject to a code of conduct complaint. For each of these questions, there were five response options: "Not at all concerned," "Slightly concerned," "Somewhat concerned," "Moderately concerned," and "Extremely concerned." To discourage arbitrary responding, respondents could also choose a response that said, "This question is totally irrelevant for this class."

Near the end of the Classroom Sampler battery, we asked about how many times, in the randomly-chosen class, "you keep an opinion related to class to yourself because you were worried about the potential consequences of expressing that opinion?" There were five response options: "Never," "Once," "Between two and five times," "Between six and ten times," and "More than ten times." This is our measure of self-censorship.

An alternative way to assess the climate for free expression is to directly gauge students' inclinations to engage with—or to suppress—views that they do not like. To do so, we move beyond the Classroom Sampler and employ a technique called a *content-controlled* survey question. The first step in this technique is to present students with a range of political views and ask them which specific view they find most objectionable. We presented students with a list of ten views, as follows:

Table 7: Political Positions Students Might Find Objectionable

Positions liberal students might hold

1) Trans women (people who were assigned male at birth but now identify as women) should be allowed to participate on women's sports teams
2) University admissions should give preference to applicants from disadvantaged racial groups in order to help alleviate past injustices
3) A woman who wants an abortion should always be allowed to have one
4) Most undocumented immigrants should be allowed to stay in the United States permanently

Positions conservative students might hold

5) Trans women (people who were assigned male at birth but now identify as women) should **not** be allowed to participate on women's sports teams
6) Affirmative action should end, and an applicant's race should not carry any weight in university admissions
7) Abortion should be illegal in almost all circumstances
8) Students at [respondent's university] should be allowed to attend classes in-person, even if they are not vaccinated against Covid
9) There is **no** convincing evidence of human-caused global climate change
10) The United States should deport as many undocumented immigrants as possible

Our objective in choosing this slate of items was to make sure that almost every respondent would see a view that they found objectionable. Yet, we were also careful to choose views that students in the UNC system—more than one or two outliers—*really do* hold. This is because the purpose of the procedure is to measure students' orientation to *genuine* disagreement—not a caricature.

The second step in our content-controlled survey question was to ask respondents about the actions that students deem appropriate to take toward people who hold the view that they just identified as most objectionable. On the screen that followed the "most objectionable view" list, we asked, "Please think about people at [Respondent's school] who believe [view selected as most objectionable]. How appropriate would it be for a person to take each of the following actions?" The actions, which were listed in random order, were:

- Ask a challenging question of a professor or campus speaker who endorsed the idea.
- Create an obstruction, such that a professor or campus speaker endorsing this idea could not address an audience.
- Write graffiti on the dorm room of a student who endorses this idea.
- Write graffiti on the office of a faculty member who endorses this idea.
- Ask the school administration to fire a professor who endorses this idea.
- Report a student who endorses this idea in class to the university.

As should be clear, we sought to ask about a range of actions including options widely regarded as part of conventional civil discourse and options that are clear breaches of civil discourse. For each action, the respondent could indicate that it was "Not appropriate," "Somewhat appropriate," "Appropriate," or "Entirely appropriate."

Analysis

The first section in Table 8 presents results for in-class concerns. For each concern, we report the percentage of students who were at least "slightly" concerned about the indicated consequence. This section

affirms an important pattern we observed in past work: respondents are more concerned about responses from their peers than from faculty. Looking from row 1 to row 2 makes for an even comparison, since these rows focus on questions that are identical, except for their focus (student opinion vs. faculty opinion). Doing so reveals that, at every university, a higher percentage of students is worried about peers than faculty. Concerns about grading penalties are lower still.

Table 8: Percentage Worried about Consequences of Expressing Sincere Views.

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
In-class concerns								
Concerned about student opinion	39%	13%	31%	35%	37%	21%	25%	37%
Concerned about instructor's opinion	22	13	15	24	18	14	20	22
Concerned about grade	15	11	8	15	12	8	16	14
External concerns								
Concerned about social media	17	13	21	22	22	15	18	18
Concerned about code of conduct	12	5	12	13	15	11	17	11
Self-censoring								
Self-censored more than once	22	17	21	18	22	17	17	22

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of respondents who indicated that they were at least "slightly" concerned about each consideration. Entries in the final row indicate the percentage of respondents who self-censored in the randomly chosen class more than once. Analysis is limited to the 36% of courses for which the respondent said that politics came up in the course more than "never."

External concerns appear lower than in-class concerns, though they are not trivial. It bears notice that concerns focused on an action peers could take (posting on social media) are more substantial than those for which faculty and staff would be involved (violating a code of conduct).

Finally, the numbers in the bottom row report the percentage of students who say that they self-censored in a randomly chosen class more than once. Across institutions, the percentage of students who report this level of self-censorship hovers around 20 percent. In Part 4, we present a fuller analysis of what topics students self-censor about.

Table 9: Actions Students See as Appropriate to Take Toward Objectionable Political Views

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Ask a question	69%	54%	77%	74%	63%	63%	47%	64%
Create an obstruction	15	13	22	16	14	18	13	14
Fire professor	13	13	21	20	16	20	15	13
Report student	10	14	14	11	10	18	11	11
Graffiti student room	4	2	4	3	2	3	3	5
Graffiti office	4	5	5	4	4	3	3	5

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of respondents who indicated it would be "appropriate" or "entirely appropriate" to take the indicated action against a specific political view that they found objectionable.

Table 9 reports the percentage of students at each university who indicated that it was "appropriate" or "entirely appropriate" to take various actions toward a person who held an objectionable view. As should be expected, the numbers are highest in the top row, focused on asking a challenging question of a speaker who disagrees. However, it is noteworthy that these numbers are not even higher. Substantial proportions of respondents deny the appropriateness of questioning a speaker. It is particularly noteworthy that the result is lowest at the two minority-serving institutions (NCCU and UNC-P).

Most students deem the more disruptive actions—creating an obstruction, reporting a student, and asking for a professor to be fired—not to be appropriate. But significant segments of respondents—likely enough to influence campus culture—see these actions as appropriate. Respondents from UNC-A seem slightly more accepting of these actions, perhaps consistent with that institution's tradition of political activism. Encouragingly, and across universities, very few students endorse the two actions that entail overt vandalism.

Key points:

- Sizeable proportions of students have concerns about stating their sincere political views in class.
- Sizeable proportions of students keep opinions related to class to themselves, due to concerns about the consequences of expressing those opinions.
- Across institutions, concerns about opinion expression focus more heavily on consequences from other students than from faculty.
- The proportion of students who endorse speech-suppressing actions such as obstructing an invited speaker is low—but not trivial.

Finding 3: Students who identify as conservative face distinctive challenges

We are also interested to explore whether student concerns about free expression are felt evenly across different groups. There are reasons to think they might not be. When a large majority within a particular group holds a particular perspective, it can erode norms against derogating non-majority perspectives.[12] And although North Carolina is a closely divided state—general elections for statewide offices such as United States senator and governor routinely hinge on just a percentage point or two—students who identify as conservative represent a clear minority at each of the institutions we examine. Liberal-identifying students often outnumber them by 3:1 or more (Table 4). In our 2019 report, we uncovered substantial

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[12] The literature on group norms is vast. For two relevant entry points, see Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin* (University of Chicago Press, 1993) and Diana C. Mutz, *Impersonal Influence: How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

evidence that conservative-identifying students have more palpable expression-related concerns than others. Here, we revisit that finding.

Methods

First, we consider responses to questions already described above, but focused on students' self-described ideological leaning (liberal, conservative, or moderate).[13] We also examine divisions according to gender and race. Students classified their gender by responding to a question that reflects current best practices in survey research: "Do you describe yourself as a man, a woman, or in some other way?"[14] They classified their race by answering the question, "With which race or ethnicity do you most identify?," with the response options: "Native American," "Asian / Pacific Islander," "Black / African American," "Hispanic / Latino," "White," and "Other" (for which they could write a self-description).[15] For our primary analysis, we divide respondents into two groups: those who identify as white *only* (i.e. they do not describe themselves as multiracial), and all others.[16]

Second, we shift our focus away from classroom experiences and examine students' social orientations toward each other. We do this with a series of questions measuring preferences for social distance. ("Social distance" was a term of art in Psychology before the Covid-19 Pandemic popularized a different meaning of the phrase. Here, it refers to "the degree to which, psychologically speaking, a person or group wants to remain separate from members of different social groups."[17]) We measured preference for social distance with eight questions. Students were asked to think about "political liberals." Then, they were asked to agree or disagree with four statements:

- I would be willing to have a person from this group as a close personal friend.
- I enjoy taking classes with students from this group.
- Students from this group are an important part of the campus community.
- Faculty from this group are an important part of the campus community.

There were five responses options: "Strongly disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither agree nor disagree," "Somewhat agree," and "Strongly agree." Students were also asked to think about "political conservatives," and to agree or disagree with the same four statements. The order of the two groups (liberals and conservatives) was randomly assigned, such that neither systematically came before the other.

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[13] Students in the "Unclassified" category in Table 4 are difficult to characterize, since they likely represent a mixture of less popular views (Marxism, anarcho-capitalism, nihilism, etc.) as well as students who simply do not think about politics enough to place themselves on a liberal/conservative political spectrum. We omit this category from the analyses reported here.

[14] See Ashley Amaya, "Adapting how we ask about the gender of our survey respondents" (Pew Research Center Decoded, 2020) for a discussion of the complex issues related to measuring gender in survey research. Available online at https://medium.com/pew-research-center-decoded/adapting-how-we-ask-about-the-gender-of-our-survey-respondents-77b0cb7367c0.

[15] We reviewed open-ended responses provided for the "other" category and, where appropriate, classified them into one of the broad headings. For instance, one respondent used the Other category to describe themself as "South Asian," which we reclassified into the Asian category.

[16] We readily acknowledge that some might reasonably be interested in the different experiences of specific minority groups (e.g. Black respondents as distinct from Asians), and that this classification scheme glosses over such differences. However, our number of cases for *specific* minority groups within a particular institution is often small, which makes related estimates noisy and difficult to interpret. Moreover, the simpler division we report in the main text gets at a comparison that we expect many will find informative: do nonwhite individuals exhibit different concerns than the historically advantaged group (whites)? Still, we provide an alternative analysis, where race is described in more granular terms, in Appendix E.

[17] Definition taken from the APA Dictionary of Psychology. See https://dictionary.apa.org/social-distance.

We use the responses to these questions to construct a score that reflects each respondent's preference for the political ingroup, relative to the political outgroup. We do this by incrementing the score by 1 point each time a respondent agrees with a statement focused on their ingroup, and decrementing the score by 1 point each time the respondent agrees with a statement focused on their outgroup. For instance, a self-described liberal respondent who strongly agrees with all the statements focused on liberals, and who strongly *disagrees* with all the statements focused on conservatives would have a score of 4, since their social distance preferences strongly favor the ingroup. But a self-described liberal respondent who strongly agrees with all the statements focused on liberals *and* conservatives would have a score of 0, since they do not favor one group over the other. Negative scores are possible (if a person prefers to socialize with the outgroup more than with the ingroup), but they are rare.

For the self-described moderates in our sample, we cannot classify liberals or conservatives as an ingroup or an outgroup. But it is still instructive to examine whether they prefer to socialize with one group over the other. To examine self-described moderates' social distance attitudes, we simply code responses such that a preference of liberals over conservatives takes high values and a preference for conservatives over liberals takes low values. But we stress that this coding is arbitrary. It would have been equally valid to code a preference for conservatives at high values.

Analysis

Table 10 breaks down the results in Table 8 by students' self-reported ideology. Cell entries represent the percentage of students in each ideological category who are at least "slightly" concerned about each of the listed consequences (or for the bottom section, who say they self-censored more than once). At every institution, and for every outcome, there is a stark ideological divide, with self-identified conservatives expressing concerns at a far higher rate than self-identified liberals. Self-described moderates routinely fall in-between the other two groups, though they tend to be closer to the self-described liberals. Together, these results underline that, across institutions, the experience of self-described conservatives is distinctive.

Table 10: Class Concerns, by Self-described Ideology

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Worry about student opinion								
Liberals	27%	11%	21%	21%	23%	13%	16%	23%
Moderates	38	10	41	33	29	26	23	29
Conservatives	57	--	68	74	51	55	39	49
Worry about prof's opinion								
Liberals	10	12	9	12	8	7	11	9
Moderates	27	5	14	21	8	13	13	21
Conservatives	35	--	43	57	42	36	22	37
Worry about grade								
Liberals	6	6	5	7	6	3	9	4
Moderates	17	12	10	8	7	6	13	14
Conservatives	27	--	38	42	31	26	16	24
Worry about social media								
Liberals	9	9	15	14	11	10	9	9
Moderates	22	5	37	23	18	19	19	14
Conservatives	31	--	59	45	34	36	30	31
Worry about code of conduct								
Liberals	4	3	6	6	4	4	6	4
Moderates	16	2	16	12	12	12	13	14
Conservatives	27	--	51	38	30	34	31	19
Self-censored more than once								
Liberals	11	11	13	9	12	8	9	10
Moderates	26	12	22	18	15	17	15	20
Conservatives	31	--	49	41	32	40	27	33

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of respondents who indicated that they were at least "slightly" concerned about each consideration. Entries in the final row indicate the percentage of respondents who self-censored in the randomly chosen class more than once. Analysis is limited to the 36% of courses for which the respondent said that politics came up in the course more than "never." The cell for NCCU conservatives is intentionally left blank, as there are too few cases for analysis.

Table 10 also hints, however, at some cross-institutional differences. Self-identified conservatives at UNC-A and UNC-CH register as somewhat more concerned about expression than at several other schools. It is perhaps not coincidental that these two institutions are the same ones where self-described liberal students most substantially outnumber self-described conservatives (Table 4).

Table 11: Class Concerns, by Gender

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Worry about student opinion								
Man	37%	14%	32%	36%	28%	24%	25%	37%
Woman	33	8	27	28	31	18	23	27
Non-binary	34	14	18	24	17	6	13	38
Worry about prof's opinion								
Man	22	21	16	23	11	16	17	23
Woman	17	6	10	19	16	10	13	17
Non-binary	17	--	13	12	11	6	20	10
Worry about grade								
Man	15	14	8	14	10	10	14	16
Woman	12	7	8	12	11	6	10	10
Non-binary	7	--	4	6	6	0	20	10
Worry about social media								
Man	18	10	25	24	18	23	18	23
Woman	16	8	21	19	18	12	16	13
Non-binary	3	--	7	6	17	3	13	14
Worry about code of conduct								
Man	16	14	19	18	14	11	17	20
Woman	10	4	10	9	11	9	14	8
Non-binary	3	--	3	6	0	3	13	5
Self-censored more than once								
Man	20	17	20	15	15	15	22	25
Woman	19	11	17	16	17	13	16	16
Non-binary	7	--	12	18	17	10	20	5

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of respondents who indicated that they were at least "slightly" concerned about each consideration. Entries in the bottom section indicate the percentage of respondents who self-censored in the randomly chosen class more than once. Analysis is limited to the 36% of courses for which the respondent said that politics came up in the course more than "never." The cell for NCCU non-binary respondents is intentionally left blank, as there are too few cases for analysis.

Table 11 parallels Table 10, but with attention to divisions by gender. Here, the divides are much smaller than for ideological self-identification. Non-binary students often exhibit the lowest frequency of concern. Men often express concern at higher rates than the other two groups, although the differences tend to be small.

Table 12: Class Concerns, by Race

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Worry about student opinion								
White, not multi-racial	34%	12%	26%	32%	33%	21%	28%	32%
All others	27	10	26	27	26	16	16	22
Worry about prof's opinion								
White, not multi-racial	18	12	12	19	17	15	14	18
All others	17	9	12	20	12	9	14	17
Worry about grade								
White, not multi-racial	12	19	8	11	12	9	12	12
All others	11	8	4	13	8	5	12	13
Worry about social media								
White, not multi-racial	16	12	19	20	20	15	18	16
All others	16	9	23	19	16	12	14	14
Worry about code of conduct								
White, not multi-racial	11	6	11	11	14	11	15	10
All others	11	5	12	13	9	8	13	11
Self-censored more than once								
White, not multi-racial	17	19	16	14	17	14	16	18
All others	22	12	20	17	15	14	16	17

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of respondents who indicated that they were at least "slightly" concerned about each consideration. Entries in the bottom section indicate the percentage of respondents who self-censored in the randomly chosen class more than once. Analysis is limited to the 36% of courses for which the respondent said that politics came up in the course more than "never."

Table 12 reports a similar breakdown by race. As with gender, the divisions appear small and unreliable. Sometimes whites report concerns at a higher rate than non-whites, and sometimes the opposite is true.

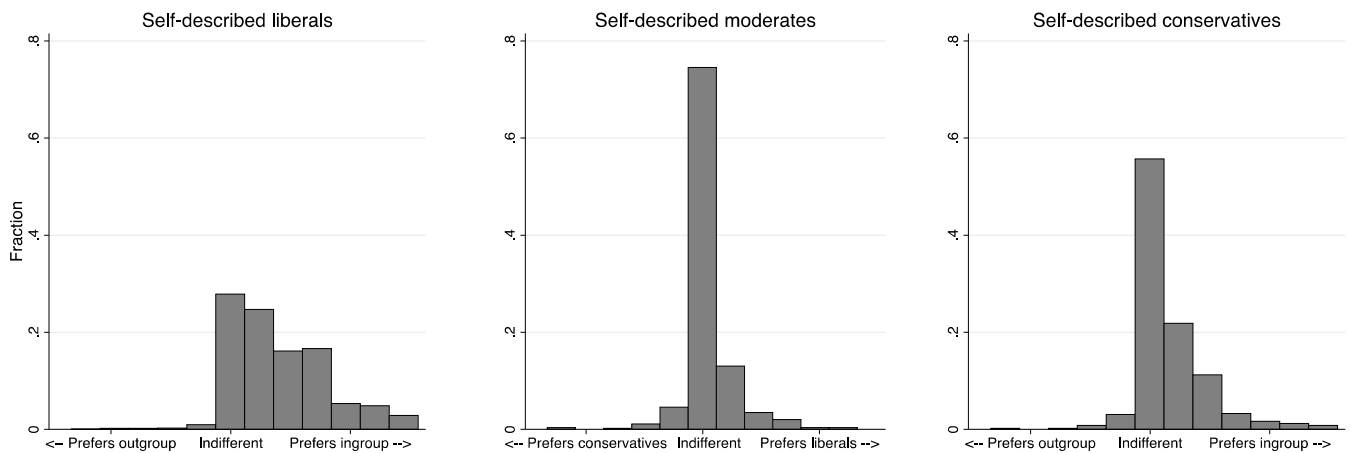Figure 2: Preference for Social Distance, by Self-described Ideology

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the social distance measure for the three main ideological groupings in our study: self-described liberals, moderates, and conservatives. As noted above, for self-described liberals and moderates, high values on this measure reflect a preference to socialize with the ingroup over the outgroup. For self-described moderates, high values reflect a preference to socialize with liberals over conservatives.

The self-described liberals exhibit a marked preference for socializing with liberals over conservatives: 78% of self-described liberals have an ingroup preference. Self-described conservatives also exhibit an ingroup preference, though the pattern is not as strong: 52% prefer the ingroup to the outgroup. Self-described moderates prefer socializing with liberals (27%) to conservatives (13%). However, as the figure reveals, this preference is low in intensity, and the largest proportion of self-described moderates (60%) prefer neither liberals nor conservatives over the other.

It is noteworthy that ingroup preferences are stronger among self-described liberals than among self-described conservatives. A possible implication of this pattern is that a student revealing themselves as conservatives would face greater social risks than those revealing themselves a liberal. This might be particularly true since, aside from having more ingroup-favoring social preferences (as shown above), liberal-identifying students are the clear majority at all campuses we examine (Table 4).

Key points

- Self-described conservatives report concerns about free expression at much higher rates than self-described liberals.
- Divisions along lines of gender identity or racial identity are smaller in magnitude.
- Self-described liberal students exhibit greater preference for socializing with the ingroup than self-described conservatives.

Finding 4: Students across the political spectrum want more opportunities to engage with those who think differently

Another objective of our research was to understand students' appetite for change. Under one caricature of college culture, liberal and conservative students have zero-sum orientation toward deliberate efforts to change the culture of free expression on campus: gains for one group are construed to come from losses for the other. But our 2019 study found something very different at UNC-Chapel Hill: students from

across the political spectrum sought exposure to a wider range of views. One of us described this and related patterns as the "hidden consensus on free expression."[18] As above, here we revisit this result as it applies across institutions and with an expanded array of questions.

Methods

The analysis in this section comes from just five questions. We asked, "How many outside of class opportunities does [respondent's institution] provide for students to hear speakers—either from on or off campus—that articulate liberal perspectives?" And we asked the same question about "conservative perspectives." The response options for these two questions were, "Far too few opportunities," "Somewhat too few opportunities," "About the right number of opportunities," "Somewhat too many opportunities," and "Far too many opportunities."

We also asked, "Do political liberals represent too small a share of the faculty at [respondent's institution], too large a share, or about the right share?" And again, we asked the same question about "political conservatives." The response options for these two questions were "Much too small a share," "Too small a share," "About the right share," "Too large a share," "Much too large a share," and "I don't know."[19]

Finally, we asked, "How many opportunities does [respondent's institution] provide for students to engage constructively with people who disagree with them?" The response options were identical to the "outside speakers" questions: "Far too few opportunities," "Somewhat too few opportunities," "About the right number of opportunities," "Somewhat too many opportunities," and "Far too many opportunities."

Analysis

Table 13 reports the percentage of students—broken down by self-described ideology—whose responses indicate agreement with each statement. The top two sections of the table show some of the in-group favoritism that is typical in public opinion work. For instance, self-described liberals tend to be more favorable toward liberal speakers than self-described conservatives. But these sections also show remarkably broad support for increasing the availability of conservative speakers across campuses: at six campuses, the self-described liberals are more likely to indicate that there are too few conservative speakers than they are to indicate that there are too few liberal speakers. Additionally, at every university, self-described moderates are more likely to indicate that there are too few conservative speakers than that there are too few liberal speakers.

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[18] Timothy J. Ryan, "The Hidden Consensus on Free Expression." Available at
https://heterodoxacademy.org/blog/viewpoint-diversity-hidden-consensus-free-expression/ .
[19] Partners at UNC-A, UNC-G, and UNC-W expressed reservations about these two questions, on the concern that students might not accurately perceive the ideological leanings of faculty, as well as the belief that responses could be used to influence hiring practices in inappropriate ways. The core research team adhered to the principle that partners would have the ability to veto any questions that local partners objected to. As such, these two questions were not asked at UNC-A, UNC-G, or UNC-W, and the related cells are left empty in the table that follows.

Table 13: Campus Opportunities, by Self-described Ideology

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Too few opportunities to hear liberal speakers								
Liberals	27%	40%	13%	21%	37%	29%	33%	43%
Moderates	30	19	16	14	23	28	28	36
Conservatives	4	--	8	8	17	8	9	20
Too few opportunities to hear conservative speakers								
Liberals	35	41	50	32	37	37	46	39
Moderates	59	42	78	56	48	58	34	56
Conservatives	74	--	92	86	64	70	50	68
Liberals are too small a share of faculty								
Liberals	8	15	--	13	11	--	19	--
Moderates	3	0	--	2	3	--	7	--
Conservatives	5	--	--	1	3	--	8	--
Conservatives are too small a share of faculty								
Liberals	11	21	--	23	14	--	13	--
Moderates	38	24	--	57	34	--	14	--
Conservatives	80	--	--	85	63	--	62	--
Too few opportunities for constructive engagement								
Liberals	52	43	41	50	52	52	49	57
Moderates	57	42	61	61	50	52	38	52
Conservatives	64	--	76	67	56	58	50	59

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of respondents who indicate agreement with each statement. NCCU conservatives are omitted due to low sample size. Some statistics are omitted for UNC-A, UNC-G, and UNC-W because certain questions were not asked at these institutions (see footnote 19).

The third and fourth sections of the table show similar patterns as concerns faculty: within each ideological group, very few students think that liberals represent too small a share of the faculty. But larger proportions indicate that conservatives represent too small a share of the faculty.

Finally, the bottom segment of the table reveals substantial agreement with the sentiment that one's institution provides too few opportunities for constructive engagement. Self-described conservatives generally agree with this statement at higher rates than self-described liberals. We also note in this table section, as we have elsewhere, that the two minority-serving institutions (NCCU and UNC-P) register somewhat differently than the others: students at these schools seem somewhat less likely to perceive there to be too few opportunities for constructive engagement.

Key points

- Support for broadening the range of viewpoints on campus, both with respect to outside speakers and faculty, is high.
- At most institutions examined, clear majorities of students feel that there are too few opportunities for constructive engagement.

Change over time

The survey we describe herein repeated several questions from the 2019 survey we conducted at UNC-CH. This affords us some opportunity to examine, within UNC-CH, how specific measures have changed over time. Doing so requires some caveats. First, although we used a nearly identical recruitment procedure, the response rates changed markedly between years (see Part 2). This is a hint that results in each year might be subject to different selection patterns, and thus not directly comparable. Second, even if selection patterns were identical, one would except some fluctuation over time due to chance alone.

Table 14 reports the 2019 and 2022 values for several repeated measures, broken down by respondents' self-described ideology. Several of the changes we examined (presented toward the top of the table) are in a range easily attributable to chance.[20] However, there are also some changes worth noting. In particular, the percentage of self-described liberals willing to have an outgroup member as a friend and who enjoy taking classes with members of the outgroup both dropped by 16 percentage points. The percentage of self-described liberals who see students from the outgroup as important to the campus community likewise appears to have decreased. For the most part, self-described conservatives' changes on the same items run in the same direction, but are smaller. Altogether, this table shows some hints of hardening student attitudes over time—at least at UNC-CH.

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[20] Among self-described liberals, over-time fluctuations of approximately 5.5 percentage points or more would routinely be attributed to chance. Because there are fewer self-described conservatives in our samples, changes as large as 12 percentage points could be attributed to chance.

Table 14: Over-time Change in Specific Measures, by Self-described Ideology (UNC-CH only)

	2019	2022
Professor encouraged participation from liberals and conservatives alike (% Disagree)		
Liberals	2%	2%
Conservatives	11	11
Appropriate/entirely appropriate to obstruct a speaker		
Liberals	19	21
Conservatives	3	5
Concerned fellow students would lower their opinion, if respondent voiced their sincere opinion		
Liberals	26	21
Conservatives	75	74
Concerned professor would lower their opinion, if respondent voiced their sincere opinion		
Liberals	13	12
Conservatives	50	57
Too few opportunities to hear liberal speakers (% agree)		
Liberals	22	21
Conservatives	19	8
Too few opportunities to hear conservative speakers (% agree)		
Liberals	37	32
Conservatives	92	86
Too few opportunities for constructive engagement (% agree)		
Liberals	58	50
Conservatives	76	67
Self-censored more than once		
Liberals	14	9
Conservatives	58	41
Willing to have outgroup member as a friend		
Liberals	63	47
Conservatives	92	82
Enjoy taking classes with students from the outgroup		
Liberals	51	35
Conservatives	67	62
Students from outgroup important to campus community (% agree)		
Liberals	73	58
Conservatives	86	86
Faculty from outgroup important to campus community (% agree)		
Liberals	65	50
Conservatives	81	77

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of self-described liberal and conservative respondents who have each listed attribute.

Summary of Part 3

We approached this research uncertain whether the patterns we saw at UNC-Chapel Hill in 2019 would apply to other institutions several years later. UNC institutions certainly have very different histories, demographics, and student cultures; however, as concerns the free expression and constructive dialogue topics we examine, we find more similarity than difference. None of the institutions in our study show compelling evidence that faculty impose their political views on their students in class. But this is not to say that all is well. Students—across the political spectrum, but particularly those who identify as conservatives—harbor substantial concerns about expressing their sincere views. Their concerns appear to center largely on peers. Nevertheless, support for increasing opportunities to engage across the political spectrum is generally high.

Although this part of our report has emphasized institutional similarly, it bears notice that the two minority-serving institutions in our study—NCCU and UNC-P—do appear distinctive in some respects. They have a smaller proportion of liberal-identifying respondents (Table 4). Their students are less likely to express concern about peers' opinions (Table 8). They are less likely to characterize posing a tough question to a speaker with whom they disagree as appropriate (Table 9). Both institutions also exhibited low response rates (Table 3), although we used the same recruitment procedure at all institutions. None of these patterns lead us to conclude that the culture for free expression and constructive dialogue is fundamentally better or worse at these schools. Rather, they serve as a reminder that these institutions are culturally distinctive and might face an entirely different array of challenges and opportunities.

Part 4: New Evidence for Standing Questions

Part 3 of this report revisited conclusions we reached in our 2019 research at UNC-Chapel Hill, considering the extent to which they apply to other UNC System institutions. In Part 4, we take our research in new directions, addressing additional questions that arise from our groundwork. Where the discussion so far has focused on the same techniques that we used in our 2019 study (with some improvements), the tools we report in this part are almost entirely new. We organize our findings around three main questions: First, what are students afraid to discuss? Second, who chooses to be politically engaged? And third, what are the opportunities for improvement?

What are students uncomfortable discussing?

In Part 3, we assert that many students—particularly those who identify as conservative—fear consequences related to expressing their sincere opinions and thus engage in substantial self-censorship. From one perspective, these results are troubling, since they might imply that students do not have the opportunity to consider and engage with a full range of views. But the pattern is open to an alternative interpretation. Perhaps the views being held back do not have a legitimate role to play in civil discourse. Perhaps they are mean-spirited. Perhaps the consequences that students expect to come from expressing them should be conceptualized not as closed-mindedness, but as an effort to protect one's self or one's peers from bigotry or hate.[21] (Even hate speech is protected by the First Amendment, but institutions of higher learning are under no obligation to place it on equal footing.)

These are difficult matters to disentangle, in part because students might not be forthcoming about what they are holding back, and in part because what counts as hate speech is itself contested. Here, we attempt to better understand what topics students perceive to be "off limits." While we do not fully resolve the tension above, we do improve understanding of what students are hesitant to discuss.

Methods

We explore what topics students are afraid to discuss using two tools. First, toward the end of our survey instrument, we simply asked respondents, "How comfortable or uncomfortable would you feel giving your honest opinions in a class discussion on the issues below?"[22] There were nine topics listed in a random order:

1. Race relations in the United States
2. Police use of force
3. Gun rights
4. Immigration policy
5. Mass incarceration
6. Mask mandates
7. Taxes
8. Climate change
9. Funding for bridges and roads

These topics were chosen to reflect a range of topics that both liberals and conservatives might be uncomfortable discussing. One topic (funding for roads and bridges) was included as a political topic we

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[21] This part of our investigation was motivated by reactions to our 2020 report. The 2020 reported high levels of self-censorship—particularly among students who identified as conservative. A common response to this finding was to posit that students might be holding back opinions they know to be intolerant: racist, sexist, or otherwise bigoted. Here, we assess this conjecture by probing students for more details about what kinds of opinions they hold back.

[22] This question was proposed by one of our campus partners, Mel Atkinson, and we are grateful for the contribution.

expected to be uncontroversial. We expected some students might be uncomfortable discussing nearly *any* political matter—perhaps because they do not feel sufficiently informed. Thus, the "roads" topic identifies the floor on how much discomfort we might expect even for a fairly anodyne issue. For each topic, the respondent could indicate that they felt "Very comfortable," "Fairly comfortable," "Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable," "Fairly uncomfortable," or "Very uncomfortable" giving their honest opinions in a class discussion.

The second tool we used to better understand what topics students are uncomfortable discussing returns to the Classroom Sampler described in Part 3. Recall that, for a randomly chosen class from a student's Fall 2021 schedule, we asked, "In [the chosen class], how many times did you keep an opinion related to class to yourself because you were worried about the potential consequences of expressing that opinion?" If students provided any answer other than "never" in response to this question, they were presented with a follow-up:

> We are trying to get a sense of what students have in mind when they say they kept an opinion related to class to themselves because they were worried about the potential consequences of expressing that opinion. Would you be willing to describe an example of what you had in mind when you answered the previous question? What kind of opinion were you worried about expressing, and why?

> As a reminder, answers on this survey are anonymous. But, you can skip this question if you choose.

Fifty-two percent of the respondents who could have answered this question did answer it. (The remaining 48% left it blank.) This results in 435 responses for analysis. The median response was 33 words long. Some respondents were quite verbose: approximately ten percent wrote more than 100 words each. We developed a scheme to hand-code these responses and categorize what topics they covered. We code each response for the presence or absence of several characteristics.

First, we coded the responses as being either political or non-political. To do so, we applied the broad (indirect) definition of politics used in Table 5: politics is "any controversial topic of public significance." Thus, references to governmental actions such as vaccine mandates or President Trump's actions in office counted as political, as did broader matters such as abortion, sexuality, or religion in society. However, instances where the respondent's focus was entirely scholastic or any plausible connection to current affairs seemed remote was classified as non-political. For instance, one respondent wrote about holding back their controversial views about the writings of Plato.

We also coded responses for mentions of specific topics and themes. Whereas the closed ended comfortable/uncomfortable question described just above required us to think of several plausible categories *ex ante*, here we took a more inductive approach. We examined the responses and identified a manageable number of themes that came up most often. We identified eight such themes. Below, we list them, along with two verbatim examples of each. Aside from helping to explain our coding procedure, these examples make for interesting reading in and of themselves because they reveal a dimension of classroom episodes that would normally remain hidden.

Table 15: Verbatim Answers Related to Holding Opinions Back

Racial issues

Example response 1:

Because the class was about analyzing the black experience through film and literature I was hesitant to participate in some of the seminars because I had to question how much I was centering myself in the dialogue instead of the African American experience, I participated but also tried to be self-aware I would learn more by listening at times compared to taking over the conversation because I am not black. I added to the conversation a lot, but I tried to critically question the amount of input I put because I wanted to uplift my black colleagues while they tied their own stories to the work we were criticizing in class and also not want to misinterpret how I read and saw black American lit and film.

Example response 2:

Our class was discussing race and ethnicity in the workforce and we all had to vote whether [student's institution] is diverse or not. I kept it to myself because no matter what I would say, someone would take what I said the wrong way.

Sex, Sexuality, or Gender

Example response 1:

The Professor displayed all of the characteristics of being extremely religious, and slightly homophobic. They address all aspects of the book or material but will consciously skip over material related to LGBTQ. The areas that focused on religion were usually noticeably longer than other content, as well. I know if I noticed, others did as well. How is that supposed to feel like a safe space for members of my community?

Example response 2:

I am a strong conservative and will not apologize for my beliefs. However, college campuses have become extremely intolerant in terms of those beliefs. I'm seen as stupid of uneducated for believing in them and I have had teachers express that to me this semester. In [course], I remember the topic of women's rights and healthcare came up and I believe there should be no abortions period. Had I expressed that I would have been reported by other students and potentially doxxed.

Religion

Example response 1:

My professor made multiple comments about God not being real, and one one [sic.] occasion was playing a song regarding the topic before class began. It was a large lecture so I was nervous to speak up on every occasion.

Example response 2:

My opinion was not political-based but religiously based. Many people criticize those who practice tarot or astrology, but I do both and am considering conversion into Hinduism. When we talked about some things people who are Hindus worship or practice, a student who was christain [sic.] said, That sounds stupid. Are we sure they didn't have schizophrenia? It made me hold my tongue from talking further about my beliefs to avoid any disruption in the classroom. Usually, I would engage in a conversation to understand why someone has views that way and maybe even explain a new point of view; however, I felt this wasn't a conversation to have right then across the classroom.

| Covid |
| --- |
| Example response 1:

 I don't support the vaccine and I'm not scared of Covid and I don't think we should be required to wear masks. Wear it if you want and get the vaccine if you want.

 Example response 2:

 Since this was a healthcare management class, the COVID-19 vaccine was brought up a lot. I believe that everyone should be vaccinated but I never said that because I knew that a lot of people in my class would probably disagree. |
| **Economic considerations** |
| Example response 1:

 My family immigrated here from [place description], I have seen first hand how increasing taxpayers money to fund social justice causes does not work because sometimes people in politics and in government are corrupt. This is not to say the government does not hold some responsibility and accountability for social justice issues (like homelessness epidemic..etc) but making it entirely a 'government funded' job (which ends up being taxpayers money, not governments money) to help those causes sounds nice but will never work in reality. Most [major] students believe the opposite. More government involvement and more government funded programs. It was difficult to get my point of view across without feeling like classmates are judging me and thinking I do not care about these social justice causes.

 Example response 2:

 I am pro increasing regulation of the financial sector, and I do not want to say that in classes with large amounts of business majors. |
| **Immigration** |
| Example response 1:

 My opinion was what was the view with the immigration crisis that was occurring in Texas.

 Example response 2:

 I don't like to engage in controversial topics like for example I feel strongly about immigration so when people down talk immigrants I try to defend my point of view on it but try not to be rude about it. |
| **Specific Politicians** |
| Example response 1:

 In my class, our professor would outright teach the class and topics from his political point of view which could make it difficult anytime you have a different view. For certain controversial topics like the death penalty, or the sitting president, I often held back my views so I would not get penalized for that discussion.

 Example response 2:

 I had coworkers in this class that were extremely conservative and don't share many similar opinions to me so when they talked about Biden being bad or something about trump i [sic.] wouldn't speak up for fear of being outcasted at work. |

Table 15, Continued

Some other specific political topic
Example response 1: *Some of our class discussion was centered around global warming issues. I personally do not know what to think about the topic, but a lot of my classmates had strong beliefs regarding the seriousness of global warming. Comments were made about how the right is hurting the planet through their ignorance. In my mind, I have no problem with shifting to clean energy, but I also wished my classmates were more respectful of right-leaning views.* Example response 2: *I have strong views about gun control, in that I want much stricter gun control and do not see the benefit of owning guns. I know that there were many students within the class that owned guns and even the professor owned guns (although he made it very clear that he understood everyone had their own views on guns and he would respect any view). I just avoided talking about gun control much as it was clear that it's an issue that is directly tied to the course because of [course topic], but I did not want to start a possible political debate when we were all there to learn how to save lives.*

Aside from the topical content, we also coded for four other characteristics. First, we coded for explicit mentions that a student held back a sincere opinion due to professor-focused concerns (e.g. "In my class, our professor would outright teach the class and topics from his political point of view"). Second, we coded for mentions that a student held back a sincere opinion due to peer-focused concerns (e.g. "I was mainly worried about the classes [sic.] reaction and how I would have to defend myself"). Third, we coded for responses where the respondent indicated that the sincere view they held back was a complaint about the course or instructor (e.g. "It was just opinions regarding the professor and the content that she was teaching."). Finally, we coded for responses where the student focused on insecurity as a major reason for holding an opinion back (e.g. "I was just worried about saying that the material or the presentation was confusing because I did not want to sound dumb if everyone understood.")[23]

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[23] These additions to our coding scheme was proposed by Aidan Buehler, an undergraduate research assistant who made invaluable contributions to this project.

Figure 3: Proportion Uncomfortable Giving Honest Opinions about Various Topics.
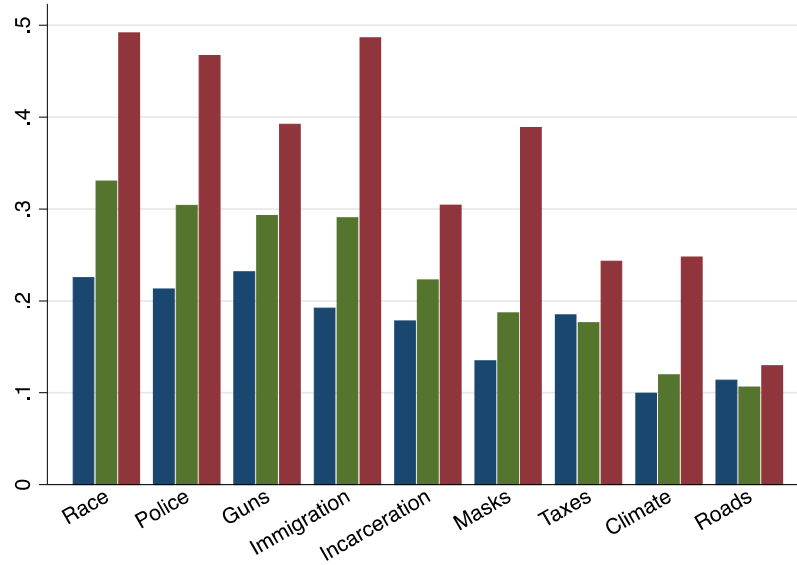
Note: Bars represent the proportion of respondents who indicated they are "fairly" or "very" uncomfortable giving their honest opinions in class, for the specified issue. Blue bars represent self-described liberals. Green bars represent self-described moderates, and red bars represent self-described conservatives. Topics are arrayed in descending order, according to the responses of self-described moderates.

Analysis

Figure 3 reports the percentage of respondents who indicated they are "fairly" or "very" uncomfortable giving their honest opinions in class about each of the topics in the survey question. The Roads topic provides a proof-of-concept that not all political topics elicit much discomfort, or that they must elicit discomfort unevenly: all three ideological groups exhibit comparably low discomfort for this topic. Naturally, as we turn to the remaining (much more charged) topics, discomfort is generally higher for all groups. However, discomfort clearly increases more drastically for self-described moderates and (especially) for self-described conservatives. Particularly stark divides open up for topics linked to race: immigration, police behavior, and race relations. Thus, the results in Figure 3 reinforce our conclusion that self-described liberals, moderates, and conservatives experience discussions about controversial topics in very different ways. If one accepts self-described moderates as a neutral comparison point, the figure reveals not only that self-described conservatives exhibit notably *high* levels of discomfort, but also that self-described liberals have notably *low* levels of discomfort.

We hasten to note that the narrative generated by Figure 3 need not be that liberal students are benefitting from the leftward lean in higher education and that conservative students are experiencing loss. Arguably a core purpose of a college education is to *induce* the kind of discomfort that is a natural byproduct of thinking about controversial topics in unfamiliar ways. Under this view, it is liberal students—noticeably more than even the self-described moderates—who are potentially deprived of educational experiences because their assumptions are not challenged significantly enough to elicit the discomfort that leads to substantial growth and learning.

Table 16: Attributes of Student Self-Censoring

	As percentage of students who provided an open-ended answer	As percentage of all complete survey responses
Political or not?		
Political	73%	8%
Non-political	27	3
Specific topics		
Race	13	1
Sex, sexuality, or gender	13	1
Religion	10	1
Covid	8	1
Economic considerations	5	1
A specific politician	4	0
Immigration	2	0
Some other specific political topic	13	1
Other characteristics		
Concerned about peers	20	2
Concerned about professor	16	2
Insecurity-focused concerns	6	1
Course complaints	6	1

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of open-ended responses coded as having various attributes. The two political topics (Political or Non-political) are mutually exclusive. All other classifications are not mutually exclusive.

The left column of Table 16 reports the percentage of responses that had each property for which we coded. In the top section of the table, we report the percentage of responses that were political versus non-political. Because these are mutually exclusive categories, the figures add up to 100%. In the middle section of the table, we report the percentage of responses that had each of the eight topic themes we examined. Because these are not mutually exclusive categories (one response could have multiple themes, and some responses did not have any specific theme), the numbers do not add up to 100%. In the bottom section of the table, we report the percentage of responses that exhibited various non-topical elements. Once again, the numbers need not add up to 100%.

The top section of the table suggests that, although political concerns are the most common reason students hold opinions back, many students hold opinions back for reasons unrelated to politics (e.g. "I thoroughly disliked the class and was afraid to tell people because it sounded as if everybody else enjoyed it"). This result is important context, as it is a reminder that people hold opinions back for many reasons, any number of which may be completely unrelated to free expression concerns.

The middle section of Table 16, which analyzes specific topics, reveals that race and sexuality are topics around which students commonly exercise restraint. However, it bears notice that even these quintessentially charged issues are mentioned in only 13% of responses each. The "some other specific political topic" category, which serves as a catch-all, comes up just as commonly. From this, we infer that students hold opinions back on a reasonably *wide* range of political topics.

The bottom section of Table 16, which reports the prevalence of non-topical characteristics, shows once again that peer-focused concerns (mentioned in 20% of responses) are at least as common as faculty-focused concerns. Insecurity-focused concerns and course complaints are relatively uncommon, but not trivially so. For instance, more students indicated they held back opinions due to insecurity than indicated they held back on economic considerations.

The second column of Table 16 exists primarily to avoid a possible misreading of what we report in the table. As discussed under Methods, not all respondents were eligible to answer the open-ended question about holding an opinion back, and not all who were eligible provided a response. There were only 435 analyzable responses out of 3,408 complete surveys. Hence, the right column of Table 16 reports the percentage of responses having each characteristic as a percentage of *all* complete surveys. We report this information to avoid the incorrect interpretation that (for instance) 73% of all respondents hold back opinions about political topics.

Finally, we commend to readers' attention the verbatim responses reported in Table 15, which are reflective of the full set of open-ended responses we reviewed. We believe they reflect a great deal of sincerity and very little callousness. (To return to a question we posed at the beginning of this subsection: across all responses, we saw essentially no evidence of views that were bigoted, hateful, or which would run afoul of university discrimination and harassment policies.) More than this, the responses we report, as well as others we reviewed, reveal how a single moment, such as a professor making an off-handed comment about God not being real, could be experienced in very different ways. One person might perceive this remark as a light-hearted jest, well-calibrated to be amusing to the typical audience member. But as the verbatim response shows, it could also land as hurtful—a clumsy affront to a person's upbringing and sincere beliefs. Per our experiences, moments like this are fairly common. Reflecting on the testimonials of the parties involved helps illustrate how some groups could feel shut out of campus conversations, even as another group feels that they have done nothing to make anyone feel unwelcome.

Key points
- Across a range of topics, self-described liberals are more comfortable expressing their sincere opinions than self-described conservatives.
- No one topic dominates student self-censorship in classes.
- There is little evidence that the views students hold back are bigoted or discriminatory. Many have the potential to contribute to a vigorous classroom discussion.

Who is engaged?

A recurrent finding in research on political behavior is that the quality of discourse in a public sphere rises and falls partly as a function of individual decisions about whether to participate in it. For instance, one reason political discussions on social media so often become adversarial is because social media platforms tend to attract participation from the most hostile and status-driven individuals.[24] Similarly, one reason mass political polarization has increased in recent years is lower participation rates from political moderates matched with higher participation from partisan "true believers."[25] Reviewing an abundance of similar evidence, Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan write, "The growing partisan divide in America can only be

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[24] Alexander Bor and Michael Bang Petersen. 2021. "The Psychology of Online Political Hostility: A Comprehensive, Cross-National Test of the Mismatch Hypothesis." *American Political Science Review* 116(1): 1-18. See also Jaime Settle, *Frenemies: How Social Media Polarizes America* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Chris Bail, *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

[25] Alan I. Abromowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (Yale University Press, 2011); Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

understood in the context of the growing gulf between people who spend their day following politics and those who do not."[26]

Findings such as these motivated us to examine whether similar patterns apply to political engagement among college students.

Methods

To assess our respondents' level of political engagement, we presented them with a prompt that read, "Next, we're interested to learn about the context in which students like you exchange ideas about politics. Here, 'politics' refers to any controversial issue of public significance. How often do you talk about politics…"

Six statements followed:

- … in your classes.
- … as part of clubs or extracurriculars.
- … as part of campus activities OTHER than classes.
- … in casual, in-person social situations, such as dinner with friends.
- … via private communication tools, such as phone calls, text messages, or WhatsApp.
- … via broadly used social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, or Instagram.

For each statement, respondents could indicate that they talk about politics, "Almost never," "Rarely (a few times per semester)," "Occasionally (a few times per month)," "Regularly (most weeks)," or "Commonly (several times per week)." We used the answers to all six questions to calculate a summary score that reflects political engagement across several contexts.[27] This variable has a theoretical range from 0 (someone who never talks about politics in any domain) to 6 (someone who commonly talks about politics in all domains).

We also designed our questionnaire to examine six possible predictors of political engagement among college students:

- *Open-mindedness.* Open-minded cognition is a cognitive style "marked by willingness to consider a variety of intellectual perspectives, values, opinions, or beliefs—even those that contradict the individual's opinion."[28] We measure open-mindedness by asking participants to agree or disagree with three standard statements:

  - I try to reserve judgment until I have a chance to hear arguments from both sides of an issue.
  - I am open to considering other viewpoints.
  - I often "tune out" messages I disagree with. (Reverse coded.)

  Following convention, there were six response options for these questions, ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree" (with no midpoint).

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[26] Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan, *The Other Divide: Polarization and Disengagement in American Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 3.

[27] The Cronbach's alpha statistic for this score is .83.

[28] Erika Price, Victor Ottati, Chase Wilson, and Soyeon Kim. 2015. "Open-Minded Cognition." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 41(11): 1488–1504. (Quotation is found on p. 1488.)

- *Perspective taking.* Perspective taking is the "tendency to adopt the point of view of other people in everyday life."[29] We measure perspective taking with three standard questions drawn from the perspective taking subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. Participants consider the statements:

  o I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
  o I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.
  o I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other person's" point of view. (Reverse coded.)

  The response options are "Does not describe me well at all," "Describes me moderately well," "Describes me very well," and "Describes me extremely well."

- *Forbearance.* Forbearance is an original measure we created specifically for this project. It is intended to capture a person's tendency to describe political groups dispassionately, as opposed to in terms that favor a particular side. To measure forbearance we asked the respondent, "Earlier in the survey, you described your own political views as [extremely liberal]. What do you see as the main differences between [liberals], like you, and [conservatives]? Using the boxes below, please note up to four things that you see as important differences." (Text in brackets was filled in as appropriate for each respondent.[30]) Respondents could list anywhere from zero to four differences.

  Subsequently, trained coders read each response and classified each distinct statement as being "descriptive"—statements that do not make one political coalition look better than the other—or "valanced"—statements that do. A respondent's forbearance score is defined as the number of descriptive statements minus the number of valanced statements.[31]

- *Relative disliking of the outgroup.* Political behavior researchers commonly measure an individual-level attribute called "affective polarization," which is associated with a range of concerning behavior (e.g. failing to uphold democratic norms, sharing false information, denigrating the outgroup).[32] Here, we measure affective polarization, but adopt the more intuitive label, *relative disliking of the outgroup.*

  To measure relative disliking of the outgroup, we asked respondents, "How much do you like or dislike students who identify as liberal." And we asked the same question about "students who identify as conservative." (The order was randomized.) There were seven response options ranging from "Dislike them a great deal" to "Like them a great deal," with a neutral point. To calculate relative disliking, we assign responses numbers ranging from 0 to 6, and then subtract each respondent's lower score from their higher score. Thus, the Relative disliking measure would take a value of zero for a respondent who liking liberal and conservative students the same. It would take a high vale for a respondent who liked one group much more than the other.

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[29] Mark H. Davis. 1983. "Measuring Individual Differences in Empathy: Evidence for a Multidimensional Approach." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44(1): 113–26. (Quotation is found on p. 117.)
[30] Respondents who described their ideological leanings as moderate or who said they didn't have any ideological leaning saw slightly different formulations of this question, such as "… Earlier in the survey, you described your own political views as neither liberal nor conservative. What do you see as the main differences between liberals and conservatives? Using the boxes below, please note up to four things that you see as important differences."
[31] Intercoder reliability, gauged by percent agreement, was 88%.
[32] For an overview, see James Druckman and Jeremy Levy. 2021. "Affective Polarization in the American Public," *Institute for Policy Research Working Paper Series.* Available at https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/working-papers/2021/wp-21-27.pdf

- *Stereotypes.* Political behavior research also finds that people attach positive and negative stereotypes to political groups, with a range of consequences.[33] To measure stereotyping, we asked respondents how well certain terms—open-minded, well-informed, tolerant, intelligent, racist, and condescending—describe "students on the conservative side of the political spectrum." And we asked the same question of "students on the liberal side of the political spectrum." Similar to the *relative disliking* measure, to calculate a respondent's stereotyping score, we calculate a difference score that acquires high values when the respondent ascribes positive traits to one group, and not the other. (Thus, the score would be at its maximum for a respondent who indicated that one group is open-minded, well-informed, tolerant, and intelligent, but not racist or condescending—and the other group is the exact opposite.)

- *Preference for social distance.* This is the same measure described in Part 3, and presented in Figure 2.

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[33] E.g. Wendy M. Rahn. 1993. "The Role of Partisan Stereotypes in Information Processing about Political Candidates." *American Journal of Political Science* 37(2)472-96.

Figure 4: Engagement, by Various Traits
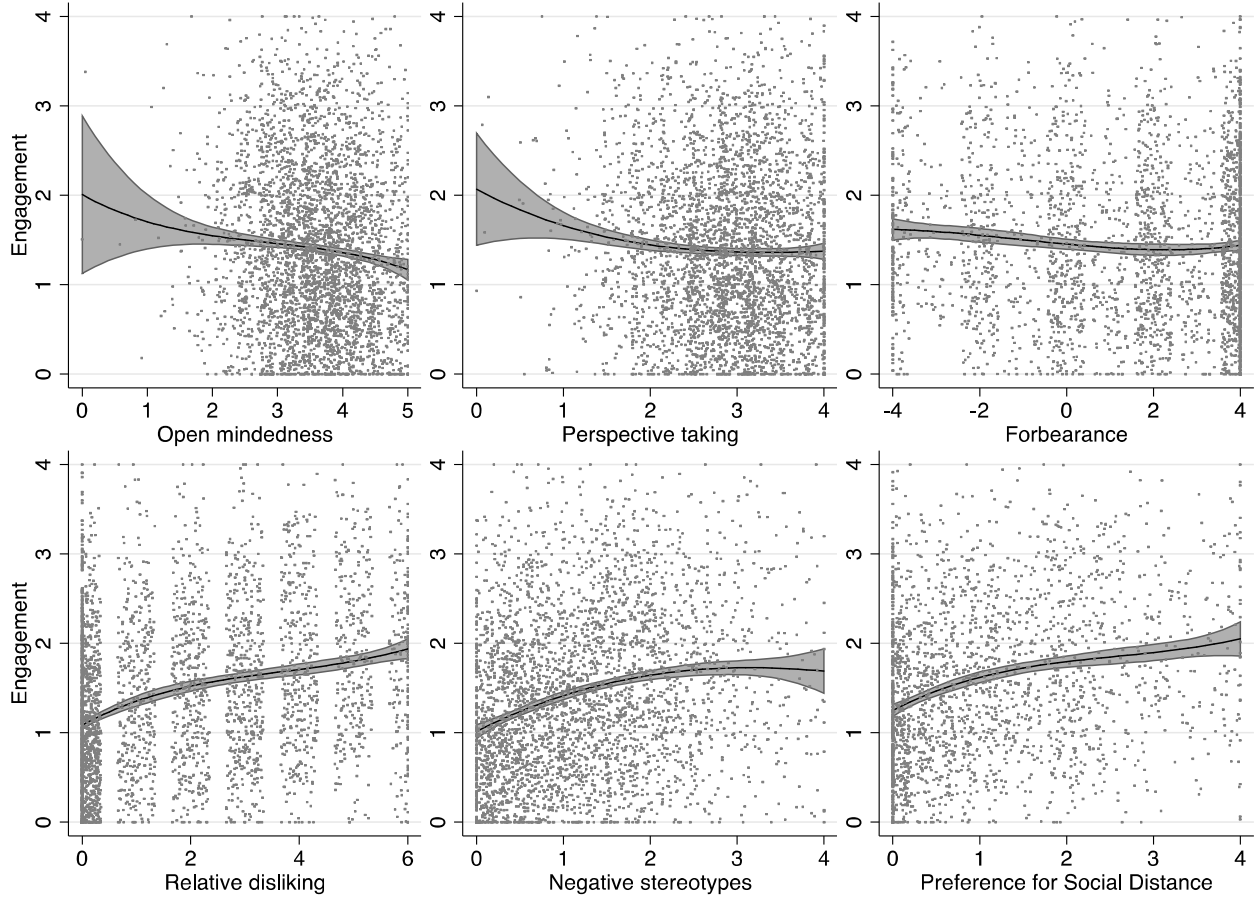
Note: Each panel shows the line of best fit from a cubic model estimated via ordinary least squares regression. Shaded regions show the 95% confidence interval about the model fit.

Analysis

Our purpose is to examine ways in which the most politically engaged students differ from those who are less engaged. As such, Figure 4 depicts the relationship between each of the traits described above (on the x-axes) and political engagement (on the y-axis).[34] The top row shows the relationship for open-mindedness, perspective taking, and forbearance—all traits that many would expect to foster constructive dialogue in political discussions. Unfortunately, each of these traits is negatively associated with engagement: e.g., the higher one is in open-mindedness, the less likely they are to be engaged. The bottom row shows the relationship for relative disliking, negative stereotyping, and preference for social distance—all traits that many would expect to hinder constructive dialogue. Here, all the associations are positive and substantial. For instance, the mean engagement score among people who like liberals and conservative students equally (relative disliking = 0) is 1.08. The mean engagement score for those who like one side much more than the other (relative disliking = 6) is 1.89—a 75% increase.

We acknowledge the need for caution in interpreting Figure 4. First, the relationship between the prediction and outcome variables in the analysis above is quite likely reciprocal: disliking one political side

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[34] The lines in each figure are expected values estimated from a cubic model (the engagement variable regressed on each predictor, as well as its squared and cubic terms). Shaded regions depict 95% confidence intervals for the expected values.

might cause students to become more engaged, but engagement might also cause students to develop greater liking for one side over the other. Nevertheless, the figure is a reminder of a key challenge that efforts to cultivate *constructive* political engagement must overcome. Politics naturally attracts people who are passionate, who are emotionally-invested, and who have strong convictions about current issues. Unfortunately, these tendencies likely also make discussion across political divides more challenging. We return to this theme in our conclusion.

Key points:

- Student political engagement is negatively associated with open-mindedness, perspective taking, and forbearance.
- Student political engagement is positively associated with disliking the outgroup, holding negative stereotypes about the outgroup, and preferences against socializing with the outgroup.
- Involvement from politically engaged students has the potential to create barriers against engagement from those less predisposed toward political engagement.

How can culture be improved?

In this final empirical section of our report, we consider evidence related to actionable steps UNC System institutions can take to improve the climate for free expression and constructive dialogue on their campuses. First, in an effort to identify points of opportunity and weakness, we examine students' perception of how on-campus constituencies influence the climate. Second, we examine what political interactions students find more and less appealing.

Methods

To examine points of strength and weakness for community building, our survey asked students, "Taking everything into account, how much do each of the following groups add to or subtract from a campus culture that encourages free expression and constructive dialogue? (We understand there might be exceptions within any particular group. Please do your best to think about the group *on average* within your university.)" There were five groups listed:

- The faculty at your university
- Fellow students at your university
- Administrators at your university
- Student activities staff at your university
- Residential life staff at your university

For each group, the respondent could indicate that they "Subtract a great deal," "Subtract a little," "Neither add nor subtract," "Add a little," or "Add a great deal." We acknowledge that the "add or subtract" terminology is more abstract than what we use throughout the rest of our study. But it serves a purpose here: it moves all five groups—which of course all influence free expression and constructive dialogue in very different ways—into a context where they can be compared to each other. We expect this approach to reveal which groups students have had positive experiences with and which they have not.

To summarize responses to the "add or subtract" questions, we calculate the percentage of students who indicated that a particular group adds to campus culture and subtract from this number the percentage of students who indicated that the group subtracts from campus culture. This procedure results in difference scores wherein positive numbers indicate that more students see the group as adding than subtracting, and negative numbers indicate that more students see the group as subtracting than adding.

Next, we used two distinct approaches to determine what political interactions students find more and less appealing. The first is a tool we call the Conversation Sampler (not to be confused with the Classroom Sampler in Part 3).[35] As a first step in the Conversation sample, respondents were randomly assigned to read one of two prompts:

> Please think about a single time when you discussed politics with someone or a group of people at [university]. Think about who was there and your relationship with those people, as well as what the topic was that you discussed.

or

> Please think about a single time when you **could** have discussed politics with someone or a group of people at [university] but chose **not** to participate in the discussion. Think about who was there and your relationship with those people, as well as what the topic was that you could have discussed.

In both cases, the prompt continued:

> To help you focus on a **specific** time you discussed politics, would you please write the initials of one of the people who was there? (We won't contact them.) If more than one person was there, just write the initials of the first person who comes to mind.

The purpose of the random assignment was to create two comparable groups: one in which respondents would describe aspects of a political conversation that they **engaged** in, and one in which respondents would describe aspects of a conversation that they **avoided**. Once respondents brought a specific conversation to mind, they were asked the following four questions:

- Was the conversation characterized more by people agreeing with each other, disagreeing with each other, or an even mixture of both? [Response options: "More by people agreeing with each other;" "About an even mixture of agreement and disagreement;" "More by people disagreeing with each other."]

- What was the context for this interaction? ["It was part of class;" "It was part of a university event, like a lecture;" "It was part of a non-class activity, like participating in a sport or a club;" "It was in a social context, like a conversation among friends or acquaintances;" "It was in some other context (please specify)."[36]]

- How many other people were part of this interaction? ["Just me and [conversation partner's initials];" "3-5 people, including me;" "6-10 people, including me;" "more than 10 people, including me."]

- How well do you know [conversation partner's initials]? ["Not very well at all (e.g. someone you met the very day of the interaction;" "Not particularly well (e.g. someone you see on a regular basis, but don't talk to very much);" "Somewhat well;" "Very well;" "Extremely well (e.g. a close personal friend)."]

Finally, we used the Modular content applied to just one university (UNC-CH) to directly examine how the characteristics of a political interaction would influence who decides to partake. Toward the end of the

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[35] The Conversation Sampler technique was adapted from Chapter 5 of Taylor Carlson and Jaime Settle, *What Goes Without Saying: Navigating Political Discussion in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[36] The "university event," "non-class activity," and "other" response options turned out to be small, accounting for only 16.5% of conversations combined. Below, we combine them into a single "other" category.

survey, UNC-CH students were asked one of two questions, determined by a random assignment. Half the respondents were randomly assigned to the *Adversarial* condition and were asked:

> Suppose there were an opportunity to attend a campus event where two outside speakers—one liberal and one conservative—debated a current political topic, such as immigration policy or policing reform. The speakers would **defend** their points of view, **criticize** the other side's record, and try to **persuade the audience to support their preferred policies**. How appealing would it be to attend an event like that?

The other half of UNC-CH respondents were assigned to the *Consensus* condition and were asked:

> Suppose there were an opportunity to attend a campus event where two outside speakers—one liberal and one conservative—discussed a current political topic, such as immigration policy or policing reform. The speakers would **present** their points of view, **consider** the other side's record, and try to **identify points of consensus and agreement**. How appealing would it be to attend an event like that? [In both prompts, the bold type is added to highlight differences and was not seen by respondents.]

The two prompts are nearly identical but contain minor alterations that present the event as having an adversarial feel (in the first case) or a consensus-seeking feel (in the second case). For both prompts, respondents could indicate that the event was "Not appealing at all," "Only a little appealing," "Somewhat appealing," "Very appealing," or "Extremely appealing." For analysis, we convert the responses to numbers, with the first response taking a value of 0, the second taking a value of 1, and so on up to 4.

Table 17: Groups Students Perceive to Add or Subtract from a Culture that Encourages Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Faculty	48	50	63	45	42	51	43	44
Students	48	61	49	49	52	55	50	48
Administrators	-13	26	12	-9	17	31	25	8
Student activities staff	47	51	50	44	49	58	49	43
Residential life staff	32	35	23	27	30	41	31	20

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of students who indicate a group adds to the campus culture for free expression and constructive dialogue, minus the percentage who indicate that the group subtracts.

Analysis

Table 17 examines which groups students perceive to add or subtract from the campus culture for free expression and constructive dialogue by reporting the difference scores we describe above. For instance, the 48 in the top-left corner of the table arises because 62% of AppState students indicated that faculty add to campus culture, and 14% indicated that faculty subtract from campus culture—a difference of 48 percentage points. Negative numbers arise when more students indicated that a given group subtracts from culture than adds to it.

Table 17 reveals more cross-institutional differences than most of the results we have reported to this point. Students at UNC-A have a more positive view of their faculty than students at many other institutions, and students at NCCU have a more positive view of their peers than students at other institutions. Views of university administrators are low across the board, though some institutions stand out more than others. Broadly, we think the results in Table 17 suggest that students and faculty may be most effective at building trusting relationships related to free expression and constructive dialogue. In contrast, programs seen as top-down because they are delivered by the administration may not be as effective. This pattern could arise because such initiatives are viewed as more paternalistic or programmatic, or it could arise because these initiative often face greater external constraints.

Table 18 reports the properties of conversations that students engaged in and compares them to the conversations that the students avoided. For instance, 47% of the conversations that students engaged in were characterized by agreement, and 36% of the conversations that students avoided were characterized by agreement. The table shows that conversations that respondents approached versus avoided are very different. The conversations that respondents approached were more likely to be characterized by agreement. They were much more likely to take place outside of class. They were smaller: more than three quarters of them involved five people or fewer. And they involved closer relationships: only 30% were with people that the respondent did not know particularly well.

We see these results as a reminder of something that it is easy to forget: discussing politics can be a deeply personal experience. Meaningful engagement often requires people to confront their fears, vulnerabilities, and uncertainties—perhaps also their stereotypes, animosities, and grievances. To speak one's mind can be to risk being regarded as ignorant, misinformed, or selfish. Even in an environment intentionally structured for the purpose (such as a class), the prospect can be terrifying. Table 18 suggests that engagement is easier in contexts that are more personal, familiar, and intimate. We return to this theme in our concluding section.

Table 18: Conversations that Respondents Engaged, versus Avoided

	Engaged	Avoided
Composition		
Characterized by agreement	47%	36%
Characterized by disagreement	9	13
Context		
Class	25	36
Social	62	43
Other	13	20
Size		
Five people or fewer	77	64
More than 5 people	23	36
Familiarity		
Knew partner not particularly well or not well at all	30	50
Knew partner very well or extremely well	50	28

Note: Cells are the percentage of conversations that respondents engaged in or avoided that had each listed characteristic.

Finally, we consider the UNC-CH experiment wherein respondents considered an event that was described with a focus on adversity or consensus. The average appeal of the adversity-focused event was 2.14. The average appeal of the consensus-focused even was 2.40. Because the appeal outcome ranged from 0 to 4 and the difference was 0.26, we can infer that using a few words to change the tenor of the event increased its appeal by about 7% of the plausible range. This difference was statistically significant by conventional standards.[37]

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[37] By a two-tailed t-test, t=2.44, p<.02.

Figure 5: Adversarial versus Consensus-focused Events, by Open-mindedness.
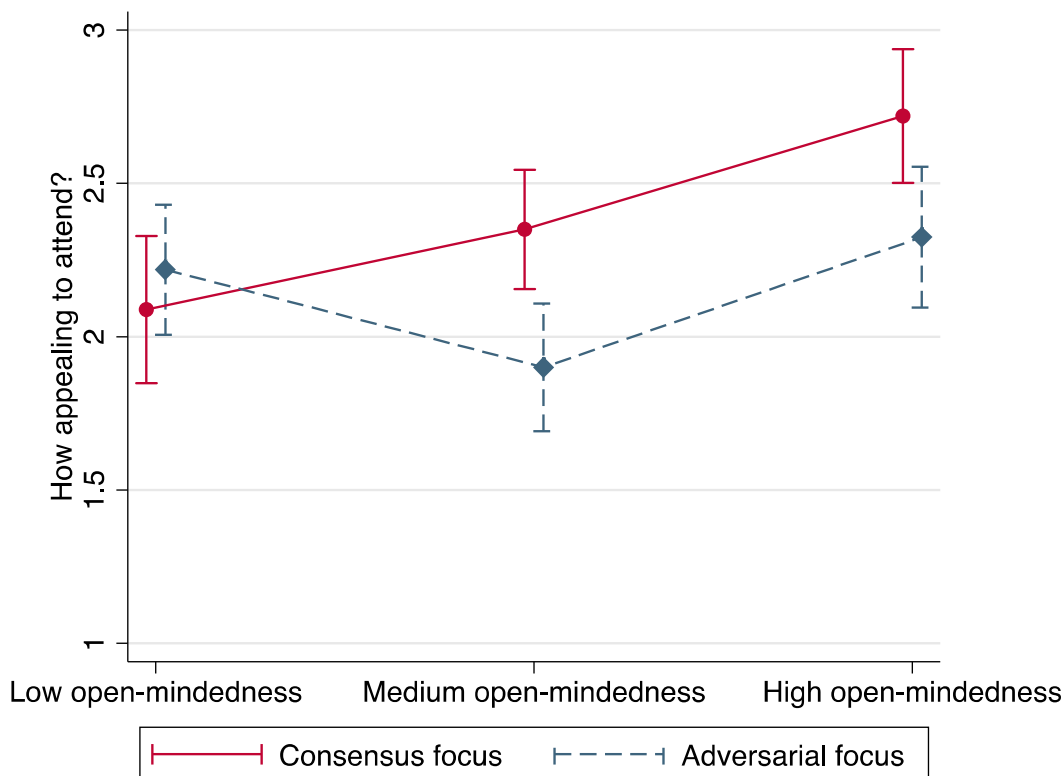
An experiment such as this also allows us to consider how an event's style might change the composition of the audience. To consider effects on composition, we examine how the event's appeal depends on which prompt was seen, as well as the respondent's open-mindedness score (described earlier).[38] Figure 5 shows the results. The figure implies that a consensus-focused event *decreases* interest among students who are low in open-mindedness by a small (and statistically insignificant) amount. But a consensus-focused event *increases* appeal among students who are medium and high in open-mindedness.[39] The implication that follows is that event organizers might garner a more open-minded audience by creating events that focus on consensus rather than adversity.

We have also examined the experimental results broken down by the other attributes presented in Figure 5. These analyses do not uncover differences nearly as potent as what we see for open-mindedness in Figure 5. Rather, the Adversarial condition appears to decrease event appeal for respondents similarly for each level of the measure.

Key points:

- Faculty, students, and administrators have markedly different reputations concerning free expression issues among students across UNC System campuses. Students see faculty and peers as a net positive for free expression and constructive dialogue. Campus administrations are viewed much less positively.

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[38] Here, open-mindedness is divided into three categories that are as near to equally-sized as possible. The analysis includes 155 respondents we label as low in open-mindedness, 193 who are medium, and 156 who are high.
[39] These increases are statistically significant at $p<.01$ and $p<.05$, respectively.

- Students are more likely to participate in political conversations that focus on agreement, that occur in social settings, that include relatively fewer people, and that build rapport with their conversation partners.
- Campus events that emphasize consensus-focused over adversarial conversations are more appealing—particularly to students who are high in open-mindedness.

Part 5: Conclusions and Next Steps

The work we report examines the climate for free expression and constructive dialogue at UNC System institutions. As we report in Part 3, across institutions, substantial proportions of UNC System students have concerns about the consequences that might follow from expressing sincere political views. These concerns arise across the political spectrum, but they are voiced disproportionately by students who identify as conservative. Students' concerns appear to center at least as much—and often more—on fallout from peers as on fallout from faculty. These patterns dispel several simplistic narratives that have been used to characterize how politics unfolds on college campuses.

We also developed new approaches to better understand the challenges that must be overcome to improve the climate for political engagement. In Part 4, we sought to better understand on what topics students tend to hold opinions back, what kinds of students tend to be politically engaged, and what steps might be taken to draw more students into campus engagement. We find that students express sincere discomfort with speaking on a wide variety of topics and for several different reasons. Their open-ended remarks reveal how people of different backgrounds could experience exactly the same encounter in very different ways—a pattern that we suspect is common. We also find that student political engagement is associated with traits that likely work against constructive engagement: less open-mindedness and greater hostility toward political outgroups, for two examples.

We see our results as providing evidence that efforts to foster a positive political culture on college campuses should be holistic in character. Much of the commentary about political engagement on campus focuses on engagement that occurs through formal institutions, such as students' classes. Indeed, classes likely help establish what political topics and considerations will be at the front of students' minds. But classes are just one part of the typical student's political experiences in college. A student who participates in a class discussion about the role of religion in society might continue the conversation with a classmate as they walk to the dining hall after class. Later in the day, this student might decide to engage with a different friend's social media post about a Supreme Court case considering public prayer in education settings. Or the student might attend practice for an athletic team and remark upon a teammate's practice of making a religious gesture after each goal. Several of our results hint that these moments have the potential to be just as formative as what occurred in the classroom. As such, efforts to improve campus culture should be attentive to the diverse contexts in which students encounter politics.[40]

A natural next step for the UNC System would be to convene stakeholders from each member institution to review the data we have collected in greater detail. Although we have begun to examine cross-university differences, the data can be probed more deeply to examine challenges and opportunities that might apply to specific institutions. Local experts will also be poised to examine the survey's Modular content—survey questions that were particular to specific institutions and which are not part of this report (see Part 2). We are committed to making the data we have collected available to institutional partners (with appropriate redactions to protect respondent anonymity). Following such a review, each local team might consider developing a campus-specific written roadmap that articulates how various campus constituencies will support constructive political engagement. (See the Bipartisan Policy Center report for an example of a "Campus Free Expression Roadmap.")

Additionally, since the data we have collected already point to several plausible ways to improve the political climate at UNC System institutions, we believe it is time to begin developing and testing specific

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[40] A task force convened by the Bipartisan Policy Center recently proposed a roadmap for improving open inquiry and intellectual exchange in colleges and universities. The roadmap stresses the need to draw on the tradition of shared governance in higher education by defining roles for each of the several stakeholders that help shape students' experiences on campus: administrators, trustees, faculty, athletic directors and coaches, and student affairs staff.

interventions. The survey experiment we report above (Figure 5) shows the promise of such activities: a simple shift in how a campus event was framed led to greater overall interest in the event—and especially from students who exhibit more open-mindedness. Researchers could build on such a result, such as with a field experiment that randomly assigned students to different forms of an advertisement for an *actual* campus event, and then examined whether each student attended the event.[41]

One especially promising focus for future studies is rapport building. A theme that runs throughout our results is that students worry that their comments about politics will be misunderstood, and perhaps used against them. There is also evidence that constructive engagement is harder when the stakes are higher— when the format is more formal, when there is an audience, and when students do not know their interlocutors very well. Unfortunately, these realities suggest that some possible routes for improving campus climates might have limited impact. For instance, events that center a controversial, provocative speaker—or even events that bring together differently-minded individuals to debate—might activate students' natural defenses against persuasion.

As an alternative, campuses could consider investing in low-stakes activities designed to build trust and deepen understanding. For instance, many students might find it far more appealing to participate in a monthly discussion group wherein five differently-minded students and a faculty (or graduate student) mentor have an extended conversation about a political topic.[42] (They might find the activity all the more appealing if it included a free meal as an enticement.) Because the interactions would be recurrent, participants would have more reason to invest in developing relationships, which in turn can discourage stereotyping.[43] And because participants would have far more space to gently call out insensitivities, add nuance, correct missteps, and contextualize their motivations, groups could explore political topics with much less risk. Such an effort would require significant commitment from mentors and students alike, but its benefits have the potential to be profound.

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[41] Political scientists have developed a suite of tools for conducting field experimental studies. See Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2012).

[42] Related, one recent study assigned high school students to discuss political topics in small groups, with a focus on either "deliberation" or "debate." The debate condition resulted in less consensus, greater student discomfort, and greater political polarization. See Paula McAvoy and Gregory E. McAvoy, 2021, "Can Debate and Deliberation Reduce Partisan Divisions? Evidence from a Study of High School Students." *Peabody Journal of Education* 96(3): 275–84.

[43] Such an approach would also likely be able to create the conditions that have been found to reduce intergroup hostility under the "contact hypothesis." For one entry point to this literature, see Elizabeth Levy Paluck and Donald P. Green. 2009. "Prejudice Reduction: What Works? A Review and Assessment of Research and Practice." *Annual Review of Psychology* 60: 339–67.

Appendix A: Project Contributors

Principal Investigator: Timothy J. Ryan, *UNC-Chapel Hill*

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Appendix B: Campus Solicitation

FREE EXPRESSION AND CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

Call for Research Partners

Higher education has the potential to ameliorate political division. At their best, college campuses are places where students discard preconceptions, test out new points of view, and engage with people whose ideas differ from theirs. Of course, current circumstances—as characterized by social media platforms that fuel adversity and a multigenerational peak in political polarization—present abundant challenges for achieving these goals. What experiences do college students have as they try to navigate this rapidly changing landscape? How are the University of North Carolina campuses preparing their students for citizenship in the 21st Century—and how can they do better?

We are seeking partners to help us answer these questions. In 2019, an interdisciplinary team surveyed UNC-Chapel Hill students to better understand the campus climate for free expression and constructive dialogue. Our ensuing report detailed points of strength, as well as areas for potential improvement. We seek to build on this work by collecting data from several UNC institutions during the 2021-2022 academic year.

Project scope

The main focus for the 2021-2022 academic year is surveying students at several UNC constituent institutions to better understand local and system-wide issues. We plan to survey 500 students at each institution. This survey is tentatively slated to be fielded in January 2022, with results to be presented to the UNC Board of Governors in May of 2022.

Topics to be covered

We seek to better understand UNC students' daily experiences as they pertain to free expression. Some of the questions this research will help answer include:

- How do students perceive their instructors' posture toward political expression in class?
- How do students interact with their peers who express political views with which they disagree?
- What free expression challenges do particular segments of the student population face?
- What opportunities to have constructive conversations about contentious political issues are being missed?
- How can UNC campuses go farther in cultivating a culture that welcomes people who hold a wide swath of perspectives while also supporting a vigorous contest of ideas?

Our existing report provides examples of how we investigated these questions at UNC-Chapel Hill, as well as what we found.

Expectations for participating institutions

The chancellor of each participating institution will appoint an on-campus liaison to secure permissions and solicit input from the campus community about how this research can address significant local topics. Each on-campus liaison will also communicate research findings to the institution's leadership.

Benefits to participating institutions

Institutional participation provides a rare opportunity to better understand the campus culture for free expression for three reasons:. first, the UNC System is providing financial support to incentivize participation from a random sample of students at each participating institution; second, institutional partners will be invited to provide feedback on the core (cross-institutional) survey content; third, there will be space reserved on the survey instrument for each participating institution to add content suited to understand local free expression issues.

On-campus liaisons will also receive a modest honorarium.

The research team is open to cooperating with campus partners on additional scholarly output, such as articles for peer-reviewed journals.

Timeline

We aim to enlist a slate of campus partners and to draft cross-institutional survey content by September 10, 2021. Partner institutions should provide draft institution-specific content by October 15, 2021. We plan to apply for IRB approval by November 1, 2021 and to field surveys in January 2022. Analysis and writeup of results will occur in February, March, and April 2022, with summary results to be presented to the UNC Board of Governors in May of 2022.

Research Team

Principal investigator: Timothy J. Ryan, Ph.D. (UNC-Chapel Hill)

Co-investigators: Andrew Engelhardt, Ph.D. (UNC-Greensboro)
                           Jennifer Larson, Ph.D. (UNC-Chapel Hill)
                           Mark McNeilly (UNC-Chapel Hill)

Questions?

For questions, please contact the PI, Timothy Ryan, tjr@unc.edu.

Appendix C: Sample Demographics

The tables below report sample demographics within each participating institution and compare them to official benchmarks. Benchmarks for race and gender come from the UNC System dashboard,[44] while those for class year come from each institution's office of institutional research and assessment. The UNC System dashboard classifies a person into a racial group if they identify as that race *only*. In contrast, we classify a respondent as belonging to a particular category (e.g. Black) even if they also identify as a second category (e.g. Asian). Hence, the percentages for race reported below do not tally to 100%, and are only roughly comparable to the System benchmark. Additionally, the System benchmark appears to have been created before it became standard to include a non-binary gender category in public opinion surveys, so that category does not exist for the benchmark data.

Table C1: Sample Demographics (Appalachian State University)

	FECD Survey	Benchmark
Race		
White	86%	81%
Black	4	3
Hispanic	9	8
Asian	4	2
Native American	1	0
Other	3	6
Gender		
Man	29	43
Woman	65	57
Non-Binary	6	
Year of entry		
Entered in/after 2021	48	28
Entered in 2020	21	24
Entered in 2019	15	23
Entered in 2018 or earlier	15	24

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[44] https://myinsight.northcarolina.edu/t/Public/views/db_enroll/EnrollmentbyLevel?iid=1&:isGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y&:embed=y

Table C2: Sample Demographics (NCCU)

	FECD Survey	**Benchmark**
Race		
White	15%	5%
Black	78	78
Hispanic	12	8
Asian	2	1
Native American	2	0
Other	1	7
Gender		
Man	19	30
Woman	76	70
Non-Binary	5	
Year of entry		
Entered in/after 2021	43	22
Entered in 2020	22	20
Entered in 2019	25	20
Entered in 2018 or earlier	10	36

Table C3: Sample Demographics (UNC-A)

	FECD Survey	**Benchmark**
Race		
White	88%	74%
Black	5	5
Hispanic	9	8
Asian	3	2
Native American	2	0
Other	3	11
Gender		
Man	27	43
Woman	57	58
Non-Binary	15	
Year of entry		
Entered in/after 2021	40	31
Entered in 2020	26	26
Entered in 2019	17	20
Entered in 2018 or earlier	17	23

Table C4: Sample Demographics (UNC-CH)

	FECD Survey	Benchmark
Race		
White	65%	56%
Black	9	9
Hispanic	8	10
Asian	22	13
Native American	2	0
Other	2	13
Gender		
Man	30	40
Woman	67	60
Non-Binary	3	
Year of entry		
Entered in/after 2021	43	25
Entered in 2020	25	16
Entered in 2019	18	26
Entered in 2018 or earlier	14	33

Table C5: Sample Demographics (UNC-C)

	FECD Survey	Benchmark
Race		
White	57%	52%
Black	19	16
Hispanic	14	13
Asian	15	9
Native American	1	0
Other	4	9
Gender		
Man	37	52
Woman	59	48
Non-Binary	4	
Year of entry		
Entered in/after 2021	52	20
Entered in 2020	21	21
Entered in 2019	15	27
Entered in 2018 or earlier	12	32

Table C6: Sample Demographics (UNC-G)

	FECD Survey	Benchmark
Race		
White	49%	41%
Black	31	30
Hispanic	13	14
Asian	9	6
Native American	1	0
Other	3	9
Gender		
Man	21	33
Woman	73	67
Non-Binary	6	
Year of entry		
Entered in/after 2021	45	22
Entered in 2020	24	19
Entered in 2019	17	27
Entered in 2018 or earlier	14	33

Table C7: Sample Demographics (UNC-P)

	FECD Survey	Benchmark
Race		
White	54%	38%
Black	26	29
Hispanic	11	10
Asian	2	1
Native American	15	13
Other	4	10
Gender		
Man	23	37
Woman	71	63
Non-Binary	5	
Year of entry		
Entered in/after 2021	36	22
Entered in 2020	26	21
Entered in 2019	20	26
Entered in 2018 or earlier	18	30

Table C8: Sample Demographics (UNC-W)

	FECD Survey	Benchmark
Race		
White	83%	77%
Black	6	5
Hispanic	8	8
Asian	5	2
Native American	1	0
Other	2	8
Gender		
Man	21	35
Woman	74	65
Non-Binary	5	
Year of entry		
Entered in/after 2021	49	20
Entered in 2020	28	19
Entered in 2019	16	25
Entered in 2018 or earlier	7	35

Appendix D: Recruitment Email

Dear [institution] student,

We are a North Carolina research team conducting research on students' experiences encountering and engaging with different viewpoints on campus. You have been randomly selected for an invitation to a survey we are conducting. If you participate, you will represent the views of dozens of other students at your school. Additionally, to thank you for your participation, we are able to offer an Amazon e-gift card valued at $10. You will be provided with information about how to obtain this gift card upon completion.

The survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you decide to participate, you will be asked questions about your experiences inside and outside of classrooms, as well as what experiences are important to have as part of your education.

Participation is anonymous and voluntary. No identifying information that could be used to identify you will be made public.

Follow ${l://SurveyLink?d=this link} to see consent-related information and to begin the survey. Or copy and paste this URL below into your internet browser: ${l://SurveyURL}

This survey will be open for you to complete until ${date://OtherDate/FL/+1%20week} at ${date://CurrentTime/TL}.

Thank you for your help with this research,
Timothy J. Ryan, UNC-Chapel Hill (Principal investigator)
fecd@unc.edu

If you have questions about this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the UNC Institutional Review Board at (919) 966-3113, or IRB_subjects@unc.edu. This is IRB Study number 21-2975.

Appendix E: Concerns by Specific Racial Identification

Table E1: Class Concerns, by Race (Granular coding)

	AppState	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Worry about student opinion								
White	35	14	27	31	34	22	27	31
Black	44	7	23	20	19	13	14	15
Hispanic	34	28	28	35	32	23	16	26
Asian	26	--	17	25	27	17	--	24
Native American	--	--	--	--	--	--	23	--
Other	36	--	42	36	29	14	45	27
Worry about prof's opinion								
White	18	14	13	19	17	14	13	18
Black	17	7	9	11	5	8	14	15
Hispanic	20	22	21	26	11	12	12	16
Asian	22	--	25	22	19	7	--	16
Native American	--	--	--	--	--	--	19	--
Other	29	--	0	18	14	14	18	18
Worry about grade								
White	12	19	8	11	12	8	11	11
Black	11	6	9	4	5	5	14	15
Hispanic	11	17	5	14	8	6	9	10
Asian	17	--	8	17	15	5	--	12
Native American	--	--	--	--	--	--	14	--
Other	29	--	0	9	5	7	9	9
Worry about social media								
White	16	14	20	20	20	15	17	16
Black	22	6	23	11	14	11	12	15
Hispanic	23	22	23	16	16	18	16	6
Asian	17	--	17	21	16	17	--	12
Native American	--	--	--	--	--	--	23	--
Other	7	--	17	27	24	7	18	27
Worry about code of conduct								
White	10	5	11	11	14	11	14	10
Black	22	4	14	2	7	5	12	15
Hispanic	11	11	10	14	7	12	12	6
Asian	9	--	17	16	14	12	--	12
Native American	--	--	--	--	--	--	19	--
Other	14	--	0	9	14	7	36	9
Self-censored more than once								
White	17	14	17	14	17	14	17	17
Black	39	12	32	13	16	11	11	15
Hispanic	23	28	18	28	13	15	25	10
Asian	22	--	33	16	14	22	--	12

Native American	--	--	--	--	--	--	26	--
Other	14	--	8	9	19	7	27	18

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of respondents who indicated that they were at least "slightly" concerned about each consideration. Entries in the bottom section indicate the percentage of respondents who self-censored in the randomly chosen class more than once. Analysis is limited to the 36% of courses for which the respondent said that politics came up in the course more than "never." Percentages that would derive from ten or fewer respondents are omitted.

Appendix F: Item-specific Analysis of Social Distance and Stereotyping

Table F1: Item-specific Social Distance Measures, by Ideology

	Liberal-identifying students (about conservatives)	Conservative-identifying students (about liberals)
"I would be willing to have a person from this group as a close personal friend."	37%	7%
"I enjoy taking classes with students from this group."	34	16
"Students from this group are an important part of the campus community."	20	8
"Faculty from this group are an important part of the campus community."	26	9

Note: Cells entries indicate the percentage of respondents saying that they somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the given statement.

Table F2: Item-specific Stereotype Measures, by Ideology

	Liberal-identifying students' perception of conservative students	Conservative-identifying students' perception of liberal students
Open-minded	9%	30%
Well-informed	24	36
Tolerant	13	28
Intelligent	47	65
Racist	73	35
Condescending	77	76

Note: Cells entries indicate the percentage of respondents saying that the trait describes a group moderately well, very well, or extremely well.