

Free Speech and Self-Censorship at Johns Hopkins: A Brief Report

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Debates in public and the media over the past several years have raised concerns that college students tend to reject free speech norms and open debate in favor of “woke” ideologies and so-called “cancel culture.” These critiques stem from highly-publicized episodes in which students have disinvited, shouted down, or otherwise prevented speakers with unpopular – generally, politically conservative – positions from speaking or expressing their views. Meanwhile, observers also have raised concerns about “self-censorship”: students refraining from expression of potentially unpopular political opinions for fear of sanctions from instructors or peers.

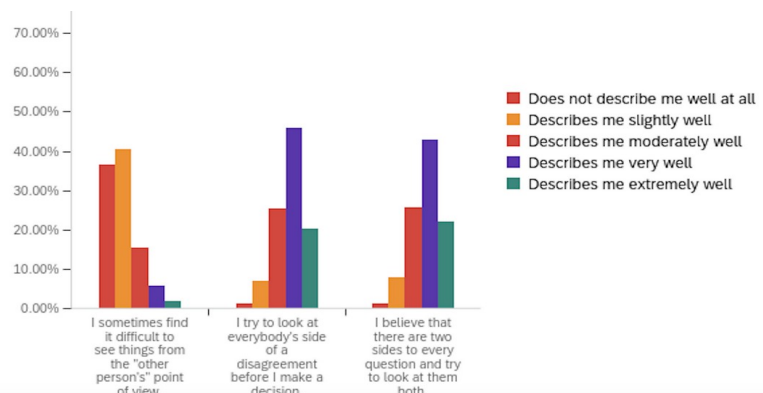
We sought to understand these dynamics, particularly among Johns Hopkins undergraduates:

- *How open are students to viewpoints different from their own?*
- *How willing are students to use repressive tactics to counter views they find objectionable?*
- *How often do students self-censor in class and why?*

This report provides preliminary evidence toward answering each of these questions based on 1,785 completed responses from undergraduate students in May, 2023.

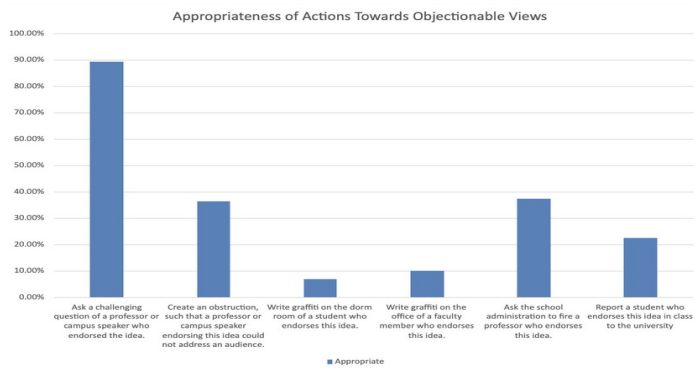
How open are students to viewpoints different from their own?

Students endorsed high levels of open-mindedness to other viewpoints. 77% of respondents said they generally did not “find it difficult to see things from the ‘other person’s’ point of view,” 91% said they generally “try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement” before they make a decision, and 91% “believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.” Large majorities of students said they did not “tune out’ messages [they] disagree with,” and over 80% said they “try to reserve judgment until [they] have a chance to hear arguments from both sides” and are “open to considering other viewpoints.”



Students expressed a desire to hear from a wider range of political voices among speakers on campus: 42% said there were too few opportunities to hear speakers that articulate conservative perspectives, while just under 16% said the same of speakers articulating liberal perspectives.

How willing are students to use repressive tactics to counter views they find objectionable?



Even though students endorse open-minded attitudes in the abstract, they may nevertheless be willing to use tactics that prevent speech they disagree with. We asked students which of several actions would be appropriate to take in response to someone with whom they disagreed with on current political questions. Nearly 90% agreed that it would be at least somewhat appropriate to “ask a challenging question”

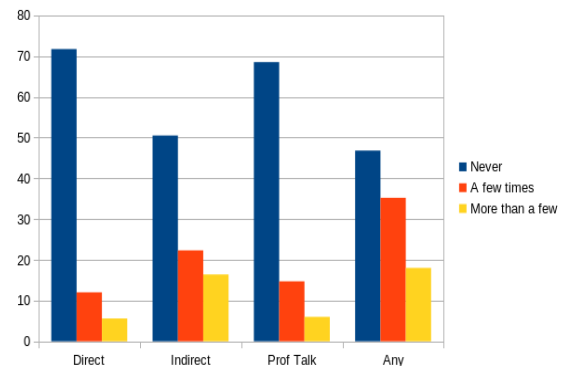
about the topic, enhancing open speech rather than suppressing it. But **many students endorsed tactics that sought to punish or suppress speech.** 32% said it was appropriate to “create an obstruction” to prevent a speaker from addressing an audience; 37% to “ask the school administration to fire a professor who endorses the idea”; and 32% to report a student who endorses the idea in class to the university for sanctioning.

Students who said they were slightly liberal, liberal, or extremely liberal were more likely to endorse these repressive tactics than were those who said they were moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative. Liberal students endorsed “create an obstruction” 46% of the time, but conservatives only 10%. Asking the school to fire a professor was considered appropriate by 44% of liberals but by only 10% of conservatives; and reporting a student to university authorities was endorsed by 25% of liberals and 12% of conservatives. *An important methodological note: only 8.4% of respondents said they were conservative, so these data do not allow for inferring general patterns about conservative students’ specific experiences.*

In short: **while students generally endorsed open-minded attitudes, many are willing to try to suppress, rather than engage with, speech they disagree with.**

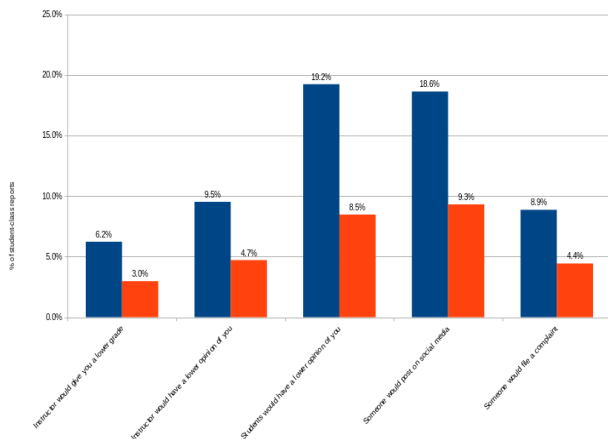
How often do students self-censor in class and why?

In most courses, political topics never came up; in 17.6% of courses students reported that directly political topics came up at least a few times during the semester, while indirectly political topics came up at least a few times in 43% of courses (only “a few times throughout the semester” in 25%). Most of these courses were in the



humanities and social sciences along with business, education, and arts; natural science and humanities courses reported many fewer. Three-quarters of students reported that the instructor “never” said something in class that “seemed to reflect [that] instructor’s political leanings,” with majorities endorsing that experience in all academic areas, including the humanities and social sciences.

Many students, though not most, expressed concern that they would experience negative consequences for expressing an unpopular, relevant, and sincere political view in class. In classes where students said political topics came up, 6.2% were concerned the instructor would give them a lower grade; 9.5% that the instructor would have a lower opinion of them; 19.2% that other students in the class would have a lower opinion of them; 18.6% that someone in class would post on social media about them; and 8.9% that another student would file a formal complaint.



would give them a lower grade; 9.5% that the instructor would have a lower opinion of them; 19.2% that other students in the class would have a lower opinion of them; 18.6% that someone in class would post on social media about them; and 8.9% that another student would file a formal complaint. Among students who said they were slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative, 32% were at least slightly concerned about a lower grade; 42% about the instructor’s opinion of them; and 64%

about other students’ opinion of them. Still, **the vast majority of students (97% of students; 95% of conservative students) agreed that “the course instructor encouraged participation from liberals and conservatives alike.”** *An important methodological note: only 8.4% of respondents said they were conservative, so these data do not allow for inferring general patterns about conservative students’ specific experiences.*

Despite those concerns, students rarely self-censored in class. Even in classes where political topics came up at least once, the vast majority of students reported that they never “kept an opinion related to class to [themselves] because [they] were worried about the potential consequences of expressing that opinion.” Over 75% reported that such self-censorship “never” happened in courses with some political topic, with an additional 10% stating that it happened “once.” Among conservative students, those rates were 72% and 4% respectively.

Recommendations

In the service of increasing students’ civic engagement and education, dialogue across difference, and openness to multiple viewpoints, we recommend that Johns Hopkins consider several possible approaches:

- Build curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular opportunities for students to talk, listen, debate, and revise across disagreement
- Help and encourage instructors to teach and model disagreement to reduce students’ tendency to self-censor in class and elsewhere
- Faculty may need to better intentionally design their classroom environments to have students from all walks of life and majors see the value and learn the skills of expression and productive conversations, regardless of background or ideology

- Integrate democratic skills and knowledge into all students' curricula, including building bridges between STEM and democracy
- Expand Democracy Day in first-year orientation, focusing on productive dialogue and disagreement
- Build other student-life programming focusing on dialogue, revision, and argument outside the classroom
- Provide opportunities for meaningful, iterative conversation with diverse speakers
- Measure student experiences, development, and outcomes to improve future performance

Methodological Appendix

Data came from a survey designed and implemented by Andrew J. Perrin, Emily Calderone, and Jessica Caterson. The survey derived from Ryan et al's "Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue in the University of North Carolina System" (https://fecdsurveyreport.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/22160/2022/08/FECD_Report_8-21-22.pdf) and was implemented with the assistance of Tim Ryan, that study's designer. Financial support was provided by the Johns Hopkins University Office of the Provost, but the office neither requested nor was provided with any prior review over study design or implementation or the publication of results.

The survey was sent to all undergraduate students at Johns Hopkins in the Krieger School of Arts & Sciences and the Whiting School of Engineering who were enrolled in at least one undergraduate course during the spring 2023 semester (N=5,318). Students were offered a \$10 Amazon gift card for participation. A total of 1,785 students responded, for a response rate of 33.5%. Notably, we achieved a much higher response rate than did several similar surveys at other institutions (33.5% compared to 7.9% in the UNC system; 2.4% in Florida; and 12.5% in Wisconsin). The survey was approved by the Homewood Institutional Review Board at Johns Hopkins University (protocol number HIRB00017078).

The survey asked students to report on attitudes and experiences with respect to free speech and "self-censorship" on campus. Using course registration data, we randomly picked one of the classes each respondent had taken that semester and asked for specific information about experiences in that class, including whether political subjects had come up in class; whether the professor had imposed his or her views on the class; and whether the respondent had felt uncomfortable expressing a relevant but unpopular opinion in the class.

The survey also asked students to report their attitudes with respect to free speech and exposure to different political viewpoints on campus. Later in the survey, they were offered a choice among 10 options as answers to the question: "Which of these statements do you find most objectionable?" They were then asked how appropriate it would be to participate in a range of actions to oppose these statements on campus, ranging from "asking a challenging question" to "Ask the school administration to fire a professor who endorses this idea."

A similar, updated survey was fielded in spring 2024 and analysis is underway.