

Contact: Rachel Boon

### FREE SPEECH SURVEY REPORT

**Action Requested:** Receive the report of the first Board of Regents free speech survey.

**Survey Administration:** On February 24, 2021, the Board of Regents approved a series of recommendations aimed at strengthening efforts to protect free speech rights at the universities. Recommendation six stated that the committee will “every two years do a survey on free speech to all faculty, staff and students.”

In the summer of 2021 a cross-institutional group of university researchers and other administrators worked with Board office staff to identify or develop an appropriate survey instrument for this purpose. Because there were limited options for nationally normed or commercially available relevant surveys of students, and none for university employees, the group determined that a locally developed survey would best serve the needs of the universities. This approach helped to ensure it was suitable for students, faculty and staff audiences. In recognition of the slightly different concerns of these groups, two surveys were created. Survey questions for both versions are available in Appendix A of this report.

The survey was conducted from November 9, 2021 to December 1, 2021. For the student survey, an initial email invitation was sent to all enrolled students (69,459), with two reminders sent to non-respondents in the following weeks. For the employee survey, an initial email invitation was sent to all individuals employed at the universities and at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC) as of November 1, 2021 (28,856). Two separate reminders were sent to non-respondents in subsequent weeks.

At the time the survey closed at midnight on December 1, 2021, there were 7,062 respondents to the student survey and 10,648 respondents to the employee survey. After removing a small number of individuals from the pool for invalid emails, the response rates were calculated.

Student Survey Response Rate: 10.2%  
Employee Survey Response Rate: 38.2%

In reviewing the results of the surveys, having a broader context can help understand and interpret the findings. A report on a national survey of college students regarding free expression on campuses was recently released by the Knight Foundation/Ipsos<sup>1</sup>. The Knight Foundation has conducted this survey four times since 2016 so has data on national trends in certain areas that appear throughout this report of student survey results (in 2016, 2017 and 2019, the Knight Foundation partnered with Gallup on the survey). While the questions are not always identical to those asked on the Board of Regents Free Speech Survey, there are similarities in content that can be useful to consider. Unfortunately, there is no similar national survey of university employees that could provide a similar degree of context. These surveys will provide a baseline for future efforts to assess free speech at the Regent universities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Knight Foundation-Ipsos (2022). *College Student Views on Free Expression and Campus Speech 2022*. Accessed on January 31, 2022 at <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/college-student-views-on-free-expression-and-campus-speech-2022/>

**Student Survey Results:** Response rates from each institution were similar (Table 1). Seventy-one percent of respondents were undergraduates while undergraduate comprise 79% of total enrolled students. Graduate/professional students comprise 29% of survey respondents, but are 21% of the total enrolled student population.

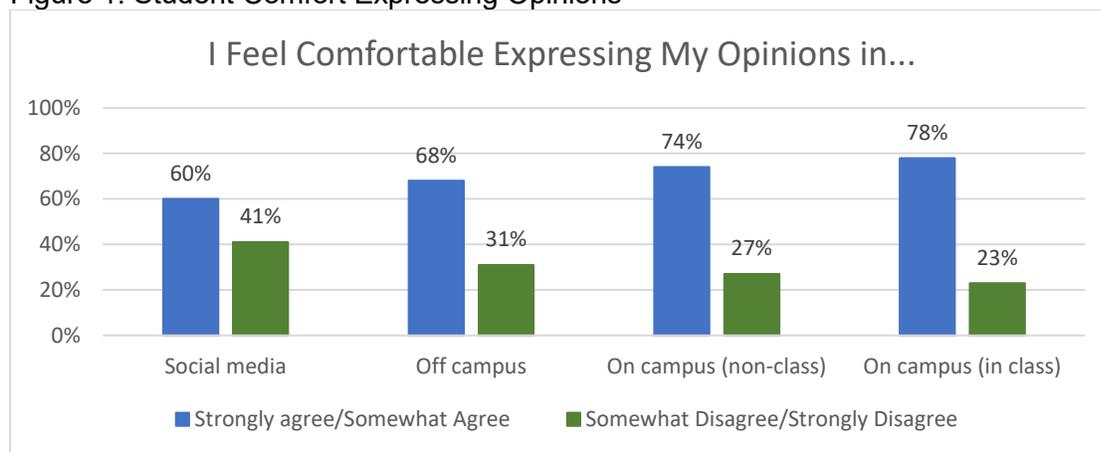
Table 1: Student Survey Response Rates

Institution	Response Rate	Total Responses
ISU	10.3%	3,114
SUI	10.2%	3,048
UNI	9.5%	870

The survey asked how comfortable students felt expressing their opinions in different settings. Figure 1 shows that students most frequently felt comfortable expressing their opinions in their classes (78% agreed they were comfortable). In contrast, results from the Knight Foundation/Ipsos survey indicated that less than half (48%) of college students felt comfortable expressing disagreement with class instructors or other students. Although these questions were asked in slightly different ways, the results suggest that students at Iowa’s Regent universities are comparatively more comfortable in their classrooms than students at many other institutions nationally.

Regent university students indicated they were least likely to feel comfortable expressing opinions on social media (60% agreed they were comfortable). The Knight Foundation/Ipsos survey of college students asked if they agree or disagree with a statement that “social media stifles free expression because people are afraid of being attacked or shamed by those who disagree with them.” Half of respondents to the Knight/Ipsos survey agreed that social media stifles their free expression.

Figure 1: Student Comfort Expressing Opinions

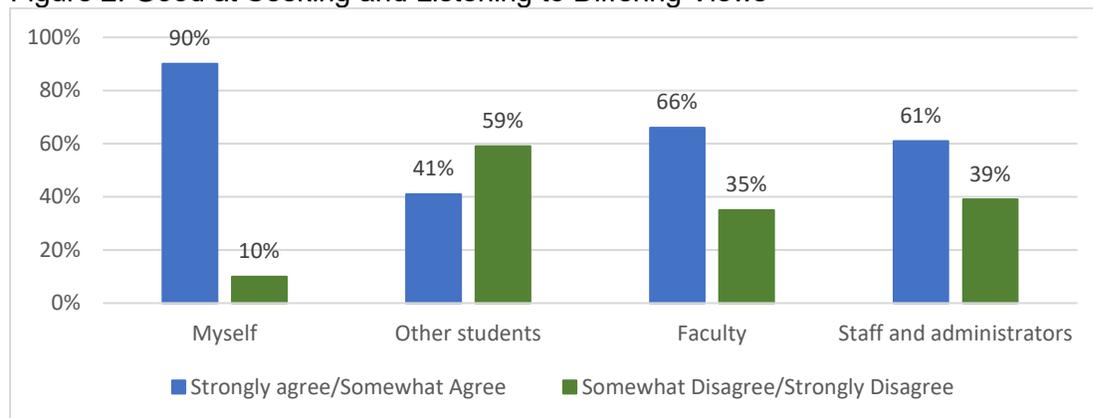


The Board of Regents Free Speech Survey also asked about personal experiences and perceptions of openness among people on campus. This question was modeled on one from the Gallup survey conducted of a national sample of college students in 2020<sup>2</sup>. The extent to which students agree that themselves or others are “good at seeking and listening to people with

<sup>2</sup> Knight Foundation-Gallup (2020). *The First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report: College Student Views of Free Expression*. <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/First-Amendment-on-Campus-2020.pdf> accessed May 14, 2021

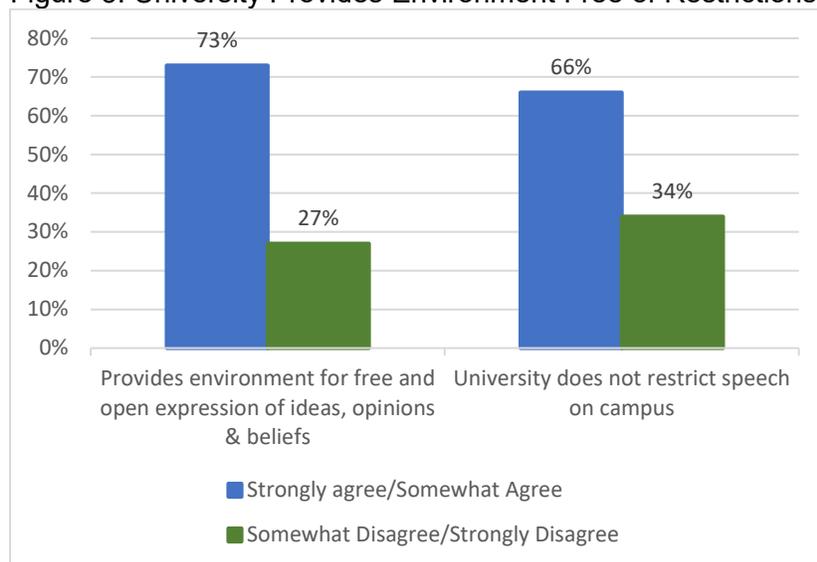
differing view” shown on Figure 2 indicates that Regent university students feel strongly about their own willingness to listen (90% agree they feel they are good at this), but are less confident that others are doing the same (41% for other students, 66% for faculty and 61% for staff/administrators). The 2020 Gallup survey of college students nationally similarly showed that 78% of students rate themselves as very good or good at this, while 45% said the same of other students and 62% agreed that faculty were very good or good at considering different viewpoints.

Figure 2: Good at Seeking and Listening to Differing Views



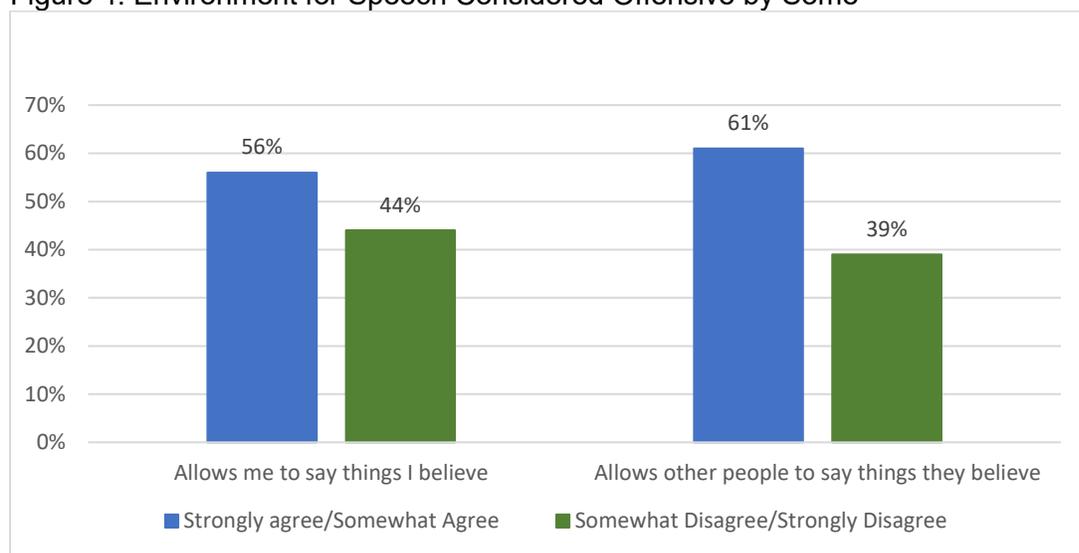
The next set of questions focused on the university environment as a whole and perceptions that it supports free speech. Seventy-three percent of student respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that their university does provide this environment, while 27% strongly or somewhat disagreed (Figure 3). Fewer respondents (66%) agreed that their university does not restrict speech even when it makes people feel uncomfortable.

Figure 3: University Provides Environment Free of Restrictions



Separate survey questions addressed students’ sense of the environment in regards to speech that may be deemed offensive. On these questions, fewer students indicated agreeing that they themselves felt free to say things others might find offensive (56%), or that other people were free to say things that might be considered offensive by others (61%). (Figure 4).

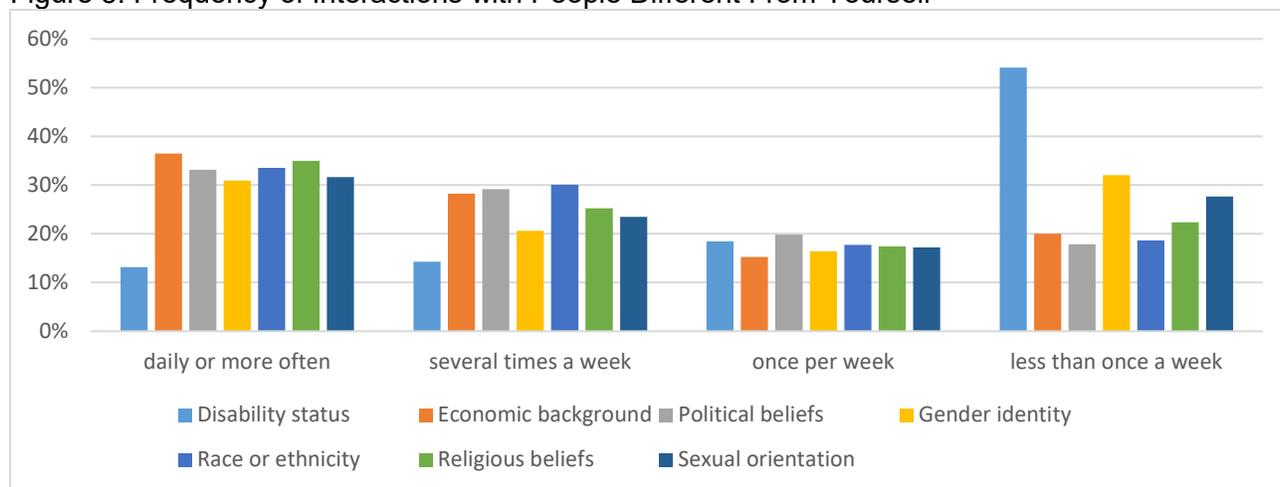
Figure 4: Environment for Speech Considered Offensive by Some



The final section of questions in the survey addressed the types of people with whom the respondent interacts in a typical week. Research has shown that informal interactions in college impact a number of student success outcomes and impact how students perceive the college environment.

For most characteristics, at least half of respondents said they have interactions with people different than themselves several times a week or more (see Figure 5). Of the seven characteristics that were included in the question, the largest outlier with infrequent interactions was disability status. More than half of respondents said they interact with someone different from themselves in this way less than once per week.

Figure 5: Frequency of Interactions with People Different From Yourself



General demographic information about student survey respondents is found in Table 2.

Table 2: Student Survey Demographics

<b>Demographic Category</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Total Count</b>
<i>Student Level</i>		
First-year	17%	1,166
Sophomore	13%	944
Junior	18%	1,298
Senior	23%	1,610
Graduate (M.A., M.S., Ph.D., etc.)	23%	1,624
Professional (Dentistry, Law Med, Pharm, Vet)	6%	420
<i>Student Race/Ethnicity/Citizenship</i>		
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.1%	5
Asian	2%	112
Black or African American	2%	85
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.1%	5
White	81%	4,198
Hispanic or Latino/a	5%	256
Two or more races	4%	195
International	4%	230
Unreported	2%	81
<i>Student Gender</i>		
Female	47%	2,440
Male	46%	2,411
Non-binary	3%	162
Prefer not to say	4%	183

**Employee Survey Results:** Response rates on the employee version of the Board Free Speech Survey were significantly higher than those on the student survey, though they did vary more by institution. The University of Iowa employee population included employees of UIHC.

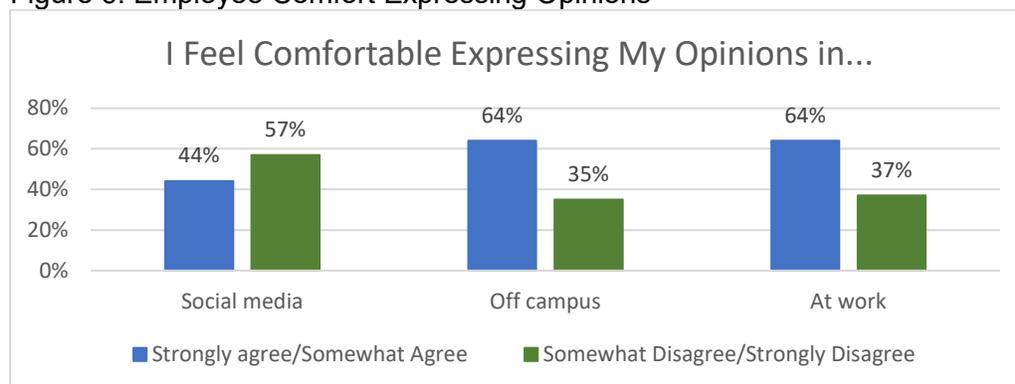
Table 3: Employee Survey Response Rates

Institution	Total Responses	Response Rate
ISU	3,162	47.5%
SUI	6,645	32.5%
UNI	841	47.6%

As was noted earlier in this report, there were not national surveys the provided context or a model for this employee survey. As with the student survey, these results can serve as a baseline for future efforts to assess free speech at the universities.

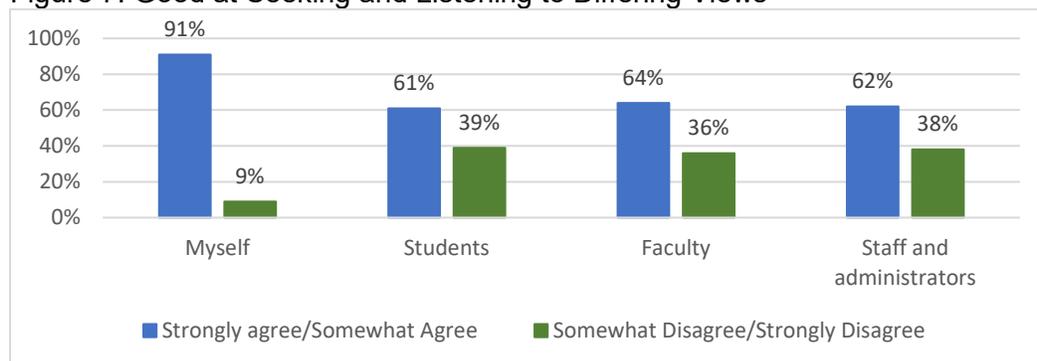
Similar to the student survey, the first question asked employees about their comfort expressing their opinions in different settings. Much like students, employees were least likely to express comfort sharing opinions on social media (44%), and equal numbers expressed comfort sharing opinions both off campus and at work (64%).

Figure 6: Employee Comfort Expressing Opinions



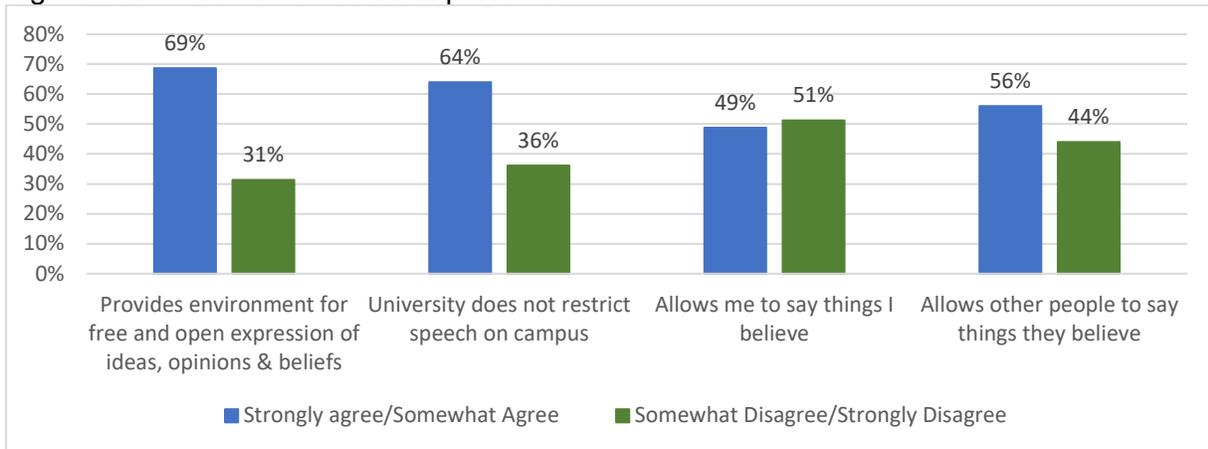
Much like on the student survey, employees were very likely to agree that they are good at seeking out and listening to views that differ from their own (91%). They noted less agreement that students (61%), faculty (64%) and staff/administrators (62%) do the same. It is worth noting that employees were much more likely to agree that students do this than was found on the student survey (student survey: 41% vs. employee survey: 61%). The levels of agreement on faculty and staff/administrators were nearly equivalent.

Figure 7: Good at Seeking and Listening to Differing Views



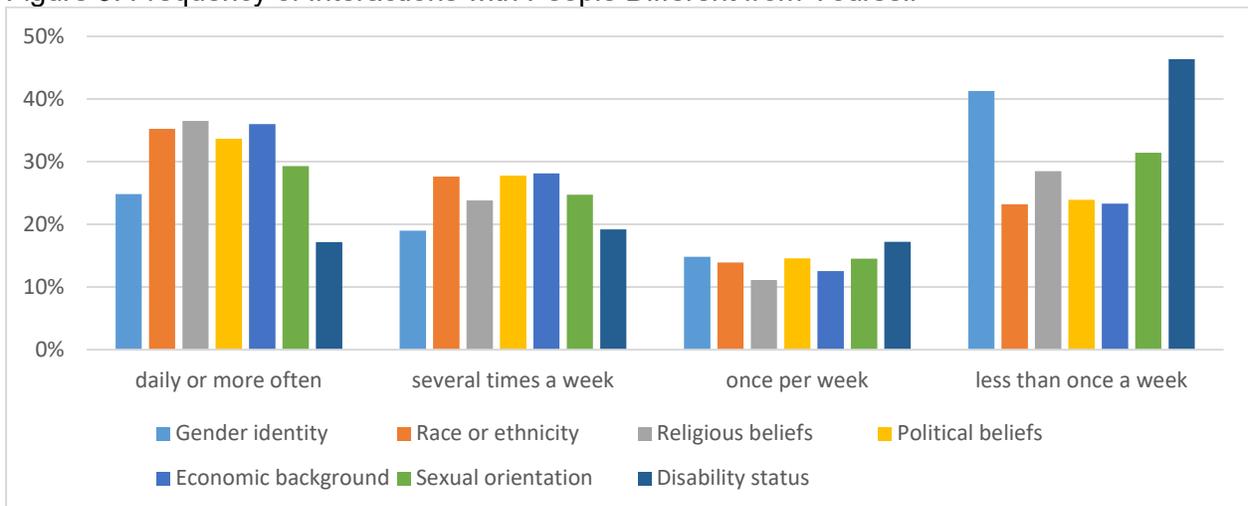
Questions regarding employee perceptions of the environment each had slightly less agreement than the same questions did for students. Sixty-nine percent of employees agree that the university provides an environment for free and open expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs, and 64% agree it does not restrict free speech. However, only 49% of respondents agreed that they feel the environment allows them to say things they believe, and 56% agreed the environment allows others to say what they believe (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Environment for Free Expression



The frequency of interactions with people different than themselves indicated that at least half of respondents said they have interactions with people different than themselves several times a week or more on five of the seven categories (Figure 9). Respondents identified differences of disability status and gender identity as the areas of difference with less frequent interaction.

Figure 9: Frequency of Interactions with People Different from Yourself



General demographic information about employee survey respondents is found in Table 3.

Table 3: Employee Survey Demographics

<b>Demographic Category</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Total Count</b>
<i>Employee Type</i>		
Faculty	27%	2,877
Professional and Scientific Staff	55%	5,854
Merit Staff	16%	1,665
Post-doctoral Fellow or Resident	1%	155
Other	1%	97
<i>Employee Race/Ethnicity</i>		
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.14%	15
Asian	4%	399
Black or African American	2%	176
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.04%	4
White	72%	7,674
Hispanic or Latino/a	3%	308
Two or more races	1%	138
Unreported	18%	1,934
<i>Employee Gender</i>		
Female	54%	4,803
Male	40%	3,562
Non-binary	1%	60
Prefer not to say	6%	528

**Appendix A**

*Student Free Speech Survey Questions*

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, unsure)

- I feel comfortable expressing my opinions related to things we are studying in classes.
- I feel comfortable expressing my opinions outside of my classes on campus.
- I feel comfortable expressing my opinions in a public forum off campus.
- I feel comfortable expressing my opinions on social media.

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, unsure)

- In general, I am good at seeking out and listening to people with views that differ from my own.
- In general, other students at my university are good at seeking out and listening to people with different views.
- In general, the faculty at my university are good at seeking out and listening to people with different views.
- In general, staff and administrators at my university are good at seeking out and listening to people with different views.

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, unsure)

- The university provides an environment for the free and open expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs.
- The environment at my university allows me to say things I believe even though others may find them offensive.
- The environment at my university allows others to say things they believe even though others may find them offensive.
- The university does not restrict speech on campus, even when it makes people feel uncomfortable.

In a typical week, how often do you interact with people who are different from you in the following ways: (less than once a week, once a week, several times a week, daily or more often, unsure)

- Disability status
- Race or ethnicity
- Religious beliefs
- Sexual orientation
- Economic background
- Gender identity
- Political beliefs

*Employee Free Speech Survey Questions*

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, unsure)

- I feel comfortable expressing my opinions when I am at work.
- I feel comfortable expressing my opinions in a public forum off campus.
- I feel comfortable expressing my opinions on social media.

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, unsure)

- In general, I am good at seeking out and listening to people with views that differ from my own.
- In general, students at my university are good at seeking out and listening to people with different views.
- In general, the faculty at my university are good at seeking out and listening to people with different views.
- In general, staff and administrators at my university are good at seeking out and listening to people with different views.

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, unsure)

- The university provides an environment for the free and open expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs.
- The environment at my university allows me to say things I believe even though others may find them offensive.
- The environment at my university allows others to say things they believe even though others may find them offensive.
- The university does not restrict speech on campus, even when it makes people feel uncomfortable.

In a typical week, how often do you interact with people who are different from you in the following ways: (less than once a week, once a week, several times a week, daily or more often, unsure)

- Disability status
- Race or ethnicity
- Religious beliefs
- Sexual orientation
- Economic background
- Gender identity
- Political beliefs