

Contact: Rachel Boon

FREE SPEECH SURVEY UPDATE

Recommendation: Nine of the Free Speech Recommendations approved by the Board of Regents on February 24, 2021 stated the following:

The Board of Regents will review and compile data from the most recent campus climate surveys and national surveys regarding free speech. The Free Speech Committee will determine if an additional survey of all members of each university regarding free speech is warranted during the fall semester 2021. Once completed this information will be presented to the Board.

The update will share some relevant findings from a recent national survey as well as some background information regarding the most recently administered campus climate surveys administered by the universities governed by the Board of Regents.

National Context

College campuses across the country have long been active sites of political activity, the exploration of new and sometimes controversial ideas, and student learning and personal development. Recent concerns about college and university restrictions on free speech are especially important for public universities that are bound by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and its commitment to free expression. Two key avenues for understanding how members of a campus community feel are through individual stories that identify problems, and through surveys which get a broader sense of people's perceptions of the campus environment.

Campus surveys that focus exclusively on free speech issues are somewhat uncommon. What is more common is including questions related to free speech within broader campus climate surveys of students, faculty and staff, or surveys addressing the student experience. To learn more about the national context of free speech on college campuses, it is most useful to review the efforts of non-partisan national organizations that conduct focused studies of college students.

In 2020, the Gallup Organization released a report entitled *The First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report: College Student Views of Free Expression*.¹ The report shared results from three national surveys of college students on the topic (conducted in 2016, 2017 and 2019). The survey had over 3,300 respondents, drawn from a nationally representative pool of full-time college students pursuing bachelor's degrees.

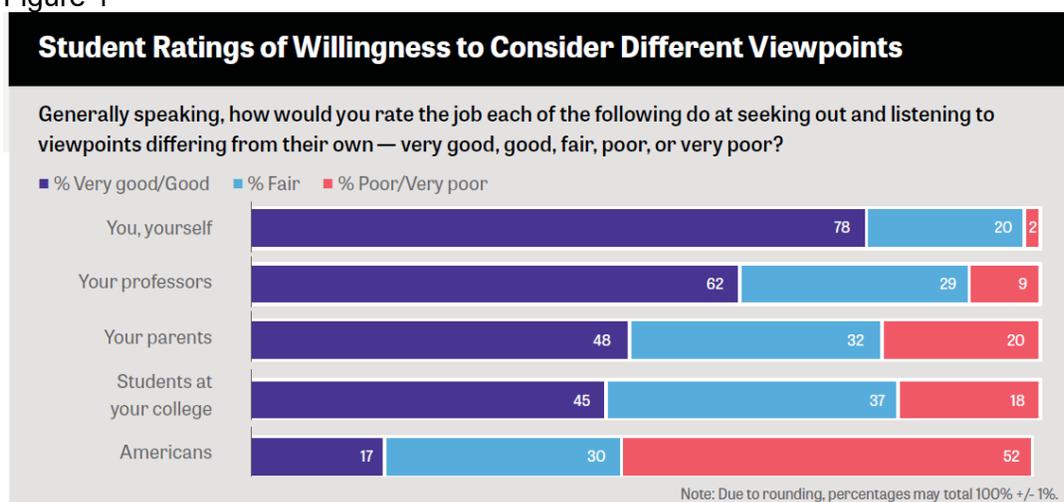
The results highlight many of the challenges of trying to understand the context for free speech on college campuses. For example, the vast majority of students (81%) indicated support for a campus environment of open speech, even if some of it is offensive; yet there is growing support for restrictions on the use of racial slurs and costumes that stereotype certain racial/ethnic groups (from 69% in 2016 to 78% in 2019). In another instance, nearly three-quarters of respondents do not want colleges to restrict expression of political views that are upsetting or offensive to some,

¹ <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/First-Amendment-on-Campus-2020.pdf>
accessed May 14, 2021

but 78% support college-provided areas on campus designed to be free from threatening actions, ideas or conversations.

The survey also asked about personal experiences and personal perceptions of the campus experience. One somewhat unsurprising finding was the gap between students’ perceptions of their ability to consider other viewpoints versus their perceptions of the ability of others (figure 1). When asked to rate themselves and various groups on how good they are at “seeking out and listening to viewpoints differing from their own”, 98% of students said they were either fair, good or very good. They had noticeably less, though still strong, confidence in other groups such as professors (91%), students at their college (82%), and their parents (80%); but less than half of students (47%) had such confidence in Americans overall.

Figure 1



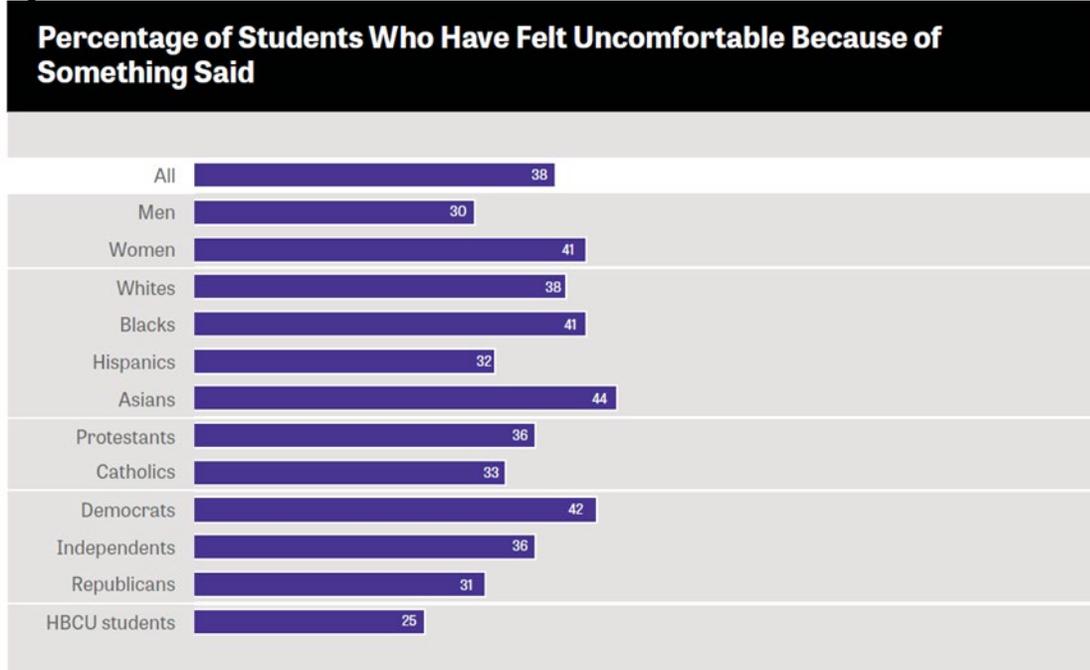
Source: *The First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report: College Student Views of Free Expression*

When asked about personal experiences and feelings regarding public statements by others on campus, students with a wide range of demographic characteristics reported feeling uncomfortable at times (figure 2). Among several of these groups, 40% or more of respondents indicated having had these experiences. Gallup found two interesting distinctions underlying these results.

“...two other factors related to students’ likelihood of having felt uncomfortable on campus—their class year and the diversity of their campus. Third- and fourth-year students (40%) are significantly more likely than first- and second-year students (34%) to report feeling uncomfortable because of comments they have heard on campus, which could merely be a function of having been on campus longer. A larger gap exists among those who describe their campus as being “not very diverse” or “not diverse at all” (49%) as opposed to those whose campus is “very” or “somewhat diverse” (35%).” Gallup, p. 19

The distinction between the experiences of those on campuses perceived as more or less diverse points to an important aspect of how colleges must examine their own climates. A critical piece of student success and learning is working to help all students feel there is a place for them at the institution. However, part of the learning process is developing an understanding of the full meaning of free speech and free expression, and its role in a democratic society.

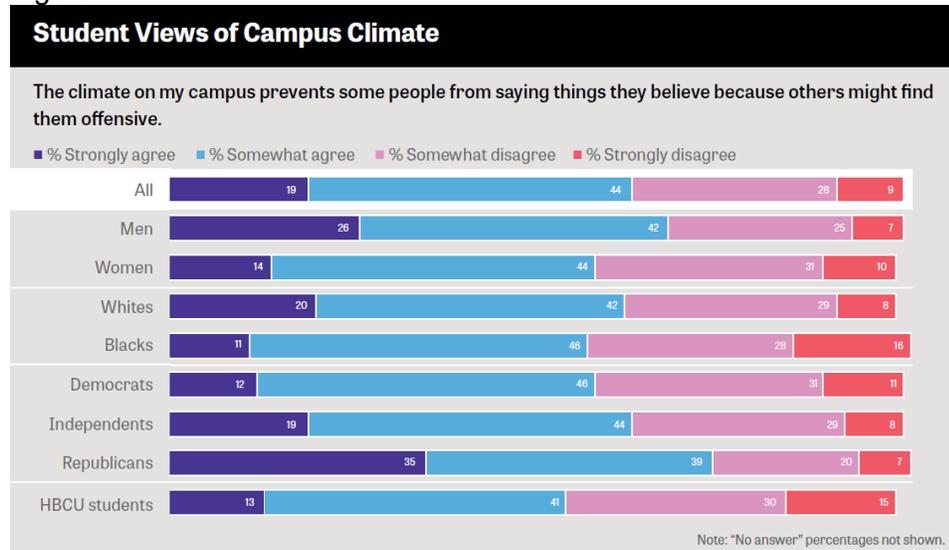
Figure 2



Source: *The First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report: College Student Views of Free Expression*

The survey also sought students’ perception on the following question: “The climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive” (figure 3). The results indicate that 63% of students agree with this statement, with sizeable variance by political affiliation (Republicans, 74%; Independents, 63%, Democrats, 58%) and gender (Men, 68%; Women, 58%).

Figure 3



Source: *The First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report: College Student Views of Free Expression*

Iowa's Public Universities Campus Climate Surveys

For several years the universities governed by the Board of Regents have been periodically assessing their campus climates with surveys of students, faculty and staff. Though each used a different survey instrument and administered it at different times, there are some findings relevant to free expression that are helpful to review.

Iowa State University

In 2017, Iowa State University hired Rankin and Associates to conduct a campus climate survey². This was a wide-ranging survey that covered aspects of the academic environment for students, the workplace environment for faculty and staff, employee benefits, sexual harassment and violence, racial and ethnic identity, gender identity and expression, sexual identity, accessibility and disability, and other topics. In October of that year, all faculty, staff and students received an invitation to respond. Ultimately, 7,326 people completed the survey.

No questions specifically spoke to the perceptions of or satisfaction with the campus open-ness for free speech, but when asked about general comfort with the campus environment, 79% of respondents indicated they feel “comfortable” or “very comfortable.” This compares favorably to other similar campuses that Rankin and Associates has worked with previously (generally ranging from 70%-80% on the same question).

On another question, 19% of respondents agreed that they had personally experienced being the target of exclusionary, intimidating, offensive, and/or hostile conduct in the prior year. In identifying the basis for that conduct, gender identity (30%) and ethnicity (21%) were the top two responses, followed by status as faculty, student or staff (20%). To a lesser extent respondents wrote in the basis of the experience being age, family status, philosophical beliefs, political views and academic performance.

Of course, these experiences may have each fallen in the category of acceptable forms of free expression, so while likely counterproductive to creating a welcoming atmosphere conducive to learning and working, they may be indicative of the realities of a public institution guided by the First Amendment.

University of Northern Iowa

The University of Northern Iowa has conducted campus climate surveys regularly since 2008 with a mix of university-developed and vendor-provided surveys. The most recent administration was in October 2019 when a university-developed survey was sent to students, faculty and staff³. There were 1,394 respondents. About half of those were from faculty and staff (32% response rate) and about half from students (7% response rate). Just as with ISU, the climate survey is not designed to capture information specific to free speech issues, but it sheds light on how comfortable individuals or groups of people feel on campus, with additional insight as to how that might relate to political viewpoints.

Faculty and staff were asked questions about their perceptions of being treated fairly across a number of characteristics, including on the basis on political ideology—63.2% reported they “strongly agree” or “agree” that they are treated fairly. When asked if students in their classes

²<https://www.campusclimate.iastate.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/ClimateSurvey/Iowa%20State%20Final%20Report.pdf> accessed May 14, 2021

³ <https://ir.uni.edu/campus-climate-surveys> accessed May 14, 2021

respect different views, only 6.9% “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with that statement, a testament to a positive and open classroom environment.

All survey respondents were asked if they had personally experienced “someone make an insensitive or disparaging remark regarding your political affiliation/views” in the past 12 months. Nine percent of students said they had experienced such remarks on a daily basis (n.b. with just a 7% survey response rate among students, this should be interpreted cautiously). Faculty had an equal response to such comments being “daily” but staff were much less likely (3%) to report experiencing such remarks with that frequency.

University of Iowa

In the fall of 2019 a campus committee reviewed and revised the University of Iowa Campus Climate Survey⁴, which had last been administered in 2018. The updated survey was sent to faculty and staff in October 2020 with a plan to administer it every two years. The survey is intended to focus on issues of diversity, equity and inclusion to help understand the campus climate, measure change over time, inform university strategic planning and ensure all people feel welcome and supported at the university. Students were surveyed in spring 2021 and those results are still being processed with a report expected later this summer.

A key question on the faculty and staff survey directly addressed free expression, and the demographic information gathered on the survey permitted the results to be reported on a variety of respondent characteristics. The question asked about the extent to which the university “provides an environment for the free and open expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs.” When combining the responses ranging from “strongly agree” to “somewhat agree”, the results were as follows (listed from most agreement to least agreement):

- Staff: 78%
- Political conservative: 72%
- Faculty: 69%
- LGBQ: 69%
- Transgender/non-conforming: 60%
- Underrepresented minority: 56%

Similar to questions asked at the surveys at ISU and UNI, the faculty and staff survey at the University of Iowa also asked if in the past 12 months respondents “personally experienced biased, intimidating or hostile treatment...based on your political opinions, belief or ideology.” The results indicate that two-thirds of respondents had not had such an experience. Among the one-third who had experienced biased, intimidating or hostile treatment were self-identified liberals (31%), conservatives (13%) and moderates (9%).

Next Steps

In order to meet the objective of a campus-wide survey on free speech, Board staff must work with the universities in summer 2021 to identify the questions, processes and timeline most appropriate to use. At the next meeting of the Free Speech Committee, they will provide a recommendation regarding a survey and process, as well as the preferred timeline for administration. All campuses will continue to pay particular attention to providing a welcoming climate for all faculty, staff, students and community members, while also ensuring that the policies and processes for addressing suppression of speech are clearly communicated.

⁴ <https://diversity.uiowa.edu/reports/2020-campus-climate-survey> accessed May 15, 2021