

### **Case Study 3: Politics and Freedom of Speech for Faculty and Students**

College professors are overwhelmingly liberal in their political orientation—one recent study puts the ratio at [around 5 to 1](#). Moreover, many college students with conservative views report that they experience a hostile atmosphere on campus. According to one recent survey, “Nearly 1 in 3 conservative students (32%) and libertarian students (30%) surveyed reported they were treated badly on campus because of their political views once a month or more (compared to 10% of liberals and 12% of moderates).”<sup>1</sup> Illustrative examples abound. For instance, last March, Michelle Shampton, a sophomore at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, tweeted about her fear of speaking out on her Republican views, and in response received thousands of negative replies.

Concerns about the lack of diversity and inclusion for conservative faculty and students have led to some proposals for guidelines that would target political diversity. Iowa Republican Senator Mark Chelgren [introduced a bill](#) to “require partisan balance” by forbidding public universities to hire professors or instructors whose most recent party affiliation would cause the percentage of faculty belonging to one political party to outnumber by more than 10 percent the percentage of faculty belonging to the other. The North Carolina senate tabled a bill that would have had similar effects.

Meanwhile, several conservative organizations have launched a “name and shame” effort to identify professors they claim have contributed to a hostile atmosphere for conservatives. Three of these are Professor Watchlist, Campus Reform, and College Fix. In response, some professors have claimed that these efforts have themselves contributed to a hostile atmosphere; some professors have even claimed that they have received death threats after being listed. In 2017 the American Association of University Professors reported [more than 100 incidents](#) of what it considered to be targeted harassment against professors on college campuses, [according to CNN](#). The creators of the websites disavow violent threats and insist this is not their intended result. Charlie Kirk, of Professors Watchlist, says that they are not seeking to silence professors, but rather to point out a problem of diversity and inclusion for conservatives.

The claims and counterclaims have led to fears of bias in the classroom, and also fears of repression of speech or self-censorship in the classroom by both professors and students.

#### Reading:

- Dan Lieberman, [Death Threats are Forcing Professors Off Campus](#), CNN.com, Dec. 28, 2017
- Andrew Dyer, [Students say campuses not friendly to conservative values](#), The Daily Aztec, Aug. 27, 2017
- Sean Stevens, [The Campus Expression Survey: Summary of New Data, Heterodox Academy](#), Dec. 20, 2017

#### Discussion questions:

- Should professors be required to present balanced views in the classroom? Why or why not? If yes, how should such policies be enforced?
- Brandon Jones, chair of the San Diego State College Republicans, said that “You just don’t get called on if you’re not speaking to what the professor and the other students want to hear.” Have you ever felt that your speech in the classroom was suppressed? If so, what led to this feeling? What do you think would have happened if you had spoken up?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://heterodoxacademy.org/2017/12/20/the-campus-expression-survey-summary-of-new-data/>

- Even if voices are not overtly repressed, individuals may choose to remain silent. The reading from Heterodox Academy describes students and professors feeling like they are “walking on eggshells.” Do you think self-censorship happens in the classroom? By faculty? By students? What are the consequences of possible self-censorship in the classroom?
- In response to a survey recounted in the Heterodox Academy reading, students said that they were most concerned about getting a lower grade from their professor. Is that concern warranted? Do you share it? How can it be mitigated?
- Have you experienced that the atmosphere in classrooms at Duke has changed during this last year, or has your experience been consistent? If it has changed, in what ways have you experienced this change?
- Take a look at the survey results about issues from the reading at Heterodox Academy. How does the classroom atmosphere vary across different issues such as race, gender and politics? How does the survey accord with your own experiences? Could problems also arise in other areas, for example biology and environmental sciences?
- In 2014 The University of Illinois Board of Trustees voted not to appoint Stephen Salaita and to rescind an offer he had received for a tenured position at the University after he tweeted critical comments about Israel. What is the appropriate response when professors make public comments that some consider offensive? See “[Academic Freedom and Tenure: The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#)”
- Drexel University Professor George Ciccariello-Maher received death threats following several controversial tweets he posted. He ended up teaching remotely and eventually resigned his post. Nick Nanakos, a business student at Drexel, argued that “Having a personal opinion is fine, but when you come out and you make these comments, you’re a representation of the university.” Where is the line between a professor’s professional speech and private speech? What should universities do to protect professors from such threats?
- Kirk with the Professors Watchlist says that it’s not their responsibility what people do with the information, and that any consequences follow from professors own speech. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Is affirmative action hiring aimed at creating more political diversity an appropriate response to this problem?
- If you could change one thing in the classroom to improve discussion, what would it be?