

FACULTY PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES RELATED TO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Last winter, AAC&U, in partnership with the American Association of University Professors and NORC at the University of Chicago, conducted a national survey of higher education faculty. To explore possible changes in faculty perceptions of academic freedom over time, respondents were asked to compare their current and recent experiences with those of six or seven years ago or, for relatively new faculty members, when they first joined the faculty at their current institution.

More than 1 in 3 faculty members perceive a recent decline in their academic freedom.

Faculty say they have less academic freedom when it comes to teaching content without interference (35%), speaking freely as citizens (36%), and speaking freely when participating in institutional governance (38%).

Those who joined the faculty prior to 2018 are significantly more likely than those who joined later to say they have less academic freedom today when it comes to teaching content without interference (44% vs. 27%), speaking freely as citizens (44% vs. 23%), and speaking freely within institutional governance (47% vs. 27%).

Faculty are less willing to address controversial topics and more likely to self-censor.

About a third of faculty report that faculty colleagues in their academic program or department are less willing to express controversial views in their courses (39%), on social media (38%), and at professional conferences (30%).

52% have altered the language in something they have written because they were worried it might cause controversy.

A quarter have felt pressure to conform their political views to those of administrators (25%) or the faculty as a whole (24%); two-thirds (67%) have refrained from raising politically divisive topics with colleagues at their institution.

Faculty are concerned about restrictions on academic freedom and worry that expressing their views freely may lead to online harassment or professional repercussions.

53% of all faculty are concerned about their ability to express what they believe as scholars to be correct statements about the world.

At least a third have faced restrictions on what they can say in faculty and department meetings (36%) or on social media (33%); about a quarter (24%) reported restrictions on what they teach in courses.

53% are worried that their beliefs or activities as faculty members may make them targets of online harassment.

34% are concerned that a political opinion they express in class might negatively affect their faculty status; 45% have not expressed an opinion or participated in an activity that could draw negative attention from external stakeholders.

The passage of divisive concepts legislation negatively impacts faculty perspectives on academic freedom.

80% of all faculty follow media coverage of divisive concepts legislation either as much or more than coverage of other topics, and 59% discuss the legislation either occasionally or often.

46% reported that the local community surrounding their institution has become more concerned about faculty teaching divisive topics; among these respondents, 62% say this greater concern has harmed the climate for academic freedom at the institution.

11% overall are considering seeking employment at a different college or university because of the climate for academic freedom in their state; where divisive concepts legislation has become law, 16% are considering leaving for a college or university in another state.