



Perceptions of Academic Freedom in Teaching

Findings from a National Survey of Instructors

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Introduction

Since 2021, people across the political spectrum have become preoccupied with questions of free speech and censorship on college campuses, and state legislators have driven the proliferation of new policies that limit spending and programming related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); alter academic autonomy or shared governance arrangements; and in some cases develop new state oversight mechanisms allowing governments to control, terminate, or alter academic programs.¹ Despite persistent attention from advocacy groups and dramatically increased public awareness over the course of the last six months, actual data on whether or how faculty are being censored or are self-censoring on campus is scant.²

Against this backdrop, we included a short block of questions centered on academic freedom in a national survey of US instructors at four-year colleges and universities.³ The survey was sent to postsecondary instructors from a wide range of disciplines and at institutions in every Carnegie Classification, yielding 2,605 responses. Our survey was in the field from February 7, 2024, to March 10, 2024. At that time, anti-DEI legislation had been passed or enacted in 12 states. Additionally, two months earlier university presidents had been questioned by a Congressional committee about their responses to antisemitism on campus. This context informed our survey design on the topic, considering the current political landscape and legislative actions. We wanted to

¹ PEN America's Freedom to Learn team actively tracks state and federal policies related to these issues. Their Index of Educational Gag Orders is a comprehensive database of relevant policy: "Index of Educational Gag Orders," PEN America, <https://airtable.com/appg59iDuPhlLPPFp/shrtwubfBUo2tuHy0/tbl49yod7l01o0Tck/viw6VOxb6SUYd5nXM?blocks=hide>.

² To date, the only systematic data capture of the impacts of contemporary crises in higher education and the impacts of emergent restrictive policies on faculty is the "Faculty Survey in the South," led by the Georgia American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in collaboration with AAUP chapters from North Carolina, Texas, the United Faculty of Florida, and the Texas Faculty Association. That survey, though, does not focus on censorship or self-censorship, but rather examines job satisfaction and the possibility of recruitment and retention issues. See: "2023 Faculty in the South Survey," Georgia AAUP, <https://www.aaupgeorgia.org/policy-resources/faculty-in-the-south-survey>.

³ The full 2024 US Instructor Survey report will be published in summer 2024. For more information about its scope, see: Melissa Blankstein and Sage Love, "The US Instructor Survey 2024 is Open," *Ithaka S+R*, 7 February 2024, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/the-us-instructor-survey-2024-is-open/>.

understand if instructors are changing their instructional practices and the degree to which they feel comfortable discussing controversial topics.

Across a number of markers, we find that faculty are not raising concerns about their academic freedom, but that there are differences in responses based on institutional type, discipline, and demographic subgroups. Our primary findings are:

- **The majority of instructors do not report feeling unsafe or uncomfortable discussing or teaching sensitive topics;** however, initial data indicates there are some differences based on institutional type, discipline, and demographic subgroups that suggest the need for further research.
- **Only a relatively small percentage of instructors agreed or strongly agreed that they avoid teaching or talking about controversial topics in the classroom for any reason,** with one in five instructors avoiding discussing conflict in the Middle East and abortion and contraception.
- **Nearly a third of instructors report that they do not face academic freedom challenges and do not need support with such challenges.** Those who are looking for help want frameworks or direct support for engaging students constructively on sensitive issues, advocating for academic freedom, or understanding how their university is responding to new government policies or regulations.
- **While roughly a third of instructors are looking for frameworks and direct support from their institutions, they are more likely to turn to their peers.** Instructors are also mixed when it comes to whether they believe their institution's culture enables constructive conversations on sensitive issues, suggesting a wariness among instructors in their institution's ability to foster civil discourse.

Methods

The analysis at hand is part of the larger national 2024 US Instructor Survey, an instructor-focused edition of the national US Faculty Survey that Ithaka S+R has fielded for over 20 years on a triennial basis. The survey was sent through Qualtrics to 135,284 faculty members at four-year postsecondary institutions in the US during February and March 2024.

We received 5,259 completed responses for a total response rate of 3.9 percent. Respondents taking the survey were randomly assigned to one of two additional blocks of questions representing topical deep dives—one on generative AI, and one on academic freedom and censorship. Findings from the overall survey are forthcoming, and the generative AI topical deep dive was published in June 2024.⁴ Here we report on the findings related to academic freedom and censorship.

A subsample of 2,605 individuals were randomly assigned to, and completed, four questions on academic freedom and censorship. It is worth noting that the response pool skews white (72 percent), 45 years and older (77 percent), and tenured (49 percent). Twenty-seven percent of faculty members have been at their current institution for more than two decades, while 56 percent have been in their academic field for over two decades. Fifty-nine percent of respondents teach at doctoral institutions, and 63 percent are from public colleges or universities. Forty-two percent of respondents teach in the social sciences, followed by 31 percent in the humanities, 24 percent in the sciences, and then medical and area studies, each at 2 percent.⁵

⁴ Dylan Ruediger, Melissa Blankstein, Sage Love, “Generative AI and Postsecondary Instructional Practices,” *Ithaka S+R*, 20 June 2024, <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/generative-ai-and-postsecondary-instructional-practices/>; Melissa Blankstein and Sage Love, “The US Instructor Survey 2024 is Open,” *Ithaka S+R*, 7 February 2024, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/the-us-instructor-survey-2024-is-open/>.

⁵ Humanities includes art history, classical studies, foreign languages, history (including the history of science), law, literature, music, philosophy, religion, and theater and drama. Social sciences includes anthropology (includes archeology), business and finance, economics, education (includes higher education), geography, political science, psychology, public policy (including health policy), sociology, and women’s studies. Sciences includes agricultural studies, biology (includes botany, ecology, zoology), chemistry, engineering, geology, mathematics (includes statistics), physics, physical sciences/astronomy, and public health. Medical faculty also received the survey. A fifth category—area studies—is not broken out separately as we did not have sufficient responses from instructors in area studies disciplines.

To analyze the data, we used a variety of statistical analysis techniques, ranging from one-way ANOVA with Tukey's HSD tests, ordered probit regression, and multivariate logistic regression, where applicable, in order to test the impact of demographic characteristics. Specifically, we ran the appropriate statistical analysis techniques to assess the impact of six key variables, three of which are institutional and three of which are individual, with some categories rolled up in such a way as to balance the diversity of identities in the sample with the need to ensure enough statistical power for our tests. For the former, we included Carnegie Classification (baccalaureate, master's, doctoral, and unclassified), sector (private or public), and macro-discipline (area studies, humanities, social sciences, sciences, and medical); while for the latter we included self-reported race (white, people of color, and prefer not say/self-identify), gender identity (man, woman, and nonbinary plus other identities), and tenure status (tenured, tenure-track, non-tenured, and other tenure status). Below, we report statistically significant findings at the alpha level of $p < .05$, as well as frequency graphs for each question.

The first two questions of the topical deep dives used a seven-point Likert scale, asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For these two questions, frequency-based figures report the cumulative frequencies at either end of the scale, indicating either strong agreement (strongly agree + agree), or strong disagreement (strongly disagree + disagree). The latter two questions were multi-select and are coded as a binary (0=did not select, 1= selected).

Findings



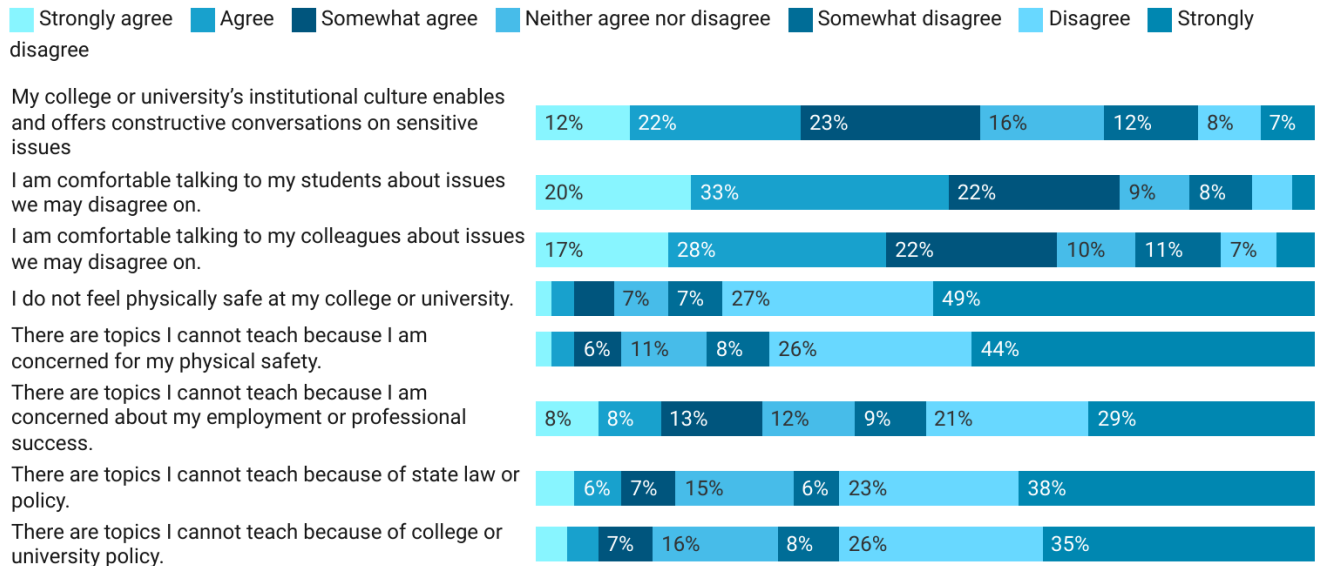
Finding 1

The majority of instructors do not report feeling unsafe or uncomfortable discussing or teaching sensitive topics; however, initial data indicates there are some differences based on institutional type, discipline, and demographic subgroups that suggest the need for further research.

The majority of instructors do not report feeling unsafe or uncomfortable discussing or teaching certain topics. More instructors indicated they are more comfortable talking to students about issues they may disagree on (53 percent) than they are doing so with their colleagues (46 percent), while three-quarters indicated that they feel physically safe on their campus (76 percent), and nearly two-thirds indicate that state or institutional policies do not negatively impact what they can teach (both 61 percent), and 70 percent indicated that physical safety concerns do not impact what topics they can teach. Then again, as Figure 1 below indicates, responses are more mixed across the board when it comes to whether instructors feel that their college or university's institutional culture enables and offers constructive conversations about sensitive issues—33 percent strongly agree or agree, 15 percent strongly disagree or disagree, leaving 52 percent of faculty somewhere in between those two poles.

Responses are more mixed across the board when it comes to whether instructors feel that their college or university's institutional culture enables and offers constructive conversations about sensitive issues.

Figure 1. Please read the following statements and indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each.⁶



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Responses by institutional type and region

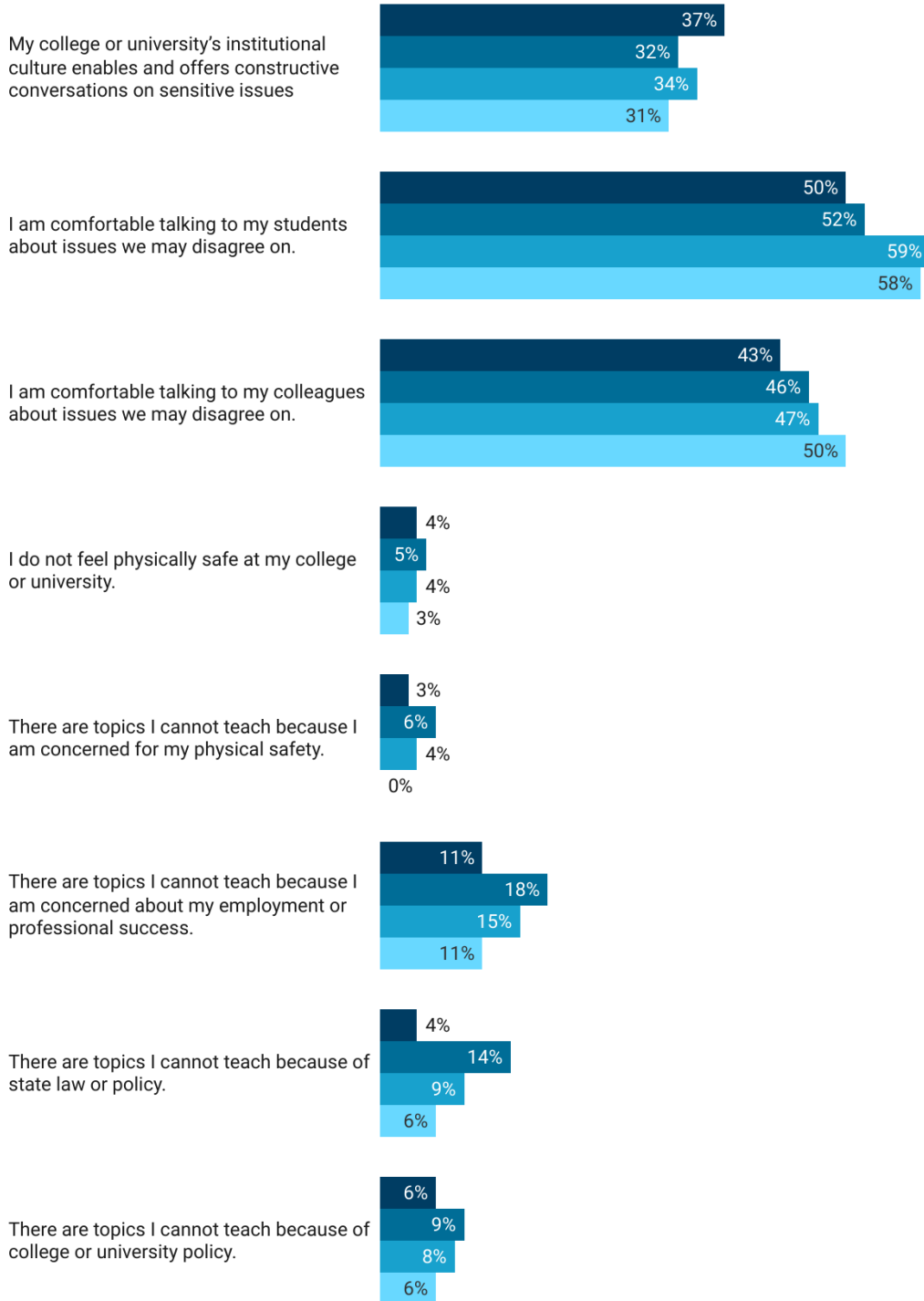
Some regional and institutional differences emerge in the sample. Respondents from private institutions are more likely than their peers at public institutions to agree that their institutional culture fosters constructive dialogue (36 percent at privates, 32 percent at publics) and are less likely to feel that there are topics that they cannot teach due to state laws or policies (4 percent at privates, 15 percent at publics). Most notably, instructors teaching at master’s institutions were more likely to be comfortable talking to their students on topics they may disagree about (59 percent) than instructors at doctoral (52 percent), or baccalaureate (50 percent) institutions. While the differences are small, doctoral instructors report having the lowest levels of comfort/highest levels of discomfort among all items except for talking to their students or colleagues about controversial issues. Specifically, these instructors note that state law and policy prevent them from teaching certain topics (14 percent) more than faculty at master’s (9 percent), or baccalaureate institutions (4 percent), and are more concerned about their employment or professional success (18 percent) than instructors at baccalaureate

⁶ Percentages may not add up due to rounding errors.

institutions (11 percent), or those at master's ones (15 percent). In the aftermath of intense national scrutiny of R1 college presidents' congressional testimonies, doctoral institution instructors are also the least confident their college or university's institutional culture enables and offers constructive conversations on sensitive issues (32 percent, see Figure 2 below).

Respondents from private institutions are more likely than their peers at public institutions to agree that their institutional culture fosters constructive dialogue (36 percent at privates, 32 percent at publics) and are less likely to feel that there are topics that they cannot teach due to state laws or policies (4 percent at privates, 15 percent at publics).

Figure 2. Please read the following statements and indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each.



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In past cycles of the US Faculty Survey, we have not analyzed responses based on the states where faculty reside. Given that several states have recently enacted laws and policies restricting diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, we wanted to take a baseline snapshot of the differences, if any, in responses between faculty who live in these states and faculty who do not.⁷ A little over a fifth of instructors in states with restrictive DEI policies report that they cannot teach topics due to state policies (23 percent compared to 7 percent in states without DEI restrictions), or due to employment or professional success concerns (22 percent, compared to 14 percent in states without DEI restrictions). Yet, the majority of instructors in states with restrictive DEI policies reported feeling comfortable talking to their students or colleagues about issues they may disagree on (53 percent and 50 percent, respectively), and feel similarly about their college or university's institutional culture's effectiveness in fostering constructive conversations as instructors in states without DEI restrictions (32 percent and 34 percent, respectively).

In the open-ended responses, instructors went into detail regarding their perception of their state's role in driving censorship or self-censorship. Respondents in particular describe wariness when it comes to certain states' legislatures, calling out specific anti-DEI legislation, or noting that the political climate can be "gaslighting." Some note that sector matters in these states—"while I live and work in a conservative state, my institution is private and so I enjoy vast amounts of academic freedom"—while another noted that "the state I am in has a legislature that is attempting to ban all kinds of free speech, but not necessarily in the classroom. We can't consider DEI when hiring, but we can talk about it and everything else freely in class." Others noted the role institutional affiliation plays in driving chilling effects, particularly at religious colleges. On the other hand, some respondents noted the cognitive cost of uncertainty: "there is an atmosphere of fear on campus, especially for faculty of color, LGBTQ+ faculty, contingent and junior faculty, and of course anyone in more than one of those categories. People are making safer choices about what to teach. Students do not always know what we are and are not legally allowed to teach and can share recordings of us and make complaints

⁷ The 12 states included in our breakout are Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming. For a list of state-by-state DEI-related legislation, see: "DEI Legislation Tracker," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 June 2024,

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts>.

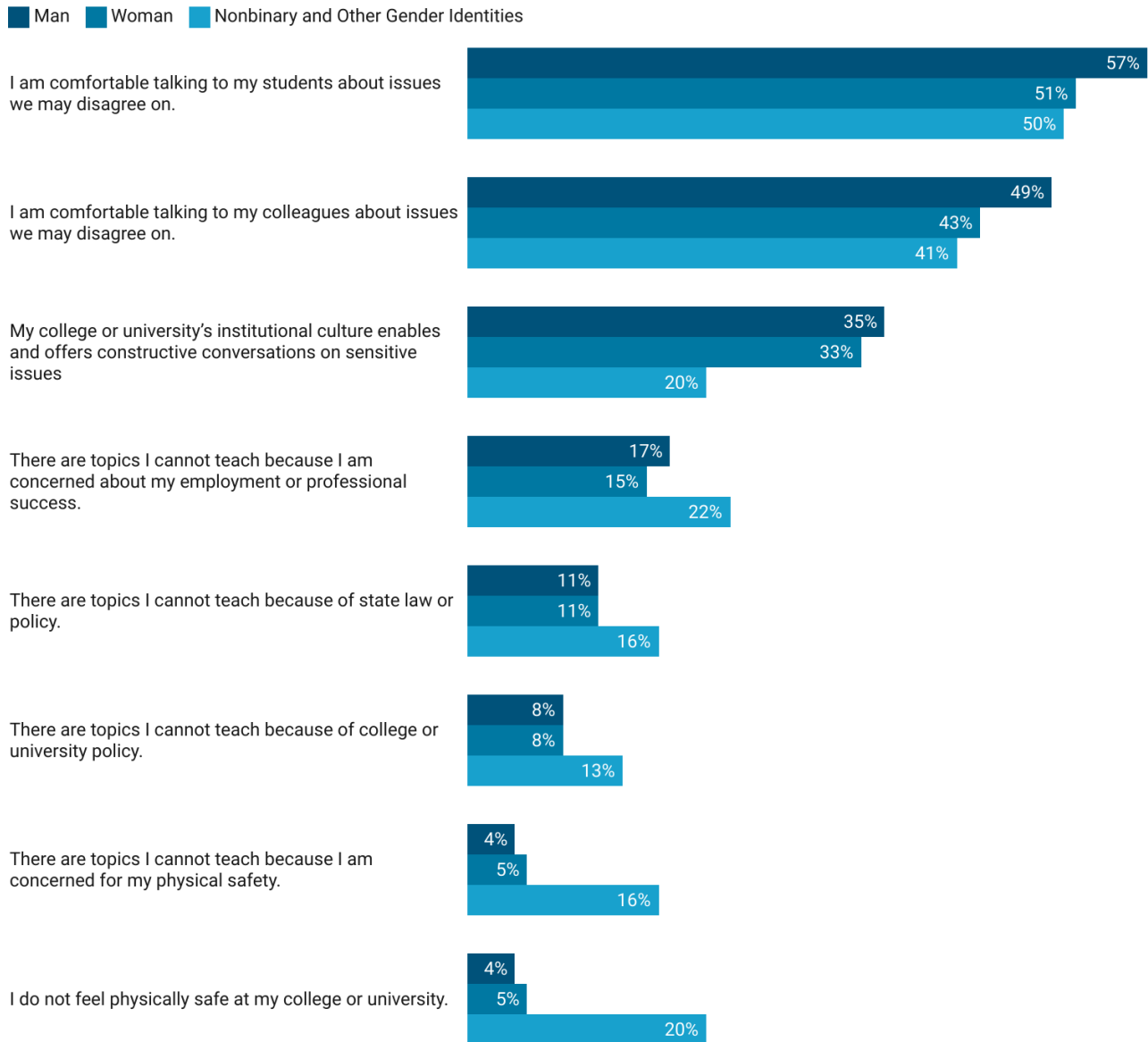
without understanding[...] My institution has excellent resources in the library and teaching center. We have great people in those and my department. We have highly engaged students. I could serve them better if I weren't constantly having to monitor new and proposed legislation and policies.”

Responses by demographic groups

While across demographic groups, instructors indicated that they feel safe and comfortable talking about sensitive issues, we did note some differences when we stratify the findings by race and ethnicity and by gender identity. While the differences are small (less than 5 percent), it is worth noting that greater percentages of instructors of color indicated feeling physically unsafe on their campus (8 percent, compared to 4 percent of white instructors), feeling unable to teach some topics due to concerns for their physical safety (8 percent, compared to 4 percent of white instructors) and concerns about professional success (19 percent, compared to 16 percent), and expressing lower levels of comfort talking to colleagues about issues they may disagree on (42 percent, compared to 47 percent of white instructors).

In the aggregate, one-third of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “My college or university’s institutional culture enables and offers constructive conversations on sensitive issues,” while 15 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. When we disaggregated by gender identity, we found that greater percentages of nonbinary and instructors of other gender identities report feeling unsafe at their college or university, and that there are topics they cannot teach due to physical safety or employment/professional success concerns, or due to state or university policies, when compared to men and women (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. Please read the following statements and indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each (Strongly agree and agree). Results by gender.



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While the majority of instructors indicated that academic freedom is not currently an issue, several noted in the open-ended responses that “the situation in my state is quickly evolving; I might say that I feel more threatened in a few months,” or in a future legislative session: “I am very lucky to work in a state that values diversity and free expression at the legislative level. That could change next time we vote in state level elections.”

“My sense of safety comes from having tenure. I do not think that others are at all safe and want to support them.”

On the question of safety, several instructors offer some context for their response options, one noting that their “concerns about campus safety are tied to the recent legalization of concealed carry of weapons on campuses in my state,” or from dealing with individuals outside the university community: “as a faculty member at a public university we frequently face outside groups with extremist views occupying parts of campus—including waiting outside faculty offices—and the administration and local public safety officials say we must simply put up with and ‘ignore’ these groups and individuals. Some of these external agents shout at and follow people on campus, including students and faculty.” Others note tenure status as a key factor in their sense of safety: “my sense of safety comes from having tenure. I do not think that others are at all safe and want to support them. I do fear publishing and speaking but I do it anyway.”

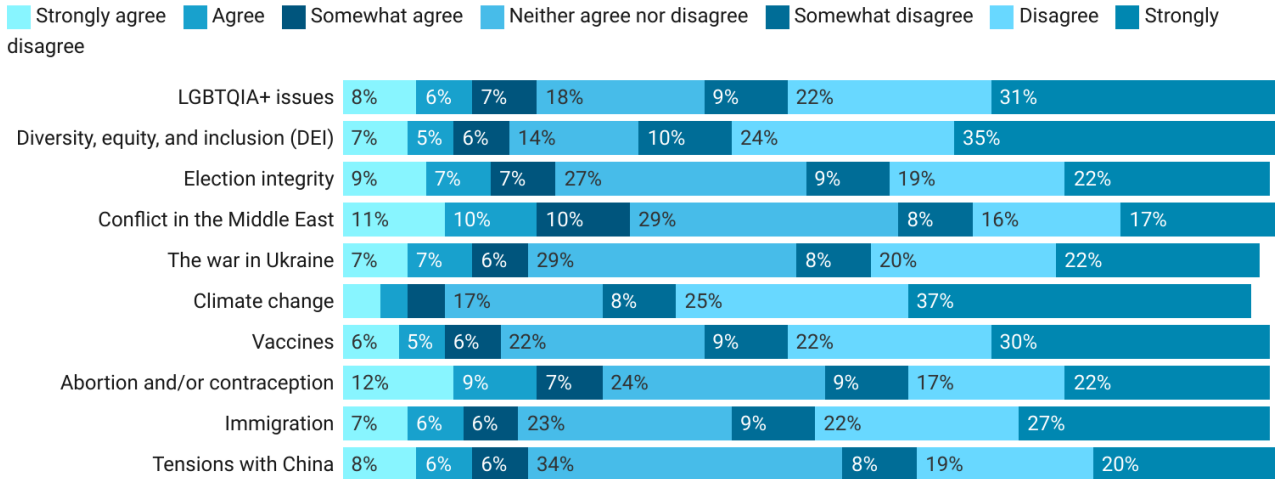


Finding 2

Only a relatively small percentage of instructors agreed or strongly agreed that they avoid teaching or talking about controversial topics in the classroom for any reason, with one in five instructors avoiding discussing the conflict in the Middle East and abortion and/or contraception.

We asked faculty members a question designed to capture their levels of comfort—or avoidance—when it comes to controversial topics in the classroom. Overall, the majority of faculty do not avoid teaching or talking about vaccines, climate change, diversity, equity, and inclusion, or LGBTQIA+ issues. However, a fifth of respondents indicated they avoid discussing the conflict in the Middle East and abortion and/or contraception (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4. When working in my capacity as an instructor, I avoid teaching or talking about... (strongly agree and agree).



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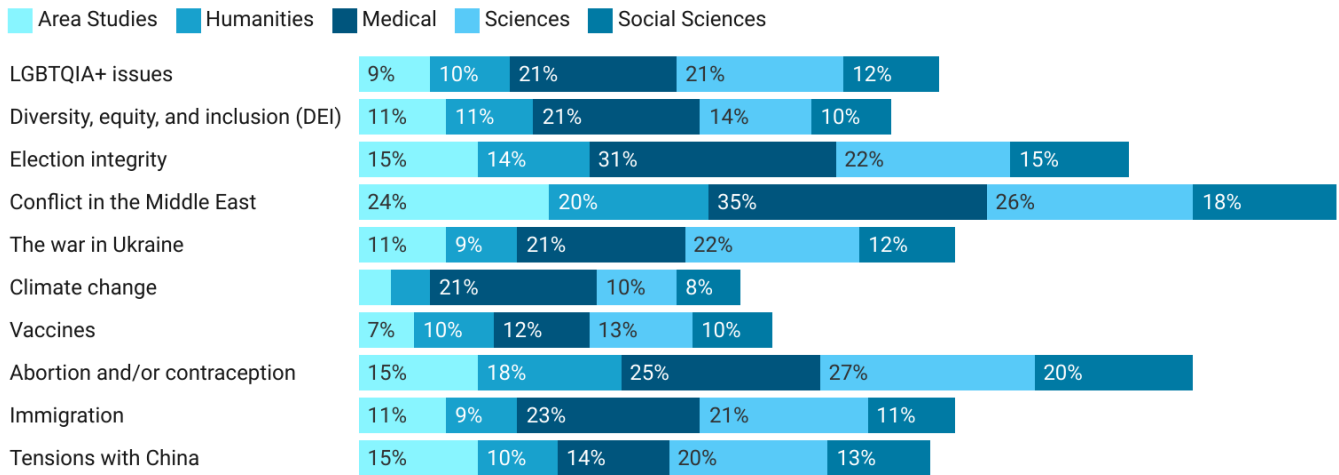
Responses by institutional type and demographics

When looking at responses disaggregated by various institutional and individual characteristics, we find that a large majority of faculty do not avoid teaching or discussing controversial topics. While the differences are small (less than 5 percentage points difference), instructors at doctoral institutions report higher levels of avoidance for all topics, compared to instructors at baccalaureate or master’s institutions. Furthermore, a greater percent of faculty of color than of white faculty reported avoiding teaching or talking about every topic and were statistically significantly more likely to avoid teaching or talking about LGBTQIA+ (19 percent, compared to 12 percent of white instructors) and DEI topics (15 percent, compared to 10 percent of white instructors). On the other hand, women (10 percent) and nonbinary individuals and those of other gender identities (11 percent) were less likely to avoid discussing LGBTQIA+ compared to men (17 percent). Similarly, men were more likely to avoid discussing DEI than women (8 percent) and nonbinary individuals and those of other gender identities (9 percent).

While responses show some minor levels of discomfort or avoidance of discussing certain topics in the classroom, the data at hand—without a “not applicable/not relevant” response option, and without additional questions designed to further probe the topic—is limited. As such, we cannot pinpoint whether avoiding teaching or discussing certain topics is motivated by censorship or self-censorship as opposed to other reasons such as a lack of expertise on a certain topic or because the topic is not relevant to a given class’s subject. A fair share of open-ended responses to the survey echo this, with faculty framing their discipline or courses as “apolitical.” Several respondents noted that the socio-political topics they were asked about are not “germane” to such fields as engineering, mathematics, physics, chemistry, or even research methods courses: “the issues presented within this survey really don’t (or shouldn’t) ever arise in science or engineering.” One instructor noted that they avoid certain topics because “either (a) they are distasteful in general, or (b) they are immaterial to the subject of my courses, if not both. So it's usually more a case of self-censoring than external or perceived pressure to avoid discussing certain topics. If I had a valid reason to explore any particular topic in my course, regardless of its sensitivity, I am fairly confident I would be supported by my administration.”

Figure 5 below suggests that instructors in the sciences and medical fields tend to drive avoidance behaviors when it comes to the topics at hand, seemingly supporting the idea that certain socio-political issues are outside the scope of their classes in those fields. Yet, instructors in the medical fields and sciences also report higher levels of avoiding talking or teaching about climate change, vaccines, and abortion and/or contraception, topics that are both under the purview of the natural sciences and also have a socio-political/public or health policy dimension. To this point, another instructor highlighted that “teaching engineering tends towards math, science, problem solving topics and approaches; however, the social and societal impacts of technical design and implementation does get discussed often (so current world events can and do get discussed in class).” On the point of relevancy, one instructor noted that the survey “did not include teaching evolution as an area of concern when dealing with new laws suppressing academic freedom. That is my PRIMARY area of concern.”

Figure 5. When working in my capacity as an instructor, I avoid teaching or talking about... (strongly agree and agree).



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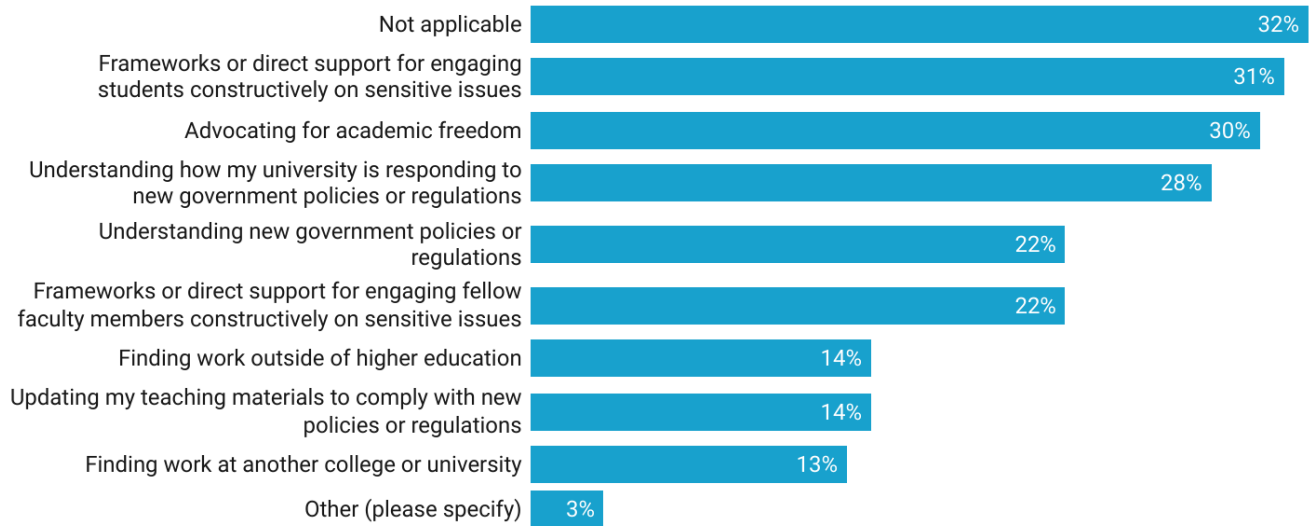


Finding 3

Nearly a third of instructors report that they do not face academic freedom challenges or that they do not need support with such challenges. Those who do need support want frameworks or direct support for engaging students constructively on sensitive issues, advocating for academic freedom, or understanding how their university is responding to new government policies or regulations most prominently.

When asked about which specific activities faculty members need support with when navigating challenges to academic freedom in their teaching, 32 percent indicated that they do not need support or do not face such challenges. Nearly a third also indicated they could use direct support or frameworks on how to engage with students constructively on sensitive issues (31 percent), advocating for academic freedom (30 percent), or understanding how their institution is responding to legislative policies or regulations (28 percent). Roughly a fifth indicated they wanted support understanding new legislative policies or regulations, as well as a framework for engaging fellow faculty in a constructive manner (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6. Which of the following activities do you need support with when navigating challenges to academic freedom in your teaching? Please select all that apply.



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In the open-ended responses, instructors offered some context for indicating that engaging students constructively is the highest priority need. “The real ‘censorship’ I experience in the classroom is students self-censoring, not because of me, but because of themselves and other students. [...] They are increasingly passive and disengaged and show little to no intellectual curiosity.” Another instructor noted that “teaching is a vocation that requires patience, humility, generosity, and gratitude. In today’s politically charged atmosphere, teaching undergrad and graduate students is also like walking through a minefield, anticipating explosions of anger, distrust, extreme skepticism, and even hostility when challenging assumptions and ideologies, regardless of whether from the left or right perspective. Teaching is now often more concerned about satisfying ‘customers’ than engaging intellectual rigor.” Other instructors ascribed some of the issues they face in the classroom to “culture wars,” “cancel culture,” “teach[ing] their students ‘what to think’ in a politically charged manner instead of how to think critically,” or the “increased divisiveness between students who are aggressively left AND aggressively right on sociopolitical issues” as negatively impacting academic rigor. As one instructor put it succinctly, “I am more concerned about how my students will react to certain topics than the administration,” suggesting there is an opportunity here for universities to offer instructors the tools they need to successfully integrate civil discourse and deliberative pedagogy techniques in their classrooms.

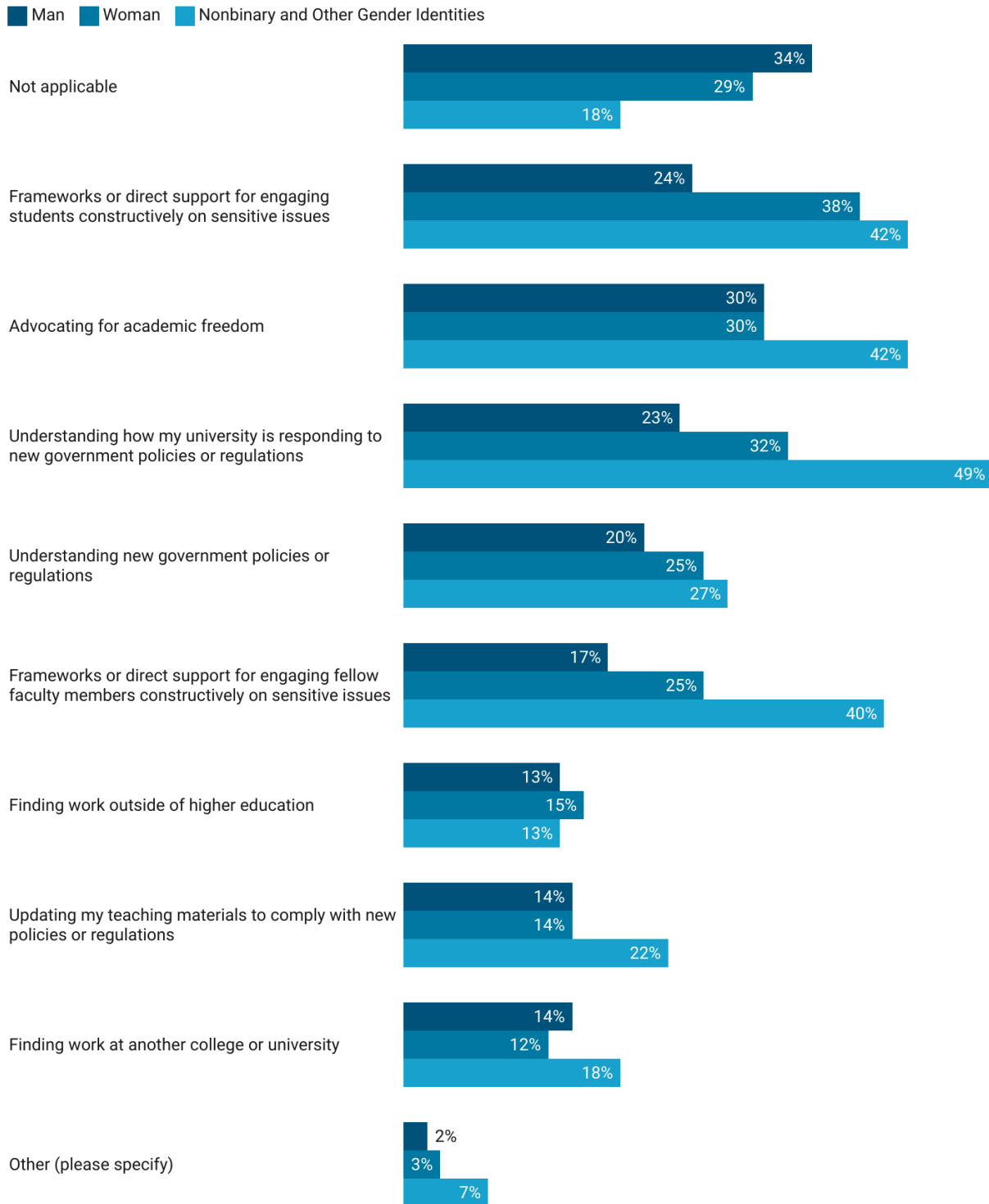
Responses by tenure status and by race/ethnicity and gender

Faculty who are not on a tenure track were statistically significantly less likely to want support advocating for academic freedom (23 percent, compared to 41 percent of tenure-track instructors and 32 percent of tenured ones), while tenure-track faculty were more likely to want support understanding new legislative policies (32 percent, compared to 22 percent of tenured instructors and 20 percent of non-tenure-track ones), as well as their institution's response to them (38 percent compared to 27 percent of tenured instructors and 26 percent of non-tenure-track ones), and support for advocating for academic freedom (41 percent, compared to 32 percent of tenured instructors and 23 percent of non-tenure-track ones).

Instructors of color indicated at the largest percentage that they need support with understanding new legislative policies or procedures (26 percent, compared to 20 percent of white instructors) and understanding new government policies or regulations (26 percent compared to 21 percent of white instructors). Nonbinary individuals and those of other gender identities indicate needing greater levels of support than women or men in several categories, including support engaging students and colleagues constructively, understanding new government policies and institutional responses to them, and updating their teaching materials (see Figure 7).

Nonbinary individuals and those of other gender identities indicate needing greater levels of support than women or men in several categories.

Figure 7. Which of the following activities do you need support with when navigating challenges to academic freedom in your teaching? Please select all that apply. Results by gender identity.



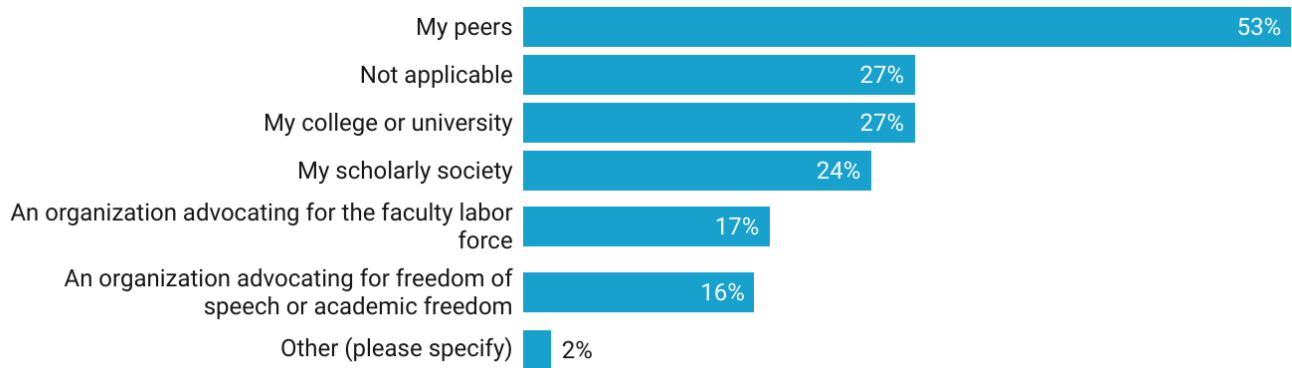
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 Finding 4

Despite expressing a desire for institutional support or frameworks, when navigating academic freedom concerns, instructors indicate they turn to their peers more than any other source for support, including institutional ones. Further, instructors' responses are most mixed when it comes to whether they believe their institution's culture enables constructive conversations on sensitive issues, suggesting a wariness among instructors in their institution's ability to foster civil discourse.

Finally, we asked faculty members to indicate where they turn to for support navigating challenges to academic freedom in their instructional activities. If in the previous question, the percentage of instructors saying they do not face academic freedom challenges, or they do not need support was 32 percent, that share of instructors that selected the same response option again dropped to 27 percent in this subsequent question, suggesting the questions may have had a priming effect. Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated that they turn to their peers, followed, in a distant second, by their college or university (27 percent). Given that instructors express wanting direct support or frameworks for engaging students and for understanding how their university is responding to new government policies, it is not surprising that the majority turn to their peers in absence of these institutional support systems. Pairing this tension with the mixed ratings of their institution's effectiveness to enable constructive conversations (finding 1 above), the data suggest there is an opportunity for further research into what, if at all, instructors believe is the universities' role to foster civil discourse, and how effective they are in this role.

Figure 8. Which of the following sources of support do you use when navigating challenges to academic freedom in your teaching? Please select all that apply.



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Responses by institutional type and demographics

A greater share of instructors in states with policies restricting diversity, equity, and inclusion indicated that they sought support from their peers (61 percent, compared to 51 percent in states without DEI restrictions), their college or university (34 percent, compared to 24 percent in other states), or their scholarly society (28 percent, compared to 23 percent in other states). Thirty-five percent of instructors in the sciences noted that considerations of academic freedom are not applicable to their teaching. Instructors from private institutions, as well as those teaching in the sciences, were less likely to indicate turning to outside organizations (whether advocating for academic freedom, or for instructors' labor), and they were also more likely to indicate that they do not need any support or that they do not encounter such challenges in their work.

Thirty-five percent of instructors in the sciences noted that considerations of academic freedom are not applicable to their teaching.

Women indicated that they turn to their peers (57 percent) at a higher rate than men (50 percent) or nonbinary individuals and those with other gender identities (51 percent). A greater share of women and men (27 percent each) indicated that they seek support from their college or university than faculty who identify as nonbinary and other gender

identities (20 percent). On the other hand, nonbinary individuals and those of other gender identities indicated at a greater rate that they turn to organizations advocating for freedom of speech or academic freedom (33 percent) than men (15 percent) or women (17 percent). Similarly non-binary and respondents of other gender identities turn to organizations advocating for the faculty labor force at a greater rate (27 percent) than men (15 percent) or women (18 percent).

Fewer instructors of color turn to their peers (49 percent compared to 55 percent of white instructors) or indicate that they do not face academic freedom challenges (23 percent compared to 29 percent of white instructors). A higher percentage of non-tenure-track instructors (31 percent) argue they do not face academic freedom challenges or do not need support than tenured instructors (26 percent) or tenure-track ones (23 percent), while a higher percentage of tenure-track instructors (63 percent) turn to their peers, compared to tenured instructors (54 percent), or non-tenure-track ones (50 percent).

Conclusion

What do these numbers mean in practical terms? And how can we understand their significance to ongoing, and rapidly changing, debates around free speech, academic freedom, and identity in higher education? On one hand, the majority of instructors do not report feeling unsafe on campus or report avoiding sensitive topics in the classroom. This suggests that for most faculty intellectual life on campus is carrying on as usual and concerns about academic freedom, free-speech, and self-censorship remain just that: concerns. On the other hand when it comes to topics like conflict in the Middle East and abortion and/or contraception, roughly one in five faculty report avoiding the topics in the classroom, citing “fit over fear” considerations, as one respondent put it. Yet, these self-censoring tendencies are slightly more pronounced among faculty with nonbinary or gender-diverse identities and faculty of color. These respondents are more likely than their cisgender and white colleagues to report feeling unsafe and to report avoiding sensitive topics in the classroom.

This exploratory, pulse-type quartet of questions has several limitations. Most immediate is the issue that the questions as written do not allow for differentiating between the various motivations to self-censor instructors may have. Second, because of low sample sizes we were not able to disaggregate the results more fully by gender identity or by race and ethnicity. The overall number of responses from faculty who identified as transgender and faculty who identified with specific races and/or ethnicities was so low (in some cases under 30) that rolling up respondents by specific racial and gender variables was necessary, both due to statistical power and anonymity concerns. This decision, though necessary, was one we were particularly conscious of given the political and legislative focus on the LGBTQIA+ community and on issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. Future research would benefit from more robust data collection focused specifically on LGBTQIA+ faculty and faculty of color.

Exploring why the majority of faculty do not strongly agree or agree that their college or university's institutional culture supports constructive conversations about sensitive topics, and how schools can best develop and cultivate such a culture, presents another opportunity for further research. At a first glance, faculty reliance on peer support and intervention suggests that colleges and universities looking to change culture and directly support faculty might look to do so by building, developing, or tapping into peer networks. And yet, disaggregated results suggest that a generalized approach like increasing peer support resources may not serve all faculty equitably, as faculty of color and nonbinary faculty rely on peer support at a lower rate and turn to more institutionalized and external resources for support.

It is our hope that this snapshot of faculty sentiment provides a foundation upon which researchers and higher education institutions can build more targeted, localized, and specific inquiries into who is impacted, where, and how, by the shifting political and cultural order in higher education.