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Self-censorship or Just Being Nice:

Understanding College Students' Decisions About Classroom Speech

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The "free speech" or "self-censorship crisis" on college campuses is hotly debated, yet student self-censorship is a poorly understood phenomenon. As more and more states engage in legislative efforts to address this problem, it is critical that we develop a deeper understanding of how students think about speech on college campuses, and especially in college classrooms. In this article I summarize findings from my recent research on how students make decisions about speaking up, or not, in class discussions. Importantly, I discuss the many different decisions students are making about their speech, and the many factors that play a role in those decisions.

Campus "Free Speech" Laws and the "Free Speech Crisis" on College Campuses

According to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE, n.d.), 22 states to date have enacted legislation ostensibly meant to protect free speech on college campuses. Many of these bills contain similar provisions, such as requiring institutions to adopt policies that are consistent with the University of Chicago Free Speech Policy Statement (Stone et al., 2014), include First Amendment or free speech training during freshman orientation, and punish students who prevent others from engaging in protected expression. Some of these policies *may* work to promote more freedom of expression on campus, but others are more concerning. For example, other states have enacted problematic legislation seeking to monitor faculty members' political affiliations or control their ability to express political viewpoints in their teaching and research. For example, a 2021 proposed bill in Iowa that would require the Board of Regents to survey employees at state universities on their political party affiliations and to report that information to the state legislature each year (Flaherty, 2021a). Although the legislation that was ultimately passed by the legislature did not contain such a provision, this latest attempt echoes previous efforts in Iowa and other states to assess and regulate faculty members' political affiliations (Flaherty, 2021a). Another bill recently passed in Florida allows students to record class sessions "in connection with a complaint to the public institution of higher education where the recording was made, or as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding" (cited in Flaherty, 2021b, para 2). As Flaherty (2021b) argued, "the bill can be read as encouraging students to snitch on professors they disagree with politically" (para. 4).

Many of these legislative efforts are grounded in the belief that institutions of higher education, and in particular faculty in higher education, are attempting to indoctrinate students with leftist beliefs, and are suppressing dissenting viewpoints. For example, in a recent debate over higher education funding in Idaho, state Rep. Ron Nate wrote that those in the legislature "have a responsibility to make sure the money truly goes

to excellence in higher education and does not work against Idaho values and American values by promoting Marxist ideologies and racial dogmatism" (as cited by Davlin, 2021). The Idaho legislature later passed a bill prohibiting public institutions, including colleges and universities, from "directly or otherwise compel[ling] students to personally affirm, adopt, adhere to" specific tenets that the bill claims are "often found in 'critical race theory'" (Idaho H.B. 377 2021, p. 1). As of June of 2021, 21 states had introduced or passed legislation banning critical race theory in schools (Ononye & Walker, 2021).

However problematic aspects of these laws might be from the perspective of free speech and academic freedom, as Jeffry Sachs recently argued, lawmakers are responding to something very real (PEN America, 2021) – multiple surveys have repeatedly found that many students refrain from speaking up about important issues in the classroom, and students who identify politically as conservative are more likely to do so than students who identify as liberal. For example, a recent report from FIRE (2020) asserted that "students who identify as Conservative are more likely to report self-censorship than Liberal students (72% vs. 55%)" (p. 13). Similarly, a report from Gallup (2020), in collaboration with the Knight Foundation, found that students who identified as Republican were far more likely than those who identified as Democrats to agree or strongly agree with the statement, "the climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive" (p. 35; 74% for Republicans vs. 58% for Democrats). This same report found that Republicans were far less comfortable "voicing disagreement with ideas expressed by the instructor or other students" (p. 39) in class discussions (45% of Republicans were comfortable or very comfortable, vs. 69% of Democrats).

To be fair, no one survey, or even a set of surveys, can answer all of our questions about students' views of their own and others' speech on campus. However, the fact that these surveys are used to make arguments about a self-censorship[1] crisis on campus, particularly one that needs to be solved through restrictive legislation, is problematic, especially if we do not understand what these surveys are actually telling us. Below I review three of the most commonly cited surveys – from FIRE, Gallup/Knight Foundation, and Heterodox Academy – and discuss the problems with how those surveys are often interpreted in the media and by others who make claims about indoctrination and censorship on campus.

FIRE 2020 College Free Speech Rankings

FIRE (2020) recently conducted a survey in order to "rank" institutions based on the "culture of freedom of speech" on campus (p. 1), which included a question asking students, yes or no, whether they had "personally ever felt [they] could not express [their] opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond?" In the report, the authors interpret a response of "yes" to this question as indicating a negative climate for free speech on campus. However, there are a number of problems with this

[1] Although I find the term "self-censorship" to contribute to a problematic, overly simplistic narrative about speech issues on campus, and prefer Cortés's (2019) use of the term "self-editing," overwhelmingly those in politics, the media, and even on campus use and recognize the term self-censorship when discussing students' choices around their own speech. As such, I have intentionally chosen to use the term "self-censorship" throughout this article in order to enter into that ongoing conversation. However, I think it is important to consider the extent to which our use of the term self-censorship is appropriate and whether it helps us understand and address the problem. Based on my own research, summarized here, I think it is likely that the narrative around student self-censorship is actually part of the problem.

question and the subsequent interpretation. In asking this as a simple yes/no question, we are not able to understand any of the nuances of students' experiences. Is this something that has happened once? Something that happens every day? Is this something that the students themselves feel is a problem, or is it simply a matter of students making common choices about how they approach discussions based on their audience? What types of opinions did students feel like they could not express? Did they actually stop themselves from expressing those opinions as a result of those feelings? What responses from students, professors, or administration were they thinking about when answering this question? On what basis had they formed their predictions of how others would respond? Despite the fact that the data generated from this survey question led to more questions than answers, the authors of this report interpret the data as indicating that students are "not expressing their opinion because of the potential consequences of doing so" (p. 13), which is not actually what the question asks, and call this "self-censorship," which is never really defined.

Gallup/Knight Foundation First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report

In a somewhat different approach to understanding students' experiences with the climate for free speech on campus, as part of their recurring First Amendment survey, Gallup (2020) asked students the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "the climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive" (p. 35). Although the authors do refrain from over-interpreting findings based on this question, the question asks students what they think other students are thinking about and doing, not about students' own thoughts and actions. Some students may interpret this question as asking about their own experience, while others may interpret the question as it is written and try to guess how other students feel on campus. Additionally, their responses may be more indicative of a broader media narrative of self-censorship on campus, rather than any true assessment of the actual campus climate. This same survey asked students how comfortable they themselves were "voicing disagreement with ideas expressed by the instructor or other students" (p. 39) in class discussions. While this item is better than the first in that it asks for students to report on their own behavior, it conflates discomfort with disagreeing with the instructor and with disagreeing with other students, which may be vastly different phenomena and require vastly different solutions to address. It also does not get at why students are or are not comfortable, or what they do in response – students may be uncomfortable but may voice their disagreement anyway, or they may be perfectly comfortable doing so but refrain for other reasons.

Heterodox Academy 2021 Report on Understanding the Campus Expression Climate

A 2020 survey from Heterodox Academy (Stiksma, 2021) took the issue one step further, not only asking students about the issues they were reluctant to speak about on campus, but also the potential consequences that students feared. Heterodox Academy researchers asked students the same question asked in the Gallup (2020) survey: the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "the climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive" (Stiksma 2021, p. 5), but then asked a series of questions about specific issues. They asked, "Think about discussing a controversial issue about [gender, politics, race or ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation] in a class this semester. How comfortable or reluctant would you feel about speaking up and giving your views on this topic?" with answer options

ranging from "I would be very comfortable giving my views" to "I would be very reluctant giving my views." If students indicated any reluctance, they were asked "if you were to speak up and give your views on one of the controversial issues during a class discussion, would you be concerned that any of the following would happen?" with a list of answer options:

- Other students would criticize my views as offensive
- The professor would say my views are wrong
- The professor would criticize my views as offensive
- The professor would give me a lower grade because of my views
- Someone would post critical comments about my views on social media
- Someone would file a complaint claiming my views violated a campus harassment policy
- I would cause others psychological harm
- Other concerns or consequences? Please list below
  (Heterodox Academy, 2021, pp. 2-3)

Although this is a far more detailed question, particularly in terms of getting into feared consequences, there are still two key issues. First, being comfortable or reluctant speaking does not necessarily mean that students actually do or do not speak up. These are likely to be correlated, but there are many other factors that could influence whether a student actually shares their beliefs in class. Second, giving students a list of reasons to be uncomfortable might not actually reflect how they are making these decisions.

The Problem with Poorly Defined Problems

In the lead-in to their Fall 2019 survey report, Heterodox Academy researchers make a strong statement about the problems of self-censorship they claim to identify in their findings:

> When students sit on the sidelines of their own education – unable or unwilling to share their views on a range of challenging topics – their learning suffers, as does that of their peers. Reports show that some students are reluctant to speak their opinions in the classroom, censoring themselves in discussions. Self-censorship in a university setting is of great concern not only to educators but to the society as a whole, as today's college students are tomorrow's leaders. (Stiksma 2020, p. 3)

The question remains, however – is this really what is going on? Are students really engaging in "self-censorship"? What does that really mean in practice? How and why are students making these decisions about speaking out in class or not?

This may seem like splitting hairs – do the nuances of this phenomenon really matter, or is it enough to know that students say that they hold back their opinions in class (or at least feel like doing so)? I argue that self-censorship on campus is an ill-defined problem, and the reasons students do or do not engage in self-censorship is poorly understood. When we don't know what the problem really is, the solutions we try to implement may be ineffective at best, and at worst, actually exacerbate the issue. If we truly want to encourage more expression of more diverse points of view in college classrooms and elsewhere on campus, it is essential

that we understand how students are actually thinking about and making decisions about expressing their own ideas.

What do Students Actually Think About Their Own Speech on Campus?

For my Fellowship project, over the past year I surveyed over 275 college students about their willingness to speak up about complex issues in the classroom, and conducted in-depth interviews with 16 of those students (10 of them twice) to dig into how they are making these decisions. How do they think about their own speech in the classroom? When do they choose to speak, when do they not, and most importantly, why? Initial findings from my ongoing research in this area point to some important dynamics in how students actually think about classroom speech.

An important note is that I conducted my study at a predominantly and historically White institution, and in the qualitative phase of my project, I focused on only White students. This was an intentional choice, as many of the dominant media narratives around free speech issues on college campuses focus on historically White institutions, and students from majoritized identity groups are likely to have very different reasons for making decisions about speaking up in the classroom compared to those from minoritized identity groups (e.g., Lee & McCabe, 2021).

On the Surface: The Quantitative Findings

For the first phase of my research, I collected survey data from a single research-extensive institution in the Midwest/Great Plains region of the U.S. In order to get a diverse sample of student responses, I advertised the survey on posters, fliers, and digital displays in the student union, dining halls, residence halls, and academic buildings. I also advertised the survey via social media, and had an email advertisement that academic advisors and student affairs professionals sent out to students in their networks.

My survey data reflect a predominantly White but politically fairly diverse group of college students. In terms of race/ethnicity, 6% identified as Asian American, 3% as Bi/Multiracial, 4% as Black/African American, 11% as Hispanic/Latino/a/x, less than 1% as Middle Eastern, 2% as Native American, 79% as White, and 2% as another race/ethnicity not listed (students could choose multiple, so these % add up to just over 100%). Politically, 23% identified as very liberal, 30% as liberal, 20% as middle of the road, 17% as somewhat conservative, and 10% as very conservative. Students who responded to the survey ranged in age from 18 to over 40 years old, with the vast majority of students between the ages of 18 and 21 (19% were 18 years old, 24% were 19, 20% were 20, and 20% were 21). In terms of gender 29% identified as men, 70% as women, and just under 1% as trans or non-binary.

Following the basic model of previous surveys, I asked students, "how often do you keep an opinion related to class to yourself because you are worried about the potential consequence of expressing that opinion?" Responses were broadly distributed, with 7% of students responding "never," 16% "seldom," 43% "sometimes," 25% "often," and 9% "always." The vast majority of students responded that they at least "sometimes" kept their opinions to themselves in class.

Similar to prior research, students who identified as somewhat or very conservative answered that they were significantly more likely to keep opinions to themselves than students who identified as middle-of-the-road or somewhat or very liberal. The overall mean was 3.0 ("sometimes") across all political groups, but the mean for somewhat or very liberal students was 2.84 and the mean for somewhat or very conservative students was 3.80 (closer to "often"). Put in other terms, only 17% of somewhat/very liberal students said that they "often" or "always" kept opinions to themselves in class, while 69% of somewhat/very conservative students did so. However, still only 8% of somewhat/very liberal students and 7% of middle-of-the-road said that they "never" keep opinions to themselves; for conservative students, 5% said that they never did so.

Digging Deeper: The Qualitative Findings

Based on their responses to the survey, I purposefully selected sixteen students for interviews who varied in their political affiliation, the frequency with which they held back their opinions in class, and their answers to other survey questions that were geared towards their judgements about other students' potentially offensive classroom speech. I was able to speak with most interview participants (ten of the sixteen) twice, which allowed me to really dig into the nuances of their views about what is and is not appropriate to say in a class discussion, and how they make decisions about their own classroom speech. Demographically, ten of the interview participants identified as women and six as men; as noted above, all identified as White. Politically, four identified as "very liberal," four as "somewhat liberal," two as "middle-of-the-road," five as "somewhat conservative," and one as "very conservative." In terms of how often they held back opinions in class discussions, one replied "always," six "often," six "sometimes," one "seldom," and two "never."

Overall, there were two key dimensions to my findings: the decisions that students are making about their classroom speech, and how they are making those decisions. I describe each in more detail below. For context, when discussing participants' decisions about their classroom speech below, I indicate in parentheses their political identification and how often they said they held back an opinion in class.

To Speak or Not to Speak? That isn't the only question.

In speaking with the participants in my research over the past year, it became clear to me that all students make choices about their own speech, in and out of the classroom – even the students who claimed on the survey to "never" hold back from sharing their opinions in class. In fact, there did not seem to be much of a relationship between a students' answer on the survey and their ability to come up with specific examples of when they had chosen not to speak up in class. For example, Sarah (very liberal, never), did in general see herself as a person who was not afraid to speak her mind. However, when I asked her about this survey question in the interview, she immediately came up with specific examples of when she had not spoken up in class, and principles for when she would not speak up in general. At the time of the interview she was taking an introductory course as a junior, and the other students in the course were generally first year students. She discussed how even though she knew a lot and cared deeply about the issues they were discussing, she was hesitant to speak up because she was not sure whether doing so would actually help the other students in the class learn and develop. She had also come to the realization that her campus was far more conservative than what she had been used to before coming to college. This made her uncomfortable and uncertain of how to best navigate this particular course.

Knowing Your Audience

Sarah's experience navigating classroom dynamics was not unique. In talking with students about their experiences with speaking up or not in class discussions, it became clear that this was not just a choice about whether or not to speak up. Students were also thinking about how the contexts they were in influenced when and where they should speak, to whom they should speak, what they should or should not say, and how they should say it. For example, when discussing what he considers before speaking up in class, Eric (somewhat conservative, often) explained,

> I personally try to avoid hurting other people's feelings. That's really not necessary. So, I would choose my words as wisely as I can. But that wouldn't really change the meaning of what I'm trying to say. It might just change how I say it.

Eric's explanation here reflects a number of common themes throughout my interviews. Students wanted to consider who was in the audience and how they would receive what the student was trying to say, so would be thoughtful about how they expressed themselves. Many students, like Eric, wanted to avoid hurting other people's feelings, and overall just wanted to be kind and respectful of other people. Greg (somewhat conservative, sometimes) explained, "If I don't have to, I don't like upsetting people." Julia (very liberal, sometimes) noted that this is just common courtesy; it is about "just being cognizant of the people around you. Realizing that you're not the end all be all. What you think is not the end all be all."

Although this consideration of audience did not hold Eric back from speaking up, other students discussed holding back when they did not know their audience well. In discussing a hypothetical class discussion, Lucy (somewhat conservative, often) explained, "I feel like I personally kind of hold back on stuff like that unless I really know my audience. And just being probably a large… class, I would not know my audience there really." Sarah (very liberal, never) similarly discussed how not knowing her audience, particularly online "where it's like 50 cameras off and I don't know who I'm talking to," made her hesitate to speak up, particularly about marginalized identities she held.

As Sarah's comment reflects, knowing your audience is not just about being considerate of others; it is also about weighing how others are likely to respond to and judge you for your comments. Although Chloe (somewhat liberal, often) said that it was easier in college, in high school she felt a lot of social pressure not to share opinions that were different from the majority of students. She explained, "I lived in a really small, really conservative town. It didn't really align with my feelings and thoughts, so I felt like a lot of the time it was just easier not to give my opinion." When I asked what she was afraid of if she did share her opinion, she said, "embarrassment. I guess losing friends maybe… people finding me difficult so they didn't want to spend time with me maybe." Jason (somewhat conservative, often) expressed a similar approach, considering how others might judge him for what he said in class:

> I'm [in college] to learn and try and make some connections. I don't necessarily want to squander those just based off of a single point of view, because I feel like A, the person that I'm talking to will disagree

> with me. Or B, they will share the way that I feel to somebody else who, if I was talking to directly, they might not necessarily disagree with me, but because it's through an informal connection, they're more likely to be like, 'Oh, he's taking a strong viewpoint that most people don't share. I don't want to necessarily talk to him anymore.'

The Importance of Important Relationships

Students often considered their relationships with others in the audience, and whether or not those relationships mattered to them, in their decisions about speaking up. Lucy (somewhat conservative, often) explained how she was more likely to discuss difficult issues with people she was close to – her roommates, people she worked closely with in a student organization, friends, and immediate family members. Dana felt that people who knew her well would be less likely to take offense if she shared her opinion: "if it was with someone I knew like a friend, I could be more open to sharing, just because I know that they know who I am. So if I say something that was wrong, they can tell me." For Emily (middle-of-the-road, often), on the other hand, having a close professional relationship with the people she was talking to often led to her holding back her opinions for the sake of maintaining those relationships:

> When I do the cost-benefit analysis a lot of times I feel like it'd be more worth it to maintain a solid working relationship. Yes, there could be certain things benefitted by bringing up those different ideas and getting to think about it, but then in the end I feel like in a lot of these situations it's like how I get along and work with people I'm around will end up being more important because it just improves the quality of relationships in the workplace.

Eric (somewhat conservative, often) discussed how when relationships do not matter to him, they do not factor into his decisions. When I asked him whether he had ever had an experience where he felt like other students would judge him or ostracize him in some way because of something he said, he replied, "I have had those instances, but when that happens I don't really care, because I don't need to be friends with them always." He went on to explain further,

> I have friends already, I guess. So, I have a pretty strong friend group that I can rely on. So, I'm not worried about making a lot more friends, and I don't really want to be friends with people who disagree with me on very fundamental values. So, a lot of the times, I'm just not afraid to share my opinion.

In contrast to the other students described above who were concerned about the social consequences of speaking up, Eric, and other students like him, did not feel the need to have a relationship with other students in his classes who might react negatively to his opinions.

(Un)Productive Contributions to the Discussion

For many students much of this consideration of audience came back to the idea of effective communication – how can you best make the point you want to make in a way that others can hear? Mason (very liberal, sometimes) explained how being argumentative "can be interesting in a lot of scenarios," but ultimately, "when you're being argumentative, there's always this air of smugness, or of, 'I think I'm right and I want to win'…I think it's just not conducive to actual discussion." Emily (middle-of-the-road, often) explained how if you make an argument "emotionally, it gets lost," so you should try to present your perspective "tactfully, but also meaningfully." In describing a class discussion where she chose not to speak up, Chloe (somewhat liberal, often) explained how her opinion was already being represented in the discussion, and adding her own voice would not have been productive. She explained, "I didn't want the person that I disagree with to feel like I was attacking them," because once someone starts to feel attacked, "the argument's going to start turning not productive."

Another important dimension of this, though, was whether students thought that there was any potential for productive discussion about a topic. If not, what was the use in speaking up? In discussing the same scenario mentioned above where she chose not to share her opinion, Chloe went on to explain when conflict is and is not productive. She explained,

> I think sometimes [conflict is] productive, but when it comes to things like that and they're passionate about it… I don't think I can change people's opinions… When it comes to class discussion, some person that doesn't know me isn't going to change their opinion on abortion when they've been raised a certain way their whole life to think a certain way.

In this situation, Chloe did not see much potential benefit in sharing her opinion in class, and instead saw that if she did choose to speak up, it might lead to unnecessary and unproductive conflict.

The Right (or Wrong) Time and Place

In addition to considering the other people with whom they were speaking, students also discussed what was or was not appropriate in an academic, classroom context. Mason (very liberal, sometimes) discussed how it was important in a class discussion to stay on topic and not distract from the professor's overall lesson plan: "Having a discussion can be great, and interesting for a lot of people to listen to if they want to. But it can also distract from the lesson, and take the whole thing off-topic." This meant that sometimes, even if he did disagree with something a professor or another student said, it just was not the right time and place to voice his disagreement. Emily (middle-of-the-road, often) expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that she did not speak up in a particular class because "there might be certain classes that encourage debate, and this just wasn't one of them. This was just a lecture and so I was like, well I'll just learn the material and move on."

Despite the fact that on its face, self-censorship seems like a fairly straightforward concept – students choose to speak up or not – it is clear from these students' experiences that there is a lot more to these decisions. Students carefully considered the contexts they were in, who they were speaking to, how they might communicate their points most effectively, and whether it was really the time or place to even try to share their

opinion. Even though students generally considered similar contextual factors in deciding whether or not to speak up, though, the decisions any one student came to were sometimes quite different from the decisions other students made. In the next section I dig deeper into what is influencing students' speech decisions in college classrooms.

How do Students Make these Decisions? "It's a Mixture of Everything"

In discussing her discomfort with the idea of sharing her opinion in class, Dana (somewhat conservative, often) summed up the core finding from my interviews when it came to how students are making these decisions – "it's a mixture of everything." Just as the decisions that students were making went far beyond a simple question of speaking up or not, the factors that went into their decisions were also complex. Figure 1[2] is a visual representation of this complexity. Students' decisions about classroom speech are shaped by the broader cultural context, personal experiences, and individual factors, all of which interact with each other in complex ways.

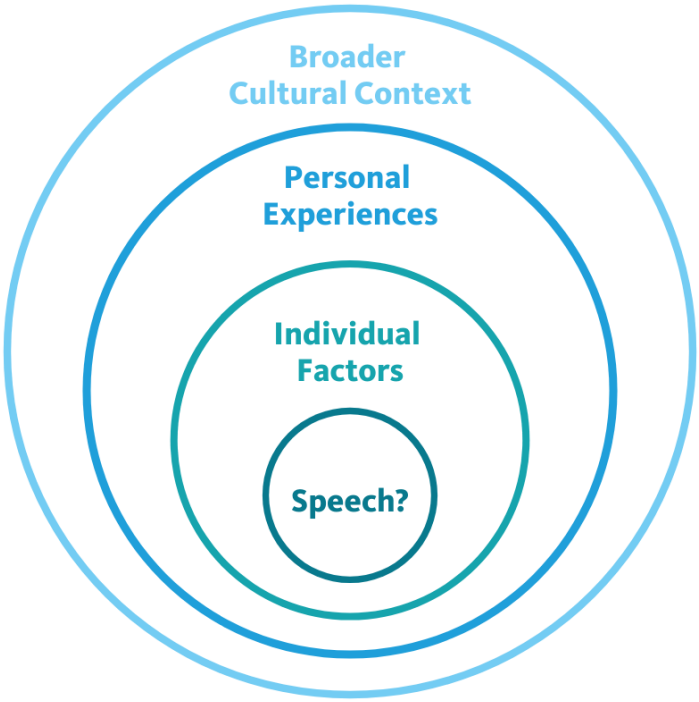


Figure 1: What influences students' decisions about classroom speech?

The Broader Cultural Context

[2] Readers familiar with student development theory will notice similarities between this model and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Although I did not use Bronfenbrenner's theory as a guiding framework for this study, my familiarity with his work clearly influenced my visual representation of my own findings.

In discussing their decisions about classroom speech, students made a wide array of references to the broader culture and how that influenced their perceptions about what they should or should not say in class discussions. These included political polarization in the U.S.; the cultural narrative around "cancel culture," which was heavily influenced by what they saw on social media; messages they received, again often from social media, about specific words or topics that were off-limits; the overall political climate, especially around issues of race; and the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on their virtual and in-person classroom experiences[3]. Lucy (somewhat conservative, often), for example, referenced the ongoing racial tensions, both locally and nationally, in how she thought about what students should or should not say in class. She explained, "I would be so careful and want to tiptoe around… I think for the past couple of months everyone has just been kind of on edge and being very sensitive to everything." When it comes to "cancel culture," a number of students referenced being influenced by seeing people getting attacked on social media, as Jason (somewhat conservative, often) described:

> I've spent a considerable amount of time on the internet, and I've seen a lot of cancel culture, and a lot of you say something controversial, you get cancelled. And people just jump on the bandwagon because they're jumping on the bandwagon and they want to ruin someone's life.

Students also discussed broader cultural messages, often convened through social media but also through family and/or religious institutions, about specific words that were not okay to say. Many of these students referenced the n-word, but they also discussed swearing/curse words, insults, other slurs, and things that would just be offensive to others. Dana (somewhat conservative, often), for example, explained, "I just feel like all the news and media stuff… I just don't want to say something that's like plainly wrong or offend anyone." This sentiment was echoed by Julia (very liberal, sometimes) who explained, "the ways that I stay updated [on what is and is not okay to say] would be through probably just what I read and watch on social media more than anything."

Personal Experiences

In addition to being influenced by broader cultural factors, students often drew on their direct personal experiences when making decisions about classroom speech. These included prior high school and college classroom discussions, their experience (and often lack of experience) discussing difficult subjects and interacting with people different from themselves, the social networks that they had on and off campus, the media and social media they consumed, and conversations with friends and family.

Although it was rare, some students did have specific examples of negative experiences with professors or other students, either in high school or college. Eric (somewhat conservative, often), for example, discussed how he perceived faculty bias in one of his courses, as he was assigned to "write a paper proving the existence

[3] For context, I collected both survey and interview data during the 2020/2021 academic year at an institution that was working under a hybrid model, with some courses offered face-to-face with masks and social distancing requirements, others offered online, and still others offered in various hybrid models.

of systemic racial injustice in America" using "a list of assigned evidence," despite the fact that he believed "there were a lot of things to the contrary that could be found." Julia (very liberal, sometimes) discussed a situation in high school where pressure from other students kept her from speaking out. She explained,

> I went to high school in a very conservative town and a very conservative young man would be over the top about [voting for Trump]… this guy, he was the quarterback of the football team and sharing everything that he felt and people really liked him. You didn't want to say the wrong thing and then get made fun of.

Although she was more comfortable speaking up in college, these types of experiences still stuck with her and made her think twice before sharing her political views. This was particularly the case in her small, cohort-based academic major, which was in a more traditionally conservative field. She explained, that many of her classmates came from similar conservative small town backgrounds, and

> in my really small classes, [other students] were very cliquey… and I was not part of those cliques. And so I would kind of be afraid to share out some of the things I was thinking or feeling because I didn't want those people to think less of me, especially as [a professional in the field].

Students' views on whether or not they could openly share their opinions were not always based on direct personal experience, however; often they were based in vicarious experience or what they heard through their social networks. Greg (somewhat conservative, sometimes), for example, talked at length about how it can be a problem "if the teacher's clearly for one side" of an issue. When I asked if he had experiences like this in college or if it is just what he has heard from others, he said

> I've heard it before… my brother's even more opinionated than me and he's much smarter and knowledgeable about what he's talking about, but I just hear people talking. It's like, 'I don't believe this side of the argument, but I just wrote this side of the argument for the teacher's sake and for my grade's sake.' But I haven't experienced it.

Emily (middle-of-the-road, often) expressed a similar sentiment when talking about a class she had where they were discussing social issues and she felt "like there's more that goes into it than what [the professor was] saying," but she didn't speak up to voice her concerns because "I worried that maybe it would affect the way that maybe my professor sees me or looks at my work." Emily went on to describe, however, that her perception of that experience had more to do with things that her friends have told her than with how the professor handled the class:

> As far as the way she dealt with the class, I mean super nice, super respectful, inclusive. It was probably more on my end, more of the fear of based on maybe what other people have said to me, about maybe not the same class but other classes, more of just even if I did disagree it would be better for me if I didn't.

In this way students' social networks, the people they talked to and relied on for advice in navigating college, heavily influenced what they felt they could and could not say in class.

Students' lack of prior experiences also influenced their decisions about speaking up in class; many students described not having a lot of pre-college experience discussing difficult issues with people who held very different beliefs, which made it more difficult for them to navigate these situations once they were in college. Dana (somewhat conservative, often) described how going to a Catholic high school, "everyone's mindsets were similar-ish or you wouldn't talk." This meant that "the discussions that I've had… have been about, I don't know, just super mundane, not super heated topics." Once she got to college this dynamic didn't change much, as she was primarily in science and math classes and hadn't had any discussion-based classes so far.

On the other end of the political spectrum, Sarah (very liberal, never) described how her high school experience was similarly filled with like-minded people:

> I have a weird background in that my circle of people that I've always been in has always been extremely progressive and friendly towards all identities. My parents very much instilled that in me and my high school was very much a progressive bubble, and so we had that comfortability to be able to speak our beliefs and be open about ourselves.

Although this experience helped Sarah build a foundation knowledge and confidence in her beliefs that helped her be outspoken in many classes, as discussed previously, she came to realize that in settings where she could not be confident that everyone agreed with her, she was much less confident speaking up. She explained, "I'm just the kind of person that I struggle when people don't have the same beliefs, have very polar opposite beliefs to me."

Of course, not all of students' prior experiences made them hesitate to speak up. Students talked about experiences they had sharing potentially controversial opinions where nothing bad happened, of only having positive experiences with high school teachers and college professors, and of feeling like college was a much more open environment than high school.

Alexander (middle-of-the-road, never) had vastly different experiences than many of the other students who I interviewed, in large part because he had been home schooled up until college. He explained,

> I was homeschooled all of my life, so college is actually my first public school experience. So, we always had the freedom to speak out. Dad actually actively encouraged us to speak out and form our own opinions in class and critically think about topics…. I never had that fear instilled in me, speaking up and potentially having things taken out of context, and be punishable by an authority.

Alexander described a number of experiences, before and during college, engaging with a wide array of people in discussion of many different controversial topics.

Another important aspect of Alexander's experience is that he has no presence on most social media platforms, which meant he did not have to worry about anything he said blowing up on social media. He explained,

> No one is able to track me down, no one is able to flay me on social media for anything, just by virtue of me not existing on social media. So in a sense, I'm more able to say stuff… I can say the most controversial thing I wanted and no one has any way to contact me.

Alexander's experience was out of the ordinary with his non-traditional home school background, but the contrast highlights important aspects of students' prior experiences that shape their approaches to speaking up in the classroom.

Individual Factors

The most proximal influence on students' decisions about their classroom speech were the individual factors – things that were individual to each student and that interacted with the broader cultural context and their personal experiences to influence their speech choices in different ways. These individual factors included students' interests, religious and other beliefs, and goals, along with how students individually viewed the purpose of higher education and how they should interact with professors and other students in an academic environment.

Often students' interests, values, and academic goals influenced their speech decisions, because often students just did not care enough about a particular topic to engage. Sarah (very liberal, never), for example, explained that on certain topics, she just does not care enough to speak up, even if she thinks they are generally important issues:

> There's certain topics that I don't necessarily get that upset about, upset enough to talk about, like women's rights. That's something that's been my entire life, I've cared very deeply about, and that's a factor of my identity where it's concerned, but I won't necessarily get super impassioned about it and want to speak up about it.

Greg (somewhat conservative, sometimes) similarly discussed how sometimes he does not share his own opinion because it just does not matter that much. In describing why he did not share his own opinion on COVID vaccination in a class discussion, he explained

> I didn't think it was that important, because, I mean, it wasn't an intense discussion or anything like that. And I didn't think anybody was saying anything that was wrong or that I could argue that was wrong. It was just my personal opinion that I don't feel the need to get [into] it at the moment.

Other students reflected similar perspectives, not speaking up because they did not care about the topic, did not have strong opinions, or just overall were not interested in engaging in political discussions. Often they talked about how they did not know much about these issues, but also did not care enough to learn enough to engage in more serious discussions. As Jason (somewhat conservative, often) explained, "I don't feel like I necessarily know everything that I want to know about this topic to really discuss it with my peers… [and] I don't necessarily have the time or want to put that work into that."

Other times students felt the issues that came up were important enough to inspire them to speak, often regardless of the consequences. Despite being reluctant to speak up in many situations, Emily (middle-of-the-road, often) discussed how she was incredibly passionate about people with special needs, and would always speak up if someone used derogatory language when talking about someone with special needs:

> I do this around my friends, and I'll do it around my coworkers too, if people make either derogatory jokes about special needs people or use the word r*, I hate that word, I have a cousin who is autistic and I hate it when people use that word, so if people say that when I'm around them I'll be like, "No, don't say that. Don't use that word, say something else."

Similarly, both Greg and Sarah discussed situations where they *did* care enough to speak up. In describing a personal, traumatic experience she had around a particular social issue, Sarah described how when the topic would come up in class, she had such a strong reaction that she didn't even think about how to respond, she just did: "when I would hear that kind of stuff in class it was just like knee jerk reaction. I'm like, "What the f*?" I just can't." Greg also described how on some issues, he just cannot stand not to speak up: "something that I really think needs to be said, I'll say it because otherwise I just sit in my seat twitching basically."

Another key internal factor guiding students' speech decisions was how they saw the purpose of education, and especially of class discussions, and how they saw their role in the classroom. For some students, class discussions were all about testing out new ideas, hearing other perspectives, and refining their own beliefs. Alexander (middle-of-the-road, never), for example, talked about how much he enjoyed discussing controversial topics:

> It's super fascinating to bring up a controversial topic and just see how people react to it, see who takes what side? Who's willing to change based on the flow of it, versus who keeps their own opinion? Who might keep their own opinions, but then see they're wrong, and will they either A, keep defending and hold on with a rock-solid grip, or B, change to the more sensible opinion? There's a whole interesting dynamic there that I love to experience.

Greg (somewhat conservative, sometimes) similarly discussed how, although as a more right-leaning person he did not often find left-leaning people open to discussion, he really wanted to have more opportunities to engage with people who had different political perspectives from his own:

> So when I do find somebody that is much more left-leaning than I am, I really enjoy having conversations with them so I do understand what their point of view is in those cases, and maybe I want to change mine. Whether I want to change my opinion or not, I just better understand the situation from different points of view. And that's why I think discussion is so important, is you don't have to agree with them, but you just have to actually understand where they're coming from.

Greg and Alexander's comments are examples of an approach to education, and an expectation, that education is about discovery and about learning new things from discussion. For other students, though, education was

about being a recipient of knowledge more than an active participant. They saw themselves as being in class to learn, often from the professor, and when they engaged in class discussion, it was to express a fully formed, knowledgeable perspective. Dana (somewhat conservative, often), for example, did not feel like she knew enough about topics she was discussing in some of her classes, so she said, "I feel like I just stay quiet and listen and absorb information rather than talking about it. So yeah, I feel like in most cases I just hold back." Jason (somewhat conservative, often) expressed a similar notion of learning as taking in new information, explaining, "I don't necessarily share my viewpoint every single chance I get because college is not the time where I'm supposed to be talking. I'm supposed to be learning more than I'm supposed to be talking." He saw his education being about learning specific facts that he needed to know for his future career, explaining,

> this is the foundation for my education and the foundation for my job. The specific opinions don't necessarily change the facts. The fact is, a doorway should be at least three feet wide… I'm learning a lot about the facts. I really have no time for the opinions.

For students who had this perspective on education, participation in class discussions was not about learning something new, but about expressing what you already did know; and more often than not, they felt like they did not know enough to speak up. Julia (very liberal, sometimes) talked about how she just did not know enough about diversity to speak up when those issues came up in class:

> Since I was from a small town, I didn't have a lot of experience with that. And so I didn't necessarily know what my opinion was fully. I mean, I wouldn't want to share something that I didn't fully feel confident that I could defend, if that makes sense. And I've felt that way in political classes as well when I was… I haven't taken any in high school. Not in high school. I haven't taken any in college, but in high school I took a class where we talked about politics and I just didn't feel like I had enough information to defend one way or the other.

Dana (somewhat conservative, often) similarly discussed how she felt like she was just expected to know things already, and that everyone else already seemed to. Like Julia, she was often concerned that if she did speak up, she wouldn't know enough to defend her opinion if others argued with her. She explained, "I feel like I just shouldn't say anything because they can come back with something and I have no idea what it is."

Where do we go from here?

So what does this all mean for how we understand students' decisions about speaking up in the classroom? First, my findings point to a critical disconnect between how students answer survey questions and their actual behavior and experiences. Students like Sarah (very liberal, never) who respond that they "never" hold back their opinions in class because they are concerned about how others will react do, in fact, do this. On the other end of the political spectrum, many students are afraid to speak up because they have heard that others may react negatively, but they themselves have never experienced this. Yes, some students do have negative experiences with how professors or other students have responded to their opinions in class discussions, but these examples are far fewer than the examples of students who hold back because they are constantly hearing that it is dangerous to speak up. Conservative students were most often the ones talking about how they chose

not to speak up in class because of things they saw on social media or heard from other students, but liberal students had some of these experiences, too.

This has important implications for how we interpret and talk about survey data about students' attitudes towards their own classroom speech. Students may be answering these questions in a way that reflects a broader cultural and political narrative, rather than in a way that reflects their own experiences. It may also be that using these survey results to support a general narrative about "self-censorship" on campus actually could be making the problem worse; the more students hear that other students feel that they cannot speak up on campus, the more they will feel that they cannot do so either. Rather than helping us solve a problem, the way these surveys are interpreted by the media, policy makers, the general public, and sometimes even the survey authors themselves may be contributing to the problem.

Second, it is clear from my findings that not all students see the benefit of engaging in these challenging classroom discussions, despite the fact that many free speech advocates assume that sharing one's opinion in class is crucial to students' educational experiences. The students I interviewed generally came to college from high schools where they did not learn about controversial political issues, and if they did discuss them with teachers and classmates, generally one side of the issue was dominant. These high school experiences shape how students view learning and how they should, and should not, engage in classroom discussions. Those who are looking to promote more discussion of ideologically diverse viewpoints in college classrooms need to understand that this is not something that students come to college necessarily expecting or being prepared for. More should be done at both the P-12 and higher education levels to help students engage with controversial issues, and in doing so, show students the educational benefit of this type of engagement. Importantly, legislation banning the discussion of controversial ideas in public schools is the opposite of what we should be doing to promote more engagement with diverse perspectives on college campuses.

Even if we do prepare students for difficult conversations before and during college, however, many students will continue to be uninterested. Scholars and organizations who continue to conduct surveys about students' attitudes towards free speech issues should keep this in mind when interpreting students' responses to survey items about whether or not they feel comfortable sharing their opinions in class discussions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, my findings point to the need to understand students' approaches to classroom speech developmentally. The way they understand knowledge and learning (cognitive development), their sense of self and their personal and social identities (intrapersonal development), and the way they navigate their relationships with others (interpersonal development) are all implicated in how they navigate the what, where, when, how, and to whom of speaking up in class. Importantly, understanding this as a developmental phenomenon helps us to realize that students are not static; they can change over time, developing more complex ways of understanding these issues. Julia (very liberal, sometimes) described her own development over time when discussing how she was more comfortable speaking up now than she had been in the past:

> Since coming to college, I definitely, especially with this last election, I'm just thinking politically now, I guess. I felt a lot more open to talk to people about what I believed and why because I had, I felt, done a lot more research. Probably not enough, but I had done as much as I could and I felt like I had formulated my opinion based on my experiences and the things that I believed. And so I was willing to share those things, but I wasn't afraid of what other people would think of me because of it, which maybe just comes with getting older, but I felt definitely more comfortable where I'm at now for sure.

Rather than defining students by their answers to a single or very small set of survey questions at a single point in time, we should strive to understand how students develop the capacity to engage in challenging, potentially high-stakes classroom discussions over time. Cross-sectional surveys can give us a glimpse of what students are thinking, but it is a very small piece of the puzzle. The existing body of research on the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development of college students can be of great use to those looking to promote more speech in the classroom and on campus more broadly.

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