Stop Offending Me!
Pornography, Free Speech, and Best Practices for Navigating Campus Controversies

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1. Why Care About Pornography?

Pornography is a lightning rod for cultural anxieties and a frequent flashpoint for campus controversies. Activists have called for professors who teach college courses on the history of pornography to be fired and their classes cancelled (Penley 2013). Invited lectures by adult performers have been scrapped after university administrators realized speakers would not hew to their anti-pornography politics or their visits were sensationalized after the fact to score political points (Comella 2015). Lawmakers in a handful of states have threatened to cut university funding when books they deem pornographic or films they object to are not banned from the curriculum (Wilson 2020). In Louisiana, a bill requiring public universities to prohibit internet access to content that is "pornographic, sexually explicit, or sexually harassing" has advanced out of committee and is currently awaiting a vote by the full Senate (Muller 2022). There is no shortage of sensationalistic headlines about professors teaching "deviant pornography" or allegedly promoting sexual acts in the classroom (Flaherty 2022; Strombler 2009). Time and again, moral panics around sex and pornography are used to silence campus speech that some people find inappropriate or offensive.

Professors who study and teach about pornography are on the frontlines of debates about academic freedom and campus free speech, serving as what one person describes as a "test case and an inspiration" for teaching material that some find challenging, others controversial, and yet still others, fundamentally obscene and unsuitable for the college classroom. As such, they offer critical insights into the politics of free speech and limits of academic freedom on college campuses at a time when higher education is increasingly under attack and new forms of censorship are being codified into law on what seems like an almost daily basis (Young and Friedman 2022). What, this study asks, can we learn from faculty who teach about sexuality and sex media, including pornography, and how might these lessons help strengthen campus free speech initiatives and conversations about academic freedom at a time when universities across the country are facing increased state surveillance and political scrutiny?

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This research examines sexual speech on college campuses, including, but not limited to pornography. Of particular interest is examining the ways that sex is "screened" on campus, both in terms of how it is shown or projected as a topic worthy of academic discussion and inquiry, but also how it is concealed and judged to be off limits by anxious administrators, angry parents, and politicized legislators. It is this dual meaning of "screening sex," and the institutional dynamics that contribute to how sexuality is both revealed and censored on campuses, that this study seeks to better understand.

This report draws on 24 in-depth interviews conducted by the author with faculty members and other campus stakeholders at colleges and universities across the United States in an effort to shed light on the following:

- How do faculty who teach courses related to sexuality and sex media navigate campus climate and free speech issues?
- How do concerns about offensive or inappropriate speech imperil free speech and academic freedom?
- What lessons do battles over sexual speech offer, and how can these lessons strengthen campus free speech policies and initiatives more broadly?

This research is informed, in part, by my own experiences over the past two decades teaching college courses that include discussions about the history, economic organization, and changing legal context of pornography. I first taught such a course in 2004 when I was a graduate student nearing completion of a Ph.D. in communication and media studies at a large research university in the Northeast. The class was titled "Public Sexual Culture" and pornography was a small part of a much larger discussion about the various ways that discourses and meanings about sexuality circulate publicly and with what kinds of effects. Two weeks into the class, the department chair emailed to let me know that the mother of a student had called the chancellor of the university, who had then called the provost, who had then contacted him with the complaint that her daughter was being "forced to watch pornography." He reassured me that he had my back but also asked if I could send him a copy of the syllabus, which I promptly did. Later that day he emailed again to let me know that he had spoken with the provost and assured him that no one was being "forced" to watch pornography or any other type of media. He told the provost that if the student was uncomfortable with the class, which was an elective and not required, there were other courses she could take that would fulfill the same requirement.

It was a formative experience and one that had a profound impact on how I think about the politics of sexuality in the college classroom. For one, it had never occurred to me that a parent would complain about a college course that their adult child had elected to take. But more than this, the class taught me a valuable lesson about *academic* freedom and my authority to teach relevant topics without restriction or interference by administrators or other campus stakeholders. There was a solid intellectual justification for the class within the discipline of media and cultural studies and my course syllabus and assignments reflected this. Moreover, my department chair, someone with far

more institutional power than I, had my back, unequivocally, and as a young scholar that mattered (Comella, 2015).

Not all faculty who teach difficult or controversial material—whether it is pornography or, increasingly, critical race theory and gender issues—fare as well as I have in terms of receiving strong institutional support. So, what accounts for these differences? What factors shape faculty experiences and the responses of administrators when a parent complains, community members express outrage, or lawmakers attempt to censor speech and outlaw ideas that threaten their worldview?

While this research study was inspired by a desire to learn more about the politics of sexual speech on college campuses—what can and cannot be said and shown in class and on campus—my findings offer insight into a range of issues regarding institutional power, academic labor, and the state of higher education today. These include: 1) the status of the porn studies scholar within academia; 2) the various forms of labor involved in teaching difficult and potentially controversial topics, including the emotional labor required to anticipate and manage student responses to challenging material; 3) the politics of trigger warnings and "safe spaces" in the context of #MeToo; 4) the lived reality and emotional toll of academic precarity; 5) and finally, the effects of institutional gatekeeping and censorship, including how faculty engage in practices of self-policing as a form of self-protection. This report focuses primarily on this final point.

There is a great deal at stake for students, faculty, and administrators in how battles over sexual speech and other controversial topics are addressed on college campuses. It is often the case, however, that there is no playbook of "best practices" for how faculty and other campus stakeholders navigate what can often be very intense moments of moral outrage, public backlash, and legislative overreach. Indeed, my research suggests that most universities are ill-prepared to offer robust defenses—or any defense at all—when faculty become the subject of a complaint, a coordinated media storm, or some other hullabaloo over campus speech. As one of my interviewees noted: "The stakes feel very, very serious"—and indeed they are. My hope is that this research can help identify basic, concrete steps that institutions can take to protect faculty and support the principles of free speech and academic freedom at a moment when these things are increasingly under attack.

In what follows, I provide a very brief overview of the history of pornography on college campuses and the emergence of the academic field of porn studies. Next, I discuss my interview sample, before turning my attention to a discussion of some of my key research findings. Finally, I end with some basic, pragmatic recommendations for what universities can do to strengthen campus free speech initiatives in tangible and, hopefully, meaningful ways.

2. Porn Goes to College

American colleges and universities have long been places where people have encountered pornography. Fraternity houses were popular venues for all-male viewing parties of stag films, those short, silent films featuring sexual acts that enjoyed underground popularity between the teens and the early 1970s before moving image pornography became quasi-legal (Williams 2005; Knight and Flanagan 2014). Similarly, it is not difficult to imagine the inaugural issue of *Playboy*, which appeared in December 1953 and featured Marilyn Monroe on the cover, passing between the hands of curious male college students. By the 1950s, explicit representations of sexuality were being enlisted in the service of scientific inquiry. During the years that Alfred Kinsey was conducting his groundbreaking research on human sexuality at Indiana University, he was also building what would become the Kinsey Institute's world-renowned collection of erotic art, photography, and film—much to the consternation of U.S. customs officials who, in 1950, seized a cache of pornographic materials Kinsey was attempting to illegally import, resulting in a federal trial that pitted academic freedom against "obscenity" (Gathorne-Hardy 1998; Yamashiro 1999).

By the start of the 1960s, ideas about sex, love, and relationships were undergoing a fundamental transformation (D'Emilio and Freedman 1997; Schaefer 2014). In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration approved the birth control pill. That same year the first Playboy Club opened in Chicago. Two years later, in 1962, Helen Gurley Brown published *Sex and the Single Girl*, an advice book encouraging women to become financially independent and not wait until marriage for sex. Propelled by changes in obscenity law in the 1950s and 1960s that dramatically changed what Americans could see and read, and fueled by a growing sexual consumer culture, sex was on public display in new ways, including on college campuses.

College campuses in the 1960s were breeding grounds for the counterculture. They were hotbeds for civil rights organizing and protests in opposition to the Vietnam War and incubators for a resurgent women's movement and gay liberation, both of which upended conventional understandings about gender and sexuality. Ideas of all kinds were hotly debated on campuses across the country, and this included the issue of pornography. Film scholars Arthur Knight and Kevin M. Flanagan contend that through university-sponsored film series and clubs, college campuses and their students played an important role in "bringing attention to film pornography outside America's big cities" (409). Under the guise of the "quasi-public/quasi-private, apparently noncommercial, pedagogical and 'protected' space of the college campus," both men and women were being invited to look at, and talk about, pornography (411).

Not everyone was pleased with the degree to which sexuality was increasingly visible and "on/scene." The concept of on/scenity refers to the process by which material that was once considered taboo and obscene is brought into public view. According to film scholar Linda Williams, who coined the term, on/scenity is "the gesture by which a culture brings on to the public scene the very organs, acts,

'bodies and pleasures' that have heretofore been designated ob—off—scene, that is, as needing to be kept out of view, locked up in what Walter Kendrick has named the Secret Museum" (1999: 282). On/scenity has long been a flashpoint for controversies surrounding new forms of sexual explicitness that challenge taken-for-granted boundaries between public and private, legal and illicit, prurient and ordinary, respectable and vulgar.

Colleges and universities have never been insulated from efforts to police the boundaries around sex and its public display. In 1969, for example, a riot broke out at the University of Notre Dame when police attempted to stop students from screening two experimental films that showed genitalia and sexual acts in supposed violation of local criminal ordinances. The film screenings were part of a "Pornography and Censorship Conference" organized by the Student Union Academic Commission. The clash between students and police was dramatic:

> [A]bout thirty sheriff's deputies, many in plainclothes, arrived on campus. Six made their way to the auditorium and, without identifying themselves or showing a warrant (which they did have), attempted to confiscate the films. Students surrounded the projectors and passively resisted, but the officers discovered Kathy Cecile attempting to smuggle the films out of the room under her dress, knocked her down, took the films, and left with the students in pursuit. Outside the students hit police with snowballs and attempted to block access to their cars. The deputies responded with mace, spraying about fifteen students, and took refuge in the Faculty Club, finally escaping out the back. In the aftermath, the Student Union Academic Commission voted 240-120 to cancel the remaining conference events (Knight and Flanagan: 418-419).

Controversies over pornography only intensified following the 1972 release of *Deep Throat*, which helped usher in the era of "porno chic" and marshal feminist opposition to pornography (see Bronstein and Strub 2016). Throughout the 1970s, feminists founded organizations to combat what they saw as the danger of violent and sexist media imagery in film, print, and advertising which, they argued, created a hostile environment for women. Over time, they narrowed the focus of their media activism to the issue of pornography (Bronstein 2011; 2015). In 1979, Women Against Pornography (WAP) was founded in New York City and the group's anti-pornography views quickly came to dominate the national conversation about pornography.

A key part of WAP's organizing efforts included an educational slideshow with images chosen to raise awareness about pornography's alleged harms. For a fee, WAP would present the show to community groups and college audiences, complete with a narrator who would analyze each slide—images of women in bondage and posed as sexual objects—to help make a case about the dangers of pornography. According to Carolyn Bronstein, in 1979 alone WAP "presented the show to 225 groups (4,500 people) at its Times Square storefront and to college audiences, women's groups, and civic, religious, and professional organizations up and down the East Coast" (2011: 216). The anti-pornography slideshow became a dominant fixture on college campuses in the 1980s (and into the 1990s), bolstered by its ability to create a space for "serious" feminist educators (Johnson 1997).

Stop Offending Me!
Pornography, Free Speech, and Best Practices for Navigating Campus Controversies

At the height of the feminist sex wars in the 1980s, universities were often sites for intensely acrimonious disagreements between feminists about the politics of pornography, lesbian BDSM, sexual fantasies, and more. These divisions reached a boiling point at the 1982 Barnard College Scholar and the Feminist Conference, "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," an event that organizers had hoped would elicit more nuanced feminist conversations about female sexuality, which at the time were dominated by a focus on sexual violence, danger, and harm. Feminism, the event's organizers argued, needed robust analyses that could speak "as powerfully in favor of sexual pleasure as it does against sexual danger" (Vance 1984: 3).

In the week leading up to the conference, controversy began to brew. Women claiming to be affiliated with local anti-pornography groups placed angry phone calls to Barnard College administrators denouncing the event and alleging that some of the invited speakers were "sexual deviants." Two days before the conference, college administrators caved to the pressure and confiscated copies of the conference's major text, *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality*. The *Diary* contained images, minutes from organizing meetings, personal reflections that documented the conference's planning, and descriptions of the scheduled workshops, including session times and room numbers. Conference organizers eventually learned that the decision to seize the *Diary* was made by the college's president, who, it was believed, was hoping to avoid a potential public relations headache. Instead, by censoring the conference she created an even bigger one (Comella 2008).

This very brief and highly condensed overview of some of the ways in which pornography appeared on college campuses throughout the twentieth century forms the backdrop for the eventual emergence of the academic field of porn studies. The 1989 publication of feminist film scholar Linda Williams's groundbreaking book, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* which examines the history of hardcore heterosexual pornography as a distinct film genre with its own conventions and representational practices, was instrumental in helping legitimize pornography as a topic worthy of serious academic inquiry. Several years later, in 1993, Constance Penley, a professor of film and media studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, taught the first college course in the United States on the history of pornography as a film genre and media industry—much to the chagrin of local anti-pornography activists and conservative religious leaders like Pat Robertson, who denounced her course in a 1994 special of the *700 Club* on "godlessness in public schools" (Penley 2013). The following year, in 1994, Williams integrated her research on pornography into her teaching by offering an upper-division undergraduate course on moving image pornographies at the University of California, Irvine, in what she described as "the heart of conservative Orange County" (Williams 2004:12).

Since then, the academic field of porn studies has grown exponentially, showing all the hallmark signs of disciplinary expansion and institutionalization. In 2014, for example, Routledge published the first issue of the international journal *Porn Studies*, the only academic journal devoted exclusively to research on pornography (Comella 2013). That same year, the Society for Cinema and Media Studies formalized the Adult Film History Scholarly Interest Group, the only professional organization of its

kind. Acquisition editors at university presses are actively soliciting manuscripts and handbooks on the history of adult film, and academic journals are publishing special issues devoted to pornography's history and uses. In recent years university archives, such as Cornell's Human Sexuality Collection and Harvard's Schlesinger Library, have dedicated significant resources to building their research collections on adult film history, with particular attention to acquiring materials related to the history of feminist and lesbian pornography. Colleagues are reporting that more students than ever are applying to graduate programs in film and media studies with the expressed interest in writing their dissertations on pornography, sex work, and kink cultures.

Up-and-coming adult film historians are taking their cues about how to navigate the academic study of pornography from the pioneers who helped establish the field. They are also drawing upon a growing corpus of published work on the politics and pedagogy of teaching porn, mining them for insights about how to strategically position themselves within the academy (see Kleinhans 1996; Jenkins 2004; McNair 2009; Penley 2013; Noble 2014; Marks 2014; Comella 2015; Tarrant 2015; Alilunas et al. 2021). As one of my interviewees noted:

> I think this whole generation of scholars that's out here right now was raised on following the lead of some of our real elders, who did think very carefully about these questions. I still annually go back and reread Constance [Penley] and Linda Williams talking about pedagogy, because it is like the Bible to me. Religious people reread the Bible over and over again; I reread these elders all the time because they have so much to say about how to approach the classroom and how to approach your syllabus, and I think I'm not alone.

The growing interest in the academic study of pornography means that more universities are hiring faculty with expertise in sexual cultures and adult film history, and those faculty are, in turn, bringing discussions about the history of pornography into their courses. On some campuses, such as the University of California, Santa Barbara, these classes are an established part of the university curriculum and have been for years; they are also, importantly, a source of pride for administrators because of the bold statement such courses make about the university's commitment to academic freedom. On other campuses, however, the topic of pornography, and sexuality more broadly, continues to be a cause for faculty anxiety and parent complaints, offering a case study for examining contemporary fault lines in the new education culture wars and the limits of free speech and academic freedom on college campuses.

3. Interviewing Professors Who Teach Sex Media

This report is based on 24 in-depth interviews conducted by the author in Spring 2022 with faculty and college personnel at universities in 17 different U.S. states. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with permission. Interviews lasted between 50-120 minutes, and were subsequently transcribed, coded, and stripped of all personal identifying information so that interviewees could speak freely without fear of institutional reprisals or professional repercussions. No one from my home institution, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, was included in this research. (See Appendix A for Interview Guide.)

Recruitment emails were sent to a diverse group of 39 professors and university administrators, most of whom are established sexuality scholars and adult film historians working at universities in the United States. Of that group, 15 people either did not reply to the recruitment email or expressed interest in participating but did not follow through with scheduling an interview. Of the 24 interviews conducted to date, eight interviewees were male and 16 were female. Ten individuals self-identified as being part of the LGBTQ community. Despite sending emails to a racially and ethnically diverse pool of potential interview subjects, all but two interviewees in the current sample are white, a research limitation I hope to address in future interviews. The ways in which gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other identity markers intersect to produce overlapping systems of privilege and disadvantage greatly impact faculty opportunities and institutional experiences and that is certainly the case in this study, too.

My interview sample includes tenured faculty at the rank of associate and full professor (N=15), assistant professors who are currently on the tenure track (N=2), and full-time, non-tenure track faculty (N=6) on renewable contracts that in some cases come with opportunities for promotion from lecturer to teaching assistant professor to teaching associate professor and so on. One interview was conducted with a former student affairs administrator who helped organize a university "Sex Week." In several cases, interviewees were also serving as, or had previously been, a department chair or program director with administrative and supervisory responsibilities. The disappearance of tenure track jobs is represented in the data, and is a trend that adversely impacts not only job security and morale, but academic freedom. Precarity, in other words, does not foster risk-taking or instill confidence that teaching challenging material of any kind comes with institutional protections, a point I return to in the following section. As one contingent faculty member told me: "It's always in the back of my head that I'm going to get fired at some point."

Interviewees work at a mix of large public research universities (N=17), private research universities (N=5) and religiously affiliated universities (N=2) located in every region of the country. This includes blue states in the Northeast and red states in the deep South, universities on the West Coast with politically progressive reputations and more conservative-leaning ones in the heart of the Midwest. Some interviewees teach at racially and ethnically diverse universities with strong faculty unions,

while others work on campuses where the study body is predominantly white and wealthy, and where parents regularly call to complain if their child does not receive the grade they feel they deserve.

Some of my interviewees have taught at the same university for decades, while others have been at their current institutions for less than a year. They are housed primarily in departments of Media and Film Studies, Cinema Studies, Communication Studies, English, History, Sociology, and Women's and Gender Studies. In some instances, they also hold academic affiliations with LGBT Studies, American Studies, and Art History. Many, although not all, identified as porn studies scholars who have conducted research and published on the topic. All but two regularly teach courses that discuss sexuality, sex media, and/or the history and politics of sexual representation, including pornography. They teach courses with titles that include but are not limited to: Media and Sexuality; Sexualities and Screens; Screening Sex in America; Feminisms and Sexuality; Censorship and Cinema; Queer Cinema; Exploitation Cinema; Censorship and Pornography; Gender, Sexuality and Media; Sexual Identities and the Media; Gender and Popular Culture; Feminism and Pornography; and Porn Studies.

Six of my interviewees currently teach, or have previously taught, stand-alone courses on the history, culture, economics, aesthetics, and industrial organization of pornography. Another was in the process of preparing to teach such a course for the very first time. The topics such a class might consider vary depending on one's disciplinary background and training, but a class on pornography might ask students to consider the following: How have the styles, strategies, and content of pornography changed over the years? What have been porn's modes of production and consumption? What have been the venues and audiences for porn's reception? What is porn's relationship to changing technologies? How has the legal climate in any given era shaped pornography? How has the internet changed pornography and the conditions under which performers labor? What, moreover, can the history of pornography teach us about sex, gender, and power (see Church 2021, Oeming 2021)?

Several interviewees indicated that they hope to offer a stand-alone course on pornography in the future, but have not yet figured out how to allay the concerns of nervous administrators and anxious colleagues who worry about potential blowback from parents and donors, a discussion I expand upon in the next section.

Despite these challenges, nearly everyone I spoke with found ways to incorporate discussions of pornography and sex media into the courses they teach. This might include, for example, talking about the history of the feminist sex wars and debates about pornography in a gender studies course or finding ways to "pepper it in" to an undergraduate media studies course by discussing the changing legal definitions of obscenity. Several interviewees include a one- or two-week "porn module" in their introduction to film and media courses or sociology of sexualities class. According to one professor: "I actually insist on including hardcore pornography [in the undergraduate survey course] because pornography is part of the history of cinema…my argument in the class is that hardcore is the most important thing to happen in the last 50 years of American cinema."

Stop Offending Me!
Pornography, Free Speech, and Best Practices for Navigating Campus Controversies

Of the 24 people I have interviewed thus far, five of them, all of whom are women, reported being the subject of targeted harassment due to a course they taught, an article they wrote, or a social media post that prompted backlash. In three instances, this harassment included rape and death threats by individuals fueled by right-wing media personalities and outlets. In one instance, a professor enlisted campus security to stand outside her classroom to ensure not only her safety, but the safety of her students. These incidents were extremely traumatizing to those on the receiving end, but especially so for non-tenure track and not-yet-tenured faculty who lack institutional power and protections and, in some cases, did not receive adequate support from supervisors who might have helped shield them from harassment, including from abusive students. None of the men in my interview sample reported similar stories of targeted harassment. Indeed, the risks that come with teaching difficult or controversial material, or speaking publicly about certain topics, are highly gendered, extremely racialized, and unevenly distributed.

As a whole, this data set offers valuable insights into how faculty evaluate the risk/reward equation as they make calculated decisions about whether or not, and if so how, to teach potentially charged and challenging material in extremely varied institutional and political contexts that are often fraught and not always supportive. It is to this discussion that I now turn.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 "Never exceptionalize porn."

Universities are comprised of interconnected webs of decision-makers, powerbrokers, stakeholders, and gatekeepers. Some of these institutional players, and the power they wield, are more obvious than others. These include members of tenure and promotion committees, department chairs, deans, provosts, presidents, chancellors, wealthy donors, and state legislators. Other institutional stakeholders and gatekeepers are perhaps easier to overlook until they assert their presence by creating an unexpected barrier. These may include, but are not limited to, media affairs and public relations personnel who refuse to publicize the publications and awards of porn studies scholars for fear of upsetting donors; university committees tasked with reviewing course proposals or programming requests who reject porn-themed proposals outright or subject them to additional scrutiny; library staff who refuse to process requests for books and films that they consider inappropriate or offensive; and administrative staff who oversee university calendars who will not list lectures or events with titles that include certain words like "kink" or "porn" out of fear of inviting public scrutiny or backlash.

The faculty I spoke with are acutely aware that talking about sexuality in the college classroom, including but not limited to pornography, can be a potential minefield that comes with professional risks. Sex is a highly charged topic and, as one of my interviewees put it, it has a "different affective register" with the potential to generate more intense reactions from students compared to a subject like math, for example. As anthropologist Gayle Rubin notes, sex is imbued with "an excess of significance" that for many people marks it as a "special case" requiring special treatment, exceptional consideration, and extraordinary vigilance to protect people from its presumed dangers and harms (2011).

It this idea, that sex is a "special case," and that it should therefore be treated with special consideration, that contributes to universities being overwhelmingly risk-averse when it comes to approving courses or programming with sexual content.

Porn studies scholars expend a great deal of time and intellectual labor combatting the idea that pornography is a "special case" or a "strange little novelty," as one person put it, opting to treat it instead as they would any other film genre or media industry As one of my interviewees explained: "Once we start exceptionalizing [porn], then it is no longer on the spectrum of film and popular culture; it is no longer on the spectrum of all other genres and media industries. *It is beyond the pale*." Despite these efforts, many faculty find themselves navigating institutional contexts in which the people around them approach the topic of pornography with extreme caution and even suspicion,

judging it to be outside the scope of what is suitable for discussing in an academic setting. Thus, porn studies scholars are faced with a catch-22: they are attempting to normalize the academic study of pornography at institutions in which many of those around them continue to exceptionalize porn or treat it—and by extension them—as academic curiosities.

One tenured female professor, for example, recounted an occasion in which a male colleague showed up at a conference she was attending with her new book on the pornography industry tucked under his arm, giggling. The interaction still makes her bristle. "This is a serious book about the industry," she explained, "and he took it as…titillating. Rather than showing up like he might for a male colleague to say, 'Amazing. Congratulations. That is a premier press you published with,' it was instead giggles and a kind of prurience."

Interviewees work hard to resist efforts on the part of students and colleagues to pigeonhole them as an academic novelty, trivialize them as a "curious other," or worse, sexualize them. They pay careful attention to the outfits they wear on days they are lecturing about porn and how they comport themselves professionally at meetings and academic conferences. This is particularly true for women, some of whom reported feeling the need to be especially "buttoned up" in an effort to be taken seriously as scholars.

Faculty who teach about and study pornography spend a considerable amount of time and energy educating various campus stakeholders about the field of porn studies in an effort to make what they do legible to others. As one person explained: "I have done a *lot* of work [at my university] to establish porn studies as a serious area of research both in the classroom and with my colleagues." The work of professionalizing porn studies matters not only because interviewees want their students and colleagues to take the field seriously, but they also want to be taken seriously. This kind of labor—the work of establishing oneself as serious, thoughtful scholar and pedagogue—is, for many people, a seemingly inescapable but necessary part of studying and teaching pornography. It is also a form of self-protection that helps to bolster their academic bona fides in the event that anyone should ever question those or attempt to undermine them.

4.2 "We're kinda nervous about what you do."

Department chairs and academic coordinators often want the "street cred" —and the enrollment numbers—that come with having a faculty member who is teaching "sexy" or provocative courses or researching a topic that is considered transgressive; and yet these same administrators often become skittish about what a course on pornography might actually entail once they have okayed it. One of my interviewees, for example, briefly taught at a private research university right out of graduate school. He was asked to provide the chair of his department with a list of film courses he might teach. The chair chose the one with the sexy title, "Adults Only," only to then become "cagey" about what kinds of

films the class might include. The chair attempted to micromanage the course content, saying: "Oh, if you are going to show *I am Curious (Yellow)*, we need to talk to the Dean, because we don't want to get the trustees upset." The instructor was having none of it and replied: "Well the Supreme Court said that [this film] was not obscene and that's nothing compared to the hardcore I'm going to show." Fifteen years later, and now a tenured professor at another university, he told me that this was the only time in his career that someone had tried to manage his academic freedom and they did so under the guise of "mentorship"—e.g., "We don't have a problem with the class, but we have to think of the trustees and donors."

It is not unusual for faculty who teach courses that include sexual media to find themselves tasked with deciphering the fundamentally contradictory messages they get from their department chairs and colleagues. In several cases, interviewees were hired for tenure track jobs specifically because of their expertise in sexual cultures and adult media. When they arrived on campus, however, some of the very same people who were part of their hiring process or who attended their job talks were suddenly nervous about the kinds of content that might find its way into their classes. In a few cases, people did not even wait until a job interview was over to express their nervousness to the candidate. One person, whose job talk included a discussion of their research on pornographic filmmakers, shared that afterward a dean approached her and said: "Your work sounds great…but please don't have any undergraduates work on your project."

The person got the job, but has decided to not include any discussions about pornography in any of their media and film courses, despite having successfully incorporated porn modules into their classes at previous institutions. The dean's comment—*and he was not even her dean*—had a chilling effect. Even with support from her departmental colleagues, who have assured her that the remark was inappropriate, the dean's comment, in her words, "freaked" her out and remains parked in her frontal lobe like a blinking caution sign screaming "enter at your own risk." "All it would take," she told me, "is one student telling their parents, especially if they are a rich kid, 'My teacher showed us porn,' and I could have a hard time when it comes to tenure. That could throw up a red flag that I would otherwise not have to deal with."

Another person shared a similar story about a few faculty members that expressed some concern about his research during his job interview: "We are kind of nervous about what you do. Can you talk to us about how you might teach this to undergraduates in a way that might not inflame parents? How would you do that?" These conversations continued after he got to campus, and he eventually decided it was in his best interest to just "lay low" and wait until he got tenure before resuming any discussions about adding courses about pornography to his teaching roster.

When I asked him what, exactly, his colleagues were worried about, he told me that one thing that made them nervous involved the physical design of the classroom where he taught his classes. The wall of the room was made entirely of glass, like some kind of "gerbil cage," he said, and his

colleagues were concerned that he might screen images that anyone walking by could see without any forewarning or consent. This example shows that institutional concerns about teaching pornography are not always moral or ideological, but are sometimes much more practical.

4.3 Flying under the radar

Interviewees regularly take the pulse of their students, colleagues, and other campus stakeholders and are deeply thoughtful, and very strategic, about how they navigate their classrooms and their institutions more broadly. This requires ongoing vigilance, and at times, a hyper-vigilance; it also requires a great deal of intellectual, pedagogical, and emotional labor. Faculty, such as the ones quoted previously, are constantly assessing the *risk/reward equation* to ensure that they are making the smartest and best decisions they can about any number of things that could potentially land them, or their departments, in hot water or jeopardize their chance at tenure or having their teaching contracts renewed. This includes everything from what titles to give their courses to what readings to include on the syllabus to whether or not to show moving image pornography in classes in which pornography is discussed.

A faculty member in a gender studies department recounted a discussion she had with her chair about what to call an independent study she was conducting with a graduate student. She initially wanted to call it "Feminism and BDSM," but in the end gave it a more generic title: "Feminist Perspectives on Sexuality." In the state in which she works, every course, at every public university, is reviewed by the state governing body for higher education and becomes part of the public record. The consensus was, according to her, "let's not draw attention to this and court, unnecessarily, potentially negative press about what is happening at this state school." Given the history of marginalization and lack of funding for women's and gender studies departments, and the ease with which these programs can be threatened with elimination, avoiding certain words, such as "BDSM" or "kink," in the hope of "flying under the radar" publicly while still teaching the course one wants to teach privately, is a pedagogical strategy that, in the current political climate, makes a great deal of sense.

4.4 Angry Parents and Twitter Crusades

At the end of the day, even the most conscientious professor cannot predict in advance the kinds of words, readings, or images that might shock or offend a student or prompt a complaint from a disgruntled parent, administrator, or legislator. A particularly striking example of this involves a faculty member at a research university who showed the film *Flashdance* in a course on 1980s cinema. A parent complained, essentially alleging that the professor was showing students pornography. "Oh my God," the professor recounted thinking at the time. "Is this the movie I go down for? Am I going to become notorious for *Flashdance*?"

If *Flashdance*, a mainstream, R-rated movie, can generate a complaint from a parent that a professor is teaching "pornography," you can imagine the calculus involved for faculty members as they consider whether or not to show actual pornography in a relevant film, media, or gender studies course. In a climate in which students are being encouraged by conservative organizations to play "gotcha" by video recording their professors and posting these videos online, and when disgruntled students are taking their complaints about professors straight to the media, as one interviewee experienced firsthand, faculty are more cautious than ever about what topics they teach, what readings they assign, and what films they screen. Some are opting to avoid hot-button issues altogether, such as abortion, while others report that they have stopped teaching certain films or novels because they can no longer accurately gauge student responses. Faculty are slowly whittling away at their syllabi, removing content that just a few years ago they were teaching without issue or pushback from students. This is especially the case, it seems, with books and films long considered to be part of the queer studies canon. A number of professors discussed occasions in which LGBT-themed books and films "just kind of blew up" on them. One professor, for example, is no longer teaching the gay coming-of-age novel *Call Me By Your Name*. According to him, students are so troubled by the age difference between the two male protagonists (in the novel one is 17 and the other 24) that there is no room for formal textual analysis or a discussion about any other part of the book.

More than one interviewee felt that even the more progressive students were becoming more conservative when it came to their willingness to engage with sexual media or sexuality in general. Rather than embracing sexual transgression and freedom as liberation, as they once did, some faculty are witnessing what feels like a generational shift on the part of their students to a more protectionist ethos, in which they expect to be shielded from anything they perceive as harmful, triggering, or traumatic. It is thus increasingly difficult for professors to assess student expectations and adequately manage their affective responses. One professor who regularly teaches a class on the sociology of sexuality told me that she once had a teaching assistant who reported that every time the professor used the word "penis" in class to talk about the human sexual body they were triggered. Some professors acknowledge that while their capacity for empathy has increased over the years, so too, has their sense of self-inhibition. In some cases, this has contributed to them moving away from teaching courses that involve sex media altogether, because the classes have become too fraught, too frustrating, or simply too exhausting to navigate. After we talked, one interviewee sent me a follow-up email in which he shared the following about his porn studies class:

> The other thing I forgot to mention is the fact that I'm not sure if I am up to teaching the course again anytime soon because of the immense and intense emotional labor involved. I'm somewhat of an empath, and the discomfort felt by a plurality of students at various points in the course, as well as my work with them to assuage some of their doubt and anxiety, can really take it out of me by the end of the semester.

Increasingly, faculty are expected to be "a teacher, but also a counselor, but also a friend, but not too much of a friend," one interviewee explained. For many, it is simply too much.

Faculty are thus spending a great deal of pedagogical and emotional labor preempting backlash and managing student anxiety. They are also putting in place mechanisms to insulate themselves against controversy. One way they protect themselves is to make sure that they design airtight syllabi with clearly stated learning outcomes and, in some cases, that they are presenting opportunities for students to "opt out" of assignments and film screenings that might make them uncomfortable. They also have at their ready sound intellectual justifications and pedagogical rationales for any and all decisions they are making about what and how they teach. Not only is this good pedagogy, but it also, again, serves as a form of protection should anyone accuse them of pedagogical malpractice. As one interviewee noted: "When I design a course, and just in general, I am never provocative for the sake of being provocative. I am never pushing buttons to simply push buttons. There is always a pedagogical philosophy behind it."

Even with these safeguards in place, there is no guarantee that a professor will not end up in the crosshairs of an angry student, parent, or lawmaker. This is exactly what happened to one of my interviewees after a student's parent went on a "twitter crusade" against her for teaching a course on sex work and pornography. The class had its own distinct twitter hashtag, so students could connect with each other online outside of class meetings and share relevant articles and ideas. Although it remains unclear exactly how it happened, a parent with a student at the university—*who was not even enrolled in the course*—found the hashtag and hijacked it, tweeting at the university president, and claiming that the course was "indoctrinating kids" into sex work and pornography. The parent did not stop there. They called the university, repeatedly, and accused the professor of essentially initiating a "pro-pimping" social media campaign. The professor was terrified that the parent's angry twitter posts could spiral and place her at the center of a national news story. She was also worried that she could lose her job. Although the professor ultimately had the support of the university, which had reviewed and approved the course syllabus in advance, the experience had a paralyzing effect. With just one week left of the class, the professor stopped using twitter, stifled her point of view, and lessened her presence in the classroom. "I just wanted it to be over," she confessed. "It was awful…it was crippling to my teaching, and I really didn't feel I had anyone to reach out to."

4.5 "If you don't have tenure, what does academic freedom really mean?"

Situations like the one described above are even more terrifying for faculty who do not have the institutional protections that come with tenure. How individual faculty members evaluate the risk/reward equation is necessarily bound up with labor relations and one's status, and relative power, within the university. Indeed, it is not possible to discuss campus free speech issues and the politics of academic freedom without accounting for this. For someone who is precariously employed on a year-to-year contract, or even a multi-year contract, talking about their research on pornography to the student newspaper, for example, might be a risk they are not willing to take, because it could become a flashpoint for larger blowback. Precariously employed faculty described intentionally

staying out of the limelight, which might mean turning down public speaking engagements or invited lectures. There is a relative safety, then, that comes from staying in the shadows. Although these kinds of strategic decisions are completely understandable, they also demonstrate the degree to which academic freedom remains an elusive concept for many precariously employed faculty. As one of my interviewee's noted: "*If you don't have tenure, what does academic freedom really mean?*"

Many contingent faculty I spoke with operate from a "cover your ass mentality," making decisions that are deeply connected to their specific locations within the university. At the same time, some noted that if they were a tenured professor, they would be teaching their classes in a very different way because, as one person put it, "I would not feel I had the various straightjackets on me."

Academic precarity or one's status pre-tenure does not always produce risk-averse faculty, however. One interviewee, recounting his experience as a post-doctoral fellow, felt that because he did not have the disciplinary structure of tenure to worry about early in his teaching career, he could, in his words, "do whatever I wanted as far as I was concerned." He felt he had the freedom to teach what he wanted, how he wanted, without being constrained—even when those around him tried to police him. Not everyone I talked to, however, felt this emboldened.

Several interviewees, for example, became more inhibited, not less, once they landed a tenure-track job, especially when it came to discussing pornography in the college classroom. They no longer felt as comfortable as they once had, as a visiting professor or lecturer, teaching potentially charged or controversial material. Some of this was due to being at a new university with more conservative-leaning students, but it also had to do with not wanting to "screw up" their trajectory toward tenure and the job security that comes with it. "Frankly," one person told me, "as an untenured person, [teaching porn] just felt like a little more of a minefield to walk." For others, residual trauma borne out of years of precarious employment, and the stress of spending multiple years on the academic job market, has made them extremely wary of doing anything that could jeopardize a smooth path toward tenure. They simply do not have the bandwidth, or the desire, to test the waters. Thus, rather than encouraging risk taking, the structure of the tenure track, and its gilded promise of job security and institutional protection, creates an environment in which many people opt to play it safe and not rock the boat.

4.6 Institutional Gatekeeping or Dancing with Donors

Universities, as I have already mentioned, are made up of various gatekeepers who control access to university resources and opportunities. This includes everything from deciding who gets hired to the allocation of research funds to programming support and more. According to several interviewees, some of the most powerful institutional gatekeepers are the individuals working in the offices of media affairs, public relations, and university communications—units whose job it is

to bring greater visibility and recognition to the university, including publicizing faculty research and accomplishments.

More than any other campus entity, faculty expressed the most frustration about the tendency on the part of their university's media and public relations staff to not publicize, or to completely ignore, their books, research awards, and other notable accomplishments, failing to give them the same kind of attention other faculty receive. One of my interviewees recounted his experience dealing with his college's media affairs office when his first book on adult film history was published:

> Anytime somebody would put a book out, [the college] would initiate the publicity machine and I just assumed that when my book came out that would happen, and it really didn't. I remember going to meet with the publicity people and being like, 'Hey, what's going on here?' And they were so nervous to talk to me. I was friends with one of them and privately, over a drink or something, I was like, 'Look, just stop playing games and level with me,' and they were like, 'Yeah, we're very anxious about donors, so we are just being cautious about how we navigate your book.'

Another time, he was invited to do an interview with university communications staff about his research, which was supposed to run on the university's homepage. He did the interview, and it never ran. "That was maybe peak frustration for me," he said, because someone consciously made the decision to not publish the interview. These two events made it pretty clear to him, pretty quickly, that, as he put it, "*my stuff was a little bit radioactive*."

Others expressed similar frustration about trying to work with media relations staff only for them to be cagey, dismissive, or worse, non-responsive. One interviewee told me that he emailed the university's public relations office to let them know he was a featured expert in a documentary on sex work, thinking they would readily publicize the news. Instead, they never replied to his email. "I mean, it was very clearly like, 'This is not going to be something we celebrate,'" he told me.

Another faculty member who teaches at a large research university, and who has won multiple research awards, had similar stories to tell about dealing with media relations people:

> I don't know why I have a pet peeve about this, but the university newsletter. It's always some kind of stock photography with a DNA cell and it's like, 'Our award-winning scientists made a breakthrough on DNA or nanotechnology.' It's really safe stuff; and whenever I send them an update like, 'I'm starring in [a documentary] on Netflix about the history of [some sexual subject], can you please put that in the newsletter?' they were like….[silence]. Even when I got my [prestigious award], they were like, 'We'll put it on the website but we're not going to post it in the newsletter'…they want to bury it…and they will literally tell me, 'We're not going to announce this because our donors read that and the wider public reads that.' They've just decided to keep me away from donors.

In fact, the week before our interview took place was the first time in almost two decades at her university that she was able to attend a donor dinner. "They weren't terrorized by me," she said. "They weren't shocked and grossed out by what I do. They were asking questions. Like, give people some credit that they can have a thought that's not vanilla just because they are a donor."

These interactions, with both media relations personnel and university donors, matter because they are part of a larger *free speech ecosystem* in which highly accomplished sexuality scholars are essentially being kept in a corner or locked in the basement out of view from donors and the wider public. Media relations personnel are operating under the assumption, one seemingly driven by their own unease rather than any empirical data, that university donors and the wider community will react negatively to research on pornography, which in turn will impact the willingness of donors to open their wallets. This kind of institutional gatekeeping and marginalization seems to be the rule, not the exception, and it greatly affects how faculty make sense of their institutional standing and the inherent value of their research and teaching.

4.7 "You can't say that!"

The strategic calculations on the part of faculty about what to teach and how to teach it, and their ability to successfully fly under the radar and not draw attention to themselves, are often enough to preempt efforts by students, department chairs, and university administrators to police or censor sexual content or speech. This is not always the case, however.

In recent years, "Sex Weeks," campus events featuring panels and speakers on topics such as sexual education, intimacy, consent, kink culture, sex toys, feminist pornography and more, have grown in popularity on college campuses, prompting, in some cases, close administrative surveillance and backlash from state lawmakers (Kingkade 2014; Gonzales and Kast 2019). At one university, event organizers were told they needed to remove the words "kink" and "polyamory" from the titles of two workshops, or the events could not take place under the auspices of student affairs. The administrator tasked with overseeing the office was concerned that conservative groups that trawl the internet looking for specific keywords, such as "Sex Week," might target the campus, resulting in negative media attention or worse. In the end, students held the workshops, with the original titles in place, but the events were not funded with money from student affairs and did not take place under the official offerings of "Sex Week" programming.

At some universities, certain words—kink, polyamory, BDSM, porn, sex toys—catch the attention of institutional gatekeepers, including staff who oversee event listings in the university calendar. One interviewee invited a documentary filmmaker to campus for a screening and discussion, and was told by the person who manages the university's calendar that while they personally supported the event, they could not print the title of the film because it included the word "whore." The official

calendar event listed named the filmmaker but not the film, forcing the faculty member to do extra promotional work to ensure the event's success.

In another case, the same professor invited a colleague to campus to give a talk on "Porn Literacy" and was told by a staff person connected with student affairs that if he used that title, the event likely would not be funded. The word "porn" risked drawing unwanted attention, including from the campus entities responsible for approving the funding request. The event was subsequently promoted as "Free Speech and Accountability," a title so generic that the lecture could have been about anything. As my interviewee noted: "So, you're censoring us with the words 'free speech'? How Orwellian."

Cumulatively, this kind of institutional gatekeeping and censorship at the level of specific *words* has a chilling effect that contributes to a culture of anxiety and tentativeness among faculty who begin to think, "Well, clearly I could never teach a course called 'Porn Studies' here." Figuring out how to navigate an institution's culture and politics can take years; and the current political climate, in which faculty across the country are facing new kinds of surveillance and restrictions about what they can and cannot teach, is only deepening the concern and paranoia that many faculty are experiencing. In some states, Big Brother is watching you, reading your syllabus, and telling you what words you can use and what ideas you can teach. Increasingly, the default for faculty is to imagine they are being recorded by students because they just might be. In response, some professors have started recording their own lectures, so they have a record of what they say in class in the event someone—a student, parent, or lawmaker—accuses them of some kind of pedagogical impropriety or an indecent speech act. Others are pulling back from social media altogether because it feels too risky and too stressful in the current backlash climate. What if someone targets you based on a tweet that mentions the word "porn" or "sex work"? Staying off of social media also means that faculty miss out on professional news and opportunities, including calls for papers, publishing and collaborative opportunities, and details about upcoming lectures and events.

5. Recommendations: Back to Basics

Faculty are navigating a dizzying array of competing interests: student demands, colleague concerns, administrator anxieties, institutional gatekeeping, and, increasingly, legislative actions that are accelerating the erosion of academic freedom and, in some places, tenure. All of this is intensified by the fact that universities are operating more and more like corporations, with a focus on the bottom line and new forms of managerialism, metrics, and surveillance (Vasquez and Levin 2018). In the neoliberal university, students are customers and faculty are entrepreneurial workers with a shrinking sphere of power and influence. Complicating matters is the almost total vacuum of meaningful dialogue and discussion about academic freedom and free speech, leaving a void that is being filled by overzealous lawmakers and ever more risk-averse administrators.

Faculty across the country are paying close attention to the education culture wars and quietly steeling themselves for what might be coming. As someone I spoke with put it: "It feels like it is coming toward me, even though it hasn't gotten here yet." At the same time, they are left to wonder what kind of institutional support, if any, they can expect to receive if their research or teaching were to come under scrutiny or attack. According to one tenured faculty person: "I would fully expect to be hung out to dry, supported by my close, collegial friends, but not necessarily by the administration or the system, which, frankly, doesn't have any plans in place to support faculty if and when this kind of thing happens."

The situation facing academic faculty on many college campuses is not good, especially for professors who are teaching challenging or controversial material that includes a focus on sexuality, race, and gender issues. My research shows that faculty are overburdened, underpaid, and pulled in multiple directions, often with very little institutional support or opportunity to even discuss the issues that are most directly affecting them. Anxiety and fear is, on many college campuses, the new normal. Indeed, many faculty I spoke with told me that our interview was the first time they had ever discussed the challenges of navigating institutional contexts that are not always supportive and sometimes downright hostile. Faculty want opportunities to talk about these issues, both informally and formally, but these conversations are just not happening. That more than one person ended the interview by telling me it felt "like a therapy session" is not incidental but an important data point.

There are, however, some basic, concrete steps that universities can take to safeguard academic freedom, strengthen their campus free speech ecosystems, and support faculty who are facing new kinds of threats and surveillance. Faculty want, among other things, more opportunities for conversation, greater support, and smart action plans. They want their institutions to be proactive rather than reactive; and when campus controversies do occur—because they will—they want to know that administrators up the ladder will have their backs and issue bold defenses of academic freedom rather than milquetoast and generic boilerplate statements that accomplish very little and satisfy few. The work of strengthening institutional cultures must be both top down as well as bottom up,

involving both faculty and administrators. These need not be costly endeavors, although if universities want to create stand-alone offices, with funded positions and designated staff who conduct trainings and workshops on issues related to academic freedom and campus free speech, a kind of "academic freedom ombuds," they most certainly should.

5.1 Action Items

- **Normalize conversations about free speech and academic freedom**. Robust conversations about campus free speech and the principles of academic freedom should be happening at all levels of the university *before a crisis presents itself*. My research indicates, however, that these conversations are not happening in any sustained, formal, and meaningful way on most campuses. When they do take place, it is often among a small group of people whose scholarship and teaching focus on sexuality, race, and gender, and who are anxiously watching what is happening in statehouses and on college campuses across the country. Faculty are concerned not only about their research and teaching, but their safety. What if they get doxxed and their home address is made public? What if they get death threats or an angry extremist shows up at their classroom? What is the university's action plan and how will they be protected? In the few instances that interviewees reported conversations happening on their campuses, it is often in response to a specific incident of racism or hate speech or a controversy involving a colleague that prompted faculty to organize. At the most basic level, conversations about free speech and academic freedom should be happening across academic departments and colleges; but there should also be opportunities for faculty to take part in more focused educational workshops and trainings. Campus offices of Faculty Affairs, for example, are well positioned to offer trainings and workshops that address academic freedom and campus free speech issues, including educating faculty and administrators about the difference between the two. As one of my interviewees noted: "I can't even tell you how mind-boggling it is that we are not having these conversations."
- **Faculty need resources, support, and also education**. Universities need to develop resources for faculty and administrators around these issues. This might include, for example, sponsored workshops that give campus stakeholders the opportunity to discuss specific campus controversies that have generated national media attention and decide whether or not a university's response was aligned with the principles of academic freedom and, if not, how the situation might have been handled differently. Other training exercises might include hypothetical scenarios in which a student, parent, or community member complains about a course or campus event. How would a faculty member or administrator respond and what do they consider to be "best practices"? Should a faculty member come under fire themselves, what kind of support would they hope to get from their department chairs, deans, and other campus leaders? Many universities require faculty to complete mandatory online workshops on Cyber Security, Title IX, and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy

Act (FERPA). They should also consider instituting required training modules on academic freedom and free speech. These kinds of trainings and workshops allow faculty to "buy in" to the principles of academic freedom and free speech. They also create an informed and knowledgable campus community that is better equipped to respond when a situation goes pear shaped.

- **Strengthening institutional cultures must be a top-down and bottom-up process**. Faculty cannot do it alone. As one of my interviewees noted: "When the president of the university or the dean of the college says, 'We are sponsoring this program, this lecture, this series on First Amendment Faculty Rights,' it sends an ***agenda-setting message*** that we, as an institution, value this and take this seriously."
- **Administrators need to be proactive rather than reactive**. Part of the job of being a department chair, college dean, or university president is to support faculty, which also means vigorously supporting academic freedom. My research indicates that what college administrators say and do, or not, when it comes to academic freedom matters greatly, because it sends a message and sets a tone for the entire campus community. One very easy thing for department chairs, college deans, and university presidents and chancellors to do is to reaffirm their fundamental commitment to campus free speech and academic freedom, which may include issuing a robust statement to this effect, circulating the university's most up-to-date statement regarding academic freedom, and initiating conversations and programming around these issues. *Do not wait for a campus crisis or national media storm to do this.*
- **Be brave.** This may seem obvious, but it needs to be explicitly stated. Faculty need to know that campus leaders will have their backs in the face of increasingly politicized attacks on campus free speech and academic freedom. My research suggests that the default for many college administrators is to retreat at the first sign of controversy or release ham-handed statements that further erode faculty trust. This must change.
- **Have an action plan and a rapid response team at the ready**. Many universities are simply unprepared to respond to a campus controversy or media storm, and lack anything resembling a thoughtful, coordinated, and well-crafted crisis response that balances the interests of the university with those of faculty. If they do have these things, faculty do not know about them. Who does a faculty member or department chair reach out to if a situation is brewing? What is the relationship between college-level communications staff and the university's media relations team? What kind of support can faculty expect should they become the focus of a coordinated attack? *What is your campus's crisis response and communication organizational chart and is it transparent and accessible to all campus stakeholders, including, importantly, faculty?*

- **No more boilerplate**. Campus administrators need to do more than issue generic, boilerplate statements about academic freedom and free speech. Such statements must specifically address the fundamental value of research on sexuality, race, gender, and other areas scholarship and teaching that routinely come under fire. Sample language might be: "We support the research of Professor X. We hired them because of their valuable research and expertise in this area. They are a respected member of our campus community, and we support them and their research unequivocally." In other words, if administrators are truly committed to protecting academic freedom and free speech, they have to be able to articulate exactly why a faculty member's speech and research is important. In a political climate in which entire histories and bodies of knowledge are being dismissed, and academic expertise disregarded, universities have a responsibility to pushback forcefully, reject mischaracterizations, and actively reframe the terms of discussion and debate.
- **Collective action**. When conversations about free speech do take place on college campuses, they are often a response to a specific classroom or campus incident, which catalyze faculty to rally and organize in tangible ways. This might mean, for example, starting a chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) on campus or organizing a campus-wide event about academic freedom and controversial speech. It might also mean working closely with the faculty union to issue a strong public statement of support for a faculty member's speech rights and calling upon administrators to uphold the principles of academic freedom. My research suggests that discussions about academic freedom are most robust on campuses where faculty are unionized. Individually, faculty should consider joining the AAUP and also the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). There is power in numbers, however, and if faculty are not organizing collectively around these issues, they should start.
- **Conversations should begin when a job candidate interviews for a faculty position**. Job candidates who are interviewing for faculty positions should be encouraged to ask department chairs and deans how they would protect and defend them should they or their courses come under fire. Asking these types of questions normalizes conversations about academic freedom and free speech in ways that help bake them into the institutional culture.
- **These conversations should be a standard part of new faculty orientations**. Conversations about free speech and academic freedom should be a standard part of new faculty orientations. Every incoming faculty member should receive a copy of the university's most up-to-date statement affirming the principles of academic freedom. If a university does not have an up-to-date document affirming or reaffirming its commitment to academic freedom, it should prioritize creating one that outlines these principles and their centrality to the university's core mission. The AAUP offers a strong model.

- **Involve students:** Students have a stake in campus climate issues, including free speech and academic freedom, and should be included in these conversations.
    - **Graduate students**: Discussions about how to navigate institutional cultures should be taking place in the context of graduate student education and professional mentorship. Since many graduate students also teach, these conversations should include strategies for teaching difficult materials, the value of risk-taking, and the basic principles of academic freedom. Some of the same workshop ideas discussed above could also be used in this context.
    - **Undergraduate students**: Institutions need to find ways to involve undergraduate students in these discussions, since undergraduate courses are often flashpoints for complaints and campus controversies. According to one of my interviewees: "We need more discussions about the success stories of approaching tough topics and encouraging students toward more risk taking…and encouraging them to think about what college is about and the what the classroom is about." Students should be encouraged to buy into the mission of higher education, which includes being open to competing perspectives and challenging material. Although it exceeds the scope of this report, thoughtful conversations are needed around the politics of safe spaces, trigger warnings, and academic freedom (see Hilderbrand 2020).
- **Involve professional academic organizations.** Professional organizations, such as the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), the International Communication Association (ICA), the American Sociological Association (ASA), among others, are places where conversations about campus free speech and academic freedom should be happening. These discussions can take place informally in the context of division or interest group business meetings, but they can also be part of official conference programming in the form of panels, roundtables, and workshops. Scholarly interest groups, such as the SCMS Adult Film History Scholarly Interest Group or the ASA Sexualities section, might consider sponsoring Zoom workshops on teaching difficult material. Academic organizations play an important role in creating scholarly communities, and can help lessen the sense of isolation that many faculty who teach difficult or challenging material are increasingly experiencing at their home institutions.

6. Conclusion

All signs indicate that it is not a matter of *if* your campus will need to mobilize a rapid response team, but *when*; and what that response consists of matters significantly, especially to faculty whose research and teaching place them squarely in the crosshairs of the new education culture wars. To be clear, this report is not just about pornography, sex media, and porn studies scholars. Rather, it is a case study that offers a glimpse into the politics of free speech and academic freedom on college campuses today. In fact, the first time I publicly presented results from this study, the educators in the room who were shaking their heads most vigorously and nodding in agreement about what my research revealed were those who regularly teach courses that include discussions about critical race theory and the history of racism in the United States. They, too, fly under the radar and engage in practices of self-censorship as a form of self-protection. They, too, are trying to figure out how to safely navigate institutions that are not always supportive and sometimes downright hostile. Faculty who teach challenging and controversial material *of all kinds* find themselves on the frontlines of the new culture wars, and as such, they have a lot to teach universities about the politics of academic freedom and campus free speech at a moment in which higher education is facing new and especially pernicious forms of attack. Campus leaders need to listen more closely to what these faculty have to say and the lessons they offer.

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8. Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. What is your current academic position and how long have you been at your current institution? In a few sentences, how would you describe your campus "vibe" and its student body (e.g., conservative, liberal, homogenous, diverse, etc.).
2. Tell me about the courses you teach related to sexuality and/or sex media, including the kinds of topics you cover.
3. Is there anything you avoid teaching or that feels off limits because it seems too difficult? Why does it feel difficult?
4. Have you ever self-censored what you teach or the topics you discuss in the classroom in order to avoid potential controversy?
5. Have you ever encountered resistance to these classes from different stakeholders? Let's start with students. How about colleagues? Administrators? Community members? If so, what were their concerns?
6. Has anything changed over the years in terms of what and how you teach? If so, what? Why do you think that is?
7. Do you include trigger or content warnings in your syllabi? Why or why not?
8. If one of your classes became the subject of public outrage or controversy, what kind of support would you expect from campus leaders and administrators? (e.g., your department chair, dean, provost). What kind of support do you think you'd get?
9. What policies does your campus have in place regarding free speech and academic freedom?
10. What kinds of conversations about free speech and academic freedom take place in your unit or on your campus? If never, why do you think that is?
11. What kinds of conversations would you like to see? And where would these conversations take place (e.g., departmental meetings, college meetings, Faculty Senate?)
12. Is the current political climate affecting what and how you teach? If so, in what ways? If not, why do you think it is.
13. Are there any controversies regarding sexual speech on college campuses, either recent or older, that that informs your teaching in any way?
14. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think is important for me to know regarding sexual speech and free speech on college campuses?