



Job Status and Canadian University Professors' Career Concerns Related to Political Opinion Disclosure

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Abstract

Debates surrounding self-censorship in academic contexts have been gaining momentum in university campuses across North America, with many scholars noting threats to academic freedom. This study examined how job status relates to university professors' concerns about potential career repercussions if their political opinions were to become known, when controlling for age. Canadian university professors ($n = 1,287$, 54.1% men) aged 29-90 ($M = 53.78$, $SD = 11.34$) completed a nationwide survey. They reported varying levels of concern; while, on average, most professors reported being not very worried, pairwise comparisons revealed significant differences in concerns regarding career repercussions between professors at different points in their career. Professors in senior and tenured positions appeared to report lower levels of concern compared to professors in part-time or non-tenured roles. Findings highlight the need for future research into self-censorship and academic freedom, and developing strategies to protect professors' academic freedom while mitigating personal harm.

Keywords: Job Status, University Professors, Comfort of Expression, Academic Freedom, Censorship

Introduction

Academic freedom can be conceptualized as a scholar's right to express and disseminate their views to others, without constraint by pressures of ideologies or politics (Kabasakal Badamchi, 2022; Woods et al., 2016). Public debate surrounding academic freedom has a history dating back to the 1900s. In 1901, an economist at Stanford University, Edward Ross, was dismissed for reasons related to his political activism and positions on certain issues that were deemed provocative by Jane L. Stanford, the co-

founder of the university (Samuels, 1991). Another notable academic freedom case was that of Mathematician Lee Lorch, who was fired from the City College of New York because of his advocacy of civil rights for Black Americans in 1948 (Joseph et al., 2017). Public discourse about academic freedom cases like these across North America eventually led to concerted efforts in defense of academic freedom. Such efforts allowed for policy development on standards for academic freedom, non-discrimination, as well as tenure (CAUT, 2023).

Despite historical efforts towards the protection of academic freedom, present day scholars have noted prevalent threats to academic freedom. Recent studies on scholars in the United States and the United Kingdom have reported difficulties with freedom of expression and threats to academic freedom (AACU, 2025; Kaufman, 2021). For example, a study from the University of Chicago found that over one third of faculty members surveyed had perceived a decline in their academic freedom over recent years (AACU, 2025). Another study by Clark and colleagues (2024) found that a majority of the professors surveyed expressed concern over potential social sanctions related to voicing their beliefs about sensitive topics. These social sanctions included peer, community, or institutional consequences such as being ostracized by peers, disciplinary actions like losing classes or leadership roles, being attacked on social media, among others. Such reported threats to academic freedom may be contextualized within global narratives regarding a rise in ideological polarization (Fang et al., 2025; Ruggeri et al., 2021), which refers to a growing ideological divergence and decreased dialogue between individuals with differing viewpoints (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Hohmann et al., 2023; see also Kotlikoff, 2025; Park, 2025).

Current evidence in the Canadian context reflects similar concerns regarding academic freedom. A recent report about Quebec Universities presents concrete examples of academic freedom threats such as books being removed from course syllabi for fear of being offensive, as well as speakers being disinvited related to pressures from groups who disapprove their ideas (Blais et al., 2021; Government of Québec, 2021). Notably, a 2024 survey found that both politically liberal and conservative professors were in agreement that academic freedom needed drastic improvement on university campuses (Quinn, 2024). Moreover, the same study also found that related to this perception of decline in academic freedom, professors frequently reported self-censoring on various topics to avoid potential repercussions on their careers and reputations (Quinn, 2024). This fear of career consequences is likely more notable for professors in non-tenured positions, who are often less protected from arbitrary dismissal compared to tenured faculty (Lassiter & De Gagne, 2010). While some believe that all faculty enjoy academic freedom, this assumption appears to be untrue for contract faculty who face greater job insecurity (Cohen, 2013). For example, qualitative accounts of contract-based Canadian university faculty have noted a possible link between precarious work and academic freedom. Although some contract-

based faculty note that they are not likely to be fired for exercising their academic freedom, their likelihood of being re-hired comes into question (Cohen, 2013). This inequity of academic freedom across job status is even more pressing as non-tenured faculty positions are increasingly common (53.6% of all university faculty appointments across 78 publicly funded Canadian Universities in the 2016-2017 year were contract positions; CCPA, 2018). One review of governance literature contended that academic freedom indeed diminished when the majority of faculty were non-tenured (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Nevertheless, there is very minimal literature examining the relationship between professor job status on academic freedom and self-censorship.

The purpose of the present study was therefore to explore the relationship between professor job status and level of concern regarding one's political opinions becoming public knowledge on their career and reputation, in a Canadian context, and regardless of age. Age is closely tied to academic tenure, as tenured faculty positions tend to be dominated by older professors (the average age at which professors receive tenure in Canada is over 40; Statistics Canada, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2022). Additionally, tenure appears to provide professors with structural privileges and protections that allow for greater academic freedom, including work that may be considered unfavorable politically. Early career academics may face serious career consequences and therefore self-censor, while others may delay conducting research deemed polarizing until they have greater career seniority (Doerfler et al., 2021). Professors at any career stage may be the target of censure or ideologically motivated harassment, have their research considered illegitimate, or even have their position undermined if their research is perceived as immoral; to avoid such consequences, professors may engage in self-censorship (Clark et al., 2024).

While the strong connection between tenure and age is undeniable (Government of Canada, 2024), it remains unclear whether professors' concerns about potential career repercussions from political opinions being revealed persist across job titles, regardless of age.

Method

Procedure and Participants

The data for the study was comprised of Canadian university professors. The survey was distributed in 2022 to professors at 39 institutions across and participants were invited to take part in the study through the Qualtrics survey platform in both French and English. The survey was primarily distributed via emails to department heads at various institutions. Participants were informed that completing the survey would take approximately 10-15 minutes and were given the opportunity to win a \$50 gift card for their participation. The study was approved by the McGill Research Ethics Board, REB File #21-08-013, and the required permissions, certifications and approvals were received

from Research Ethics Boards from 15 additional institutions to which the survey had been sent, in accordance with individual university policies and the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. Informed consent was obtained. The responses to the survey were confidential and no identifiable information was collected.

1,287 participants completed the survey. A little over half (56%) completed the survey in English, while 44% completed it in French. Participant ages ranged from 29 to 90 years ($M = 53.78$, $SD = 11.34$). The majority (54.1%) of the sample identified as men, 42.8% as women, 1.9% preferred not to respond, and 1.3% identified as non-binary or transgender. The majority of the respondents (84.1%) were White/Caucasian. Most professors (46.2%) participating in the study were full professors, 22% were associate professors, 8.6% were assistant professors, 8% were part-time instructors, and 6.1% were full-time instructors. Furthermore, 9.1% of participants selected the “other” category, where they could specify their job status; lecturers, retired professors, and emeritus/emerita professors accounted for 55.5% of the “other” category.

When asked about their political views, the majority (43.3%) of participants described themselves as somewhat left-wing, 26.4% as very left-wing, 16.2% as centrist, 5.8% as somewhat right-wing, 3% as radical left, 0.7% as very right-wing, 0.2% as radical right, and 1.8% responded “I don’t know” while 2.6% preferred not to say.

Measures

The survey questions were developed from questions from the Centre for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology’s Students Survey (Kaufman, 2021) and from the Campus Expression Surveys by Zhou et al. (2019-2023). The survey consisted of 2 open-ended and 32 multiple-choice questions on: demographics (9), politics and activism (3), censorship, comfort of expression, and perceived repercussions (7), views regarding the mission of the university and of professors (5), views regarding university admissions, hiring, and policies (6), professors’ perception of other professors’ comfort of expression (1), and professors’ experiences of maltreatment on campus (1). The survey included two open-ended questions, one asking participants if there is any other group they think may be especially uncomfortable sharing their views, and one asking for general feedback.

Results

Professors’ career concerns were assessed by a single question, “How worried are you about having your reputation damaged, facing major adversity, or missing out on professional opportunities should one of the following occur? - If your political opinions became known.” The response scale was a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, with 1

representing “Not at all worried” and 4 indicating “Very worried”. The average score was 2.23 ($SD = 1.07$).

All relevant assumption checks for the statistical tests were examined. A one-way ANCOVA was conducted to examine whether career concerns significantly differed between professors' job status when controlling for age. Age was associated with professors' career concerns, $F(1, 1277) = 7.93, p = .01 (p < .05), \eta^2 = .01$, as detailed in Table 1. Also, university professors' job status had a significant main effect, $F(5, 1277) = 2.30, p = .04 (p < .05), \eta^2 = .01$.

Table 1: One-Way analysis of covariance examining the association between professors' job status and their career concerns controlling for age

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	partial η^2
Corrected Model	20.19 ^a	6	3.37	2.95	.01	.01
Intercept	352.98	1	352.98	309.34	<.001	.20
Age	9.05	1	9.05	7.93	.01	.01
Job Status	13.12	5	2.63	2.30	.04	.01
Error	1457.18	1277	1.14			
Total	7879.00	1284				
Corrected Total	1477.37	1283				

a) $R^2 = .01$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .01$)

As professors' job status had a significant main effect when controlling for the effect of the covariate, age, $F(5, 1277) = 2.30, p = .04$, we conducted pairwise comparisons to test whether there was a difference in career concerns between professor job levels (part-time instructor, full-time instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, other; see Table 2).

Table 2: Pairwise comparisons examining the differences between professors' job statuses

I) Job status	(J) Job status	Mean Difference (IJ)	SE	p ^b	95% CI for Difference ^b	
					Lower	Upper
Part-time Instructor	Full-time Instructor	.11	.16	.50	-.21	.42
	Assistant Professor	.07	.15	.65	-.23	.36
	Associate Professor	.07	.12	.58	-.17	.31
	Full Professor	.05	.11	.69	-.18	.27
	Other	-.29*	.15	.04	-.58	-.01
Full-time Instructor	Part-time Instructor	-.11	.16	.50	-.42	.21
	Assistant Professor	-.04	.16	.81	-.35	.28
	Associate Professor	-.04	.14	.77	-.31	.23
	Full Professor	-.06	.13	.62	-.31	.19
	Other	-.40*	.16	.01	-.71	-.10
Assistant Professor	Part-time Instructor	-.07	.15	.65	-.36	.23
	Full-time Instructor	.04	.16	.81	-.28	.35
	Associate Professor	.00	.12	1.00	-.24	.24
	Full Professor	-.02	.12	.84	-.25	.21
	Other	-.36*	.15	.02	-.65	-.07
Associate Professor	Part-time Instructor	-.07	.12	.58	-.31	.17
	Full-time Instructor	.04	.14	.77	-.23	.31
	Assistant Professor	.00	.12	1.00	-.24	.24
	Full Professor	-.02	.08	.77	-.18	.13
	Other	-.36*	.12	.00	-.59	-.13
Full Professor	Part-time Instructor	-.05	.11	.69	-.27	.18
	Full-time Instructor	.06	.13	.62	-.19	.31

	Assistant Professor	.02	.12	.84	-.21	.25
	Associate Professor	.02	.08	.77	-.13	.18
	Other	-.34*	.11	.00	-.55	-.13
Other	Part-time Instructor	.29*	.15	.04	.01	.58
	Full-time Instructor	.40*	.16	.01	.10	.71
	Assistant Professor	.36*	.15	.02	.07	.65
	Associate Professor	.36*	.12	.00	.13	.59
	Full Professor	.34*	.11	.00	.13	.55

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Table 3: Adjusted Means, Standard Errors, and Confidence Intervals for Professors' Job Status

<i>Job Status</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	
			<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
Part-time Instructor	2.25 ^a	.11	2.05	2.46
Full-time Instructor	2.15 ^a	.12	1.91	2.38
Assistant Professor	2.19 ^a	.11	1.98	2.40
Associate Professor	2.19 ^a	.06	2.06	2.31
Full Professor	2.21 ^a	.04	2.12	2.30
Other	2.55 ^a	.10	2.35	2.74

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Age = 53.75.

The adjusted means for each group, presented in Table 3, were: 2.55 (*SE* = .10) for “other”, 2.25 (*SE* = .11) for “part-time instructor”, 2.21 (*SE* = .04) for “full professor”, 2.19 (*SE* = .11) for “assistant professor”, 2.19 (*SE* = .06) for “associate professor”, and 2.15 (*SE* = .12) for “full-time instructor”. Pairwise comparisons were conducted on adjusted means, using the sequential Bonferroni procedure. There was a statistically significant difference between the job status “other” (largely comprising course lecturers, retired professors, and emeritus/emerita professors) and “associate professors” in teaching streams (*p* = .04), as well as a statistically significant difference between the job status “other” and “full

professor” ($p = .03$) controlling for age. The professors within the “other” category exhibited greater concern regarding the impact on their job status if their political opinions were to become publicly known. There were no significant differences between any of the other groups. For the entire set of analyses, please refer to Table 2 in the Appendix.

Discussion

The present study provides preliminary support about the association between job status on professors’ concerns about the consequences of their political opinions becoming public knowledge. Results indicate that professor job status is significantly associated with career concerns related to political opinions becoming known, when controlling for age. Specifically, professors in more senior and tenured positions (e.g., associate and full professors) reported generally lower levels of concern compared to professors in more part-time or non-tenured roles; full-time and tenured professors also reported significantly lower levels of concern than those who selected the “other” category (e.g., contract lecturers, retired professors, and emeritus/emerita professors). This finding aligns with recent research suggesting that non-tenured faculty are more concerned about repercussions on their careers compared to tenured faculty (Honeycutt et al., 2023) and with prior research asserting that tenure positions do act to protect professors from arbitrary dismissal, ultimately ensuring a baseline of academic freedom (Asbill et al., 2016; AAUP, 2015b; Lassiter & De Gagne, 2010). The added job and economic security that tenured positions provide may limit the perceived risks of expressing unpopular or unconventional ideas (Cohen, 2013; Horn, 2015). Our results suggest that professors in more precarious positions such as part-time lecturers may experience a greater sense of vulnerability to external pressures to self-censor which aligns with qualitative findings on the subject (Cohen, 2013; Honeycutt et al., 2023). Given the continuing decline of tenure and tenure-track positions in academia (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008; Honeycutt et al., 2023; Robinson, 2010; Taylor & Watts, 2024), professors’ career concerns and pressures to self-censor could grow more pronounced over time. Comparatively, and as supported by Gordon and colleagues (2024), professors with full-time tenure-track positions—who typically experience a higher level of institutional protection—appeared to be less worried with the potential risks of expressing political opinions publicly. Nevertheless, the small effect size suggests that other factors may play a larger role in explaining variance in professor’s career concerns related to their political opinions becoming known.

Interestingly, while the majority of the “other” category consisted of part-time faculty, it also included emeritus professors. “Emeritus/Emerita” professors refer to an honorific designation accorded to selected professors upon retirement (Dorfman, 1981). Many emeritus faculty continue to work part-time or full-time in teaching, clinical, or research activities (Steinberg, 2011); hence, it is possible that concerns with job security

or maintaining a reputation at work could also play a role in findings for this group despite their tenured positions. For instance, it could be contended that emeritus professors who boast long and successful careers may be more concerned about negative impacts on their reputations post-retirement (Veissière et al., 2020). Overall, these results provide some valuable insight into the possibility of job status influencing perception of academic freedom.

Ongoing debate exists regarding whether tenure and academic freedom should be viewed as linked. Some contend that tenure may be outdated and should be reformed given the inconsistency of tenure policies and the risk for potential discrimination amidst tenure decisions (Asbill et al., 2016). This position also considers the inherent suggestion that there is lesser academic freedom guaranteed for those without tenure. Here, it has been asserted that tenure should not be considered a guarantee of academic freedom, but rather simply a protection of one's contract (Rogers, 2008). Such considerations warrant further investigation. Whether we define tenure as simply a protection of contract or something more, tenure in practice appears to be related to professor self-censorship and sense of academic freedom.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the results of this study contribute to the recent discourse regarding academic freedom and university professors' perspectives, it also contains several limitations. First, while our sample is consistent with current data by Statistics Canada (Government of Canada, 2020) which reports that 80% of university professors are not a visible minority, the majority of our respondents identified as White/Caucasian (84.1%). Thus, it is possible that visible minority respondents' reported opinions may not have been well-represented by our data. We recommend more focused sampling in future research. Additionally, nearly half of our respondents' disciplines were in the humanities, social sciences, and business. Several studies have found differing perceptions regarding academic freedom across different disciplines in academia (e.g., Prelec et al., 2022). Therefore, the results of the survey may not be reflective of professors' concerns of potential repercussions on their career in other fields and disciplines.

Lastly, while the results were significant, only a small portion of the variance in professors' career concerns was explained by their job status, when controlling for age. These results suggest an important influence of other factors beyond job status and age in regard to professors' career concerns on disclosure of their political opinions. Such other factors may include the pursuit of tenure and the risk of various types of harassment, including ideological pressures (Doerfler et al., 2021). Future research should also include more qualitative investigation into why professors' career concerns—damage to one's reputation, facing major adversity, and missing out on professional opportunities—differ

across job statuses (e.g., full professor vs emeritus/emerita).

Recent renewed interest in safeguards to academic freedom within universities highlights the need for continued research into how self-censorship among professors and others within the academy may limit the applicability of academic freedoms. Overall, further research is needed to better understand professors' concerns when expressing political opinions. Developing strategies to protect professors' academic freedom while mitigating any potential harms is especially important, and further study on how university and government policies or restrictions—such as Quebec's Bill 32 (Bill 32, 2022)—should or should not apply to academic freedom concepts in universities is warranted here. Such strategies might include outlined procedures by institutions in the face of harassment, increased support from administration, and advocacy services for professors.

Conclusion

Academic freedom refers to professors' right to teach, conduct research, and express their thoughts without restriction (Kabasakal Badamchi, 2022; Woods et al., 2016). This study aimed to investigate whether professors' job statuses impact their concerns for potential career repercussions should their political opinions become known, controlling for age. Results show that professors express significant variations in concern regarding the potential impact on their careers if their political opinions were to be disclosed. When controlling for age, those in more senior and tenured positions tended to express lower levels of concern, compared to professors in less secure roles (e.g., lecturers) and professors who have left academia (e.g., emeritus/emerita or retired professors). Given the importance of open dialogue in the creation of collaborative spaces to tend to the world's most pressing issues in university classrooms, greater understanding of factors influencing academic freedom are crucial. Relatedly, ongoing research into institutional policies on what constitutes academic freedom and to reduce harm among those expressing their opinions may be an important research avenue. The classroom can act as an exploring ground for the complexity of current affairs and diverse ideologies, and this can only continue to exist if all parties feel free to participate openly. Recent literature coming out of the United States has highlighted concerns regarding institutional and governmental interventions in response to current political issues (Norris, 2025). Similar concerns have been documented across Canadian university campuses (CAUT, 2025). These concerns point to a need for greater tolerance of viewpoints deemed unpopular in order to reduce the risk of a spiral of silence among individuals holding differing opinions. If universities aim to develop independent thinkers and further the pursuit of knowledge, academic freedom remains fundamental to protecting that independence. As social and political conditions continue to evolve globally, continued research in this area is needed to capture the state of academic freedom on an ongoing basis.

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