



Canadian University Professors' Perceptions on Campus Climate, Politics, and Comfort of Expression

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DOI: 10.53103/cjess.v6i5.565

Abstract

Recent reports have brought attention to declines in academic freedom worldwide, and research from the US indicates that self-censorship among professors is common. To build upon the existing literature on this topic within the Canadian higher education context, this study explored professors' views on campus climate, censorship, politics, and comfort of expression. A nationwide survey was completed by 1,289 Canadian university professors (54.1% men), aged 29-90 ($M = 53.78$, $SD = 11.34$). Findings revealed that one in three professors perceived the campus climate to be hostile to those who shared their perspectives. Two-thirds reported self-censorship during discussions, while nearly one-third reported experiencing censorship by others. Professors also reported concern about potential repercussions associated with the disclosure of their views on sensitive topics. Overall, results suggest a need for stronger protections of academic freedom and interventions that facilitate open expression without concern for potential outcomes.

Keywords: Academic Freedom, Professors, Campus, Policy, Comfort of Expression

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The topic of academic freedom, defined as 'the right, without constriction by

prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies' (UNESCO, 1997), has gained momentum on college campuses in recent years (Garry, 2023; Norris, 2023). According to Fernandez and colleagues (2024), academic freedom has declined globally since 2011. As of 2024, there are more autocracies than democracies worldwide, and freedom of expression, including academic freedom, has deteriorated in 44 countries (Nord et al., 2025).

With this recent rise in autocracy and neo-nationalism, academic institutions are being targeted (Douglass, 2021). In post-industrial societies like the US, Sweden, and the UK, right-leaning political scientists report hostile academic climates, while in developing societies like Nigeria, left-leaning scientists report a worsening cancel culture (Norris, 2023). Cancel culture, involving public condemnation, withdrawal of support, and attempts to impose consequences for behavior deemed unacceptable (Tandoc Jr et al., 2024), is said to silence free speech in academia (Garry, 2023; Norris, 2023; Stargardt, 2025). This is documented by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (*Scholars Under Fire Database* | *The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression*, n.d.), where faculty across universities have faced pressure from administrators, government officials, and publishers to punish activities normally protected under academic freedom. Consistent with this, faculty report self-censoring due to fears of repercussions (Stargardt, 2025). Similarly, academics have been targeted over moral concerns about their research findings (Clark et al., 2025). Data from over 100 countries further suggest that academics are less willing to speak up about viewpoints they perceive as not commonly shared among colleagues and society (Norris, 2023). Certain developments, such as the events in Israel and Palestine, have also intensified debates among opposing views and censorship of dialogue in the field of education in both Canada (CAUT, 2025) and the US (Deeb & Winegar, 2024).

Recent studies have examined professors' views on academic freedom on college campuses. A study by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2025), conducted in partnership with the American Association of University Professors, found that over one-third of faculty perceived less academic freedom today compared to before. Faculty who joined in 2017 or earlier were significantly more likely than those who joined later to report lower levels of academic freedom. Additionally, over half of faculty reported concerns about online harassment due to their beliefs or activities; unauthorized lecture recording, students sharing statements out of context, and repercussions they may face in academia for having expressed a political opinion. While the survey found that most faculty valued diverse perspectives, the majority also reported self-censoring when engaging in politics or controversial topics.

Another study that surveyed 1,491 faculty at colleges and universities in the US found that over half of faculty were worried about losing their jobs or reputation due to statements being taken out of context, someone posting something from their past online, and misunderstandings (Honeycutt et al., 2023). About one-third reported feeling uncomfortable sharing opinions on a subject due to possible reactions from students, colleagues, or administration, and 11% reported being disciplined or threatened with discipline because of their teaching (Honeycutt et al., 2023).

While there are many reports on professors' comfort of expression in the US, more investigation is required within the Canadian context. The current study explores findings from a cross-Canada study of university professors regarding their perceptions on campus climate, politics, and comfort of expression.

Methods

The survey was distributed to Canadian university professors from 39 institutions across the country. Recruitment was predominantly through email exchange with department heads of the universities. Participants were entered into a giveaway for a \$50 gift card for their participation. The survey took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

The current 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 the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. Informed consent was obtained. The responses to the survey were confidential and no identifiable information was retained.

Measures

The questions were developed using the questions from the Centre for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology's Students Survey (Kaufmann, 2021) and from the Campus Expression Surveys by Zhou and colleagues (2022; 2023). The survey, made up of 2 open-ended and 32 multiple-choice questions, addressed: demographics (9), politics and activism (3), censorship, comfort of expression, and perceived repercussion (7), views regarding the mission of the university and professor (5), views regarding university admissions, hiring, and policies (6), professors' perception of other professors' comfort of expression (1), professors' experiences of maltreatment on campus (1), opinions concerning other possible groups uncomfortable of sharing their viewpoint (1), and general feedback (1).

Results

1,289 participants completed the survey (English, 56%; French, 44%). Ages ranged from 29 to 90 years ($M = 53.78$, $SD = 11.34$). Approximately 54.1% of the survey respondents identified as men, 42.8% as women, 1% as non-binary, 0.2% as transgender man, 0.1% as transgender woman, and 1.9% preferred not to respond. The majority of respondents were White/Caucasian (84.1%) and nearly half (49.9%) did not identify with a religion or were atheist or agnostic. Most participants (95.4%) reported not having a visible disability, while 17% reported an invisible disability. From the sample, approximately 46.2% were full professors, 22% were associate professors, 8.6% were assistant professors, 8% were part-time instructors, and 6.1% were full-time instructors. As well, 9.1% of survey respondents fell into the “Other” category, which included lecturers, retired professors, and emeritus/emerita professors among other self-specified job titles. Professors’ institutional affiliations showed great diversity, with respondents from Université Laval, University of Montreal, University of Ottawa, University of Toronto, University of Alberta, The University of British Columbia, University of Calgary, and McGill University collectively comprising about 50.3% of the sample.

Professors’ fields of study are shown in Figure 1. The majority of the professors (38.5%) who participated in the survey were from the fields of humanities and social sciences.

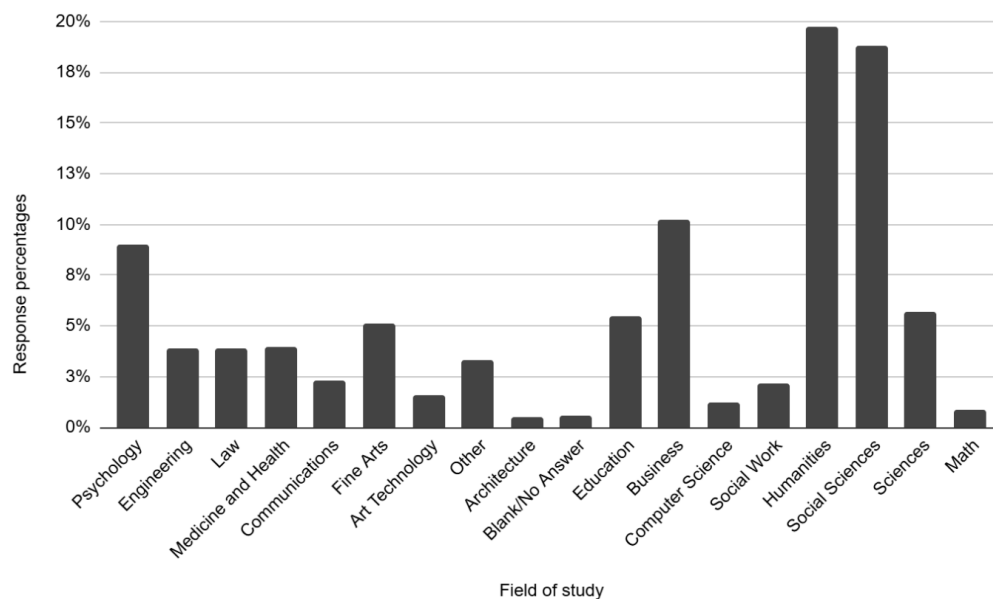


Figure 1: Field of study of respondents

Politics and Activism

Professors were asked about their political views. The majority (43.3%) were broadly left-leaning, 26.4% mostly left-leaning, 16.2% centrist, 5.8% broadly right-leaning, 3% radically left-leaning, 0.7% mostly right-leaning, and 0.2% radically right-leaning; 2.6% of professors preferred not to state their political views, while 1.8% responded that they did not know their political views. When questioned about likely voting preference, 32.9% of professors stated they would vote for New Democratic Party (NDP), 28.7% for Liberal Party, 13.2% ineligible to vote or not voting, 12.3% for Bloc Quebecois, 6.8% for Conservative Party, 5.8% for Green Party, and 0.3% for People's Party. Professors were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement "I would consider myself an activist." The majority of respondents (71.8%) answered "No", 20.4% answered "Yes", and 7.8% answered "I don't know."

Censorship, Comfort of Expression, and Perceived Repercussions

In response to questions about whether they perceived a supportive or hostile climate for people with beliefs similar to their own in their program or department, most professors (40.7%) responded as *somewhat supportive*, 29% *supportive*, 21.5% *somewhat hostile*, and 8.7% *hostile*.

Censorship

When asked whether professors censured themselves during discussions with colleagues or students, 69.2% of participants answered *yes*, while 30.5% answered *no*. Of the 1,289 participants, 28.8% responded affirmatively to whether anyone ever tried to censor them due to their opinions, while the majority (70.9%) responded negatively.

Comfort of Expression

Professors were inquired regarding their comfort level when speaking up and giving their views on the following topics either in class or in a faculty meeting: a non-controversial issue, and about a controversial issue on the topics of gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, politics, religion, race, and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The results are presented in Figure 2 below. The topic participants were the most reluctant giving their views was a controversial issue about sexual orientation (24.3%), followed by EDI (22.1%). The majority (77.1%) of participants were very comfortable giving their views on a non-controversial issue.

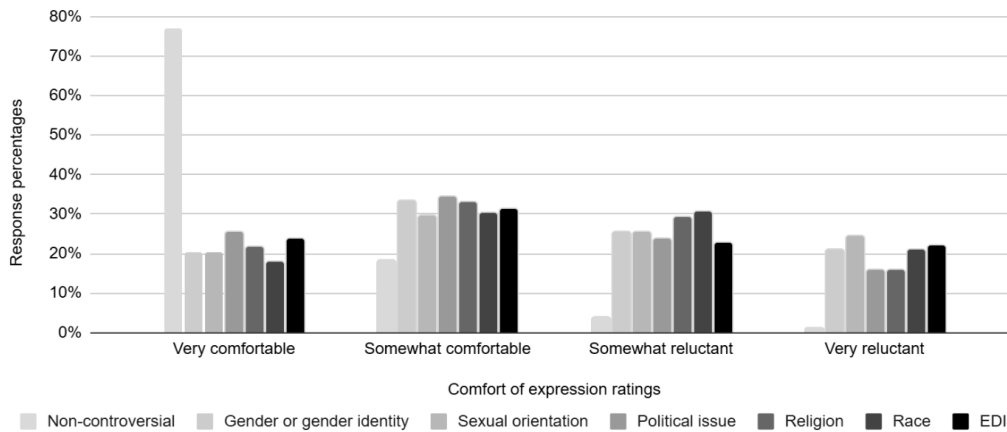


Figure 2: Professor comfort level when discussing a controversial topic in class or faculty meeting

Perceived Repercussions

Professors were asked how concerned they would be of repercussions if they expressed their opinions on one of the aforementioned controversial issues during a class discussion or in a meeting. More than half respondents were *somewhat* to *extremely concerned* that someone would post critical comments about their views on social media (54.7%), that someone would criticize their views as offensive (53.2%), and that someone would file a complaint claiming their views violated a campus policy or code of conduct (50.3%), presented in Figure 3 below.

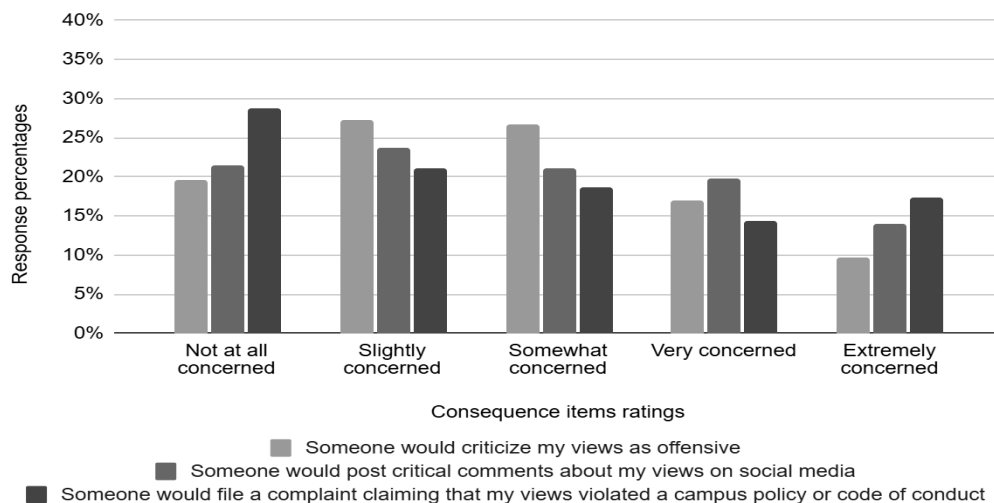


Figure 3: Professor concern for repercussions of opinions

Professors were asked how worried they are about having their reputation damaged, facing major adversity, or missing out on professional opportunities should their opinions on politics, university policy regarding EDI, gender or gender identity, and dominant notions regarding social justice became known. Professors showed a range of concern about potential repercussions for expressing their opinions, presented in Figure 4 below, indicating the least concern for expressing their opinions concerning dominant notions regarding social justice (*not at all worried*; 33.7%) and the most concern for expressing their opinions concerning university policy regarding EDI (*very worried*; 19.8%). Levels of worry were stable across all topics, however analyses were not performed to determine whether there was statistical significance to professors having greater or less worry for any one topic over another.

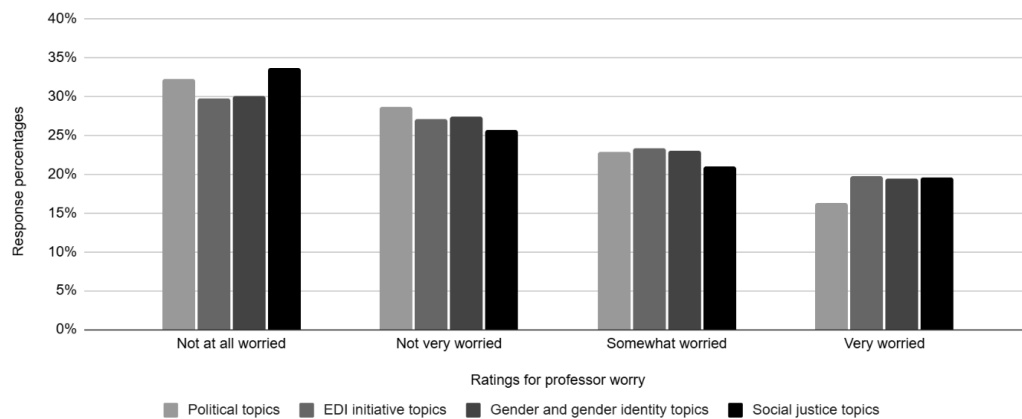


Figure 4: Professor worry about their opinions becoming known

When asked how confident they were that representatives of their university would defend their right to express themselves, 46% of professors were *not at all confident*, 42.9% were *somewhat confident*, and only 11.2% were *very confident*.

Views Regarding the Mission of the University and Professor Purposes of the University

Professors provided rankings regarding which statements they perceived corresponded to the purposes of the university, presented in Table 1 below. A majority of professors (62.8%) ranked “educating students” as the highest purpose of the university, followed by “conducting research and creating knowledge,” and “preparing students for work & contribution to economic prosperity.” More than half of professors (56%) ranked

“working for social justice and progress” as the lowest for the purpose of the university.

Table 1: Rankings on Purposes of the University

	Highest rank		Second highest rank		Third rank		Lowest rank	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<i>University purpose</i>								
Educating students	721	62.8	366	31.9	47	4.1	15	1.3
Conducting research & creating knowledge	336	29.2	566	49.3	217	18.9	30	2.6
Working for social justice and progress	44	3.8	93	8.1	368	32	644	56
Preparing students for work & contribution to economic prosperity	48	4.2	124	10.8	517	45	460	40

Role of University Professors

Professors also provided rankings regarding which statements they perceived corresponded to the role of university professors, presented in Table 2 below. A majority of professors (52.1%) ranked “teaching and conducting research that aims to advance knowledge of and improve our understanding of the world” as the highest role of university professors, followed by “teaching and conducting research that aims to shape and change society.” Nearly half of professors (49.1%) chose “teaching and conducting research that aims to help students find good career prospects” as the lowest ranking on the role of university professors.

Table 2: Rankings on the Role of University Professors

	Highest rank		Middle rank		Lowest rank	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Role of professor</i>						
Teach & conduct research that aims to shape & change society	372	17.3	871	40.4	605	28.1
Teach & conduct research that aims to help students find good career prospects	352	16.3	438	20.3	1058	49.1
Teach & conduct research that aims to advance knowledge of and improve our understanding of the world	1124	52.1	539	25.0	185	8.6

Note. Based on $n = 1289$ responses

Self-censorship

Professors were asked whether they refrained from airing views in teaching or academic discussions, or avoided pursuing or publishing research, out of possible consequences to their career. A majority of professors (46.8%) responded “often,” closely followed by “never” (40.9%), and then by “occasionally” (12.4%).

Views on Social Justice and Course Content

Professors were queried about their views regarding the freedom of professors to publish research on their interests compared to the freedom of professors to promote social justice for disadvantaged groups. Professors expressed a range of opinions regarding the topic, presented in Figure 5.

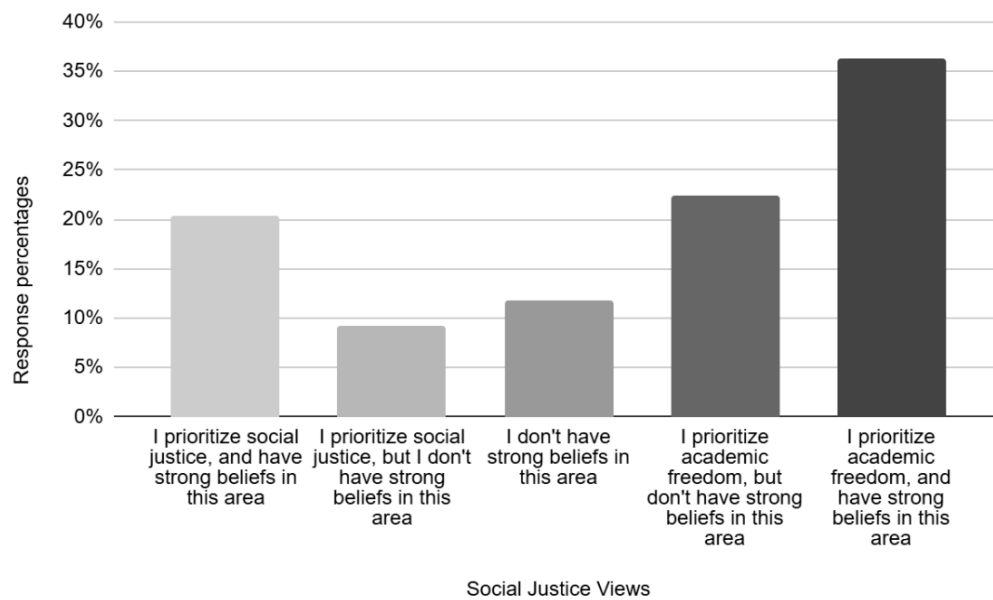


Figure 5: Professor views on social justice

Professors were provided with a false dichotomy forcing them to choose the hypothetical statement that best matches their views regarding what should be prioritized in university course content; whether it should feature authors and thinkers of diverse backgrounds, or the most intellectually foundational knowledge in the field. A majority of professors (64.3%) matched their views, choosing course content that features the most intellectually foundational knowledge in the field while the remainder (34.4%) chose content that features authors of diverse backgrounds.

Professor Views Regarding University Admissions, Hiring, and Policies Admissions

Professors were asked the extent to which they found the following inquiries and decisions acceptable for a university admissions committee on a Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*: 1) inquiring about identity (gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, ethnicity, and/or political stance) of students during an admission interview in order to increase diversity in the program, 2) to favor any of the identities presented above over performance (such as GPA) when reviewing applications, 3) to favor performance (such as GPA) over any of the identities presented above when reviewing applications. Responses varied among professors, presented in Figure 6; 1) 53.3% of professors either *strongly* (33.1%) or *somewhat disagreed* (18.2%) with inquiring about

students' identity, 2) 52.1% of professors either *strongly* (29.7%) or *somewhat disagreed* (22.4%) on favoring diversity first, and 3) 49.3% of professors either *strongly* (27.1%) or *somewhat agreed* (22.2%) on favouring merit first when reviewing applications.

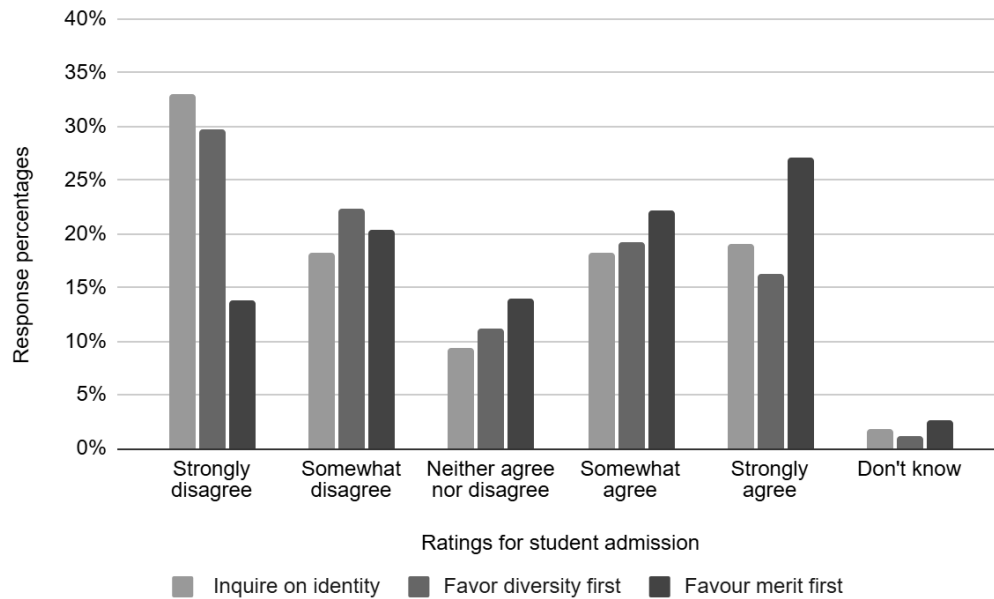


Figure 6: Professor views regarding university admissions: applicant's identity and merit

Regarding rating student applications, professors were asked, on a Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, to what extent they agreed that the following inquiries and decisions would be acceptable for a university admissions committee: 1) to rate a student's application lower if it had a politically left-leaning perspective, 2) to rate a student's application lower if it had a radical left political perspective, 3) to rate a student's application lower if it had a politically right-leaning perspective, and 4) to rate a student's application lower if it had a radical right political perspective. A majority of professors either *strongly agreed* or *strongly disagreed* on rating students' applications lower based on political perspectives, presented in Figure 7 below; most *strongly disagreed* (59.5%) with rating politically left-leaning applicants lower, followed by rating politically right-leaning applicants lower (54.6%), rating applicants that had a radical left political perspective lower (52.2%), and lastly rating applicants that had a radical right political perspective lower (45.4%).

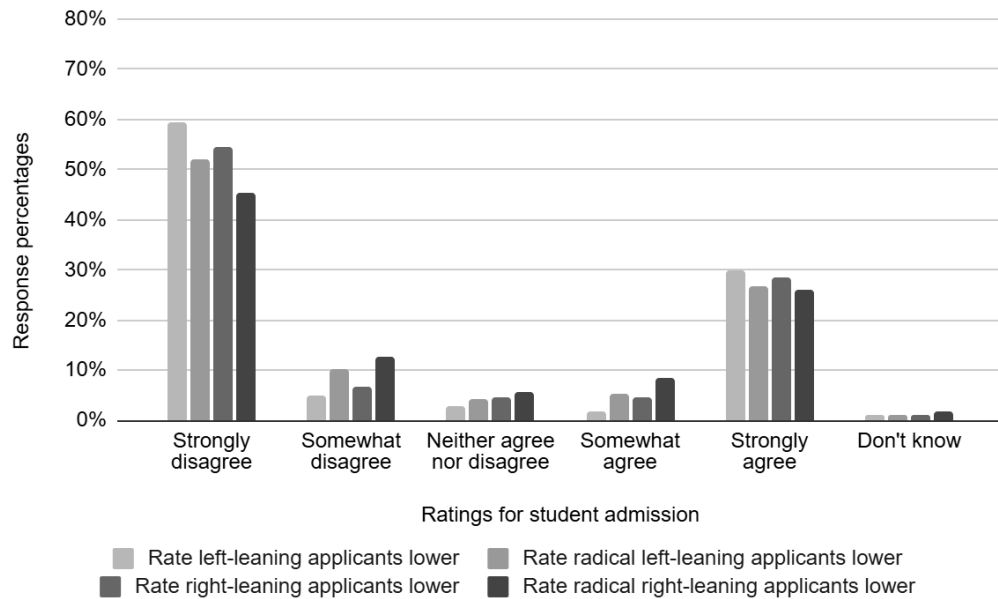


Figure 7: Professor views regarding university admissions: politics of applicant

Hiring

Regarding evaluating an academic job (e.g., professor) application, professors were asked, on a Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, to what extent they agreed that the following inquiries and decisions would be acceptable for a university hiring committee: 1) to rate a professor's application lower if the application had a politically left-leaning perspective, 2) to rate a professor's application lower if the application had a radical left political perspective, 3) to rate a professor's application lower if the application had a politically right-leaning perspective, and 4) to rate a professor's application lower if the application had a radical right political perspective. Professors' responses were similar to those regarding student admissions; the majority either *strongly disagreed* or *strongly agreed* with rating an academic job (e.g., professor) application based on the applicant's political perspective, presented in Figure 8. Nearly 3 in 5 (58.3%) professors *strongly disagreed* with rating left-leaning applicants lower, followed by nearly half (52.8%) *strongly disagreeing* with rating right-leaning applicants lower, 48.2% for rating applicants that had a radical left political perspective lower, and 41% with rating applicants that had a radical right political perspective lower.

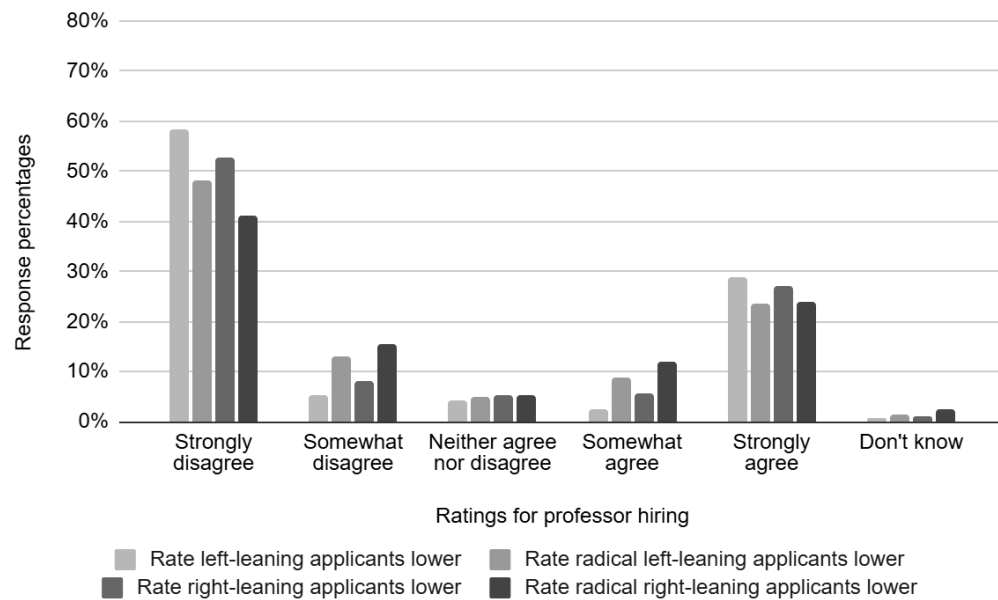


Figure 8: Professor views regarding hiring policies depending on politics of applicant

Cancelling Events

Universities have sometimes faced calls to cancel events or lectures. Professors were asked to what extent they agreed that the university should cancel an event depending on the presenter's politics: 1) where the presenter clearly has a left-leaning political position, 2) a radical left political position, 3) a right-leaning political position, and 4) where the presenter clearly has a radical right political position. Professors' responses skewed in the two extremes, as most either *strongly disagreed* or *strongly agreed* that the event should be canceled depending on the presenter's politics, presented in Figure 9. A majority of professors *strongly disagreed* that the university should cancel an event depending on the presenter's politics; 59.2% of professors *strongly disagreed* that a left-leaning presenter's event should be cancelled, followed by a 55% *strongly disagreeing* that a right-leaning presenter's event should be cancelled, 47% for the radical left-leaning presenter, and 39.3% for the radical right-leaning presenter. In comparison, 29.2% of professors *strongly agreed* that the university should cancel an event if the presenter was left-leaning, followed by 28.1% for right-leaning presenter, 23.7% for a radical left-leaning presenter, and 22.5% for a radical right-leaning presenter.

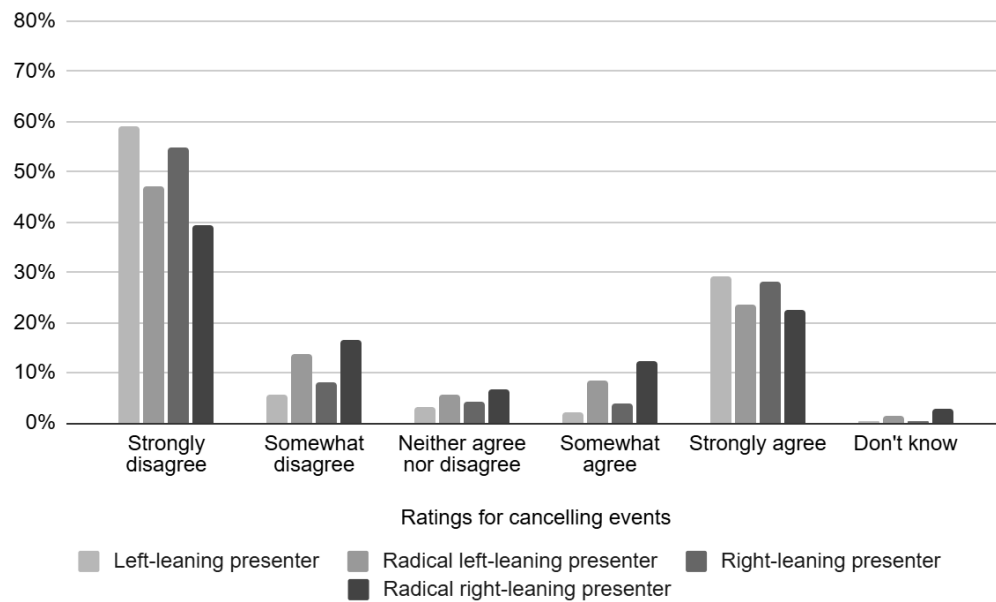


Figure 9: Professor views on cancelling a speaker event depending on politics of the presenter

Professors were also asked to what extent they agreed that the university should cancel an event for the following reasons: 1) where the presenter is controversial or discusses triggering topics, 2) where there will be a protest against the presenter, 3) where there is a strong risk of physical violence, 4) where the presenter, based on clear evidence, expresses hate towards certain segments of society, and 5) where the presenter is a respected but provocative academic figure. As presented in Figure 10, professors' responses were mixed: 58.4% of respondents either *strongly disagreed* (42.5%) or *somewhat disagreed* (15.9%) that the university should cancel an event where the presenter is controversial or discusses triggering topics while 22.5% *strongly agreed* with cancelling; 55.8% of respondents either *strongly disagreed* (38.3%) or *somewhat disagreed* (17.5%) with cancelling an event where there will be a protest against the presenter while 21.7% *strongly agreed* to cancel; 36.1% of respondents either *strongly disagreed* (16.4%) or *somewhat disagreed* (19.7%) that the university should cancel an event where there is a strong risk of physical violence while nearly one third (30.2%) *strongly agreed* to cancel. More than half of professors (55.2%) either *strongly agreed* (45.8%) or *somewhat agreed* (9.4%) that the university should cancel an event where the presenter, based on clear evidence, expresses hate towards certain segments of society while 36% either *strongly disagreed* (25.5%) or *somewhat disagreed* (10.5%). In comparison, the majority of professors (56.9%) either *strongly disagreed* (41.5%) or *somewhat disagreed* (15.4%) that

the university should cancel an event where the presenter is a respected but provocative academic figure, and nearly one third (30.4%) either *strongly agreed* (23.5%) or *somewhat agreed* (6.9%).

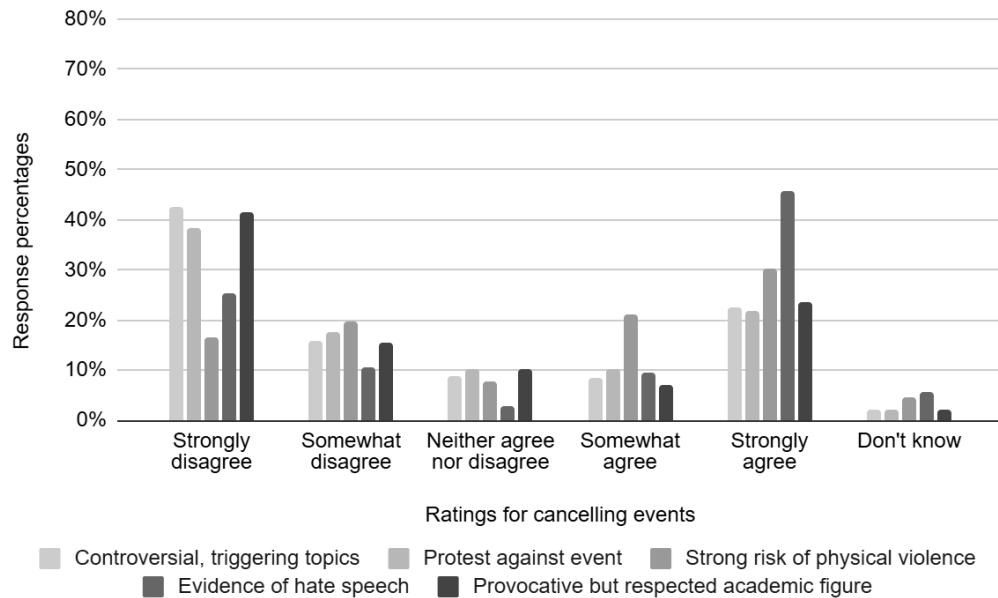


Figure 10: Professor views on cancelling a speaker event for different reasons

Response to Student Protests

Professors were asked how they would respond to the following hypothetical situations involving students petitioning to have a professor sanctioned, reprimanded or fired for statements or behaviour, and whether they would oppose or support the student petition either publicly or privately: 1) if a professor objected to an initiative for EDI on the grounds that it violated their academic freedom, 2) if a professor stated that equity, diversity, and inclusivity is more important than academic freedom in universities, 3) if a professor did research that questioned the idea that systemic racism is a significant problem in Canada, and 4) if a professor did research that questioned the idea that transgender people who are minors should have access to hormonal therapy. Professors gave a variety of responses, presented in Figure 11, with the majority opposing the student petition either publicly or privately. Across all hypothetical scenarios, about 1 in 3 professors responded they would oppose the student petition but say nothing publicly, while about 1 in 5 responded they would oppose the student petition publicly in all hypothetical scenarios except for research questioning the idea that systemic racism is a significant problem in Canada, in which about 1 in 4 professors responded they would oppose the student petition

publicly. Overall, opposing the student position privately was more common than supporting the student petition.

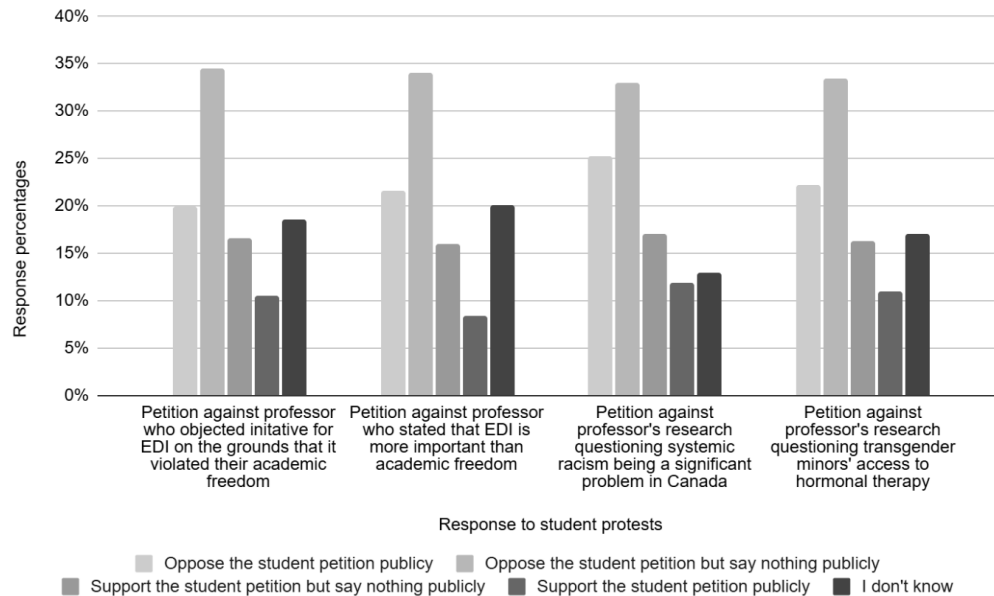


Figure 11: Professor views on student petitions against professor who engages with controversial topics

Response to EDI Initiatives

Professors showed mixed views when asked how they would respond to a hypothetical equity, diversity, and inclusion initiative at their university to improve diversity in course readings, and whether they would express their opposition or support publicly or privately. For this question, professors were asked to imagine a new initiative at their institution stipulating that on each reading list, at least 30% of readings must come from women and 20% from authors of colour to promote greater diversity. The majority of professors (48%) expressed that they would oppose the initiative (27.3% privately and 20.7% publicly), 27% expressed that they would support the initiative (15.2% publicly and 12% privately), and nearly 1 in 4 (24.8%) held neutral views or were unsure.

Additionally, professors were also asked their opinions on how the university should deal with other professors who refuse to comply with the initiative. A majority of respondents (51.9%) held the opinion that there should be no action of any kind towards the hypothetical non-compliant professor. Regarding consequences, about 1 in 4 professors (24.7%) expressed that the professor should not face formal or informal pressure but must complete implicit bias awareness training, 15.9% expressed that the professor should not

face formal disincentives, just social pressure from colleagues and managers. A small minority supported giving the professor less favourable teaching and administrative roles, or less access to research funding (2.5%), canceling the course (2%), or terminating employment (0.4%).

Professors' Experiences of Maltreatment on Campus

Professors were asked to indicate the frequency of their experience of being treated badly or unfairly on campus due to their political views, race or ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, gender, and language. In all instances except gender, an overwhelming majority (>70%) reported never being treated badly or unfairly on campus, while nearly one third of professors reported experiencing being treated badly or unfairly on campus due to their gender, for example, a few times a year (18.1%) or once a year or less (13%).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate university professors' perception of campus climate, politics, comfort of expression, and related issues within the Canadian higher education context. To our knowledge, this study is among the first to collect data on professors' perspectives across Canada in both English and French.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample included proportionally fewer respondents from disciplines outside the arts and humanities, and most participants identified as White/Caucasian. As a result, findings may not fully represent the perspective of professors across disciplines and backgrounds. No definitions of the political terms "right" and "left" were provided, leaving interpretation to participants, which may have affected results. Additionally, several questions were framed as false dichotomies forcing professors to choose between categories that are not mutually exclusive (e.g., academic freedom and social justice), which may have shaped the study's outcomes. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of significant social disruption (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022) and widespread dissemination of misinformation (Ferreira Caceres et al., 2022). Since data collection, important political developments have occurred in Canada and the United States which may have impacted professors' viewpoints. Consequently, follow-up research is needed to assess whether and how these perspectives have changed over time. Nevertheless, this study provides an important benchmark of Canadian professors' viewpoints during and shortly thereafter the COVID-19 pandemic.

Campus Climate

This study found that nearly one in three professors perceived the climate within their program or department to be *somewhat hostile* or *hostile* toward individuals with views similar to their own. Concerns over censorship were more pronounced; more than two-thirds of professors reported censoring themselves during discussions with students or colleagues, and nearly one-third reported having been censured by others. These findings are concerning as universities have historically been viewed as institutions where open discussion is encouraged in the pursuit of knowledge (Matthews, 2022). However, findings indicate that many professors perceive the university climate as hostile and face barriers to openly expressing their views. Professors' reluctance varied by topic, with greater hesitation around expressing views on sensitive topics. One explanation may be the "spiral of silence" effect (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), whereby individuals who fear repercussions from others in the form of criticism and social isolation become reluctant to express their views. As a result, they observe their environment and remain silent if they perceive their opinions differ from the majority. Over time, views perceived as widely held become dominant in public discourse, while those who perceive themselves as holding minority viewpoints become less likely to voice their opinions (Matthes et al., 2018). Supporting this, Clark and colleagues (2025) found that self-censorship among US psychology professors was lower among those holding views deemed more socially desirable.

Another explanation for this reluctance may be explained by professors' concern over the potential repercussions they may face if they were to share their views on sensitive topics. One in two professors reported that they were *somewhat* to *extremely concerned* that someone would criticize them on social media, criticize their views as offensive, or file a complaint against them claiming their views had violated campus policy. Similarly, research from the US found that while most professors supported complete academic freedom, most were also very concerned about possible repercussions they may face for sharing their views openly on taboo topics including being ostracized by colleagues, online attacks, and stigmatization (Clark et al., 2025).

Concerns about potential repercussions were higher among professors than among Canadian students, wherein one in three students expressed concern over perceived repercussions after sharing their views (Cormier et al., 2026). In a study on cyberbullying, Cassidy and colleagues (2017) found that while students reported being cyberbullied by other students, faculty members reported being cyberbullied by both students and colleagues. This difference may help explain professors' greater concerns, as they may perceive potential repercussions coming from multiple sources within the academic environment rather than a single group. Doerfler and colleagues (2021) also reported on the challenges faced by researchers which included various types of harassments such as harassment to professors' research, harassment by colleagues and administrators, and

ideological harassment. Professors, many of whom are also active researchers, often occupy more public-facing roles than most students. As such, they may be exposed to a broader range of criticism, harassment, or potential consequences that may come with sharing their views. This greater visibility may also explain why professors reported higher levels of concern about potential repercussions in comparison to students.

Consistent with the findings above, professors expressed a range of concerns depending on the topic about potential professional repercussions including adversity, reputational damage, and missed professional opportunities, should their views on various topics become known. Across topics, 39.1% to 43.2% reported being *somewhat worried* to *very worried* about these repercussions.

Professors were divided in their confidence that university representatives would defend their right to express themselves, with nearly half answering that they were *not at all confident*, while the remaining professors answered *somewhat* to *very confident*.

Institutional Implications

With respect to the purpose of the university, the majority of professors reported that the institutions' two primary functions are educating students, and conducting research and creating knowledge. This belief appears to be in line with historical ideas of the university (Tight, 2024). Similarly, most professors agreed that their role within the university includes both teaching and the pursuit of research that aims to advance knowledge and understanding. Opinions were divided regarding self-censorship; while nearly half of professors reported self-censoring during academic or teaching discussions or refraining from conducting and publishing research out of possible career consequences, two out of five responded that they never self-censor. These findings are consistent with results from a US-based survey of higher education faculty, wherein between 20% and 50% of faculty reported feeling restricted in sharing their views and being inclined to self-censor (AACU, 2025). Canadian findings by Dummitt and Patterson (2022) are also somewhat consistent with ours, reporting that over 57% of right-leaning professors, and 34% of left-leaning professors engage in self-censorship.

Implications for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Initiatives

Most professors—representing nearly three-fifths of respondents—indicated prioritizing academic freedom over social justice when forced to choose between academic freedom and social justice, and most respondents reported that they would prioritize authors and thinkers with the most foundational contributions to the field over authors from diverse backgrounds. Professors and students differed somewhat in their responses, as approximately half of students reported prioritizing social justice within this dichotomy,

and more than half indicated a preference over prioritizing diversity of authors (Cormier et al., 2026).

When it came to university admissions, an overwhelming majority of professors *strongly* or *somewhat disagreed* with inquiring about students' identity or with favoring diversity above and over performance when reviewing applications. Student responses revealed similar results (Cormier et al., 2026). Most professors opposed rating university applicants lower based on their political perspectives, however between one-quarter and one-third *strongly agreed* with doing so. Interestingly, the greatest polarization occurred for politically left-leaning applicants; 59.5% of professors *strongly disagreed* with rating them lower, while 30% *strongly agreed* with doing so. Similarly, professors generally disagreed with evaluating academic job applications lower based on the applicants' political perspectives, with the greatest polarization occurring for left-leaning applicants; over half (58.3%) *strongly disagreed* with rating politically left-leaning applicants lower, whereas nearly one-third (29%) *strongly agreed* with doing so.

Results were similar regarding cancelling events or lectures based on a presenter's politics. Professors generally opposed cancellations based on the presenter's politics, however there was slightly less support for those with radically right-leaning politics. Findings were in line with what was observed in the previous questions, as the greatest divide occurred for left-leaning presenters, with 59.2% *strongly opposing* cancellation and 29.2% *strongly supporting* it. This polarization is somewhat noteworthy, as the majority of the sample identified as broadly or mostly left-leaning in their political views (69.7%). This may suggest a possible divide within the left-leaning political sphere among study participants; it could also be reflective of left-leaning politics where some are seen as "being too left" and others are viewed as "not left enough" (Goldberg, 2022).

Overall, professors tended to oppose cancelling events on the basis that the presenter was controversial, discussed triggering topics, was a respected but provocative academic figure, or faced a protest against the event. However, more than one-fifth were in *strong agreement* with cancellation for these reasons. These findings are consistent with earlier result showing that while most professors prioritize academic freedom, one-third prioritize social justice. Results were reversed when events involved a strong risk of physical violence and evidence of hate speech towards certain segments of society; over half of professors supported cancellation of the event while slightly more than one-third opposed it. This suggests that while professors are generally open to differing viewpoints, most oppose events involving risk of physical danger and perhaps draw a distinction between what constitutes academic freedom and what does not.

Regarding hypothetical student petitions to sanction, reprimand, or terminate a professor for expressing views or conducting research perceived to be outside mainstream academic and progressive norms, more than half of respondents expressed that they would *oppose the petition*. About 1 in 4 professors reported that they would *support the petition*.

Similar findings emerged in the study by Clark and colleagues (2025) which explored self-censorship and professors' perspectives on controversial empirical claims—referred to as “taboos.” The researchers found that professors did not want to dissuade research into controversial topics, and most opposed sanctioning colleagues based on moral objections to research findings and reported high levels of contempt towards those who participate in petitions to retract papers for the same reasons. The findings were also consistent with the study conducted by Dummitt and Patterson (2022), wherein most professors reported they would oppose a student petition to silence a professor who conducted research questioning racial injustice as a significant problem in Canada, though a sizeable minority said they would support the petition. Responses showed little heterogeneity across topics, with private support and opposition more frequently reported than publicly.

In a hypothetical scenario involving a university equity, diversity, and inclusion initiative, most professors opposed institutional quotas for diverse authorship on course reading lists, while one in four were in support. Opposing the initiative privately appeared more common. When asked what steps should be taken for professors who did not comply with the initiative, over half of professors expressed that no action should be taken. Approximately one-quarter indicated that professors should complete implicit bias awareness training, which differed considerably from students, among whom four out of five students supported this view (Cormier et al., 2026). These findings and others above on differences between Canadian student and professor views suggest that there may be ideological or generational divides between these groups.

Lastly, professors were asked about their experiences of maltreatment on campus based on their opinions, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and language. The lowest occurrence for maltreatment was for sexual orientation where 90% of individuals reported never experiencing it, while the highest was for gender, wherein nearly one-fifth of individuals reported experiencing unfair treatment *a few times a year*, 13% *once a year or less*, and 6.3% *every few weeks*. Studies from other countries examining harassment among university professors have shown that gender harassment, while more prevalent among women, is experienced by professors across genders (Lampman, 2012; Muhonen, 2016).

Conclusion

This research explored university professors' comfort of expression, politics, and perception of the campus climate across Canadian higher education institutions. Many professors perceived the academic climate as unwelcoming toward individuals who shared their views, and a majority reported engaging in self-censorship during discussions while also experiencing censorship by others. Within this context, professors reported high levels of concern over possible consequences of expressing their views freely. In general, most

professors prioritized academic freedom and expressed opposition to inquiries into prospective student or applicant identities, to favoring diversity over performance, or to evaluating applicants based on their political views. The findings align with those indicating a general decline in perceived academic freedom among professors and indicate a need for greater protections of academic freedom in Canadian universities. Whether such protections are best enacted from a top-down institutional or governmental safeguarding, from a department or faculty level, or through broader campus culture initiatives remains to be seen. This line of research suggests that Canadian universities would benefit from measures encouraging broader acceptance of individual expression of diverse viewpoints on campuses such as greater practice and normalization of comfort of expression on sensitive topics without fear of repercussions. Further research in the Canadian context is required to explore professors' experiences in light of current global, political, and technological developments—and, to elucidate what are likely a combination of complex factors contributing to this decline in academic freedom in order to initiate appropriate strategies to address these concerns. Exploring important differences found in beliefs between students and professors regarding censorship, academic freedom, and EDI may also represent an important avenue for future research.

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