

Scholars Under Fire

The Targeting of Scholars for
Ideological Reasons from 2015 to Present



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights in Education



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Executive Summary

Scholars have long been targeted for sanction by ideological adversaries. However, some worrying trends are emerging.¹ The current research reveals that since 2015 targeting incidents are on the rise and are increasingly coming from within academia itself — from other scholars and especially from undergraduate students. These targeting incidents take a multitude of forms, ranging from demands for termination and other sanctions (e.g., demotion, retraction, suspension, etc.) to various forms of harassment or intimidation, including death threats.²

This research documents the ways and reasons that scholars have faced calls for sanction; how scholars and institutional administrators have responded to different forms of targeting; and what (if any) sanctions scholars have ultimately faced in response to these targeting incidents, from 2015 to the present (up to and including July 31, 2021).

The key findings of this report include:

- Over the past five and a half years, a total of 426 targeting incidents have occurred. Almost three-quarters of them (314 out of 426; 74%) have resulted in some form of sanction.
- The number of targeting incidents has risen dramatically, from 24 in 2015 to 113 in 2020. As of mid-2021, 61 targeting incidents have already occurred.
- Scholars were targeted most often for speech involving race (e.g., racial inequality, historic racism, racial slurs, BLM, DEI).
- In addition to race, targeting incidents tended to involve hot-button issues such as partisanship, gender, and institutional policy.
- In almost two-thirds (269; 63%) of the incidents, scholars were targeted for expressing a personal view or opinion on a controversial social issue.
- Half of the targeting incidents have occurred because of a scholar's scientific inquiry (106 incidents; 25%) or teaching practices (107 incidents; 25%).

¹ Stevens, S.T., Jussim, L., & Honeycutt, N. (2020). Scholarship suppression: Emerging trends and theoretical perspectives. *Societies*, 10, 82; doi:10.3390/soc10040082.

² Tiede, H.J., McCarthy, S., Kamola, I., & Spurgas, A.K. (2021). Data snapshot: Whom does Campus Reform target and what are the effects? An influential conservative website's strategic coverage and its impact. *Academe*, 107, 2. Available online: <https://www.aaup.org/article/data-snapshot-whom-does-campus-reform-target-and-what-are-effects> (accessed on July 7, 2021).

- Targeting incidents have occurred most often in the disciplines that are at the core of a liberal arts education: law, political science, English, history, and philosophy.
- Targeting incidents have come from individuals and groups to the political left of the scholar more often than the political right; these targetings have come more often from those on campus, have been more organized (i.e., the online petitions have considerably more signatures), and have typically been aimed at scholars who are tenured, White, and male.
- Campuses where the most targeting incidents have occurred tend to also have severely speech-restrictive policies, and are unlikely to have adopted the Chicago Principles guaranteeing the preeminence of free speech.

About Us

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to defending and sustaining the individual rights of students and faculty members at America's colleges and universities. These rights include freedom of speech, freedom of association, due process, legal equality, religious liberty, and sanctity of conscience—the essential qualities of liberty.

For more information, visit thefire.org or FIRE's Twitter account, @thefireorg.

Acknowledgments

Our gratitude goes to Komi German and Sean Stevens for conceptualizing and conducting this research, and for authoring this report.

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Suggested Citation: German, K.T. & Stevens, S.T. (2021). Scholars under fire: The targeting of scholars for ideological reasons from 2015 to present. *The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education*. Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/research/publications/miscellaneous-publications/scholars-under-fire/>

Detailed Methodology

FIRE researched targeting incidents involving scholars at public and private American institutions of higher education, including both community colleges and four-year institutions, from the year 2015 to mid-2021 (i.e., targeting incidents that occurred before July 31, 2021). Not all demands for professional sanction result in the scholar being penalized. In the database, we include incidents in which scholars were targeted, regardless of the results of their targetings. A total of **426** targeting incidents were identified and **almost three-quarters** of them (**314 out of 426; 74%**) resulted in some form of sanction. Below, we first define important terminology and then describe how we identified scholars who have been the subject of a targeting incident from 2015 to mid-2021.

Who is a scholar?

A scholar is any individual who engages in acts of scholarship within the academic domain and has an official affiliation with a college or university. This includes teaching at a college or university, conducting research and submitting the findings to the peer-review process, and/or discussing peer-reviewed scholarship at professional academic events (e.g., conferences, panel discussions).

For the purposes of this database, a scholar, based on this definition, includes: professors (assistant, associate, full, emeritus), lecturers (adjunct, clinical, instructors), postdoctoral researchers/research fellows/scholars at universities or university-affiliated research centers (e.g., Princeton's University Center for Human Values, Stanford University's Hoover Institution), attending physicians (medical doctors working in university settings), graduate students (master's, doctoral, law), and medical trainees (medical students, residents, fellows).

We exclude deans and other administrators who have never held a faculty position, as well as researchers working for non-university-affiliated organizations.

What is a targeting incident?

We define a *targeting incident* as a campus controversy involving efforts to investigate, penalize or otherwise *professionally* sanction a scholar for engaging in constitutionally protected forms of speech. Our definition of a *targeting incident* does not include instances in which the scholar is subjected to harassment or other forms of intimidation, but does not face an attempt at being professionally penalized or sanctioned. Nor does it include cases where the individual(s) or group(s) expresses opposition to a scholar's speech, but does not make any demands that the scholar and/or institution take action to remedy the situation.

What details are recorded for each targeting incident?

For each targeting incident recorded, we document what was being expressed (*topic*); who was being addressed or talked about (*subject*); the reason for the expression (*intent*), and where the scholar's speech took place (*context*). Additionally, we identified those who initiated the targeting incident (*source*); how they want the scholar sanctioned (*demands*); and whether the targeting incident was initiated by those to the

political left or right of the scholar (*politics*). We also included how the scholar reacted to the targeting incident (*response*); how the institution or administration reacted (*administrative response*); and the result of the targeting incident (*outcome*).

For each of the above descriptor categories, the coding options are not mutually exclusive and more than one option could be selected. For instance, when Sandra Sellers, a former adjunct professor of law at Georgetown University, was unwittingly recorded telling her colleague, “I end up having this angst every semester that a lot of my lower ones [students] are Blacks,” the *topic* was categorized as “race”; the *subjects* were “Black people,” “graduate students,” and “scholars”; the *intent* was categorized as both “personal view/opinion” and “unintentional/accidental”; the *context* was a “direct interaction”; the *source* was both “graduate students” and “undergraduate students”; the *demands* included a “list,” “policy change,” and “termination”; the *scholar’s response* was to “express regret” and “leave/resign”; the *institution’s response* was to “apologize” for and “terminate” the scholar; and the *result* was that the scholar was “terminated.” (Note: although Sellers announced her resignation, the dean of the law school also informed her that he was terminating her contract, effective immediately; therefore, the outcome was “termination” rather than “resignation.”)

The topics of expression identified are: abortion, climate change, coronavirus (COVID-19), court trial, elections/voting, foreign affairs, free speech/expression, gender, immigration, institutional policy, Israel/Palestine, law enforcement protests, mental health, partisanship, race, religion, Second Amendment, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and terrorism.

The subjects of expression identified are: administrators, Asian people, Black people, Chinese people, Christian people, doctors, feminists, graduate students, Hispanic people, immigrants, Jewish people, left-wing people, LGBTQ people, men, Muslim people, Native American people, Palestinian people, plaintiffs/defendants, police officers, politicians, public figures, religious figures, right-wing people, scholars, transgender people, undergraduate students, White people, and women.

The contexts of expression identified are: classroom, direct interaction, email, op-ed/blog, professional duties, protest, public comments, scholarship, and social media.

When inferring the scholar’s intent, we evaluated the tone and content of the scholar’s speech and we took the perspective of the scholar rather than the perspective of those demanding sanctions. The intentions of the scholar’s expression identified are: whether the scholar expressed support for a social or political cause (*activism/social change*); whether the scholar meant to make a joke or friendly remark (*benign/friendly*); whether the scholar meant to offend, show contempt, and/or approve of violence (categorized as *malicious/hateful*); whether the scholar meant to express a personal view or opinion on a controversial social issue (*personal view/opinion*); whether the scholar presented sensitive, controversial, and/or difficult content (e.g., texts containing a racial slur, violence against women) to encourage discussion and learning (*pedagogical*); whether the scholar discussed scholarship, conducted research, published research, and/or presented a testable hypothesis (*scientific inquiry*); and, whether the scholar’s expression was meant to

occur in private (*unintentional/accidental*). There were also a small number of cases where the scholar's intent was not clear (*unclear*).

The sources of targeting incidents identified are: activists, administrators, alumni, corporations, general public, graduate students, politicians, public figures, scholars, stakeholders, undergraduate students, and anonymous.

The demands made by the source of a targeting incident identified are: apology and/or condemnation, censorship, demotion, list, policy change, suspension, termination, training, and vague investigation.

The scholar's responses identified are: to deny responsibility, to deny wrongdoing, to express regret, to file a lawsuit, to provide additional context, to voluntarily leave or resign, and to make no comment.

The administration responses identified are: to apologize publicly for and/or condemn the scholar, to launch an investigation, to require the scholar to not engage in that form of expression again, to require the scholar undergo training, to support the scholar's speech or right to free speech, to suspend the scholar, to terminate the scholar, and to make no comment.

The outcomes of a targeting incident identified are: censorship of the scholar, demotion of the scholar, investigation into the scholar, mandatory training for the scholar, reinstatement of the scholar, suspension of the scholar, termination of the scholar's employment, voluntary resignation of the scholar, and no sanction against the scholar.

For more specific details on how each of these categories were coded, please refer to the [Scholars Under Fire Codebook](#) on FIRE's website.

Political motivations for targeting incidents

Often scholars are targeted because their speech is perceived as politically conservative or politically liberal by the source of the targeting incident. However, this does not mean that the scholar being targeted is, in fact, a conservative or a liberal. There are many recorded targeting incidents in which a scholar is not ideologically dissimilar from those targeting them for sanction. Instead, those targeting them tend to be more ideologically committed or extreme.

For instance, a scholar may resemble someone who would identify as "slightly" or "somewhat" liberal on an ideological self-identification measure, while the source of the targeting resembles someone who would identify as "very" or "extremely" liberal. Because of this, we classify the political motivation for a targeting incident as relative, coming "from the left of the scholar" or "from the right of the scholar," rather than inferring the scholar's actual political orientation. Not all targeting incidents have identifiable political motivations. The political motivations for such incidents are classified as "unclear/irrelevant."

Collecting the data

To collect data on faculty targeting incidents we relied on eight sources. Our primary source for identifying targeting incidents was news reports obtained from campus, local, and national news outlets. We then checked the following seven existing sources tracking targeting incidents of scholars (and other individuals)³ to identify additional cases that did not emerge during our search of news reports:

- Lee Jussim’s list of “Threat(s) to Academic Freedom ... From Academics”
- Jeffrey Sachs’ list of “The US Faculty Termination for Political Speech Dataset (2000-2020)”
- The “Free Speech Tracker” from The Free Speech Project at Georgetown University
- Duke Law School’s “Campus Speech Database”
- The National Association of Scholars (NAS) list of “Tracking ‘Cancel Culture’ in Higher Education”
- National Review’s list “Tracking ‘Cancel Culture’ in Higher Education”
- The “Retraction Watch Database”

As noted above, this method identified a total of 426 targeting incidents from January 1, 2015, to July 31, 2021.

³ Acevedo, D. (2020). Tracking “Cancel Culture” in Higher Education. Available online: https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/tracking-cancel-culture-in-higher-education?mc_cid=a2bc86b30c#caseslist (accessed on July 7, 2021); Duke Law Campus Speech Database. Available online: <https://campus-speech.law.duke.edu/> (accessed on July 7, 2021); Evans, Z. & Loftus, J. (2020). The Cancel Counter: Thousands Sign Petition to Remove Walt Whitman Statue From Rutgers. Available online: <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/the-cancel-counter/> (accessed on July 7, 2021); The Free Speech Project. Free Speech Tracker. Available online: <https://freespeechproject.georgetown.edu/free-speech-tracker/> (accessed on July 7, 2021); Jussim, L. (2020). The Threat to Academic Freedom . . . from Academics. 2020. Available online: <https://medium.com/@leej12255/the-threat-to-academic-freedom-from-academics-4685b1705794> (accessed on July 7, 2021); Sachs, J. The US Faculty Termination for Political Speech Dataset (2000-2020). Available online: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1eeTHZQOh9faZ2P3C_O3sVBuRAG1LzIZnsg6LB50NUHk/edit#gid=122618086 (accessed on July 7, 2021); The Retraction Watch Database. Available online: <http://retractiondatabase.org/RetractionSearch.aspx?> (accessed on July 7, 2021).

Overview

Throughout human history, scholars have been targeted for their work. In 399 B.C., Socrates was found guilty of “corrupting the youth of Athens” through his teaching approach and philosophy of knowledge. He was sentenced to death. In the early 17th century, Galileo was declared a heretic by the Catholic Church for his support of heliocentrism and ordered to completely abstain from teaching, defending, or even discussing it. Later in life, he was convicted of heresy a second time and placed under house arrest until his death. There are other, subtler forms of scholarship suppression that result from fearing the social consequences that can occur when one engages in controversial pedagogy or pursues controversial scholarship. For instance, Nicolaus Copernicus and Charles Darwin both delayed the publication of their most influential work (Copernicus, until after his death; Darwin for decades) to avoid sanction and punishment from the Catholic Church.

Today, at least in Western democracies, scholars do not face the possibility of house arrest or being put to death for their speech work. Furthermore, within modern academic scholarship there are very few topics that are explicitly forbidden. Nevertheless, since 2015 numerous scholars have faced attempts to have their peer-reviewed research retracted;⁴ been terminated for their political views;⁵ and seen petitions with more than 10,000 signatories demanding an administrative response to off-campus speech (data from this report); been harassed or threatened;⁶ or received death threats.⁷

Additionally, there are several “academic blacklists” that list scholars because their research, teaching, and/or extramural activities involve contentious political issues (e.g., Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions). We determined that a scholar appearing on such lists did not meet the threshold for inclusion in the database and report unless we could confirm that the scholar also faced explicit demands for professional sanctions. Even though these cases are excluded from our database, we are very concerned that these “academic blacklists” chill speech because they can make the listed scholars more likely to be targeted in the future.

We do not think our concern is overblown. A recent survey of 206 faculty members who were profiled for “liberal bias” by *Campus Reform* in 2020 found that almost one in four (24%) curtailed their social media presence. Moreover, 83 of the faculty surveyed (40%) reported that they were harassed and received threats of harm and physical violence. Among these faculty members, 39% curtailed their social media presence, 12% changed their teaching, and 6% made changes to their research.⁸

⁴ Jussim (2020).

⁵ Sachs.

⁶ Tiede et al. (2021).

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

Furthermore, in the process of building this database we identified 12 cases where a scholar was possibly harassed, intimidated, or even received death threats but was neither targeted for, or subjected to, *professional* sanctions thus, these were not included as a targeting incident in our database. That figure across five and half years is lower than the 83 scholars who, via an anonymous survey, reported they were harassed, intimidated, or targeted with death threats.⁹ This discrepancy suggests that such incidents are made public less frequently, as we relied on publicly available information as our main source of data. That almost half (48%) of the faculty surveyed who reported receiving threats also said they did not report those threats to campus security or law enforcement, supports this notion. The Scholars Under Fire Database is an ongoing project. FIRE will add new targeting incidents that occur, update targeting incidents that occurred between 2015 and 2020, and investigate the occurrence of targeting incidents prior to 2015. If you were targeted or know of an incident that you would like to report, please email ScholarsUnderFire@thefire.org. If you wish to keep certain aspects of the incident confidential, FIRE will take all necessary legal precautions to do so. Furthermore, FIRE has created the [Faculty Legal Defense Fund](#) (FLDF), which provides legal aid to scholars whose institutions attempt to penalize them for their expression.

The body of this report contains five sections. First, we present the topics that are most likely to result in a scholar being targeted. Next, we discuss the major trends since 2015, followed by an exploration of the outcomes that resulted from these targeting incidents. We describe the most common outcomes, the demographic and professional characteristics of scholars who were more likely to be sanctioned or even terminated, and whether the scholar's intent mattered to the outcome. We also explore what kinds of responses, what contexts of expression, and what topics of speech were most likely to result in a scholar's termination. Finally, we discuss in depth particular scholars who have faced some of the strongest opposition, as measured by the number of times they have been targeted and/or the number of signatories on petitions calling for sanctions against them.

The Scholars Under Fire Database and this report reveal that since 2015 scholars have increasingly been targeted for sanction by ideological adversaries. These adversaries are increasingly arising within academia, and more often than not, are successful at achieving some form of professional sanction against the scholar.

⁹ Id.

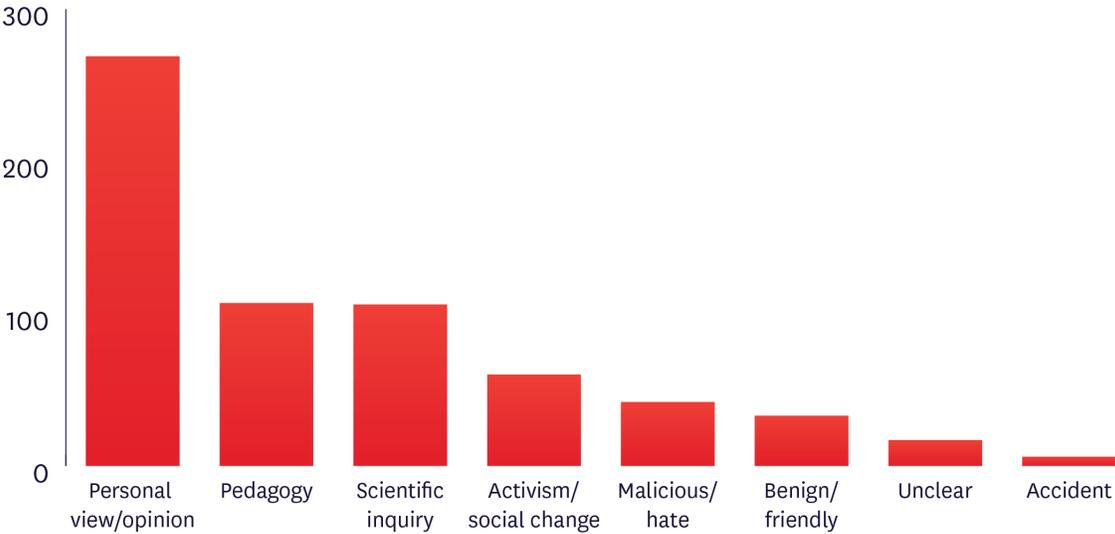
Key Findings

Scholars have many potential reasons for expressing their views. After classifying the various intentions of scholars who were subsequently targeted, we made some surprising and concerning discoveries. In almost two-thirds (269; 63%) of the incidents, scholars were targeted for expressing a personal view or opinion on a controversial social issue.

Although this figure is concerning, we find it even more alarming that half of the scholars were targeted for expression intended to serve a pedagogical (25%) and/or scientific (25%) function. In 107 targeting incidents, scholars were presenting sensitive, controversial, and/or difficult content (e.g., text containing a racial slur, content showing violence against women) for purposes of encouraging discussion and learning. In 106 incidents, scholars were discussing scholarship, conducting research, and/or offering a testable hypothesis.¹⁰ Such targetings have the effect of undermining the primary function of academic freedom: to ensure the furtherance of knowledge in American institutions of higher education.

Scholars are targeted most often for expressing their views on controversial social issues.

Number of scholars targeted for the following reasons:



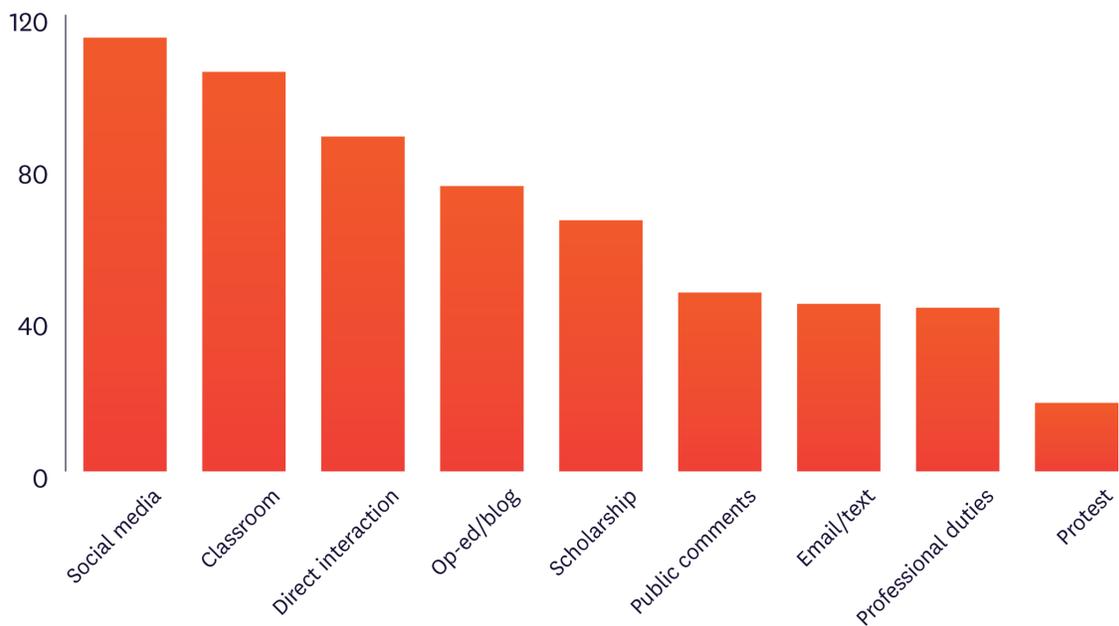
¹⁰ Note: In 37 incidents, scholars were targeted for both their scientific inquiry and pedagogy.

Also worrying is that the scholars who were most often targeted come from disciplines that routinely discuss and debate what it means to live in a free and open society, namely law (37 incidents), political science (32 incidents), English (29 incidents), history (30 incidents), and philosophy (24 incidents). Although a large percentage of the total faculty population comes from these fields, they are still overrepresented in the database, and by contrast, many other highly populated disciplines (e.g., business, health professions, engineering) were the site for fewer than 10 targeting incidents. For scholars in the fields of law, political science, English, history, and philosophy to be disproportionately under siege suggests that the core of a liberal arts in higher education institutions is one of the primary sites for our current culture wars.

The most common contexts of targeted scholars' expression were social media (114 incidents; 27%), the classroom (105 incidents; 25%), and direct interaction (88 incidents; 21%). "Social media" expression takes place on Facebook and/or Twitter and involves posts and/or comments made from the scholar's account. "Classroom" expression involves in-person and/or virtual sessions, assignments, exams, syllabi, and/or course descriptions. "Direct interaction" means that the scholar was communicating with a specific, identified individual in person and/or online.

Scholars are targeted most often when expressing their views on social media.

Number of scholars targeted for expression in the following contexts:



The majority of targeting incidents came from individuals and groups on campus, and many of these incidents came from those to the political left of the scholar. This is not surprising when one considers that

the professoriate¹¹ and the students¹² are predominantly liberal. Furthermore, on-campus targeting incidents tend to involve scholars who are White (85% of targeted scholars), male (70%), and tenured (65%). Although White and/or male scholars were targeted at slightly higher rates than their respective population numbers within academia (approximately 75% of scholars are White and approximately 60% are male¹³), the rate that tenured scholars were targeted at was alarming, as only 24% of faculty in the United States have tenure.¹⁴ It may be that non-tenured scholars, due to their professional vulnerability, self-censor more than their tenured counterparts, and/or that tenured scholars express themselves more freely because of their professional security. It is also possible that because tenured scholars are more prominent, they may have a larger platform and therefore may be more prone to criticism.

When on-campus targeting incidents come from the right of the scholar, they tend to be initiated by administrators, and not students or other scholars. This may be due to their desire to maintain order and penalize transgressions that may draw negative public attention to the institution or its leadership. Indeed, in recent years institutional leaders and administrators have responded to financial stresses and opportunities by expanding beyond the traditional core of students and scholars to focus on building relations with governmental officials, donors, trustees, CEOs, and other constituencies that help them generate revenue and enhance the brand reputation of their institutions. Given that a good number of the targeting incidents from the right of the scholar are initiated by off-campus individuals and groups (e.g., the general public, politicians), it may not be surprising that administrators cater to, or are aligned with, the goals of these constituencies.

¹¹ Gross, N., & Fosse, E. (2012). Why are professors liberal?. *Theory and Society*, 41(2), 127-168.; Langbert, M. (2018). Homogenous: The political affiliations of elite liberal arts college faculty. *Academic Questions*, 31(2), 186-197; Ladd, E. C., Liset, M. (1976). *The Divided Academy: Professors and Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company; Zipp, J. F., & Fenwick, R. (2006). Is the academy a liberal hegemony? The political orientations and educational values of professors. *International Journal of Public Opinion Quarterly*, 70(3), 304-326.

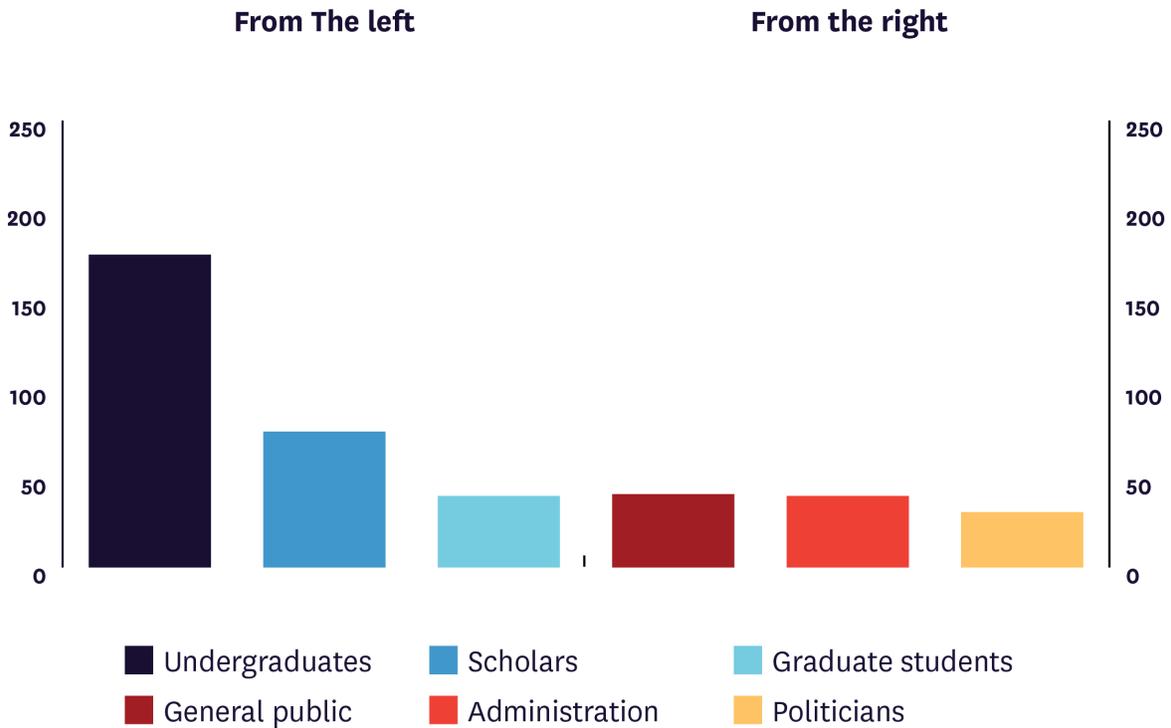
¹² Stevens, S.T. & Schwichtenberg, A. (2020). 2020 College Free Speech Rankings: What's the Climate for Free Speech on America's College Campuses? Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/research/publications/student-surveys/2020-college-free-speech-rankings/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

¹³ "Fast Facts: Race/ethnicity of college faculty." *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)*. Available online: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

¹⁴ "Tenure Status of Full-Time and Part-Time Faculty Members, Fall 2018" (2020, August 16). *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Available online: https://www.chronicle.com/article/tenure-status-of-full-time-and-part-time-faculty-members-fall-2018?cid=reg_wall_signup&bc_nonce=ipcfrynotehn257mxmgzu (accessed on July 13, 2021).

Scholars Under Fire 2015 TO 2020

Top 3 Sources of Targeting Incidents From the Left and Right



Targeting incidents occurred at a fairly similar rate at public (228; 54% of all targeting incidents) and private (197; 46%) institutions. The split between the types of institutions is surprisingly close, revealing a systemic problem: Scholars at colleges and universities of all types are increasingly being targeted for ideological reasons.

The most frequent subjects of targeted scholars' speech (i.e., people who the targeted scholar was talking to and/or about) were individuals and groups on campus, including undergraduate students (217 incidents), other scholars (165 incidents), graduate students (97 incidents), and administrators (72 incidents). With regard to racial groups, Black people were by far the most common subject of expression (109 incidents), followed by White people (61 incidents), Hispanic people (23 incidents), Asian people (21 incidents), and then Native American people (6 incidents). Women were far more likely to be the subject of expression (80 incidents) than were men (24 incidents). Among religious groups, Jewish people were the most common subject (31 incidents), followed by Christian people (24 incidents), then Muslim people (23 incidents).

Political groups — including right-wing people (73 incidents) and left-wing people (51 incidents) — were also a common subject of targeted scholars’ speech, as were members of the LGBTQ+ community (54 incidents).

Finally, there are six institutions that have experienced five or more targeting incidents since 2015. Stanford University experienced the most targeting incidents with 18, a figure double that of the runners-up, including Harvard, Georgetown, and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), with 9 incidents, the University of Pennsylvania with 7 and Yale with 6 incidents.

With the exception of UCLA, which has a green light rating from FIRE for its speech policies and was ranked highly in the 2020 Campus Free Speech Rankings,¹⁵ the remaining schools are more likely to maintain severely speech-restrictive policies, tend not to have adopted the Chicago Statement as a reassurance of the institution’s preeminent commitment to free speech (Georgetown being an exception), and rank average to below average on the Campus Free Speech Rankings (Yale being an exception).

Which topics of speech are most likely to result in scholars being targeted?

There are myriad topics of expression for which faculty have been targeted in recent years. Although the “hot topics” differ slightly from year to year, the four that stand out across time are race, partisanship, institutional policy, and gender. From 2015 to July 31st, 2021, there were 198 incidents (and 37 corresponding terminations) in which scholars were targeted for discussing various issues surrounding race. These issues include the discussion of racial inequality, historical racism, race-specific diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and the use of racial slurs.

In 110 incidents (25 of which resulted in termination), scholars were targeted for discussing issues of partisanship. By “partisanship,” we mean explicit mentions of specific politicians, or terms like Democrat, Republican, liberal, conservative, left, or right during the scholar’s speech or expression. Of these 110 such incidents, 58 came from the left of the scholar and 52 came from the right.

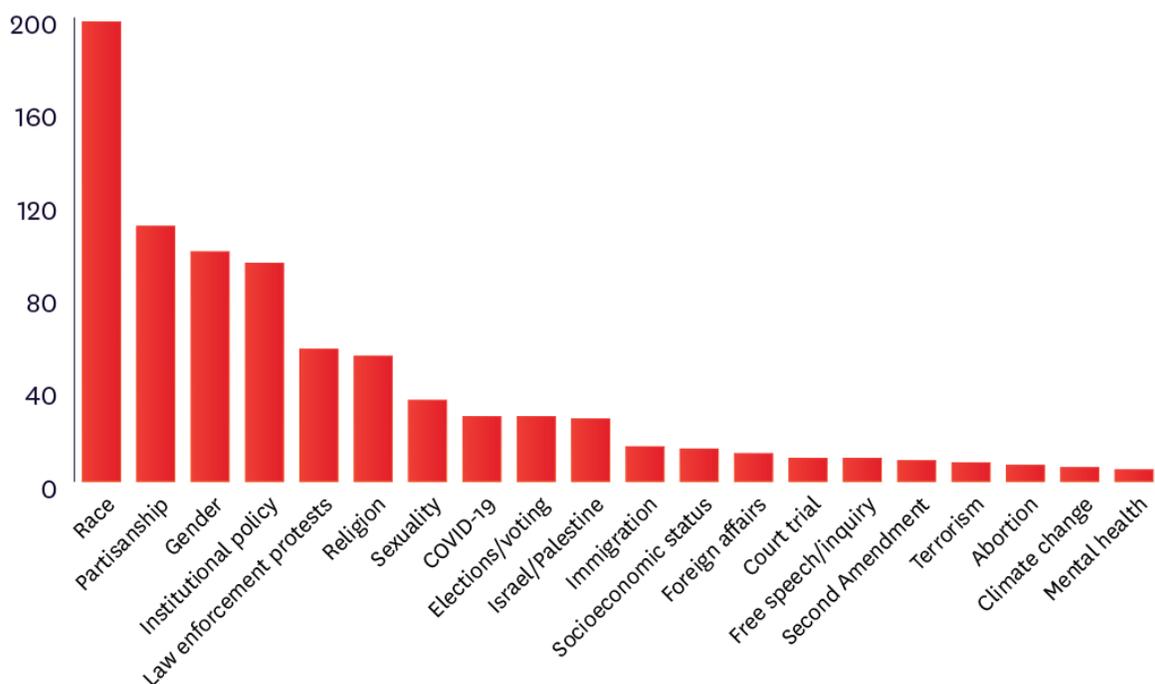
In 99 incidents (and 26 terminations), scholars were targeted for discussing issues of gender. These issues include the discussion of gender inequality; Title IX procedures and cases; sexual harassment allegations and defenses; transgender identity; sexual assault allegations and defenses; and the use of misogynistic slurs.

Scholars were also frequently targeted for their expressed views on institutional policy (94 incidents, 38 terminations), law enforcement protests (57 incidents, 8 terminations), and religion (54 incidents, 22 terminations).

¹⁵ Stevens & Schwichtenberg (2020).

Scholars are targeted most often for expressing their views on race.

Number of scholars targeted for expression about the following topics:



Not surprisingly, in every year since 2015, race has been one of the three topics most likely to produce a targeting incident. The topics of partisanship, gender, and institutional policy were also more likely to produce a targeting incident, although in 2020 gender and institutional policy were surpassed by the topic of law enforcement protests. This shift was brief, however, as midway through 2021, institutional policy is once again in the top three, along with race and partisanship.

Major Trends Over Time

In recent years scholars have expressed concerns that targeting incidents are occurring with greater frequency¹⁶ and that they are increasingly coming from within the academy (e.g., from other scholars or students).¹⁷ The Scholars Under Fire Database provides scholars and journalists with a plethora of information about each targeting incident (see Detailed Methodology), and allows us to assess the veracity of these claims. Based on the current data, it is clear that both of them hold water.

¹⁶ Jussim (2020); Stevens et al. (2020).

¹⁷ Id.

Targeting incidents: 2015 to present

In 2015, a total of 24 targeting incidents occurred, and by 2020, this figure reached 113. The pace does not appear to be abating as, so far in 2021, we have recorded 61 targeting incidents. There were two notable spikes in targeting incidents over the past five years, and both times the number of targeting incidents almost doubled the previous year's total.

The first occurred in 2017 when 68 targeting incidents occurred, compared to 38 in 2016. Interestingly, 2017 is also the only year in which targeting incidents came from the right of the scholar more often than from the left. This increase may have been a result of how scholars reacted to the 2016 presidential election, particularly on social media. After all, in 2017, 20 targeting incidents involved partisanship, compared to seven in 2016 and nine in 2018. Additionally, in 2017, 10 of the targeting incidents involved speech or expression about elections, compared to two such incidents in both 2016 and 2018. Furthermore, politicians (e.g., Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton) were the subject of expression 17 times, compared to just five times in 2016 and seven in 2018, and right-wing people (e.g., Donald Trump, Republicans) were the subject of expression in 19 targeting incidents, compared to just three in 2016 and 10 in 2018. Finally, 18 targeting incidents were the result of some form of expression on social media, compared to nine in 2016 and twelve in 2018.

For instance, in 2017 Garrett Nichols, an assistant professor of English at Bridgewater State University, was placed on temporary leave after facing calls for the university to investigate his social media posts. In the first post Nichols said, "F--- Donald Trump. F--- ANYONE who voted for Donald Trump. F--- ANYONE who tries to explain to me the 'real' needs of people who voted for Donald Trump." The second post of Nichols linked to an article with the headline, "The Ku Klux Klan says it will hold a Trump Victory Parade in North Carolina." With the article Nichols posted, "Trump voters: you all belong in this parade." The administration condemned Nichols' speech and the incident was investigated by university police, who found no basis for taking any further action against Nichols.

The second spike occurred last year when targeting incidents hit their current peak of 113, compared to 66 in 2019. This increase coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, and the subsequent racial justice protests. More specifically, 75 of these targeting incidents involved speech or expression about race, 34 were about law enforcement protests, and 20 of them were about COVID-19. The vast majority of these targeting incidents (87%) came from the left.

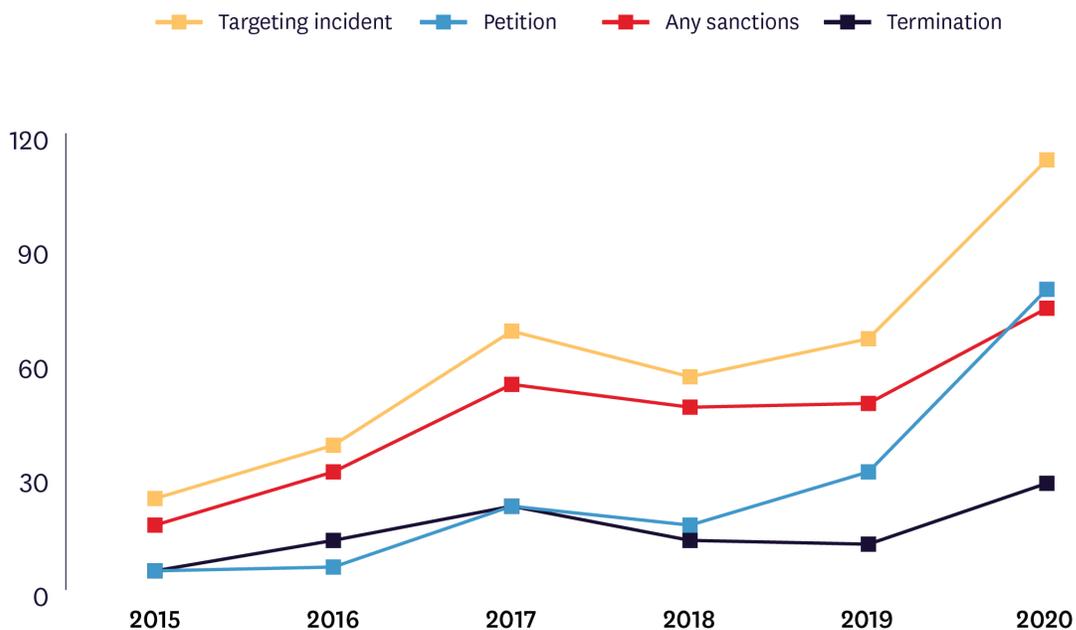
From 2015 to 2020 the annual number of petitions targeting scholars for sanction also increased from five to a high of 79. The pace of this trend has accelerated rapidly over the past two years when the figure at least doubled both times—from 17 in 2018 to 31 in 2019, and then up to 79 in 2020. As with targeting incidents, the pace of petitions targeting scholars for sanction appears to be remaining steady this year; as of July 31, 2021 we have recorded 36 petitions.

Since 2015, the number of scholars facing a targeting incident has risen and these campaigns are becoming more organized. But how successful are they? How often does a targeting incident result in sanctions? Overall, targeting incidents are often successful —with a success rate above 68% in every year included in

the database. However, 2020 had the lowest success rate (69%) even though it set a record for the number of scholars who were successfully sanctioned. This suggests that one of the primary reasons sanctions and terminations have increased since 2015 is because the number of targeting incidents overall has increased and not because such attempts have become more effective.

Scholars Under Fire 2015 to 2020

Number of Incidents Per Year



Targeting incidents: From within academia

It is quite clear that scholars are increasingly subject to targeting incidents. But, are these targeting incidents increasingly coming from within academia itself? The answer to that question is also yes. To be clear, by “coming from within academia itself” we mean that the targeting incident was initiated by undergraduate students, graduate students, other scholars, and/or school administrators.

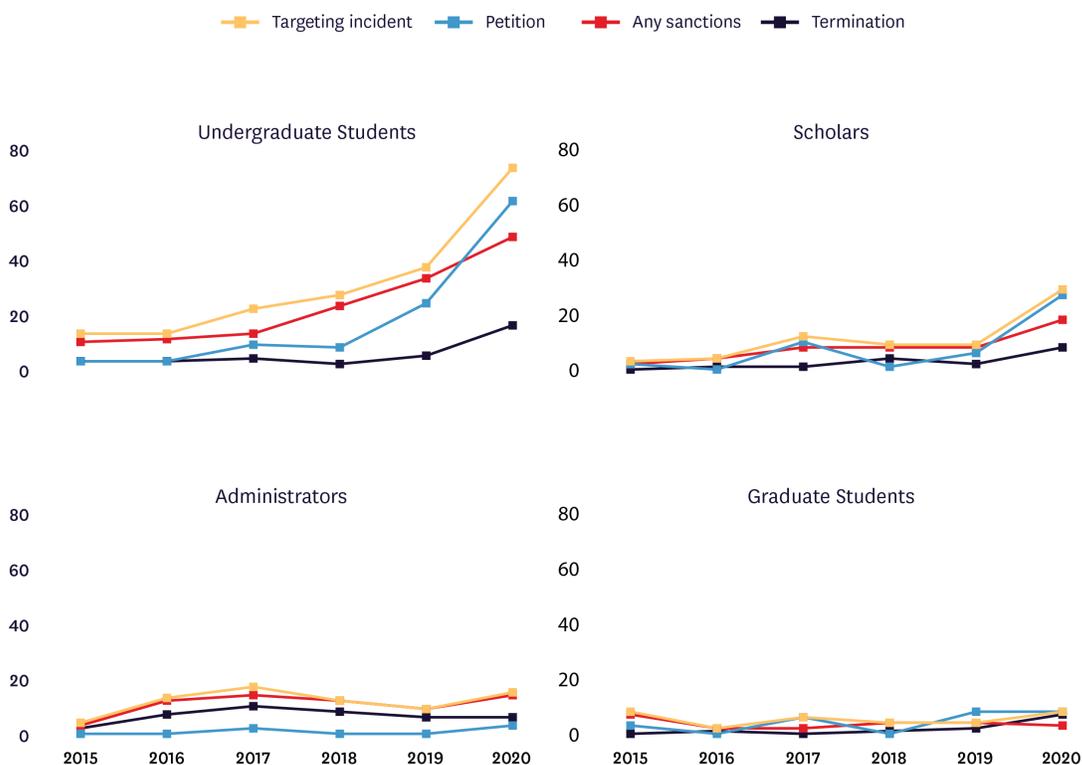
In 2015, undergraduates were involved in 13 targeting incidents, graduate students were involved in eight, scholars were involved in three, and administrators were involved in four. In 2020, these figures were more than five times larger for undergraduates (involved in 73 targeting incidents) and, overall, half of all of the targeting incidents in our database were initiated by undergraduates (213; 50%). In other words, undergraduate students are the primary source for the increased number of targeting incidents coming from within academia.

Yet, when comparing 2015 to 2020, the number of targeting incidents initiated by scholars was almost ten times larger in 2020 (3 vs. 29, respectively). This is concerning because within academia the production of ideas and knowledge — otherwise known as scholarship — primarily depends on the subjective evaluations of one’s colleagues, otherwise known as other scholars. Almost all academic incentives are fundamentally social. Finding a job, obtaining tenure, getting promoted, obtaining grants and funding for research, and publishing one’s research all depend on evaluations from one’s peers. When social evaluations are so central to one’s success, it is fairly easy to induce a fear of social sanction for expressing ideas that may not be factually or scientifically wrong, but are widely disapproved of and unpopular, and such fears have the potential to chill academic freedom and deter scholars from exploring ideas and hypotheses. Unfortunately, in 2021 we have already recorded 23 targeting incidents initiated by scholars.

Administrators initiated four targeting incidents in 2015, more than triple that in 2016 (13 incidents), reaching a peak of 17 in 2017. In 2020, 15 targeting incidents were initiated by administrators, more than triple the number of such incidents from 2015. Finally, graduate students were the only group within academia who did not show a marked increase in the number of targeting incidents they initiated over the past six years.

Scholars Under Fire 2015 to 2020

Number of Incidents Per Year



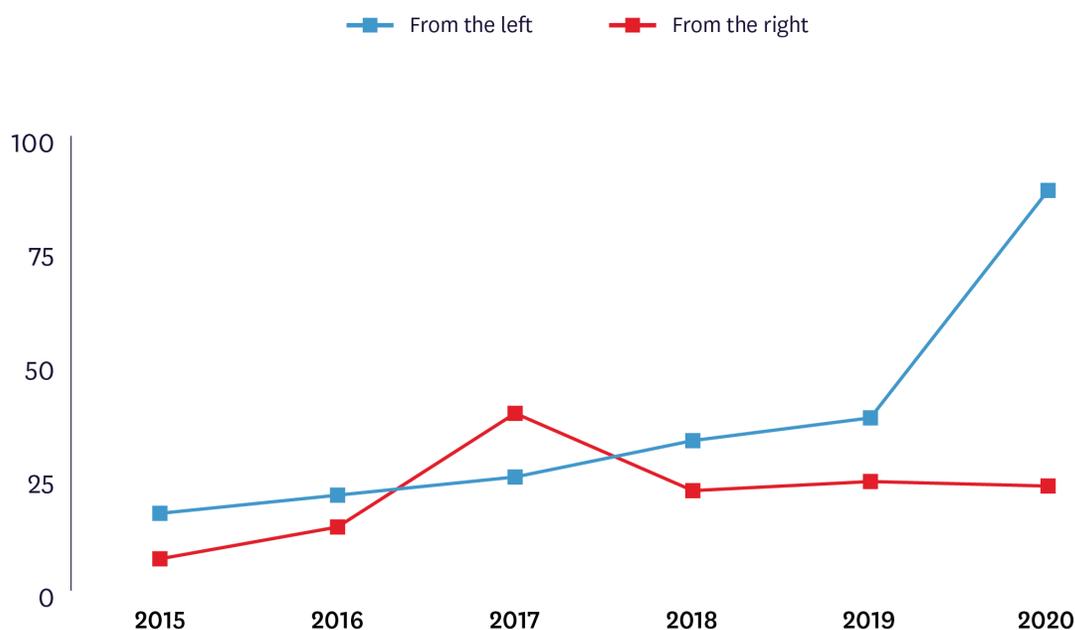
Political motivations

As noted above, when it came to the political motivations of those who targeted the scholars, the majority of targeting incidents came from the left of the scholar (62%), compared to slightly more than one in three that came from the right of the scholar (34%). However, 2020 amplified this difference. From 2015 to 2019, the number of targeting incidents from the left of the scholar steadily increased from 17 in 2015 to 38 in 2019. In 2020, there were 88 targeting incidents that came from the left of the scholar, more than double the previous year. This uptick does not appear to be abating, as halfway through 2021 we have recorded 43 targeting incidents from the left of the scholar.

During the same time period the number of targeting incidents that came from the right of the scholar was less than those from the left in 2015 (seven incidents) and 2016 (14 incidents) but then spiked to a high of 39 in 2017. This was the only year in which the number of targeting incidents from the right of the scholar exceeded the number from the left of the scholar. In 2018, the number of targeting incidents from the right of the scholar fell to 22, and in 2020 there were 23 targeting incidents from the right of the scholar. However, there have already been 18 targeting incidents from the right of the scholar in 2021, a pace that is similar to 2017.

Scholars Under Fire 2015 to 2020

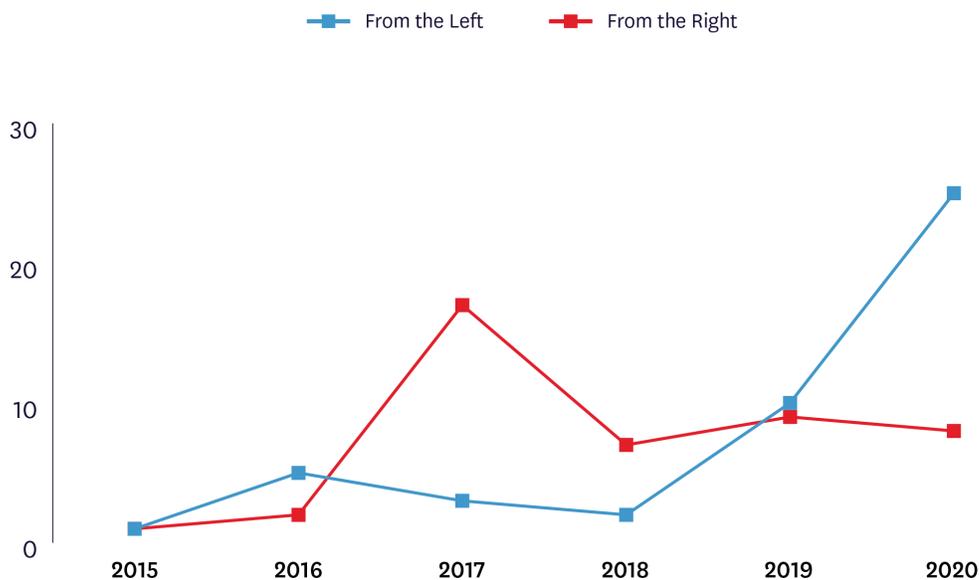
Number of Targeting Incidents From the Left or Right Per Year



Finally, the number of targeting incidents which occurred because of a scholar’s partisan statements has also increased since 2015. That year, two scholars faced a targeting incident because of their partisanship — one from the left of the scholar and one from the right. Attempts from the right of the scholar peaked in 2017, and from 2017 to 2019, targeting incidents over partisan statements came more often from the right of the scholar. In 2020, however, the number of targeting incidents involving partisanship that came from the left of the scholar was over twice 2019’s total (25 compared to 10) and greater than the nine targeting incidents that came from the right. So far in 2021, we have recorded 12 partisanship-related targeting incidents from the left of the scholar and 8 from the right.

Scholars Under Fire 2015 to 2020

Number of scholars targeted per year for partisan statements.



Terminations and Other Outcomes

This report, and accompanying database, focus primarily on targeting incidents, to raise awareness of *attempts* at sanctioning scholars for engaging in constitutionally protected speech. However, the *outcomes* of such targeting incidents are crucial to understanding the extent that scholars are, in fact, sanctioned as a result of being targeted. Thus, the following section details who, what, when, where, why, and how scholars have faced professional sanctions, especially termination. Before proceeding, it is important to note that regardless of the extent that a scholar is ultimately sanctioned, the experience of being targeted may have a chilling effect on not only their own willingness to exercise their free speech rights and academic

freedom, but also the willingness of other scholars and the students on campus to do so. When scholars are ultimately terminated or otherwise sanctioned, this chilling effect is likely to be even greater.

What are the most common results of targeting incidents?

A staggering three-fourths of the incidents (314 out of 426) resulted in some form of sanction, the most common being investigation, termination, and suspension. In one-third of the incidents (149 out of 426; 35%), the scholar was subjected to a formal investigation by the institutional administration. In almost one-fourth of the incidents (104 out of 426; 24%), the scholar was terminated, meaning that the scholar's contract was terminated or not renewed, the scholar's contract extension or tenure was revoked, the scholar was forced to resign, or the scholar was not hired. In over one-fifth of the incidents (93 out of 426; 22%), the scholar was suspended, meaning that the scholar was placed on leave and/or relieved of teaching duties.



Were certain types of scholars more likely to be terminated?

As both a percentage and in terms of raw numbers, adjuncts were most likely to be terminated (29 out of 52; 54%), followed by lecturers (23 out of 47; 49%). It is worth noting that these ranks of scholars are untenured, suggesting that targeting attempts are more likely to result in termination when the scholar is untenured. Indeed, 71 out of 184 (39%) of untenured scholars who faced targeting were terminated. By contrast, 32 out of 240 (13%) of tenured scholars were terminated.

With regard to gender, almost twice as many male scholars were terminated as female scholars (69 vs. 35, respectively), but a slightly higher percentage of female scholars who were targeted were subsequently terminated (29% vs. 23%, respectively).

With regard to race, in terms of raw numbers, Whites were more likely than any other racial group to be terminated. Out of the 348 White scholars who were targeted, 89 (26%) were subsequently terminated. By contrast, 4 out of 20 Asian scholars (20%), 4 out of 29 Black scholars (14%), 3 out of 14 Middle Eastern scholars (21%), and 2 out of 8 Hispanic scholars (25%) were terminated.

Does the intent of expression matter to whether or not the scholar was terminated?

Intent played an interesting (and surprising) role in whether the scholar was ultimately terminated. One-quarter (68 out of 269) of scholars who were targeted for expressing a personal view or opinion were ultimately terminated. More than one-fourth (29%; 31 out of 107) of scholars whose expression involved presenting sensitive, controversial, and/or difficult content (e.g., texts containing a racial slur, content showing violence against women) to encourage discussion and learning were ultimately terminated. Approximately one-sixth (17%; 18 out of 106) of scholars whose expression involved discussing scholarship, conducting research, and/or offering a testable hypothesis were ultimately terminated.

What types of scholar responses are most likely to result in scholars being terminated?

Refusal to concede wrongdoing was the most common response by scholars (246 out of 426) and was also the response most commonly associated with termination (77 out of 264). In fact, these scholars were approximately two times more likely to be terminated (31%) than were scholars who expressed regret or apologized for their speech (16%; 15 out of 91). Thus, both in terms of raw numbers and percentages, scholars who refused to concede wrongdoing were more likely to be terminated than were scholars who expressed regret or apologized for their speech.

What are the most common contexts in which the scholar's speech results in termination?

The context of the scholar's speech also mattered to whether the scholar was subsequently terminated. Scholars were most likely to be terminated after expressing themselves in the context of a direct interaction with another individual. Out of the 88 incidents in which scholars were targeted for expression involving a direct interaction, 30 were terminated. The second most-common context was the classroom, where 32 out of the 105 incidents resulted in termination. The third most-common context was social media, with 27 terminations out of 114 incidents.

Which topics of speech were most likely to result in scholars being terminated?

Not surprisingly, the topics of expression that were the most contentious also resulted in the most terminations. Mirroring targeting incidents, the most frequent topics that resulted in termination were institutional policy (38 terminations), race (37 terminations), gender (26 terminations), partisanship (25 terminations), and religion (22 terminations).

Individual Case Studies

Among the scholars who faced targeting incidents since 2015, there are some who have faced stronger opposition, as measured by the number of separate targeting incidents they have faced, along with the number of petitions against them, and the number of signatories demanding their termination, suspension, demotion, censorship, and/or resignation. Scholars who received the strongest opposition (more than 10,000 signatures on petitions opposing them) are listed in the table below:

Scholars Targeted by Petitions With 10,000 or More Signatures						
Year	Scholar	Incidents	Petitions	Signatures	Source	From the left or right?
2020	Betsy Schoeller	2	2	172,703	Undergraduate students	From the left
2017	Christine Lattin	1	1	162,597	Activists	From the left
2017 2018 2019	Amy Wax	3	4	138,759	Activist; Alumni; Graduate students; Scholars; Undergraduate students	From the left
2018	Randa Jarar	1	1	94,075	General public	From the right
2016	Matt Lasner	1	1	63,578	General public	From the right
2016 2020	Mike Adams	2	4	58,742	General public; Undergraduate students	From the left
2019	Elizabeth Lederer	1	4	40,608	Graduate students; Undergraduate students	From the left
2020	Charles Negy	1	2	35,403	Undergraduate students	From the left
2020	Gordon Klein	1	1	21,219	Undergraduate students	From the left
2018	Tat-siong Benny Liew	1	1	20,486	Alumni; Public figure; Anonymous	From the right
2020	Douglas Brooks	1	1	20,427	Activist	From the left
2017 2019 2020 2021	Bruce Gilley	4	4	18,141	Administration; Scholars	From the left
2018	Grover Furr	1	1	16,418	Activist	From the right
2020	Matthew Hubbard	1	1	12,917	Undergraduate students	From the left
2019	Joshua Clover	1	1	10,090	Undergraduate students	From the right
2021	J. Mark Ramseyer	1	1	10,000	Undergraduate students	From the left

Among these highly controversial scholars, a few stand out due to the nature of the speech for which they were targeted. These scholars include Mike Adams, Elizabeth Lederer, and Gordon Klein.

Mike Adams

Mike Adams, a former professor of criminology at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, was targeted in two separate incidents by students and members of the public to his political left, who created and signed four petitions (totaling 58,742 signatures) against him. The first incident occurred in 2016 when Adams was targeted for publishing (and subsequently tweeting about) an article titled “A ‘Queer Muslim’ Jihad?”¹⁸ in which he doubted the ability of a student to be both a Muslim and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Undergraduate students petitioned for his removal from the university.¹⁹ In response, the chancellor released a message reminding the campus that the university does not regulate or respond to opinions from students and faculty, but that if anyone feels harassed or discriminated against, they should report it. Adams, pleased with the institution’s response, told a local news outlet, “Excellent! This Chancellor gets it!”²⁰ This first incident resulted in no institutional or self-imposed sanctions.

The second incident involving Adams occurred in 2020 and resulted in Adams committing suicide. Adams was targeted for a series of controversial tweets in which he opposed a Democratic governor’s response to COVID-19,²¹ criticized women’s studies programs, and described BLM rioters as thugs.²² In one petition demanding sanctions, members of the public pledged not to financially support, apply to, or fund the university until Adams was removed.²³ In another two petitions, the public demanded his termination.²⁴ The institution responded by releasing a statement calling Adams’ tweets “vile” and stating “the university’s constitutional obligations and support of free expression do not lessen our disgust when those viewpoints offend or otherwise upset those who read these comments.”²⁵ Adams responded by retiring after he reached

¹⁸ Adams, M. S. (2016, September 15). “A ‘Queer Muslim’ Jihad?” *The Daily Wire*. Available online: <https://www.dailywire.com/news/queer-muslim-jihad-mike-s-adams> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

¹⁹ “Remove Mike Adams from UNCW.” (2016). *Change.org*. Available online: <https://www.change.org/p/unc-president-remove-mike-adams-from-uncw> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

²⁰ WECT staff. (2016, November 16). “UNCW responds to dispute between professor, student.” *WECT News 6*. Available online: <https://www.wect.com/story/33728723/uncw-responds-to-dispute-between-professor-student/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

²¹ WTVD-AP (2020, June 30). “UNC Wilmington professor to retire after backlash from social media post calling governor ‘Massa Cooper.’” *ABC 11 News*. Available online: <https://abc11.com/mike-adams-uncw-unc-wilmington-professor-retires/6284472/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

²² Wernicke, V. & Flanagan, B. (2020, June 5). “Students speak out against UNCW professor Dr. Mike Adams.” *The Seahawk*. Available online: <https://theseahawk.org/26360/news/students-speak-out-against-uncw-professor-dr-mike-adams/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

²³ “Remove Mike Adams From UNCW / Pledge Not to Financially Support, Apply to, or Fund UNCW.” (2020). *Change.org*. Available online: <https://www.change.org/p/uncw-remove-mike-adams-from-uncw-pledge-not-to-financially-support-apply-to-or-fund-uncw> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

²⁴ “Fire Mike Adams from UNCW.” (2020). *Change.org*. Available online: <https://www.change.org/p/unc-wilmington-fire-mike-adams-from-uncw> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

²⁵ “UNCW Statement re. Faculty Member’s Comments”. (2020, June 5). *University of North Carolina Wilmington News*. Available online: <https://uncw.edu/news/2020/06/uncw-statement-re-faculty-members-comments-june-5,-2020.html> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

a settlement,²⁶ which was announced by the institution in a Facebook post.²⁷ On July 23, 2020, Adams was found alone in his house with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head²⁸ after receiving numerous threats, harassment, and other forms of intimidation.²⁹

Gordon Klein

In 2020, Gordon Klein, a lecturer of accounting at the University of California, Los Angeles, sent an email³⁰ in which he declined a student's request for grading accommodations in the wake of George Floyd's death. He was then targeted by undergraduate students to the political left of him, who created and signed a petition (totaling 21,219 signatures)³¹ demanding his termination. In response, the dean of the university accused Klein of having a "disregard of our core principles" and engaging in an "abuse of power."³² UCLA then placed Klein on administrative leave from campus³³ and reassigned his courses until FIRE wrote a letter to the institution³⁴ — ultimately resulting in his reinstatement.³⁵ Nevertheless, when Klein went on Laura Ingraham's program, "The Ingraham Angle," to defend himself, he subsequently received death threats.³⁶

²⁶ WECT staff. (2020, June 29). "UNCW announces that controversial professor Mike Adams to retire on Aug. 1" *WECT News 6*. Available online: <https://www.wect.com/2020/06/29/uncw-announces-that-controversial-professor-mike-adams-retire-aug/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

²⁷ UNCW. (2020, June 19). *Facebook.com*. Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/uncwilmington/posts/10157450989510920> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

²⁸ Shibley, R. (2020, August 1). "In Memoriam: Professor Mike Adams, 1964-2020." *The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)'s Newsdesk*. Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/in-memoriam-professor-mike-adams-1964-2020/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

²⁹ Lukianoff, G. (2020, December 15). "Professor Mike Adams' suicide will always haunt me." *The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)'s The Eternally Radical Idea*. Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/professor-mike-adams-suicide-will-always-haunt-me/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

³⁰ "Gordon Klein Email To Student – June 2, 2020." *The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)*. Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/gordon-klein-email-to-student-june-2-2020/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

³¹ "Fire UCLA Professor Gordon Klein." *Change.org*. Available online: <https://www.change.org/p/ucla-fire-ucla-professor-gordon-klein> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

³² "Email from Antonio Bernardo to the UCLA Anderson Community, June 4, 2020." *The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)*. Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/email-from-antonio-bernardo-to-the-ucla-anderson-community-june-4-2020/>

(accessed on July 13, 2021).

³³ "Notice of Administrative Leave, June 3, 2020." *The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)*. Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/notice-of-administrative-leave-june-3-2020/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

³⁴ "FIRE Letter to the University of California Los Angeles, June 10, 2020." *The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)*. Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/fire-letter-to-the-university-of-california-los-angeles-june-10-2020/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

³⁵ "VICTORY: UCLA reinstates professor suspended for email on why he wouldn't change exam, grading for black students." (2020, September 15). *The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)*. Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/victory-ucla-reinstates-professor-suspended-for-email-on-why-he-wouldnt-change-exam-grading-for-black-students/> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

³⁶ Eichholz, W. (2020, June 12). "UCLA professor suspended, placed under police protection after denying special treatment to minorities." *Campus Reform*. Available online: <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=15036> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

Elizabeth Lederer

Elizabeth Lederer, a former adjunct professor of law at Columbia University, served as prosecutor during the Central Park Five trial in which a group of Black and Latino teens were accused (but later exonerated for the crime) of raping and murdering a White woman. The case received national attention following the 2019 release of the Netflix series, *When They See Us*.³⁷ Subsequently, undergraduate and graduate students to the political left of Lederer, including the Columbia University Black Students' Organization, created and signed four petitions (totaling 40,608 signatures) demanding termination³⁸ and resignation,³⁹ as well as prosecution and disbarment.⁴⁰ In response, the dean of the university explained that Netflix's portrayal of the Central Park case had "reignited a painful -- and vital -- national conversation about race, identity and criminal justice." The dean also thanked the Black Law Students Association for its activism.⁴¹ Lederer did not comment on her role in the case, but explained that the recent publicity surrounding it made it best that she resign. Lederer is no longer affiliated with Columbia University.

³⁷ "When They See Us." (2019). *Netflix*. Available online: <https://www.netflix.com/title/80200549> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

³⁸ "Fire Elizabeth Lederer from Columbia School Of Law!"(2019). *Change.org*. Available online: <https://www.change.org/p/dean-gillian-lester-fire-elizabeth-lederer-from-columbia-school-of-law> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

³⁹ "Columbia University Must Hold Elizabeth Lederer and Linda Fairstein Accountable." (2019). *Change.org*. Available online:

<https://www.change.org/p/columbia-university-columbia-university-must-hold-elizabeth-lederer-and-linda-fairstein-accountable> (accessed on July 13, 2021);

"Demand Elizabeth Lederer resign!" (2019). *Change.org*. Available online: <https://www.change.org/p/manhattan-district-attorney-demand-elizabeth-lederer-resign> (accessed on July 13, 2021).

⁴⁰ "The Prosecution and Disbarment of Elizabeth Lederer." (2019). *Change.org*. Available online:

https://www.change.org/p/andrew-m-cuomo-the-prosecution-and-disbarment-of-elizabeth-lederer?recruiter=947745626&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=share_petition (accessed on July 13, 2021).

⁴¹ Flayerty, C. (2019, June 14). "Past As Present: A Columbia law adjunct is the latest person to leave a place in academe following the release of a new film on the Central Park Five." *Inside Higher Ed*. Available online:

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/06/14/columbia-law-adjunct-latest-leave-academe-following-release-new-film-central-park?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=27a6de80f7-DNU_2019_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-27a6de80f7-236148529&mc_cid=27a6de80f7&mc_eid=7d5c2eb2c1 (accessed on July 13, 2021).

Conclusion

The phenomenon of scholar targetings is alarming yet understudied. The Scholars Under Fire Database and this report offer the most comprehensive documentation to date on targeting incidents of scholars at public and private American institutions from 2015 through July of 2021. We detail the various ways and reasons scholars are targeted, as well as how scholars and administrators respond to incidents, and what (if any) sanctions ensue.

The goal of this ongoing project is to provide scholars and journalists with a comprehensive picture of how these targeting incidents — a form of attempted censorship — occur on campus. It is intended to be an informational resource for those interested in not only broad patterns, as discussed in this report, but also specific details regarding individual targeting incidents. Thus, the database itself contains a good deal of important information not included in this report, such as the original content of the scholar’s expression (when available) and various news stories on each incident, to allow users of the database to learn more about any incident. FIRE has also created the [Faculty Legal Defense Fund](#) (FLDF), which provides legal aid to scholars whose institutions attempt to penalize them for their expression.

In sum, targeting incidents and petitions against scholars have increased since 2015, as have the number of scholars who were not terminated but still experienced some kind of professional sanction. What is even more concerning is that these targeting incidents are increasingly coming from within academia. Undergraduate students are the primary source of this increase, but scholars have increasingly been targeted by other scholars and/or administrators as well. In particular, *half* of the targeting incidents that we recorded since 2015 were because of a scholar’s scientific questions or teaching practices. If this trend continues, scholars’ speech and expression will be increasingly chilled on campus, in the classroom, and in their research.

This could have profound implications for academic freedom and open inquiry in the academy. If scholars are unable to ask certain questions because they fear social or professional sanctions, particularly from their students and colleagues, then the advancement of human knowledge will be hindered. We may unknowingly continue to pursue important societal goals using ineffective means and policies because scholars fear the consequences of investigating whether such means and policies help us achieve what they are intended to.

Such a state of affairs should worry anyone with a vested interest in American higher education because it undermines academic freedom and open inquiry, threatening academia’s ability to ensure the furtherance of knowledge. One need not agree with a scholar’s research or teaching to nevertheless respect that scholar’s right to research and teach how they see fit. Distinguishing support for one’s speech from one’s right to speech is often lost in today’s culture wars and the “Scholars Under Fire” project reveals that when censorship spreads rampantly, it does not restrict itself to views and people one opposes; it also comes, sometimes with even more fervor, for those who hold similar views.



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