

Sanctioned Scholars: The Price of Speaking Freely in Today's Academy



Contents

Executive Summary	1
Overview	2
Today's Academy	3
Present Study	5
EXPERIENCES OF SANCTIONED SCHOLARS	6
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SUPPORT	8
IMPACT OF SANCTIONS ON FUTURE SPEECH	12
Silence Begets Silence	15
A Public Defense	16
Conclusion	17
Methodology	19
SAMPLE	19
MEASURES	19
PROCEDURE	19
SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS	20
NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY	21
LIMITATIONS	21
Survey Items and Topline Results	22
Acknowledgments	39
Citation	39
About Us	39

Executive Summary

The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), a nonprofit organization committed to defending and sustaining the individual rights of all Americans to free speech and free thought, maintains a database documenting the ways and reasons scholars have faced calls for sanction because of their speech. This report presents the results of a survey of 209 scholars in this “Scholars Under Fire” database who were targeted for sanction because of their speech between 2020 and 2024.

Key takeaways include:

1. **Targeted scholars experienced severe and lasting harms.** 94% of respondents reported negative impacts, which for many included reputational damage, PTSD, and/or job loss.
2. **Damage often extended beyond the scholar.** Family members and students were frequently caught in the fallout — costs rarely acknowledged in institutional policy or response.
3. **Public defense of academic freedom is rare.** While many scholars report receiving private support from peers and others, public backing — especially from administrators and unions — was much less common.
4. **Chilling effects are real and uneven.** Overall, scholars were split on whether they’d speak similarly again. Along ideological lines, liberals were more likely to report their speech being chilled (i.e., that they were less likely to say similar things in the future), while conservatives were more likely to indicate they were not deterred (i.e., that they were as much, if not more likely, to say similar things in the future).
5. **Speech norms are narrowing.** Public silence sends a message about what views are acceptable and safe to express, effectively narrowing the range of ideas deemed reasonable to discuss on campus. This may result in topic avoidance in teaching and research, especially on contested or policy-relevant issues.
6. **Talent pipeline risks.** Early-career scholars and ideological minorities may self-censor or exit the academy, reducing intellectual diversity and weakening open inquiry and future leadership in higher education over time.
7. **The future of academic freedom depends on visible, courageous, principled defense.** Private agreement or support is not sufficient. A culture of open, consistent, and courageous defense — regardless of agreement — is essential to sustaining free inquiry in higher education.

Overview

In the classic model of a university, a professor does not simply transmit knowledge, but also is a guardian for and advocate of inquiry — someone who models intellectual bravery. That ideal is under strain. Today, many faculty and scholars operate in a climate where speaking honestly may feel risky, and defending unpopular views dangerous. In such a climate, courage becomes a professional necessity.

Since 2000, almost 1,700 scholars have faced sanctions over their speech, with more than 300 of these cases resulting in termination or forced resignation.¹ These campaigns have been driven by both on-campus actors — such as students, faculty, and administrators — and off-campus groups, including activist organizations, politicians, and members of the general public. They have also come from all across the political spectrum.²

In many cases, the backlash experienced by these scholars was far from professional, and was quite jarring. As one professor recounted:³

Due to the extreme amount of hate mail and voicemails I received, I had a campus police officer posted outside my class for a period of time and an escort to my vehicle. My husband was constantly worried about my safety, we rarely went places in public, and my mother was harassed online by complete strangers.

Or for another, this message landed in her email inbox:

You are unintelligent. You are poorly educated. You are nauseatingly fat and hideous. Your life has no value. Kill yourself.

These scholars are not alone.

For example, a 2021 survey of faculty found that 40% of faculty members whose speech was highlighted for “liberal bias” by Campus Reform, “a conservative watchdog,” later received threats of harm, including physical violence or death threats by email, direct messages, phone calls, texts, and even letters in the mail.⁴

1 Data are current as of October 17, 2025: FIRE (n.d.). *Scholars Under Fire Database*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/scholars-under-fire>

2 Stevens, S. T. & Lenthall-Cleary, C. (2025). Efforts to silence scholars hit record high. *Expression*. <https://expression.fire.org/p/efforts-to-silence-scholars-hit-record>

3 Note: All quotes from participants are without attribution due to the intentionally anonymous nature of the survey. Participation in the survey was anonymous to encourage candid responses without fear of personal consequence, and to allow participants to speak more freely about their experiences.

4 Tiede, H. J., McCarthy, S., Kamola, I., & Spurgas, A. (2021). Data snapshot: Whom does Campus Reform target and what are the effects? *Academe*. <https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/spring-2021/data-snapshot-whom-does-campus-reform-target-and-what-are-effects>

Even now in the aftermath of the horrific assassination of Charlie Kirk on a college campus, we continue to see commitments to free expression put to the test as many colleges and universities grapple with calls — particularly from government actors — to fire or punish faculty for speech justifying the shooting or critical of Kirk. In some instances, institutions have already buckled to the pressure.

As King Solomon aptly observed, “there is nothing new under the sun.”

In this report, we build on these findings and document the bruising toll on faculty sanctioned — or targeted for sanction — because their words were deemed controversial, offensive, or otherwise out-of-bounds.⁵ These data reveal that scholars who face sanctions rarely regret their ideas or what they said. But accompanying this, they report PTSD flashbacks, police escorts to class, and shattered reputations. In story after story, these scholars also remember, and resent, the abandonment. They were betrayed by the institutions designed to protect free inquiry, and received deafening silence from peers who chose safety over courage.

Today’s Academy

In American higher education, First Amendment protections are essential to sustaining an open intellectual climate. Public colleges and universities are legally bound to uphold them, while many private institutions have adopted policies or bylaws that effectively commit themselves to the same standards. These commitments generally reflect long-standing principles of academic freedom, which provide faculty additional protections for their speech in the classroom and in their scholarship. As a result, most offensive expression or controversial research is legally protected within American colleges and universities.

Of course, First Amendment protections do not shield scholars from criticism for their views or the nature of their research. The same constitutional rights that protect academic expression also protect those who call for a university to discipline or dismiss a professor. In such cases, it falls to the institution — its faculty and administrators — to uphold the expressive and academic freedoms of their colleagues facing cancellation campaigns.

Unfortunately, the reality on many campuses today is different. Those once entrusted with safeguarding the mission of higher education have too often become hesitant or inconsistent defenders of free expression and academic freedom.

Decades of survey data from faculty indicate that the academy is an ideological echo chamber characterized by fear and censorship. Faculty report being worried about losing their jobs or damaging their reputations because someone misunderstands something they have said or done, or because they expressed something that goes against the dominant viewpoint on campus. Many report being unable to speak freely for fear of how others on campus might respond.⁶ And many also report

⁵ See Methodology for more information on terminology, including “sanction” and “sanction attempt” and how FIRE classifies such events in the Scholars Under Fire Database.

⁶ Honeycutt, N. (2024). *Silence in the classroom: The 2024 FIRE Faculty Survey Report*. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/silence-classroom-2024-fire-faculty-survey-report>

difficulty having an open and honest conversation on their campus about important issues of the day, whether it is racial inequality or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁷

In a 2024 FIRE survey, roughly one in 10 faculty reported suffering discipline or being threatened with discipline for their teaching, research, academic talks, or other off-campus speech.⁸ One in 10 may sound small, but with over 800,000 professors in the U.S.⁹ that would correspond to roughly 80,000 faculty members who've been disciplined or threatened with discipline for their expression. As one professor recounted, sanctions and discipline can abruptly end a lifetime of academic work:

I was already at the end of my career planning on retiring. This was how I ended my career - with a huge controversy. I had been controversial throughout my career and the "incident" was no incident at all...What was once acceptable became unacceptable...There was a financial settlement and I retired. I am unscathed and the world is entirely different. My career would be impossible today.

That said, even though the majority of faculty surveyed by FIRE in 2024 did not report suffering discipline or threats of discipline, a substantial portion of professors still indicated they have toned down their writing for fear of causing controversy (one in three), and roughly one in four reported that they feel they can't express their opinion on a subject because of how others (faculty, students, the administration) would respond.¹⁰

These concerns are especially pronounced among politically moderate and conservative faculty members, who report self-censoring more frequently than their liberal and progressive colleagues. They also express greater worry about damaging their reputations or losing their jobs. In the 2024 faculty survey, for instance, more than half of conservative respondents reported at least occasionally hiding their political beliefs from peers in order to protect their careers. It remains unclear whether this climate of fear is primarily driven by the threat of cancellation itself or by the broader unwillingness of faculty to defend foundational principles of free expression.

Faculty apprehension today extends beyond abstract concerns about collegial disapproval. For many, disapproval manifests as formal investigations, reprimands, or even termination. This shift underscores the corrosive power of a reputational system in which social and institutional pressures reinforce one another. Recent data suggest that self-censorship and disciplinary action now operate in a mutually reinforcing cycle, steadily narrowing the space for academic freedom.

But, while many surveys have documented widespread fear and self-censorship among faculty, we know far less about what happens after a scholar is actually targeted. To address this gap, we surveyed faculty who have recently faced sanction campaigns.

7 Honeycutt (2024)

8 Honeycutt (2024)

9 National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *Characteristics of postsecondary faculty*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/csc/post-secondary-faculty>

10 Honeycutt (2024)

Present Study

FIRE's Scholars Under Fire database independently tracks and documents the ways and reasons scholars in the United States have faced calls for sanction for their speech from 2000 to present.¹¹ This database includes over almost 1,700 documented sanction attempts, including a record number this year, with 300 of these attempts resulting in faculty terminations. Most of these incidents have occurred over the past decade.

While these records provide ample detail about the incidents themselves, they tell us little about the personal experiences of the scholars targeted. To address this gap, FIRE invited 635 scholars listed in the database who were sanctioned or targeted between 2020 and 2024 to participate in a survey. Of these, 209 completed our survey, yielding a 33% response rate.

Participation in the survey was anonymous to encourage candid responses without fear of personal consequence, and to allow participants to speak more freely about their experiences.

The incidents that drew backlash for these scholars were wide-ranging. For some scholars, a classroom remark on a controversial subject sparked student complaints. For others, a social media post drew public attention and outrage. In other cases, mandated departmental or university trainings triggered conflict. Disagreements over COVID-19 restrictions and policies were also frequent flashpoints.

Nearly all respondents (94%) described the impact of their experience as negative. Looking ahead, most (71%) expressed pessimism about the state of academic freedom on their campus, saying it is "not at all" or "not very" secure — a striking contrast to the 36% of faculty nationally who recently reported the same concern.¹²

¹¹ FIRE (n.d.). *Scholars Under Fire Database*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/scholars-under-fire>

¹² Honeycutt (2024)

EXPERIENCES OF SANCTIONED SCHOLARS

For many scholars, the professional consequences of being sanctioned or targeted with sanction were compounded by emotional and psychological trauma, which often reached into their personal lives. One respondent recalled the atmosphere of fear that followed being targeted:

I was afraid to leave my home for several weeks. I was afraid for the safety of my children. I received death threats.

When asked about the impacts of their experiences, scholars reported emotional distress (65%), loss of sleep (53%), and workplace shunning (40%). More than a quarter sought psychological counseling (27%), and one in five (20%) reported losing their job. For some, the incident meant not only reputational harm, but the effective end of an academic career.

When I was told I was losing my job, I was [xxx] years old, too young to retire and too old to find new employment in Higher Education in my field. I suffered from PTSD nightmares, panic attacks, extreme anxiety, muscle spasms, and other stress-related ailments. I sought therapy and medical treatment. I never did find a position in Higher Ed that matched my rank, status, and salary level. Thus, I did not just lose my job; I lost my entire career and all my scholarship.

Experienced by scholars as a result of a sanction or sanction attempt:



Question: *Please select which (if any) of the following you experienced as a result of the incident.*

Chart: Nathan Honeycutt • Source: FIRE's Sanctioned Scholars Survey, 2025

Even years later, the fallout persisted for some, extending into family life. One scholar described how stigma on campus spread into home life:

My special needs child, who works a few hours weekly [locally], was told by [students from campus] that I am a racist. [My child] picked up on that lie and cannot let it go. So, the plot to do harm to me remains in my household [years] after. I have held many leadership jobs over the years, so I can deal pretty well with professional dislikes and challenges. But I admit the attacks contrived from the lie have been real harassment, when [a child] is drawn into the eager harm some enjoy.

For others, the impact was not only psychological but also physical:

I went to a psychologist and was diagnosed with “off the charts” PTSD. At this time, I was reeling from physical effects— I was vomiting throughout the day, couldn’t eat, was having constant panic attacks, couldn’t be around people or leave the house, couldn’t keep still, was losing weight rapidly and physically weak/would come close to fainting routinely. I suffered teeth damage from the vomiting, and felt I nearly lost my life ultimately. Things were dire.

In some situations the damage was not confined to the scholar, it also rippled outward to families and students. As one professor noted:

The greatest problem was the eight PhD students I had at the time. I was not allowed to go to my office to meet with them for nine months, and [they] are the ones who really suffered as a result. Most of my anxiety on this series of events related to the hardships put on my students.

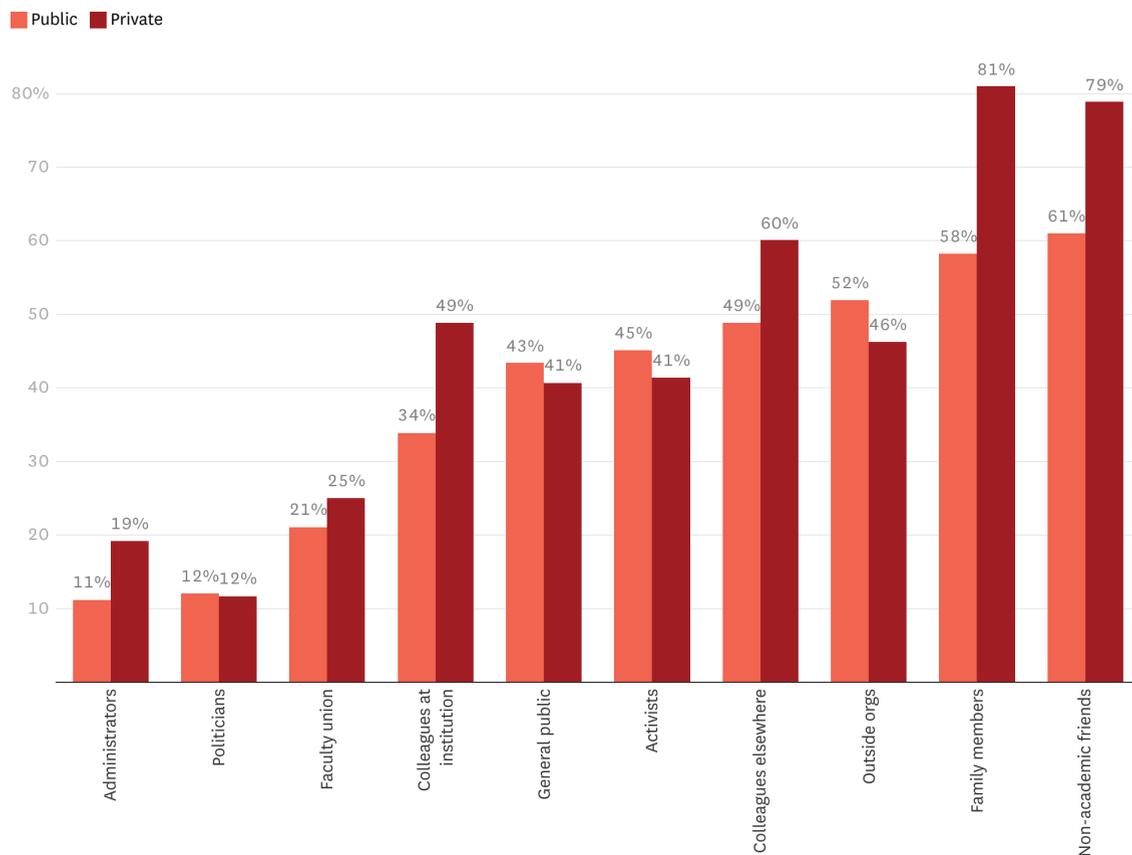
Adding to this distress was a sense of isolation. At a time when support was needed most, nearly half of the surveyed scholars reported losing professional relationships. Many also reported losing friends, strained family ties, and being shunned at work.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SUPPORT

The support — or lack thereof — received by sanctioned scholars tells an unfortunate story. Private support was more common than public support, and in some cases, scholars reported almost no support at all.

Only a few respondents received at least a moderate amount of public or private support from politicians, administrators, or their faculty union. Politicians are often unaware of campus controversies, administrators are frequently the ones enforcing sanctions, and faculty unions — expected by many to be champions of academic freedom¹³ — were largely absent. In fact, 68% of scholars reported receiving no public support from their union.

Scholars who received at least “a moderate amount” of public or private support, by source



Note: Percents are for those who indicated they received “a moderate amount,” “a lot,” or “a great deal” of support from each of the groups/individuals listed.

Chart: Nathan Honeycutt · Source: FIRE’s Sanctioned Scholars Survey, 2025.

¹³ AAUP (n.d.). *Organizing philosophy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aaup.org/issues-higher-education/aaup-unionism/organizing-philosophy>

One professor, facing violent threats, described feeling abandoned by campus leadership:

I was getting violent threats via email every day. The university did nothing to help—my department was there for me though. The police were doing daily drive-bys because so many people threatened me with violence.

By contrast, majorities of scholars reported receiving at least a moderate amount of private support from family, non-academic friends, and colleagues at other institutions. Yet even among peers, most support stayed behind closed doors. About 49% reported receiving private support from colleagues at their own institution, compared to only 34% who received public support. When it came to colleagues at other institutions, 60% received private support, while again only 34% reported public support.

For some, the silence of peers may have been as painful as the sanction itself. One respondent bluntly summed up the feeling:

My biggest disappointment was in the cowardice of other faculty who refused to do anything public on my behalf.

Patterns of support also varied along ideological lines. Liberal scholars were more likely to report receiving public backing from colleagues and unions. Four in ten liberal scholars said they received at least a moderate amount of public support from colleagues at their institution, compared to fewer than two in 10 moderate and conservative scholars. Nearly three in 10 liberal scholars reported public support from their union, compared to only about one in 10 moderate and conservative scholars.

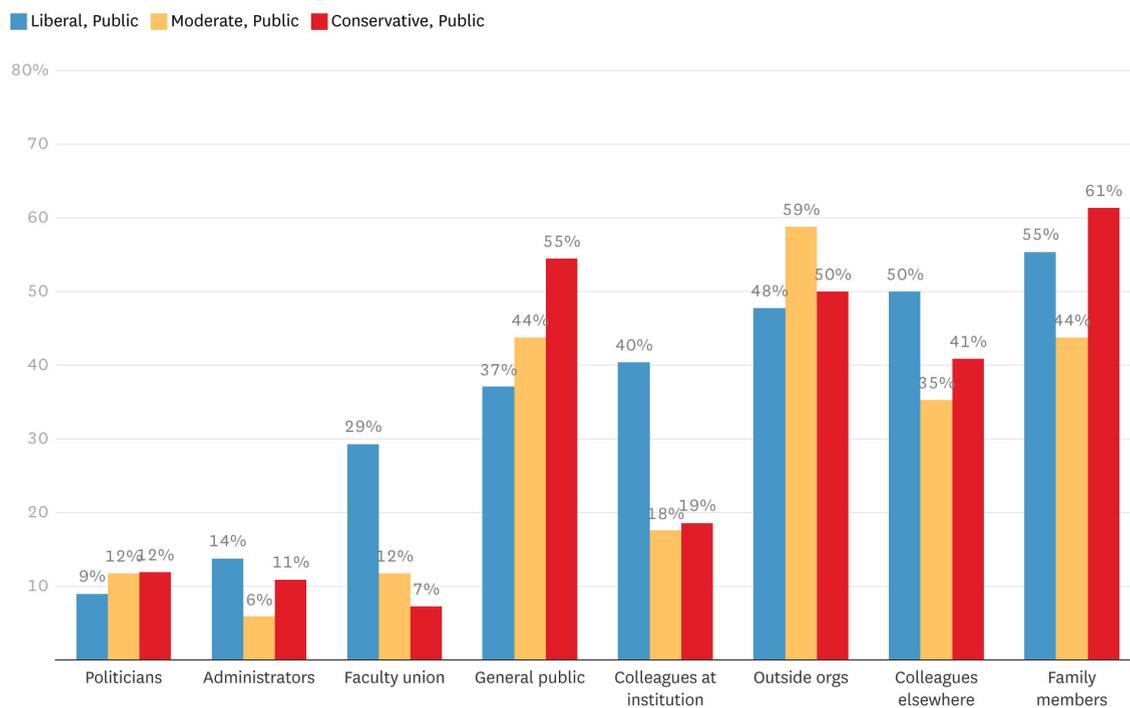
Conservative scholars, however, reported greater support from outside the academy, and outside their home institution. A little over half (55%) said they received support from the general public, compared to 37% of liberals. While such support may be meaningful, the general public has limited influence on campus policy.

More tellingly, conservative scholars also reported a gap between private and public support from academic peers: 43% received private support from colleagues at their institution, while only 19% reported receiving public support (compared to 57% private and 40% public among liberals).

Support from colleagues at other institutions was a bit more common for conservative scholars compared to support from colleagues at their own institution — 66% received private support from colleagues at other institutions, and 41% received public support (compared to 63% private and 50% public among liberals). But the public-private gap still existed, and again, this support was from outside their home institution.

Taken together, these disparities suggest that in higher education, not all ideas are considered equally “defensible.” For many scholars, the silence of colleagues and institutions left them feeling that some voices are more worthwhile to defend than others.

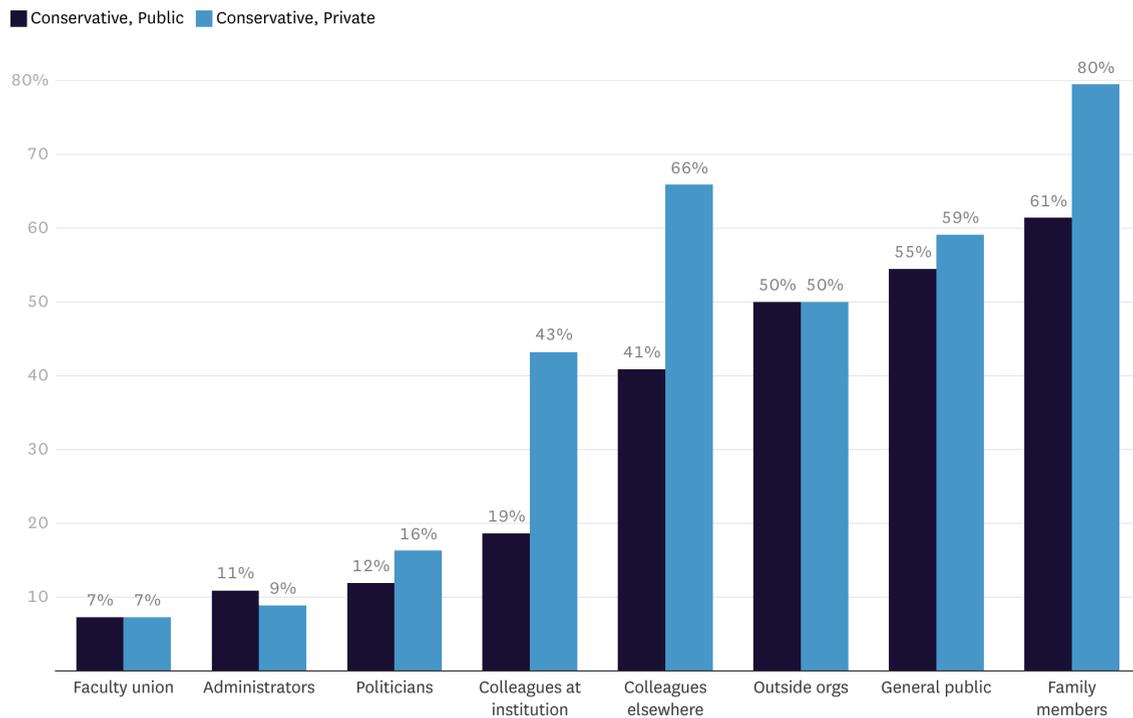
Scholars who received at least “a moderate amount” of *public* support, by political ideology and source



Note: Percents are for those who indicated they received “a moderate amount,” “a lot,” or “a great deal” of support from each of the groups/individuals listed.

Chart: Nathan Honeycutt · Source: FIRE’s Sanctioned Scholars Survey, 2025

Conservative scholars who received at least “a moderate amount” of public or private support, by source



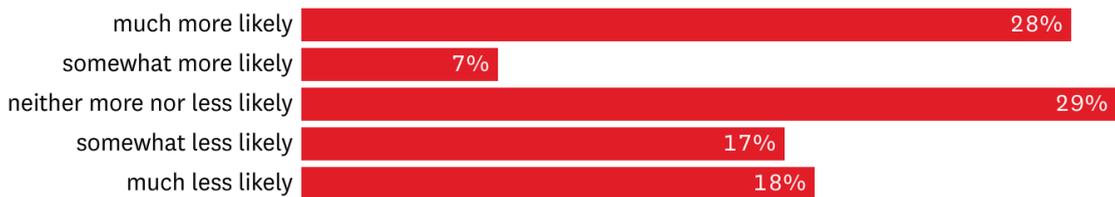
Note: Percents are for those who indicated they received “a moderate amount,” “a lot,” or “a great deal” of support from each of the groups/individuals listed.

Chart: Nathan Honeycutt • Source: FIRE’s Sanctioned Scholars Survey, 2025

IMPACT OF SANCTIONS ON FUTURE SPEECH

One of the central questions about cancellation campaigns is whether they chill expression or whether they make scholars more likely to speak out in the future. For many sanctioned scholars, the impact of their experience was significant, but there was no clear consensus on whether it made them more or less likely to express similar views in the future. Roughly one-third said they would be more likely to do so (35%), one-third less likely (35%), and the balance reported no change (29%).

Scholars' likelihood of expressing similar views in the future



Note: Question: "Did the sanction attempt make you more or less likely to express similar views in the future?"

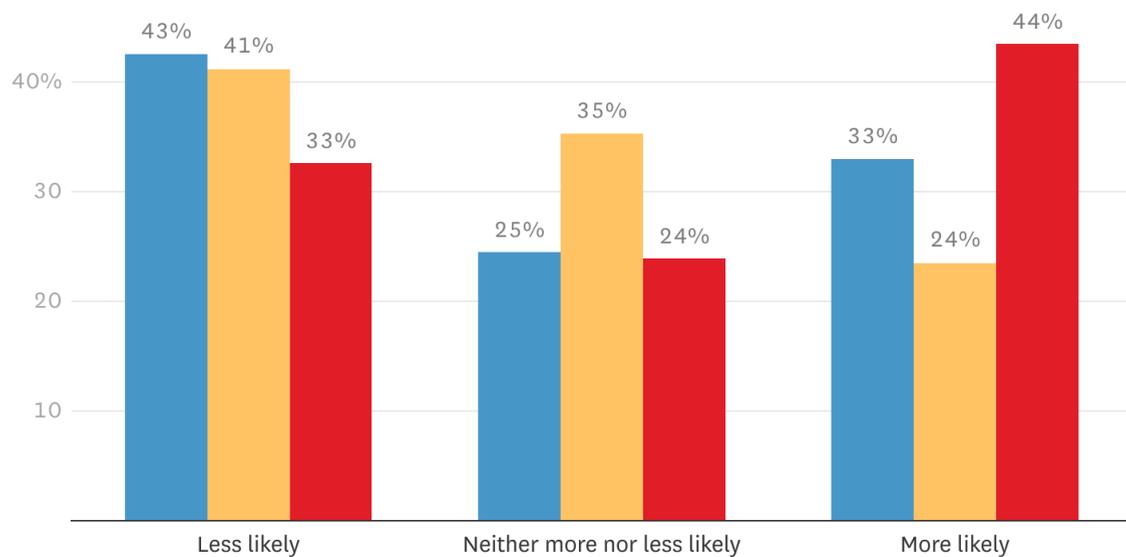
Chart: Nathan Honeycutt · Source: FIRE's Sanctioned Scholars Survey, 2025

However, an ideological divide also emerged on this question. Among conservative scholars, the largest share (44%) said they were *more* likely to express similar views in the future, while among liberal scholars, the largest share (43%) said they were *less* likely to do so. This suggests that sanction attempts may produce a greater chilling effect on liberal scholars, or, at minimum, on those liberals who have already been targeted.

Yet despite these differences, most respondents were not ambivalent about the legitimacy of their speech. When asked if they would change anything they had said or done that led to the sanction attempt, nearly three-quarters (72%) said they would not.

Scholars' likelihood of expressing similar views in the future, by political ideology

■ Liberal ■ Moderate ■ Conservative

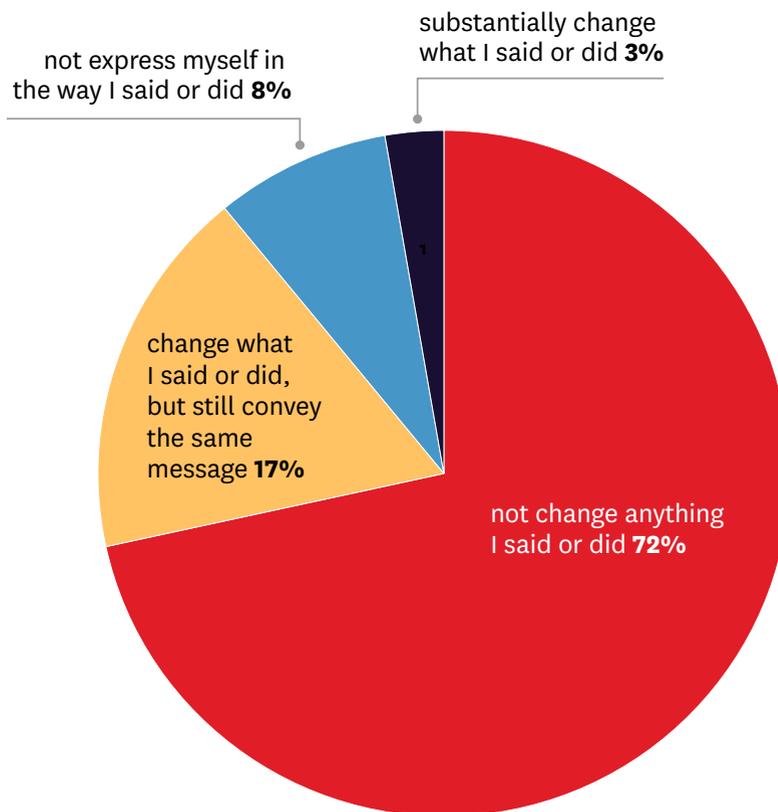


Notes: Question: "Did the sanction attempt make you more or less likely to express similar views in the future?"
"More likely" includes those who selected "much more" or "somewhat more." "Less likely" includes those who selected "much less" or "somewhat less."

Chart: Nathan Honeycutt · Source: FIRE's Sanctioned Scholars Survey, 2025

Scholars who indicated they would or would not change anything they said or did that led to the sanction/sanction attempt.

I would...



Note: Question: "If you could do it over again, would you change or not change what you said or did THAT LED TO the sanction/sanction attempt?"

Chart: Nathan Honeycutt · Source: Scholars Under Fire Survey, 2025

Silence Begets Silence

Taken together, these findings suggest a campus climate where the costs of being targeted are high, the defenses are inconsistent, and the message to observers is unmistakable: speaking freely may carry professional, social, and even personal risk. Nearly all respondents (94%) described the impact of their experience as negative, and most (71%) expressed pessimism about the security of academic freedom on their campus — far above the national faculty benchmark (36%). The consequence is not only immediate harm to targeted scholars, but a durable signal to their peers about what is or is not safe to say.

A consistent pattern underlies these experiences: support is more plentiful in private than in public. Colleagues, friends, and even institutional peers often express solidarity behind closed doors but hesitate to defend publicly. This gap reflects a form of preference falsification — quiet agreement coupled with outward silence — that amplifies isolation and makes principled defense feel exceptional rather than expected. In such an environment, silence becomes self-reinforcing, and the space for dissent narrows.

Consequently, the disparity between private and public support reflects a need for courage in the academy.¹⁴ Whether motivated by fear, careerism, or ideological convenience, silence sends a deafening message that speech is only defensible when it is politically safe.

The distribution of support also reveals institutional fault lines. Many scholars perceived administrators as absent or adversarial, likely because they were the ones typically enacting the sanctions. Similarly, unions — who are supposed to be stalwart defenders of faculty — were seldom publicly supportive (68% of faculty reported no public support from their union). These patterns weaken trust in shared governance and raise doubts about whether universities and faculty unions will defend expressive and academic rights when they are most contested.

The effects on future speech are mixed in the aggregate but asymmetric by ideology. In this sample, conservative scholars were most likely to say they would speak similarly again, while liberal scholars were most likely to say they would not. Whether due to differing campus pressures, expectations within peer networks, or selection effects among who stays in academia, the implication is clear: chilling is not evenly distributed. Over time, this selective chilling can shape course syllabi, discourage contentious or novel research agendas, and constrict the range of ideas modeled for students.

The costs also extend beyond the academic workplace. The testimonies describe sustained psychological distress, physical symptoms, and family spillover — harms that outlast the news cycle and outpace the formal processes designed to resolve disputes. When the memory that lingers is not the controversy itself but the abandonment, institutions forfeit trust and make future defense of academic freedom harder, not easier.

Silence begets silence, and provides cover to punishing more speech with little to no resistance. If open inquiry is to remain a defining value of higher education, defending expression must be normalized — predictable, principled, and public — rather than defended in private whispers and occasional acts of individual courage.

¹⁴ George, R. P. (2024). *College conservatives and the victims-identity narrative*. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/22/opinion/college-conservatives-victims-identity.html>

A Public Defense

Many organizations are actively working to create networks and tangible resources to help faculty when they come under fire for their free expression. In particular, many of these groups are working to help ensure that faculty aren't alone when they come under fire for their expression. We highlight a few:

- At FIRE, program officers with the Faculty Legal Defense Fund (FLDF)¹⁵ review cases where public college or university faculty have been punished, or are facing threats of punishment, for expressive activity in their instruction, scholarship, or when speaking on matters of public concern. When appropriate, FLDF connects faculty under fire with experienced lawyers in FIRE's network for legal assistance.
- The Academic Freedom Alliance (AFA)¹⁶ takes a sort-of NATO stance, whereby "an attack on academic freedom anywhere is an attack on academic freedom everywhere." As such, AFA promotes and defends academic freedom by publicly speaking out in support and defense of faculty under fire, seeking to counter the pressure administrators, employers, or other officials may come under to sanction speech.
- Community and support are also a key focus for Heterodox Academy (HxA),¹⁷ which (among many initiatives being undertaken) is quickly expanding a network of HxA campus communities (on individual college campuses), united behind the goal of bringing people together and promoting constructive disagreement, open inquiry, and viewpoint diversity on campus.
- In an effort to push back against the stigma often associated with expressing controversial views, HxA also created the Open Inquiry Awards as an avenue to honor exemplary individuals, groups, and institutions who are unapologetic and courageous in championing constructive disagreement, open inquiry, and viewpoint diversity.
- In 2023, FIRE created the Berkson Courageous Colleague Award,¹⁸ named after its inaugural recipient professor Mark Berkson, who publicly defended his besieged colleague. The award seeks to honor and celebrate faculty who go above and beyond to defend their colleagues' rights to free speech and academic freedom.

These initiatives, among many being undertaken by other individuals and organizations across the United States, seek to ensure that scholars like those in this study receive the support and resources needed at the time they likely need it most.

¹⁵ FIRE (n.d.). *Faculty legal defense fund*. Retrieved from <https://www.thefire.org/defending-your-rights/legal-support/faculty-legal-defense-fund>

¹⁶ AFA (n.d.). *Academic Freedom Alliance*. Retrieved from: <https://academicfreedom.org/>

¹⁷ HxA (n.d.). *Heterodox Academy*. Retrieved from: <https://heterodoxacademy.org/>

¹⁸ FIRE (2024). *Berkson Courageous Colleague Award*. Retrieved from: <https://x.com/TheFIREorg/status/1717910508232433920>

Conclusion

Taken together, the data and testimonies from this study depict a campus climate in which the costs of being targeted are high and lasting: reputational damage, derailed careers (including job loss for one in 5), and significant emotional and physical distress. Nearly all respondents described their experience as negative and a majority expressed pessimism about the security of academic freedom on their campuses. The signal to observers is unmistakable: speaking freely can carry professional and personal risk.

Just as consequential is what happens around the targeted scholar. Across groups, support was more common in private than in public. Colleagues, friends, and even institutional peers sometimes voiced solidarity behind closed doors but hesitated to defend publicly — especially within the scholar’s own institution. Unions and administrators, whom many expected to be visible guardians of academic freedom, were frequently perceived as absent. This public–private gap fosters isolation, erodes trust, and narrows the practical boundaries of acceptable speech. In effect, silence becomes a second sanction.

Even in cases where an official investigation might ultimately clear a scholar, the silence from colleagues and others in the midst of the investigation — the lack of public support, and frequently the lack of even private support — can still chill future expression, operating as a long-lasting sanction.

Those who faced sanctions span disciplines and institution types — STEM and humanities, elite private universities and local community colleges. What they share is that, at some moment, their words or expressive acts were deemed out of bounds. Outcomes varied. Some left academia. Others fought and stayed. Some were terminated. A few found allies; many were left to fend for themselves, often at significant cost. One professor recalled:

It was very painful to be subjected to a mass emailing making the charges. Ultimately, the university body entirely cleared me. But it cost me a lot of money to hire a lawyer and was very emotionally painful. Moreover, the university rules did not permit me to publicly state that I had been cleared.

Not every story ends in bitterness. Some of these surveyed scholars have chosen to be optimistic:

Don't lose hope - there are people out there from many backgrounds who are committed to core principles like academic freedom and freedom of expression who can help buoy you when you feel like you're drowning.

Some respondents also described reconciliation and a way forward:

Last Spring I was contacted by the former [University President] who presided over my firing. We met for coffee, and [the former University President] personally apologized to me, saying, “I am so sorry for what I did to you and your family. Will you please forgive me?” I forgave [the former University President], and we had a wonderfully healing conversation. We are now fully reconciled. I also forgive the former provost and dean who were actually more involved in my termination. More than four years later, neither of them has ever responded. Still, I forgive them unconditionally, and my soul is free.

Others were not as hopeful:

Quit, there is no fixing it. Ideological toxicity is strangling the light of freedom and clear thought on campus, where it should burn brightest.

One key implication is the chilling effect these experiences likely exert on faculty broadly. When colleagues witness sanctions, terminations, or reputational collapse — often accompanied by institutional silence — they may conclude that caution is the safest course. The result is a self-reinforcing loop: private agreement, public quiet, shrinking room for dissent. Students, watching their mentors navigate these dynamics, learn the same lesson. In such a climate, intellectual risk-taking becomes a liability and open discourse a casualty.

The dramatic gap between private and public support also raises questions about the strength of shared academic values. Where faculty unions and administrators are expected to offer principled, visible defense, their absence reads not as a mere oversight but as a compounding failure — one that amplifies the damage of the original controversy. When coupled with clear ideological asymmetries in who is publicly defended, the academy edges toward selective protection, shaping what gets researched, taught, and said.

If open inquiry is to remain a defining value of higher education, its defense must be predictable, principled, and public: consistent, viewpoint-neutral processes; timely and transparent communication; and practical support for safety and well-being. Above all, it requires colleagues and leaders to treat the defense of speech as a professional obligation rather than a personal gamble.

Courage is contagious. So is cowardice. The future of academic freedom — and the mission of higher education — depends not only on policies and procedures, but on whether faculty are willing to stand up for one another when it is hard or unpopular. This is a test of integrity, and one the academy can no longer afford to fail.

Methodology

The Scholars Under Fire survey was fielded from January 15 to April 15, 2025. No donors took part in any part of the project. All methods received IRB approval from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. The instrument was hosted on a secure Qualtrics site.

SAMPLE

A sample of 209 scholars was recruited for participation in this study. These scholars are individuals listed in FIRE's Scholars Under Fire Database because they experienced a sanction or sanction attempt between 2020 and 2024. Scholars from these years were selected due to the recency of their experiences. Please refer to the Scholars Under Fire Database for more information on database inclusion criteria.¹⁹ In total, 635 scholars were contacted with an invitation to participate, the final sample reflecting a 32.91% response rate. Participation in the survey was anonymous.

MEASURES

Using a combination of new questions, as well as questions implemented in similar research,²⁰ an instrument was constructed. See topline for precise question and response option wording.

PROCEDURE

K. Frey and N. Honeycutt, on behalf of B. Maranto, emailed participants with an invitation to participate in the study. The email was followed by a reminder email to participants who had not yet started or completed the survey. Upon opening the survey online, participants were presented with the informed consent. Upon agreeing to the informed consent, participants completed the survey.

¹⁹ FIRE (n.d.). *Scholars under fire database*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/scholars-under-fire>

²⁰ Honeycutt (2024)

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

To further protect the identities of participants, because the sample population is so small, most standard demographic questions were not included in the survey. But, demographic frequencies for political ideology and political party ID can be found in Table 1.

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC FREQUENCIES	
Political Ideology	
Far left	36
Liberal	42
Slightly liberal	17
Moderate, middle-of-the-road	17
Slightly conservative	17
Conservative	23
Far right	6
Something else	26
Missing (left blank)	25
Political Party	
Strong Democrat	41
Weak Democrat	14
Independent, lean Democrat	15
Independent	20
Independent, lean Republican	16
Weak Republican	3
Strong Republican	20
Libertarian	4
Green Party	2
Something else	49
Missing (left blank)	25

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Since our founding in 1999, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression has fought the culture of censorship on college and university campuses. One prominent aspect of campus censorship culture are scholar sanction attempts. These attempts involve public calls on colleges and universities to sanction scholars for their protected expression. This can include demands that a school place a scholar under investigation for a social media post on X all the way up to calls for terminating the scholar’s employment. We record the outcomes of these campaigns in our Scholars Under Fire database.²¹

A sanction attempt does not mean that the scholar was ultimately sanctioned, although many are. The types of sanctions we record vary in severity from placing a scholar under investigation or requiring them to undergo additional training to terminations and forced resignation. Outcomes such as censorship, scholarship suppression, demotion (e.g., removal as chair of a department), or suspension (e.g., placed on administrative leave) are also recorded. Administrative punishment of a scholar’s expression in the absence of a public call to sanction a scholar is also recorded accordingly.

LIMITATIONS

These findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. Our sample consists of scholars listed in our Scholars Under Fire database who were sanctioned or targeted between 2020 and 2024; 209 of 635 invited participated (33%). As a targeted, self-selected, cross-sectional sample relying on retrospective self-reports, the results illuminate the experiences of sanctioned scholars — not the average faculty member — and they cannot establish causality. Recall and visibility biases are possible (severe or high-profile cases may be overrepresented), and effects may vary by rank, discipline, institution type, and other demographics in ways our topline estimates do not capture. Observed ideological differences may also reflect selection effects (e.g., who remains in academia or who chooses to respond). Finally, definitional choices (e.g., “sanction” vs. “sanction attempt”) and the limits of any database mean some relevant cases may be missed or underreported.

²¹ FIRE (n.d.). *Scholars under fire database*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/scholars-under-fire>

Survey Items and Topline Results

Which of the following statements best represents your opinion on the academic freedom of professors?: “University professors should be free to express any of their ideas or convictions **IN** the classroom . . .”

Response	n	%
On any subject.	50	24.39%
On any subject, if it’s presented respectfully.	69	33.66%
On any subject, if it’s within their field of expertise.	72	35.12%
On any subject, if it’s consistent with what is widely accepted within their field of expertise.	10	4.88%
University professors should NOT be free to express their ideas or convictions in the classroom.	4	1.95%

Which of the following statements best represents your opinion on the academic freedom of professors? “University professors should be free to express any of their ideas or convictions **OUTSIDE** the classroom . . .”

Response	n	%
On any subject.	158	75.96%
On any subject, if it’s presented respectfully.	42	20.19%
On any subject, if it’s within their field of expertise.	6	2.88%
On any subject, if it’s consistent with what is widely accepted within their field of expertise.	1	0.48%
University professors should NOT be free to express their ideas or convictions outside the classroom.	1	0.48%

In your opinion, how secure is academic freedom on your campus today?

Response	n	%
Not at all secure	92	44.23%
Not very secure	55	26.44%
Somewhat secure	43	20.67%
Very secure	12	5.77%
Completely secure	6	2.88%

Now we want to ask you about the sanction attempt you experienced. How clearly do you remember the time you were targeted and/or sanctioned for your speech?

Response	n	%
Very clearly	184	95.83%
Somewhat clearly	7	3.65%
Slightly clearly	0	0.00%
Not at all clearly	1	0.52%

How would you describe the impact, if any, of the incident?

Response	n	%
Extremely negative	116	60.42%
Moderately negative	50	26.04%
Slightly negative	15	7.81%
Neither positive or negative	5	2.60%
Slightly positive	1	0.52%
Moderately positive	2	1.04%
Extremely positive	3	1.56%

Please select which (if any) of the following you experienced as a result of the incident:

Response	n	%
Termination/loss of employment	42	20.10%
Early retirement	18	8.61%
Lost opportunities for promotion	31	14.83%
Lost opportunities for other employment	54	25.84%
Reduced salary	25	11.96%
Fewer research or grant opportunities	28	13.40%
Fewer teaching opportunities	44	21.05%
Legal costs	49	23.44%
Lost friendships	69	33.01%
Lost professional relationships	99	47.37%
Shunning at work	83	39.71%
Family members or friends suffering collateral damage	61	29.19%
Strained relationships with family members	43	20.57%
Lost sleep	110	52.63%
Emotional distress	136	65.07%
Had to seek psychological counseling	57	27.27%
Other (please explain)	45	21.53%

How much PUBLIC (i.e., open, publicly visible) support, if any, did you receive for your free speech/academic freedom rights from the following groups:

- Administrators

Response	n	%
None at all	146	78.07%
A little	20	10.70%
A moderate amount	9	4.81%
A lot	5	2.67%
A great deal	7	3.74%

- Graduate students

Response	n	%
None at all	96	58.18%
A little	26	15.76%
A moderate amount	14	8.48%
A lot	16	9.70%
A great deal	13	7.88%

- Undergraduate students

Response	n	%
None at all	79	44.63%
A little	40	22.60%
A moderate amount	22	12.43%
A lot	21	11.86%
A great deal	15	8.47%

- Faculty union

Response	n	%
None at all	113	68.07%
A little	18	10.84%
A moderate amount	13	7.83%
A lot	12	7.23%
A great deal	10	6.02%

- Colleagues at your institution

Response	n	%
None at all	68	37.16%
A little	53	28.96%
A moderate amount	26	14.21%
A lot	19	10.38%
A great deal	17	9.29%

- Colleagues at other institutions

Response	n	%
None at all	48	26.67%
A little	44	24.44%
A moderate amount	34	18.89%
A lot	27	15.00%
A great deal	27	15.00%

- Outside organizations

Response	n	%
None at all	52	28.73%
A little	35	19.34%
A moderate amount	30	16.57%
A lot	35	19.34%
A great deal	29	16.02%

- Family members

Response	n	%
None at all	56	30.77%
A little	20	10.99%
A moderate amount	14	7.69%
A lot	20	10.99%
A great deal	72	39.56%

- Non-academic friends

Response	n	%
None at all	46	25.27%
A little	25	13.74%
A moderate amount	24	13.19%
A lot	30	16.48%
A great deal	57	31.32%

- Activists

Response	n	%
None at all	68	38.86%
A little	28	16.00%
A moderate amount	30	17.14%
A lot	19	10.86%
A great deal	30	17.14%

- Government officials/politicians

Response	n	%
None at all	137	78.74%
A little	16	9.20%
A moderate amount	12	6.90%
A lot	6	3.45%
A great deal	3	1.72%

- Religious figures

Response	n	%
None at all	130	75.58%
A little	20	11.63%
A moderate amount	6	3.49%
A lot	10	5.81%
A great deal	6	3.49%

- Other public figures

Response	n	%
None at all	114	65.52%
A little	21	12.07%
A moderate amount	12	6.90%
A lot	11	6.32%
A great deal	16	9.20%

- General public

Response	n	%
None at all	62	35.43%
A little	37	21.14%
A moderate amount	38	21.71%
A lot	20	11.43%
A great deal	18	10.29%

How much PRIVATE support, if any, did you receive for your free speech/academic freedom rights from the following groups:

- Administrators

Response	n	%
None at all	106	58.24%
A little	41	22.53%
A moderate amount	21	11.54%
A lot	7	3.85%
A great deal	7	3.85%

- Graduate students

Response	n	%
None at all	69	41.32%
A little	36	21.56%
A moderate amount	29	17.37%
A lot	18	10.78%
A great deal	15	8.98%

- Undergraduate students

Response	n	%
None at all	57	32.76%
A little	44	25.29%
A moderate amount	25	14.37%
A lot	24	13.79%
A great deal	24	13.79%

- Faculty union

Response	n	%
None at all	105	64.02%
A little	18	10.98%
A moderate amount	7	4.27%
A lot	16	9.76%
A great deal	18	10.98%

- Colleagues at your institution

Response	n	%
None at all	25	13.89%
A little	67	37.22%
A moderate amount	36	20.00%
A lot	30	16.67%
A great deal	22	12.22%

- Colleagues at other institutions

Response	n	%
None at all	24	13.48%
A little	47	26.40%
A moderate amount	40	22.47%
A lot	44	24.72%
A great deal	23	12.92%

- Outside organizations

Response	n	%
None at all	51	29.14%
A little	43	24.57%
A moderate amount	31	17.71%
A lot	25	14.29%
A great deal	25	14.29%

- Family members

Response	n	%
None at all	19	10.61%
A little	15	8.38%
A moderate amount	18	10.06%
A lot	29	16.20%
A great deal	98	54.75%

- Non-academic friends

Response	n	%
None at all	18	10.00%
A little	20	11.11%
A moderate amount	32	17.78%
A lot	37	20.56%
A great deal	73	40.56%

- Activists

Response	n	%
None at all	67	38.51%
A little	35	20.11%
A moderate amount	26	14.94%
A lot	17	9.77%
A great deal	29	16.67%

- Government officials/politicians

Response	n	%
None at all	133	77.78%
A little	18	10.53%
A moderate amount	9	5.26%
A lot	4	2.34%
A great deal	7	4.09%

- Religious figures

Response	n	%
None at all	121	71.60%
A little	17	10.06%
A moderate amount	13	7.69%
A lot	6	3.55%
A great deal	12	7.10%

- Other public figures

Response	n	%
None at all	114	66.28%
A little	21	12.21%
A moderate amount	14	8.14%
A lot	5	2.91%
A great deal	18	10.47%

- General public

Response	n	%
None at all	61	35.47%
A little	41	23.84%
A moderate amount	31	18.02%
A lot	16	9.30%
A great deal	23	13.37%

Next, we'd like to ask you about the impact of the sanction attempt. What **BENEFITS**, if any, did the individuals demanding sanctions receive? (Select all that apply.)

Response	n	%
Academic / professional advancement	42	20.10%
Social support from the broader community	73	34.93%
Reputational enhancement among peers	93	44.50%
Monetary or material rewards such as grants or royalties	20	9.57%
Positive media coverage	69	33.01%
Something else (please explain)	55	26.32%
None of the above	36	17.22%

What COSTS, if any, did the individuals demanding sanctions incur? (Select all that apply.)

Response	n	%
Academic / professional penalties	14	6.70%
Social ostracism from the broader community	13	6.22%
Reputational damage among peers	33	15.79%
Monetary or material costs such as the loss of grants or royalties	6	2.87%
Negative media coverage	59	28.23%
Something else (please explain)	36	17.22%
None of the above	91	43.54%

Did the sanction attempt make you more or less likely to express similar views in the future?

Response	n	%
I am much more likely to express similar views in the future	51	27.72%
I am somewhat more likely to express similar views in the future	13	7.07%
I am neither more nor less likely to express similar views in the future	54	29.35%
I am somewhat less likely to express similar views in the future	32	17.39%
I am much less likely to express similar views in the future	34	18.48%

If you could do it over again, would you change or not change what you said or did THAT LED TO the sanction/sanction attempt?

Response	n	%
I would not change anything I said or did	131	71.58%
I would change what I said or did, but still convey the same message	32	17.49%
I would substantially change what I said or did	5	2.73%
I would not express myself in the way I said or did	15	8.20%

If you could do it over again, would you change or not change what you said or did AFTER the sanction/sanction attempt?

Response	n	%
I would not change anything I said or did	137	74.46%
I would change what I said or did, but still convey the same message	30	16.30%
I would substantially change what I said or did	11	5.98%
I would not express myself in the way I said or did	6	3.26%

Since the sanction attempt, have you personally mentored any other scholars who have experienced a similar incident?

Response	n	%
Yes	96	52.17%
No	88	47.83%

How much confidence do you have in your college/university to properly handle similar incidents in the future?

Response	n	%
None at all	99	53.51%
Very little	47	25.41%
Some	20	10.81%
Quite a lot	13	7.03%
A great deal	6	3.24%

This next series of questions asks you about self-censorship in different settings. For these questions, self-censorship is defined as follows:

Refraining from sharing certain views because you fear social (e.g., exclusion from social events), professional (e.g., losing job or promotion), legal (e.g., prosecution or fine), or violent (e.g., assault) consequences, whether in person or remotely (e.g., by phone or online), and whether the consequences come from state or non-state sources.

Compared to before the sanction attempt, how much more or less do you self-censor during conversations with the following groups on campus:

- Faculty

Response	n	%
A great deal less	11	6.01%
Slightly less	9	4.92%
Neither more nor less	92	50.27%
Slightly more	26	14.21%
A great deal more	28	15.30%
Not applicable	17	9.29%

- Administrators

Response	n	%
A great deal less	14	7.65%
Slightly less	8	4.37%
Neither more nor less	77	42.08%
Slightly more	20	10.93%
A great deal more	44	24.04%
Not applicable	20	10.93%

- Students

Response	n	%
A great deal less	13	7.10%
Slightly less	10	5.46%
Neither more nor less	80	43.72%
Slightly more	32	17.49%
A great deal more	30	16.39%
Not applicable	18	9.84%

Compared to before the sanction attempt, how much more or less do you self-censor in the following areas:

... research topics investigated

Response	n	%
A great deal less	14	7.69%
Slightly less	6	3.30%
Neither more nor less	118	64.84%
Slightly more	10	5.49%
A great deal more	9	4.95%
Not applicable	25	13.74%

... academic publications

Response	n	%
A great deal less	13	7.14%
Slightly less	5	2.75%
Neither more nor less	115	63.19%
Slightly more	10	5.49%
A great deal more	10	5.49%
Not applicable	29	15.93%

... publications, talks, interviews, or lectures directed to a general audience

Response	n	%
A great deal less	16	8.79%
Slightly less	12	6.59%
Neither more nor less	98	53.85%
Slightly more	18	9.89%
A great deal more	23	12.64%
Not applicable	15	8.24%

... online correspondences via institutional email and other professional sites

Response	n	%
A great deal less	11	6.04%
Slightly less	9	4.95%
Neither more nor less	88	48.35%
Slightly more	29	15.93%
A great deal more	35	19.23%
Not applicable	10	5.49%

... online social media accounts and other sites connected to you personally but not professionally

Response	n	%
A great deal less	18	9.89%
Slightly less	13	7.14%
Neither more nor less	64	35.16%
Slightly more	28	15.38%
A great deal more	37	20.33%
Not applicable	22	12.09%

... classroom lectures and discussions

Response	n	%
A great deal less	7	3.85%
Slightly less	10	5.49%
Neither more nor less	84	46.15%
Slightly more	38	20.88%
A great deal more	20	10.99%
Not applicable	23	12.64%

Acknowledgments

Our gratitude goes to Nathan Honeycutt for study and questionnaire design, data collection, data analysis, and authoring this report; and to Sean Stevens for support with study and questionnaire design and authoring this report. We would additionally like to thank Komi Frey and Robert Maranto for support with study and questionnaire design, and with data collection; Khalia Abner for designing the report; Jordan Howell for designing the online version of the report; and Logan Dougherty, Angela C. Erickson, Zach Greenberg, Alex Grizwold, Mertcan Gungor, Graham Piro, and David Volodzko for editing support.

Greg Lukianoff
President and CEO, FIRE

Citation

Honeycutt, N. & Stevens, S. T. (2025). *Sanctioned Scholars: The Price of Speaking Freely in Today's Academy*. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/sanctioned-scholars-price-speaking-freely-todays-academy>

About Us

The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to defending and sustaining the individual rights of all Americans to free speech and free thought. These rights include freedom of speech, freedom of association, due process, legal equality, religious liberty, and sanctity of conscience — the most essential qualities of liberty. FIRE also recognizes that colleges and universities play a vital role in preserving free thought within a free society. To this end, we place a special emphasis on defending these rights of students and faculty members on our nation's campuses.

For more information, **visit [thefire.org](https://www.thefire.org)** or **@thefireorg on X**.



Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE)
P.O. Box 40128
Philadelphia, PA 19106
p: 215-717-3473 | www.fire.org

