

# Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue at the University of North Carolina

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# Background and objectives

- This is a faculty-led project.
- We build on the work we completed in 2019-2020.
  - <https://fecdsurveyreport.web.unc.edu/>
- The purposes of the renewed effort were to:
  - Revisit findings with attention to variation across time and place.
  - Push harder on standing questions.
  - Begin to identify opportunities for improvement.

# Research approach

## Participating institutions

Appalachian State University	UNC-Charlotte
NC Central University	UNC-Greensboro
UNC-Asheville	UNC-Pembroke
UNC-Chapel Hill	UNC-Wilmington

- Local research partners at each institution supported this work.
- We invited random samples of students at each institution to participate.
- Respondents were offered \$10 to complete the survey.
- We met our target of 500 complete respondents at 5 out of 8 institutions.
  - NC Central and UNC-P had a very low response rates.
  - UNC-Asheville had a great response rate, but is a small school.
- Across schools, there were 3,408 complete responses.

# Research approach

- The survey had two kinds of questions.
  - Core content (~80% of survey length) was constant across schools.
  - Modular content (~20% of survey length) was specific to each school.
  - Local partners developed the modular content for their institution, with feedback from the PI.
  
- The samples generally come close to campus demographics.
  - First-year students and women are slightly overrepresented.
  
- Not part of this presentation: A minority oversample (Black and Latino students) at UNC-Charlotte, initiated by Mel Atkinson.
  
- Coming up: A “tasting menu”:
  - Four findings.
  - Three questions and answers.
  - There is a lot more in the report.

# Finding 1: Faculty generally do not push political agendas

Approach: “Fly on the wall” class sampling

Percentage who *disagree* that “The course instructor encouraged participation from liberals and conservatives alike”

	University							
	App	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Respondent identifies as								
Liberal	6	13	2	2	2	6	2	3
Moderate	6	8	6	0	7	8	21	6
Conservative	7	--	11	11	9	16	10	12

Note: Analysis is limited to the 36% of courses where the respondent indicated politics came up in class.

## Finding 2: Campuses do not consistently achieve an atmosphere that promotes free expression

Approach: “Fly on the wall” class sampling

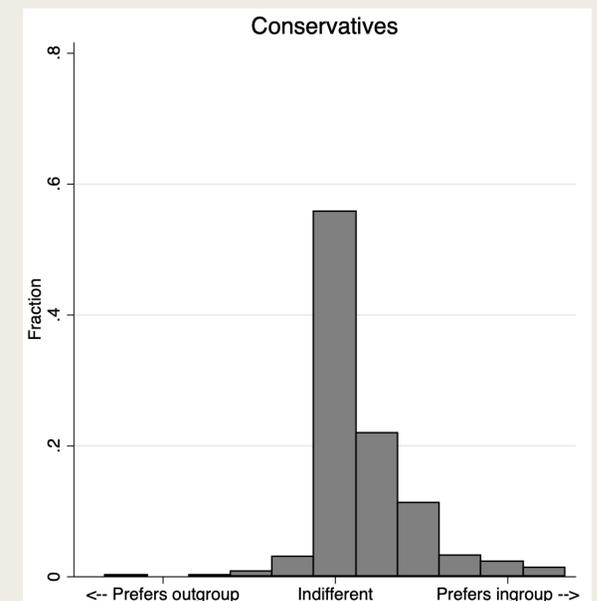
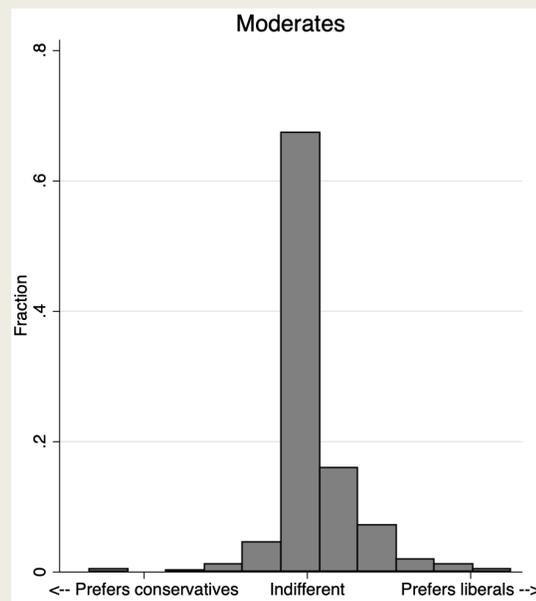
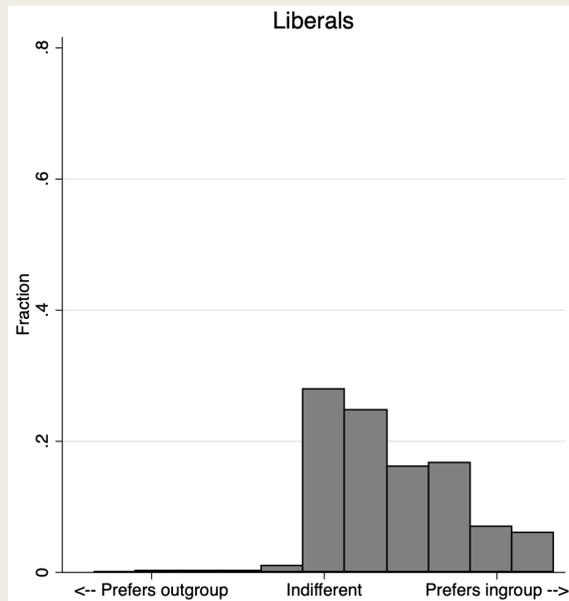
Percentage of students with various concerns

	University							
	App	NCCU	UNC-A	UNC-CH	UNC-C	UNC-G	UNC-P	UNC-W
Concerned about <i>peers</i>	39%	13%	31%	35%	37%	21%	25%	37%
Concerned about <i>instructor</i>	22	13	15	24	18	14	20	22
Self-censored more than once	22	17	21	18	22	17	17	22

Note: Analysis is limited to the 36% of courses where the respondent indicated politics came up in class.

# Finding 3: Students who identify as conservative face distinctive challenges

- There are large liberal/moderate/conservative divides related to expression concerns (see report).
- We also measured students' willingness to socialize with political outgroups.



# Finding 4: Students across the political spectrum want more opportunities to engage with those who think differently

- At 5 universities, majorities indicate that there are too few opportunities for constructive engagement.
  
- Students exhibit substantial enthusiasm for increasing opportunities to hear conservative speakers.
  - This often includes a majority of students who describe themselves as moderate.
  - Among students who identify as liberal, there is often more support for inviting more conservative speakers than for inviting more liberal speakers (6 universities).

		UNC-CH
There are too few opportunities to hear liberal speakers		
	Liberals	21%
	Moderates	14
	Conservatives	8
There are too few opportunities to hear conservative speakers		
	Liberals	32%
	Moderates	56
	Conservatives	86

Table shows the percentage of students who agree

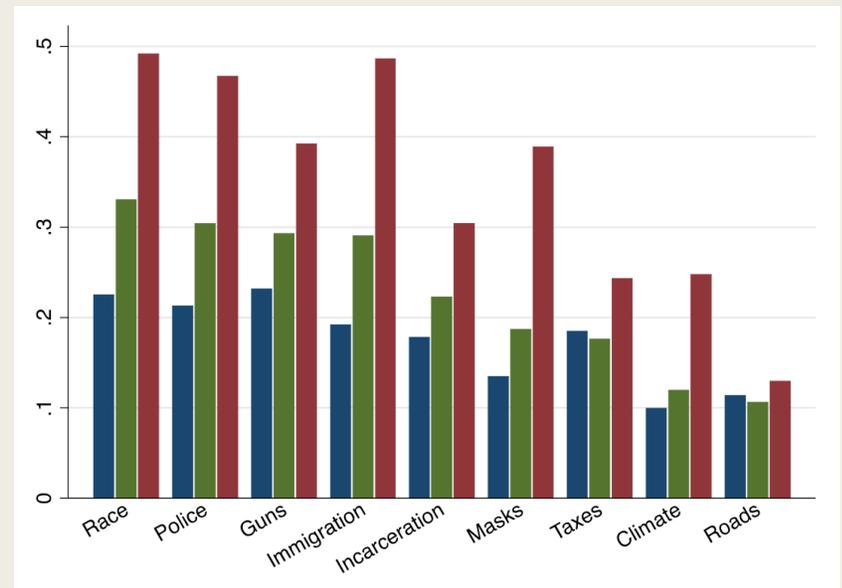


# New Evidence for Standing Questions

# What are students uncomfortable discussing?

- Answer: The things you'd expect.
- But not *only* the things you'd expect.
- The open-ended responses reveal some of the “Rashomon” moments that unfold on campus.

Proportion uncomfortable giving honest opinions in class, for various issues

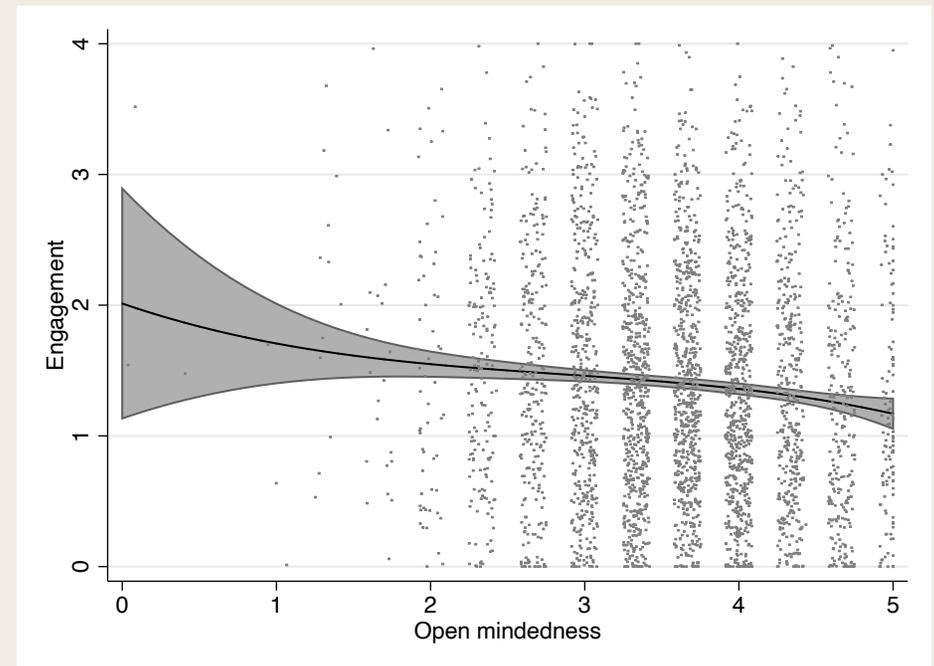


Blue bars: Self-described liberals  
Green bars: Self-described moderates  
Red bars: Self-described conservatives

# Who is engaged?

- Answer: Not necessarily who we hoped.
- Highly-engaged students tend to be:
  - Less open-minded.
  - Less adept at perspective taking.
  - More likely to harbor negative stereotypes.
  - And more (see report).
- For students whose opinions are more tentative, these trends can make engagement less appealing.

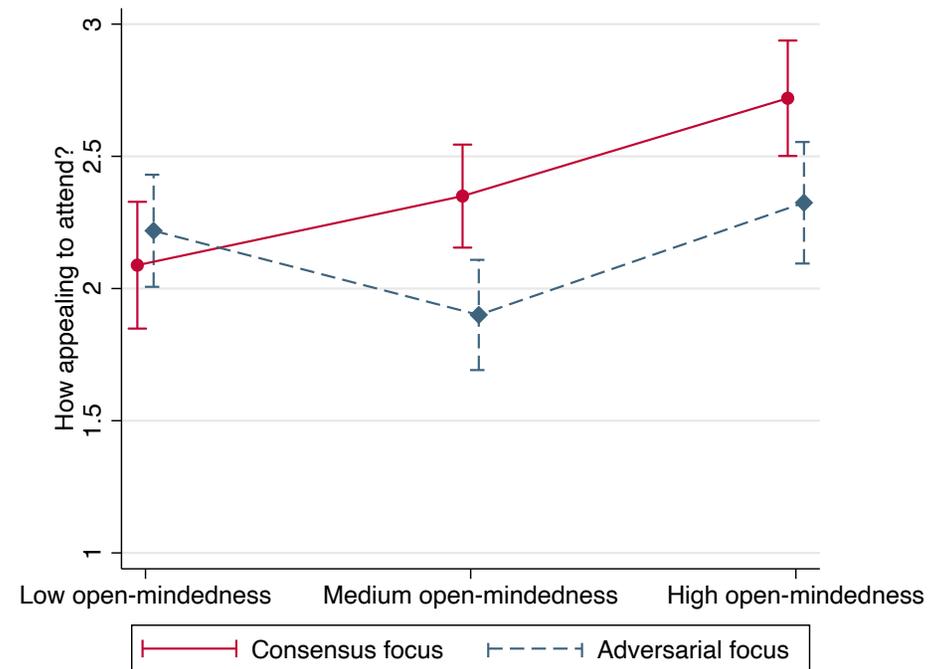
More open-minded students are less likely to be engaged



# How can culture be improved?

- Answer: Trust and rapport.
- We find evidence that students are much more comfortable discussing politics in familiar settings. (See report.)
- We measured appeal of an event described in two different ways:
  - “The speakers would defend their points of view, criticize the other side’s record, and try to persuade the audience to support their preferred policies.”
  - “The speakers would present their points of view, consider the other side’s record, and try to identify points of consensus and agreement?”

Focusing on consensus increases appeal to open-minded students



The BPC Roadmap offers a holistic, strategic framework for building a free expression & constructive dialogue culture. It also enables customization by each campus to meet their unique environments and assess their progress.

Areas	Example Recommendations
Chancellors/Provosts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define a free expression/constructive dialogue strategy and culture</li> <li>• Model free expression and teach constructive dialogue</li> <li>• Determine which issues are appropriate to take a stance on</li> <li>• Prepare to support academic freedom when controversies occur</li> </ul>
Trustees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publicly support free expression and constructive dialogue</li> <li>• Support research into free expression, viewpoint diversity, etc.</li> </ul>
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support/model free expression in the classroom and beyond</li> <li>• Promote/model evidence-based argument</li> </ul>
Athletic Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support athletes' free expression rights</li> </ul>
Student Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize orientation and other communications to build an understanding of students' free speech rights and academic freedom</li> </ul>

# Thank you

- There is a lot more in the written report, and lots of opportunities for stakeholders to push the data further.
- Not part of this presentation:
  - Campus-specific modules.
  - Minority oversample at UNC-C.
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