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## Chilling Effects? The Impact of Political Statement-Making on Faculty at R1 Universities

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Colleen P. Eren, William Paterson University, USA. E-mail: erenc@wpunj.edu

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### Abstract

Domestic and international socio-political crises have reinvigorated debate about whether colleges should issue statements on topics outside of their academic missions of teaching and research. Philosophical arguments for and against the practice of institutional neutrality are abundant, but no empirical research has looked at attitudes towards institutional position-taking among faculty and how institutional statements may affect faculty's professional and extramural behaviors. This study addresses this gap through a survey of tenure-track faculty (N=250) at U.S. R1 universities. Findings indicate that a majority of faculty are familiar with at least some institutional statements issued by their universities, but a non-negligible percentage is unfamiliar with them (22%). Most faculty favor neutrality and have disagreed with at least some of the institutional positions taken. Self-censorship has been a reported outcome of institutional statements among a third of the faculty, and about half of faculty report modifying their professional engagement with a topic based on their university's position. Formal sanctions of faculty due to behaviors indicating their disagreement with statements were rare, but they nevertheless expressed concerns about social marginalization, which may be attributable to their reported perception of strong ideological homogeneity among their academic community. Among demographic variables, race and tenure status were found to have a significant impact on responses to the survey questions. Non-white and untenured faculty were more likely to indicate constraint in expressing their viewpoints, and more likely to be discouraged from participating in professional activities on a topic if their views were misaligned with those of their university. The results point to some chilling effect of statements, for which institutional neutrality should be considered.

*Keywords:* institutional neutrality; faculty attitudes; academic freedom

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## Introduction

The debate over universities' leadership issuing institutional statements on social and political topics outside of those focused on scholarship and teaching did not arise in the past decade. It has cyclically arisen in times of political crisis, when stakeholders and activists within and outside of the university have pressed to have their position on an issue officially recognized. University leadership took political positions well before the 1960s, such as when Harvard's president James Conant spoke to students following the Pearl Harbor attacks, pledging to use Harvard's resources for the war effort (Ireland, 2011). But it was the student Vietnam War protests and demands they made upon leadership, including to divest from businesses with links to apartheid South Africa (Fang, 2013) that led the University of Chicago's Kalven committee to issue their Report in 1967, which advocates and serves as a model for institutional neutrality at universities.

Institutional neutrality refers to the idea that universities and their leaders should not adopt organizational positions on social/political issues unless they have directly to do with the mission of the university and its values of free inquiry and truth-seeking (Shaw, 2025; Trinidad, 2024). Despite the Kalven Report's influence, only 8 colleges had adopted neutrality by the early 2020s. But after a decade of increasing demand for such statements following the Black Lives Matter movement, the election of Donald Trump, and most influentially, the Hamas attacks on Israel in October 2023 and the contentious clashes among students, faculty, funders, and the public over how universities should respond to that event, 140 more universities were either independently compelled to do so or forced to do so by state law or internal policy (Patel, 2025).

Institutional neutrality as an ideal has proven controversial. Proponents and detractors from academia, think tanks, and politicians have made their pitches (for example, see Diermeier, 2024; Wilson, 2023; Ford, 2024; Vasquez, 2024; Roth, 2024; Banout, 2024; Wilson, 2024). Legislative efforts in Republican-led states including North Carolina, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Utah, and Iowa have made the adoption of neutrality a cornerstone of their university reform efforts, and public university systems in states like Georgia, Texas, and Tennessee have implemented internal neutrality requirements. However abundant the commentaries about neutrality, peer-reviewed research examining how position-taking by universities affects the academic community in practice has not been forthcoming. Extant scholarship on institutional neutrality clusters into three categories: practical and philosophical arguments for and against neutrality; socio-historical narratives of when and why universities speak, and analyses of field-specific debates about whether neutrality is a desirable or coherent ideal. What is missing are empirical investigations of the core claims behind those in favor or opposed to neutrality.

This study addresses this gap by addressing one of the chief claims made by proponents of institutional neutrality: that political statement-making has a chilling effect on the academic community, limiting the bounds of permissible speech, topics under investigation, professional and extramural engagement with issues. Our work contributes to the literature on institutional neutrality and academic freedom in several ways. It moves the debate about neutrality away from conjecture or principle-based assertion to one grounded in the evidence of faculty-reported attitudes and behaviors. Second, it specifies which manifestations of academic freedom are most at risk of being chilled. Last, it identifies which groups are most vulnerable to having their speech chilled, challenging among other presumptions, the insulating effects of tenure.

This article proceeds by grounding our research first in the literature on institutional neutrality,

presenting the key themes and controversies, before proceeding to our research questions, methods, and data analysis. We conclude with a discussion of implications for policy-making and advocacy around institutional statements as they impact academic freedom and sketch a research agenda that tests the effects of statements on a broader constituency.

### Literature Review

Most of the writing about institutional neutrality has come from news reports or commentaries. Peer-reviewed literature on the concept of institutional neutrality, or on the impact of position-taking by universities is limited. As this review will show, the scholarly work available is almost exclusively divided into philosophical and practical justifications for why or why not a university should adopt such a practice. Some provide a limited historical account. There is also a narrow subset of studies that focus on the ways in which neutrality has influenced academic fields, primarily law.

#### Justifications For Institutional Neutrality

Among those scholars who argue in favor of neutrality are Ginsburg (2023), Whittington (2024), Saiger (2024), and Zambrano (2024). Ginsburg (2023) claims that among the open-inquiry-stifling effects of political statements are that they discourage speaking out contrary to an official position; they impoverish discourse; they reduce intellectual diversity; they deter those who disagree from ever entering the university; they raise the costs of inquiry and disincentivize certain forms of inquiry, and they generate backlash from external actors that threatens academia. He also implicates taking political positions in the decline in public confidence in the university. Institutional neutrality's purpose for him is to act in the role of a constitution, articulating shared values, allowing for ideas to flourish democratically, and taking certain questions off the table. Whittington (2024) states that not only does he believe that universities and subunits should not issue statements, but scholarly associations should not do so. He agrees with Ginsburg that they discourage disagreement or debate, and at the departmental level especially, position-taking "chill[s] speech" (p. 24). When universities are politicized, their roles as truth-seeking institutions and providers of impartial knowledge are questionable. And, as Ginsburg claimed, universities then compromise themselves by becoming political targets.

Saiger (2024) follows these two scholars in his insistence that political speech can chill expression on campus through a fear of sanctions, and that a culture of open inquiry is impeded. Like Ginsburg and Whittington, he sees the mission of universities undermined through position-taking and contends that statements present an institutional orthodoxy, while putting universities in the position of having to opine on everything. Saiger also agrees with Ginsburg and Whittington in asserting that position-taking puts pressure on professors and students to comply and chills dissent. Zambrano (2024), differing from these scholars in that he weighs the potential advantages of position-taking versus neutrality, ultimately arrives at the same conclusions, that there are no clear or strong advantages to position-taking, while the disadvantages are compelling and well-supported. Neutrality has benefits, according to Zambrano, such as deterring orthodoxy, preserving academic freedom, maintaining public legitimacy, and avoiding administrative costs. He emphasizes the chilling effect of statements on faculty and students but does not offer evidence that this exists. He says on average professors or students may not be negatively influenced by statements, but some may, and "even a small danger of speech chilling" should lead to neutrality (p. 8).

## Critiques of Institutional Neutrality

Post, while still raising caution against universities straying from their academic mission, lest they compromise their ability to claim they need freedom to achieve that mission, raises several critiques of adopting institutional neutrality (2023). Those critiques are focused on neutrality's actual beneficial impact on the academic community. He questions the claims to its necessity and the negative impacts of statement-making, as does Medeiros (2019). Post notes that there is a lack of theoretical rigor in the seminal 1967 Chicago Kalven Report tying together freedom to teach and do research to neutrality. He says there is a lack of empirical evidence to back up the claim that political statements pressure faculty to conform and therefore limit academic freedom, and points out that this claim was not accepted at the time of the Kalven Report. He admits, though, that among subunits of universities there may be a chilling effect if an official position is declared.

Post argues that there is no one-to-one relationship between academic freedom and statements, and intervening variables must be considered. He gives the example of a tweet over the Supreme Court's Dobbs ruling from the University of North Carolina and notes the complicated empirical question of whether that, in itself, had a chilling effect on the academic community. He asserts that there is no evidence that universities' divestment from South Africa in 1988 hurt academic freedom. Trinidad (2024), although less critical, joins Post in a skepticism about academics' freedom being chilled by an institutional position and in observing the lack of empirical work on institutional neutrality. Where he is interested in further empirical research is in organizational and institutional ecological analyses around position-taking but does not conduct empirical analyses: he gives propositions for factors that may influence whether a university will adopt a resolution. Whittington (2024) also raises questions about institutional processes related to statements that haven't been answered empirically, like who actually speaks for the university.

Katz (1983), Medeiros (2019), Aby (2007), Barnhizer (1993) and Byrne (1993) move away from criticisms rooted in a lack of empiricism. They raise critical concerns with the notion of academic neutrality more broadly in discrete disciplines. Katz (1983) demonstrates within the field of Tibetan studies how neutrality has been detached from the reality of how politics work, and decisions made within universities. Barnhizer (1993) and Byrne (1993) problematize the concept of academic neutrality in the field of law. Barnhizer (1993) describes the orthodoxy that prevailed in that field prior to the 1970s, one which presented the law and its study as neutral; a view which he argues can be misleading or untrue. At the same time, he sees that the changes to the field between 1970 and the early 1990s were improperly guided by political correctness and personal agendas. He counters that extreme subjectivism is equally detrimental to intellectual legitimacy. He proposes that intellectual honesty, rather than neutrality, is the ideal. Like Barnhizer, Byrne sees legal scholarship as incapable of being neutral, because it is directed towards the education of lawyers who should seek to improve justice outcomes.

Aby (2007), in describing the career of UCLA professor Angela Davis in the 1960s, fired for her membership in the Communist Party, follows these scholars in describing neutrality as fictitious. He argues that neutrality such as that imposed by the UCLA Board of Regents, which fired her, was faux neutrality. Grants for war-related research are considered acceptable and neutral, for example, while statements critical of these wars are not. Medeiros similarly posits a type of faux neutrality among universities. Decisions about curriculum, policies, and resources are always political. He assigns anti-progressive motivations to neutrality provisions, saying they are

designed to undercut DEI efforts and promote neoliberalism. He notes the Goldwater Institute in 2017 began issuing model policy for states which advocated for neutrality.

Although he sides with institutional neutrality, Zambrano (2024) presents arguments used in its favor: teaching students about political events; fostering belonging; building community; and changing the outcome of external political debates. He notes that none have empirical validation, and at best are weak and short-lived in potential benefits.

### **Historical Context of Institutional Neutrality**

The history of institutional neutrality is not laid out linearly in the literature. Whittington's "On Institutional Neutrality and the Purpose of a University," (2024) and Bok's *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University* (1982) provide the deepest overviews. They note that the debate over neutrality goes back at least to the 19th century. U.S. colleges, unlike their German counterparts, were grounded in their ecclesiastical origins and leadership by clergy. The Board of Trustees for these colleges felt empowered to determine the content of statements about social questions, and to get rid of controversial professors or leadership. Whittington (2024) asserts that therefore institutional neutrality became a way of pushing meddlesome Trustees out of the way, an exchange to secure academic freedom for professors. He gives another reason for U.S. universities steering towards neutrality in the 19th century: public universities arose during a highly partisan political environment, and they wanted to maintain independence from the fray. The University of Chicago, which figures prominently in writing about academic freedom and neutrality, appears in the recounting of the 19th century's push for neutrality. Ginsburg (2023) points out the University's 1899 commitment to non-engagement in public affairs and affirming the importance of freedom of speech in all subjects.

Though the University of Chicago had this early commitment, Ginsburg (2023) notes examples of universities making statements about World War I, around the time that Bok (1982) points out that the AAUP was founded. Their Declaration of 1915 elaborated on the principles of academic freedom, and "regard[ed] the university as a non-partisan forum detached from the struggles and disputes of outside" (p. 5). The acceptance of institutional neutrality and its linkage to academic freedom that followed this Declaration was adequate for a time before World War II when universities were small and detached from federal and state governments. After the end of the War, with the increased number of students, an influx of federal research grant dollars, the government becoming more involved with social causes, and more oversight of social matters within colleges, this changed.

Bok shows that the student protests of the 1960s were a turning point for the acceptance of institutional neutrality as the default administrative response. Pressure was placed on universities to be responsive to students' political concerns. In 1969, he documents, Harvard was asked to issue statements condemning war in Vietnam. Murphy (1971) also alludes to political events of that period involving student unrest that led to administrations going against neutrality.

The University of Chicago's 1967 Kalven Report predictably is centered in the literature. Ginsburg (2023) and Post (2023) point out it was a defensive document. The original impetus was a student demand for divestment from South Africa and during the period of large-scale protest against the Vietnam War (Zambrano, 2024, p. 3). The AAUP's 1969 "The Question of Institutional Neutrality" is also mentioned in the historical recounting (Post, 2023; Whittington, 2024). While not directly

contradicting the Kalven Report, it pointed out that debate is not precluded when an institutional political position is taken. The AAUP's findings were that both sides of the neutrality debate had their points.

Whittington (2024) observes that as campus protests went down with the withdrawal from Vietnam, demands for institutional neutrality faded, but with further instances of campus activism, the issue continually resurfaces. There is no further deep engagement with institutional neutrality's history in the peer-reviewed/refereed literature after his contribution.

### Research Questions

As demonstrated, there are substantial gaps in the literature on institutional neutrality. Empirical research is lacking on the impact of institutional statements at any level, on any population. Ginsburg (2023) rightfully indicates, "[that] junior faculty [have] tough skins and [are not] intimidated by collective statements is an empirical question" (p. 2).

This research queries R1 faculty's attitudes toward political statement-making by university administration and the impact on their professional and personal activities. The questions it answers are:

1. What are tenured and tenure-track (TT) faculty's attitudes towards political statement-making by their universities?
2. What is faculty's perception of their academic community's attitudes towards these statements?
3. Do they modify any of their professional or extramural activities in response to political statements by their universities?
4. Do demographic variables, political orientation, university characteristics, or tenured/untentured status have a significant influence on these attitudes and behaviors?

### Methods

#### Sample

IRB approval was obtained for the present study, which relies on data from 250 TT faculty at R1 universities in the United States that had not declared institutional neutrality at the time of fielding the survey between December 2024 and April 2025. R1 universities in the U.S. representative of all regions were selected due to several factors (see Appendix A for universities surveyed). First, if statements chill academic freedom, their impact on universities that have the highest productivity and incentivization of research should be outsized. Secondly, R1 universities are often deemed the most prestigious, with faculty often being looked to for thought leadership, and graduates dominating prominent roles across multiple sectors (Wai & Perina, 2018). Chilling their freedom would therefore have a large public impact.

#### Recruitment

To obtain the contact information for TT faculty, the tool Hunter.io was used to identify e-mail addresses and job titles associated with the domains of the universities. Potential subjects' e-mail

addresses and titles were filtered for titles indicating currently occupying a tenured or tenure-track position. These included “assistant professor,” “associate professor,” “full professor,” or “professor.” Titles including the words “visiting,” “emeritus” or “adjunct” were filtered out. In addition to this method, 400 professors from the target schools listed as members at the nonprofit Heterodox Academy, even if they were missing from the Hunter.io lists, were sent a survey due to their perceived interest in the topic of academic freedom. Their e-mail addresses were obtained using Hunter.io’s e-mail finder and searches of university websites. 13,767 e-mails were sent from four accounts at 60 e-mails a day, and 13,318 e-mails were delivered. Reasons for the discrepancy included e-mails bouncing or being cancelled by the software. Using the statistics provided by Hunter.io, 34% of the emails were opened. The completion rate was 2% of delivered surveys, and 6% of opened surveys.

### **Survey: Measures, Anchors, Psychometric Properties, Coding and Data Transformation**

This study relied on a cross-sectional survey of 25 questions (see Appendix B). 15 questions queried professors’ attitudes towards statements, their behavioral responses, and perceptions of other campus community members’ support for statements. 7 questions provided demographic and professional data, and 2 questions were open-ended to provide space for additional comment and clarification of responses. The substantive 15 questions relied primarily on forced binary responses and three-option categorical responses that were intended to limit central tendency bias among participants. One anchoring question was used, “Are you familiar with any of your university’s statements on social or political topics that do not directly concern its academic mission?” to establish respondents’ awareness before asking them attitudinal and behavioral questions related to such awareness.

The survey did not attempt to devise a single psychometric scale or rely upon previously validated scales. It was designed to capture two key constructs that can inform scholarly debate on political statements: attitudinal alignment (the extent to which faculty support and perceive support for statements among others), and behavioral modifications/ chilling effects (perceptions of behavioral modifications in response to political statements). To ensure sufficient measurement of behavioral modifications/ chilling effects, the survey included modifications not only to professional activities, but also extramural activities, the potential increase of activities, as well as decrease in activities. It also differentiated between self-censorship on statements due to risk to job security and those motivated by peer approval/disapproval in order to gain a more nuanced appreciation for the pathways by which people have their academic freedom “chilled.”

#### ***Data Transformation***

Prior to descriptive and inferential statistical analysis, the coding procedure of demographic collapsing was conducted to ensure sufficient statistical power. Race was collapsed into the dichotomous variable white/non-white; Political Orientation was coded into Left-leaning (Liberal/Leftist), Moderate/Centrist, and Right-leaning (Conservative/Libertarian). Religion was coded into Christian, Jewish, Atheist/Agnostic, and Other, and Discipline was collapsed into STEM and non-STEM.

#### ***Quantitative Statistical Testing***

Descriptive statistics were run for the transformed demographic and professional-status variables as well as the substantive question responses. One-sample proportions tests were then

conducted to determine if the percentage of faculty indicating either agreement or disagreement with each attitudinal and behavioral modification question was statistically different from an even split among responses. With a sample size of 200 respondents, the study had sufficient statistical power to detect meaningful departures—medium effects—from that 50/50 split using one-sample proportion tests where  $p < .05$  (Cohen, 1992, p. 158).

Chi-Square Tests of Independence were run to determine if attitudes or behaviors were correlated with specific demographic and professional status categories, such as race or tenure status.

### **Qualitative Analysis and Coding**

To perform content analysis on the 81 responses received to the open-ended question, “If you have any additional comments on the subject matter of this study, please enter them below,” the qualitative software Atlas.ti was used. The unit of analysis for the content analysis was the individual response, and an inductive process of open-coding on these responses was used to identify themes and topical references directly from the data. Preliminary codes on each individual response were revisited for consolidation once a first round of coding was performed. To highlight salient versus more idiosyncratic responses, a threshold of 10% of responses containing a theme was established for reporting that theme.

## **Results**

### **Sample**

250 TT professors from R1 universities completed surveys (see Table 1 for summary demographic information). The majority of respondents were male (67.6%), White (77.2%), politically left-leaning (62.8%) and tenured (87.6%), from public R1s (66%), in non-STEM disciplines such as the social sciences and the arts and humanities. Atheists or Agnostics were the largest group by religious affiliation (47.6%), as were those from colleges in the West (32.8%). Several of these demographic variables rely on collapsed categories to avoid low cell counts and maintain the validity of inferential statistical analysis.

**Table 1.** Demographic Summary (N=250).

Category	Percentage (%)
Race	White (77.2) Non-white (20.8) No response (1.6)
Sex	Male (67.6) Female (30.8) Nonbinary (0.8) No response (0.4)
Religious Affiliation	Atheist/Agnostic (47.6), Christian (28.0) Jewish (12.4) Other (10.0) No response (1.6)
Tenure Status	Tenured (87.6) Untenured (11.6) No response (0.4)
Political Affiliation	Left-leaning (62.8) Moderate/Centrist (22.8) Right-leaning (10.8) Other (1.6) No response (1.6)
Institution Region	West (32.8) Midwest (30.0) Northeast (26.0) South or Southwest (9.6) No response (1.2)

Public versus Private                      Public (66.0) Private (32.4) No response (1.2)

Discipline                                      STEM (36.4) non-STEM (62.4) No response (0.8)

**Table 2.** Descriptive Data for Survey Questions (N = 196).

Question Summarized (see Appendix B for full text)	Response Percentages (non-responses excluded)
Have you agreed with all statements?	Yes: 33.2%; No: 66.8%
Do you agree with the university making statements?	Disagree: 53.3%; Agree: 46.7%
Have you felt more of a sense of belonging due to statements?	Neither: 45.4%; More of a sense of not belonging: 36.7%; More of a sense of belonging: 17.9%
Have you voiced your opinion to others [on campus] about statements?	I've voiced both agreement and disagreement depending on the statement: 35.2%; No: 31.6%; Voiced disagreement: 25.5%; Voiced agreement: 7.7%
Did you experience any consequences?	No: 82.1%; Yes--A negative consequence: 14.9%; Yes--A positive consequence: 3.0%
Have you ever withheld your opinion because of concerns about losing job security?	No: 65.2%; Yes: 34.8%
Have you withheld your opinion even if it did not affect your job security?	Yes: 66.8%; No: 33.2%
In your professional capacity, would you feel more encouraged to engage about an issue if your university's position aligns?	No: 51.9%; Yes: 48.1%
In your professional capacity, would you feel discouraged to engage about an issue if your university's position misaligns?	No: 55.9%; Yes: 44.1%
Have you felt more likely to engage in extramural activities... because the official position of the university aligns?	No: 89.8%; Yes: 10.2%
Have you felt less likely to engage in extramural activities because of the official position...being misaligned	No: 73.7%; Yes: 26.3%
Would you prefer institutional neutrality?	Yes: 59.7%; No: 40.3%

Do you think most administrators agree with the majority of statements? Yes: 81.1%; No: 18.9%

Do you think most students at your institution agree with the majority of statements? Yes: 66.7%; No: 33.3%

Do you think most faculty at your institution agree with the majority of statements? Yes: 65.9%; No: 34.1%

### **Awareness of university political statements**

Among the 250 participants, 196 indicated that they were aware of at least some of their university's public statements on social or political issues. Therefore, 78% were aware of these statements.

### **Support for institutional neutrality and agreement with statements**

Among the 78% of respondents who were aware of their university's public statements on social or political issues, a majority disagreed with the university's taking such positions (53%), and 60% supported adopting institutional neutrality on those issues (60%). A majority indicated that they disagreed at least some of the time (67%) with these statements. Belief in ideological homogeneity within universities, particularly among administrators, is indicated when we look at survey respondents' perceptions of other university community members' support for statements. Faculty believe administrators are mostly supportive of political/social statements (81%), as well as students (67%) and faculty (66%).

### **Behavioral responses to political and social statements**

Self-censorship and professional/ extramural engagement on topics: A third of professors self-censor in speaking about some statements due to fears of job loss and/or social isolation. Their professional behavior also appears influenced: 48% would be more encouraged to engage with topics in a professional capacity if their opinion aligned with the university, and 44% would be discouraged from doing so if their opinion misaligned. Their extramural behavior appears less affected, with 26% saying they would be less willing to engage with a topic if the university opinion misaligned with their own, and only 10% saying they'd be more likely to engage extramurally if their opinion aligned.

Speaking about statements and consequences: A majority of faculty (70%) have spoken to other campus community members about these statements, but only 15% had some kind of negative consequence attached to speaking, and 3% had a positive consequence. Among those who indicated they experienced a consequence, 19 answered an open-ended question asking for a description. 17 of these described negative consequences. Many described social marginalization and uncomfortable interactions with faculty and administration such as "pushback," "harassment," the "ending of cordial relationships" and "disinvitations from committees." A minority of negative consequences were directly linked to job security and advancement, such as being reprimanded, "being locked out of decision-making," being removed from the classroom, student petitions to be fired, or being passed over for administrative roles. One instance was cited

of a state Board of Regents and a university president “rewriting rules to penalize faculty statements and impose a climate of censorship.” Among the positive consequences of speaking out, a professor noted, “The University condemned antisemitic, terrorist protests.”

Feelings of belonging: Feelings of belonging may not be directly linked with academic freedom, but a justification for institutional statements is to speak to shared concerns among the university community to create a sense of belonging. Among this sample, 18% of respondents felt more of a sense of belonging, versus 37% who felt less of a sense of belonging in response to the statements.

### Inferential statistics

#### *Checking for significance in the responses for the entire sample*

One-sample proportions tests (Table 3) were conducted to determine if responses were statistically more or less likely to be in the majority among the respondents. Z-tests and associated 2-tailed p tests were run to determine said significance.

**Table 3.** One-Sample Proportions Tests (N=196).

Variable	Yes	No	Proportion	Z	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Agree with university making statements	91	104	0.467	-0.931	0.176	0.353
Agree with all statements aware of	65	131	0.332	-4.714	<.001	<.001
Statements create more of a sense of belonging	35	161	0.179	-9	<.001	<.001
Voiced your opinion	69	127	0.352	-4.143	<.001	<.001
Consequence for opinion	61	135	0.311	-5.286	<.001	<.001
Withheld opinion because of job security	65	122	0.348	-4.168	<.001	<.001
Withheld opinion for other reasons	125	62	0.668	4.607	<.001	<.001
Encouraged to engage professionally	90	97	0.481	-0.512	0.305	0.61
Discouraged to engage professionally	82	104	0.441	-1.613	0.054	0.107
More likely to engage in extramural activities	19	167	0.102	-10.852	<.001	<.001
Less likely to engage in extramural activities	49	137	0.263	-6.452	<.001	<.001

Prefer neutrality	111	75	0.597	2.64	0.004	0.008
Administrators agree with statements	146	34	0.811	8.348	<.001	<.001
Students agree with statements	116	58	0.667	4.397	<.001	<.001
Professors agree with statements	118	61	0.659	4.26	<.001	<.001

*Note:* Due to small expected counts, mid-p adjusted binomial tests were also conducted and resulted in identical significance results.

Collectively, respondents answered “yes” to the following questions, all significant at the 2T  $p \leq .05$  level:

1. Have you ever withheld your opinion due to reasons other than job security?
2. Would you prefer the university to remain neutral?
3. Do you think administrators agree with the majority of statements?
4. Do you think students agree with the majority of statements?
5. Do you think faculty agree with the majority of statements?

The sample collectively also responded “no” to the following questions:

1. Have you agreed with all of the statements with which you are aware?
2. Have you withheld your opinion due to job security?
3. Have you felt more likely to engage in extramural activities if aligned with the university’s position?
4. Have you felt less likely to engage in extramural activities if misaligned with the university’s position?

The following three questions had more than one response, and the Z test found significance at the 2T  $p \leq .05$  level for these as well:

1. Have these statements made you feel more of a sense of belonging? A larger proportion of subjects indicated that they either were neutral or felt more of a sense of not belonging.
2. Have you voiced your opinion on these statements? A larger proportion of subjects indicated they voiced their opinion on them.

3. If you voiced your opinion, was there a consequence? A larger proportion of those who voiced their opinion did not experience a consequence, either positive or negative.

Significant differences were not found in the responses to the following questions:

1. Do you agree or disagree with the university making statements on political issues?
2. In your professional capacity, would you feel more encouraged writing, teaching...if the university's position aligned with your own?
3. In your professional capacity, would you feel discouraged from writing, teaching...if the university's position was misaligned with your own?

### Differences in responses between and among subgroups

Chi-square tests were conducted on the crosstabs between the demographic/ professional status characteristics of participants and their question responses. Sex, political affiliation, and religious identification did not account for valid statistically significant differences in responses, whereas tenure status and race accounted for statistically significant differences to five questions (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Significant Differences in Survey Responses by Tenure Status and Race (N=196).

Question (Summarized)	Tenure Status			Race		$\chi^2$ (df=1) Sig.
	Tenured	Non-Ten	Sig.	White	Non-White	
Withheld opinion due to job security	N:91.0% Y:9.0%	N:79.7% Y:20.3%	4.77 (.029)	N:86.8% Y:13.2%	N:71.0% Y:29.0%	6.77 (.009)
Encouraged to engage if positions align	N:95.9% Y:4.1%	N:77.5% Y:22.5%	13.90 (.009)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Discouraged to engage if misaligned	N:91.3% Y:8.7%	N:81.5% Y:18.5%	3.93 (.048)	N:87.4% Y:12.6%	N:73.4% Y:26.6%	5.74 (.017)
Less likely to engage in extramural activities if misaligned	N:91.2% Y:8.8%	N:75.5% Y:24.5%	7.83 (.005)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Prefer institutional neutrality	N:80.0% Y:20.0%	N:91.8% Y:8.2%	5.52 (.019)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Administrators agree with statements	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	N: 67.6% Y 32.4%	N:83.8% Y:16.2%	4.59 (.032)
Students agree with statements	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	N:70.2% Y:29.8%	N:85.1% Y:14.9%	5.31 (.021)
Professors agree with statements	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	N:71.3% Y:28.3%	N:85.2% Y:14.8%	4.63 (.032)

In response to the question, “Have you ever withheld your opinion because of job security?” untenured and non-white professors expressed more constraint than their white and tenured counterparts. A similar tenure and racial breakdown was found for the item, “In your professional capacity, would you feel discouraged from writing, researching, discussing, inviting speakers, or teaching about an issue because the university's official opinion on that issue doesn't align with your own position?” with non-white and untenured faculty expressing more discouragement. Tenured faculty, in keeping with the logic displayed in their responses to the above questions, were less likely to feel discouraged from engaging professionally with topics with which their opinions were misaligned with the university, and less likely to engage more with topics with which they had positions which were aligned with the university. They furthermore were less likely to say they were discouraged from pursuing extramural activities related to topics with which the university was misaligned than their non-tenured counterparts. Counterintuitively, given their relative lack of being affected by university statements vis a vis non-tenured faculty, tenured faculty were more likely to support institutional neutrality. White faculty were more likely to perceive homogeneity of belief via agreement with institutional statements among campus community members (faculty, administrators, and students) than their non-white peers.

The public/private status of the university affected responses to one question: “In a professional capacity, would you feel discouraged from writing...because the university's official position on that issue misaligns with yours” (Chi-square=5.251, df=1, sig=.022), with those in public schools more likely to be discouraged than their private school counterparts. STEM faculty status was associated with a statistically different response on the question, “Do you think most students at your institution agree with the majority of statements,” to which they were more likely to perceive student support than their non-STEM counterparts (Chi-square=4.159, df=1, sig=.041).

### **Content Analysis of Open-Ended Questions**

81 respondents answered the open-ended question, “Do you have any additional comments on the subject matter of this study?” Below, we discuss thematic content that appeared in at least 10% of responses. Among the most frequent themes to emerge from these questions were: self-censorship in response to the institutional climate; the lack of impact of statements on faculty or society; support for institutional neutrality, and fear of government overreach, both at the state and federal levels. The discrete topics invoked most frequently within the context of these themes included the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Trump administration/federal government's 2025 university reforms, which were uniformly discussed as incursions on academic freedom.

### ***Self-Censorship***

Nine responses mentioned self-censorship, either at the individual level (among faculty and students, especially those who are not progressive) or at the institutional level (in response to the Trump administration and state governments). Participants (P) did not confine their comments to institutional statements, but about the climate for expressing political views in general. A sample of these responses include:

P1: There are topics, such as the war in the Middle East, on which we've been implicitly instructed not to speak. [There is a] culture of fear around speaking, [which] sees a collapse of debate which only serves to worsen any analysis done, and prevents us from teaching and clarifying for fear of

reprisal.

P2: I suspect that there are conservative students whose opinions have been suppressed because of the university statements.

P3: [These institutional] statements are undermining the trust that students, faculty, staff, and the public have in higher [ed]... They cause deeper divisions and pain than many realize, and they remind me of self-censorship in China.

### ***Lack of Statements' Impact***

The objective survey questions showed that overall, faculty were not statistically more likely to engage (or disengage) professionally or extramurally with topics according to university alignment or misalignment, were not more likely to withhold their opinion due to fear of job security, and that 22% did not even know what their university's position is on any topic. Eleven of the open-ended responses hinted that the lack of impact of statements can be explained by the conservatism of those statements, and/or the lack of faculty concern with the statements:

P4: The vast majority of the university's statements about political issues are anodyne. Most of us do not pay close attention to them.

P5: Universities...shouldn't speak as corporate wholes. Nonetheless, it's important to note that by and large, university faculty are very independent and don't really seem to be very influenced one way or another by these university-wide statements.

P6: My university rarely makes statements. My usual disagreement with them is they are too tepid.

P7: I have pretty much ignored 'official' proclamations by the university because they have negligible impact on pretty much everything. Universities way overestimate their social impact.

### ***In Support of Institutional Neutrality***

Independent of whether statements have impact, twelve faculty described their support for ending institutional statements on practical (such as avoiding discordance, or keeping out of the crosshairs of the federal government) or philosophical grounds:

P8: These statements made by universities and departments are inappropriate. We are seeing the consequences of taking sides with the possible loss of substantial financial support.

P9: Our institution has held to institutional neutrality on political issues, which I greatly appreciate... I don't think institutions should be picking sides.

P10: The university would save itself headaches by adopting the 'Chicago Model.'

P11: In two relatively recent cases (BLM protests; Palestine/Israel) I have seen considerable ill will generated, mostly between students and faculty, when students were not satisfied with statements [or] lack of statements. [If] a university is not in the business of making political/social statements, much of this ill-will could be avoided.

### ***Government Overreach***

Eight participants' answers to the open-ended question focused on the perceived threat to academic freedom posed by state governments or the federal government under President Donald Trump, and a timidity evidenced by universities in countering that threat:

P12: I was previously faculty at a Florida institution. I left there (post-tenure) in large part due to the restrictions on what I could and could not teach.

P13: We are rapidly losing academic freedom, and my university has yet to respond in any meaningful way, other than indicating compliance with directives from DC.

P14: This survey feels outdated because of the Trump administration's current assault on University's autonomy and right to determine the parameters of speech.

P15: Because my university has not ended up on a list targeted by the White House, it feels it is doing well to keep its head down and not oppose the threatening messages being released by the White House.

P16: Our administration has mostly behaved well but sometimes shows indications of having bought into the false equivalency between antisemitism and pro-Palestinian protests. It has been slow to comprehend the existential threat posed to all of academia by the Trump regime.

### Discussion

Though contested, institutional neutrality, as an assertion of principle, and as a defensive strategy, saw a resurgence of interest in the 2020s. Beyond universities themselves debating its pros and cons, non-governmental organizations have been making a concerted push to promote neutrality on campuses as a centerpiece of reform in favor of free speech, viewpoint diversity, and free expression, particularly the Goldwater Institute, which offered Campus Free Speech Model legislation affirming institutional neutrality (Kurtz et al., 2017). The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal also issued a "Blueprint for Reform" (2020) that includes neutrality. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE, 2025) is promoting and tallying those universities that have adopted neutrality, and Heterodox Academy is also providing model statements of institutional neutrality and promoting it (Heterodox Academy, 2024) to bolster academic freedom on campus.

Given the attention, time, and resources being channeled into a form of movement around neutrality, it is important to provide empirical evidence to back claims of the effectiveness, necessity, and positive outcomes of institutional neutrality.

This is the first empirical study to ask whether faculty members' academic freedom is, in fact, viewed by faculty as being impinged upon, and whether their expression is chilled by political statements from their university. While there are limitations to generalizability that will be noted in the following section, the study has several major takeaways about faculty attitudes and perceptions of attitudes in the campus community towards political statement making, and behavioral modifications in response to these statements. Attitudinally, and in alignment with other recent studies' results (Honeycutt, 2024), professors were statistically more likely to say that the university should adopt institutional neutrality than not, with 60% indicating this preference. However, faculty perceived supportive attitudes toward political statement-making on campus among other faculty, students, and especially administrators, even though a

significant majority of the surveyed faculty indicated that they had disagreed with at least some of the political positions taken by their university and have spoken about them.

Behaviorally, the study's results show that these statements have perceived chilling effects on faculty, especially as they pertain to self-censorship, with a statistically significant majority indicating they have withheld their opinion on the statements. These results are largely aligned with those of larger studies of U.S. faculty, such as that conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago in 2024, which reported that 45% of faculty were self-censoring (Quinn, 2025). This chilling effect appears to be more rooted in fears of social disapproval than of job precarity, with a significant majority stating that they had self-censored to prevent a negative social reaction. This is perhaps a consequence of a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) born of their perception of ideological homogeneity on campus. By withholding their opinions due to fear of a perceived negative reaction, they may be missing the range of viewpoints on campus around a particular issue.

Although the one-sample proportions tests for other individual questions related to behavioral modifications other than self-censorship (such as engaging with a topic professionally and/or extramurally) did not reveal significant majority opinions, we can't conclude that political statements are without a chilling effect. Negative behaviors, even if in the minority, can have outsized societal impacts. We wouldn't, for example, dismiss a finding that 40% of a population holds racist beliefs, or has a substance abuse problem. Nearly half of the sample said they would be susceptible to modifying their behavior due to statements, with 44% indicating they'd be less likely to professionally engage with a topic if their opinion misaligned with that of the university, and 48% saying they'd be more likely to do so if it were aligned. About a third of faculty reported self-censoring out of concern for either their livelihood or other sanctions. University administrations, therefore, appear to be moving the needle on what is permissible inquiry in the academic community, on their engagement with specific issues, and are instilling a sufficient amount of fear to create a chilled campus climate.

In keeping with a commonsense understanding of the perceived protective impact of tenure (AAUP, 2025) and in keeping with literature on DEI in the workplace that documents how people of color feel like they have less of a voice (Rosanwo, 2021) and higher levels of job insecurity than whites in privileged occupations (Mossakowski, 2009), this study showed that non-white and untenured faculty expressed significantly higher levels of discouragement from pursuing professional activities related to issues on which their opinions were misaligned with the university. They were also significantly more likely to say they were discouraged from pursuing extramural activities related to topics on which their views were misaligned with the university than their non-tenured counterparts. Counterintuitively, non-white and untenured professors were less likely to say they supported institutional neutrality--it could be that they perceive institutional neutrality as a stalking horse for conservative policies that might disadvantage them, or their behaviors evincing a chilling effect have more to do with intervening variables than with political position-taking.

But what of the argument, like those enumerated by Zambrano (2024), of the positive effects of political statement-making on the campus community? The study's results neither refute nor support positive effects of position-taking. Among those purported benefits to which the study might speak are 1. teaching students about political events and 2. showing inclusion, belonging, and empathy to stakeholders, and building community.

Do political statements teach students about political events? If 48% of professors are more likely to engage with a topic if their position aligns with the university, it could be that they dedicate classroom time to assigning readings and discussing political topics that they might not have, which would have an educative function. However, 44% of the sample was less likely to engage with the topic professionally if their position is misaligned, and so students' exposure to multiple perspectives on a political issue being taught may be limited. It is also necessary to operationally define teaching in this context: students may be more aware of an issue and a sanctioned opinion on that issue if their university gives a statement. However, this may not mean that they are learning substantive information.

Do political statements create belonging? The answer based on professors' responses, at least, is no. A statistically larger proportion of professors indicated they either felt less of a sense of belonging due to statements, or that these statements didn't influence their sense of belonging, than those who said it increased feelings of belonging, which comprised only 17.9% of the sample. And some of the open-ended responses pointed to faculty and students feeling disaffected not only if the university position misaligns with their own, but if they don't have their issue of concern addressed at all, or the response is too muted.

An unexpected finding was the extent to which tenure-track faculty may be more disinterested in, and even oblivious to their leadership's official positions than assumed (Ginsburg, 2023; Whittington, 2024; Saiger, 2024). As a respondent described, "I have pretty much ignored 'official' proclamations by the university because they have negligible impact on pretty much everything." Indeed, a full 22% of professors surveyed were not familiar with any of their university's statements on social or political issues. Given that there is selection bias among a sample that would choose to take a survey on statement-making, it is intuitive that the number of R1 faculty who do not know about statements may be higher. Reasons for this may include professors' desired focus on their own research agendas and classes or a lack of attention to university-wide messages and announcements in general. The lack of concern may also be partially attributable to the perceived tangible consequences to dissent: among those who said they spoke to others in the academic community about statements, only 15% experienced a negative consequence which, based on the open-ended questions, seemed to manifest primarily in forms of social marginalization rather than formal sanctions.

### ***Limitations and Future Study***

This study was a first step towards examining claims that faculty are impacted by their university's political positions. It points to patterns and perspectives that can lead to further targeted research. Among its chief limitations were the small sample size, a consequence of the low completion rate of those targeted by e-mail for the survey. It relied upon a sample with a 6% completion rate for opened e-mails. Although this is in line with the low response rate (3%) for similarly fielded online surveys of academics, such as Kaufmann's 2020 survey (Kaufmann, 2021) of 40,000 academics at top universities in the US and Canada, it is very difficult to generalize based on these results to the population. There are multiple hurdles in securing subjects to participate in a survey on a politically charged topic from an elite group of professionals, including reluctance to participate in a politically sensitive survey; lack of incentivization; busy schedules; university filters preventing it from being delivered, and thinking the survey was spam.

Because of this low response rate, there is the strong possibility of non-response bias. It is

reasonable to assume that faculty who are most aware of and feel most strongly in favor of statement-making or against statement-making, will have participated. Therefore, while 22% of this sample were unaware of their universities' statements, this may be an underestimate, and the perspectives shared may be reflective of a more engaged sample than exists in the population. Additionally, although only about 3% of those contacted were confirmed members of Heterodox Academy and because the responses were anonymous, their participation rate is unknown, this subset of potential respondents are likely to have been among the more motivated to respond and most likely to support institutional neutrality, given the membership requirement to indicate support of viewpoint diversity within the academy. To avoid non-response bias, future research should attempt to secure higher participation rates at universities to which researchers might have privileged access.

Further complicating generalizability, while the sample mirrors the racial composition of full-time faculty at colleges (NCES, 2024) the number of non-whites who answered that they were familiar with at least some of the university statements was 39, therefore there is the risk of Type 1 errors. Women were underrepresented, as were STEM professors, conservatives, and those from Southern universities. The low cell counts for political leaning which invalidated the chi-square results point to a need for future studies to more deliberately seek participation from underrepresented groups, as well as qualitative research to understand the psychosocial reasons for the perceptions and attitudes.

While there were open-ended questions in the survey, more in-depth qualitative research is needed to tease out nuances in attitudes towards political statements, perceptions of how the academic community retaliates or rewards based on adherence to university leadership's opinions, their behavior in various scenarios and motives for that behavior. There was also indication that public/private status of the university and whether one was a STEM faculty might impact behaviors and perceptions related to political statement-making in significant ways, which should be probed further. Scholars should continue this exploratory study to confirm or refute its findings among different samples, moving beyond R1s to colleges at every Carnegie rating, and including the faculty who do most of the teaching: part-time and non-tenure track teaching faculty, who have the most precarity in the academic community.

Areas of continued exploration include investigating the impact of subunits' or professional organizations' statements; perceptions of political homogeneity on campus and its effect on engaging in open inquiry. Zambrano wrote (2024) "there are no benefits to position-taking that are clear, compelling, and well-supported." If institutional statement-making has benefits that outweigh areas of concern described in this study, those should be demonstrated. Studies can also look at whether university statements discourage or generate public trust; whether they sway political opinion; whether students feel more of a sense of belonging and community; and whether they lead to tangible pedagogical benefits.

In the meantime, we again cite Zambrano: "Even a small danger of speech chilling" (2024, p. 8) should lead to neutrality. The study has, in fact, demonstrated that danger, which merits adopting a policy of institutional neutrality. Still, the impact appears less dramatic than expected. Universities, scholars, and advocacy groups who have made political statements a focal point of their attention should also dedicate resources to phenomena that have a larger demonstrable impact on improving climates of open inquiry, enshrining cultures of academic freedom, lowering levels of self-censorship, and rectifying the diminution of public trust in universities.

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**Appendix A**

**Universities Surveyed, Grouped by Region and Institution Type**

Region	Institutional Type	University
Midwest	Private	Case Western Reserve University
		Northwestern University
	Public	Indiana University
		Iowa State University
		Kent State University
		University of Missouri (Mizzou)
		North Dakota State University
		Ohio University
		University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Northeast	Private	Boston College
		Brandeis University
		New York University
		Northeastern University
		Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
	Public	New Jersey Institute of Technology
		Stony Brook University
		The Graduate Center, CUNY
South	Private	Baylor University
		Emory University
	Public	Clemson University
		James Madison University
		Mississippi State University
		University of Arkansas
West	Public	Montana State University
		Oregon State University
		University of California, Berkeley
		University of Nevada, Las Vegas
		University of Washington

## Appendix B

### Survey Questionnaire

1. Are you a tenured or tenure-track faculty member at an R1 university?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No(If no, the survey is exited)
2. What is your sex?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Nonbinary
3. What are your primary racial and/or ethnic identifications? (Select all that apply.)
  - a. White
  - b. Black or African American
  - c. Asian
  - d. Latino/a or Hispanic
  - e. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - g. Middle Eastern
  - h. Other
4. What is your religious identification?
  - a. Christian
  - b. Jewish
  - c. Buddhist
  - d. Hindu
  - e. Muslim
  - f. Atheist/Agnostic
5. Which of the following best describes your political orientation? (Select all that apply.)
  - a. Liberal
  - b. Leftist
  - c. Libertarian
  - d. Conservative
  - e. Moderate/Centrist
6. With which type of university are you primarily affiliated?
  - a. Public Northeast
  - b. Private Northeast
  - c. Public South
  - d. Private South
  - e. Public Midwest
  - f. Private Midwest
  - g. Public West
  - h. Private West
7. Which broad academic discipline category best describes your department?
  - a. Physical Sciences, Mathematics, and Computer Science

- b. Social Sciences
- c. Business
- d. Communications, Media, and Public Relations
- e. Education
- f. Engineering
- g. Arts and Humanities
- h. Biological Sciences and Agriculture

Unless otherwise indicated, the following questions use “Yes/No” or “Agree/Disagree” responses.

8. Are you familiar with any of your university’s statements on social or political topics that do not directly concern its academic mission?
9. Have you agreed with all such statements of which you are aware?
10. Do you agree or disagree with colleges or universities making statements on political or social issues that do not directly concern their academic mission?
11. Have these statements affected your sense of belonging in your academic community?
  - a. More of a sense of belonging
  - b. More of a sense of not belonging
  - c. Neither
12. Have you voiced your agreement or disagreement with these statements to other faculty, students, or administrators on campus?
  - a. Yes, voiced agreement
  - b. Yes, voiced disagreement
  - c. No
  - d. I have voiced both agreement and disagreement, depending on the statement
13. If you voiced agreement or disagreement, did you experience any consequences?
  - a. Yes, a positive consequence (*please explain*)
  - b. Yes, a negative consequence (*please explain*)
  - c. No
14. Have you ever withheld your opinion about a statement from other faculty, students, or staff due to concerns about losing job security or other professional benefits?
15. Have you ever withheld your opinion about a statement due to concerns about a negative social reaction, even if it did not affect job security or professional benefits?
16. In your professional capacity, would you feel more encouraged to write, discuss, invite speakers, or teach about an issue if your university’s official position aligns with your own position?
17. In your professional capacity, would you feel discouraged from writing, researching, discussing, inviting speakers, or teaching about an issue if your university’s official position does not align with your own position?
18. Have you felt more likely to engage in extramural activities (e.g., posting on social media) about a topic because the university’s official position aligns with your own position?
19. Have you felt less likely to engage in extramural activities (e.g., posting on social media) about a topic because the university’s official position does not align with your own position?

20. Would you prefer the university to remain neutral on social or political issues that do not directly concern its academic mission?
21. Do you think most administrators at your institution agree with the majority of political or social position statements issued by the university?
22. Do you think most students at your institution agree with the majority of political or social position statements issued by the university?
23. Do you think most faculty at your institution agree with the majority of official political or social position statements issued by the university?
24. If you have any additional comments on the subject matter of this study, please enter them below.