



What Students Fear vs. What Happens When Students Discuss Controversial Topics:

**Insights from the 2023 Campus
Expression Survey**

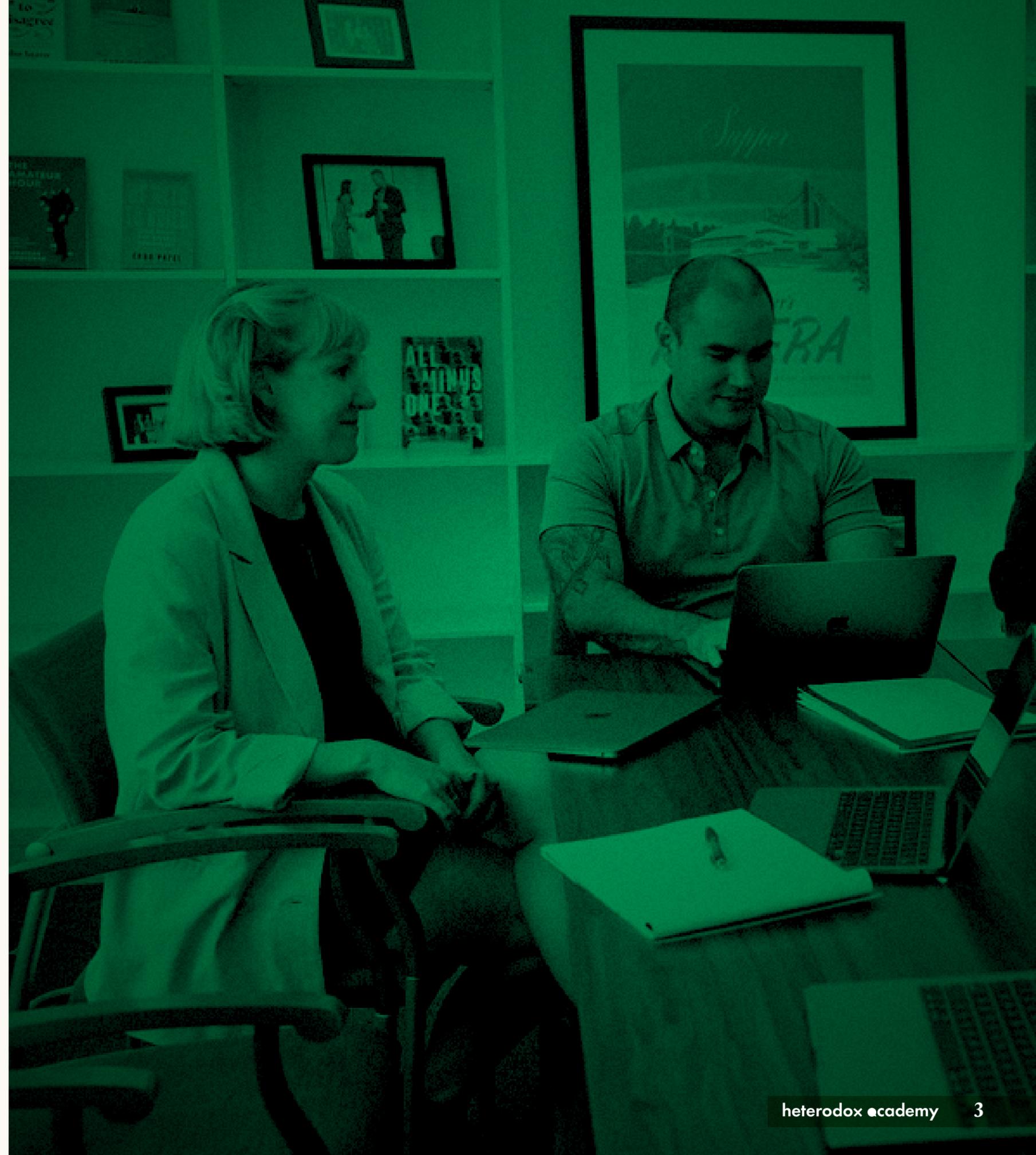
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What is the Campus Expression Survey?

The 2023 Campus Expression Survey (CES) asks undergraduate students at four-year colleges and universities in the US about different facets of their experience relevant to open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. Heterodox Academy has been surveying students on topics of free expression and open inquiry since 2019.

Learn more about the CES on [our website](#).

In this research brief, we focus on a subgroup of the CES sample, the “reluctant respondents,” students who report being at least somewhat reluctant to discuss at least one of the 10 topics on campus asked about in the survey (79% of our total sample, N = 3,760), in order to better understand (a) why they are reluctant to discuss controversial topics and (b) whether any of them have suffered sanctions for doing so.



A Major Reason for Students' Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics is Fear of Sanctions

We asked reluctant respondents why they were reluctant—what consequences did they fear? We presented respondents with a list of possible consequences, from which they could choose as many as they thought appropriate.

For our analysis we divided the list of possible consequences into four types: (a) concerns about informal sanctions, (b) concerns about formal sanctions; (c) concerns peers wanting to voice disagreement or debate; and (d) concerns about harming others.

Reluctant respondents explained their reluctance to discuss controversial topics by appealing to possible consequences from all four types. However, 96.2% of reluctant respondents reported that they feared suffering at least one sanction (informal or formal) if they were to discuss a controversial topic.

The top three informal sanctions that reluctant respondents feared were that “[o]ther students would make critical comments about [them] with other people after class” (51.3%), that “[o]ther students would criticize what I said as offensive during class” (48.5%), and that “[they] would jeopardize current or potential friendships with other students” (45.9%).

As for feared formal sanctions, 59.0% of reluctant respondents reported that they feared suffering at least one formal sanction. Of formal sanctions, 32.3% of reluctant respondents feared that “[a] student would file a complaint claiming what [they] said violated a campus harassment or bias policy”, 31% feared that “[t]he instructor would be less willing to write a letter of recommendation on my behalf”, and 26.6% feared that “[t]he instructor would give [them] a lower grade because of what [they] said.”

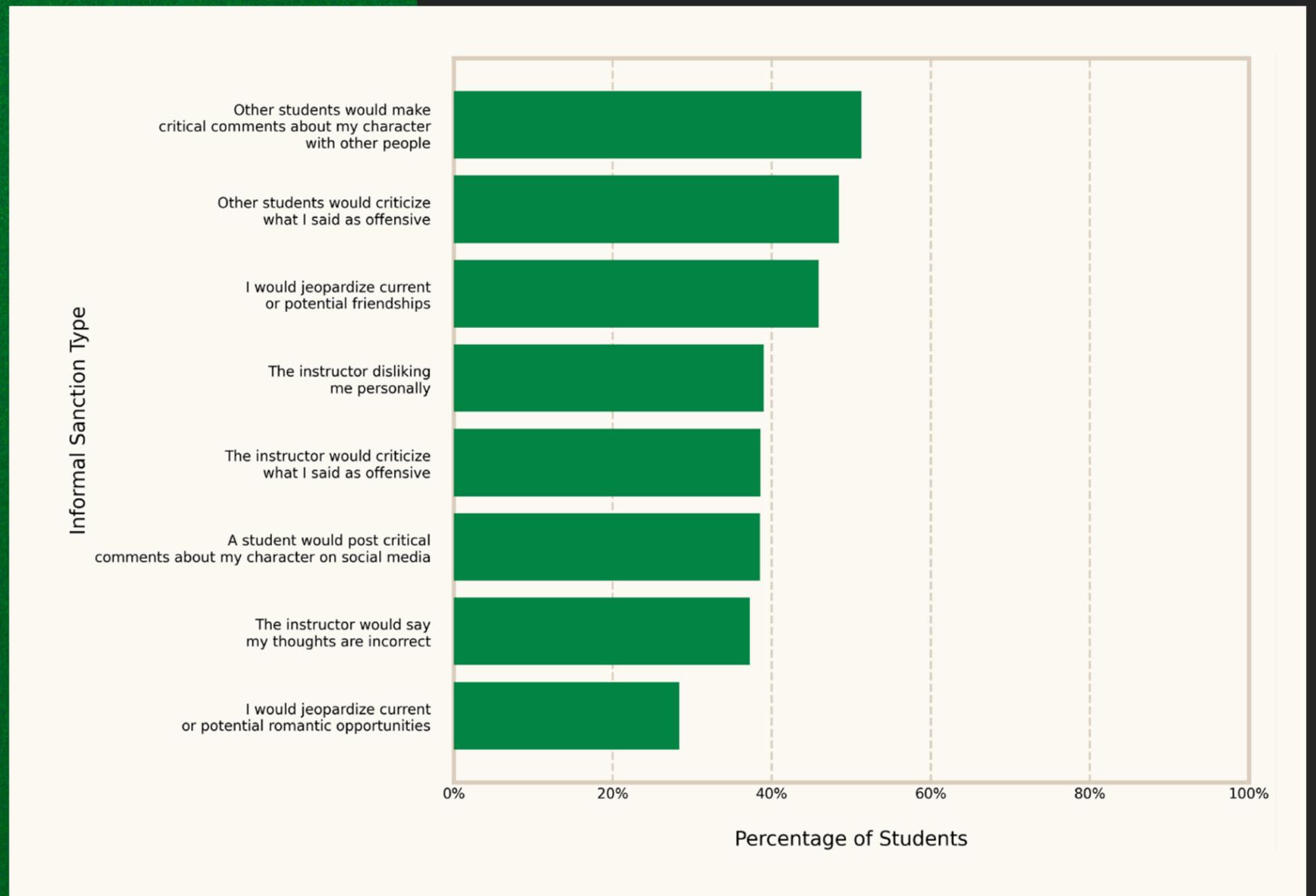


Figure 1. Percent of students indicating fear of each informal sanction for expressing their views on various contentious topics.

Students are also Reluctant to Discuss Controversial Topics due to Fear of Disagreement and Debate with Peers

While an overwhelming majority of reluctant respondents feared sanctions, whether informal or formal, for discussing controversial topics, 52.4% of reluctant respondents also feared that “[o]ther students would voice disagreement or want to debate” were they to discuss controversial topics on campus.

Many institutions of higher education prioritize fostering inquiry, which naturally involves disagreement and debate. Therefore, the significant number of students who fear engaging in such discussions with their peers suggests a mismatch in expectations between these institutions and their students.

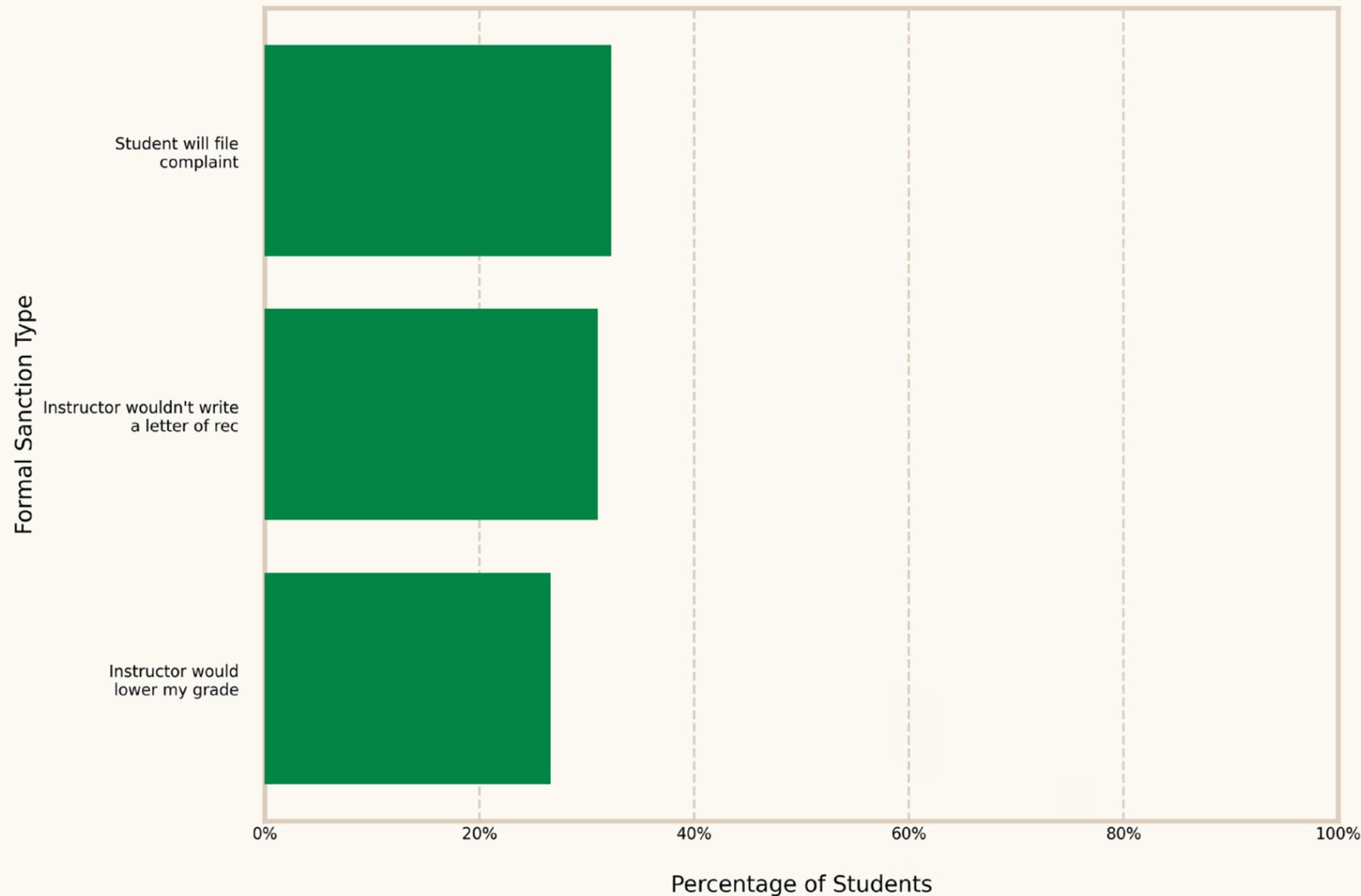


Figure 2.
Percent of students indicating fear of each formal sanction for expressing their views on various contentious topics.

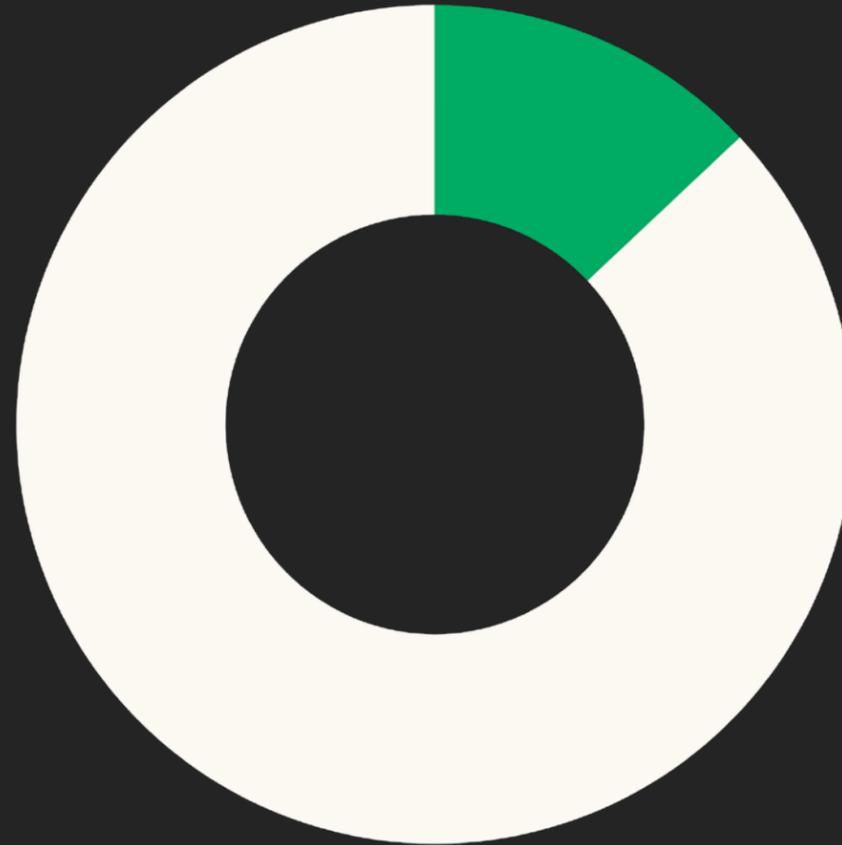
We asked respondents who reported being at least somewhat reluctant to discuss at least one topic in the classroom or privately with peers or instructors (79% of the sample) whether they themselves or someone they knew had suffered an adverse experience for discussing a controversial topic, which the survey question characterized as follows:

"Some students have experienced [adverse experiences]... For instance, some students have received reprimands from college faculty, have had formal complaints or code-of-conduct violations filed against them, have had peers contact their employers, peers post about them on social media, etc. Have you ever personally experienced anything like this at your college or university?"

13.3% of respondents said 'yes.'

This is equivalent to *at least* 10.2% of the total CES sample reporting actually being sanctioned for discussion of a contentious issue on campus.

If we extrapolate this figure to the population of US college students (researchers estimate that about **8.5 million students** were enrolled at four-year colleges or universities in fall 2023), then somewhere around 867,000 college students have potentially suffered some sanction for discussing a controversial topic on campus. Even if the estimate derived from the 2023 CES data is off by 50%, it still follows that nearly half a million college students have suffered sanctions for discussing a controversial topic on campus.



13.3% of Reluctant Student Respondents Report Being Actually Sanctioned for Discussing a Controversial Topic

Figure 3.
Percent of students who reported experiencing a sanction for their classroom expression among the 79% of the sample who also reported being at least somewhat reluctant to discuss a topic in the classroom.



Universities Should Strive to Provide Environments That Protect Open Inquiry

Universities and colleges should strive to provide environments where open discussion of controversial issues doesn't result in sanctions for students, but is rather encouraged. The 2023 CES data strongly suggest that universities and colleges need to do more to foster open inquiry on controversial topics. **Ideally, no student would ever suffer sanctions for doing what is expected of them in college: to freely discuss controversial topics in an environment that protects open inquiry.**

About Heterodox Academy

Heterodox Academy (HxA) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization consisting of over 7,300 members of faculty, staff, and students from around the world who advocate for preserving and promoting the values of open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement in institutions of higher education and research. If you are interested in supporting our mission, **become a member** or **make a donation** to support our work. If you want to stay up-to-date on HxA news, the latest HxA content, or upcoming HxA events, **subscribe to our emails**.

Acknowledgments

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Availability of Data and Analysis Code

We welcome discussion of the CES data and results. To make this easy, HxA makes the direct survey response data and the analysis code used to write reports about the **2023 CES publicly available on its website**. For further details about the 2023 CES, please see our writeup of its data and methods.

Report citation

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