



The Universal Problem of Campus Expression: Data from the 2019-2022 CES

How does students' reluctance to share their views about controversial topics on campus vary with institution type and geography?

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What is the Campus Expression Survey?

The 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 about expression on campus since 2019. Learn more at [our website](#).

In this research brief, we joined data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) about the types and locations of institutions of higher education with our four years of CES data (collected from 2019-2022) to see what might be learned about the institutional and geographic scope of universities' struggle to foster campuses where students can discuss controversial political and social topics.



Is campus expression under threat at all types of higher ed institutions?

Given the significant media focus devoted to the problem of campus expression at prestigious institutions of higher education, or those located in urban areas or politically liberal coastal cities, it is tempting to think that campus expression is more stifled in those places than elsewhere in the US. The data, however, suggest this is not correct.

We compiled data from 5,203 CES respondents collected between 2019-2022 to address the following questions about problems of campus expression:

- Are they worse at more “elite” institutions as compared to less “elite” ones?
- Are they more pronounced at research-intensive universities?
- Are they worse at institutions located in major urban centers or on the coasts?
- Do they look different at private versus public institutions of higher education?
- Do they depend on the size of an institution or the typical size of student classes?

The CES asks respondents a series of questions about their level of reluctance in speaking their opinions about a variety of controversial topics, including race, gender, politics, and religion. The CES also asks respondents questions about their level of reluctance in speaking about uncontroversial topics; this allows us to control for individual differences (such as being generally shy) in willingness to share one’s thoughts. Individual respondent answers

are combined to generate a *reluctance score* that measures that individual’s overall level of reluctance.

To understand whether differences in how reluctant students are in sharing thoughts on controversial topics vary with where they attend university and what type of institution they attend, we calculated a *z-score* for reluctance of students to express their opinions in institutions of different kinds.

A z-score measures how far the level of students’ reluctance to express their views on controversial subjects at a type of institution is from the average. A z-score of 0 indicates that the level of reluctance is average—such institutions have around 50% of their respondents to the CES report being reluctant to express their opinion on at least one of the controversial topics we surveyed them on.

A z-score of 1 or above means that the reluctance is at least one standard deviation higher than the average—such institutions have at least 90% of their respondents to the CES report being reluctant to express their opinion on at least one of the controversial topics we surveyed them on.

A z-score of -1 or below indicates that the reluctance is at least one standard deviation lower than the average—such institutions have at most 29% of their respondents to the CES report being reluctant to express their opinion on at least one of the controversial topics we surveyed them on.

The universal problem of campus expression: key takeaways

The 2019-2022 CES data show that students' experiences of being reluctant to express their views on controversial topics does not vary geographically or by institutional type—**student concerns about the climate for campus expression are universal.**

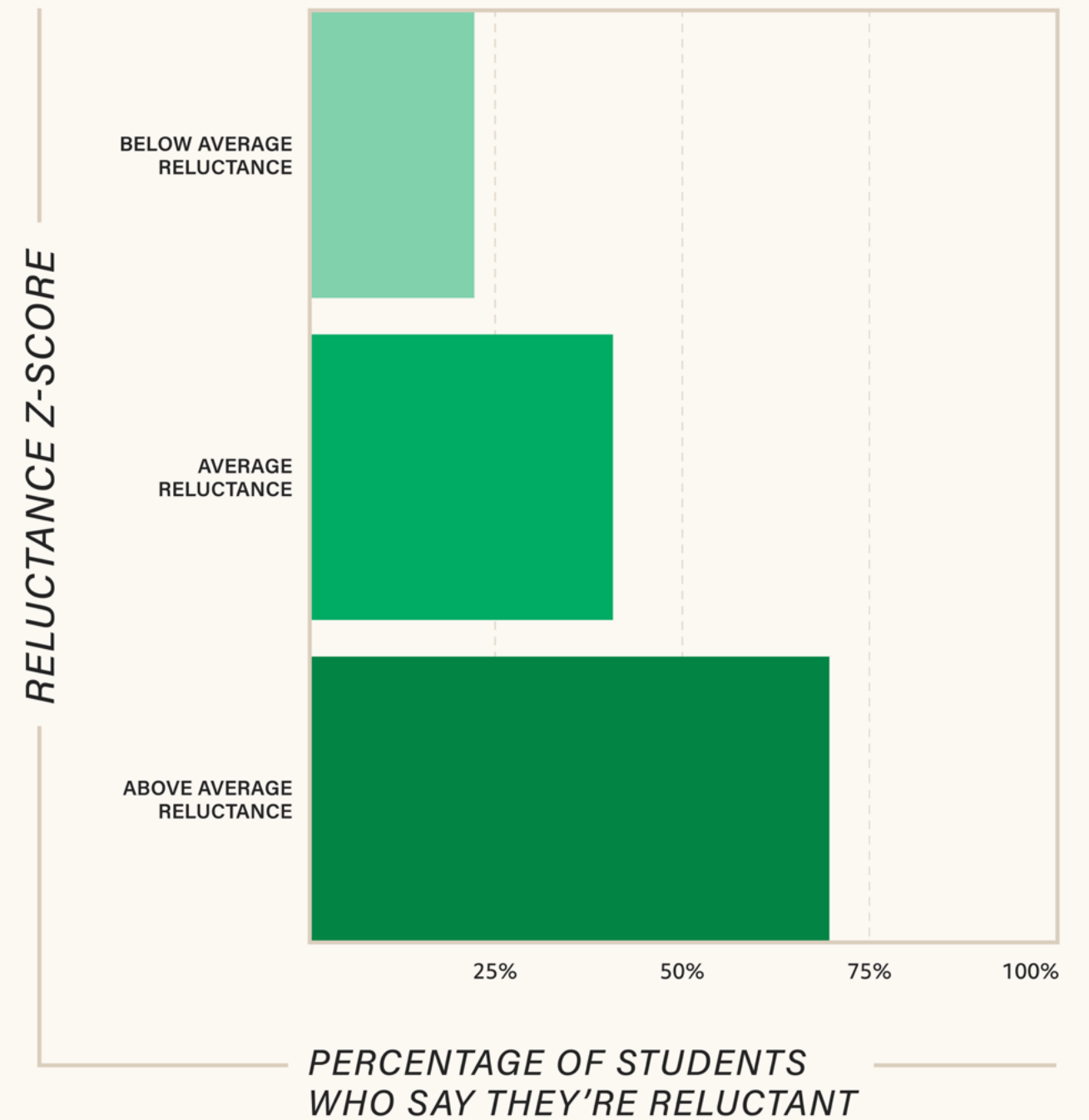


Figure 1.
Percentage of students reporting reluctance to speak about at least one topic asked about grouped by z-scores.

Students at non-Ivy League schools exhibit levels of reluctance to share their thoughts on controversial topics that are quite similar to—indeed, slightly higher than—those of their peers at Ivy League universities.

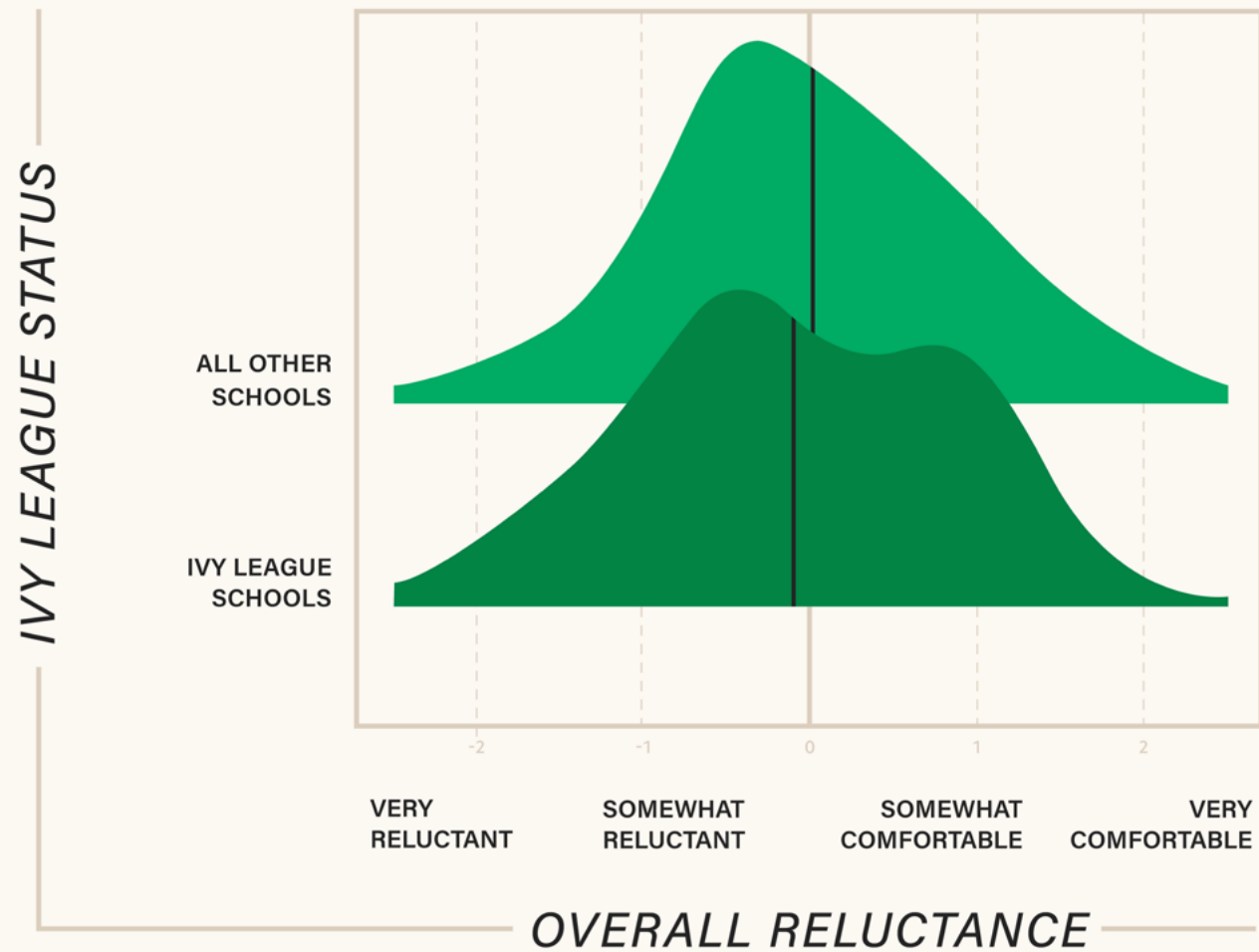


Figure 2.
Comparison of average student reluctance (z-scores) for Ivy League Universities and all other universities.

Students at institutions across the Carnegie Classifications exhibit similarly high levels of reluctance to share their thoughts on controversial topics

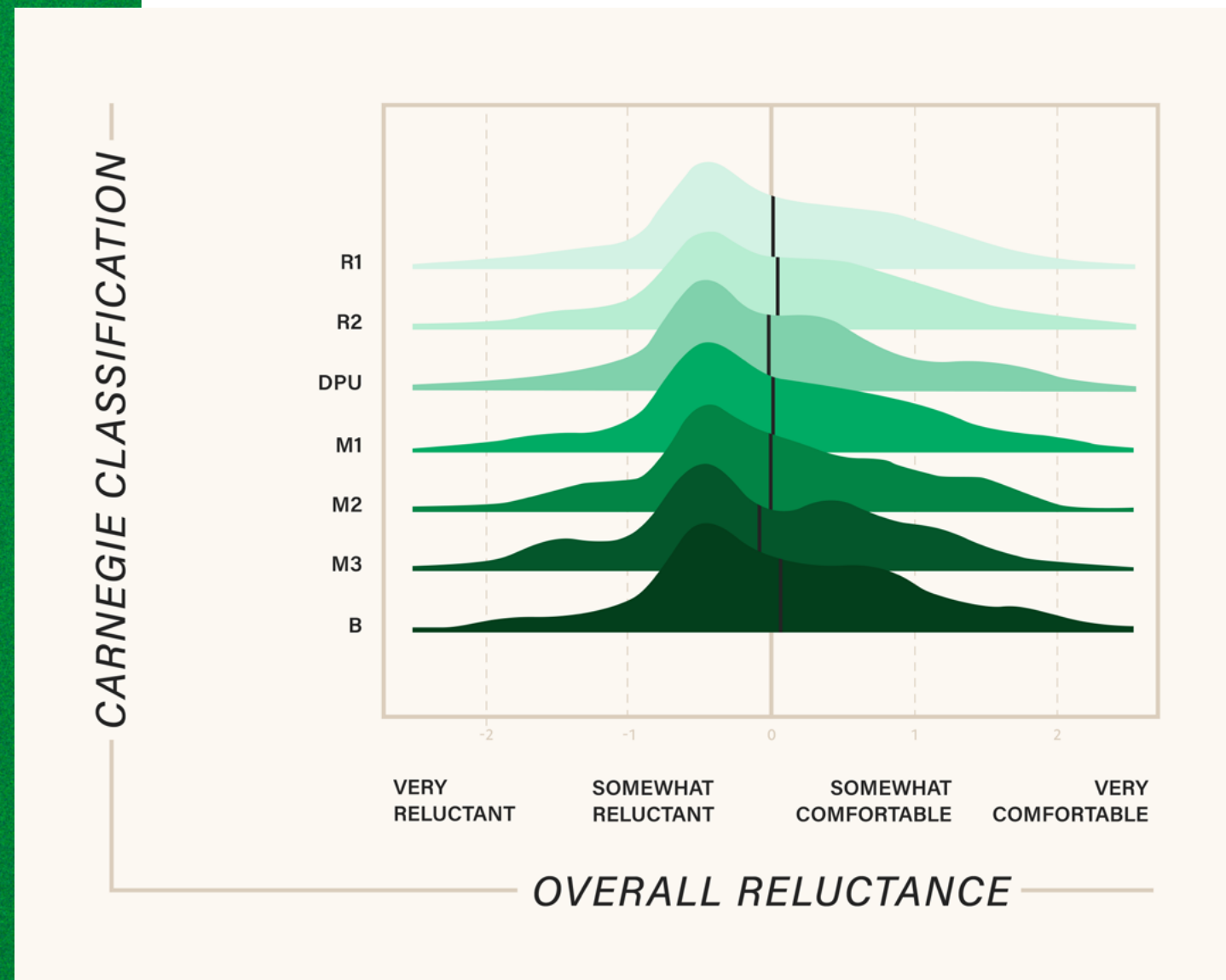


Figure 3. Comparison of average student reluctance (z-scores) by Carnegie institution classification.

Geographic location of students' institutions exhibit the same high levels of reluctance to share their thoughts on controversial topics – those in the West, the Northeast, and urban regions of the US are not unique.

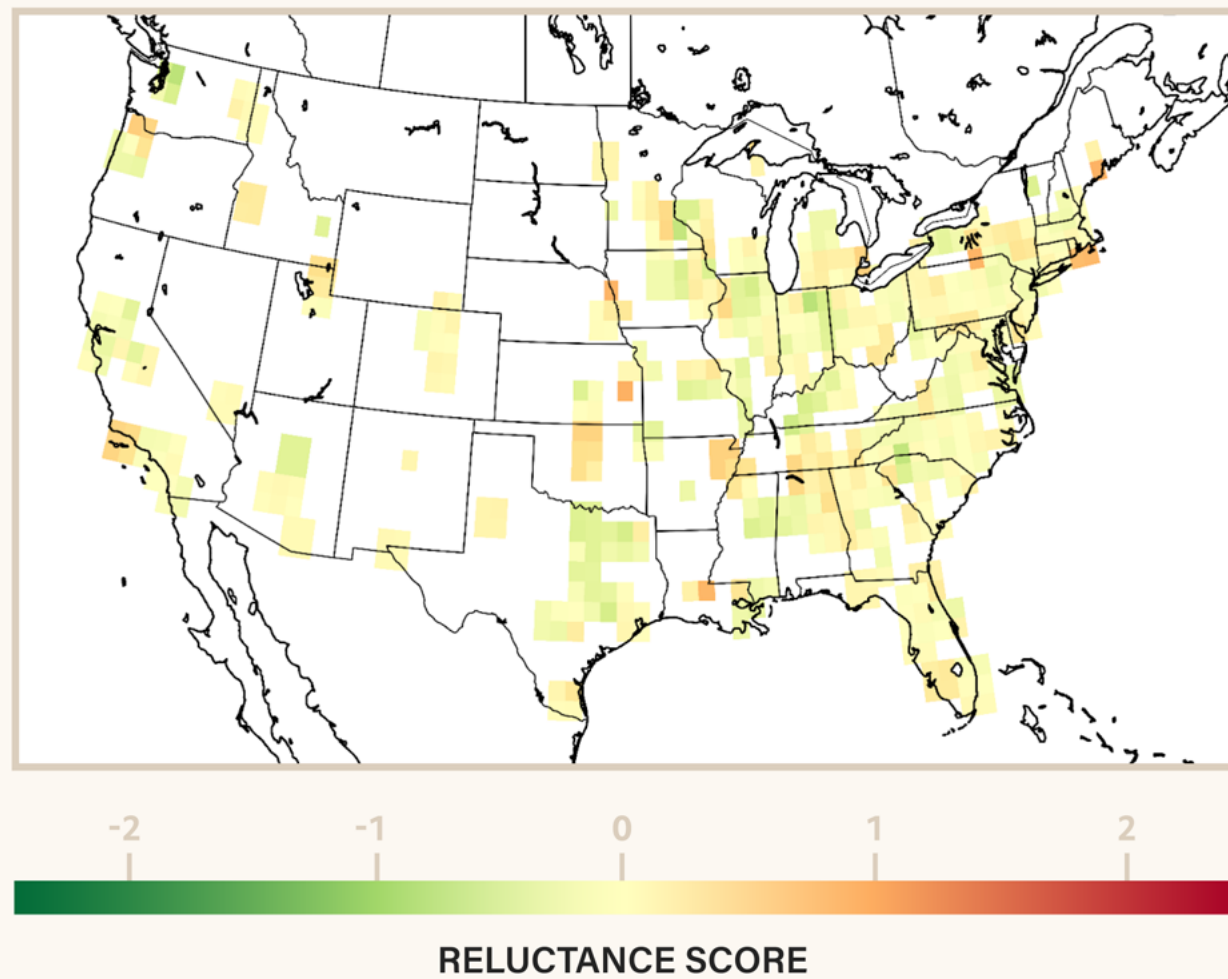


Figure 4.
Average student reluctance (z-scores) by geographical location across the United States.

Students at public and private institutions exhibit a similarly high level of reluctance to share their thoughts on controversial topics.

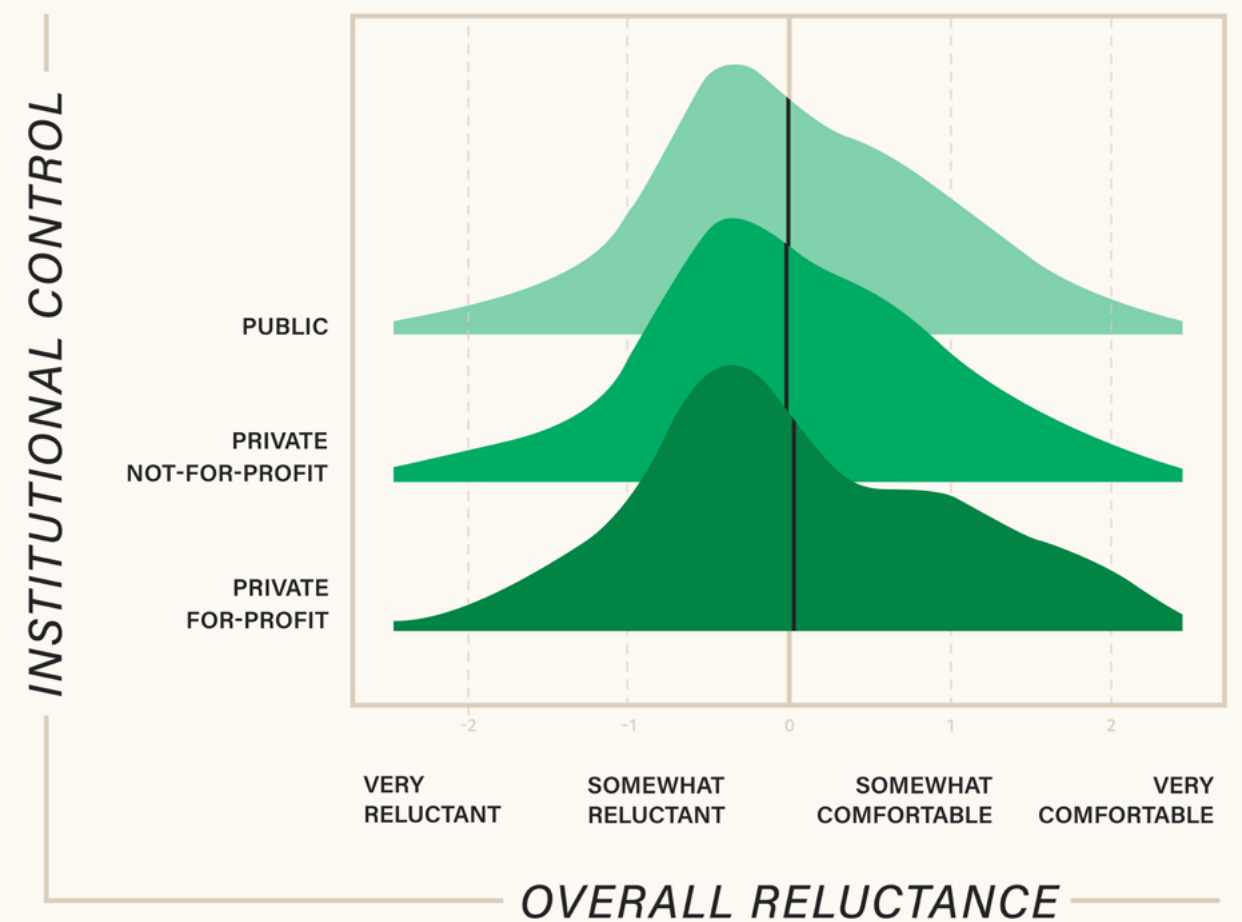


Figure 5.
Comparison of average student reluctance (z-scores) by institutional control.

Figure 6.
Comparison of average student reluctance (z-scores) by institutional student population.

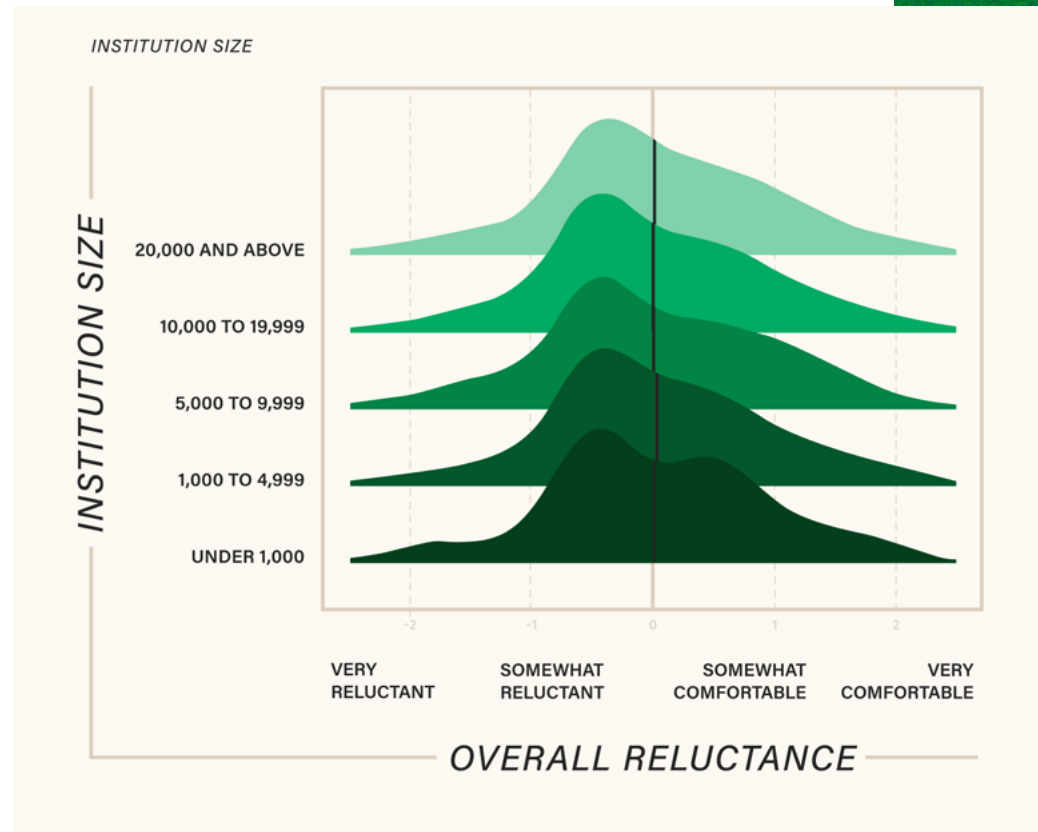
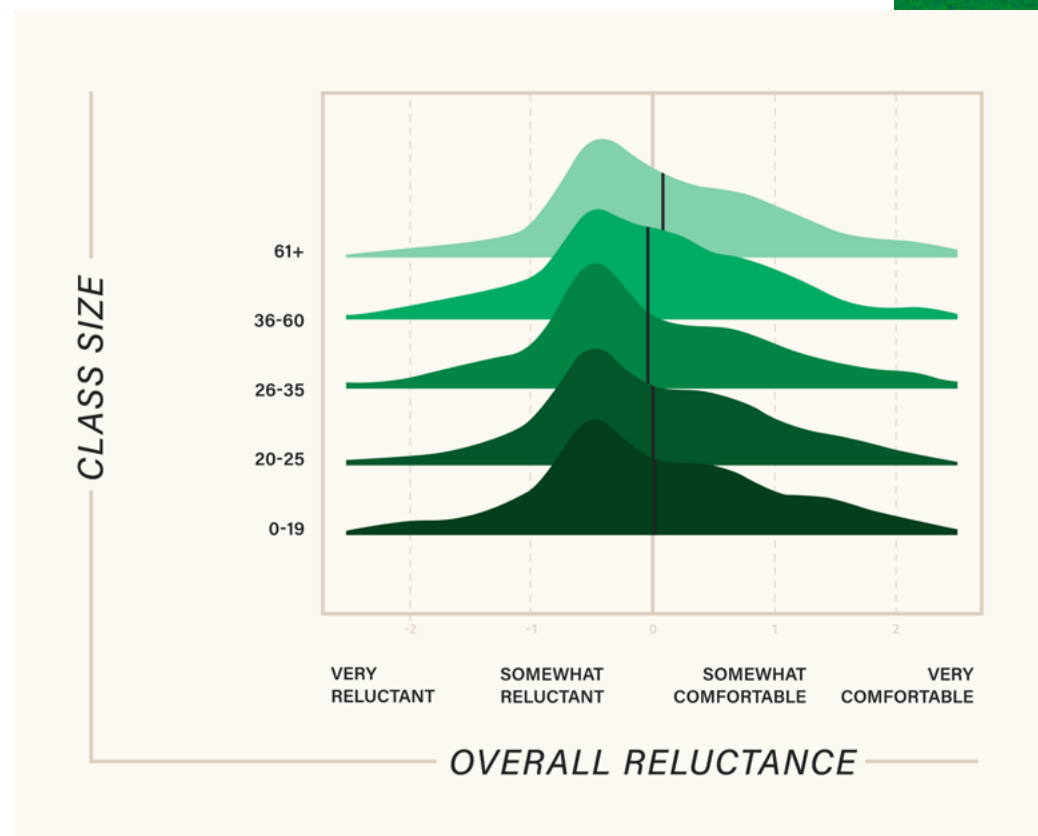


Figure 7.
Comparison of average student reluctance (z-scores) by institutional average class size.



Student reluctance to share their thoughts does not differ by institutional student population or average class size.

University leaders must take charge to foster climates of free expression



The data make clear the *universality* of the problem of campus expression. Leaders in higher education *everywhere* have cause for concern, as the evidence is building that universities and colleges are not fulfilling one of their most important missions: to serve as places where students, regardless of their identity, their personal history, or their views, feel at their freest to ask difficult questions, consider challenging ideas, and grapple with a variety of opinions on a variety of issues, especially controversial ones.

This should prompt university and college leaders *everywhere* to think carefully and creatively about ways they might foster campus communities that encourage, rather than discourage, the vigorous and open exchange of questions, ideas, and viewpoints among students. Heterodox Academy's aim is to elevate the university from within, to help the university better fulfill its mission. If you would like to join us in this endeavor, **please consider becoming a member.**

About Heterodox Academy

Heterodox Academy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit membership organization of thousands of faculty, staff, and students advocating for policy and culture changes that allow universities to be truth-seeking, knowledge-generating institutions grounded in open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. 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 and scrutiny of the underlying CES data and methods used to write this brief. We describe our analysis methods and sample demographics of the CES data for this brief along with a more detailed white paper of these analyses on **our website**. We have also made the analysis code used to write this brief publicly available on our website on the report pages for each year's report. Regrettably, we cannot share the data file used for this brief because it may contain information that identifies individual respondents. For further details about the Campus Expression Surveys whose data were used for this brief please visit the webpages for the **2019**, **2020**, **2021**, and **2022** Campus Expression Surveys.

Report citation

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