Degrees of Chill:

The effects of political-position taking on tenure-track faculty at R1 universities

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Abstract

Recent domestic and international socio-political crises have reinvigorated debate about whether colleges should issue statements on issues outside of their academic mission, with more colleges than ever pledging neutrality. Although philosophical arguments for and against the practice are in abundance, no empirical research has looked at how position-taking affects faculty and their behaviors. This research addresses this gap through a survey of tenure-track faculty (N=250) at U.S. R1 universities. Findings indicate a majority of faculty are aware of at least some statements, but a non-negligible number are unaware (22%). Most favor neutrality and have disagreed with some of the positions. Nearly one third report self-censoring around statements, and about half are influenced in professionally engagement with a topic based on their university's position. Formal sanctions were rare, but faculty expressed concerns about marginalization. Differences in responses based on race and tenured status were found. Non-white and untenured faculty more likely to be constrained in expressing their viewpoints, and more likely to be discouraged from participating in professional activities on a topic if their views were misaligned. Most faculty perceived ideological homogeneity among their academic community. The results point to some chilling effect of statements, worth considering neutrality to counteract.

Keywords: institutional neutrality; faculty attitudes; academic freedom

Degrees of Chill:

The Effects of Political Statement-Making on Tenure Track Professors at R1 Universities

The debate over universities'[1] leadership issuing institutional statements on social and political topics outside of those focused on research and education 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 protests against the Vietnam War 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 model for institutional neutrality at universities.

Institutional neutrality[2] "refers to the idea that universities and colleges should not, as a corporate organization, take positions on social/political issues unless those pose a threat to the mission of the university or its values of free inquiry" (Trinidad, 2024, pg. 3). 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).

[1] For brevity the word university will be used in the article to be used to encompass both universities and colleges.
[2] A related concept, institutional restraint, carries with it a *presumption* of impartiality/neutrality, although there isn't an absolute injunction against the university "speaking" on issues considered vital to the university's mission or values.

Institutional neutrality as an ideal has proven controversial. Proponents and detractors from academe, 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 article addresses this gap by addressing one of the chief claims made by proponents of institutional neutrality (see author, forthcoming): 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 will proceed 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 reportage 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, or why. Some provide a limited historical account. There is also a narrow subset of articles that focus on the ways in which neutrality has influenced academic fields, primarily law.

In Favor of Institutional Neutrality

Among those scholars who argue in favor of neutrality are Ginsburg (2023) Wittington (2024) Saiger (2024) and Zambrano (2024). Ginsburg (2023) claims that among the open-inquiry-stifling effects of political statements are that it discourages speaking out contrary to an official position; it impoverishes discourse; it reduces intellectual diversity; it deters those who disagree from ever entering the university; it raises the costs of inquiry and disincentivizes certain forms of inquiry, and it generates backlash from external actors that threatens academia. He also implicates it 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. Wittington (2024) states that not only does he believe that universities and subunits should not issue statements, but scholarly associations should not. He agrees with Ginsburg that they "inevitably discourage debate and dissent" and especially at the departmental level, position-taking "chill[s] speech" (2024, pg. 24). He asserts that the purpose of the university is to be a purveyor of truth. When it is politicized, its providence of impartial knowledge is questionable. And, as Ginsburg also claimed, the university then compromises itself by becoming a political target.

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 Wittington, he sees the mission of universities undermined through position-taking and contends that “institutional speech declares official orthodoxy” (2024, pg. 1), while putting universities in the position of having to opine on everything. Saiger also agrees with Ginsburg and Wittington 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 benefits to position-taking that are clear, concerning, and compelling...[whereas neutrality] avoids institutional orthodoxy, preserves academic freedom, preserves institutional legitimacy and avoids the administrative costs of decision-taking" (pg. 2). He says that the disadvantages of taking position-taking are “clear, strong, well-supported, and compelling” (pg. 8). He emphasizes the chilling of faculty and student speech but does not offer evidence. He says it may not be that on average professors or students will not care about statements, but *some* may care. “Even a small danger of speech chilling” should lead to neutrality, he argues (pg. 8).

Questioning of institutional neutrality

Post (2024) 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. 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 (pg. 12). He gives the example of a tweet over the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* ruling from the University of North Carolina: “whether it chilled discussion and inquiry is a complex empirical question” (pg. 11), and asserts that there is no evidence that divestment from South Africa of 155 universities 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 "little empirical work” has been done to study [institutional neutrality]” (pg. 6). Where he is interested in further empirical research is in organizational and institutional ecological analyses around position-taking, but does not conduct an empirical analyses. He gives propositions for factors that may influence whether a university will adopt a resolution. Wittington (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 (2006), Barnhizer (1993) and Bryne (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 “removed from [the] reality” of how politics work, and decisions made within universities (pg. 6). Barnhizer (1992) and Bryne (1993) problematize the concept of academic neutrality in the field of law. Barnhizer (1992) 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. Bryne, describing legal scholarship's lack of methodological consensus on how to reach truth, reaches conclusions aligned with Barnhizer: "Political neutrality [requires] a commitment to honest discussion on the basis of reason and evidence, in which participants assume the risk of changing their minds," he writes (pg. 339). Like Barnhizer, he sees legal scholarship as incapable of being neutral, because it is directed towards the education of practicing lawyers who should "enhance justice." (pg. 339).

Aby (2006), 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. He says that while direct attacks on academic freedom may have lessened, the pretense of neutrality in a so-called marketplace of ideas means that bias and repression attain legitimacy. "Partisan activities on the part of those in power [such as receiving grants for war-related research] are considered acceptable, while criticisms of such activities [such as protesting Vietnam] are not," he writes (pg. 297). Medeiros similarly posits a type of faux neutrality among universities. Decisions about curriculum, policies, and resources, are always political. He argues, "'neutrality' in fact reinforces ideologies of colorblindness, neoliberal individualism and corporate hegemony.'" He assigns anti-progressive motivations to neutrality provisions, saying they are designed to undercut DEI efforts, and 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, are "weak" or "fleeting," in their benefits (pg. 8).

Historical context of institutional neutrality

The history of institutional neutrality is not laid out linearly in the literature. Wittington's "On Institutional Neutrality and the Purpose of a University," (2024) and Bok's *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University* (1984) 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.[3] Wittington (2024) asserts that therefore that 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 "not disputing on a public question," and the 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" (pg. 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" (Bok, pg. 6). After the end of the War, with the increased number of students, an influx of federal

[3] In 1897 the President of Brown University issued statements supportive of populist presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan that were opposed by his "men of business" university trustees, which sought to intervene.

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[4] 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 (2024) 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, pg. 3). The AAUP's 1969 "The Question of Institutional Neutrality" is also mentioned in the historical recounting (Post 2024; Wittington 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.

Wittington (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 and Methods

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

[4] for instance after the United States' invasion of Cambodia, and the 1970 shootings of college students during anti-war protests at Jackson State and Kent State. Some colleges condemned President Nixon, while also making efforts to incorporate more explicitly political classes into their curriculum that Fall.

(2023) rightfully indicates, "[that] junior faculty [have] tough skins and [are not] intimidated by collective statements is an empirical question" (pg. 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. Do they modify any of their professional or extramural activities in response to political statements by their universities?
3. Do demographic variables, political orientation, tenured/untenured status, and university characteristics (public versus private, location) have a significant influence on these attitudes and behaviors?

Methods

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.[5] R1 universities in the U.S. representative of all regions were selected due to several factors (see Appendix B 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 have therefore a large public impact.

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

[5] The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression maintains a list of those who have officially adopted neutrality: https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/adoptions-official-position-institutional-neutrality. Heterodox Academy maintains a more expansive list of those who have adopted positions of either neutrality or restraint, which in June 2025 was over 150 institutions, the majority of which were R1s. https://heterodoxacademy.org/issues/institutional-neutrality/

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 were targeted 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.

While Hunter.io can quickly produce large numbers of e-mail addresses and verify them in bulk, e-mails nevertheless bounced or were canceled by the platform due to the e-mail addresses being invalid. 13, 767 e-mails were sent from four different accounts at 60 e-mails a day to minimize the likelihood of the universities' servers labeling them as spam, 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.

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 Agnostic 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.[6]

[6] Subjects could check racial and ethnic categories, which included Asian, Middle Eastern, White, Black or African American, Other, Mixed race, Latino/a or Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Native American, or Alaska Native. These were collapsed into "White"

[Insert Table 1 here]

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for survey responses.

[Insert Table 2 here]

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 disagree 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 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

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and "Non-white." The academic disciplines of social sciences, arts and humanities, education, communications, media, public relations, and business were collapsed into "non-STEM," and Biological Sciences and Agriculture, Engineering, Physical Sciences, Mathematics, and Computer Science, were collapsed into "STEM." Subjects could check multiple categories for political affiliation, including "leftist," "liberal," "moderate/centrist," "conservative," and "libertarian." Those who checked "leftist," "liberal," or a combination of these two categories with "moderate/centrist" were coded as "left-leaning." Those who checked "moderate/centrist" discretely were given that category. Those who checked "conservative," "libertarian" or a combination of these categories and "moderate/centrist" were coded as "right-leaning."

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 a "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 were conducted to determine if there were responses were statistically more or less likely to be in the majority. Z-tests and associated 2-tailed p tests were run to determine said significance.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Collectively, respondents answered "yes" to the following (abbreviated) questions, all significant at the 2T p<=.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. How 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<=.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. How 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, race, private/public status of the university, and STEM/non-STEM faculty status as a faculty member did. Tenure status and race each accounted for statistically significant differences to five questions (see Table 4).

[Insert Table 4 here]

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 with *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; 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, 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). Respondents did not confine their comments to institutional statements, but about the space for expressing political views in general. A sample of these responses include:

> Participant (P) 1: 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 impact of statements

The objective survey questions showed that overall, faculty were not 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 a certain 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 concern of faculty with the statements:

P4: “The vast majority of the university's statements about political issues are anodyne and not controversial. 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 in making political/social statements, much of this ill-will could be avoided.”

Government overreach

Eight participants' answers to the open-ended question focused 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

Institutional neutrality in the mid-2020s, though contested, is seeing a resurgence of interest as an assertion of principle and as a defensive strategy. 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 conservative Goldwater Institute, which offered Campus Free Speech Model legislation affirming institutional neutrality (Kurtz, Manley, & Butcher 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, 2024) 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) as a means 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 article is the first empirical work to ask the question of whether faculty members' academic freedom is, in fact, viewed as *by faculty* as being impinged upon, 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 pointed to tenure-track faculty's being more impervious and even oblivious to their leadership's official positions than assumed by some (Ginsburg 2023; Wittington (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. And, among those who were familiar with at least some statements, a series of one-sample Z-tests comparing faculty responses with an expected proportion of 0.50 evinced a lack of an unqualified, majoritarian chilling effect. They were statistically more likely to say they do have *not* withheld their opinion on a topic opined on by the university out of fear of loss of job security or other benefit. They were also statistically more likely to say they do *not* decide to engage or disengage with extramural activities linked to an issue depending on the university's position on that issue. The proportion who reported being more likely to engage or disengage professionally with topics according to their

university's official position did not rise to the level of significance. There was furthermore no statistically significant difference between the proportion of those disagreeing with the university's making political statements and agreeing with it doing so. And, 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.

Yet, the study's results do not make the case that these statements are without a chilling impact. Aligning with other recent studies' results (Honeycutt, 2024), professors were statistically more likely to say that the university *should* adopt institutional neutrality than not, and 60% indicated this preference. They were additionally more likely say that they have withheld their opinion on a topic opined on by the university, but for reasons *other* than job security, such as a negative social reaction. This is perhaps a consequence of a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) born of their perception of ideological homogeneity among faculty, staff, and especially administrators: a statistically larger proportion of professors asserted that all these three stakeholder groups agreed with most of the statements than disagreed. 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, as professors who didn't agree with all the political positions their university took were statistically more likely to be in the majority.

We also can't conclude that political statements are without a chilling impact because although the proportion of those saying they would modify their professional behavior according to statements did not rise to significance *vis a vis* those who would not, still, 44% of the sample said they would be less likely to professionally engage with a topic if their opinion misaligned with that of the university, and 48% said they'd be more likely to do so if it were aligned. That nearly half of professors surveyed say they are susceptible to modifying their professional behavior is a consequential finding. The university leadership therefore appears to be moving the needle on what is permissible inquiry in the academic

community, and the amount of engagement on a specific topic. About a third of faculty reported self-censoring out of concern for either their livelihood or other sanctions. 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 reported self-censoring or participating (Quinn, 2025).

The study's results neither refute nor support positive effects of position-taking. Among those purported benefits to which they study might speak, as noted by Zambrano (2024), are teaching students about political events; 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 the range of exposure students have 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, then that which said it *did* increase feelings of belonging, only 17.9% of the sample. And some of the open-ended responses pointed faculty and students may feel 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.

This research, beyond surveying the attitudes and behaviors of professors in response to political statements, investigated correlations among demographic variables. Among the primary findings was the intuitive result that non-tenured professors were more likely to withhold their opinion about a topic with which they were misaligned with the university due to fears of job security or losing another benefit; were more likely to not engage with a topic professionally if they misaligned, more likely to engage professionally if they aligned; and less likely to engage extramurally if misaligned. This affirms the common-sense argument that tenure protects academic freedom (AAUP 2025).

Literature on DEI in the workplace 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). The study largely upheld this sensibility among faculty of color, as it showed the whites were less likely to withhold their opinion due to a fear of losing job security, and less discouraged from pursuing professional activities on an issue with which their views were misaligned. This difference was seen although whites were more likely to perceive ideological consensus on campus versus their non-white peers, which might predict *more* fear of social opprobrium for going against popular opinion.

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, which means that 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; thinking the survey was spam and not opening it, and perception of research on institutional statements as right-coded. Future research should attempt to secure higher participation rates at universities to which researchers might have insider access.

Further complicating generalizability, while the sample mirrors the racial composition of full-time faculty at colleges (NCES 2022) 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.

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.

Further areas of 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, concerning, and compelling." If institutional statement-making's benefits outweigh areas of concern described in this article, 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.

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, and who yet have the most precarity in the academic community.

In the meantime, we again cite Zambrano: “Even a small danger of speech chilling” (2024, pg. 8) should lead to neutrality. The study has, in fact, demonstrated that danger, and we believe, merits adopting a policy of institutional neutrality. Because 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 impacts 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.

Appendix A: Universities Surveyed Grouped by Region and Type

Midwest

Private

- Case Western Reserve University
- Northwestern University

Public

- Indiana University
- Iowa State University
- Kent State University
- Mizzou
- North Dakota State University
- Ohio University
- University of Minnesota Twin Cities

Northeast

Private

- Boston College
- Brandeis University
- New York University[7]

[7] Although Hunter.io did not show that the e-mails to NYU professors were blocked, no professors from this university were shown to have opened their e-mails, making it likely that they didn't receive the messages.

- Northeastern University
- Rensselaer Polytechnic University

Public

- New Jersey Institute of Technology
- Stonybrook University
- The Graduate Center

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 Questions

1. Are you a tenured or tenure-track faculty member at an R1 university? [if no, survey is exited]

2. What is your sex?

    Male
    Female
    Nonbinary
3. What are your primary racial/ethnic identifications (click all that apply).

    White
    Black or African American
    Asian
    Latino/a or Hispanic
    American Indian or Alaska Native
    Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
    Middle Eastern
    Other
4. What is your religious identification?

    Christian
    Jewish
    Buddhist
    Hindu
    Atheist/ Agnostic
    Muslim
5. Which of the below best describe your political orientation? (click all that apply)

    Liberal
    Leftist
    Libertarian
    Conservative
    Moderate/Centrist
6. With which type of university are you primarily affiliated?

    Public Northeast
    Private Northeast

Public South
Private South
Public Midwest
Private Midwest
Public West
Private West

7. Which broad academic discipline category best describes your department?

Physical Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Science
Social Sciences
Business
Communications, Media and Public Relations
Education
Engineering
Arts and Humanities
Biological Sciences and Agriculture

[Below questions, unless otherwise indicated, have “yes” or “no”/ “agree” or “disagree” as possible responses].

8. Are you familiar with any of your university's statements on social/political topics do not directly concern its academic mission? [If no, survey is ended]
9. Have you agreed with all of these statements of which you are aware?
10. Do you agree or disagree with the college/university's making statements on political and social issues that do not directly concern its academic mission?
11. Have you felt more of a sense of belonging or of not belonging in your academic community because of these statements?

More of a sense of belonging
More of a sense of not belonging
Neither

12. Have you voiced your agreement or disagreement with these statements to other faculty, students, or administrators on campus?

Yes. Voiced Agreement
Yes. Voiced Disagreement
No
I’ve voiced both agreement or disagreement depending on the statement

13. [If voiced agreement] Did you experience any consequences for expressing agreement or disagreement?

Yes—a positive consequence [if so, explain]

Yes—a negative consequence [if so, explain]
No

14. Have you ever withheld your opinion about a statement from other faculty, students, or staff because of concerns about losing job security or other benefits?
15. Have you withheld your opinion about a statement from other faculty, students, or staff because of concerns of a negative social reaction, even if it did not affect your job security or other 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 on that issue 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 because the university's official opinion on that issue doesn't align with your own position?
18. Have you felt MORE likely to engage in extramural activities (such as posting on social media) about a topic because the official position of the university aligns with your own position on that topic?
19. Have you felt LESS likely to engage in extramural activities (such as posting on social media) about a topic because of the official position of the university on that topic does not align with your own position on that topic?
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/social position statements issued by the university?
22. Do you think most students at your institution agree with the majority of political/social position statements issued by the university?
23. Do you think most faculty at your institution agree with the majority of official political/social position statements issued?
24. If you have any additional comments on the subject matter of this study, please enter them below.

25. If you have any additional clarifying comments on questions asked in this study, please enter them below.

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