# Academic Freedom in Canadian Universities: 2018

A project of reclaimingdiscourse.org

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## Introduction

Why are academics under fire for their ideas so often recently?  Why isn't someone standing up for them and their academic freedom?  Why don't they defend each other?  What is everyone so afraid of? *Is this really happening at all?*

These are the questions we asked ourselves while recording a podcast in 2017.  We had been discussing what was happening to professors like Jordan B. Peterson and Brett Weinstein. They seemed like they meant well, but they both said something that some people disagreed with, and now they feared for their jobs and turned to the public for support as their institutions virtually (or in Dr. Weinstein's case, literally) abandoned them.  We wondered, researched, and asked our friends: where is this pressure to be quiet and compliant coming from, and is it all overblown and exaggerated by the news-media? We got a mix of answers, but none were very reliable.

So we just asked the academics. And they answered.

We gathered a list of 8500 public emails of academic staff at major universities across Canada, and we asked them our burning questions until we got shut down.  Here's what they said.

# Executive Summary

Professors and other academics from across Canada were asked anonymously how they felt about several issues surrounding academic freedom. For the most part, most of these academics felt like they had freedom; however, in most cases, a substantial minority of academics felt like they did not have sufficient freedom.

**Broad questions**

80% of academics think that academic **tenure should protect an academic** regardless of what ideas they pursue.

77% of academics rarely or never feel **restrictions on the types of ideas** they can pursue in their research/teaching, but 23% do feel such restrictions at least sometimes, with 8% feeling restrictions often or always.

11% of academics have had the quality of their **scholarship suffer** due to pressure to avoid controversy at least sometimes, with the rest having this happen rarely or never.

84% of academics disagree or strongly disagree that there are **some topics** which are so sensitive that they **should not be discussed** on campus.

37% of academics feel like certain **popular values** in the university **cannot be challenged** without harm to their career at least sometimes.

17% of academics feel like their **tenure** rarely or never **protects their academic freedom**, while 21.4% feel like their tenure does so sometimes.

**Specific Questions:**

23% of academics feel **pressure** to avoid controversy from their **institution** at least sometimes.

25% of academics feel **pressure** to avoid controversy from their **colleagues** at least sometimes.

22% of academics feel **pressure** to avoid controversy from their **government** at least sometimes.

22 % of academics feel **pressure** to avoid controversy from their **students** at least sometimes.

13% of academics have considered how to protect their **personal safety** from threats related to their scholarship at least sometimes.

39% of academics agree or strongly agree that their students would receive a **better education** academic freedom was better protected by strong policy.

# Background and Rationale

Academic freedom is probably important for some reason. This is the principle that inspired us to look into its current state. We didn't have a perfectly clear definition of academic freedom going in, but we were displeased that there was no good assessment of academics' opinions about it available to be read.

One can argue what exactly constitutes academic freedom. Some say it must be all-encompassing. Others say there is a point where it must end, for example, when research may uncover uncomfortable truths or facts that can fuel hate. This argument and the authors' opinions on it are beyond the scope of this inquiry. We simply wanted to look at academic freedom <u>as it is understood by current academics</u>, the current best judge of the concept.

We hoped that if we asked a variety of questions, with a variety of specificities, we could start to piece together what academics find important, what they feel they have, and what they feel they lack, regarding this difficult-to-define concept of academic freedom.

We knew going in that this research would not yield precise conclusions; we viewed it more as a starting point. We wanted to start a discussion, and more importantly, make it easier for others to look into this concept by providing some foundation, as unstable as it may be.

Given the coverage in the popular press of high-profile cases of a professor getting stuck between academic freedom and pressures to stop expressing or exploring, we had some general questions that guided this research:

1. Is this even a problem?

2. Is this as common an issue as reports make it seem?

3. How do academics feel about various parts of what constitute academic freedom?

Our general hypothesis, insofar as there can be one in this type of inquiry, was that only a very small proportion of academics feel like they don't have enough academic freedom, and that the issue is not as important among academics as it was portrayed in the news. We expected less than 5% of faculty members to have significant problems with their academic freedom situation.

We decided to just start asking questions. A list of questions that could start to elucidate this problem, if it existed, was assembled. We ran these questions by a committee of academics for feedback, and then just started asking academics across Canada randomly, via email.

The questions can be roughly split into three categories:

### 1. Abstract opinion questions

These are meant to just gauge academics' feelings, as they perceive them.

*Eg. Q.18: "Do you feel free to pursue and idea that interests you in your scholarship?"*

### 2. Consequence-based questions

These are meant to make the academic think about what they really expect would happen.

*Eg. Q.22: "My students would receive a better education if my academic freedom, and that of my peers, was better protected by strong policy."*


### 3. Exploratory causal questions

These are meant to try to understand why their feelings arose, or where influence is coming from.

*Eg. Q.4: "I feel pressure from my government to avoid controversy."*


This work was out of personal curiosity. It was not funded, endorsed, supported, or facilitated by any university, corporation, or government.


# Methods

**University selection:** The 15 major research institutions in Canada were included. Research rankings by reported grant funding and publication numbers were used to assemble the list.

**Contact list:** A list of academics was created by going through faculty contact pages on university websites, department by department. We focused on academic staff and tried to exclude support staff or technical staff. The contact list was then randomized, and batches were selected to receive a personalized form letter asking them to complete a survey.

**Ethics:** No personally identifiable information was collected. We submitted the study design for evaluation by our university's ethics board (University of Alberta). They declined to evaluate the study as it was out of their jurisdiction, as this research was not formally supported by the university. They called it "independent special interest". We only contacted people through emails listed and open to the public on their institutional websites, and we took this listing as indicative that it would be appropriate to use the email address to ask academic questions. We asked only academic questions to academics, only through their academic email that was publicly listed on their academic institution's website.

**Survey:** Google Forms was used to administer the survey. Responses were anonymous and respondents could leave a contact email for updates if they wanted to be emailed. New batches of emails were sent until we had enough responses to satisfy our statistical requirements.

**Statistics:** We received 358 responses that met inclusion criteria, including consent and appropriate status as an academic. Data reported are with 95% confidence $\pm$ 5.1% (error), calculated against a population of 43,000 academics in major Canadian Universities, the best estimate we could get from listed employment numbers. That is, "X% said yes" in this report means that we are 95% sure that the true percentage of people who say "yes" is $X \pm 5.1\%$. This was satisfactory to the authors for the questions we had, and we are happy to support others in continuing this research to increase confidence and decrease error, should anyone be interested.

**Raw data:** Raw data is accessible to others for verification, audit, and further analysis. We deleted location and institution information to keep our promise of anonymity. We published the raw data to ensure that those who distrusted our analysis would have an opportunity to use our data to dispute our claims. Transparency is our goal in all aspects of this project, insofar as it does not compromise the identity of respondents, who were promised anonymity.

**Further research:** We have created the only known list that contains the email addresses (that were published for academic purposes) of academics from major research universities in Canada. This list contains 8500 emails, and we are happy to make it available for academic purposes on a case by case basis. Contact us and tell us about the research you are conducting.

## Discussion

A significant proportion of academics are having fairly serious academic freedom issues, if this survey is even a somewhat close representation of the real-world situation. Yet most academics (73%) rarely or never hear their colleagues complaining about it. This seems like an interesting disconnect. Perhaps the same factors that cause the feelings around academic freedom also cause the lack of discussion of the problem within academic circles. That would be intuitive. But maybe it's an entirely different issue. While academic freedom in general can be the subject of criticism from many groups, including governments, students, institutions and other academics, conversations within the academic groups should be immune to most of those, at least in theory. We should not unfairly minimize the problem; one in four academics do hear complaints from their colleagues on this topic at least sometimes. But you'd think since at least 25% of academics are having at least moderate academic freedom issues, and academics tend to know many colleagues, these discussions would be more popular.

There is another interesting disconnection between questions 21 and 22. Academics feel that pressure to avoid controversy is more harmful to their students' education than it is to their research. We wonder if this is simply explained by the fact that there are typically more eyes, and generally less-nuanced/expert eyes, on their teaching product than on their research product. This finding might shift the "blame" of this problem more into the hands of the students, to whatever extent "blame" makes sense in this context.

Interestingly, only about a third of the people that feel pressure from their institution to avoid controversy actually fear losing their job because of controversy. This might give us some insight about how the norms are enforced in institutions. There must be other levers to pull than firing.

Question 19 also places emphasis on the role of politics. Despite academics' concerns about freedom, when it comes down to actually choosing research topics, the only factor other than strength of scholarship that they claim to be majorly influenced by is politics (federal, provincial, and municipal). There are a few minor other factors, but politics stands out as the main driving force that influences research topic selection. This is an important question to consider because this survey was largely about how the academics feel, but this question is about what they do, and there is a disconnect. Academics generally feel pressure and restrictions from several sources, but they do not let most things leak significantly into their scholarship, or so they claim.

This study is too limited in response numbers to do an accurate analysis of the data stratified by interesting categories like academic discipline, research methods, topics of interest, tenure status, etc. Our survey was set up to allow for this, and if the project wasn't shut down prematurely, we would have these insights.  This is part of the reason why we are recommending others pick up where we left off. This could help us put together a more accurate characterization of this problem with a solution-oriented mindset. This of course presumes that you find some of these numbers problematic, which you may not.

**Three trends stand out as interesting:**

- Academics whose research/teaching includes the topic of gender are 2.2X more likely to feel pressure from students to avoid controversy than academics whose topics do not include gender.

- Academics whose research uses non-empirical methods are 2.2X more likely to feel pressure from students to avoid controversy than academics whose research uses empirical methods.

- Academics whose research/teaching does not include the topic of health are 2.1X more likely to feel pressure from government to avoid controversy than academics whose topics do include health.

Note that these three observations do not have the same statistical strength as the other answers and are to be take as introductory trends only.

Interpret how you will, examine the date as much as you'd like, and get in touch if you want to discuss.

## Limitations/Criticism

First, let's acknowledge that this is survey data.  The questions are imperfect, the randomness of who responds is imperfect, and how we interpret the answers is imperfect. Our philosophy is that we should be as open as we can about the problems with research like this so that it does not get taken more seriously that it should.

In that spirit, we will publish here our own criticisms and all the criticisms we receive from others.  To send criticism, contact us and we will publish it. If you have a very long criticism, please host it on your own site (this can be done for free) and send us the link with a <50-word abstract to publish.

**Our own criticism:**

1. **The stats tell us** that the numbers reported should be fairly close to actual value in the population. But this is a small group of people. Only 385 people responded before Google closed our survey. So, while the percentages we report are a good estimation, there is a fairly good chance that a few of them are wrong. Let's look at what a 5% error or 95% confidence level means. When something should go wrong 5% of the time, it is fairly likely to happen once if you repeat it 20 times. We asked 23 questions, and our confidence level is 95%, so we expect that about one of these answers is just plain wrong. That is, one of these answers very likely does not accurately represent the true feelings of the population, even if all wording was completely clear and there were no failures in communications. This is true with any study that uses a random sample as a representative of the actual population. It is true here too.

2. **Multiple choice survey questions** allow for quantification, but open questions that allow the respondent to describe their answer how they see fit allow for more precision. We chose the former for ease of analysis and communication. It is a quick and dirty estimate that helped us answer the questions we had. We acknowledge that with this simplicity comes some advantages and disadvantages. It prohibits us from injecting our biases in the analysis because we simply calculate percentages, but it does allow us to inject our biases in the question design, because survey questions can be written to elicit certain responses more reliably than others. We were cognizant of this in the study design, but we know we didn't do it perfectly. So in many instances, we asked the same sort of questions a couple ways to give us and our readers a method of examining how important the wording was to a certain response.

3. **Response bias** is probably an issue here. It usually is with these types of studies. We had one great advantage in this study: literally every respondent was an immensely educated person with a firm understanding of research, and the tools needed to evaluate research. The fact that we were asking academics means that this may be one of the more accurately communicated studies ever performed (through no virtue of the authors). But there is a clear problem that likely occurred. People who felt most strongly were probably more likely to respond than those who felt least strongly. That is, the polarity of responses may be over-represented in this study. Imagine in real life on a hypothetical issue, 20% strongly agreed, 20% agreed, 20% were neutral, 20% disagreed, and 20% strongly disagreed. We would not be surprised 50% of the strong opinionated people answered, but only 10% of the others answered. This would create a ratio of 10:2:2:2:10, thus exaggerating how strongly people feel about the issue and falsely suggesting that 38% (10/26) strongly agree. This probably happened here to some extent.

4. In **creating our list of emails** of academics to contact, we wanted to only use email addresses that were listed publicly for academic purposes and could only obtain emails that were simply listed online. Some universities have certain faculties/departments' contact info unlisted or masked and thus we did not contact them. This may have skewed the results in some unknown direction. Some of this can be mitigated by looking at the stratified data, but the numbers once stratified are so small that we cannot make strong conclusions from them.

NOTE: We publish all criticism we receive at www.reclaimingdiscourse.org.

# Future Directions

This is just a starting point.  We need more questions asked, and more responses collected.  And this work needs to evolve into the practical realm.  If we acknowledge that there is a perceived problem, is there an appetite to fix it? Are academics motivated to work on changes?

After this study was shut down by Google, we realized that this was a battle we did not have the resources to win at this point.  We encourage researchers who want to look at this issue more thoroughly to get in touch so we can transfer our lists, data, and tools, and make the next steps even easier.

And finally, we will be working on making research ethics review more accessible as a public good.  Get in touch if you want to be involved in that effort.

# Full Results

**Q1**     "I feel restrictions on the types of ideas that I can pursue in my research/teaching."
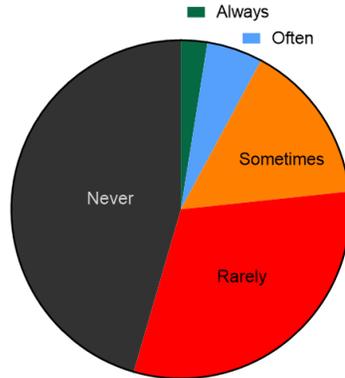


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Always | 2.5% |
| Often | 5.3% |
| Sometimes | 15.4% |
| Rarely | 31.2% |
| Never | 45.5% |

**Q2**     "I feel pressure from my institution to avoid controversy."
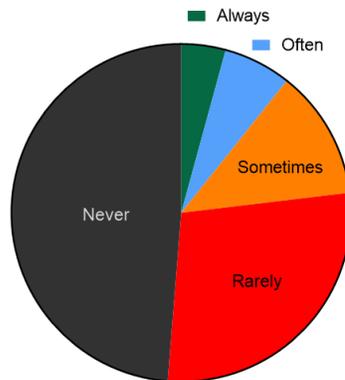


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Always | 4.2% |
| Often | 6.5% |
| Sometimes | 12.4% |
| Rarely | 28.2% |
| Never | 48.7% |

**Q3**     "I feel pressure from my colleagues to avoid controversy."
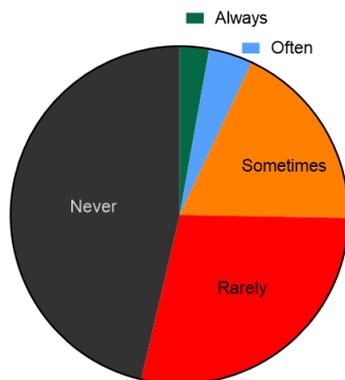


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Always | 2.8% |
| Often | 4.2% |
| Sometimes | 18.3% |
| Rarely | 28.4% |
| Never | 46.3% |

**Q4**    "I feel pressure from my government to avoid controversy."
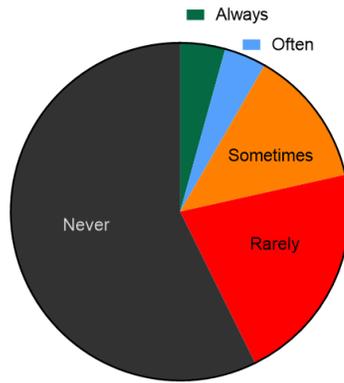


| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Always | 4.3% |
| Often | 4.0% |
| Sometimes | 13.2% |
| Rarely | 21.2% |
| Never | 57.3% |

**Q5**    "I feel pressure from my students to avoid controversy."
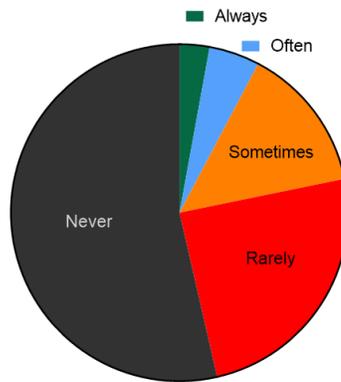


| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Always | 2.9% |
| Often | 4.9% |
| Sometimes | 14.0% |
| Rarely | 24.6% |
| Never | 53.6% |

**Q6**    "The quality of my scholarship has suffered due to pressure to avoid controversy."
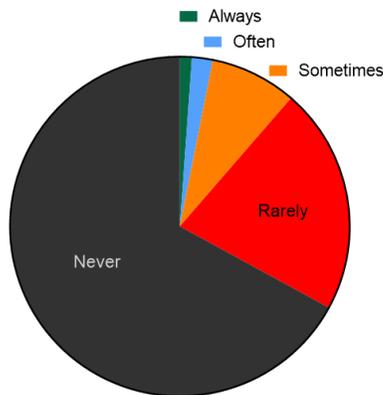


| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Always | 1.1% |
| Often | 2.0% |
| Sometimes | 8.2% |
| Rarely | 21.6% |
| Never | 67.0% |

**Q7**     "I have considered how to protect my personal safety from threats related to my scholarship."
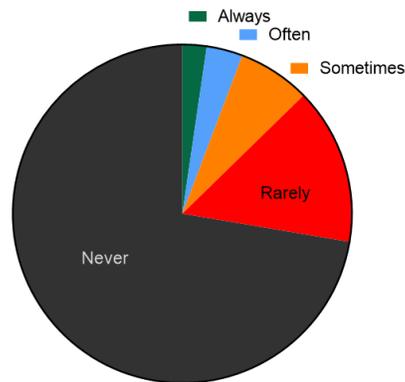


| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Always | 2.3% |
| Often | 3.5% |
| Sometimes | 6.9% |
| Rarely | 15.0% |
| Never | 72.3% |

**Q8**     "I have changed the content in a course I have taught due to concerns that my students may find it offensive."
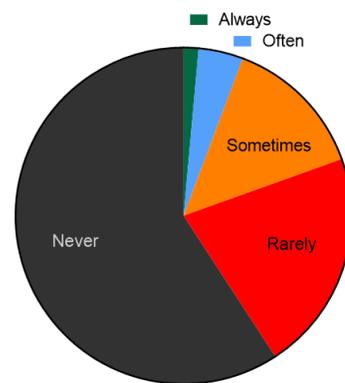


| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Always | 1.4% |
| Often | 4.3% |
| Sometimes | 13.8% |
| Rarely | 21.3% |
| Never | 59.2% |

**Q9**     "I feel like certain popular values in the university cannot be challenged without harm to my career."
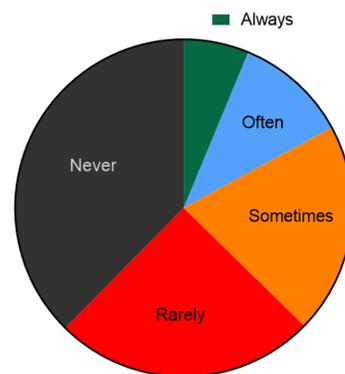


| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Always | 6.3% |
| Often | 10.8% |
| Sometimes | 20.2% |
| Rarely | 25.1% |
| Never | 37.6% |

**Q10**    "I feel like my tenure protects my academic freedom."
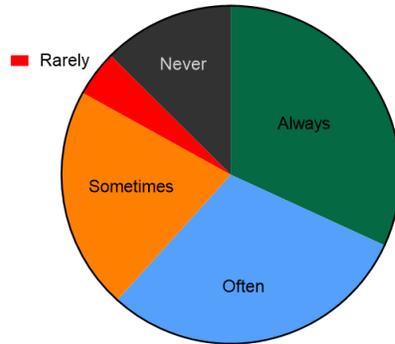


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Always | 31.9% |
| Often | 29.8% |
| Sometimes | 21.4% |
| Rarely | 4.4% |
| Never | 12.5% |

**Q11**    "Academic tenure should protect an academician regardless of what ideas they pursue."
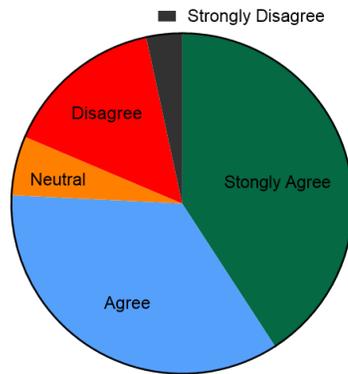


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Strongly agree | 40.8% |
| Agree | 34.9% |
| Neutral | 5.6% |
| Disagree | 15.2% |
| Strongly Disagree | 3.4% |

**Q12**    "There are some topics which are so sensitive that they should not be discussed on campus."
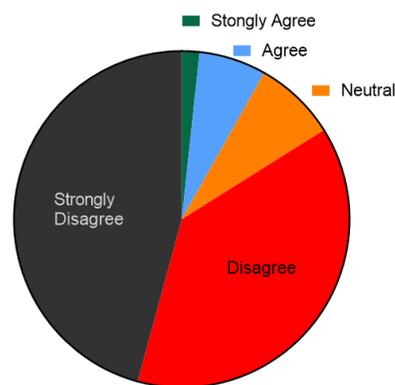


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Strongly agree | 1.7% |
| Agree | 6.5% |
| Neutral | 7.9% |
| Disagree | 38.1% |
| Strongly Disagree | 45.8% |

**Q13**  "Students should be able to influence who has a platform at a university through creating protests and/or disruption."
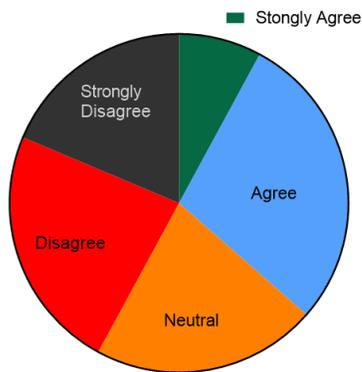


| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Strongly agree | 7.9% |
| Agree | 28.5% |
| Neutral | 21.5% |
| Disagree | 23.4% |
| Strongly Disagree | 18.6% |

**Q14**  "Academics should be open to changing content or research topics to accommodate students' sensitivities or values."
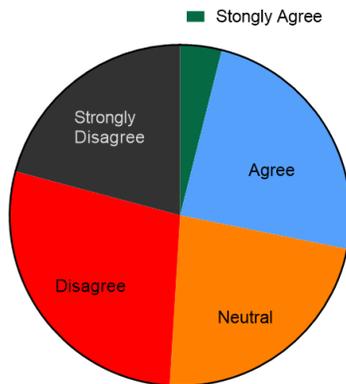


| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Strongly agree | 3.9% |
| Agree | 24.2% |
| Neutral | 22.8% |
| Disagree | 28.2% |
| Strongly Disagree | 20.8% |

**Q15**  "The University should be an intellectual safe space where everyone can feel comfortable."
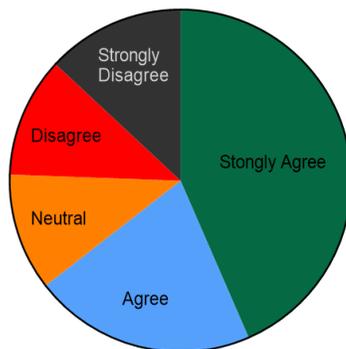


| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Strongly agree | 43.5% |
| Agree | 21.0% |
| Neutral | 11.1% |
| Disagree | 11.4% |
| Strongly Disagree | 13.% |

**Q16**

"Is hiring at your institution based solely on merit?"
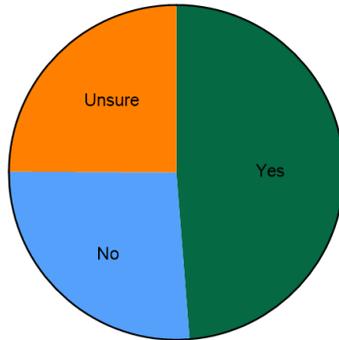


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 48.7% |
| No | 26.3% |
| Unsure | 24.9% |

**Q17**

"Have you ever left a topic you think could be fruitful and interesting off of a grant proposal due to expected negative perception or controversy of your research?"
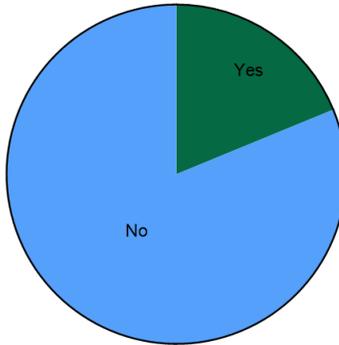


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 18.8% |
| No | 81.2% |

**Q18**

"Do you feel free to pursue any idea that interests you in your scholarship?"
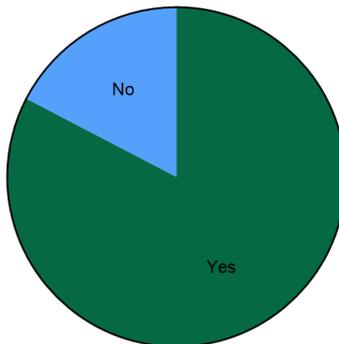


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 82.6% |
| No | 17.4% |

**Q19**   "Which factors do you actually consider when choosing research topics? (Select all that apply)"
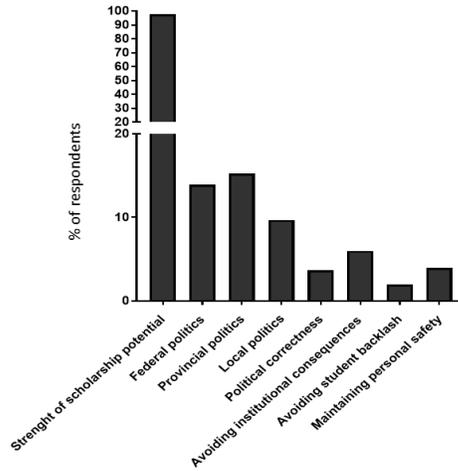


**Q20**   "I sometimes fear losing my job based on controversy generated by my research or teaching"



| Answers by percentage of total | |
| --- | --- |
| Strongly agree | 2.2% |
| Agree | 4.8% |
| Neutral | 7.8% |
| Disagree | 23.2% |
| Strongly Disagree | 61.9% |
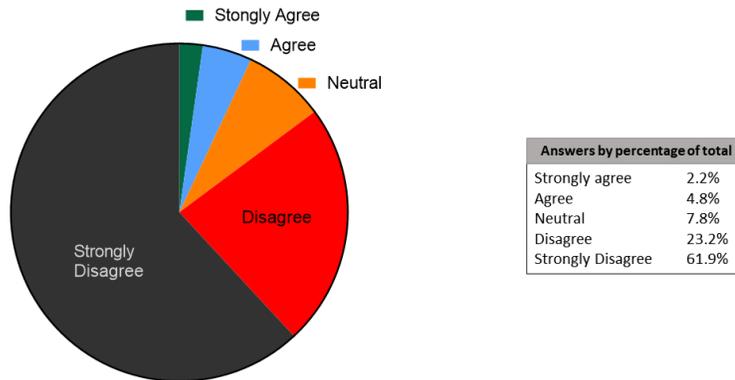
## Q21

"My research could be stronger if my academic freedom was better protected by strong policy."

## Q22

"My students would receive a better education if my academic freedom, and that of my peers, was better protected by strong policy."
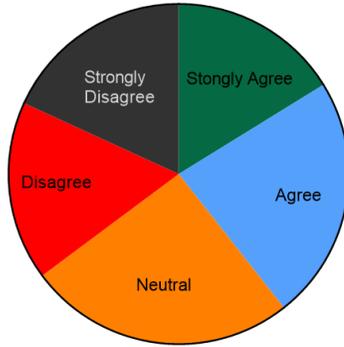


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Strongly agree | 16.2% |
| Agree | 23.2% |
| Neutral | 25.4% |
| Disagree | 17.0% |
| Strongly Disagree | 18.2% |

## Q23

"I hear my colleagues complaining about lacking adequate academic freedom."
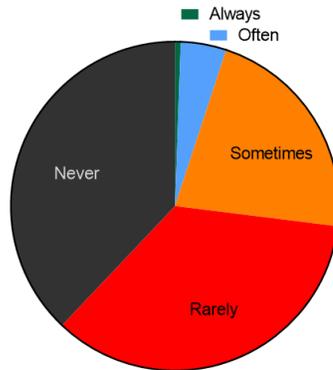


| Answers by percentage of total | |
|---|---|
| Always | 0.6% |
| Often | 4.5% |
| Sometimes | 21.9% |
| Rarely | 35.1% |
| Never | 37.9% |