



What's AHEAD draws on the expertise of higher education trend-spotters to offer insights into important issues in higher education management. Administered shortly after the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, this poll sheds light on higher education leaders' views about freedom of speech on college campuses.

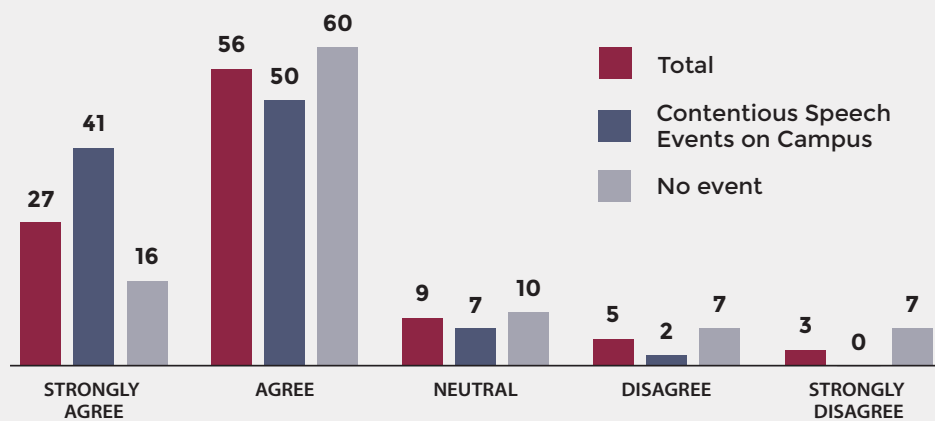
About half of responding higher education leaders report a contentious speech event on campus

Of the responding higher education leaders who work on a college campus, about half (46%) report that there has been a contentious speech event.

Higher education leaders report commitment to ensuring freedom of speech on campus

Most higher education leaders agree (27%) or strongly agree (56%) that their institution is committed to ensuring freedom of speech on campus. Agreement is higher among leaders who report a contentious speech event on campus than among those who do not. Nearly all (91%) leaders who report that there has been a contentious speech event on campus agree or strongly agree that their institution is committed to ensuring freedom of speech, compared with 76% of leaders on campuses where there have not been contentious events.

FIG 1. My institution is committed to ensuring freedom of speech on campus.



When asked how they understand the roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions with regard to “free speech,” a number of respondents stressed that free speech is “a core value of higher education” and “a right that must be practiced and protected.” In one representative comment, a leader commented:

Higher education institutions are places of learning, critical thinking, discourse, and exploration. How can students experience these things without the ability to express and debate their theories, views, and understanding of the world? It is the responsibility of these institutions to foster an environment in which this can happen without concern for one's safety. It's fundamental to our democracy.



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Most respondents believe that someone may be prohibited from speaking on campus because of safety concerns

Only 8% of responding higher education leaders report that there is no reason that is sufficient for prohibiting someone from speaking on campus. Nearly all (87%) respondents believe that a college or university may prohibit someone from speaking on campus because of concerns about the safety of students, staff, and faculty. Only 16% of respondents report that the content of the speech is a sufficient reason for prohibiting someone from speaking. The most commonly offered other reasons were hate speech, followed by threats to safety.

Several respondents offered comments stressing the importance of both the exchange of ideas and campus safety. In one representative comment, a leader wrote:

A university should be a place that values free speech and the exchange of ideas in a civil and non-violent way. This is part of how we help to develop students as critical thinkers and citizens of the world. We should resist the urge to censor those whose opinions we disagree with and instead allow for and encourage reasoned discussion and even argument. With that said, there is clearly no place for violence on our campus as an outgrowth of contentious speech, and the physical safety of our community members must remain a top priority.

Most respondents are confident in the ability of campus leaders and security to respond to contentious speech events.

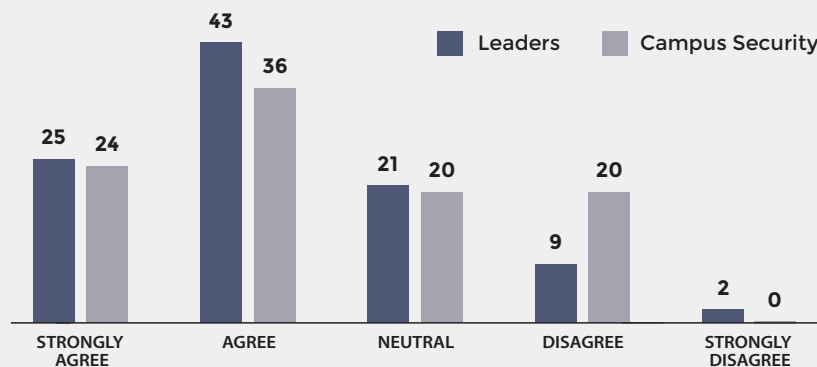
More than half (68%) of respondents agree (43%) or strongly agree (25%) that leaders on their campus will respond effectively to contentious speech issues. While 60% of respondents agree (36%) or strongly agree (24%) that campus security will respond effectively, a noteworthy share (20%) disagree.

FIG 2. Reasons for prohibiting someone from speaking on campus

REASON	PERCENT*
Concerns about safety of students, staff, and faculty	87
Content of the speech	16
Other (explain)	20
None / No reason is sufficient	8

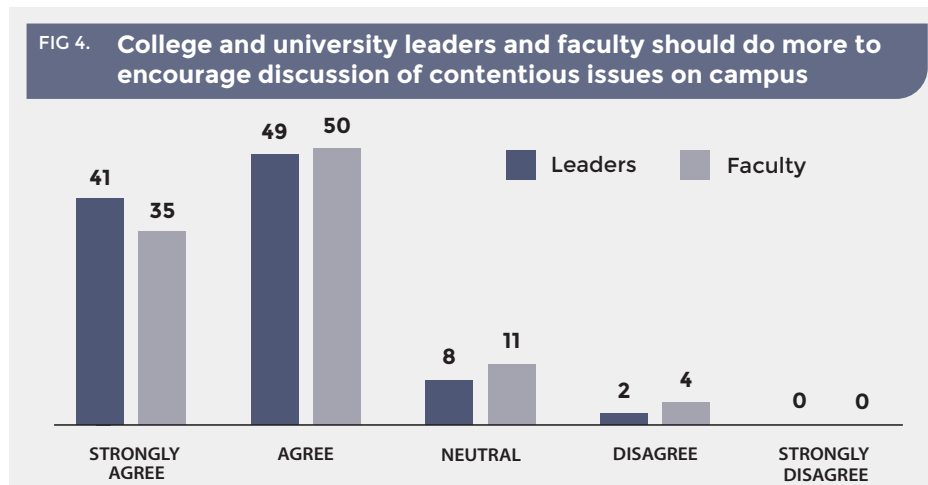
* Total does not sum to 100% as respondents could check more than one reason.

FIG 3. At the college or university where I work, I am confident in the ability of campus security and campus leaders to respond effectively to contentious speech issues



College and university leaders and faculty should do more to encourage discussion of contentious issues

Nearly all (90%) respondents agree (49%) or strongly agree (41%) that college and university leaders should do more to encourage discussion of contentious issues on campus. Respondents hold similar views about faculty, with nearly all (85%) agreeing (50%) or strongly agreeing (35%) that faculty should do more to encourage discussion of contentious issues in the classroom.



Several commented on the need for continued efforts with one respondent writing:

I believe that, as educational institutions, free speech is important AND we must be prepared for the “teachable moments” that contentiousness sparks on campuses and draw some line when hate speech and violence is possible. We had students who had never visited a museum, let alone one with such provocative art. We need to do a better job of educating and supporting them.

When asked to offer an example of a leadership response to contentious speech issues on campus, several respondents noted the importance of having “a protocol” and sending “campus emails.” One respondent noted the importance of preparation, writing:

On my campus, in the last few years there have been a couple of instances where leadership responded poorly to issues of contentious speech. The events I’m thinking of had to do with religious expression. In both instances, the failure of leadership came in not recognizing that actions would be contentious. They made a decision to allow certain groups to speak and act very publicly, and while those actions were, I believe, the right thing to do, I don’t think our leadership thought it would “be a big deal” until the news cameras arrived. At that point, it was too late to respond in the most effective way. I would hope other campuses might be more diligent about recognizing how outside media and others will interpret campus events. You can’t always control the narrative, but you have to at least be prepared for others to notice what is happening.

A few respondents noted the perceived value of presidential leadership, with one respondent writing:

About Penn AHEAD

The Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) is dedicated to advancing higher education policy and practice that fosters open, equitable, and democratic societies.

Drawing on the intellectual resources of the University of Pennsylvania and a global alliance of higher education and academic leaders, AHEAD achieves its mission by creating knowledge, improving practice, and building capacity.

Through our engagement with policymakers, institutional leaders, scholars and practitioners, AHEAD produces research and applies research-based knowledge to address the most pressing issues pertaining to the public purposes of higher education in the U.S. and around the globe.

For more information see:
<http://ahead-penn.org>

Our President has spoken out in public and in writing about the power of free speech and what it means to truly uphold its value.

Other respondents note both the responsibilities and challenges for colleges and universities. In the words of one leader:

We can regulate time, place and manner for almost everything, and we should to maintain regular operations of the campus. We have the responsibility to ensure that more radical speakers that have or are likely to incite violence (on the left or the right) are either planned well with security or not permitted on-campus. ... I am concerned, however, with the slippery slope of "what can incite violence." We need more of different ideas, and edgy conversations on our campus (as much for staff and faculty as for students).

ABOUT THIS POLL

Members of the What's AHEAD trend-spotter panel were invited to participate in the poll (n = 372). The panel is made up of higher education leaders, including alumni of the Executive Doctorate program in Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania, and members of NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. We received 115 responses during the 10 days in which the poll was open (August 21 to 30, 2017): 96 of 262 Executive Doctorate alumni, 16 members of NASPA, and 3 other higher education leaders. About half (55%) of respondents work at private not-for-profit four-year institutions, 20% work at public four-year institutions, 4% at public two-year institutions, 3% at for-profit institutions, 1% at non-US based universities, and 1% in administrative units (e.g., system offices). The remaining respondents (17%) work in organizations other than colleges and universities. More than a third (38%) of respondents hold positions that focus on administration, 24% on academic matters, 24% in student affairs, 2% in finance, and 11% in other areas.

Suggested Citation

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