



2023 Campus Expression Survey Data and Methods

April 2024

The 2023 CES surveyed a nationally representative convenience sample of full-time college undergraduates at four-year colleges and universities within the US from November 14, 2023 through December 30, 2023. Survey respondents were recruited online using stratified sampling via CloudResearch.

At the close of the survey period, we received responses from 5,009 survey takers. After removing incomplete or potentially suspicious responses, we restricted our analyses to data from 4,730 respondents. This more than triples the responses of past CES administrations, which may improve the statistical power of our analysis's inferences, especially in examining subgroups in our sample. Research reports derived from the CES are exploratory and descriptive in nature.

CES Demographics

We tried as much as possible to match the CES sample's demographics with those of the US college student population at large, using as reference the 2021 data (the most recent available when the CES was administered) from the [National Center for Education Statistics's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System \(IPEDs\)](#), which tracks demographic information about college students in the US.

Gender breakdown of sample

- ≈57% self-reported as Female
- ≈40% self-reported as Male
- ≈3% self-reported as Other.

Race/ethnicity breakdown of sample

- ≈43% self-reported as White
- ≈23% self-reported as Hispanic or Latino/a
- ≈18% self-reported as Black or African-American
- ≈11% self-reported as Asian
- ≈5% self-reported as Multi-racial
- ≈3% self-reported as Other

Compared to the 2021 IPEDS data, non-White respondents are slightly over-represented, Asians especially.

Religion breakdown of sample

- ≈57% self-reported as Christian
- ≈34% self-reported Atheists, Agnostics, and Other
- ≈3% self-reported as Muslims
- ≈2% self-reported as Buddhists
- ≈2% self-reported as Jews
- ≈2% self-reported as Hindus

IPEDS does not collect data on the religious affiliations of US college students, so our sample's religious demographics cannot be compared to the IPEDS data. However, our sample's religious

demographics are broadly in line with data about the religious demographics of so-called Gen-Z Americans from the [2021 American National Family Life Survey](#). Note, however, that Gen-Z Americans who attend college may be unrepresentative of Gen-Z Americans in general. [The most recent data from Pew Research in 2020](#) indicates that a little more than half of Gen-Z Americans at that point in time were enrolled in college.

Institutional control breakdown of sample

- ≈62% Public
- ≈32% Private not-for-profit
- ≈5% Private for-profit

Carnegie classification breakdown of sample

The 2023 CES asked respondents to pick the institution where they were enrolled from a pre-populated list of verified institutions of higher education from IPEDS. This also let us categorize respondents' institutions according to their Carnegie classification. The following represent the proportions of our sample present at various Carnegie classification institution-types:

- ≈29% Doctoral Universities – Very High Research Activity (R1)
- ≈19% Baccalaureate Colleges
- ≈17% Doctoral Universities – High Research Activity (R2)
- ≈17% Master's Colleges and Universities – Larger programs (M1)
- ≈8% Doctoral/Professional Universities (D/PU)
- ≈4% Master's Colleges and Universities – Medium programs (M2)
- ≈3% Master's Colleges and Universities – Small programs (M3)
- ≈3% Other

Significant changes to the 2023 CES

Asking about comfort or reluctance to discuss one's thoughts, ideas, and questions

Past versions of the CES have asked college undergraduates at traditional four-year colleges and universities about their comfort or reluctance in "speaking up and giving your views"

(the 2022 CES's phrasing) on controversial topics. This framing emphasizes students' comfort or reluctance to *speak their opinions*. While important, student comfort or reluctance to speak their opinions isn't necessarily the same as their comfort or reluctance to discuss controversial topics. Discussion involves more than asserting opinions; it involves asking questions, giving arguments, weighing evidence, considering objections, listening to other perspectives, and more.

To better focus this year's CES on gauging students' comfort in discussing important topics, especially controversial ones, the questions' wording this year shifts from asking about students' level of comfort or reluctance in "speaking up and giving your views" to asking about students' level of comfort or reluctance to "discuss [their] honest thoughts, ideas, and questions." This is not a radical change, but it aims to more specifically elicit respondents' comfort engaging in behaviors that partly constitute inquiry.

Adding to and refining the list of controversial topics

The 2023 CES carried over from previous versions all of the controversial topics respondents were surveyed about, with two changes. First, "Israeli-Palestinian conflict" was added as a new topic, given its salience after the October 7, 2023 attacks by Palestinian militants on communities in southern Israel. Second, whereas previous CES's had "gender" as a topic, the 2023 CES split this topic into two distinct topics, "gender roles" and "trans identity".

Asking about actual sanctions suffered

All respondents who reported being at least somewhat reluctant to discuss their honest thoughts, ideas, and questions about a controversial topic (≈80%) were asked a series of follow-up questions about whether they had "personally experienced" an unfortunate consequence as a result of discussing a controversial topic on campus. If respondents replied Yes, then the survey asked whether they themselves were the recipients of the unfortunate consequence, or whether someone they knew was. These questions were asked in order to estimate the incidence of actual sanctions suffered by college students for discussing controversial topics.

Measuring personality traits

The 2023 CES surveyed respondents using the [Ten Item Personality Inventory \(TIPI\)](#), which

measures respondents' personalities along the dimensions of the Five-Factor Model of personality. We also measured respondents using the [Left-Wing Authoritarianism scale](#). These measures enable analysis of statistical relationships between reluctance to discuss controversial topics and personality traits.

The CES's limitations

Because the CES data derives from a non-probability sample, caution is warranted when drawing inferences about college students at large. Our sample was demographically and geographically representative, within a reasonable margin, of the college student population at large. But due to opt-in online recruitment, its respondents *may* differ on various unmeasured characteristics that may bias the sample's properties in ways that render it unrepresentative of college students in general. We hope, however, that the CES can illuminate to some degree an aspect of the situation regarding open inquiry on college campuses.

Caution is also advisable in inferring claims about the extent to which 2023 CES respondents—or students more generally—actually do refrain from discussing their honest thoughts, ideas, and questions about controversial topics. People can be reluctant—even very reluctant—to do something, and still nonetheless do it. Thus, CES respondents may report being somewhat or very reluctant to, for example, discuss their honest thoughts, ideas, and questions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, nonetheless, set aside their reluctance and do so. However, one would expect that feeling some degree of reluctance will, at the margin, inhibit discussion of controversial topics.

Availability of data and analysis code

We welcome discussion of the CES data and results. To make this easy, HxA makes the direct survey response data and the analysis code used to write reports about the 2023 CES publicly available. For demographic variables specifically, a small proportion of data (~2% for year in school, <1% for all other variables) were missing due to respondents opting out of those questions, and have been imputed in the public dataset.