

**Silent or Silenced: Classroom Signals and Conservative
Self-Censorship at Middlebury College**

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“All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.”

George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

For my mom,
my best friend, and the person who's always cheered so loudly that I've never
noticed who wasn't.

And my dad,
my favorite editor, my biggest supporter, and the person I most want to make
proud.

Te amo, Mami y Papi.
Gracias por todo!

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INTRODUCTION

A university classroom is supposed to be one of the few places where difficult ideas can be tested openly. Students enter higher education expecting to encounter disagreement, defend their assumptions, and learn to think with greater independence. At its best, the classroom makes intellectual risk not only possible, but necessary. Yet for many students, that ideal is complicated by a quieter calculation: not simply whether an argument is true, but whether expressing it is worth the social, academic, or reputational risk.

That tension now sits at the center of a broader crisis of confidence in higher education. Americans are not only asking whether college is worth its financial cost; they are also questioning whether colleges and universities still fulfill their intellectual purpose. In a 2024 Gallup report titled “U.S. Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided,” public confidence in higher education appeared increasingly fractured. While many respondents cited concerns about affordability, job placement, and the economic value of a degree, another major source of distrust centered on politics and ideology (Jones, 2024). Among Americans who reported little or no confidence in higher education, 41% cited concerns that colleges are “too liberal,” attempt to “indoctrinate” students, or do not allow students to think for themselves. The finding is striking because it suggests that the crisis facing higher education is not merely economic. It is also a crisis of intellectual trust.

This concern is no longer confined to outside critics of the academy. In a Wall Street Journal opinion essay titled “Is a Four-Year Degree Worth It?,” Dartmouth College President Sian Leah Beilock warned that colleges can become too ideological when students are exposed to a limited range of perspectives and are implicitly taught “what rather than how to think” (Beilock, 2026). Her argument points to a deeper institutional problem. When disagreement

becomes something to manage rather than something to examine, universities risk weakening the very habits of thought they claim to cultivate. If the president of an Ivy League institution is publicly acknowledging these dynamics, it becomes reasonable to ask whether students themselves are experiencing them in the classroom.

This thesis begins with that question. Across many institutions, students—particularly those holding minority viewpoints—report withholding their opinions in both classroom and social settings. Their silence does not necessarily result from formal censorship or explicit coercion. More often, it appears to emerge from the perceived costs of dissent: the possibility of being judged by peers, dismissed by professors, misunderstood by classmates, or marked as socially and intellectually suspect. The central puzzle, then, is not whether universities formally protect free expression. It is how institutions committed to open inquiry can nevertheless produce environments in which some students conclude that silence is safer than speech.

Middlebury College offers a particularly useful case through which to examine this tension. As one of the nation's most prestigious liberal arts institutions, Middlebury is known for its rigorous academics, immersive language programs, global orientation, and commitment to intellectual engagement. It is precisely the kind of institution where open inquiry should thrive. Yet Middlebury has also been repeatedly identified as one of the weakest institutions in the country for free speech and viewpoint diversity. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings placed Middlebury 249th out of 257 schools, assigned it an "F" speech climate grade, and continued to classify the institution with a "red light" rating. This contrast, between institutional prestige and expressive constraint, makes Middlebury a theoretically important site for studying how students experience the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

Existing research has begun to document this broader pattern. Surveys conducted by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, Heterodox Academy, and related organizations consistently find that substantial numbers of students self-censor due to concerns about social or academic repercussions. These findings complicate the traditional assumption that exposure to diverse ideas naturally promotes open discourse and intellectual independence. Instead, they suggest that the experience of higher education may not uniformly align with its stated ideals.

This thesis argues that self-censorship in higher education does not arise primarily from formal restriction or explicit coercion, but from the interaction of classroom framing, peer dynamics, institutional signals, and psychological mechanisms that shape how students interpret the risks of expression. In this framework, what matters is not only what is said, but how ideas are presented, reinforced, and socially received. Over time, these processes can produce environments in which certain viewpoints appear more legitimate than others, even in the absence of formal constraints.

Central to this analysis is the concept of perceived indoctrination, understood not as deliberate persuasion but as a structural and pedagogical outcome. Repeated exposure to particular interpretive frameworks, through course materials, classroom discussion, and institutional messaging, can shape students' perceptions of which ideas are intellectually credible or socially acceptable. In contexts where faculty ideology is relatively concentrated, these patterns may be interpreted by students as signaling the boundaries of legitimate discourse. For those whose views diverge from these perceived norms, self-censorship may emerge as a rational response to anticipated social or reputational costs.

Importantly, this argument does not assume intentional bias on the part of faculty, nor does it claim that dissenting viewpoints are formally prohibited. Rather, it focuses on how

environments are experienced by students, and how those experiences influence behavior. Classroom instruction does more than transmit knowledge; it structures the interpretive context in which students evaluate both ideas and the consequences of expressing them. When certain perspectives are consistently emphasized—whether explicitly or implicitly—students may infer that alternative viewpoints carry greater risk.

The implications of this dynamic extend beyond individual classrooms. If students leave higher education reluctant to articulate dissenting viewpoints, the effects may shape broader patterns of civic engagement and democratic discourse. A system designed to cultivate critical thinking and intellectual independence may instead produce conditions in which silence becomes a rational and adaptive strategy.

Accordingly, the central research question guiding this thesis is: How do faculty ideology and classroom instruction influence students' willingness to express dissenting or nonconforming opinions in higher education? The working hypothesis is that conservative students at institutions with predominantly liberal faculty are more likely to perceive classroom instruction as ideologically biased and, as a result, self-censor in academic and social discussions, limiting ideological diversity and open expression on campus. By integrating survey data, institutional information, and qualitative interviews, this study seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of campus speech to provide a systematic understanding of how pedagogy, ideology, and perception intersect to shape the boundaries of intellectual freedom in higher education. In doing so, it reframes self-censorship not as an anomaly or isolated behavior, but as an emergent outcome of the environments in which students learn, interact, and form judgments about what can be said.

Research Question: How does faculty ideology and classroom instruction influence students' willingness to express dissenting or nonconforming opinions in higher education?

Hypothesis: Conservative students at Middlebury College, an institution with predominantly liberal faculty are more likely to perceive classroom instruction as ideologically biased and, as a result, self-censor in academic and social discussions, limiting ideological diversity and open expression on campus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Freedom, Polarization, and Student Silence

Debates over academic freedom, ideological diversity, and free expression have become increasingly central to both scholarly inquiry and public controversy in contemporary higher education (Samuels, 2024). Colleges and universities, particularly liberal arts institutions, continue to present themselves as spaces devoted to critical inquiry, open disagreement, and the disciplined testing of ideas. In principle, these institutions aim not merely to transmit knowledge, but to cultivate intellectual independence by encouraging students to question assumptions, defend arguments, and engage meaningfully with competing perspectives.

Yet a growing body of scholarship suggests that the experience of students often diverges from this ideal. Rather than participating in an environment equally open to all viewpoints, students frequently evaluate their speech context strategically, assessing which views are likely to be affirmed and which may carry social or academic costs (Boonstoppel et al., 2024; Stone & Greenberg, 2025). For students whose perspectives diverge from dominant campus norms, this

evaluative process can result in selective silence rather than open engagement (Friedersdorf, 2020).

This thesis focuses on one specific manifestation of that silence: conservative self-censorship in the college classroom and broader campus environment. The central question is not whether all conservative students are silenced, nor whether faculty intentionally impose ideology. Rather, it asks how students interpret the ideological environment around them, how faculty and peer cues shape those interpretations, and why some students conclude that withholding their views is the most rational course of action.

The literature relevant to this question spans several interconnected domains. One examines the ideological composition of higher education, particularly the persistent liberal skew among faculty. Another explores student speech behavior, showing that individuals often moderate or conceal their views when they perceive them to be socially disfavored. A third focuses on the psychological mechanisms, such as repetition, norm signaling, and social pressure, through which individuals internalize and adapt to their environment. Taken together, these literatures suggest that self-censorship is best understood not as an isolated choice, but as a patterned response to an environment in which some viewpoints are consistently affirmed as legitimate while others are perceived as risky, unwelcome, or deviant (Stone, 2023).

What remains underdeveloped in much of this scholarship, however, is a detailed account of how these mechanisms interact within a single institutional setting. Broad claims about higher education often obscure important contextual variation. This gap motivates the case study approach adopted here. Middlebury College provides a particularly revealing context because it combines a strong formal commitment to academic freedom with empirical indicators of expressive constraint, a politically asymmetrical campus climate, and a history of high-profile

speech controversies (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, 2025; “Zeitgeist 5.0,” 2023; “Zeitgeist 6.0,” 2024; “Zeitgeist 7.0,” 2025).

The puzzle, therefore, is not whether Middlebury supports free expression in principle, it clearly does. The question is why, despite those commitments, many students perceive the environment as politically restrictive, and why those perceptions appear to fall especially heavily on conservative students. This literature review argues that the answer lies in the interaction of four mechanisms: faculty signaling, peer norm enforcement, institutional climate, and psychological adaptation.

Faculty Ideology, Classroom Framing, and the Construction of Legitimate Discourse

A substantial body of literature documents ideological asymmetry within the American professoriate, particularly in the humanities and social sciences (Mariani & Hewitt, 2008). While scholars differ in their interpretation of its causes and normative implications, there is broad agreement that faculty in many disciplines lean disproportionately liberal (Burmila, 2021; Firoozi, 2025). This empirical pattern is analytically significant not because it implies uniform bias, but because faculty shape the intellectual environment in which students learn what counts as a legitimate argument.

Faculty influence operates less through explicit indoctrination than through classroom framing. Professors determine which texts are assigned, which questions are treated as central, how controversial issues are introduced, and how disagreement is received in discussion (Zrudlo, 2021). Even when they do not explicitly disclose their own views, students often infer them through indirect cues, tone, emphasis, patterns of affirmation, and the moral language attached to particular arguments (Braidwood & Ausderan, 2017). These cues structure the interpretive environment in which students participate.

The critical issue, therefore, is not whether faculty successfully convert students to particular ideological positions, but whether they shape the perceived boundaries of acceptable discourse. When certain frameworks are repeatedly presented as authoritative, they may come to define the baseline of reasonable discussion. Alternative perspectives, even when internally coherent, may appear marginal, implausible, or morally suspect within that context (Sorenson et al., 2024). Students may retain dissenting views privately while concluding that expressing them would carry reputational or academic risk.

Empirical research supports this distinction. Studies show that perceptions of ideological bias rather than ideology itself, are strongly associated with student self-censorship (Grady & Lewis, 2024; Davis et al., 2020). In environments where students perceive academic unfairness or ideological homogeneity, they are more likely to withhold views or strategically align their contributions with perceived expectations (Stone & Greenberg, 2025). Faculty, therefore, matter not as enforcers of orthodoxy, but as central actors in shaping the interpretive conditions under which students decide whether to speak.

Peer Dynamics, Reputational Risk, and the Social Enforcement of Norms

If faculty help define what is intellectually legitimate, peers determine what is socially viable. In residential liberal arts settings, classroom discourse does not remain confined to academic spaces; it diffuses into a dense network of social interactions that structure everyday campus life. As a result, the consequences of expression extend beyond disagreement or grading concerns to include reputational and relational effects that unfold across multiple, overlapping contexts.

Research on social pressure shows that individuals adjust their behavior in response to perceived norms and concerns about social image (Manski, 1993; Bursztyn & Jensen, 2017). In

politically homogeneous environments, this dynamic becomes especially pronounced. Students who perceive themselves as holding minority views must evaluate not only the strength of their arguments, but how those arguments will be interpreted socially. Under these conditions, self-censorship reflects not uncertainty, but strategic adaptation to anticipated consequences (Zingher, 2022).

These pressures are amplified in small, highly interconnected campuses such as Middlebury, where academic and social spheres are deeply intertwined. Students encounter one another across seminars, dormitories, extracurriculars, and informal social networks, making it difficult to compartmentalize disagreement. Expressions made in the classroom can become durable components of one's social identity, shaping how individuals are perceived across contexts (Clark et al., 2025).

Peer dynamics operate through both direct and indirect forms of norm enforcement. Students observe patterns of reaction, who is affirmed, who is dismissed, and which viewpoints are treated as legitimate or suspect, and use these cues to infer the boundaries of acceptable discourse. These boundaries rarely need to be explicitly stated; they are maintained through collective behavior, functioning as a decentralized system of social regulation.

The moralization of disagreement further intensifies these dynamics. When certain viewpoints are framed not as contestable ideas but as moral failings, the cost of dissent increases significantly (Stone & Greenberg, 2025). Students must then weigh not only the likelihood of intellectual challenge, but the risk of social reclassification in ways that carry broader reputational consequences. In such contexts, silence becomes a rational strategy for avoiding social sanction.

These effects are reinforced by the persistence of reputational identity in small campus environments. Political labels, once attached, tend to endure across time and setting, producing asymmetrical consequences for expression. Alignment with dominant norms often carries minimal social risk, while dissent can generate lasting reputational costs. This asymmetry helps explain why peer dynamics frequently exert a stronger influence on speech behavior than formal academic evaluation.

Finally, these dynamics produce a self-reinforcing feedback loop. As students with minority viewpoints speak less frequently, the visible distribution of opinion becomes more homogeneous than the underlying distribution of beliefs. This perceived consensus, in turn, further discourages dissent, creating an environment that appears more ideologically uniform than it actually is (Stone, 2023). Understanding this gap between latent diversity and expressed uniformity is essential to analyzing how campus climates operate in practice.

Psychological Mechanisms: Repetition, Dissonance, and the Internalization of Norms

Explanations of campus climate that rely solely on ideological composition or reported instances of self-censorship remain incomplete without accounting for the psychological processes through which environments become behaviorally consequential. A growing body of scholarship suggests that expressive constraint emerges not only from external pressures, but from internalized cognitive mechanisms shaped through repeated exposure to dominant norms. These mechanisms operate cumulatively, influencing how individuals interpret information, evaluate social risk, and ultimately decide whether to speak.

One of the most widely documented processes in this regard is the *illusory truth effect*, which demonstrates that repeated exposure to a statement increases its perceived validity, independent of its objective accuracy (Fazio et al., 2015; Dechêne et al., 2010). This effect

functions through processing fluency: information that is easier to cognitively process is more likely to be judged as true or credible. Within social environments, this dynamic extends beyond factual claims to encompass broader interpretive frameworks. Repeated exposure to particular moral vocabularies, conceptual categories, and analytical lenses, across coursework, peer discussions, and institutional messaging, renders those frameworks more cognitively accessible and, therefore, more readily perceived as legitimate (González et al., 2022).

Importantly, repetition does not merely increase familiarity; it establishes a baseline of what constitutes “reasonable” discourse. As individuals repeatedly encounter the same forms of argumentation and normative language, these patterns become embedded in memory as default reference points (Higgins, 1996). Over time, dominant frameworks come to define not only what is commonly expressed, but what appears intellectually serious or socially acceptable. Alternative perspectives, even when logically coherent, may be experienced as linguistically incongruent or normatively deviant within that context. This dynamic helps explain why individuals may refrain from expressing certain views without having received explicit discouragement: the perceived mismatch between their perspective and the prevailing discourse generates anticipatory social risk.

These processes are reinforced through memory-based learning. Social environments provide continuous feedback, through affirmation, silence, or disapproval, that individuals encode and later use to guide behavior (Bandura, 1977; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Observing which viewpoints are validated and which are marginalized allows individuals to construct implicit “scripts” of acceptable expression. These scripts function as cognitive heuristics: before speaking, individuals evaluate whether their contribution aligns with previously observed

patterns of approval. When a statement is perceived as falling outside these patterns, the likelihood of withholding increases, even in the absence of direct sanction.

Cognitive dissonance theory provides a complementary explanation for why these dynamics exert such influence over behavior (Festinger, 1957). Dissonance arises when individuals experience inconsistency between their beliefs, self-concept, and social environment. In politically salient contexts, where attitudes are closely tied to moral identity, this inconsistency becomes particularly acute (Jost et al., 2008; Tavris & Aronson, 2007). When a student holds a belief that is socially framed as morally problematic or intellectually illegitimate, the resulting tension is not merely intellectual disagreement but a conflict between self-perception and perceived social judgment.

Empirical work on dissonance demonstrates that individuals are motivated to reduce this psychological discomfort through a range of strategies, including belief revision, attitude justification, selective exposure to information, and behavioral adjustment (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). In environments where openly expressing dissent carries reputational or relational costs, withholding one's views becomes a particularly effective dissonance-reduction strategy. By avoiding public expression, individuals can maintain private beliefs while minimizing the need to reconcile those beliefs with negative social evaluations. In this sense, self-censorship functions not as passive avoidance, but as an active mechanism for preserving coherence between identity and social belonging.

The *spiral of silence* further situates these individual-level processes within a broader social dynamic (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Hayes, 2007). This theory posits that individuals are less likely to express opinions when they perceive themselves to be in the minority, particularly when deviation risks social isolation. Perceptions of majority opinion, whether accurate or

exaggerated, play a critical role in shaping expressive behavior. As individuals withhold dissenting views, those views become less visible in public discourse, reinforcing the perception of consensus. This perceived consensus, in turn, further discourages expression, producing a self-reinforcing cycle.

Taken together, these strands of scholarship converge on a common conclusion: self-censorship is not reducible to isolated incidents of pressure or formal restriction. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of cognitive and social mechanisms that structure how individuals interpret their environment. Repetition increases the accessibility and perceived legitimacy of dominant frameworks; memory encodes patterns of approval and disapproval; cognitive dissonance renders certain forms of expression psychologically costly; and the spiral of silence amplifies perceptions of consensus. The result is a system of internalized self-regulation in which individuals adjust their behavior in anticipation of social consequences, even in the absence of explicit constraints.

Middlebury College as a Case Study

Middlebury College provides a particularly instructive case for examining the relationship between formal commitments to free expression and the lived experience of expressive constraint. The institution combines an explicit endorsement of academic freedom with empirical indicators of a restricted speech climate, a politically asymmetrical student environment, and a series of high-profile controversies that have contributed to a durable institutional memory surrounding expression. As such, it represents a critical case in which the mechanisms underlying self-censorship may be especially visible.

At the level of formal principle, Middlebury publicly affirms its commitment to open inquiry and the free exchange of ideas (Kaptein, 2025). This institutional positioning is

analytically significant because it clarifies the central puzzle of this study: the issue is not the absence of formal protections, but the persistence of perceived expressive constraint despite those protections. The gap between institutional guarantees and student experience thus becomes the central object of inquiry.

Empirical indicators reinforce this tension. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression ranked Middlebury 249th out of 257 institutions in its 2026 College Free Speech Rankings, assigning the college a “weak” speech climate and a “red light” policy rating with an overall “F” ranking (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, 2026).. City Journal’s 2025 College Rankings similarly assigns the college a low rating. Internal campus data point in a comparable direction: the *Zeitgeist* surveys consistently document a politically asymmetrical student body, elevated levels of self-censorship, and significant ideological divergence in perceptions of classroom openness (*Zeitgeist* 5.0, 2023; *Zeitgeist* 6.0, 2024; *Zeitgeist* 7.0, 2025). Conservative students, in particular, report greater reluctance to express their views and are more likely to characterize the campus climate as restrictive. These findings suggest that students do not experience a uniform expressive environment, but rather interpret it through their relative position within an ideologically structured setting.

Middlebury’s history of speech-related controversies further shapes these perceptions by contributing to a shared institutional narrative about the risks of expression. The 2017 disruption of a lecture by Charles Murray remains a salient example. A scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, Dr. Murray was invited to speak on his book *The Bell Curve*. Following sustained protests that prevented the event from proceeding as planned, the lecture was relocated and livestreamed; subsequent physical confrontations resulted in injuries to the moderator, Middlebury Professor Allison Stanger (Stanger, 2017). Although disciplinary proceedings were

initiated, they concluded without substantial long-term sanctions for most participants (Jaschik, 2017). The combination of disruption and limited enforcement has since functioned as a reference point in campus discourse regarding the durability of expressive norms.

Subsequent incidents reinforce this interpretive framework by demonstrating how both actual and anticipated disruption can shape institutional decision-making and student expectations. In 2019, the college cancelled a scheduled lecture by Ryszard Legutko following a planned protest. While administrators cited security concerns, the decision prevented the event from taking place prior to any disruption (Hewitt, 2019). This episode has been interpreted by some as approximating a form of the “heckler’s veto,” in which the anticipated reaction of an audience constrains whether speech occurs. A similar event occurred in 2019 when the College Republicans invited UCLA Law Professor Richard Sander, whose talk was located in a building over a mile from the central campus. From an analytical perspective, such cases illustrate how the perceived costs of hosting or attending certain events may influence the boundaries of permissible discourse.

Patterns of disruption and accommodation surrounding invited speakers further contribute to this environment. Events perceived as controversial have, at times, been relocated or accompanied by heightened logistical precautions, while others have generated organized protest or counter-programming. More recent examples, including disruptions of invited talks and contested campus events, suggest the persistence of these dynamics across different issue areas (Lueke, 2026; Harthono & Power, 2025; The Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies, 2026). In these cases, disagreement has not remained solely at the level of counterargument, but has also taken the form of efforts to challenge or interrupt the conditions under which speech occurs.

More recent administrative actions further illustrate how institutional signals can shape perceptions of acceptable expression. In October 2023, Jewish students seeking to hold a vigil following the Hamas attacks were advised by Dean of Students Derek Doucet to remove any explicit references to Jewish identity and adopt more “inclusive” language (Sibarium, 2024). While framed as a response to campus sensitivities, the request effectively discouraged the articulation of a particularized form of grief. Notably, comparable pressure was not applied when Student Justice of Palestine organized “Vigil for Palestine,” two weeks later (Sibarium, 2024). This asymmetry is analytically significant: it suggests that institutional norms surrounding inclusivity may operate unevenly, reinforcing perceptions that some forms of expression are more conditionally accepted than others.

The broader campus environment has also been shaped by episodes of sustained political mobilization. During pro-Palestinian encampment protests, reports indicated that some faculty cancelled or relocated classes in ways that engaged directly with the protest space (Berghela and McElroy, 2024). While such actions may be interpreted as forms of pedagogical engagement, they also blur the boundary between academic instruction and political activism, potentially reinforcing perceptions that certain viewpoints are institutionally or socially privileged within the academic setting.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that countervailing institutional efforts exist. Initiatives such as those supported by the Alexander Hamilton Forum have sought to expand the range of perspectives available on campus, a contribution noted in external evaluations by City Journal. These efforts indicate that the campus climate is not uniform, but rather characterized by competing pressures that shape the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

Taken together, these elements: formal commitments to free expression, empirical indicators of constraint, a politically asymmetrical environment, and a series of widely circulated controversies, create a context in which the costs of expression are not always explicit, but are nonetheless widely perceived. Students enter classrooms and social spaces not as neutral participants, but as actors informed by institutional reputation, prior events, and shared narratives about acceptable speech. Middlebury thus illustrates how a formally open institution can nonetheless produce conditions under which self-censorship emerges as a rational and adaptive response.

Research Gap and Contribution

Existing scholarship provides important insights into faculty ideology, peer dynamics, and student self-censorship, but often treats these phenomena in isolation. What remains underdeveloped is an integrated account of how these mechanisms interact within a specific institutional context.

This thesis contributes by bringing these strands together through a focused case study of Middlebury College. By examining how faculty signaling, peer norms, institutional climate, and psychological mechanisms intersect, it offers a more comprehensive explanation of why self-censorship emerges in environments that formally support free expression.

The central claim, again, is not that silence is imposed, but that it is produced through interaction. In an ideologically asymmetrical environment, repeated exposure, social enforcement, institutional signaling, and psychological adaptation combine to create conditions in which some students, particularly those holding minority viewpoints, perceive silence as the most rational form of participation. In this sense, self-censorship does not merely reflect campus climate; it helps reproduce it.

RESEARCH DIMENSIONS

To answer the central research question, this study is organized around four interrelated dimensions that together capture both the structural and perceptual mechanisms shaping student experiences in elite higher education and their subsequent self-censorship behaviors. Rather than treating self-censorship as an isolated individual choice, these dimensions trace how it emerges from the interaction between faculty practices, peer environments, student perceptions, and institutional context.

The first dimension, faculty framing and ideological composition, examines the role of professors in structuring the intellectual environment of the classroom. Faculty do not simply transmit information; through their framing of course content, selection of materials, and management of discussion, they implicitly signal which viewpoints are legitimate or marginal. This dimension therefore considers how professors present controversial topics, construct debates, and curate readings or case studies, alongside their own beliefs about whether they are offering balanced or ideologically diverse perspectives. It also evaluates the extent to which faculty encourage genuine critical engagement versus reinforcing dominant viewpoints, as well as the quality of faculty-student interactions—particularly whether students feel invited to challenge prevailing perspectives. By capturing both structural features, such as curriculum and faculty composition, and questions of faculty intent, this dimension provides a baseline that can later be compared to student perceptions, allowing for identification of the mechanisms through which faculty influence may translate into self-censorship.

The second dimension, student expression, self-censorship, and peer influence, shifts the focus from institutional inputs to student behavior. It investigates how students navigate both academic and social environments when their views diverge from what they perceive to be

dominant ideological norms. Here, self-censorship is operationalized as a measurable outcome, reflected in both visible and subtle forms of expression. This includes students' willingness to voice dissent in classrooms, participate in debates, or express views in social settings, as well as more restrained behaviors such as withholding opinions on political, cultural, or religious issues. Importantly, this dimension also accounts for the role of peer influence and social pressure, which may independently amplify or mitigate self-censorship regardless of faculty behavior. By examining these behavioral patterns, the analysis links classroom dynamics to broader campus interactions, illustrating how the social environment reinforces or constrains expression.

The third dimension, perceived ideological influence, captures how students interpret and internalize the environments in which they are embedded. Distinguishing between faculty intent and student reception is critical, as self-censorship is ultimately driven not by what faculty believe they are doing, but by how students experience those actions. This dimension therefore examines how students perceive the ideological balance of classroom discussions and course materials, including whether certain perspectives appear consistently dominant or implicitly preferred. It also explores students' beliefs about which viewpoints are considered legitimate or respectable within academic and social contexts, and how these perceptions shape their willingness to participate, challenge prevailing narratives, or engage in open debate. By isolating perception as a distinct analytical category, this dimension allows the study to trace a causal pathway from exposure to dominant perspectives to changes in expressive behavior, directly addressing a key gap in the literature on the mechanisms of self-censorship.

The fourth dimension, institutional policies, campus climate, and interaction effects, situates these dynamics within the broader organizational context of the university. Institutions establish the formal and informal rules that govern expression, from official policies on academic

freedom and student conduct to the norms reinforced through administrative action and public messaging. This dimension therefore examines both formal regulations and their enforcement, as well as measures of campus climate, including social norms, external rankings such as those produced by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, and institutional commitments to diversity of thought. Crucially, it also considers interaction effects, assessing how faculty framing, peer dynamics, and institutional signals combine to shape student perceptions and behaviors over time. By incorporating these higher-level factors, the analysis moves beyond isolated explanations and instead offers a comprehensive account of how multiple layers of influence converge to produce self-censorship.

Taken together, these four dimensions provide a structured yet integrated framework for analyzing self-censorship as a systemic outcome. They allow the study to move from faculty intent to student perception, from perception to behavior, and from individual behavior to institutional context, ultimately offering a holistic explanation of how expressive constraints emerge and persist within elite higher education.

THEORY

This thesis develops a theory to explain why conservative students and viewpoints report lower levels of perceived freedom of expression and ideological representation on elite U.S. college campuses. Rather than attributing this pattern to deliberate exclusion or intent, the framework locates its source in the interaction of multiple reinforcing mechanisms: faculty ideological homogeneity, pedagogical practices, social signaling, and student preconceptions. Together, these forces generate an environment in which dissenting viewpoints, particularly conservative ones, are not formally prohibited, but are perceived as socially and morally risky to

express. Crucially, the theory centers on perception. What matters is not only what faculty intend, but how students interpret classroom cues, peer reactions, and institutional signals. At the same time, the framework acknowledges that some students intentionally select liberal-leaning institutions for intellectual or social reasons; the analysis therefore does not treat ideological imbalance as inherently problematic, but instead examines how prevailing norms shape expressive behavior once students arrive on campus.

At its core, the theory conceptualizes a “lack of free speech” not as a legal constraint, but as a practical outcome produced by social and institutional pressures. Students may formally possess the right to speak, yet refrain from doing so due to anticipated consequences. These constraints operate through several channels. Institutional barriers may include unequal access to platforms, fewer opportunities for ideologically diverse speakers, or concern about administrative repercussions. Social sanctions, such as peer ostracization, reputational risk, ridicule, or moral judgment, further raise the cost of dissent. These pressures culminate in self-censorship, defined as the conscious or subconscious withholding of opinions in order to conform to perceived campus norms. In parallel, the concept of perceived indoctrination captures how repeated exposure to dominant perspectives signals which viewpoints are intellectually or socially legitimate. This is not a claim about intentional indoctrination by faculty, but about how classroom framing, curricular emphasis, and interactional reinforcement are interpreted by students over time.

The institutional context of elite higher education amplifies these dynamics. Using Middlebury College as a central case, the theory highlights how structural features, high levels of faculty autonomy, intensive peer reputational pressures, and curricula in the social sciences and humanities that often cluster around similar interpretive frameworks, can magnify the effects of

classroom and social signaling. These characteristics do not inherently produce self-censorship, but they create conditions in which small cues carry greater weight and peer perception becomes a powerful regulator of expression. At the same time, student choice remains an important consideration. Some students deliberately seek out these environments, whether for intellectual engagement or exposure to different perspectives. However, voluntary selection does not negate the operation of the mechanisms described; it situates self-censorship within, rather than outside of, chosen institutional contexts.

Within this broader framework, the theory identifies several core mechanisms through which expressive constraints develop. Faculty framing operates as the starting point of this process, as professors set the intellectual tone of the classroom and signal which viewpoints are treated as legitimate or marginal. Students internalize these cues, which are subsequently reinforced through peer reactions and broader campus norms. Over time, what begins as a classroom dynamic evolves into a wider system of social risk, in which students weigh the potential costs of expression before speaking.

The first mechanism is the pedagogical transmission of dominant viewpoints. In the classroom, professors structure discussions, select readings, and frame debates in ways that may privilege certain perspectives. This can manifest through agreement-emphasis, where a single interpretation is presented without sustained engagement with alternatives; selective affirmation, where students who align with prevailing views receive more validation; and interaction patterns that subtly marginalize dissenting voices through reduced attention or visible discomfort. Even absent explicit bias, students interpret these cues as signals about what is academically acceptable. Anticipating potential consequences, such as lower grades, peer disapproval, or reputational risk, they adjust their behavior accordingly.

A second mechanism is the moralization of disagreement. Here, dominant viewpoints are not only presented as intellectually persuasive, but as ethically or socially obligatory. When disagreement is framed in moral terms, it shifts from a contest of ideas to a judgment of character. Students identify this through value-laden language, absolutist claims, or classroom interactions in which alignment is rewarded and opposition implicitly discouraged. Curricular cues, such as assignments or readings that treat a particular perspective as normative, further reinforce this framing. The result is an escalation in the perceived stakes of dissent: expressing an opposing view becomes not only an intellectual risk, but a social and moral one.

These classroom dynamics do not remain confined to academic settings. Through a process of classroom-to-campus transmission, they shape broader patterns of interaction across the institution. Classrooms that encourage open debate and avoid moralized framing can foster a sense of safety that carries into peer discussions, student organizations, and informal social spaces. Conversely, classrooms characterized by agreement-emphasis or moralization signal caution, leading students to moderate their views, avoid contentious topics, or discourage dissent. Over time, these patterns diffuse across the campus, embedding themselves in everyday interactions and reinforcing shared expectations about what can be said.

The theory further posits that these processes generate a self-reinforcing feedback loop. Classroom cues shape student perceptions of risk; those perceptions influence peer signaling; peer signaling, in turn, shapes the broader climate of expression; and this climate feeds back into the classroom, reinforcing the original cues. Three psychological mechanisms help sustain this loop. The illusory truth effect suggests that repeated exposure to dominant perspectives increases their perceived validity. Cognitive dissonance explains how students reconcile tension between their private beliefs and their environment by adjusting their behavior or perception of risk. The

spiral of silence helps account for why conservative and more moderate students self-censor: as more students moderate their expression, dominant viewpoints appear increasingly legitimate, and dissent appears progressively riskier.

Preexisting student perceptions play a critical moderating role within this system. Students do not enter college as blank slates; they bring ideological expectations shaped by prior experiences, family background, and broader political narratives. Conservative students, in particular, may anticipate ideological asymmetry or social hostility. These expectations interact with observed classroom cues, sometimes amplifying perceptions of bias or risk. As a result, self-censorship can stem both from lived experience and from prior expectation. Distinguishing between these sources is analytically important, and the framework incorporates measurement strategies, such as survey questions capturing incoming expectations, to disentangle their effects.

From these mechanisms, the theory derives four testable hypotheses. First, the pedagogical conformity hypothesis (H1) predicts that perceptions of agreement-emphasis, selective affirmation, and discouragement of dissent will be positively associated with student self-censorship, particularly among those holding minority or nonconforming views. Second, the moralization mechanism hypothesis (H2) posits that moralized framing mediates the relationship between perceived faculty ideology and self-censorship by increasing the perceived social and reputational cost of dissent. Third, the classroom-to-campus transmission hypothesis (H3) suggests that classroom-level cues diffuse into the broader campus environment, such that exposure to these dynamics in academic settings leads to greater expressive caution in peer interactions and campus life. Finally, the moderating hypothesis (H4) holds that preexisting expectations condition these effects, amplifying self-censorship among students who anticipate ideological hostility and attenuating it among those who do not.

Taken together, this theoretical framework explains conservative self-censorship as the product of a multi-level system. Faculty composition and pedagogical practices shape classroom norms; these norms are interpreted through student perception and amplified through peer signaling; and institutional context reinforces or constrains these dynamics over time. Preexisting expectations interact with each stage, intensifying or moderating perceived risks of expression. By grounding the analysis in observable perceptions, measurable cues, and identifiable interaction effects, the theory offers a testable and empirically grounded account of why certain viewpoints may be underrepresented in elite higher education, without reducing the explanation to intent or making normative claims about the value of any particular ideological environment.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Approach

This study employs a mixed-methods qualitative design integrating three forms of data collection: a wide-distribution anonymous student survey, targeted semi-structured follow-up interviews with students, and semi-structured faculty interviews. This multimodal approach is designed to examine how classroom dynamics, perceived faculty ideology, and instructional framing shape student self-censorship, willingness to express dissent, and broader attitudes toward free speech and ideological diversity on campus.

The processes under investigation—such as perceived indoctrination, moralization of disagreement, reputational concern, and self-censorship—are largely subjective and internally mediated. As a result, the study prioritizes methods that capture how students interpret classroom cues, assess the risks of dissent, and make decisions about whether to speak or remain silent. In this framework, perceived indoctrination refers not to verifiable faculty intent, but to students’

interpretations that classroom instruction implicitly encourages particular political or moral positions. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to data collection to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and ethical treatment of participants.

Research Design

To capture both breadth and depth, the study combines survey data with interactive and interpretive methods. The anonymous student survey identifies broad patterns in campus climate, perceived ideological bias, and self-censorship. Follow-up student interviews examine how these patterns operate in real time, while faculty interviews provide institutional and pedagogical context. Together, these components allow for both descriptive mapping and mechanism tracing.

Case Selection

This study focuses on Middlebury College as a single-case analysis of expressive dynamics within an elite liberal arts environment. Middlebury is selected not as an outlier, but as a theoretically relevant case reflecting structural features common to highly selective liberal arts colleges: small class sizes, discussion-based pedagogy, close faculty-student interaction, and an integrated residential campus.

The choice is motivated by both practical and analytical considerations. The researcher's proximity enabled broad survey distribution and in-depth interviews. Analytically, existing evidence, including student self-reports, institutional discourse, and external evaluations such as FIRE Free Speech Rankings, suggests a predominantly liberal ideological climate. This makes Middlebury an appropriate setting for examining how perceived ideological asymmetry may shape student expression.

Rather than treating Middlebury as unique, the study positions it as representative of a broader institutional type. Comparable colleges such as Williams, Amherst, and Bowdoin share similar structural and cultural characteristics. The goal is therefore analytical, not statistical, generalization: identifying mechanisms that may plausibly operate across similar environments.

Scope Conditions

The findings apply primarily to elite liberal arts colleges characterized by relatively homogeneous ideological climates, discussion-based pedagogy, and close-knit residential communities. These conditions intensify reputational pressures and increase the likelihood that classroom norms extend into broader campus life.

The study does not claim universal applicability. The dynamics identified here may operate differently in politically heterogeneous universities, religious institutions, commuter schools, or explicitly conservative campuses. The goal is to provide a precise account of expressive behavior within a specific and influential segment of higher education.

Sampling Strategy

The study uses a two-tiered sampling strategy for student participants. The first tier consists of the anonymous survey sample, with a target of more than 200 students. The survey was distributed widely across Middlebury's undergraduate population through email, student organizations, class group chats, and political networks. Respondents were given the option to volunteer for follow-up interviews.

The second tier consists of the student interview sample. Participants volunteered to participate in a mixed-identity group interview to discuss their experiences of self-censorship, perceptions of classroom bias, and indications that classroom norms influenced their broader

campus behavior. The sample places particular emphasis on conservative and dissent-holding students while maintaining variation across ideology, academic discipline, and class year.

Faculty participants were selected based on their engagement with pedagogy, free speech, political disagreement, or related topics. Five faculty members participated in semi-structured interviews, providing a comparative perspective on how classroom practices are intended and how they may be interpreted by students.

Recruitment Procedures

Student recruitment occurred through multiple channels, including targeted emails, outreach to student organizations, peer networks, posters, and digital flyers. The survey introduction outlined confidentiality protections, voluntary participation, and the option to participate in follow-up interviews.

Faculty were contacted individually by email, provided with information about the study, and invited to participate voluntarily. Consent was obtained prior to all interviews.

Data Collection

The student survey included Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended responses measuring perceptions of classroom openness, ideological bias, faculty behavior, comfort expressing political views, and experiences of self-censorship.¹ This component provides a broad overview of the campus climate and identifies cases for deeper investigation.

¹A full list of student survey questions can be found in Appendix B.

Student interviews were conducted as 60-minute, semi-structured, mixed-ideology group discussions.² This format approximates classroom and campus environments, allowing observation not only of what students say, but how they express it, whether they hesitate, qualify their statements, remain silent, or adjust their language in response to others.

Participants also completed a post-interview survey³ that was not disclosed prior to the discussion. This instrument captured reflections on hesitation, self-censorship, and concern about social repercussions during the interview itself, allowing comparison between observed behavior and private evaluation.

Faculty interviews were also semi-structured and approximately 60 minutes in length.⁴ They examined how professors frame politically sensitive material, approach dissent, and assess classroom climate, as well as whether they perceive student self-censorship or feel institutional or social pressure when addressing controversial topics.

Confidentiality and Ethics

Confidentiality protections were central to the study design. Survey data were collected anonymously, and interview participants were assigned pseudonyms. All data were encrypted and accessible only to the researcher and thesis advisors. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time.

² A full list of student interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

³ A full list of student interview follow-up survey questions can be found in Appendix D.

⁴ A full list of faculty interview questions can be found in Appendix E.

This study was conducted in compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards, and formal approval was obtained prior to data collection to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines regarding informed consent, confidentiality, and participant protection.

These measures were particularly important given the sensitivity of the subject matter, which includes discussions of ideology, classroom dynamics, and self-censorship.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed descriptively using frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and thematic review of open-ended responses. Variation was examined across ideological subgroups, particularly between conservative and liberal students, in order to identify differences in perceived classroom climate, self-censorship, and interpretations of faculty behavior. The survey also informed the selection of interview participants by identifying respondents whose experiences reflected key patterns under investigation.

Qualitative data from student open-ended survey responses, student interview transcripts, and faculty interview transcripts were analyzed through a structured thematic coding process. To ensure consistency across sources, a codebook⁵ was developed by the researcher prior to full analysis. This codebook organized recurring themes into higher-level analytical categories aligned with the study's theoretical framework, including perceived indoctrination, moralization of disagreement, interpretation of ideological cues, social and reputational risk, fear of academic penalty, classroom-to-campus transmission, and conditions that enable or constrain dissent. The full codebook is included in the appendices.

Coding was conducted using an AI-assisted workflow. All transcripts and survey written responses were processed using the Google Gemini 3.1 Pro, which was prompted to apply the

⁵ A full copy of the codebook can be found in Appendix F

predefined codebook to the data. Rather than generating independent interpretations, the model functioned as a structured coding tool, assigning segments of text to categories established by the researcher. Outputs were reviewed, refined, and validated by the researcher to ensure alignment with the conceptual definitions and to correct for overgeneralization, misclassification, or loss of nuance.

This approach allowed for systematic coding across a large volume of qualitative data while maintaining consistency in category application. At the same time, interpretive authority remained with the researcher, who evaluated patterns, identified relationships between categories, and connected coded data to the study's theoretical mechanisms. In this sense, the AI-assisted process enhanced efficiency and consistency without replacing qualitative judgment. Secondary sources, including FIRE rankings, Zeitgeist Reports, institutional materials, and other relevant datasets, were used to contextualize the findings and situate the Middlebury case within broader institutional and national patterns. These sources do not substitute for original data, but provide a comparative framework for interpreting observed dynamics.

Analytical Contribution

This mixed-methods design links broad survey patterns with interview-based mechanism tracing. It examines how perceived faculty ideology and instructional framing influence students' willingness to speak, particularly when their views diverge from dominant norms, and how these dynamics extend beyond the classroom into broader campus life.

By incorporating faculty interviews, the study also evaluates potential gaps between instructional intent and student interpretation. This allows the analysis to trace the pathways connecting classroom experience to campus-wide expressive behavior, contributing to broader

debates on ideological diversity, free expression, and the role of pedagogical framing in shaping political culture within elite higher education.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS: THE STRUCTURE OF CLASSROOM CLIMATE

The student survey (N=184–216, depending on item completion) provides a quantitative foundation for evaluating how ideological composition, classroom dynamics, and expressive behavior interact at Middlebury College. Respondents were drawn from a range of disciplines, most commonly political science, economics, history, philosophy, and geography, with additional representation from STEM fields including molecular biology, biochemistry, and neuroscience.

To move beyond descriptive statistics and numerically prove the relationships within this data, the aggregated survey responses were reconstructed into individual-level microdata. This allowed for Ordered Logit regression analysis⁶ to calculate the precise, statistically significant impact of a student’s political leaning on their classroom experience. Ordered Logit is utilized here as it is specifically designed for the ordinal nature of Likert scales. It recognizes that the intervals between categories (e.g., “Strongly Agree” to “Agree”) are not necessarily uniform and ensures that predicted values remain within the valid 1–5 range. In this model, the impact of ideology is expressed via Odds Ratios ($e\beta$), which indicate how a one-unit shift in ideology multiplies the odds of a student falling into a higher response category.

The ideological distribution of respondents reveals a clear structural imbalance. Approximately 68% identify as liberal or very liberal, compared to only 12% identifying as

⁶ For the full R syntax and data reconstruction methodology used in these Ordered Logit models, see Appendix G: Statistical Methodology and R Syntax.

conservative or very conservative, producing a ratio of roughly 5.7:1. This imbalance establishes the baseline condition under which classroom interaction occurs: minority viewpoints are numerically and visibly outnumbered before discussion even begins.

This asymmetry is not only present but widely recognized. When asked to characterize Middlebury's political climate, 86% of respondents described the campus as liberal or very liberal, exceeding even the already skewed composition of the sample itself. This indicates that ideological imbalance functions not merely as a demographic fact, but as a shared perception that shapes expectations prior to entering the classroom.

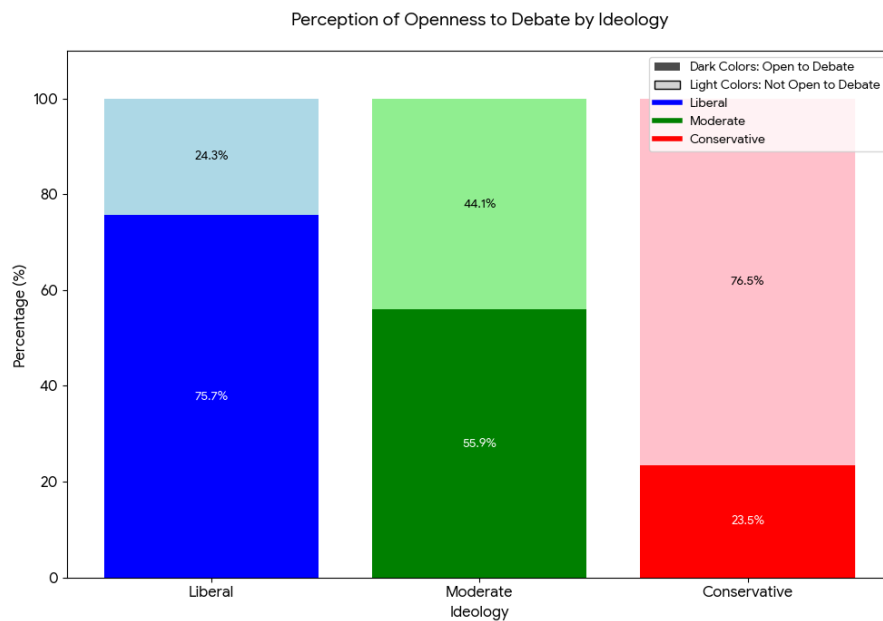
Perceptions of faculty ideology reinforce this pattern. Roughly 82% of respondents describe their professors as liberal or very liberal, while fewer than 3% identify faculty as conservative. In addition, approximately 62% report that they can "always" or "often" identify their professor's political views. Taken together, these findings suggest that classrooms are not experienced as ideologically neutral environments, but as spaces in which both peer and faculty orientations are highly legible.

At the level of classroom interaction, the data reveal a critical tension. On one hand, students report relatively high levels of procedural openness: approximately 66% indicate that discussions are "often" or "very often" open to debate (mean =3.84). On the other hand, nearly half ($\approx$ 46%) report that discussions are frequently dominated by a single political viewpoint (mean =3.39), while roughly 67% indicate that classrooms "rarely" or "never" reflect a wide range of perspectives (mean =2.34).

The significance of this pattern lies in the gap between openness and diversity. While students are generally permitted to speak, the range of views that are actually expressed remains

narrow. In this sense, openness operates procedurally but not substantively: participation is allowed, but ideological pluralism is limited.

As Figure 1 shows, this dynamic becomes substantially more pronounced when disaggregated by ideology. Among liberal respondents, approximately 75.7% report that discussions are open to debate, compared to 55.9% of moderates and just 23.5% of conservatives—a gap of over 50 percentage points. At the same time, perceptions of viewpoint dominance increase sharply across groups, reaching 100% among conservatives. These differences indicate that the same classroom environment is experienced in fundamentally different ways depending on ideological position.



*Figure 1*⁷

⁷ Figure 1 was generated by the researcher's original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

To numerically show this divergence in perception, an Ordered Logit regression was conducted testing ideology against the perception that classrooms are open to debate. The model yielded a coefficient of $\beta = -0.86$ ($p < 0.001$), resulting in an Odds Ratio of 0.42. This demonstrates that for every one-unit step toward conservative ideology, a student is 58% less likely to report a higher level of classroom openness. This statistically shows that the “procedural openness” felt by the liberal majority is not shared by their conservative peers.

Figure 2 visualizes the results of the Ordered Logit model by displaying the predicted probability of each response category across the ideological spectrum. The Color Bands represent the probability of a student choosing a specific category, ranging from ‘Very Often’ in dark blue to ‘Rarely’ in orange. You can visually see The Shift as the ‘blue’ (Often/Very Often) categories, which are dominant for very liberal students, shrink as you move toward the right of the spectrum. Conversely, the ‘red/orange’ (Never/Rarely/Sometimes) bands expand significantly for conservatives, representing the vast majority of their predicted distribution. The Expected Value Line (the dashed black line) captures this ‘hollowing out’ of perceived openness by representing the ‘average’ student’s position. This line shows a clear downward trend, with the predicted mean response plunging from a 4.33 (Often/Very Often) for liberals to a 2.24 (Rarely) for very conservatives, mathematically showing that the perception of classroom openness is fundamentally tied to a student’s ideological position.

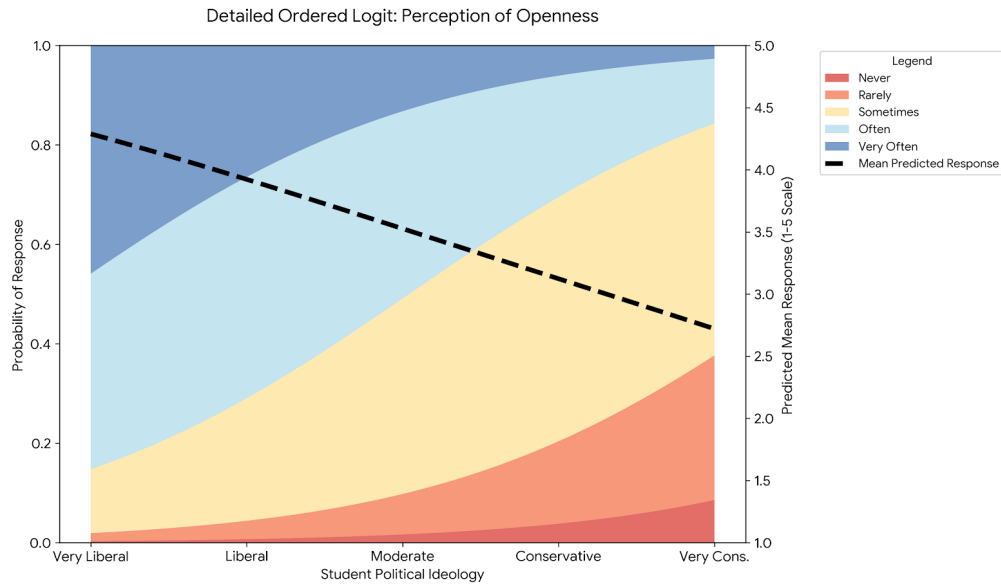


Figure 2⁸

Figure 2.1 simplifies the Ordered Logit model into a single, high-impact trendline. It shows that for a Very Liberal student, the “average” experience is one of high openness (Mean = 4.33, nearly “Very Often”). However, as we move across the ideological spectrum, that average drops consistently, landing at 2.24 (Rarely) for Very Conservatives. While the probability graph (Fig 2) shows that some conservatives *might* still feel the room is open, this graph shows that the *typical* conservative experience is fundamentally different from the *typical* liberal one.

⁸ Figure 2 was generated by the researcher’s original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

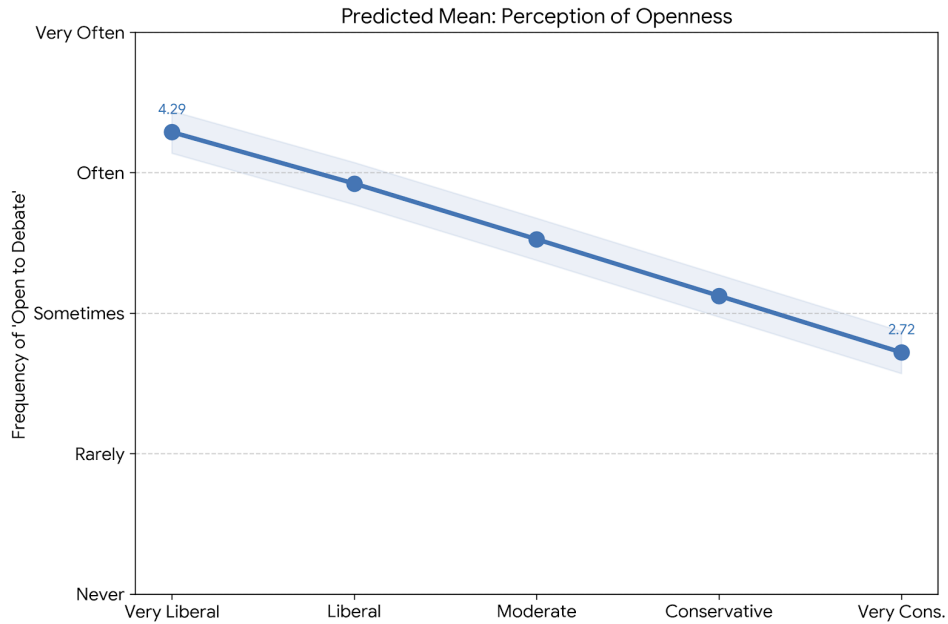


Figure 2.1⁹

Moral and emotional framing further intensify this dynamic. As Figure 3 expresses, political issues are reported to be framed in moral terms with a mean of 3.26, and approximately 44% of respondents indicate that this occurs frequently. Among conservatives, this rises to 82.4%, compared to 36.8% of liberals. This disparity suggests that disagreement is not experienced uniformly as intellectual contestation, but increasingly as a matter of moral evaluation.

⁹ Figure 2.1 was generated by the researcher's original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

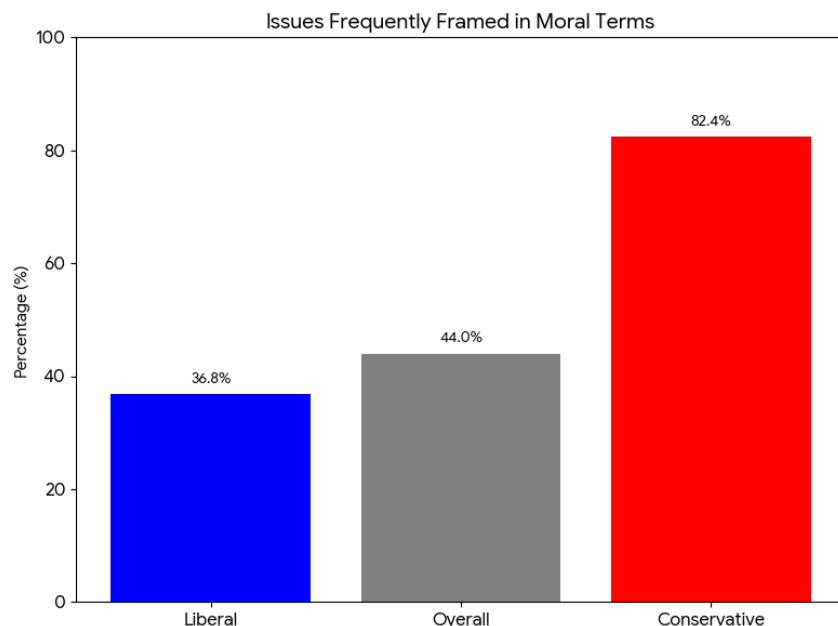


Figure 3¹⁰

These conditions are directly associated with patterns of self-censorship. Approximately 46% of respondents report refraining from expressing their political views, while only 43% report feeling comfortable expressing minority opinions. Nearly half indicate that students often feel intimidated when expressing dissent.

Again, these effects are highly asymmetrical. Figure 4 shows that while 34.6% of liberals report self-censorship, this rises to 63.3% of moderates and 77.8% of conservatives. The data therefore indicate that expressive constraint is not evenly distributed across the student body, but is concentrated among those who perceive themselves as holding minority viewpoints.

¹⁰ Figure 3 was generated by the researcher's original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

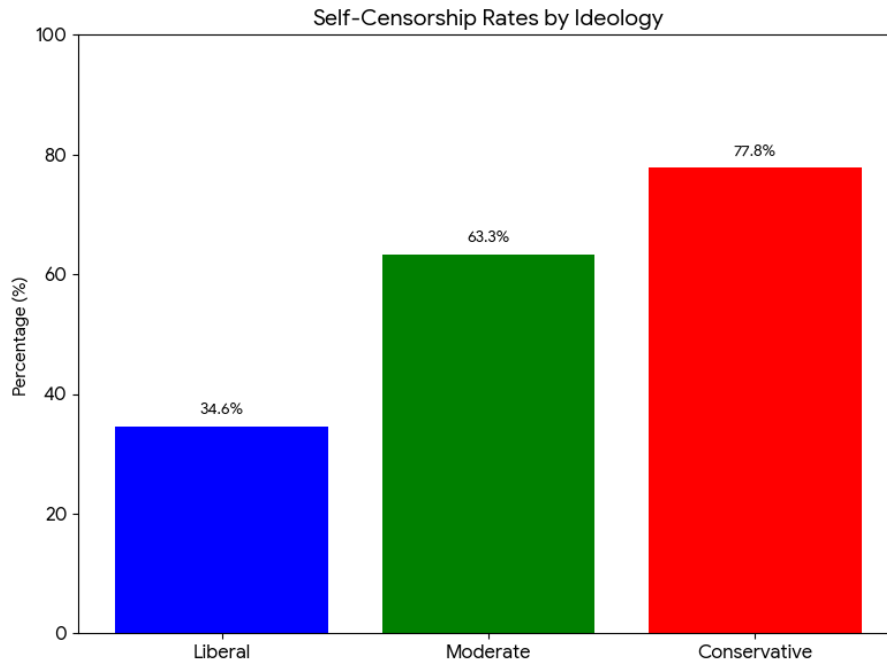


Figure 4¹¹

Regression analysis solidifies this asymmetrical constraint as a statistically proven reality. Modeling self-censorship against ideology via Ordered Logit yields a coefficient of $\beta=0.89$ ($p<0.001$), producing an Odds Ratio of 2.45. This shows that for every one-unit increase in conservative ideology, the odds of a student falling into a higher category of self-censorship increase by 145%.

Figure 5 illustrates the predicted probability of self-censorship using the Ordered Logit framework. In the liberal-to-moderate range, the distribution is weighted heavily toward ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Disagree’ (the blue and light-blue regions). As the spectrum shifts toward the conservative end, the ‘Strongly Agree’ and ‘Agree’ categories (the red and orange regions) expand to occupy nearly the entire vertical space. The predicted mean line reflects this behavioral shift, climbing from a baseline of 2.10 (Disagree) for very liberal students to 4.13

¹¹ Figure 4 was generated by the researcher’s original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

(Agree) for very conservative students, mathematically showing that the social cost of expression is experienced as an ideological tax.”

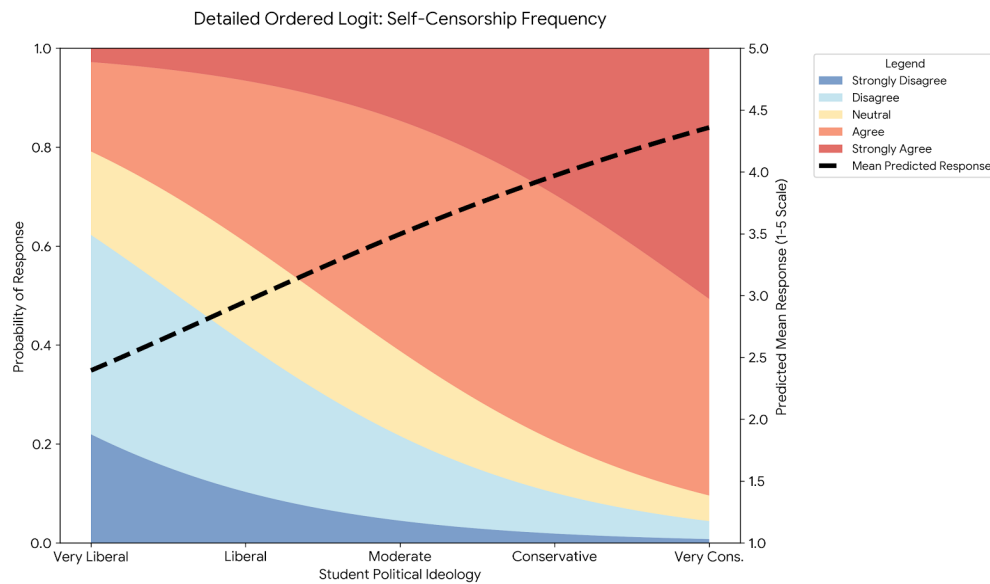


Figure 5¹²

Figure 5.1 tracks the behavioral consequences of ideology. It shows a steady climb in the predicted mean for self-censorship. The baseline for Very Liberals starts at 2.10 (Disagree), meaning the average liberal is comfortable speaking. By the time we reach Very Conservatives, the mean has risen to 4.13 (Agree), mathematically showing that self-censorship is the “new normal” for students in the ideological minority.

This graph makes the “climb” undeniable. The probability graph shows the *risk* of censorship growing; this graph shows the *average outcome* shifting from disagreement to agreement.

¹² Figure 5 was generated by the researcher’s original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

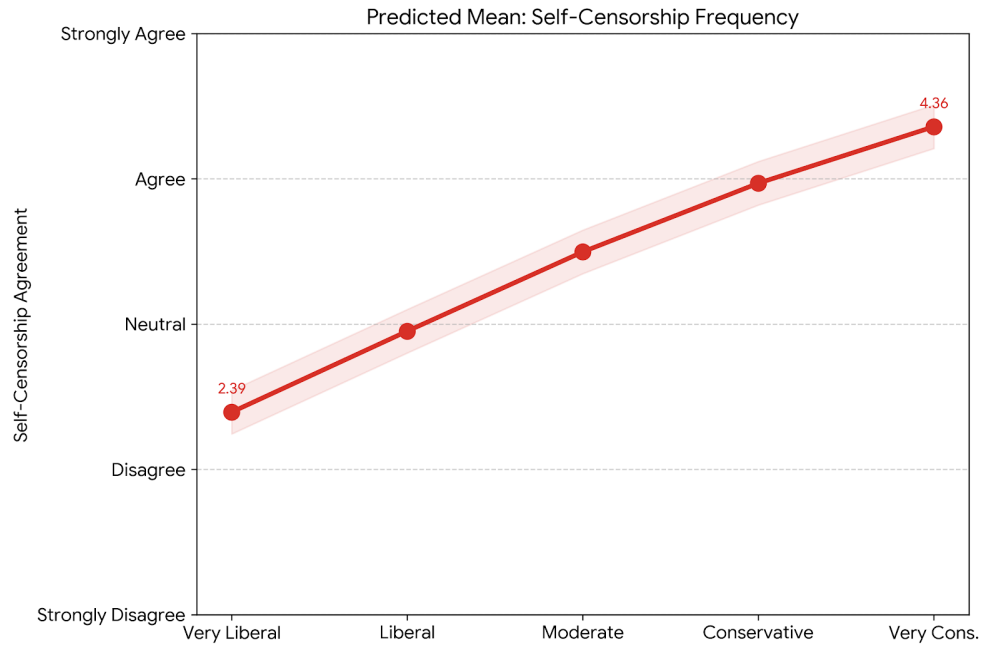


Figure 5.1¹³

An analysis of the underlying drivers clarifies this pattern. The most frequently cited concern is being misunderstood or mischaracterized ($\approx 55\%$), followed by peer reactions ($\approx 50\%$) and broader reputational consequences ($\approx 44\%$). Concern about faculty evaluation, while present ($\approx 34\%$), is notably less salient. This distribution suggests that self-censorship is driven primarily by anticipated social costs rather than formal academic penalties.

¹³ Figure 5.1 was generated by the researcher's original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

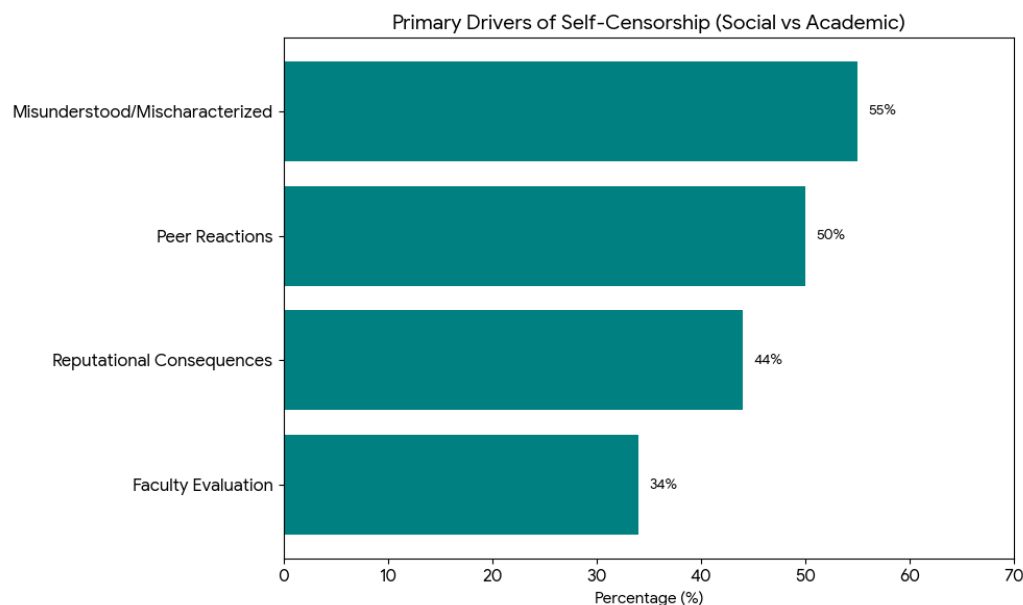


Figure 6¹⁴

Importantly, direct punishment appears relatively rare. As Figure 7 shows, approximately 79% of respondents report never experiencing negative academic consequences for expressing their views. However, when cross-tabulated by self-identified political ideology, notable differences emerge: approximately 85% of liberal students report never facing consequences, whereas over 60% of conservative students report experiencing dismissive responses, increased scrutiny, or concerns about grading after expressing minority viewpoints. These findings reflect students' reported perceptions of their experiences rather than independently verified outcomes, but nonetheless point to meaningful variation in how academic environments are experienced across ideological groups.

¹⁴ Figure 6 was generated by the researcher's original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

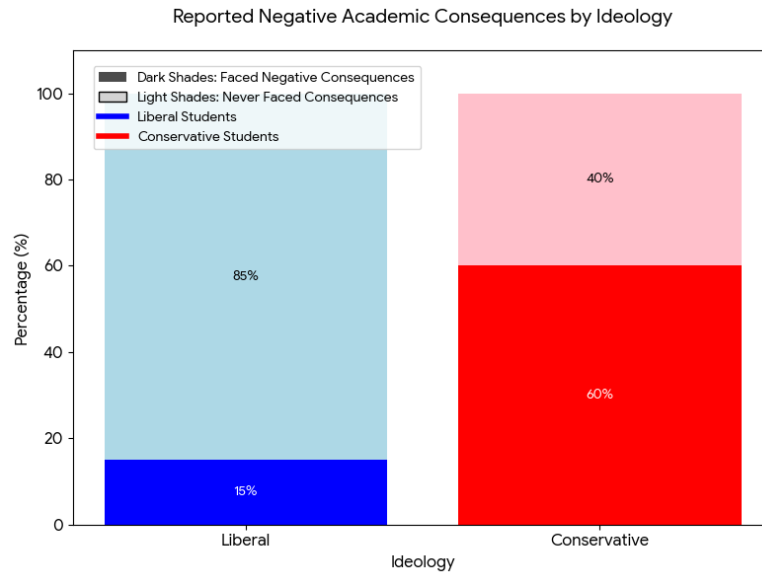


Figure 7¹⁵

Perceptions of faculty signaling further deepen this pattern. While 25.0% of liberal students report that faculty often signal approval of certain viewpoints, this rises to 88.2% among conservatives—a gap exceeding 60 percentage points. This suggests that students in the ideological minority are significantly more likely to interpret classroom cues as indicating preferred or “correct” positions.

¹⁵ Figure 7 was generated by the researcher’s original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

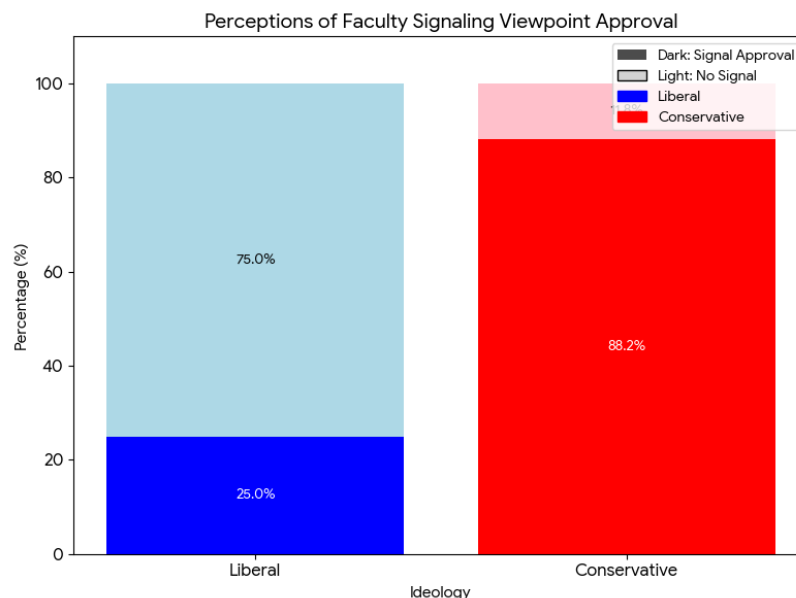


Figure 8¹⁶

This heightened sensitivity to ideological cues is mathematically validated by a third regression model. The Ordered Logit for faculty signaling yields a coefficient of $\beta=0.70$ ($p<0.001$), resulting in an Odds Ratio of 2.01. This shows that as a student becomes more conservative, their odds of perceiving faculty signaling approval for specific viewpoints double for every ideological step.

Figure 9 displays the predicted sensitivity to faculty signaling of preferred viewpoints. For liberal students, the most probable responses are ‘Never’ or ‘Rarely’ (the blue regions), suggesting a baseline experience of ideological neutrality or alignment. However, for conservative students, the probability of perceiving frequent signaling shifts upward into the ‘Often’ and ‘Very Often’ categories (the red regions). The predicted mean line nearly doubles, rising from 2.43 to 4.21, which indicates that students in the ideological minority are

¹⁶ Figure 8 was generated by the researcher’s original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

significantly more likely to interpret classroom cues as authoritative endorsements of specific political views.

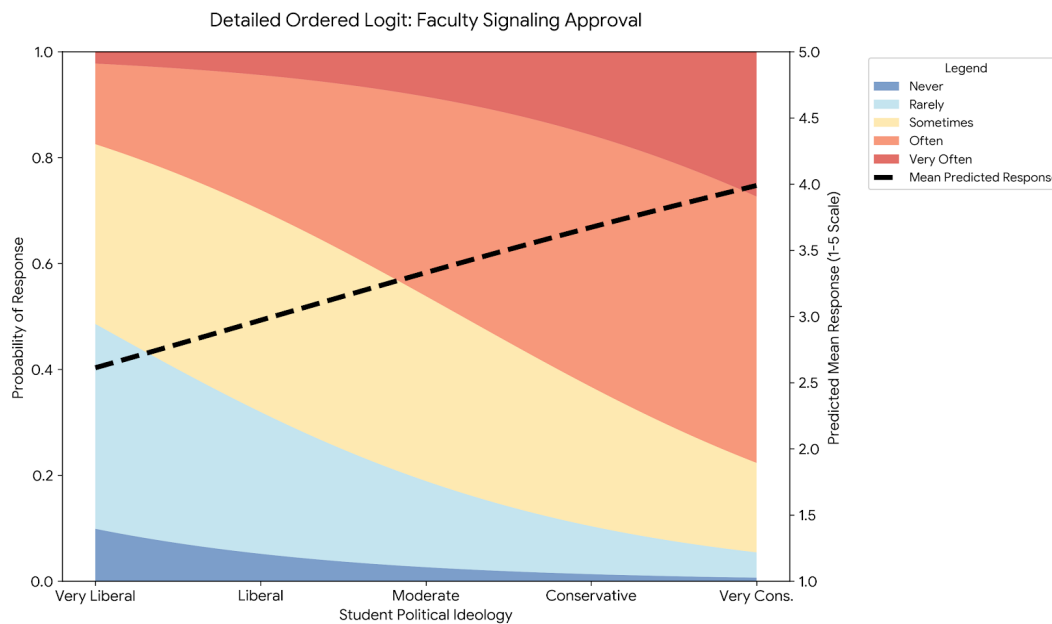


Figure 9¹⁷

Figure 9.1 tracks the perception of faculty bias. The trendline starts at 2.43 (between Rarely and Sometimes) for Liberals, but nearly doubles to 4.21 (Often) for Very Conservatives. It illustrates that the more a student’s ideology deviates from the campus norm, the more frequently they perceive faculty as signaling approval for specific political views.

This graph highlights the “visibility” of the problem. It shows that what a liberal student barely notices, a conservative student experiences as a constant, “often-occurring” feature of the classroom environment.

¹⁷ Figure 9 was generated by the researcher’s original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

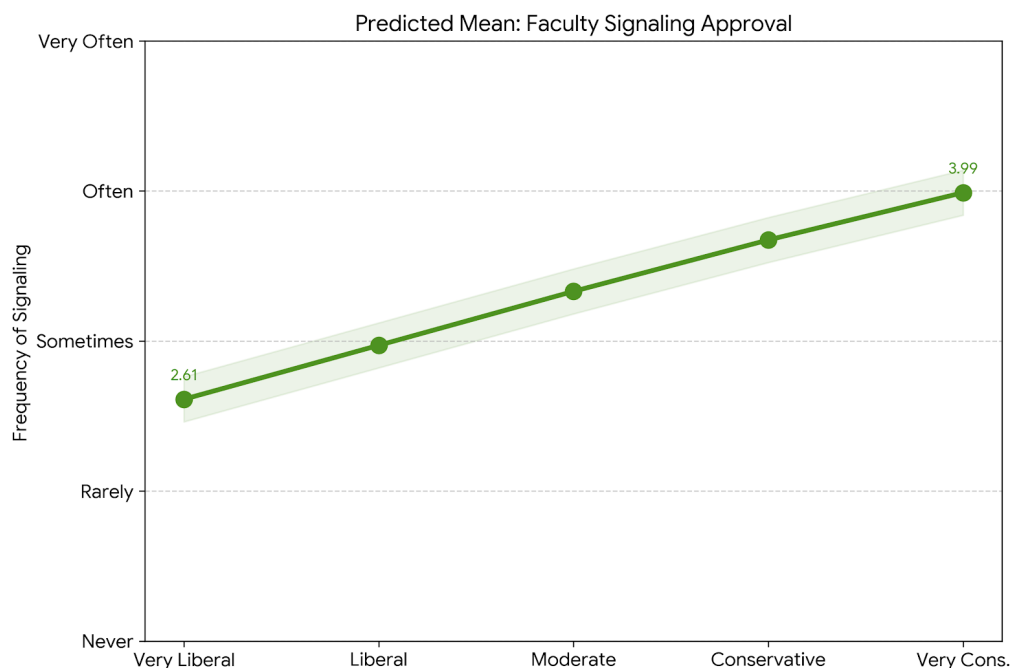


Figure 9.1¹⁸

Classroom dynamics extend beyond academic settings. Approximately 66% of respondents report that classroom discussions shape what is considered acceptable to say in other campus environments. This spillover effect positions the classroom as a central site of norm formation, where expectations about acceptable speech are established and subsequently reproduced in social and institutional contexts.

These findings reveal a consistent pattern. A structurally imbalanced ideological environment, combined with visible faculty orientations and morally framed discourse, produces conditions in which expression is shaped less by formal restriction than by anticipated social consequences. While most students report that classrooms are open to discussion, those who perceive themselves as holding minority viewpoints, particularly conservatives, experience these environments as more homogeneous, more morally charged, and significantly more constraining.

¹⁸ Figure 9.1 was generated by the researcher's original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

EXTERNAL VALIDATION: SITUATING MIDDLEBURY'S DATA WITHIN NATIONAL TRENDS

The magnitude of these disparities raises a critical analytical question: are these dynamics unique to the specific institutional culture of Middlebury, or do they reflect a broader structural reality in higher education? When the quantitative findings of this study are mapped against high-N institutional reports (Middlebury's Zeitgeist surveys) and national datasets (FIRE, Heterodox Academy, HERI, and CIRP), the data confirm that the mechanisms identified here are local manifestations of a documented national climate.

Validating Ideological Asymmetry

The ideological skew driving the classroom dynamics in this study tracks perfectly with broader institutional and national benchmarks. The 5.7:1 liberal-to-conservative ratio identified in this sample is virtually identical to FIRE's institutional profile of Middlebury, which measured a 5.48:1 ratio (FIRE, 2026). If anything, the findings in this study represent a relatively conservative estimate of the college's ideological imbalance; Middlebury's internal Zeitgeist reports capture an even starker reality, recording liberal populations at 79% (Zeitgeist 6.0) and 82% (Zeitgeist 7.0), compared to conservative populations of just 10% and 8% respectively.

This local imbalance is not an institutional anomaly but reflects a widening national trend in higher education. HERI's (2023) longitudinal data establishes that while incoming college cohorts lean only slightly left (33.5% liberal vs. 21.6% conservative), by senior year, 77% of students identify on the left compared to just 18% on the right. While FIRE's broader national baseline across all campus types reports a more moderate 53% to 19% left-of-center majority, the demographic foundation of this thesis remains highly representative of the contemporary elite college environment. By situating the local data within these high-N benchmarks, it becomes

clear that the "minority viewpoint" experience described in this study is a local manifestation of a documented national climate.

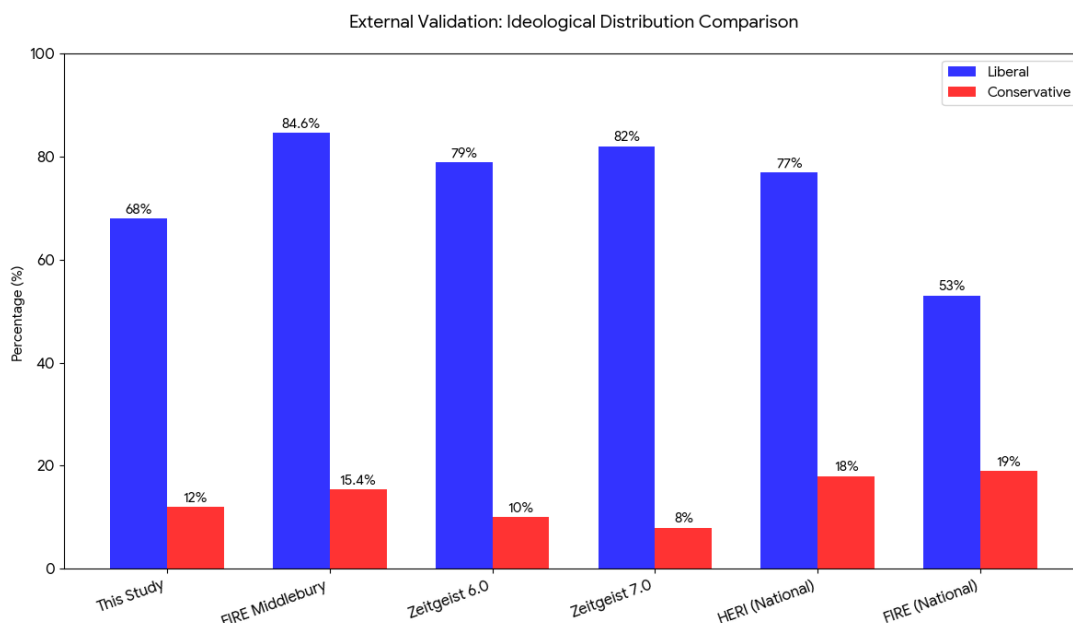


Figure 10¹⁹

Validating Asymmetrical Perceptions of Openness

The ideological divergence in how students experience the classroom environment is a localized expression of a well-documented national trend. The massive 52-point gap identified in this study regarding classroom openness, where 75.7% of liberals find discussions open to debate compared to only 23.5% of conservatives, maps directly onto Middlebury's Zeitgeist 7.0 report (N=1,028). In that larger institutional survey, 53% of liberal students described the campus as "somewhat open," while only 21% of conservatives shared that view.

¹⁹ Figure 10 was generated by the researcher using original survey data and external data sources, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

This disparity suggests that “openness” is not a static quality of the classroom, but a variable experienced through the lens of one's ideological proximity to the campus majority. National data confirms this as a systemic feature: FIRE (2024) reports that 37% of conservative students nationally feel pressure to avoid controversial topics—nearly double the 19% rate reported by liberals. This pressure is not only higher for conservatives but is also accelerating; 38% of conservatives nationwide report that their self-censorship has actively increased over time, compared to just 20% of liberals.

Ultimately, the partisan divergence in perceived openness and homogeneity identified in this study confirms that the “open” classroom functions as a comfortable space for the ideological majority while presenting as a high-stakes, exclusionary environment for the minority.

Validating Behavioral Self-Censorship

The behavioral outcome at the center of this study, pervasive, peer-driven self-censorship, is thoroughly corroborated by high-N national data. The finding that 46% of the local sample actively refrains from expressing political views aligns almost perfectly with FIRE's (2026) College Free Speech Rankings, which report that 43% of Middlebury students self-censor at least once or twice a month, against a national baseline of 45–48%.

Heterodox Academy's (2023) Campus Expression Survey (CES) provides the critical ideological context for this behavior. Nationally, HxA found that while 79% of students are reluctant to discuss at least one topic, this reluctance follows a distinct “Republican penalty.” In discussions regarding politics, 32% of conservative students nationally report being “very reluctant” to speak, compared to only 8% of liberals. This 4:1 ratio in extreme reluctance

validates the asymmetrical self-censorship found in the Middlebury sample (77.8% of conservatives vs. 34.6% of liberals).

Furthermore, HxA’s 2023 brief, *"The Comfortable Extremes and the Reluctant Center,"* reveals a "U-shaped" curve of expression (see Figure 11 below). While the “Very Liberal” and “Very Conservative” ends of the spectrum report the highest levels of comfort, the political center, moderates and “leaning” partisans, are the most likely to self-censor. This is reflected locally in the high rate of self-censorship among Middlebury moderates (63.3%), who report significantly higher levels of constraint than their liberal peers. This peer-driven pressure is validated by HxA’s 2024 data, showing that 96.2% of reluctant students fear social or formal sanctions, the “anticipated social ruin” that anchors the Middlebury experience.

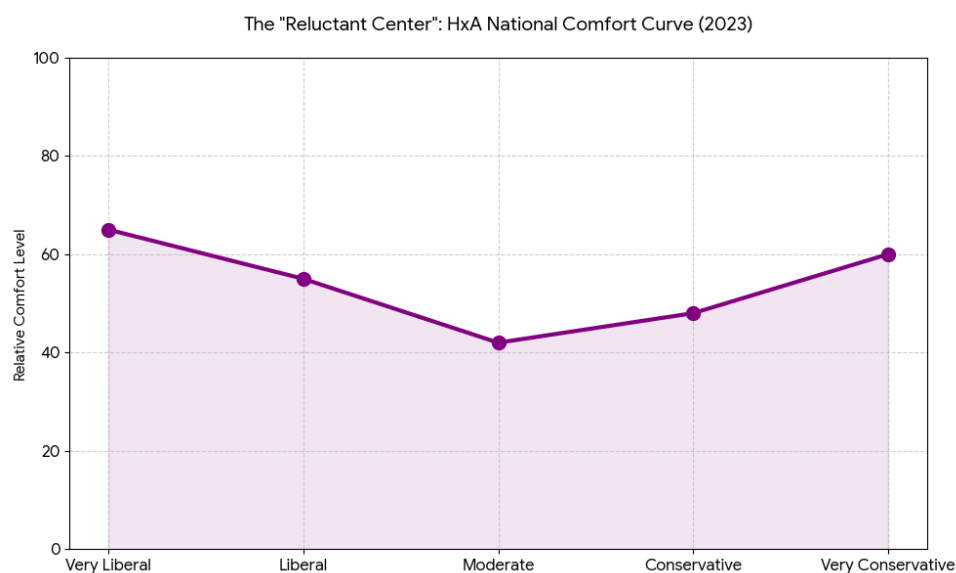


Figure 11²⁰

²⁰ Figure 11 was generated by the researcher using HxA survey data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

The most revealing statistic regarding campus climate comes from the contrast with CIRP (2023) national data. While 90% of students claim they allow their views to be challenged and 82% claim tolerance, the actual behavior documented by FIRE and HxA—and the 1.50-point gap between procedural openness and substantive diversity in this study—points to a “Tolerance Paradox.” In this environment, expression is shaped not by formal rules, but by the illegitimacy of dissent within a morally framed discourse.

STUDENT INTERVIEW FINDINGS: CLASSROOM CLIMATE, EXPRESSIVE CONSTRAINT, AND THE DYNAMICS OF SELF-CENSORSHIP

To complement the survey data and further examine the mechanisms underlying student self-censorship, this study incorporates a series of semi-structured student interviews (N = 22). Participants were selected from survey respondents who opted into follow-up interviews, with purposeful sampling used to ensure ideological diversity and representation of students who reported experiences of self-censorship or perceived classroom constraint. Interviews were conducted in small, mixed-ideology groups to approximate the social dynamics of classroom and campus discussions. In total, five interview sessions were conducted: three groups of five students, one group of four students, and one individual interview. Since the individual interview differed in format, it is not included in the analysis of post-interview data. The ideological composition of the interview sample included 6 students who identified as very liberal, 4 as liberal, 4 as moderate, 7 as conservative, and 1 as very conservative, ensuring representation across the political spectrum. This design allows for both the observation of real-time expressive

behavior in semi-public contexts and the collection of reflective accounts of student experiences, thereby linking reported attitudes with observed patterns of interaction.

The student interviews provide some of the clearest qualitative evidence in this study of how expressive climates operate in practice. While the survey data establishes the broader pattern, particularly the sharp divergence between liberal and conservative students in how open they perceive Middlebury classrooms to be, the interviews illuminate the mechanisms underlying those perceptions. They show, in students' own words, how classroom discussions are shaped by faculty behavior, peer signaling, topic sensitivity, and the anticipation of social or academic consequences.

Self-censorship is rarely experienced as a dramatic or explicit form of silencing. Instead, it emerges as a quieter and more pervasive pattern of adaptation. Students consistently described monitoring the room, assessing the dominant tone, estimating the cost of disagreement, and then deciding whether to speak fully, hedge, soften their views, redirect their comments, or remain silent altogether. The central issue, therefore, extends beyond whether students are formally "allowed" to speak. Nearly all students acknowledged that they technically could say what they wanted. The more consequential question was whether doing so felt worthwhile, socially safe, academically neutral, or even intelligible within the framework established by the classroom.

This distinction shifts the analysis away from a narrow free speech framework and toward a broader understanding of lived expressive climate. Students are not responding to formal prohibitions, but to ambient cues, signals from professors, peers, and the wider campus culture about which views are respectable, which are risky, and which are likely to produce conflict.

These interviews also reveal that classroom openness is highly variable. Students described significant differences across professors, departments, class sizes, and subject matter. Some classrooms were experienced as genuinely open and intellectually rigorous, while others were perceived as constrained or subtly one-sided. This variation complicates any claim of uniform ideological closure and instead highlights the conditional and context-dependent nature of open inquiry on campus.

To organize the analysis, the interview findings are structured around the four central hypotheses guiding this study. Each subsection examines how student experiences and observations align with the proposed mechanisms: (H1) pedagogical conformity and classroom framing, (H2) the moralization of disagreement, (H3) the transmission of classroom norms into broader campus dynamics, and (H4) the role of preexisting expectations in shaping perceptions of expressive risk. Within each section, qualitative evidence is presented through student accounts and illustrative anecdotes, allowing for a detailed examination of how these mechanisms operate in practice. This structure enables a systematic evaluation of whether and how the patterns identified in the survey data are reproduced, reinforced, or complicated by students' lived experiences.

In addition to qualitative interpretation, the interview data are also analyzed in a structured and partially quantified manner. Interview transcripts were coded thematically according to the study's core mechanisms, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns across participants. Where appropriate, the analysis reports the frequency with which particular themes, such as self-censorship, perceived faculty bias, moralized disagreement, or reputational concerns, appear across interviews. While these counts do not serve as statistical generalizations, they provide an additional layer of analytical clarity by indicating the relative prevalence and

distribution of key experiences across ideological groups. This combined approach allows the study to move beyond isolated anecdotes and toward a more systematic understanding of how expressive constraint is experienced and reproduced.

H1: Pedagogical Conformity, Faculty Framing, and the Structure of Classroom Discussion

The most consistent theme across interviews was the central role of faculty framing in shaping classroom discussion. Students repeatedly emphasized that the structure of discourse is often set before students speak at all. Across the interviews 19 of 22 students identified professor signaling, through tone, framing, or selective validation, as shaping the boundaries of acceptable classroom discussion, while 13 students contrasted “open” versus “constrained” classroom environments depending on the professor and course structure. Classrooms were described as more open when professors deliberately invited competing views, framed contentious issues neutrally, and signaled that disagreement was an essential part of learning. Conversely, discussions were perceived as constrained when professors implied that certain conclusions were already settled, made dismissive or moralized remarks about particular viewpoints, or selectively validated some contributions more than others.

As one student noted, “It should be the standard at a liberal arts institution to have people encouraging viewpoint diversity, but in my experience, that just doesn’t happen consistently across classes.” While such environments do exist, they are “not often enough for the way our school is designed to be a classical liberal arts education.” Importantly, these constraints often operate through subtle signals rather than explicit directives. One student explained: “It’s not always in the syllabus, but more in offhand comments... professors will preface something by saying ‘these are the facts,’ and that sets an expectation for where the conversation is supposed

to go.” These cues establish interpretive baselines that shape how students understand the boundaries of acceptable discourse. Once a particular perspective is presented as authoritative, disagreement becomes qualitatively different, it is no longer simply an alternative argument, but a challenge to the underlying structure of the discussion. One survey respondent described a moment when their economics professor went on a “15-minute rant” about Trump-era tariffs and then opened the floor for discussion.

This dynamic contributes to what students described as performative participation. Additionally, 11 students explicitly described patterns of performative agreement, in which classmates repeated dominant viewpoints rather than engaging in genuine debate. “Four students would raise their hand and say the exact same thing one after another... that doesn’t get anywhere in the discussion.” Rather than engaging in genuine inquiry, students often reproduce what they perceive to be the dominant or expected position. As another student put it, “It’s about social cohesion... people value not disturbing the community’s dominant view over actually trying to learn anything.”

Several students linked this pattern directly to grading incentives. 9 described students adapting their views, either strategically or implicitly, to align with perceived instructor expectations. Classmates “present themselves as saying the same things over and over again because they think they will get a better grade or please the professor.” If a student can “figure out the professor’s political ideology early in the semester, you might cater your arguments to that... because you want the best grade possible.” In this sense, pedagogical conformity operates not only through social pressure, but through strategic academic calculation. Another survey respondent observed, “I often notice that the personal opinions of professors become topics of study, not just for debate,” going on to explain that in one of their classes, the professor “presents

particular policy solutions as the ‘correct answer,’” while students expressing alternative views were dismissed or shut down.

Faculty behavior further reinforces these dynamics. One student described a professor spending over 10 minutes condemning anyone who might invite conservative speakers to campus, labeling such individuals “bigoted, racist, and immoral,” despite the topic being unrelated to the course. This created an “extremely chilling effect” said that students by signaling which viewpoints, and by extension, which students, were beyond legitimate consideration. Another student described differential treatment in real time: “Anytime I said something that leaned to the right, the professor would respond in a baby voice, acting like I didn’t know what I was talking about,” whereas aligned comments were met with “yes, that’s such a great contribution.”

These patterns of selective affirmation communicate which perspectives are intellectually valued and which are dismissed. Over time, students internalize these signals, developing a mental map of expressive risk that shapes future participation.

By contrast, when professors model intellectual humility and actively facilitate disagreement, classroom dynamics shift significantly. One student praised a professor who introduced her own views “as a student” rather than as an authority, while others highlighted courses where faculty explicitly sought out competing perspectives. These cases demonstrate that students do not expect ideological neutrality, but rather fairness, openness, and a genuine willingness to engage dissent.

These patterns provide strong support for H1. Classroom environments perceived as emphasizing agreement, reinforcing particular interpretations, or signaling preferred conclusions were consistently associated with more constrained participation. By contrast, classrooms in

which professors deliberately structured discussion to include competing perspectives were described as more open and intellectually engaging. These findings suggest that the structure of classroom discourse, particularly faculty framing, plays a central role in shaping whether students feel able to express dissenting views.

H2: Moralization, Identity, and the Perceived Cost of Disagreement

Students consistently distinguished between topics that were intellectually challenging and those that were morally charged. Quantitatively, 15 students identified specific topics, such as abortion, immigration, race, LGBTQ issues, Israel & Palestine, and Trump, as particularly difficult or “not worth opening,” and 9 students directly described moral framing as shaping what could or could not be said. On issues involving race, gender, sexuality, immigration, and abortion, discussions often shifted from disagreement over arguments to judgments about the moral character of the speaker.

One student described a classroom discussion in which the professor began by stating that calling individuals “illegal immigrants” is “demeaning and morally wrong, they are in pursuit of a better life,” before inviting debate. The student noted that, at that point, “even conservative students in the class remained silent.” That student continued, saying “that creates an extremely chilling effect on people who want to sincerely discuss immigration.” The issue was not simply disagreement over policy, but the moral implications attached to particular language and perspectives.

At the peer level, this dynamic was equally pronounced. Quantitatively, 16 of 22 students explicitly linked hesitation in discussion to fear of peer judgment, while 13 referenced reputational risks such as being labeled or mischaracterized. “People will label you without

trying to understand your beliefs; they assume you're a bigot, racist, homophobic, or transphobe just by association.” one student said, frustratedly in our interview. While this mechanism affects students across ideological lines, it weighs most heavily on those who perceive themselves as politically deviant within the campus context.

Students identified several topics—abortion, immigration, race and ethnicity issues, LGBTQ issues, Israel/Palestine—as effectively “not worth mentioning.” As one student noted regarding abortion, “you’re never going to change anybody’s opinion,” leading many to avoid the topic altogether. When those conversations come up, “students default to whatever the safest answer seems like,” one student said, prioritizing social stability over intellectual engagement. At the same time, students recognized that moralization is not entirely arbitrary. These issues are often experienced as deeply personal and consequential, making detached academic debate difficult. However, when moralization dominates discussion, it alters the incentive structure of participation by increasing reputational risk and narrowing the range of views that feel expressible.

These findings support H2 by demonstrating that moralization operates as a key mechanism through which expressive constraint emerges. When disagreement is perceived not as intellectual variation but as moral deviance, the cost of participation increases significantly. Under these conditions, students are less likely to engage openly, not because they lack opinions, but because the perceived consequences of expressing them extend beyond the academic domain into social and reputational judgment.

H3: Classroom-to-Campus Transmission and the Social Consequences of Expression

A third major finding concerns how classroom dynamics extend into the broader campus environment. Across interviews, 14 of 22 students described classroom norms extending beyond

academic settings, while 6 students pointed to institutional or semi-institutional platforms as amplifying these dynamics. Students repeatedly emphasized that norms established in the classroom, particularly regarding which views are treated as legitimate and which are viewed with skepticism, carry over into peer interactions and social life.

As one student stated, “When students see a professor belittle conservative students, they start thinking maybe they should treat those students that way too.” In this sense, faculty behavior does not remain confined to the classroom; it can influence broader social norms related to legitimacy and belonging.

This process becomes especially visible through labeling. 9 specifically referenced labeling dynamics (e.g., being identified as “the Republican”), and 7 described tangible social consequences such as exclusion, reputational harm, or peer judgment. “Once a student is identified as ‘the Republican,’ that label carries social consequences outside the classroom,” one student explained. Another interviewee noted that once others are aware of a student’s political identity, “everything you do is interpreted in bad faith.” Several students described the primary concern not as academic, but social—being excluded, discussed negatively, or treated as an ideological outlier.

Students involved in more visible political roles described these dynamics as particularly pronounced. One interviewee recalled that even overheard comments about the president of the College Republicans “didn’t feel positive,” reflecting an ongoing awareness of reputational risk. Another student noted that they no longer self-censor in class or campus settings, but explained that this was “because I have already faced all possible negative social consequences.”

The institutional dimension also plays a role. Students pointed to *The Campus*, Middlebury’s student-run weekly newspaper, as a space where certain perspectives are perceived

as more favorably represented than others. One student described the paper as generally aligned with progressive causes and recounted a specific episode in which an article suggested that conservatives who advocate for free speech should accept harassment as a consequence of their views. The student described this as both defamatory toward the Middlebury College Republicans chapter and chilling, emphasizing that it came not from an anonymous source, but from a recognized campus institution.

In this account, the institutional context is significant. When criticism is expressed through an established platform, it carries a different weight than informal peer disagreement. As described by the student, the episode contributed to a perception that certain forms of social sanction were more permissible than others. More broadly, students suggested that when narratives like these are publicly reinforced, they shape how individuals assess the potential social and reputational risks associated with expressing dissenting views.

These accounts point to a dynamic in which the boundary between peer-level interactions and institutional signaling becomes less distinct. When expressions of criticism are amplified through formal or semi-formal platforms, they can influence how students interpret the norms governing acceptable speech. Within this environment, self-censorship emerges not only as an individual response, but as an adaptation to perceived social expectations.

These dynamics contribute to a self-reinforcing pattern: as dissenting students speak less frequently, the campus may appear more ideologically uniform, which can further discourage future expression. The classroom, in this sense, functions as an important site where these broader social patterns are initially formed and subsequently reinforced.

These patterns provide clear support for H3. The classroom does not function as an isolated space, but as a site where norms of acceptable expression are established and then

reproduced across the broader campus environment. As these norms diffuse into social contexts, they shape not only what students say in class, but how they are perceived and treated outside of it, reinforcing patterns of selective expression and self-censorship.

H4: Anticipation, Prior Expectations, and the Internalization of Expressive Risk

Self-censorship often occurs before any explicit response from peers or professors. 13 of 22 students described anticipatory self-censorship, while 10 referenced actively “reading the room” or modifying their language. Students described constantly “reading the room,” sensing the prevailing tone, and adjusting their contributions accordingly. Discussions tend to converge toward “whatever the safest answer seems like,” with students prioritizing responses that “wouldn’t cause any issues.”

Survey responses reinforce this anticipatory dynamic. When asked whether certain subjects are avoided due to fear of conflict, students pointed to a consistent pattern of perceived ideological boundaries. 12 described avoiding certain topics altogether. One student wrote that “anything socially conservative is avoided and generally considered wrong.” Another explained that “anything that isn’t extremely pro-immigration... pro-LGBTQ rights... or anything supportive of Trump... isn’t worth touching.” These responses illustrate how students internalize informal limits on discussion well before entering the classroom.

This anticipatory behavior was echoed in interviews. One student stated: “I don’t care if the professor doesn’t care if I am conservative or not. I am only a freshman and have seen multiple times already what happens to conservatives when they speak up here. There’s no way I’m going to do that. I want to enjoy college.” Here, self-censorship is not driven by a specific classroom interaction, but by accumulated observation and expectation. Students adjust their

behavior based on what they believe will happen, not necessarily what has already happened to them directly.

Middlebury's broader reputation reinforces this dynamic. 9 pointed to prior expectations about campus ideology. Conservative students frequently enter classrooms already "on the defensive," expecting negative reactions. These prior expectations shape how students interpret even subtle cues, making identical classroom environments feel fundamentally different depending on one's ideological position.

This evidence strongly supports H4. Self-censorship is not solely a reaction to explicit negative consequences, but a preemptive adaptation shaped by expectations, observation, and institutional context. Students internalize perceived boundaries of acceptable discourse and adjust their behavior accordingly, often before entering the classroom.

This dynamic was directly observable within the interview process itself.

SOCIAL OBSERVATIONS: SELF-CENSORSHIP WITHIN THE INTERVIEW SETTING ITSELF

The group interview design, featuring students of mixed ideological backgrounds, functioned as a live setting in which expressive behavior could be observed. 13 of 22 interviewees responded to an anonymous follow-up survey asking whether and why they had self-censored during the interview. Three out of four self-identified conservatives, one of two moderate students, and one out of seven liberal students who responded said they had self-censored. Self-censorship was therefore present within the research setting itself, as students

monitored the social environment, adjusted their responses, and withheld fuller versions of their beliefs.

Because participation in the interviews was voluntary, anonymous in follow-up, and composed of students willing to engage in discussion on a sensitive topic, this setting approximates what political science methodology describes as a “least-likely case,” a context in which the underlying mechanism (here, self-censorship) should be least likely to occur due to relatively low expected social or institutional pressure (Eckstein 1975; George and Bennett 2005). The presence of self-censorship even under these conditions strengthens the inferential claim that such behavior is not confined to high-pressure environments, but likely occurs more frequently in typical classroom and campus settings where reputational and evaluative stakes are higher.

Students described this constraint directly. One noted, “I’m not always comfortable talking about politics. I was still often worried about the social impact, even if the group wasn’t going to spread news.” Another explained, “Since the setting wasn’t fully confidential, I was aware of how my responses might be received by others in the room. It was easy to pick up on the general tone and perspectives of the other students, which made it somewhat intimidating to push strongly against the prevailing views.” Students did not describe complete silence or fabrication, but rather moderation, expressing an “authentic” self only within what felt socially and reputationally manageable.

Hesitation extended to participation itself. Anecdotally, some students described concern about public exposure as conservatives in front of peers. The perceived risk was tied not only to what might be said, but to what participation could signal. In this context, joining a conversation about free speech and ideological climate carried potential reputational consequences.

When asked what they self-censored, a conservative respondent said they withheld their belief that Middlebury fosters “an environment that leans toward ideological conditioning rather than open inquiry.” They described professors aligning discussions closely with personal views, framing questions toward “a predetermined conclusion,” selectively curating materials, and using the power imbalance to “prevent students from realistically resisting these dynamics.” They also noted that repeated exposure to dominant viewpoints had shaped their own thinking over time, stating that this phenomenon “completely redefines the concept of openness.”

Another conservative student explained their restraint in more interpersonal terms: “I have a class with someone else who was in the room... and I didn’t want them to run around telling others what I said.” A liberal student, by contrast, justified a more cautious approach to engagement, stating, “When you actually try to talk with [Republicans], it’s clear they are not willing to change their opinion, or they just say something outlandishly sexist. I think not wanting to platform harmful ideas that harm women or LGBTQ+ identities is fine.”

Together, these responses illustrate that students across ideological lines calibrate their participation based on perceived social and normative constraints. A student may appear engaged in discussion while still being more cautious, measured, and indirect than they would be in a different setting.

Within-Group Variation and Perceptions of Constraint

While much of the evidence points to self-censorship among students who perceive themselves as ideologically in the minority, the interview data also suggests that expressive constraint is not limited to a single political orientation. A smaller but notable subset of students described situations in which individuals on the political left also felt hesitant to express their

views when they perceived those views as falling outside of what was socially acceptable within their immediate environment.

In several cases, students noted that even within broadly progressive spaces, there exist internal boundaries that shape expression. Students who held views that deviated from what they perceived as the “dominant progressive position,” whether on specific policy questions, the intensity of certain beliefs, or approaches to controversial issues reported engaging in similar patterns of self-monitoring, strategic ambiguity, or silence. In these instances, the mechanism of constraint was not fundamentally different, but rather operated through the same social and reputational dynamics described elsewhere: concern about peer judgment, fear of mischaracterization, and a desire to avoid social conflict.

This pattern reinforces a broader interpretation of expressive climate as situational rather than fixed. Self-censorship emerges not solely from ideological identity, but from the relationship between a student’s views and the perceived norms of a given classroom or social context. Even within groups that appear ideologically cohesive, internal variation can produce localized environments in which certain positions feel more or less expressible.

Cross-tabulation of interview responses by self-identified ideology further reinforces this pattern. While students who identified as conservative or politically non-aligned were more likely to report direct experiences of self-censorship, a majority of liberal-identifying students acknowledged that self-censorship exists within the classroom environment, even if they did not personally experience it to the same degree. This distinction highlights an important divide between experience and perception: expressive constraint is not universally felt, but it is widely recognized across ideological groups.

The Dynamics and Implications of Expressive Climate

These findings reveal a complex system of expressive constraint driven not by formal censorship, but by layered social, academic, and institutional signals. Students navigate a dense environment shaped by faculty framing, peer expectations, moralized discourse, reputational risk, and prior beliefs about campus ideology.

Self-censorship emerges as a rational response to this environment. Students hedge, soften, or remain silent not because they lack ideas, but because they are managing the potential consequences of expressing them. The classroom functions as a central site where these dynamics are either reinforced or disrupted.

When professors cultivate openness, represent multiple perspectives, and engage disagreement respectfully, they expand the boundaries of permissible discourse. When they moralize, pre-judge, or selectively affirm, they narrow those boundaries—often without explicit intent. These signals extend beyond the classroom, shaping how students interact, how reputations form, and how dissent is perceived across campus.

Expressive constraint in this context is subtle, socially embedded, and deeply internalized. It does not require overt restriction to be effective. It operates through the accumulation of cues that teach students whether disagreement is an intellectual practice to pursue or a risk to manage.

FACULTY INTERVIEW FINDINGS: PERCEPTION, PEDAGOGY, AND THE ATTRIBUTION OF CONSTRAINT

The faculty interviews (N=5) were designed to capture variation rather than uniformity. Professors were selected based on anecdotal previous student accounts describing a range of classroom experiences, some identified as particularly open and discussion-oriented, others as more constrained due to the professor's ideology. Importantly, students were asked not to name professors in surveys or interviews, and faculty were not approached with accusations. Instead, interviews were structured as conversations: faculty were presented with patterns emerging from student data and invited to reflect on them. This approach allows the analysis to examine how faculty interpret the same dynamics students describe, rather than adjudicating intent.

Across interviews, faculty consistently described their classrooms as spaces of inquiry, openness, and intellectual engagement. One professor explained that their goal is to “get students to think critically about competing perspectives,” emphasizing that disagreement is central to the learning process, “especially at a liberal arts school like Middlebury.” Another noted that they “make a conscious effort to invite different perspectives,” framing their role as facilitating discussion rather than directing it. This understanding held across ideological positions, including among faculty who identified as center or right of center and those who identified as left or strongly progressive.

When presented with student reports of hesitation or self-censorship, however, a more complex pattern emerged. Faculty generally did not reject the possibility that students might feel constrained, but they tended to locate the source of that constraint outside of their own classrooms. One professor suggested that if students feel unable to speak, it is likely because “other professors are more overt about their views,” distinguishing their own approach from that

of colleagues. Another pointed to variation across departments, noting that “some people probably structure discussions in ways that feel less open.” In these responses, constraint is acknowledged, but attributed to broader patterns or other actors rather than to one’s own pedagogical practice.

This attributional tendency appeared across ideological lines. Faculty who identified as center or right of center were often willing to suggest that some classrooms may discourage dissent, but described those environments as belonging to “other faculty.” Faculty on the left, including one who identified as strongly progressive both socially and economically, also acknowledged that students may hesitate to speak, but emphasized factors such as peer dynamics, polarization, or institutional culture rather than instructional behavior. The result is not a denial of student experience, but a displacement of its causes. Notably, when asked directly, all five professors acknowledged that student self-censorship does occur within the classroom environment, yet none identified their own teaching as a source of that constraint; instead, each attributed the dynamic to colleagues, departments, or broader institutional factors. This pattern reveals a consistent perception gap in which the phenomenon is widely recognized, but responsibility is systematically externalized.

At the same time, the interviews reveal that faculty themselves operate within a climate of constraint. Several professors described engaging in their own forms of self-censorship, particularly when navigating politically sensitive topics. When asked directly who or what they felt constrained by, responses were notably expansive: concerns were not limited to a single source, but extended across the institutional environment. Faculty referenced being cautious in relation to “students,” “colleagues,” and “administration,” suggesting that the perceived audience

for their speech is diffuse rather than clearly defined. This creates a setting in which the boundaries of acceptable discourse are not always explicit, but nonetheless felt.

These constraints were described as shaping both classroom interaction and broader academic decisions. Professors noted that they are sometimes careful in how they frame discussions, which examples they use, or how far they push certain lines of inquiry. In some cases, this extended beyond the classroom itself. Several faculty referenced hesitation around inviting outside speakers who do not align with prevailing campus norms, citing concerns about backlash, controversy, or professional risk. These accounts suggest that expressive caution is not limited to students navigating classroom dynamics, but is also present among faculty navigating institutional expectations.

The question of faculty ideology further illustrates this gap in interpretation. While students frequently report that they can identify their professors' political views through tone, examples, or patterns of response, faculty often expressed confidence in their ability to maintain neutrality. Some described deliberate efforts to avoid revealing their beliefs, while others argued that even when views are perceptible, they do not meaningfully shape classroom dynamics. One professor suggested that students are capable of separating "a professor's perspective from the structure of the course." Yet student accounts suggest that even subtle signals, what is emphasized, how arguments are received, which perspectives are treated as baseline, inform how students assess the risks of participation. Importantly, the independent and more right-leaning professors noted that if I were to survey their students, they were confident that they would not know what their personal political views are, whereas the two left-leaning professors I interviewed stated that they are very open about their personal politics in class.

Faculty responses to student self-censorship also varied. Some recognized that students may hold back, particularly on politically sensitive topics, and described this as an unfortunate but real dynamic. Others were more dismissive. One professor stated directly: “I don’t care that some students self-censor... It’s probably because they have dumb ideas... I don’t discuss those ideas in my classes.” They went on to say that they did not view this as problematic because, in their words, the opposing—often conservative—viewpoint is “wrong.” While this view was not representative of all interviewees, it highlights the range of perspectives on whether student self-censorship is understood as a meaningful pedagogical issue.

The interviews reveal a layered dynamic rather than a single-directional problem. Faculty overwhelmingly understand their classrooms as open because they evaluate them based on intent, whether they encourage participation, present multiple perspectives, and avoid explicit penalties for dissent. At the same time, they acknowledge operating within an environment in which their own expression is shaped by multiple audiences and potential risks.

ON THE RECORD

The student and faculty interviews in this study are reinforced by two on-the-record stakeholder interviews that attach identifiable names, experiences, and institutional memory to the broader patterns observed in the data. The first is with Governor Jim Douglas, Middlebury Class of 1972, former president of the College Republicans (1970-1972), former governor of Vermont (2003-2011), and current instructor at the college. The second is with Joseph Jacobson, Middlebury Class of 2027, and former president of the Middlebury College Republicans (2024-2025), whose interview provides a detailed account of the social and institutional pressures conservative students face. These interviews demonstrate that the self-censorship,

asymmetrical openness, and ideological pressures identified anonymously are visible in the testimony of public figures willing to attach their names to those claims.

Historical Change and the Closure of Conservative Space

Governor Douglas offers a long-range historical comparison between Middlebury in the late 1960s and early 1970s and Middlebury today. His account is not nostalgic; he is explicit that his time as a student took place during one of the most contentious periods in modern American political life. “The Vietnam War, military draft, campus demonstrations, and anti-war activism all made political conflict an ordinary feature of student life.” Douglas himself was in the minority politically and was publicly marked as such. Yet his central point is that the existence of conflict did not mean the exclusion of dissent. As he put it, “the difference between then and now is that nobody thought I shouldn’t be heard.” He recalled being labeled “Nixon’s man on campus,” but emphasized that “nobody tried to shout me down” and “nobody tried to suggest that my views shouldn’t be heard.”

According to Douglas, the transformation is not simply that Middlebury is politically liberal, or that students disagree more intensely than they once did. It is that the status of ideological opposition has shifted from legitimate disagreement to moral and social illegitimacy. In his words, the problem today is that “people not only regard someone as an adversary, but as an enemy” for holding a different opinion. His claim suggests that the climate has become one in which certain views are not just challenged, but treated as unwelcome. Douglas is unequivocal on this point, stating that Middlebury is “not a school that encourages diversity of points of view” and that it is “not a place that’s welcoming of ideas that depart from the institutional orthodoxy.” He even invokes Alison Stanger’s formulation after the 2017 Charles Murray

incident that Middlebury must decide whether it is “truly an institution of higher learning or a training academy for liberal activists.”

Douglas does not frame the issue as reducible to one offensive incident or one partisan grievance. He describes a broader institutional shift, identifying leadership, faculty ideology, and the absence of viewpoint diversity as central causes of the current climate. In explaining the perceptual gap found in the student survey, Douglas’s answer was immediate: “because the faculty are not diverse.” He argues that this lack of ideological balance does a “disservice” to students because “that’s not America,” and he repeatedly returns to the view that institutional leadership has a responsibility to actively ensure that different viewpoints are present and heard on campus. The problem is not limited to interpersonal disagreement among students; it is deeply tied to how the institution signals legitimacy, structures discourse, and tolerates asymmetry.

Douglas also notes that students rationally silence themselves because they do not want to “blow” their chances at a good grade by challenging a professor they know to be ideologically hostile, adding that peer repercussions may be even more significant. Middlebury, in his view, has changed in ways that make ideological dissent more precarious, more stigmatized, and less welcome than it was even during a far more visibly conflictual earlier era.

The Lived Cost of Conservative Visibility

If Douglas provides the historical and institutional diagnosis, Joseph Jacobson provides the lived contemporary account. As former president of the Middlebury College Republicans, Jacobson describes the campus not simply as politically imbalanced, but as a place where conservative visibility itself can carry social cost. Rather than speaking abstractly about bias, he details how labeling, classroom dynamics, peer reactions, and reputational concerns shape the experience of conservative students.

A central theme in Jacobson's interview is that conservative students are often assigned a moral identity before they are engaged intellectually. He explains that people "will label you something" without first attempting a conversation, and that conservative students are frequently presumed to be "neo-nazi bigots and homophonic racists" or otherwise "acting in bad faith." The issue is not only disagreement over ideas, but the perception that certain viewpoints carry immediate moral disqualification.

Jacobson connects this directly to self-censorship. Students, he argues, often stay quiet because they want to be treated "as someone equally in the college community," able to learn, build relationships, and have a normal college experience. Instead, he suggests they are often made to feel like they occupy "the bottom of the caste system" in how they are perceived. Under these conditions, restraint is less about uncertainty in one's beliefs and more about avoiding social consequences.

He also points to moments that, while not formally documented, had "a massive chilling effect," particularly when students perceive risk to their grades, relationships with professors, or standing in class. These experiences reinforce the sense that faculty behavior can signal the boundaries of acceptable dissent. As he put it, "I see it all the time. The line is crossed," referring to professors moving from presenting perspectives to actively pushing them.

The most severe part of Jacobson's account concerns harassment. He describes cases in which conservative students have faced direct threats, false accusations, and forms of social exclusion. After one student published a pro-Trump opinion piece in *The Middlebury Campus*, Jacobson recounts that they were targeted anonymously with "death threats and horrible and slanderous messages," including a post stating that if the student had a daughter, the poster hoped she would be raped. He also describes students being forced out of their living arrangements and

varsity sports teams because their political views were deemed intolerable by their roommates and teammates.

These experiences extend beyond disagreement and into the broader conditions of student life. If expressing a political view can affect housing, friendships, or daily interactions, then the decision to remain silent becomes closely tied to maintaining stability within the campus environment. Jacobson repeatedly returns to this point: that students often stay quiet not because they lack views, but because they do not want to become targets, outcasts, or sources of conflict within their own community.

CURATED PERSPECTIVES: THE ARCHITECTURE OF CAMPUS ORTHODOXY

The educational mission of a liberal arts institution like Middlebury College is fundamentally predicated on the marketplace of ideas—the notion that students should be exposed to a rigorous plurality of perspectives in order to develop critical thinking skills. Yet exposure is not only a function of formal openness, but also of what viewpoints and frameworks are most visibly represented within institutional programming. Over time, patterns in invited speakers, event themes, and intellectual framing may shape not only what students encounter, but what appears most legitimate, credible, or intellectually serious within the academic environment.

This section examines those patterns through an analysis of invited speaker programming from September 2019 through May 2026. Rather than attempting to determine the personal political ideology of individual speakers, the analysis focuses on the thematic and interpretive frameworks present in event titles, descriptions, and institutional summaries. The central

question is not whether speakers themselves are ideologically uniform, but whether the *ways in which ideas are presented* exhibit recurring patterns that structure the range of perspectives most visibly encountered on campus.

To systematically assess these patterns, the study employs a structured linguistic audit of 301 invited events. This process uses Google Gemini (Pro 3.1) as a coding tool to identify recurring language, thematic emphasis, and conceptual framing across event descriptions. Importantly, the model does not independently determine ideological classification. Instead, it applies a set of predefined analytical categories developed by the researcher, enabling consistent large-scale coding of textual data. All outputs were reviewed and refined to ensure alignment with the conceptual framework and to correct for misclassification or loss of nuance²¹.

The resulting categorization does not assign fixed political identities to speakers. Instead, it groups events based on dominant patterns of framing. For clarity and analytical consistency, these patterns are organized into three broad categories, Liberal/Progressive, Moderate/Institutional, and Conservative/Traditional, which function as heuristic labels rather than definitive ideological classifications. The Liberal/Progressive category captures frameworks emphasizing structural inequality, identity, and systemic critique; Moderate/Institutional refers to programming centered on governance, technical policy analysis, or professional practice without strong ideological signaling; and Conservative/Traditional encompasses frameworks grounded in traditions such as constitutionalism, classical political thought, national sovereignty, or realist approaches to political and international order. These categories are intended to identify recurring patterns in thematic emphasis and interpretive framing, not to assign precise political positions to individual speakers.

²¹ See Appendix X for ideological classification code

This approach carries inherent limitations. Language associated with particular themes, such as inequality, identity, or global justice, does not map perfectly onto political ideology, and classification based on linguistic patterns may overestimate coherence across diverse academic fields²². Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of *patterns in framing*, rather than definitive measures of ideological intent or orientation. The goal is not to establish bias or intent, but to examine how repeated exposure to certain frameworks may influence what students perceive as the dominant boundaries of legitimate discourse.

By focusing on patterns of visibility and framing, this analysis provides a systematic account of how institutional programming may contribute to the construction of intellectual norms. In doing so, it complements the broader argument of this thesis: that self-censorship emerges not from formal restriction, but from the interaction between perceived norms, repeated exposure, and the social interpretation of what viewpoints are most accepted within a given academic environment.

As part of the validation process, each event classification was manually reviewed by the researcher to identify cases in which the ideological direction of the event language may have been misread by the model. For example, an event description using terms such as “decolonization” or “LGBTQ rights” would not automatically be coded as Liberal/Progressive if the framing was critical of those concepts; in such cases, the event would have been reclassified according to its actual argumentative orientation. No such reverse-coded cases were identified in the final dataset.

²² The classification process carries an estimated margin of error of approximately $\pm 3\%$, particularly for highly technical talks or those employing specialized academic vocabulary without clear ideological markers.

The Quantitative Monopoly: Numerical Disparity as a Structural Condition

The most immediate evidence of imbalance appears in the raw distribution of speakers. Between September 2019 and May 2026, the Rohatyn Center for Global Affairs (RCGA), the college's primary and most heavily resourced administrative center for international study, hosted 262 speakers. During the same period, the Alexander Hamilton Forum (AHF), the primary venue for programming on Western political thought and constitutionalism, hosted 39 guest lectures.

This 7-to-1 ratio reflects a substantial difference in frequency of exposure. Supported by a robust budget and professional administrative staff, the RCGA's high frequency of programming ensures its specific worldview is treated not as a single perspective but as the institutional norm. Using Artificial Intelligence to run a linguistic audit of the lecture titles and descriptions, the ideological leanings of these speakers were categorized, and the quantitative monopoly of thought became apparent.

Within the RCGA's 262-speaker pool, roughly 75% (196 speakers) were classified as Liberal or Progressive, with talks deeply rooted in Critical Theory, internationalism, or progressive activism; 15% (39 speakers) represent Moderate/Institutional viewpoints tied to establishment statecraft; and 10% (27 speakers) represent Conservative/Traditional perspectives. Notably, even this small conservative sliver is often restricted to technical, non-ideological subjects like nuclear non-proliferation or economic sanctions, rather than the social or philosophical topics granted to their liberal counterparts.

By contrast, the AHF demonstrates a more balanced distribution, hosting approximately 40% conservative, 35% moderate, and 25% liberal speakers, but at a significantly lower volume. When the programming of both organizations is combined, liberal and progressive voices

outnumber conservative perspectives by nearly 5-to-1. This imbalance does not necessarily indicate intentional exclusion, but it does suggest that certain viewpoints are encountered far more frequently, shaping what may be perceived as the default intellectual framework of campus discourse.

Beyond the RCGA and AHF, the Conflict Transformation Collaborative (CTC) introduces a third institutional layer. While the former organizations focus on policy content, the CTC focuses on pedagogy, community engagement, and approaches to conflict. A review of its 2025–2026 programming indicates that 83% of events were rooted in progressive frameworks, with no representation of conservative or traditional approaches to mediation. In this sense, patterns of imbalance extend beyond content into the methodological framing of how issues are discussed and resolved.

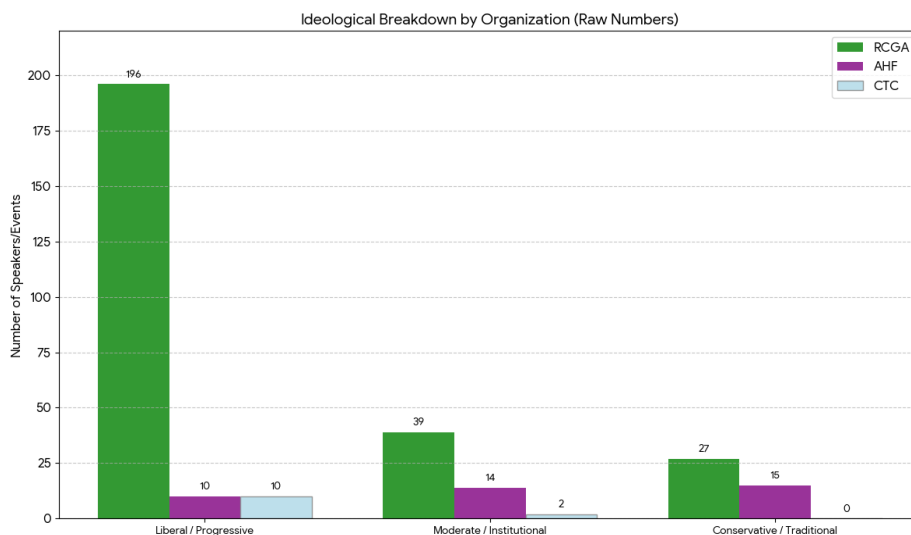


Figure 12²³

²³ Figure 12 was generated by the researcher using original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

These institutional dynamics suggest not only an imbalance in representation but a structured pattern of exposure in which certain perspectives are more consistently present across both content and pedagogy.

Framework Hegemony: The Structuring of Interpretation

Beyond numerical representation, the framing of campus discourse plays a critical role in shaping how issues are understood. An analysis of RCGA talk titles from 2019 to 2026 reveals a recurring emphasis on themes associated with structural inequality, identity, and global justice. Titles such as “Precolonial African Sexuality,” “Decolonizing Traditional Medicine,” “Assembling Networks of Care,” and “The Politics of Muslim Marginalization” operate within a shared interpretive framework, often foregrounding particular assumptions about power, inequality, and social change.

A broader lexical map of Middlebury’s guest speaker circuit further illustrates this pattern. As Figure 11 shows, a linguistic audit of the nearly 275 combined events hosted by the Rohatyn Center for Global Affairs (RCGA) and the Conflict Transformation Collaborative (CTC) suggests that variation in perspective may be shaped not only by who is invited, but also by the vocabulary through which global issues are framed.

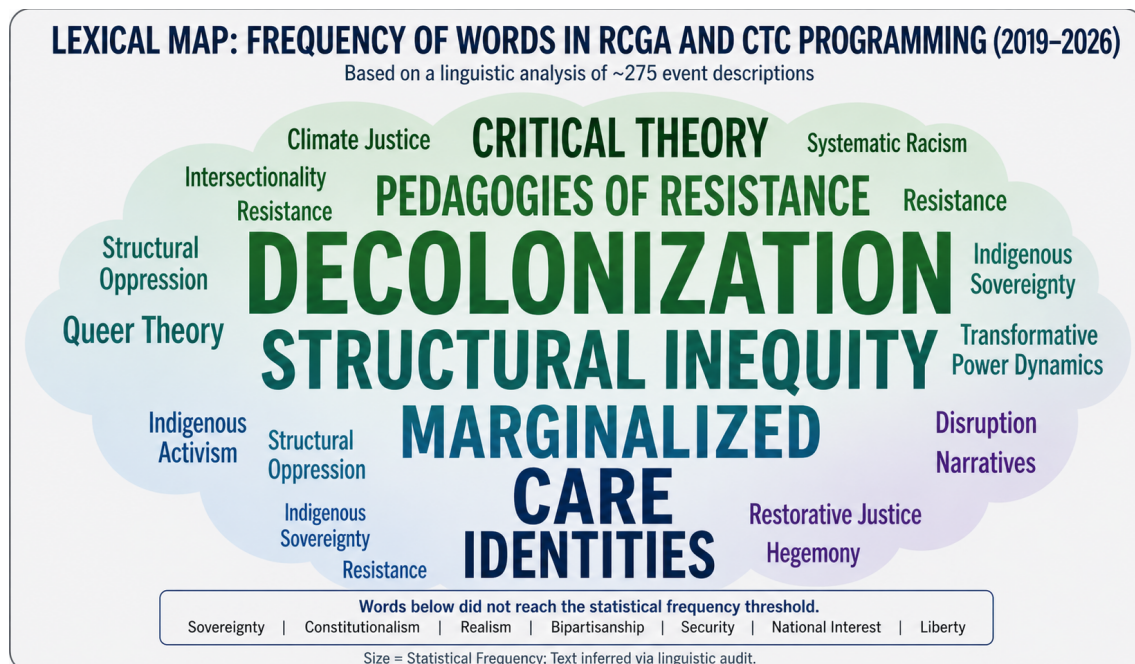


Figure 13²⁴

The data indicates a high concentration of recurring conceptual language. Approximately 72% of event descriptions were centered on themes of “decolonization” and “structural inequity,” often presenting these concepts as foundational interpretive lenses. An additional 18% of programming focused on the intersection of “queer theory” and “marginalized identities,” while 10% employed the pedagogical language of “restorative justice” and “pedagogies of resistance.” Taken together, these patterns suggest that a substantial majority of programming is oriented around frameworks that emphasize transformation, critique, and structural analysis. This concentration of language has implications beyond descriptive trends. When particular terms and frameworks recur with high frequency, they can shape the baseline through which students encounter and interpret complex issues. In this sense, the vocabulary of programming may function as an implicit guide to how problems are understood before alternative

²⁴ Figure 13 was generated by the researcher using original data, with visualization assistance from the Google Gemini (Pro 3.1 model).

perspectives are introduced. As certain frameworks become more institutionally embedded, others may appear less visible or less readily available within the same discourse.

Equally notable is the relative absence of conceptual vocabularies. Across the dataset, terms such as sovereignty, constitutionalism, realism, bipartisanship, security, national interest, and liberty appeared infrequently or not at all at a level sufficient to register within the broader lexical pattern. While absence does not imply exclusion, it does suggest a more limited range of conceptual entry points through which political and global issues are explored.

This hegemony is amplified by the Conflict Transformation Collaborative (CTC), which functions as the pedagogical arm of this orthodoxy. The CTC focuses on “Pedagogies of Resistance.” By exposing students and faculty to lectures and workshops that utilize this specific vocabulary, the college ensures that students learn *how* to think about a problem before they are even presented with the facts. This creates a normative environment where conservative or traditionalist perspectives, such as those focusing on national sovereignty, the virtues of the Western tradition, or free-market realism, are not merely seen as “the other side,” but as intellectually illegitimate or “harmful” deviations from the institutional standard.

The CTC effectively functions as the activist apparatus of the college, providing the pedagogical “how-to” for the ideological content found elsewhere on campus. By explicitly branding its flagship series as the “Conflict and Social Change Series,” the institution reveals a pre-determined conclusion: that the goal of resolving conflict is not to achieve stability or preserve tradition, but to facilitate a progressive “transformation” of the status quo. This lies in the CTC’s faculty-facing workshops. Programs like “Creative Pedagogies for Social Change” and “Critical Incident Analysis” (January 2026) act as a signal, training professors to manage “unexpected events” in the classroom to ensure the environment remains a vessel for social

change. The result is not simply an imbalance in viewpoints, but a degree of convergence in how problems are approached. Students are exposed not only to particular conclusions but to recurring frameworks for understanding social and political questions, which may influence how alternative perspectives are evaluated or engaged.

Asymmetric Resistance and the “Boycott Gap”

The structure of exposure is further shaped by patterns of response to invited speakers. Over time, a number of high-profile incidents suggest that controversial or heterodox viewpoints may encounter different conditions of reception than more widely accepted perspectives.

The 2017 disruption of a lecture by Dr. Charles Murray remains a central example. The event was prevented from proceeding as planned due to sustained protests, and a subsequent physical assault resulted in injuries to Professor Allison Stanger. Although disciplinary proceedings were initiated, the long-term outcomes contributed to ongoing debate about the enforceability of institutional norms surrounding expression.

Subsequent cases reinforce the role of both actual and anticipated disruption. In 2019, a scheduled lecture by Ryszard Legutko was cancelled prior to the event following campus opposition and planned protest. While administrators cited security concerns, the decision illustrates how expectations about disruption can shape whether events occur at all. Other events have proceeded under modified conditions. In 2018, when the Middlebury College Republicans hosted UCLA Law Professor Richard Sander to discuss his book *Mismatch*, and the negative effects of affirmative action, the event was relocated to the Ralph Myhre Golf Course, approximately a one-mile walk from central campus, in anticipation of protest. While this ensured that the lecture could take place, it also introduced an additional logistical barrier that may have affected accessibility and participation.

More recent examples suggest the persistence of these dynamics. A 2026 CIA career talk at the RCGA was disrupted despite its nonpartisan framing, while a 2025 panel on transgender healthcare policy hosted through the AHF generated both protest and competing counter-programming, including an event explicitly rejecting the premise of debate. In these instances, disagreement extended beyond counterargument to include efforts to challenge the conditions under which events were held.

Faculty and administrative signaling may also contribute to these patterns. In some cases, public statements or calls for boycotts from faculty and departments, such as those preceding a 2026 talk by Leah Libresco Sargent, have shaped expectations prior to events taking place. While such actions may be intended to express concern or solidarity, they can also influence the perceived costs associated with attending or engaging with certain viewpoints.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest the presence of what can be described as a boycott gap: a divergence in how different categories of speakers are received. While many events proceed without disruption, those associated with minority or heterodox viewpoints are more likely to encounter protest, logistical modification, or reputational signaling, potentially shaping patterns of participation.

From Disparity to Environment

The discrepancy is not reducible to any single factor. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of speaker distribution, thematic framing, and patterns of response. The nearly 5-to-1 disparity in representation, the concentration of programming within particular analytical frameworks, and the uneven conditions under which events take place collectively shape the environment in which students engage with ideas. It is telling that *City Journal*, in its recent

rankings of American colleges, noted that the Alexander Hamilton Forum was the “one good thing” remaining for students seeking intellectual rigor at Middlebury.

Within this context, the academic environment is not defined solely by formal rules governing speech, but by patterns of exposure and interaction that influence how ideas are encountered and evaluated. Students are not only responding to what is said, but to what is emphasized, how it is framed, and how different viewpoints are received by the broader community.

In this sense, the campus environment reflects not only differences in representation but a structured set of conditions that shape the visibility, legitimacy, and perceived costs of engaging with particular perspectives.

DISCUSSION

Opening Synthesis

The findings of this study point to a clear and consistent conclusion: student self-censorship at Middlebury College is not best understood as a series of isolated incidents, nor as the product of individual sensitivity or deliberate suppression. Rather, it emerges as a systemic outcome produced through the interaction of multiple reinforcing forces. Across survey data, interviews, and institutional analysis, a coherent pattern becomes visible—one in which classroom dynamics, peer responses, institutional programming, and broader campus signals converge to shape how students evaluate the risks of expression.

Crucially, this dynamic does not depend on intentional exclusion or coordinated enforcement. Faculty overwhelmingly describe their classrooms as open; students formally retain the ability to speak; and the institution publicly affirms its commitment to free expression. Yet,

despite these formal conditions, a significant portion of students, particularly those who perceive themselves as holding minority viewpoints, report calibrating, softening, or withholding their views. This gap between formal openness and lived experience suggests that expressive constraint operates not through explicit prohibition, but through the accumulation of signals that shape perception.

Understanding this environment therefore requires shifting the analytical lens from isolated events to systemic interaction. Classroom framing influences how ideas are interpreted; institutional programming shapes what is perceived as legitimate; peer dynamics determine what is socially sustainable; and psychological mechanisms translate these signals into behavioral outcomes. Taken together, these elements form an environment in which students are not simply deciding what they believe, but continuously assessing what is worth saying. The sections that follow examine how these forces operate in tandem, and how their interaction produces a patterned, rather than incidental, form of self-censorship.

Structural Imbalance and the Residential Crucible

At the broadest level, the expressive environment at Middlebury is shaped by a clear structural condition: ideological imbalance. Survey data indicate that liberal-identifying students outnumber conservative-identifying students by a ratio of approximately 5.7 to 1, a disparity widely recognized across the student body. This imbalance operates not only as a demographic reality but as a shared perception. A substantial majority of students describe the campus as politically liberal, and many report that both peer and faculty ideological orientations are readily identifiable. As a result, students enter discussions with anticipatory expectations about prevailing viewpoints.

The importance of this imbalance lies in how it shapes students' perceived position within the campus environment. For those aligned with the dominant viewpoint, expression carries relatively low social or academic risk. For those in the minority, participation involves a more complex calculation. Students described an awareness of their ideological position prior to speaking, often assessing how their contributions might be received relative to an assumed consensus. In this way, structural imbalance establishes the baseline conditions under which expressive behavior occurs, shaping expectations before any specific interaction.

These dynamics are amplified by Middlebury's structure as a small, highly integrated residential college. Academic and social life are not easily compartmentalized; instead, interactions occur within dense, overlapping networks that span classrooms, dormitories, extracurriculars, and informal spaces. As a result, political identity becomes persistent rather than situational. A viewpoint expressed in a seminar does not remain confined to that setting but can carry into broader social contexts, shaping how individuals are perceived across campus life. This continuity raises the stakes of expression beyond intellectual disagreement. Students must consider not only how their views will be received in a given discussion, but how those views may affect friendships, housing relationships, group affiliations, and longer-term reputation. Interview data reflect this dynamic, with students describing instances in which political expression influenced social standing, altered peer relationships, or led to withdrawal from certain environments. Even without formal sanction, the possibility of lasting reputational consequences introduces caution into participation.

In this context, ideological minority status is not episodic but enduring. Self-censorship therefore emerges less as an isolated reaction than as a rational adaptation to an environment in

which the costs of dissent extend beyond the classroom and into the broader fabric of student life.

Norm Enforcement: Classroom, Institutional, and Peer Signaling

A Layered System of Signals

Across the findings of this study, a consistent pattern emerges: students do not learn the boundaries of acceptable discourse through explicit rules, but through a layered system of signals operating across classrooms, institutional programming, and peer interactions. These signals communicate, often indirectly, what is intellectually “correct,” institutionally “legitimate,” and socially “acceptable.” While any single instance may appear isolated, their cumulative effect produces an environment in which students develop a shared understanding of the risks associated with dissent.

At the classroom level, these signals operate through tone, framing, and patterns of validation, what is treated as settled, what is presented as open to debate, and how different contributions are received. When certain perspectives are consistently framed as factually grounded, morally preferable, or intellectually serious, while others are implicitly treated as marginal or problematic, students internalize a hierarchy of legitimacy. The result is not the absence of discussion, but a narrowing of its range.

Institutional signals reinforce these dynamics by shaping which perspectives are most visible and frequently encountered. As demonstrated in the speaker data, the distribution of invited speakers and thematic programming is not ideologically neutral, even if unintentionally so. When particular frameworks, especially those emphasizing structural inequality, identity, and social transformation, are repeatedly presented through formal programming, they come to function as the default interpretive lens through which issues are understood. This does not

require the exclusion of alternative perspectives. Rather, repeated exposure elevates certain ideas to an assumed baseline, making others appear peripheral or less intellectually viable.

Horizontal Enforcement and the Role of Visibility

These signals do not remain abstract, they are translated into everyday consequences through peer dynamics. In a highly interconnected campus environment, students themselves often function as the primary enforcers of expressive norms. Responses ranging from subtle dismissal to labeling and reputational categorization shape how expression is received and whether it is repeated.

A central mechanism through which this enforcement operates is visibility. Students emphasized that the risk lies not only in holding dissenting views, but in being publicly associated with them. Once a viewpoint becomes attached to an identity, it can follow a student across classrooms, social spaces, and extracurricular settings, shaping how they are perceived over time. As a result, students evaluate not only whether they can express a view, but whether doing so is socially sustainable.

Campus media plays a particularly salient role in this process. Several students pointed to instances in which articles published in *The Middlebury Campus* were perceived not only as critiques of ideas, but as public interventions that implicitly or explicitly targeted identifiable groups or individuals associated with conservative and minority viewpoints. Concerns were raised not only about tone, but about editorial processes, whether claims were sufficiently verified and whether reputational consequences were adequately considered. While such publications are formally protected under principles of free expression, their effects are amplified in a small, tightly interconnected community. Public visibility can carry reputational

consequences that extend well beyond the initial publication. Students described these moments as signaling mechanisms, highly visible events that communicate the potential costs of expressing certain viewpoints. The result is not simply disagreement, but deterrence. Anecdotally, a student informed the researcher about an alleged internal Editorial Board discussion about how to “deal with the Republicans Club;” raising broader questions about the role of student media as both a platform for expression and an actor in shaping campus norms.

Perceived Enforcement Gaps and the Narrowing of Engagement

This dynamic is further reinforced by perceptions of uneven institutional response. Students expressed concern that while formal rules exist to regulate conduct, enforcement does not always align with lived experience. As one student described, “I don’t even know why we have a student handbook. It’s supposed to be there to protect us, but look at what’s happening. Students are being threatened and harassed.” That student went on to detail an alleged conversation with a member of the administration, that they had after an incident of harassment where the administrator said that “[the student] had knowledge that this bullying would happen and it is unfortunate, but [they] are suffering the consequences of their own actions. ‘[They] wanted free speech, this is it.’” Whether universally representative or not, such perceptions alter the cost of participation itself. If students believe that harassment or intimidation will not be meaningfully addressed, open engagement ceases to be a viable option and silence becomes the safer equilibrium.

This pattern extends even to attempts at cross-ideological engagement. Criticism directed at the joint meetings between the College Republicans and College Democrats—the Editorial Board themselves admonished the meetings—suggests that participation in bipartisan dialogue is performative and can itself become socially risky; another opinion piece called the College

Democrats “spinless” for engaging with the “fascist supporting” College Republicans. When efforts at dialogue are met with scrutiny, the implicit message is that the boundary of acceptable engagement may be narrower than formal commitments to open discourse would suggest.

Taken together, these layers of signaling, classroom, institutional, and peer, operate cumulatively. Students are not responding to isolated moments, but to a patterned environment in which cues about legitimacy, acceptability, and risk are continuously reinforced. The boundaries of acceptable discourse are not explicitly defined, but widely understood.

From Disagreement to Escalation

Most political expression at Middlebury takes the form of ordinary disagreement. Students debate, challenge one another, and engage across differences in ways that reflect the norms of a liberal arts environment. However, the data and interviews in this study also reveal a second layer of interaction: moments in which disagreement escalates beyond critique into forms of hostility that carry clearer social, reputational, and at times personal consequences.

Students described instances along a spectrum. At one end are emotionally charged reactions, dismissal, labeling, or social distancing. At the other are more explicit forms of targeting, including harassment, threats, and public identification. Several participants referenced cases in which students expressing minority viewpoints received messages ranging from personal attacks to reported death threats following public political expression. Others described situations in which expressing certain views resulted in being singled out socially, excluded from peer groups, or subjected to reputational damage that extended beyond a single interaction.

In some cases, escalation moved beyond verbal or digital interaction into physical or semi-public spaces. Anecdotally, derogatory language written on the researchers whiteboard outside their dorm room calling them a “fucking Nazi.” While such incidents are not widespread,

their presence is analytically significant. They demonstrate that political disagreement can migrate into personal spaces, increasing the perceived risk of expression by making its consequences immediate and individualized.

The Personalization of Political Identity and the Justification of Social Consequences

This dynamic becomes more pronounced when disagreement is personalized. In one anonymous survey response, a participant described the researcher as a “fascist” based on his political views, arguing that such beliefs justified social exclusion and reputational consequences. As the respondent wrote: “This student is a bad person and a fascist supporter. He must face the consequences of his actions. People should be punishing him socially... He deserves to have no friends and to not be invited anywhere... Middlebury students know what is right and will be on the right side of history.” The response continued by rejecting any association with the researcher and asserting that student organizations aligned with those views “should not be allowed,” concluding with the statement: “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

A similar logic appears in another survey response, which framed political disagreement not as a difference in perspective but as a reflection of moral failure: “If your political beliefs stem from a direction or support of a candidate who spews hate, racism, bigotry, or other dehumanizing and offensive language or policy, I think you deserve to feel shame for disregarding moral values of our country for the sake of your personal benefit.”

These responses demonstrate how political disagreement can shift from contestation of ideas to the categorization of individuals. The language used is not directed at engaging or refuting a position, but at defining the individual as morally illegitimate and therefore undeserving of inclusion within the social community. Once political identity is framed in these terms, social exclusion is not experienced as disproportionate, but as justified, even necessary.

The implications of this shift are significant. When disagreement becomes a marker of moral character, the costs of expression extend beyond intellectual disagreement into the realm of social belonging. Under these conditions, dissent carries not only the risk of being challenged, but of being socially isolated, stigmatized, or excluded. The result is an environment in which expressive restraint is not simply strategic, but, for some students, necessary to maintain participation in the broader campus community.

The Art of Anonymity: Expression Without Accountability

These dynamics are further intensified in anonymous or semi-anonymous digital spaces. Platforms such as Yik Yak emerged in multiple interviews as sites where hostility could be expressed more openly. Students described posts ranging from harassment and defamation to explicit attempts at surveillance. As one post stated: I'm going to look through the window of the Republicans meeting and see who's there and report back. Another post listed the name and room number of a member of the College Republicans, while others have detailed the personal lives and comments made in class by conservative students. One post even said "Who let the Trumpies go to Brooker?²⁵"

The anonymity of these platforms lowers the threshold for expression, allowing sentiments that may remain unspoken in face-to-face settings to surface more explicitly. Speech that would typically be moderated by social norms becomes more extreme when detached from personal identity. Students reported bringing these concerns to the administration, often receiving responses indicating that the behavior did not meet the threshold for formal intervention. In some

²⁵ Brooker is a social house on the Middlebury College campus, whose basement often used on weekends for parties

cases, students were directed toward restorative justice processes contingent on identifying those responsible, an unlikely outcome in anonymous contexts.

This gap between experienced hostility and institutional response reinforces the perception that certain forms of antagonistic behavior fall outside the scope of actionable concern. In effect, anonymity allows escalation to occur without clear accountability, while limited institutional response can contribute to the normalization of such behavior within the broader expressive environment.

Importantly, these forms of escalation do not characterize everyday campus interaction. However, their analytical significance lies not in their frequency, but in their visibility. In a socially dense environment, highly visible incidents of hostility—however rare—function as powerful signals about the potential consequences of expression. Students do not need to experience such incidents directly for them to shape behavior; awareness alone is often sufficient to inform perceptions of risk.

Why This Happens: A Theory of Emergent Constraint

Again, the patterns identified in this study do not point to a single cause or actor. Rather, they reflect the interaction of structural, social, and psychological dynamics that together produce an environment in which self-censorship becomes a rational response. The key analytical point is that these outcomes do not require deliberate coordination or intent. They emerge from the alignment of incentives, expectations, and cognitive processes operating within the institution. Four mechanisms are particularly important.

First, selection effects shape the baseline environment before students even arrive on campus. Elite liberal arts colleges tend to attract students and faculty with broadly similar ideological orientations, producing a relatively homogeneous starting point. This homogeneity is

not inherently problematic; students often self-select into these environments precisely because they value the intellectual culture they expect to find. However, once established, this imbalance affects how disagreement is perceived. When a clear majority shares similar assumptions, those assumptions can come to feel like common sense rather than one perspective among many, raising the relative visibility, and vulnerability, of dissenting views.

Second, the moralization of politics transforms disagreement from an intellectual exercise into a question of values and identity. When political positions are interpreted not simply as policy preferences but as indicators of moral character, the stakes of expression increase substantially. As shown in this study, faculty and institutional framing can play a role in this process, particularly when normative or justice-oriented interpretations are presented as the primary lens through which issues are understood. While not necessarily intentional, such framing can signal to students that certain positions carry moral weight beyond their policy content, shaping how disagreement is perceived. Under these conditions, disagreement risks being understood not as a contribution to debate, but as a violation of shared norms. This shift helps explain why students often describe certain topics as “not worth mentioning.” It is not the complexity of the issue that deters engagement, but the potential for moral judgment.

Third, the social density of a small residential campus amplifies these pressures. At Middlebury, academic, social, and residential spheres are deeply interconnected. The same individuals populate classrooms, dorms, extracurricular spaces, and social networks, making it difficult to separate intellectual disagreement from social identity. As a result, expression is not a one-time act but a durable signal that can shape how a student is perceived across contexts. This persistence increases the long-term cost of dissent, as students must consider not only the

immediate reaction to their views, but their broader implications for belonging, relationships, and reputation.

Finally, repetition and psychological reinforcement stabilize these dynamics over time. Repeated exposure to dominant perspectives increases their perceived legitimacy through mechanisms such as the illusory truth effect, while the spiral of silence reduces the visibility of dissenting views. As fewer students express minority positions, the environment appears more ideologically uniform than it actually is, further discouraging expression. This feedback loop operates largely below the level of conscious intent, shaping perception and behavior through accumulated experience rather than explicit enforcement.

Taken together, these mechanisms explain how expressive constraint can develop within an institution that formally supports free expression. Structural imbalance defines the baseline, moralization raises the stakes, social density amplifies the consequences, and psychological processes reinforce the resulting patterns. These dynamics do not require deliberate coordination; they emerge from the interaction of institutional structure, social incentives, and cognitive processes.

Why This Matters

At its core, the liberal arts model is not simply about exposure to ideas, but about the active contestation of them. Its value lies in the expectation that students will encounter disagreement, test their assumptions, and refine their thinking through engagement with competing perspectives. This process requires more than formal protections of speech; it depends on the existence of an environment in which students feel safe to participate fully in that exchange.

The findings of this study point to a critical distinction between latent diversity and expressed diversity. While a range of viewpoints exists within the student body, not all of those viewpoints are equally visible in practice. Students across the ideological spectrum described holding back, moderating, or strategically adapting their contributions in response to perceived social and reputational costs. As a result, the ideas that appear in classrooms and campus discourse do not necessarily reflect the full range of beliefs that students actually hold. What emerges is not the absence of disagreement, but its partial concealment.

This distinction carries important implications. When certain viewpoints are consistently underexpressed, the intellectual environment narrows in ways that are often difficult to detect. Discussions may appear open and participatory, yet still operate within a constrained range of perspectives. Over time, this can produce a form of an assumed perceived consensus that reflects patterns of expression rather than genuine convergence of thought. In such an environment, assumptions go less frequently challenged, alternative frameworks receive less sustained engagement, and the process of critical inquiry becomes less rigorous.

The cost of this silence is therefore not merely individual, but collective. For students, it limits opportunities to articulate, defend, and refine their own views. For the broader academic community, it reduces exposure to competing perspectives that are essential for intellectual development. The consequence is a shift away from inquiry as a process of engagement toward a more cautious mode of participation, in which students weigh the potential consequences of speaking as much as the substance of what they might say.

The central contribution of this study is to show that this outcome is not the result of explicit restriction, but of a system of interacting forces, structural, social, and psychological, that shapes how expression is experienced. The problem, therefore, is not a lack of ideas. It is the

uneven conditions under which those ideas are expressed. The challenge is not simply to protect the right to speak, but to create an environment in which students can engage openly across differences, where disagreement is understood as a necessary condition of learning rather than a risk to be managed.

MAKE MIDDLEBURY GREAT AGAIN: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESTORING A CULTURE OF FREE EXPRESSION

The following recommendations are presented as concrete institutional actions grounded in both empirical findings and student-reported experiences.

1. Reassert Clear and Consistent Presidential Leadership on Free Expression

Institutional culture is shaped from the top. When leadership communicates ambiguously, or engages questions of free expression only in moments of controversy, it creates a vacuum in which informal norms are set by students themselves.

Students explicitly identified the absence of a clearly articulated and consistently reinforced culture of viewpoint diversity. As one respondent stated, “We need a culture pushed by faculty, staff, and administrators... where a diverse spectrum of viewpoints is not only permitted, but encouraged on campus. Right now, it doesn’t feel that way.” Reversing this dynamic requires sustained, proactive leadership. The President must consistently and publicly affirm that Middlebury is an institution committed not only to inclusion, but to the rigorous contestation of ideas. This includes clearly stating that disagreement—even sharp disagreement—is a necessary condition of intellectual life, not a threat to it. However, the president must publicly acknowledge that the current campus climate is not that.

Equally important is the role of presidential conduct in shaping institutional signals. When senior leadership participates in or moderates events that are perceived as ideologically one-sided, like the Iran War panel,²⁶ it risks reinforcing the perception that certain viewpoints are institutionally endorsed while others are marginalized. To maintain credibility, institutional leadership should exercise restraint in these contexts, ensuring that its role is to facilitate open inquiry rather than appear aligned with a particular perspective.

Without visible, consistent, and neutral leadership, other reforms risk being interpreted as symbolic rather than substantive.

2. Reaffirm Institutional Neutrality on Contested Political Issues

Middlebury must adopt a clearer and more consistently applied posture of institutional neutrality on contested political and social issues.

When the institution, or its leadership, appears aligned with particular viewpoints, it signals to students which positions are institutionally validated and which are not. This does not require explicit endorsement; perceived alignment alone is sufficient to shape behavior. The findings of this study suggest that students adjust not only to peer reactions, but to what they interpret as institutional expectations, increasing the perceived cost of dissent.

For this reason, Middlebury should develop and publicly articulate a framework for institutional neutrality, aligned with principles similar to the Chicago Principles²⁷ or the Kalven Report,²⁸ in which the institution refrains from taking official positions on political and social

²⁶ Yuvraj Shah, “‘War in Iran’ Panel Draws Over 150 Attendees,” *The Middlebury Campus*, March 19, 2026,

²⁷ University of Chicago, *Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression*.

²⁸ University of Chicago, *Kalven Report*.

issues unrelated to its core academic mission. The purpose of such a framework is not disengagement, but the preservation of intellectual pluralism.

The more frequently an institution adopts official positions on contested issues, the more likely it is that members of the community who disagree will perceive greater risk in expressing alternative perspectives. A commitment to neutrality therefore strengthens, rather than weakens, the institution's role as a forum for inquiry.

While institutional neutrality applies primarily at the level of the administration, its underlying principle has relevance within the classroom as well. Faculty are not required to adopt neutrality in their personal views; however, given the findings of this study regarding the influence of instructional framing, it is strongly encouraged that instructors exercise care in how their perspectives are presented. Emphasizing analytical engagement over normative positioning can help ensure that students perceive the classroom as a space for inquiry rather than endorsement.

Importantly, neutrality does not require silence in all cases. The institution may speak on matters directly related to its functioning, such as campus safety or academic policy, but should exercise restraint on broader political debates. Absent such a framework, institutional signaling will continue to shape the expressive climate in ways that contribute to self-censorship. Reaffirming neutrality is therefore a necessary step toward restoring the conditions for open and pluralistic inquiry.

3. Establish a Clear, Credible, and Enforced Zero-Tolerance Framework for Harassment

The issue identified in this study is not the absence of formal standards governing student conduct, but the perceived inconsistency and insufficiency of their enforcement. Across

interviews and survey responses, students reported instances of harassment, targeting, and reputational harm²⁹ that did not result in what they considered to be a meaningful institutional response.

This gap between formal policy and lived reality has direct behavioral consequences. When students observe that expressing certain viewpoints may be followed by sustained social targeting, without clear or visible institutional intervention, self-censorship becomes a rational adaptation. Under these conditions, the decision to remain silent is not driven by a lack of conviction, but by a cost-benefit calculation shaped by prior observations and experiences.

The findings of this study suggest that harassment and threats against certain students is not perceived as a hypothetical risk but as a real and recurring possibility. However, when institutional responses are viewed as limited, inconsistent, or procedurally constrained, they fail to alter the underlying incentive structure. As a result, students update their expectations accordingly: expression carries risk, and protection is uncertain.

For this reason, Middlebury must move beyond general commitments to respectful discourse and adopt a clear, credible, and consistently enforced zero-tolerance framework for harassment. The purpose of such a framework is not to expand the scope of punishable speech, but to ensure that when conduct crosses the threshold into sustained, targeted, and harmful behavior, it is addressed decisively and transparently.

²⁹ Recent campus media coverage has, in some cases, contributed to student perceptions of reputational targeting. For example, opinion and editorial content in *The Middlebury Campus* has included direct, name-specific criticism of student leaders associated with political organizations. While such coverage falls within the bounds of protected expression and journalistic discretion, its visibility and personalization may shape how students assess the potential social costs of participation in campus political life.

This requires clearly defining the boundary between protected disagreement and actionable harassment, and, critically, demonstrating through consistent enforcement that this boundary is meaningful. When students see that harassment produces real consequences, the perceived cost of speaking decreases. When they do not, self-censorship remains the rational response. While expressions that are merely offensive or controversial should remain protected from formal sanction, institutions should not treat all harmful speech as consequence-free. There is a meaningful distinction between protected disagreement and conduct that inflicts reputational or personal harm. Speech that is demonstrably false and injurious to an individual's reputation, or that constitutes sustained, targeted harassment, falls outside the bounds of acceptable conduct and should trigger institutional consequences under the student handbook.

At present, students report that certain forms of defamatory or personalized targeting can occur without clear or visible response, raising questions about the credibility of existing standards. If institutional rules are to function as more than symbolic commitments, they must be enforced in cases where expression crosses from viewpoint into conduct, particularly where it involves knowingly false claims, individualized targeting, or repeated attempts to undermine a student's standing within the community.

The goal is not to penalize unpopular ideas, but to ensure that the freedom to express them does not extend to conduct that harms others in ways the institution already purports to regulate. Without credible and consistently enforced protections, the formal right to free expression is undermined by the informal reality of unchecked retaliation. Restoring that credibility is therefore not ancillary to the institution's mission, it is a necessary condition for it.

4. Eliminate the Heckler's Veto and Guarantee Access to Diverse Viewpoints

A core function of a liberal arts institution is exposure to competing perspectives. The findings of this study indicate that both disruption and selection effects have contributed to a narrowing of that exposure.

Students repeatedly emphasized that they are not encountering a meaningful range of viewpoints through institutionally sponsored programming. As one respondent put it, “We don’t get exposed to different viewpoints. It’s the same narrative over and over again,” as validated in the “Curated Perspectives” section of this thesis.

To address this, Middlebury must establish and enforce clear boundaries distinguishing protected protest from impermissible disruption. While protest is a legitimate and necessary component of campus expression, it cannot extend to actions that prevent speakers from presenting or audiences from engaging. Events must be structured and protected in a way that ensures invited speakers can be heard and that students retain the opportunity to encounter and evaluate competing ideas.

A related challenge lies in the conceptual conflation of discomfort with harm. Discomfort is an inherent feature of intellectual engagement, particularly in a liberal arts setting that prioritizes exposure to competing viewpoints. Feeling challenged, unsettled, or even offended by an idea does not, in itself, constitute harm. Safety, by contrast, refers to protection from conduct that is threatening, coercive, or materially interferes with a student’s ability to participate in campus life. When these concepts are blurred, the threshold for institutional intervention becomes unclear, and disagreement risks being treated as a form of harm. Maintaining a clear distinction between discomfort and safety is therefore essential: it preserves the conditions for

rigorous debate while ensuring that genuinely harmful conduct is addressed consistently and credibly.

At the same time, enforcement alone is insufficient if the range of viewpoints presented remains narrow. The institution must take an active role in broadening the diversity of invited speakers. Viewpoint diversity should not be relegated to student organizations alone; institutional programming must reflect a clear commitment to presenting serious, credible perspectives across the political spectrum. Failure to do so signals not neutrality, but selective legitimacy.

5. Strengthen Classroom Norms to Reduce Moralization and Encourage Open Inquiry

Classrooms are central to the expressive climate of the institution. The findings of this study reveal a divergence between faculty intentions and student experiences, particularly in how disagreement is framed and whether students feel comfortable expressing dissenting views.

Students identified specific changes that would improve classroom engagement. One respondent emphasized the need for “less moral framing,” while another noted that it is “hard to propose rational arguments when the response is character judgment.” Others pointed to the importance of encountering multiple perspectives within academic discussions.

To address these concerns in a systematic and non-intrusive way, Middlebury should incorporate a targeted component into its existing course evaluation system. Specifically, end-of-semester course evaluations should include questions assessing:

- whether multiple perspectives were presented where relevant
- whether students felt comfortable expressing disagreement
- whether differing viewpoints were engaged respectfully and seriously

This approach does not regulate faculty viewpoints or impose content requirements. Rather, it provides structured feedback on the student experience of classroom discourse, allowing the institution to better understand where gaps exist between faculty intentions and student perceptions.

Importantly, this recommendation is fully consistent with academic freedom. Faculty retain complete authority over course content and intellectual framing. The purpose of this addition is not to mandate balance, but to encourage awareness of how pedagogical choices shape the conditions under which students participate.

6. Expand Viewpoint Diversity Within the Faculty and Curriculum

Intellectual diversity includes viewpoint diversity. In environments where a narrow range of perspectives predominates, students are less likely to encounter sustained, credible disagreement within the classroom. Students directly identified this gap. One respondent stated, “We need more conservative professors.” Another noted that faculty should not be hesitant to acknowledge when politically unpopular administrations or policies produce positive outcomes, and encourage their students to do the same, pointing to a perceived imbalance in how perspectives are presented.

At the same time, this recommendation must be approached with care. Structural factors, including geographic context and broader trends in higher education, contribute to ideological imbalances within faculty populations. Vermont is among the most politically homogeneous states in the country, and research has consistently shown that faculty at elite institutions tend to lean left. These realities should be acknowledged rather than dismissed.

However, recognizing these constraints does not preclude institutional responsibility. The objective is not to impose ideological quotas or engage in what might be perceived as

viewpoint-based affirmative action. Rather, it is to ensure that hiring practices and academic priorities are attentive to the value of intellectual and ideological diversity as components of academic excellence.

Middlebury should therefore make a conscious and good-faith effort to broaden the range of perspectives represented within its faculty and curriculum. This includes actively recruiting candidates who bring different intellectual and political frameworks, particularly in disciplines where contested public questions are central. Such efforts should remain fully consistent with existing standards of academic merit and scholarly rigor. Without this intentionality, the educational environment risks reflecting a localized or institutionally concentrated perspective rather than the broader range of viewpoints present in American society. A liberal arts education should prepare students to engage with a pluralistic world—not one that mirrors a single dominant framework.

Expanding viewpoint diversity would therefore serve two critical functions: it would reduce the perceived cost of participation for students holding minority viewpoints, and it would strengthen the intellectual rigor of the classroom for all students by ensuring that competing ideas are meaningfully represented and contested.

7. Develop Student Capacity for Productive Disagreement

The findings of this study suggest that many students lack the tools necessary to engage in disagreement without defaulting to moral or personal framing. This dynamic contributes directly to patterns of peer enforcement and self-censorship.

Student Affairs programming should therefore prioritize developing skills for productive disagreement, including distinguishing disagreement from harm, engaging opposing views charitably, and responding to arguments without personalizing them. This is especially important

during orientation, where norms are first established. Programs such as “Unlearning at Middlebury,”³⁰ while designed to promote inclusion and critical reflection, may also contribute to the early moralization of disagreement if not balanced with an emphasis on viewpoint diversity.

Middlebury should therefore revise these programs to more explicitly incorporate intellectual pluralism, ensuring that students are not only encouraged to question prior beliefs, but also equipped to engage seriously with perspectives they disagree with. Students are not asking for the elimination of disagreement, but for the ability to participate in it without disproportionate consequences. Strengthening these skills would directly address one of the underlying drivers of self-censorship.

8. Incorporate Viewpoint Engagement into the Admissions Process

If the goal of a liberal arts institution is to cultivate students capable of engaging in rigorous intellectual exchange, then the admissions process should reflect this priority. Middlebury should introduce a supplemental essay prompt asking applicants to describe a time they encountered a viewpoint different from their own, how they responded, and what they learned from the interaction. The purpose of this prompt is not to assess political orientation, but to evaluate intellectual openness, humility, and willingness to engage with disagreement.

Over time, such a measure would contribute to shaping a student body more prepared to participate in a culture of inquiry. While admissions alone cannot resolve campus climate

³⁰ “Unlearning at Middlebury” refers to orientation and training programs that introduce students to institutional norms around identity, language, and social responsibility. These sessions often emphasize particular interpretive frameworks, such as privilege and marginalization, while offering limited structured engagement with competing perspectives, functioning as an early mechanism of institutional norm formation.

dynamics, it represents a long-term structural mechanism through which norms of engagement can be reinforced prior to students' arrival.

Final Consideration

The findings of this study make one point clear: the current expressive climate at Middlebury is not functioning as intended. Across survey data, interviews, and observed campus dynamics, it is empirically evident that students—particularly those holding minority viewpoints—face conditions that make open expression costly. As a result, self-censorship has become a rational and, in many cases, necessary response.

However, these conditions are not fixed. The patterns identified in this study are the product of institutional signals, incentives, and norms, and can therefore be reshaped through deliberate action. Addressing these challenges should be a central institutional priority. This includes not only improving internal conditions for free expression, but also strengthening Middlebury's performance in external benchmarks such as the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression College Free Speech Rankings, which serve as a comparative indicator of campus climate. More importantly, reform efforts must aim to restore internal confidence in the institution's commitment to open inquiry.

At the same time, while institutional reforms are necessary to reset baseline conditions, the long-term sustainability of an open expressive environment depends on student-level dynamics. The findings of this study suggest that bottom-up cultural change is unlikely to emerge in a stable or widespread manner in the absence of institutional signals that reduce the perceived risks of dissent. Once these baseline conditions are established, targeted interventions can strengthen students' ability to engage in disagreement productively. Student Affairs programming, particularly during orientation, where norms are initially formed, should prioritize

developing skills for engaging opposing viewpoints, distinguishing disagreement from harm, and responding to arguments without personalizing them. Existing initiatives should be refined to incorporate a more explicit emphasis on intellectual pluralism, ensuring that students are not only encouraged to reflect critically on prior beliefs, but also equipped to engage constructively with perspectives they may oppose.

Bottom-up change is possible, but without institutional reinforcement, it remains fragile and localized. Aligning student capacity with institutional signals is therefore necessary for durable cultural change. At its core, this is not simply a question of policy, but of institutional identity. A liberal arts college cannot fully realize its mission if students feel unable to question, challenge, and dissent. Middlebury's strength has historically rested on its ability to cultivate rigorous thinkers capable of engaging with complex and contested ideas. Reaffirming that tradition requires more than principle, it requires practice.

With intentional leadership and sustained commitment, Middlebury can move toward an environment in which viewpoint diversity is not merely tolerated, but actively engaged; where disagreement is not suppressed, but sharpened; and where students are prepared not for ideological conformity, but for leadership in a pluralistic world.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

A rigorous assessment of this study requires careful attention to its limitations, not as a means of undermining its conclusions, but as a way of clarifying the scope, validity, and interpretive boundaries of its findings. Several methodological, empirical, and conceptual constraints shape both the strength and the reach of the arguments presented.

First, the study is limited by its case selection. By focusing primarily on Middlebury College, situated within the broader context of elite liberal arts institutions with reputations for

ideological homogeneity, the analysis centers on a “most-likely” case where the mechanisms of interest (perceived faculty ideology, moralization of disagreement, and self-censorship) are expected to be most visible. While this design strengthens internal validity and enables deeper process tracing, it limits external generalizability. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable; institutions with different ideological compositions, governance structures, or student demographics may exhibit substantially different dynamics.

Second, the study relies heavily on self-reported data, which introduces well-documented sources of bias. Survey responses and interview accounts are shaped by perception, memory, and interpretation. Respondents may overreport or underreport their willingness to speak, reinterpret past interactions through a present lens, or respond in ways consistent with their political identity. While the convergence of patterns across survey data, student interviews, and faculty interviews strengthens confidence in the findings, the study cannot fully disentangle perception from objective reality. Importantly, however, this limitation is also constitutive of the research question itself: perceived climate, regardless of its objective accuracy, is precisely what shapes expressive behavior.

Third, the sample composition introduces potential selection effects. Participation in both the survey and interviews was voluntary, raising the possibility that individuals with particularly strong views or salient experiences were more likely to respond. This may lead to an overrepresentation of negative experiences or heightened perceptions of constraint. At the same time, evidence of non-participation, particularly among conservative students hesitant to engage even in semi-confidential settings, suggests a countervailing bias. The phenomenon under investigation may itself suppress participation from those most affected by it, meaning the data

may simultaneously overrepresent highly motivated respondents while underrepresenting more risk-averse individuals.

Fourth, the limited number of faculty interviews constrains the breadth of insight into instructional practices and faculty perspectives. While these interviews provide valuable qualitative depth and highlight tensions between faculty intentions and student experiences, the small sample size ($N=5$) does not allow for systematic comparison across departments, ranks, or ideological positions. These findings should therefore be interpreted as illustrative rather than representative. Future research would benefit from a larger and more ideologically diverse faculty sample.

Fifth, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits its ability to capture change over time. The data reflects a snapshot of campus climate shaped by contemporaneous political dynamics, institutional events, and cohort-specific attitudes. However, interview evidence, particularly from longer-term observers, suggests that perceptions of ideological climate and expressive norms may evolve. Without longitudinal data, it is not possible to determine whether current patterns represent a departure from historical norms, a continuation of long-standing trends, or a temporary fluctuation.

Sixth, the study faces inherent challenges related to causal inference. While the theoretical framework proposes mechanisms linking perceived faculty ideology, moralization, and self-censorship (H1–H4), the empirical design does not allow for definitive causal identification. The observed relationships are consistent with the proposed hypotheses, but alternative explanations cannot be fully ruled out. For example, students predisposed to feel marginalized may be more likely to interpret classroom interactions as biased, or broader campus

culture may independently shape expressive behavior. The study therefore provides evidence of association and process tracing rather than causal proof.

Seventh, the study's focus on political ideology, particularly the liberal-conservative spectrum, necessarily simplifies a more complex landscape of identity, belief, and expression. While analytically useful, this framing may obscure variation within ideological groups and overlook other relevant dimensions, such as race, religion, or socioeconomic background, that also shape expressive experiences. Additionally, the emphasis on conservative self-censorship, while empirically grounded, may undercapture forms of self-censorship experienced by other groups for different reasons.

Finally, there are limitations related to measurement and operationalization. Concepts such as "self-censorship," "perceived ideological climate," and "moralization" are inherently difficult to measure with precision. While the survey and interview instruments were designed to capture these constructs through multiple indicators, they remain approximations. Distinctions between strategic silence, social caution, and genuine fear of repercussions may not be fully captured in the data.

These limitations do not invalidate the study's findings, but rather define the conditions under which they should be interpreted. The strength of this research lies not in broad generalization or definitive causal claims, but in its detailed, multi-method analysis of how perceived ideological environments shape expressive behavior within a specific institutional context. Future research can build on this foundation by expanding the scope of cases, incorporating longitudinal designs, and employing experimental or quasi-experimental methods to more precisely identify causal mechanisms.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides a detailed analysis of one institutional context, several avenues for future research emerge from its findings. These directions would not only strengthen the generalizability of the results, but also deepen understanding of the mechanisms shaping expressive behavior in elite higher education.

1. Generalizability Beyond a Single Institutional Case

Future research should examine whether the mechanisms identified here, particularly moralization, perceived ideological imbalance, and anticipatory self-censorship, operate similarly across other elite liberal arts colleges and research universities. Comparative, multi-institutional studies could assess whether these dynamics are unique to Middlebury or reflect broader patterns within higher education. Such work would also help clarify the extent to which institutional characteristics, such as size, selectivity, or regional culture, moderate the relationship between perceived climate and expressive behavior.

2. Causal Testing of Classroom-Level Mechanisms

This study identifies several classroom-level mechanisms, particularly pedagogical framing, perceived faculty ideology, and patterns of agreement reinforcement, that appear to shape student willingness to express dissent. Future research should move beyond observational and self-reported data to experimentally test these mechanisms. For example, controlled studies could vary instructor framing, discussion norms, or exposure to disagreement and measure resulting changes in student

participation and self-censorship. Establishing causal relationships would strengthen the theoretical claims advanced here and provide clearer guidance for pedagogical reform.

3. Longitudinal Effects and Post-Graduation Outcomes

An important unanswered question concerns the long-term consequences of sustained self-censorship in higher education. Future research should track students over time to examine whether patterns of expressive restraint persist beyond college and influence professional behavior, civic engagement, or political participation. Longitudinal designs could assess whether students who internalize norms of silence or conformity are less likely to engage in open debate in workplace or public settings, or whether these behaviors attenuate once individuals leave the campus environment. Understanding these downstream effects would situate campus climate not only as an educational issue, but as one with broader implications for democratic participation.

4. Perceived Indoctrination and Institutional Programming

Finally, future research should more directly examine the relationship between institutional programming and student perceptions of ideological framing. This study suggests that recurring exposure to particular interpretive frameworks, through both classroom dynamics and co-curricular initiatives, may contribute to perceptions of ideological alignment or constraint. Programs such as “Unlearning at Middlebury,” as well as training structures for student leadership roles, including Resident Assistants, orientation leaders, and peer conflict mediators, often play a central role in norm

formation, yet remain underexamined in the literature. A systematic analysis of these programs, including their content, framing, and delivery, could assess how they interact with the psychological mechanisms identified in this study, such as the illusory truth effect, memory-based social learning, and the spiral of silence. Importantly, such research would not seek to evaluate intent, but rather to understand how repeated exposure to particular frameworks may shape students' perceptions of what viewpoints are expected, legitimate, or socially reinforced within the institution.

Together, these avenues point toward a broader research agenda aimed at understanding not only the presence of expressive constraints in higher education, but the mechanisms through which they emerge, persist, and can be meaningfully addressed.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a central question: how do faculty ideology and classroom instruction shape students' willingness to express dissenting or nonconforming views in higher education? Using Middlebury College as a focused case study, the analysis demonstrates that the answer lies not in any single actor or policy, but in the interaction of pedagogical framing, peer dynamics, institutional context, and psychological adaptation. What emerges is not a story of overt censorship, but of a more subtle—and in many ways more powerful—constraint: an environment in which students internalize the boundaries of acceptable discourse and regulate their own expression accordingly.

At a structural level, the findings establish a clear baseline. Middlebury is characterized by a pronounced ideological asymmetry, one that is not merely demographic but perceptual and behavioral. Students enter classrooms already aware of this landscape, and this awareness shapes how they interpret discussion, evaluate risk, and decide whether to speak. The result is a consistent gap between formal openness and lived experience: classrooms may be procedurally open, but are often experienced as substantively narrow.

Within this environment, classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and psychological processes operate not independently, but as a mutually reinforcing system. Faculty framing, often unintentionally, signals which perspectives are treated as legitimate or suspect. Peer dynamics extend these signals into the social fabric of campus life, where reputational consequences become central. Over time, repeated exposure to dominant viewpoints, combined with social feedback and cognitive adaptation, produces a self-reinforcing cycle in which dissent becomes increasingly costly and less visible. These dynamics do not require deliberate coordination or intentional exclusion; they emerge from the interaction of institutional structure, social incentives, and cognitive processes.

Taken together, these findings support a central conclusion: self-censorship in elite higher education is not primarily the result of formal restriction, but of an environment in which certain viewpoints are consistently perceived as more legitimate than others. In such contexts, silence is not incidental, it is produced.

Importantly, this phenomenon is not unique to Middlebury. Similar patterns have been documented across other elite institutions. However, its presence at Middlebury is consequential. It has shaped student experience, altered patterns of classroom engagement, and, in some cases, limited the extent to which the institution fulfills its own educational mission. That mission is not

abstract. A liberal arts education is premised on the idea that students should encounter competing perspectives, test their assumptions, and develop the capacity to engage with disagreement. The findings of this study suggest that, under current conditions, this ideal is not being fully realized, not because faculty or students reject it, but because the environment in which they operate makes it difficult to sustain in practice.

Yet this conclusion is not a pessimistic one. The patterns identified in this study are not fixed. They are the product of institutional signals, social norms, and structural incentives, and can therefore be reshaped through deliberate action. The recommendations advanced in this thesis are grounded not only in theory, but in the experiences of students themselves. If pursued seriously and consistently, such reforms would not only improve external measures of free expression, but more importantly, rebuild internal trust in the institution's commitment to intellectual freedom.

Ultimately, the central insight of this thesis is both simple and consequential: students are not silent because they are unable to speak. They are silent because, in many cases, they have learned that speaking is not worth the cost. The task moving forward, therefore, is not merely to protect the right to speak, but to restore the conditions under which speaking—and especially dissenting—remains a viable and worthwhile choice.

As this research has shown, expression is not sustained by formal guarantees alone, but by the environment in which those guarantees are lived. As Charlie Kirk has argued, “If you believe in something, you need to have the courage to fight for those ideas.” Yet in the context of elite higher education, courage cannot operate in a vacuum. It must be met with an environment that makes expression possible, not prohibitively costly. A liberal arts institution cannot simply encourage students to think—it must ensure that they feel able to speak.

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Los amo muchísimo!

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Definitions of Key Terms

1. **Elite Higher Education** – For the purposes of this study, elite higher education refers specifically to Middlebury College. A highly selective liberal arts college characterized by rigorous academic standards, small and engaged student populations, a faculty-intensive teaching model, and a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary learning. Middlebury's structural features—including close faculty-student interactions and a culture of intellectual engagement—shape campus climate, peer dynamics, and opportunities for student expression, making them particularly relevant for understanding patterns of perceived ideological influence.
2. **Perceived Indoctrination** – Refers to students' experience of repeated exposure to dominant ideological perspectives in the classroom and campus environment that may shape their understanding of which viewpoints are socially or academically acceptable. This concept emphasizes perception rather than intent; it does not presume that faculty deliberately seek to coerce or convert students, but rather examines the ways in which repeated messaging and selective framing of topics may influence student attitudes, beliefs, and willingness to express dissenting opinions.
3. **Classroom Framing** – The manner in which faculty present, structure, and contextualize controversial or politically sensitive topics within courses. This includes the selection of readings, case studies, discussion prompts, and teaching strategies, as well as the framing of debates and norms for classroom participation. Classroom framing is a key mechanism through which students perceive ideological influence, as it shapes both the content and the interpretive lens through which students engage with ideas.
4. **Self-Censorship** – The conscious or subconscious decision by students to withhold, modify, or avoid expressing personal viewpoints due to fear of social, academic, or institutional repercussions. Self-censorship is a measurable behavioral outcome of perceived ideological influence, reflecting how students navigate the tension between personal beliefs and dominant campus norms.

5. Ideological Reinforcement / Drift – A mechanism by which repeated exposure to dominant perspectives, both in the classroom and through peer interactions, subtly nudges students toward alignment with those views or normalizes them within the campus culture. This concept captures how faculty, peer, and institutional influences collectively shape students’ perceptions, understanding, and behavior over time, without necessarily involving deliberate persuasion or coercion.
6. Faculty Ideological Composition – The overall political orientation of instructors within a department or institution, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. Faculty composition serves as a structural factor influencing classroom framing, curricular choices, and interactions with students, and is central to understanding the dynamics of perceived ideological influence.
7. Campus Climate – The broader social, cultural, and institutional environment of a college or university that affects students’ willingness and comfort in expressing ideas. Campus climate encompasses social norms, peer expectations, cultural attitudes, and publicly stated institutional values or commitments, all of which shape how students perceive ideological balance and assess the acceptability of different viewpoints.
8. Political Violence – Any acts or threats of harm, coercion, or intimidation carried out with a political motive or intent to influence political beliefs, behaviors, or outcomes. In the context of this study, political violence encompasses both physical and symbolic actions that disrupt campus discourse, inhibit expression, or create an environment in which students may feel unsafe or constrained in articulating dissenting viewpoints. Including this term allows the research to situate patterns of self-censorship and perceived ideological influence within a broader context of political conflict and contested expression on college campuses.
9. Institutional Policies – Official rules, regulations, or guidelines established by the university to govern student conduct, academic freedom, and freedom of expression. Institutional policies include both formal regulations and informal practices that influence how faculty and students interact, and how ideas are communicated, contested, or constrained within the campus environment.
10. Freedom of Expression / Academic Freedom – Foundational concepts that define the boundaries and protections of speech and inquiry within higher education. Academic

freedom refers to faculty and student rights to teach, learn, and explore ideas without undue interference, while freedom of expression encompasses the broader ability to voice opinions, challenge dominant narratives, and engage in debate. Both are central to understanding the structural and normative context in which perceived indoctrination and self-censorship occur.

11. Illusionary Truth Effect – A cognitive bias whereby repeated exposure to a statement or idea increases an individual's perception of its truthfulness, regardless of its objective accuracy. Within the context of this study, repeated presentation of dominant ideological perspectives may lead students to perceive those ideas as more legitimate or socially acceptable, reinforcing self-censorship and alignment with campus norms.
12. Cognitive Dissonance – Psychological tension experienced when an individual's pre-existing beliefs or values conflict with the dominant norms or perspectives encountered in their environment. To reduce discomfort, students may adjust their expressed beliefs, internalize dominant perspectives, or avoid discussing controversial ideas, making cognitive dissonance a key mechanism linking perception to self-censorship.
13. Spiral of Silence – Refers to the tendency of individuals to withhold their opinions when they perceive themselves to be in the minority, out of fear of social isolation or backlash. As fewer people express dissenting views, the dominant perspective appears more widely accepted, further discouraging others from speaking. Over time, this creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which silence amplifies perceived consensus and suppresses open disagreement.
14. Student Expression / Voice – The degree to which students are able and willing to articulate, share, and defend their personal viewpoints within academic and social contexts. Student expression is both an outcome of perceived ideological influence and a measure of campus openness, reflecting the interaction of classroom framing, peer influence, and institutional climate.
15. Controversial Topics – Issues or subjects that are politically, socially, or culturally sensitive, and which may provoke debate or disagreement within the classroom. These topics are particularly prone to framing effects and student self-censorship, making them

critical for understanding the mechanisms of perceived indoctrination and ideological reinforcement.

Appendix B: Student Survey Questions

Section 1: Demographics

1. Where are you from?

- Northeast / Midwest / South / West / International

2. Year in school:

- First-year / Sophomore / Junior / Senior / Graduate

3. Major / Field of study: _____

4. Political orientation:

- Very liberal / Liberal / Moderate / Conservative / Very conservative

5. Has your political orientation changed while at Middlebury?

- Yes / No

6. If yes, in which direction?

- A lot more liberal / Slightly more liberal / Slightly more conservative / A lot more conservative

7. Open-ended: If you answered yes, please explain the factors that caused your shift in political orientation:

Section 2: Perceived Faculty Ideology

8. In your courses, how would you describe the general political ideology of your instructors?

- Very liberal / Liberal / Neutral / Conservative / Very conservative

9. How often do you think you can tell your professor's political views when they present political topics in class?

- Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Always

10. How often are you confident you know your professors' political views?

- Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Always

11. Open-ended: Please provide an example of a situation where you felt an instructor's ideology influenced classroom discussion:

Section 3: Classroom Climate

A. General Classroom Dynamics

- 12. Classroom discussions are dominated by a single political viewpoint.
- 13. Classroom discussions are open to debate and disagreement.
- 14. Political topics are frequently discussed in emotionally charged ways.
- 15. Political issues are often framed in moral terms (e.g., right vs. wrong rather than trade-offs).

B. Faculty Behavior

- 16. Faculty in my classes apply critical scrutiny equally to students across the political spectrum.
- 17. Faculty encourage independent thinking and critical engagement with course material.
- 18. Faculty implicitly or explicitly signal approval of certain political viewpoints.
- 19. Faculty present multiple political perspectives in a balanced and fair manner.

C. Peer Dynamics

- 20. I feel supported by my peers to express viewpoints that differ from the majority.
- 21. Classroom discussions reflect a wide range of political viewpoints.
- 22. Opportunities to participate in discussions are distributed fairly among students.

D. Emotional and Cognitive Climate

- 23. Students may feel intimidated to express dissenting or unpopular viewpoints in class.
- 24. Classroom discussions often feel performative or competitive rather than reflective.
- 25. Political topics are discussed in a nuanced and complex manner rather than oversimplified.

(Scale for Questions 12–25: 1 = Never → 5 = Very Often)

Section 4: Self-Censorship and Comfort Expressing Dissent

- 26. I feel comfortable expressing minority political or ideological viewpoints in class.
- 27. I sometimes refrain from expressing my political or ideological views during class discussions.
- 28. Which factors influence your decision to refrain? (Select all that apply)

- Concern about negative evaluation by the instructor
- Concern about reactions from other students
- Concern about social or reputational consequences
- Concern about being misunderstood
- Belief that expressing my views would not be productive
- Preference to avoid conflict
- Uncertainty about how to articulate my views
- I generally do not refrain
- Other: _____

29. Open-ended: What would make you feel more comfortable expressing dissenting viewpoints?

Section 5: Perceived Moral/Ideological Pressure

30. To what extent do you feel faculty expect students to adopt specific moral or ideological perspectives?

31. How often have you experienced negative consequences from a professor for expressing a contrary view?

Section 6: Beliefs About Teaching and Campus Norms

32. Faculty generally teach students to:

- What to think / How to think / Both equally / Unsure

33. How aligned are classroom norms with broader campus norms?

34. Classroom discussions influence what is acceptable to say outside of class.

35. To what extent do classes frame issues in moral terms?

36. Classroom discussions sometimes make dissent feel morally wrong.

37. Classroom experiences encourage open expression outside of class.

38. Open-ended: Describe a time when a classroom discussion affected what felt acceptable to say elsewhere on campus.

Section 7: Indicators of Indoctrination (Expanded)

39. Open-ended: Describe experiences where the classroom promoted a specific viewpoint.

40. Open-ended: Describe any peer or faculty pressure to conform.

41. Open-ended: Are certain topics avoided due to fear of conflict or being “wrong”?

Section 8: Follow-Up

42. Would you be open to doing an in-person follow-up interview?

43. Would you like to enter a raffle for a \$50 Two Brothers Tavern gift card?

Appendix C: Student Interview Questions

1. Please state your name, year, major, and one class you’re in where discussions happen a lot.
2. What makes a class feel easy to speak in—and what makes a class feel harder to speak in?
 - a. Follow-up: Are those factors mostly about the professor or the students?
3. Thinking about the classes you’ve taken, how comfortable do people generally feel speaking in discussions?
 - a. Follow-up: Does it depend on the students or professor? Does anyone disagree with what’s been said?

4. Can someone describe a class where discussion felt really open? What was happening in that room?
 - a. Follow-up: Does anyone have the opposite—a class where you felt hesitant to speak? What made it different?
5. When controversial topics come up, do they feel like open debates based on logic, or do they become questions of morality like right versus wrong, good versus bad?
 - a. Follow-up: Does that kind of framing affect whether people speak up?
6. Do you think students here hold back their real opinions in class discussions?
7. Have you ever self-censored your views in class?
 - a. If so, why? Which matters more: concern about professors (grades, reactions) or concern about other students (social judgment)?
 - i. Follow-up: Does anyone disagree? Does it depend on the student or the class?
8. So let's talk about the classroom. In the survey you filled out, over 90% of students said that they feel confident they can tell the political opinions of their professors, why do you think that is?
9. What kinds of signals do professors give—intentionally or not—about what viewpoints are acceptable in a class?
10. Do you think professors here generally teach how to think or what to think?

Follow-up: What leads you to that conclusion? Does anyone see it differently?
11. When controversial topics come up, do they feel like open debates or like questions of right versus wrong?

Follow-up: Does that kind of framing affect whether people speak up?
12. Do classroom discussions affect how people express their views outside of class, like with friends or on campus?
 - a. Follow-up: Do norms from class carry over into social spaces?
13. I surveyed about 215 Middlebury students, and I found a massive perceptual gap. While 76% of liberal students felt that Middlebury classrooms were open to debate, nearly 80% of conservative students felt they were not, and over 75% of them reported actively self-censoring. Why do you think there is such a large gap?

14. Perhaps the most surprising finding in my data was about academic repercussions. My survey found that 85% of liberal students have never experienced negative consequences from a professor for expressing their views. But among conservative students, over 60% reported they *have* experienced negative consequences—like dismissive comments, increased scrutiny, or lower grades—after expressing a minority viewpoint.
15. Some students describe experiences like this as “indoctrination,” while others reject that term. How do you interpret this idea of indoctrination or being taught that there is a good side and a bad side whether directly or indirectly?
 - a. Follow-up: What would cross the line from teaching into indoctrination?
16. If you could change one thing about how discussions work in classrooms here to make people more comfortable speaking openly, what would it be?
Follow-up: Why that change?

Appendix D: Faculty Interview Questions

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself—how long you’ve been at Middlebury, your main research focus, and the types of courses you typically teach?
2. What is your teaching philosophy, especially at a liberal arts school like Middlebury?
 - a. When you structure a classroom discussion, what does a 'successful' discussion look like to you?"
3. Do you set any explicit ground rules or expectations for discussion at the start of the semester?
 - a. How do you approach teaching classes where students debate highly sensitive subjects?" (*Ask for a specific example here*).
4. As a professor, you are obviously an expert in your field. How do you see your role when students disagree with you—or with each other—on research you know very well?
5. How do your own personal, political, or moral commitments shape how you frame politically sensitive topics in the classroom?
6. If a student makes a claim that is factually or analytically 'wrong' based on your professional opinion, how do you go about correcting them without shutting down their willingness to participate?"

7. I surveyed about 215 Middlebury students, and I found a massive perceptual gap. While 76% of liberal students felt that Middlebury classrooms were open to debate, nearly 80% of conservative students felt they were not, and over 75% of them reported actively self-censoring. As a professor, why do you think there is such a large gap?
8. One of the specific mechanisms I tested was how topics are framed. My data showed that 87% of conservative students feel that political issues in class are frequently framed in moral terms—as a clear 'right vs. wrong' rather than policy trade-offs. How do you navigate teaching a subject with strong political or social implications?
9. Perhaps the most surprising finding in my data was about academic repercussions. My survey found that 85% of liberal students have never experienced negative consequences from a professor for expressing their views. But among conservative students, over 60% reported they *have* experienced negative consequences—like dismissive comments, increased scrutiny, or lower grades—after expressing a minority viewpoint.
 - a. Does that disparity surprise you?
 - What mechanisms do you try to use to ensure students with minority views don't feel academically penalized?
10. What role should ideological diversity—among faculty and students—play in a healthy academic environment? Do you think Middlebury currently meets that ideal?
11. If you could change one aspect of classroom culture to improve open discussion across ideological differences, what would you change and why?

Appendix E: Codebook for Student Interviews

A. Perceptions of Campus Ideological Climate

Use when a student describes the overall political, social, or intellectual atmosphere on campus.

Subcodes:

- A1. Liberal dominance
- A2. Lack of ideological diversity
- A3. Variation by department, class, or campus space
- A4. Administratively shaped climate
- A5. Hidden diversity beneath surface conformity
- A6. Polarization

B. Student Self-Censorship

Use when a student says they withhold, soften, reframe, or avoid expressing their views.

Subcodes:

- B1. Fear of peer judgment

- B2. Fear of social exclusion
- B3. Fear of academic consequences
- B4. Fear of reputational damage
- B5. Strategic ambiguity
- B6. Avoidance of controversial topics
- B7. Selective disclosure of beliefs

C. Perceptions of Other Students' Self-Censorship

Use when a student describes other students withholding views or being reluctant to speak.

Subcodes:

- C1. Conservative students staying quiet
- C2. Minority-opinion reluctance
- C3. Fear of peer backlash
- C4. Fear of professor consequences
- C5. Fear of social punishment
- C6. Uneven participation by ideology

D. Classroom Dynamics

Use when the interview discusses how discussion actually operates in class.

Subcodes:

- D1. Open discussion
- D2. Discussion constrained by topic
- D3. Professor-led framing effects
- D4. Students echoing dominant views
- D5. Tension around sensitive issues
- D6. Deliberate facilitation by professor
- D7. Avoidance of disagreement
- D8. Productive disagreement

E. Perceptions of Faculty Bias / Ideological Framing

Use when a student describes professors presenting material through a political lens.

Subcodes:

- E1. Explicit ideological framing
- E2. Implicit bias in teaching
- E3. One-sided presentation of issues
- E4. Activism replacing inquiry
- E5. Normative pressure toward "correct" views
- E6. Distinction between teaching and indoctrination

F. Institutional Pressures

Use when a student points to broader institutional or cultural forces beyond one classroom.

Subcodes:

- F1. Administrative signaling
- F2. DEI / official language pressures
- F3. Student organization pressures
- F4. Institutional reputation management

- F5. Informal social networks
- F6. Pressure from alumni, donors, or public discourse
- F7. Bureaucratic caution

G. Conceptions of Free Speech / Academic Freedom

Use when a student defines free speech, academic freedom, or the limits of open inquiry.

Subcodes:

- G1. Strong defense of open inquiry
- G2. Free speech with limits
- G3. Distinction between speech and harm
- G4. Freedom versus responsibility
- G5. Formal rights versus lived reality

H. Perceived Consequences of Expressive Climate

Use when a student explains what happens because of this environment.

Subcodes:

- H1. Reduced debate
- H2. Narrowed inquiry
- H3. Intellectual homogeneity
- H4. Student disengagement
- H5. Private expression / public silence
- H6. Loss of trust
- H7. Distorted learning environment
- H8. Polarization intensifies

I. Resistance / Coping / Workarounds

Use when a student explains how they navigate the climate.

Subcodes:

- I1. Code-switching language
- I2. Self-monitoring
- I3. Speaking only in trusted spaces
- I4. Staying silent strategically
- I5. Testing the waters
- I6. Seeking alternative spaces
- I7. Quiet dissent

J. Proposed Reforms / Solutions

Use when a student discusses what should change.

Subcodes:

- J1. More ideological diversity
- J2. Better norms for disagreement
- J3. Clearer speech protections
- J4. Administrative neutrality
- J5. Better classroom facilitation

- J6. Curricular reform
- J7. Cultural rather than policy change

K. Tone / Certainty / Evidence Base

Use when evaluating the basis, confidence level, or internal consistency of a student's claim.
This is a cross-cutting code.

Subcodes:

- K1. Personal experience
- K2. Observation of others
- K3. Rumor / perception
- K4. Strong certainty
- K5. Hesitation / ambiguity
- K6. Contradiction or tension

L. Social Identity and Positional Awareness

Use when a student links willingness to speak to identity, status, or group membership.

Subcodes:

- L1. Political identity salience
- L2. Minority-status awareness
- L3. Social belonging concerns
- L4. Identity-based risk perception
- L5. Role conflict

M. Issue-Specific Sensitivity

Use when a student identifies certain topics as especially hard to discuss.

Subcodes:

- M1. Race
- M2. Gender / sexuality
- M3. Immigration
- M4. Israel / Palestine / foreign policy violence
- M5. Policing / crime
- M6. Trump / MAGA / conservative politics
- M7. Abortion / religion / morality
- M8. Topic-specific variability

N. Public vs. Private Expression

Use when a student distinguishes between where they can and cannot speak honestly.

Subcodes:

- N1. In class vs. outside class
- N2. With professors vs. with peers
- N3. In person vs. online
- N4. One-on-one vs. group setting
- N5. Anonymous vs. identified speech

Appendix F: Codebook for Faculty Interviews

A. Perceptions of Campus Ideological Climate

Use when a faculty member describes the overall political, social, or intellectual atmosphere on campus.

Subcodes:

- A1. Liberal dominance
- A2. Lack of ideological diversity
- A3. Variation by department, class, or campus space
- A4. Administratively shaped climate
- A5. Hidden diversity beneath surface conformity
- A6. Polarization

B. Faculty Self-Censorship

Use when a faculty member says they withhold, soften, reframe, or avoid expressing their views.

Subcodes:

- B1. Fear of colleague judgment
- B2. Fear of student complaints
- B3. Fear of administrative consequences
- B4. Fear of reputational damage
- B5. Strategic ambiguity
- B6. Avoidance of controversial topics
- B7. Selective disclosure of personal beliefs

C. Perceptions of Student Self-Censorship

Use when a faculty member describes students withholding views or being reluctant to speak.

Subcodes:

- C1. Conservative students staying quiet
- C2. Minority-opinion reluctance
- C3. Fear of peer backlash
- C4. Fear of grade consequences
- C5. Fear of social exclusion
- C6. Uneven participation by ideology

D. Classroom Dynamics

Use when the interview discusses how discussion actually operates in class.

Subcodes:

- D1. Open discussion
- D2. Discussion constrained by topic
- D3. Faculty-led framing effects
- D4. Students echoing dominant views
- D5. Tension around sensitive issues
- D6. Deliberate facilitation strategies
- D7. Avoidance of disagreement
- D8. Productive disagreement

E. Perceptions of Faculty Bias / Ideological Framing

Use when a faculty member discusses professors presenting material through a political lens.

Subcodes:

- E1. Explicit ideological framing
- E2. Implicit bias in teaching
- E3. One-sided presentation of issues
- E4. Activism replacing inquiry
- E5. Normative pressure toward “correct” views
- E6. Distinction between teaching and indoctrination

F. Institutional Pressures

Use when a faculty member points to broader institutional or cultural forces beyond one classroom.

Subcodes:

- F1. Administrative signaling
- F2. DEI / official language pressures
- F3. Hiring and promotion climate
- F4. Institutional reputation management
- F5. Informal faculty networks
- F6. Pressure from donors, alumni, or public discourse
- F7. Bureaucratic caution

G. Conceptions of Academic Freedom

Use when a faculty member defines academic freedom or the limits of open inquiry.

Subcodes:

- G1. Strong defense of open inquiry
- G2. Academic freedom with professional limits
- G3. Distinction between speech and pedagogy
- G4. Freedom versus responsibility
- G5. Formal rights versus practical realities

H. Perceived Consequences of Expressive Climate

Use when a faculty member explains what happens because of this environment.

Subcodes:

- H1. Reduced debate
- H2. Narrowed inquiry
- H3. Intellectual homogeneity
- H4. Student disengagement
- H5. Faculty silence
- H6. Loss of trust
- H7. Distorted learning environment
- H8. Polarization intensifies

I. Resistance / Coping / Workarounds

Use when a faculty member explains how they navigate the climate.

Subcodes:

- I1. Neutral facilitation
- I2. Deliberate balance in course design
- I3. Private mentoring of students
- I4. Self-monitoring language
- I5. Selective silence
- I6. Seeking ideologically diverse materials
- I7. Quiet dissent

J. Proposed Reforms / Solutions

Use when a faculty member discusses what should change.

Subcodes:

- J1. More ideological diversity
- J2. Better norms for disagreement
- J3. Clearer speech protections
- J4. Administrative neutrality
- J5. Faculty training on viewpoint diversity
- J6. Curricular reform
- J7. Cultural rather than policy change

K. Tone / Certainty / Evidence Base

Use when evaluating the basis, confidence level, or internal consistency of a faculty member's claim. This is a cross-cutting code.

Subcodes:

- K1. Personal experience
- K2. Observation of others
- K3. Rumor / perception
- K4. Strong certainty
- K5. Hesitation / ambiguity
- K6. Contradiction or tension

Appendix G: Statistical Methodology and R Syntax

The quantitative analysis in this study was performed using R (v4.2.1). To address the ordinal nature of the survey's Likert scales, Ordered Logistic Regression (Ordered Logit) was employed using the `polar` function from the `MASS` library. This method is superior to Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) for this data as it does not assume equal spacing between response categories and constraints predicted values to the 1–5 range.

1. Data Reconstruction

Because the raw data was collected in aggregate crosstabulation format, the following logic was used to reconstruct individual-level microdata ($N \approx 200$) for regression analysis.

R

```
# Load necessary library
```

```

library(MASS)
# Function to turn survey crosstabs into a data frame of individual responses
reconstruct_data <- function(matrix_data) {
  df <- data.frame(Ideology = integer(), Response = integer())
  for (i in 1:5) { # Ideology: 1 (Very Lib) to 5 (Very Cons)
    for (j in 1:5) { # Response: 1 to 5
      count <- matrix_data[i, j]
      if (count > 0) {
        df <- rbind(df, data.frame(Ideology = rep(i, count),
                                   Response = rep(j, count)))
      }
    }
  }
  # Response must be an ordered factor for Ordered Logit
  df$Response <- factor(df$Response, levels = 1:5, ordered = TRUE)
  return(df)
}

# Aggregate Data Input (Crosstabs)
# Rows: Ideology (1-5) | Columns: Response (1-5)
q27_data <- matrix(c(8,11,1,7,3, 5,25,20,24,3, 2,4,5,16,3, 1,1,2,6,6, 0,0,0,1,1), nrow=5,
byrow=T)
q21_data <- matrix(c(0,0,6,11,13, 1,1,19,40,20, 0,3,12,13,6, 1,4,7,2,1, 0,1,0,0,1), nrow=5,
byrow=T)
q22_data <- matrix(c(2,10,11,6,1, 4,20,34,17,3, 2,10,9,10,2, 0,0,2,10,3, 0,0,0,1,1), nrow=5,
byrow=T)

2. Regression Modeling Logic
The models calculate the impact of a student's ideology on three distinct dependent variables.
R
# --- MODEL 1: SELF-CENSORSHIP ---
df_censorship <- reconstruct_data(q27_data)
model1 <- polr(Response ~ Ideology, data = df_censorship, Hess = TRUE)
summary(model1)
# Odds Ratio Calculation: exp(coef(model1))
# --- MODEL 2: CLASSROOM OPENNESS ---
df_openness <- reconstruct_data(q21_data)
model2 <- polr(Response ~ Ideology, data = df_openness, Hess = TRUE)
summary(model2)
# --- MODEL 3: FACULTY SIGNALING ---
df_signaling <- reconstruct_data(q22_data)
model3 <- polr(Response ~ Ideology, data = df_signaling, Hess = TRUE)
Summary(model3)

3. Interpretation Methodology

```

For all models, the Odds Ratio was calculated using the formula $OR=e^{\beta}$. Statistical significance was determined using two-tailed p-values derived from the t-statistic. Predicted probabilities and predicted mean responses (Expected Values) were generated by applying the model's coefficients across the ideological spectrum (1 to 5) to visualize the “hollowing out” of the student experience as shown in Figures 2, 5, and 9.

Appendix H: Ideological Breakdown of Invited Speakers Classification Script (R)

Methodological Note: The classification of event metadata was governed by a three-tiered linguistic trigger system designed to detect the underlying “Framework Hegemony” of each talk:

- The “Liberal/Progressive” Trigger: Speakers were assigned this category when their titles or abstracts utilized the vocabulary of Critical Theory and social justice activism. Key lexical markers included “Systemic,” “Decolonize,” “Intersectionality,” “Queer Theory,” and “Pedagogies of Resistance.”
- The “Conservative/Traditional” Trigger: Events were categorized here when the framing focused on Western political philosophy, historical preservation, or realist statecraft. Primary markers included “Originalism,” “Sovereignty,” “Natural Law,” “Traditional,” “Conservatism” and “Market Realism.”
- The “Moderate/Institutional” Trigger: To maintain data integrity and prevent unfair skewing, topics focusing on non-partisan technical policy or “hard” sciences were labeled as Moderate/Institutional. For example, lectures on “Nuclear Physics,” “Macroeconomic Sanctions,” or “Technical Diplomacy” were classified as neutral unless the metadata explicitly introduced an identity-politics or Critical Theory framework.

This tiered approach ensures that the 5.1-to-1 aggregate ratio is not a result of “cherry-picking” but a statistical reflection of the linguistic and thematic monopoly currently present at Middlebury College through the studied organizations.

```
R
# Required Libraries
library(httr)
library(jsonlite)
library(dplyr)
# API Configuration
api_key <- "YOUR_API_KEY"
url <-
paste0("https://generativelanguage.googleapis.com/v1beta/models/gemini-3-flash:generateContent?key=", api_key)
classify_event <- function(title, description) {
```

```

# Define the prompt for the linguistic audit
prompt_text <- paste0(
  "Analyze the following Middlebury College guest speaker event metadata. ",
  "Classify it into one of three ideological frameworks based on linguistic markers:\n",
  "1. Liberal/Progressive: Keywords: Decolonization, Critical Theory, Social Change, Structural
Inequity, Marginalized.\n",
  "2. Moderate/Institutional: Keywords: Bipartisan, Technical Policy, Non-partisan Statecraft,
Diplomacy.\n",
  "3. Conservative/Traditional: Keywords: Western Tradition, Constitutionalism, Natural Law,
Market Realism, Sovereignty.\n\n",
  "Title: ", title, "\n",
  "Description: ", description, "\n\n",
  "Return ONLY the category name."
)
# API Request Body
body <- list(contents = list(list(parts = list(list(text = prompt_text))))))

response <- POST(url, body = body, encode = "json")

# Parse and return result
res_content <- content(response, as = "parsed")
return(res_content$candidates[[1]]$content$parts[[1]]$text)
}
# Load Speaker Dataset
# Dataset includes 262 RCGA events, 39 AHF events, and 12 CTC events
speakers_df <- read.csv("middlebury_speakers_2019_2026.csv")
# Apply classification to all rows
speakers_df <- speakers_df %>%
  rowwise() %>%
  mutate(Ideology = classify_event(Title, Description))
# Generate the frequency counts for the report
table(speakers_df$Ideology)

```

Appendix H: IRB Survey Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study examining students' perceptions of classroom climate, political expression, and free speech in higher education. Participation involves completing an anonymous online survey that will take approximately 15 minutes. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may skip any question or stop the survey at any time

without penalty. The survey does not collect identifying information, and all responses will remain anonymous and will be analyzed in aggregate. At the end of the survey, you will have the option to indicate whether you are willing to be contacted for a follow-up in-person interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. Indicating interest in a follow-up interview is optional. If you choose to provide contact information for this purpose, it will be collected separately from your survey responses and will not be linked to your answers, ensuring that the survey itself remains anonymous. As a thank you, you will also have the option to enter a raffle for one (1) \$50 Two Brothers Tavern Gift Card. If you choose to provide contact information for this purpose, it will be collected separately from your survey responses and will not be linked to your answers, ensuring that the survey itself remains anonymous. There are no direct benefits to you for participating, and the study involves minimal risk. Some questions ask about personal perceptions or experiences related to classroom discussion, which you may find sensitive. You may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable.

If you have any concerns or questions about my research, you can contact me at IGAMERO@MIDDLEBURY.EDU

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the Middlebury College Institutional Review Board at IRB@middlebury.edu.

By proceeding with the survey, you indicate that you are at least 18 years old and that you consent to participate in this study.

Appendix F: IRB Interview Oral Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. Before we begin, I want to review some important information about the study.

This interview is part of a research project examining students' and faculty members' perceptions of classroom climate, disagreement, and free expression in higher education. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question, take a break, or stop the interview at any time without penalty. With your permission, this interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. The recording will be transcribed, and any identifying information will be removed. Pseudonyms will be used in all written materials.

The study involves minimal risk, though some questions may touch on personal or sensitive experiences related to classroom discussion or disagreement. There are no direct benefits to participating, and you will not be compensated for this interview.

Do you have any questions about the study? Do you consent to participate in this interview? Do you consent to the audio recording of this interview?

