Viewpoint Diversity at UNC Charlotte

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Abstract:

Introduction: A number of recent surveys have shown that college campuses are becoming intolerant of different viewpoints. Part of the mission of any college should be to create a space where different viewpoints can be debated in a healthy, intellectual way. To gauge the campus climate at their own University, the authors deployed a survey to business students asking how comfortable they were sharing and responding to different viewpoints.

Methods: Business students were surveyed for their attitudes towards diverse viewpoints. The survey instrument has been used at other colleges to survey students for several years.

Results: A portion of students are censoring their views on controversial topics. There is often a reluctance to present honest viewpoints in the classroom.

Discussion: Faculty needs to be mindful of the classroom environment they create. Colleges should be a major place where different viewpoints are discussed and debated.

Limitations: Only business students were surveyed. There may be different outcomes for students in other majors.

Conclusions: These results suggest that many students are self-censoring their views in class. Faculty should be aware of this and create an environment where different viewpoints are welcome.

Key words: viewpoint diversity, teaching, business students.

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Introduction

A college campus should be a place for intellectual exploration. However, a number of recent surveys show that students are becoming increasingly reluctant to discuss controversial topics in class. For example, the 2021 Campus Expression Survey by the Heterodox Academy showed that 60% of students were hesitant to discuss at least one controversial topic.

The knowledge imparted in an academic setting is just one part of higher education goals. Perhaps more important is the sharpening of critical thinking. In other words, the classroom shouldn't teach you what to think. Instead, the academic experience should teach us how to think. Additionally, students should be learning how to respectfully disagree with one another. In a world of tweets, posts, and texts, this is a lesson easily forgotten. Teaching students how to think and how to respect others' thinking is an important tenet of democracy that universities have upheld for centuries.

The promotion of diversity in all its forms is a profoundly consensual idea in contemporary education, and with good reason. Diversity, in general, is associated with greater strength and vitality. This principle is true whether discussing genetic diversity, which helps prevent diseases, or the diversification of an investment portfolio, or the diversity of ideas.

The diversity of ideas and the interaction of ideas are central to the traditional idea of university campuses. Campus should be associated with thinking and the exchange of ideas through knowledge spillovers. Universities often advertise themselves as institutions created for the pursuit of truth. Progress comes when students and faculty challenge dogmatic ideas that have outlived their usefulness. The story of the theory of relativity replacing Newtonian physics is countless examples of a long-held truth challenged and replaced through critical thinking.

But viewpoint diversity is more than just a boon to research and education. It encourages intellectual humility by fostering the atmosphere that there is no one acceptable viewpoint. Yet there is an oppressive lack of ideational pluralism among students and faculty all too often. Why does this matter? In our polarized society, many citizens feel absolute certainty in the validity of their opinions. This close-mindedness allows proponents to dehumanize ideological opponents. The genuine encouragement of viewpoint diversity can help heal our society and create a bedrock for a healthier civil discourse.

The purpose of this study is to analyze student viewpoint diversity at a large Southern public university. In order to foster viewpoint diversity and keep critical thinking traditions alive at universities, we need to know students' opinions and attitudes about their ability to express their viewpoints. For this study, students majoring in business were surveyed for their opinions on viewpoint diversity on campus. The results are presented below and discussed.

1   Overview

You will not find too many people who are ideologically opposed to viewpoint diversity in the classroom. And yet, it can be difficult to foster. First, we must remember that students are young and often insecure about their intellectual capabilities and social role within the peer group. A potential reason students are hesitant to discuss their views in class is the perceived negative comments from classmates (Larson, McNeilly, & Ryan, 2020). However, most surveyed students state that they would be open to diverse viewpoints in class. Therefore, students' perceived fear of the consequences of speaking out is not entirely realistic. This dynamic means creating a positive classroom environment for exploration is critical to make sure students' voices are heard.

Many initiatives have focused on the role of students in encouraging viewpoint diversity. For example, Heterodox Academy has a stated mission to "improve the quality of research and education in universities by increasing open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement." To encourage student viewpoint diversity, they have created a questionnaire and activity set for the people who are most influenced by the issue (Heterodox Academy, 2022).

This paper focuses on studying viewpoint diversity in the classroom. Students can join groups or interact online with like-minded individuals in our increasingly polarized society. While this may be enjoyable, this does not promote intellectual growth. If students are primarily discussing their views with like-minded peers outside of class, this will lead to more polarization and distortion. We view the classroom as a pivotal space to have students develop their individual views. Students can develop solid intellectual views that recognize diverse perspectives through debate and discourse. Through civil discussion, students can see different viewpoints and learn to seek common ground.

2   Literature review

Much of the literature on viewpoint diversity is provided by pressure groups of various sorts. One of the most common discussion points relating to viewpoint diversity is academia's alleged liberal or left-wing bias (Inbar & Lammers, 2012). However, there are counterclaims that this bias does not exist or it has little influence (Burmila, 2021). Unsurprisingly, these claims come mostly from right-wing scholars and advocates. However, there have been similar claims from the left that there is a tamping down on healthy criticism and dissent from orthodox opinions (Gordon, 2009). If so, there is no meaningful debate in the literature on whether viewpoint diversity is valuable and desirable. Instead, disagreements center on how severe the problem is empirically.

A related body of work focuses on the importance of critical thinking in the classroom. While critical-thinking and viewpoint diversity are not the same, these elements are deeply intertwined and facilitate each other. Much like viewpoint diversity, there is a large amount of literature exhorting teachers to embrace critical thinking (Kamii, 1991; Murawski, 2014). Other literature on the classroom focuses solely on the debate in political science courses and the study of potential indoctrination of students by faculty. But these studies indicate that students support the need for freedom of speech and alternative viewpoints in the classroom (Rom, 2021; Woessner & Maranto, 2021). One issue with studies on ideology in the classroom is the focus on political science students. Studying political science introduces bias into studies because these students likely already have a base political belief before coming to the university. This study looks at business students to analyze how average students who may not be engaged in politics feel about viewpoint diversity. The debate, such as it is, is only over which measures are best suited to impart critical thinking tools to students.

Since our future research leaders come from the ranks of university students, an ideationally homogenous environment will have a material influence on future scientific advances. The absence of viewpoint diversity focuses on students' research questions and inquiries to similar avenues. Contrarily, it renders other questions and assumptions culturally taboo. That means that beliefs are held for their social capital rather than their ability to withstand scrutiny. Therefore, a lack of diversity allows false narratives to stand and does not allow for the possibility that stronger arguments exist outside the consensus (Inbar & Lammers, 2012).

The absence of viewpoint diversity in the classroom will also negatively influence the workforce. Employers consistently cite the ability to think critically as one of their primary criteria for hiring (Sanders, 2021). However, a lack of viewpoint diversity in the classroom means that students' assumptions are not materially challenged, and critical thinking skills will be correspondingly weaker. Indeed, employers often complain that young graduate applicants for jobs are woefully lacking in their critical-thinking skills (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2021).

Research has also shown that viewpoint diversity is a crucial component for developing cognition in first-year college students (Goodman, 2017). Increasing evidence shows that some colleges are becoming less tolerant to opposing viewpoints (Revers & Traunmüller, 2020; Delhez, 2020). Universities and students are increasingly putting forth a "greater good" argument for restricting free speech on campus (Sengupta & Blessinger, 2020). At the same time, many Universities are not including viewpoint diversity in their legal protections (Rozado, & Atkins, 2018).

These trends continue even though evidence mount that this limits the development of critical thinking (Fenton and Smith, 2019). Lack of political diversity can also limit progress in specific subjects, like psychology and sociology (Duarte et al., 2015; Haaga, 2020; Baehr, 2020). Research suggests increasing viewpoint diversity will help Universities fulfill their core mission of advancing knowledge (Whittington, 2020).

3 Survey procedure

An online survey was distributed in the fall 2021 semester to select students. This survey was created by the Heterodox Academy to study student opinions on viewpoint on diversity on campus (https://heterodoxacademy.org/library/ campus-expression-survey-manual/). These results are compiled with results from other schools to produce the Campus Expression Survey mentioned above.

The survey format was an online survey with a link sent via email. Students who completed the survey received a $5 gift card. The survey was voluntary and not connected to the grades of any course. The results were anonymous and no individual student's data was released.

The survey link was sent to students in sections of two classes: Principles of Macroeconomics, a sophomore level required course for business majors, and Managerial Economics, a junior level required course for all business majors. There was no separation of results for students from these two classes.

The survey link was emailed to 834 students in total. From that, 87 students started the survey. Of those 87 surveys, 67 were fully completed and 20 were partially completed. Both completed and partial surveys were included in the analysis.

4 Results

Two surveys (A and B, respectively) were disseminated to students in an effort to gauge ideational diversity in the classroom, on campus and between peers (see Appendix for survey document and raw survey results). The surveys were sub-divided into "blocks" of themes, such as empathy toward others with differing viewpoints, openness to new or different perspectives, and flexibility around personally-held viewpoints. 87 total participants were surveyed in total, although many did not ultimately complete the surveys in their totality. Blocks varied in length, ranging from 3 prompts at a time (e.g., Survey B - Block 8) to 18 (e.g., Survey B - Block 5). With a few exceptions when it came to straightforward demographic prompts such as questions about the participants' age or race, the standard format of measurement was a Likert scale. Participants were also asked questions about their family's income and provided with scales

to indicate their level of coldness or warmth toward politically liberal or conservative people.

Before participating in the survey, respondents consented to answering approximately 51-71 questions about their perceptions of their college campus climate, acknowledged the confidentiality of their responses, and were provided with instructions allowing them to receive an optional Amazon gift card for $5, if they wished to do so. Participants also agreed to provide thoughtful and honest answers to the questions in the survey and agreed to be 18 years of age or older. Both surveys showed that 100% of respondents lived in the United States and were full-time students. Of the respondents surveyed, 1 participant identified as American Indian or an Alaska Native, 16 identified as Asian, 7 identified as Black, 11 identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 6 identified as Middle Eastern, 1 identified as Pacific Islander, and 28 identified as White. 30 total respondents identified as men, 37 identified as women, and an overwhelming majority identified as straight, with only a handful identifying as gay, bisexual, or providing an alternate response such as "exploring."

Survey A contained 10 blocks and 67 total questions/prompts and Survey B contained 6 blocks and 49 total questions/prompts. In Survey A - Block 2, participants were provided with 7 prompts around empathy and flexibility, with prompts such as: "When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to 'put myself in their shoes' for a while." (Question 7) and "I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both." (Question 4). Participants demonstrated an aptitude for empathy on the whole, with 45 percent of respondents claiming the statement "Before criticizing someone, I try to imagine how it would feel if I were in their place." described them fairly well. A third of respondents responded that the statement "If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments." described them a little (on a scale of does not describe me to describes me very well). To the prompt "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective." 20 out of 31 respondents claimed that the statement described them fairly well, with no respondents saying that the statement did not describe them, and 5, or 16 percent, claiming the statement described them very well. It appears based on the data that most students are empathetic to the rights of others to hold differing viewpoints, and most respondents find value in viewpoint diversity.

In Survey A - Block 3, participants were provided prompts around empathy, to which a Likert scale was also used to assess the full range of responses. Prompts included "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me." (Question 10) and "I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person." (Question 11). Question 10 yielded some variation, with less than 1 percent of respondents claiming the prompt "does not describe me," around a

fifth of percent of respondents claiming that the prompt described them a little, a quarter percent claiming the statement described them somewhat well, and nearly half claiming the statement described them fairly well, and less than 1 percent claiming the statement described them very well. Overall, the empathy block showed that a vast majority of participants expressed empathy toward others experiencing misfortune or pain, with participants who claimed that empathic statements did not describe them outliers. Most respondents fell somewhere in the middle, qualifying their statements by relating "a little" or "fairly well" to the prompts. Notably, participants demonstrated a sensitivity to external occurrences in Question 14: "I am often quite touched by things that I see happen." by responding that this described them very well, fairly well, somewhat described them, described them a little, with no respondents saying that the statement did not describe them.

Table 1 provides an overview of the general level of student empathy.

Table 1

General level of student empathy

Survey Question	*Average*
Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.	3.2
If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments.	2.5
I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.	3.9
I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.	3.8
I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other person's" point of view.	2.1
I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.	3.7
Scale:	
Does not describe me (1)	
Describes me a little (2)	
Somewhat describes me (3)	
Describes me fairly well (4)	
Describes me very well (5)	

In Block 4, flexibility around viewpoints and an ability to reconsider opinions was assessed. Participants were provided with prompts such as: "I recognize the value in opinions that are different from my own." (Question 17) and "In the face of conflicting evidence, I am open to changing my opinions." (Question 19). Overall, the results of the survey revealed quite a bit of variation not only in the respondents' demographic makeup and identities, but in how comfortable they felt expressing their viewpoints on campus for fear of making others uncomfortable. In Block 9, respondents were asked questions about their specific experiences on campus. To Question 40, "Think about being at your college in a class that was discussing a controversial issue about Politics. How comfortable or reluctant would you feel about speaking up and giving your views on this topic?" out of 44 surveyed, 10 claimed they would be "very reluctant" giving their views. 15 claimed they would be "somewhat reluctant," 12 would be "somewhat comfortable," and 7 would feel "very comfortable." Even though respondents find value in viewpoint diversity, there is still reluctance over expressing one's own viewpoints.

The results of the campus climate module are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Results of the campus climate module

Survey Question	Average
Giving your views on GENDER	2.0
Giving your views on POLITICS	2.6
Giving your views on RACE OR ETHNICITY	2.0
Giving your views on RELIGION	2.2
Giving your views on SEXUAL ORIENTATION	2.0
Giving your views on NON-CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC	1.6

Scale:
 I would be very comfortable giving my views. (1)
 I would be somewhat comfortable giving my views. (2)
 I would be somewhat reluctant giving my views. (3)
 I would be very reluctant giving my views. (4)

In Survey B - Block 2, respondents were asked about their comfort level discussing controversial topics relating to identity in the classroom. When asked "How often does your college/university encourage students to consider a wider variety of viewpoints and perspectives?" (Question 72) revealed a substantial variation, with less than 2 respondents responding never, 1 student responded very rarely, 8 students answering rarely, 17 students answering occasionally, 12

students answering frequently, and 3 students answering very frequently. This question in particular ought to be taken with a grain of salt, depending on how much students' preexisting belief and value systems align with those of the University. However, in trying to gauge ideational variation, the number of students responding never, very rarely, or rarely, should be noted as a potentially concerning point worth flagging for administrators especially given students' support for diversity of opinions.

Table 3 presents these results.

Table 3

Students' support for diversity of opinions

Survey Question	*Average*
The climate on my campus prevents me from saying things I believe because others might find them offensive.	2.5
The climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive.	2.2
I am able to share ideas and ask questions without fear of retaliation, even if those ideas are offensive to some people.	3.3
Regardless of my point of view, I am treated as a valued contributor to conversations.	3.7
My college welcomes students and professors with a lot of different points of view.	4.2
My college encourages students and professors to interact respectfully with people whose beliefs differ from their own.	4.1
My college encourages students and professors to be open to learning from people whose beliefs differ from their own.	3.8
Scale:	
Strongly disagree (1)	
Somewhat disagree (2)	
Neither agree nor disagree (3)	
Somewhat agree (4)	
Strongly agree (5)	

The surveys revealed vast heterogeneity in a number of key areas, such as comfort around expressing beliefs others might find offensive on campus or feeling like a valued contributor to conversations. However, students tended to mostly agree that their college welcomed students and professors with a lot of different points of view. This, however, somewhat contradicts the finding that

many respondents felt that their university does not encourage students to consider a wide range of viewpoints and perspectives. Very few respondents indicated that they would be "very reluctant" to provide their opinions on controversial issues around sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, or religion however a considerable percentage indicated they would feel somewhat reluctant.

It can be interpreted as an encouraging sign that most participants appear to be open to engaging in uncomfortable conversations, and have indicated an openness to both changing their viewpoints and demonstrating empathy toward those with differing viewpoints. When it came to the question: "How important to your sense of identity is your political ideology?" (Question 63) 8 respondents said "very important," 11 said "somewhat important," 17 said "somewhat important," and 3 said "not at all important." Participants also claimed they had a low rate of interaction with other students on campus, probably due in a large part to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The imposition of at-home working and anxiety around in-person learning may discourage students from socializing as they would in other circumstances.

5 Limitations

Overall, the surveys were limited by respondents' partial responses, the relatively small sample sizes and frequently conflicting results. Still, the surveys revealed some large and perhaps surprising variation when it came to feelings toward politically conservative or liberal people, with a huge degree of variation in the results. This would suggest students experience (although perhaps unknowingly) quite a strong degree of political diversity on-campus, although may feel uncomfortable discussing their political beliefs amongst one another, unless directly prompted to do so within classroom settings. For the most part, respondents indicated moderately high levels of empathy for others who were less fortunate and a willingness to view disagreements from multiple perspectives. To the prompt "I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision." (6), most respondents claimed that they felt this statement described them fairly well. Two other notable areas where respondents experienced high levels of variation were in religious diversity and family income. Many respondents opted not to disclose their family's income. Moving forward, it would behoove researchers to ask specific questions about what might be preventing them from engaging with others whose belief vary from their own and ensure that all respondents completed the entirety of the survey provided, rather than having mismatched sample sizes with only partial responses.

Conclusion

The variable responses from this survey indicate the need for more study on student's viewpoints as well as their ability to express their viewpoints in the classroom. Classrooms should be open areas of free expression where students learn from one another as well as from faculty members to be open to new ideas. Universities have long served the function as areas for intellectual exploration and knowledge transfers. Based on our research in this survey, students self-censor even while supporting the rights of others to express diverse viewpoints. Students also report a lack of encouragement for opposing viewpoints on campus. Taken together, it is possible that students self-censor due to a combination of insufficient institutional/university support and the fear of negative feedback from other students. This opens an opportunity for institutions to change the narrative and environment to foster more viewpoint diversity on campuses and in classrooms. Students appear willing, but the big question is, are universities?

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