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Strengthening Wisconsin.*

PROFS Statement on the University of Wisconsin System Survey on Free Speech

On Wednesday, February 1, University of Wisconsin System President Jay Rothman [released](#) a survey of student's understandings of the First Amendment and of their opinions of the extent to which their universities promote free expression.

Despite real [problems](#) with the survey, we are still able to distill some useful information, including about what the University of Wisconsin is doing right to promote free speech, academic freedom, and the deliberation about diverse and sometimes uncomfortable perspectives:

- Fewer than one in seven students believe that their universities are not doing a good job at promoting free expression different from those they themselves hold.
- Fewer than one in six students believe that they are not encouraged to explore diverse viewpoints in classes where viewpoint diversity is relevant to the topic of the course, and
- Fewer than one in ten students feel that they have been discouraged to explore diverse viewpoints.
- Fewer than one in five students report that they are uncomfortable airing unpopular views, and
- Fewer than one in ten students reported feeling pressure to agree with a particular political or ideological point of view in class.

These data suggest that our universities are doing a remarkably good job at promoting precisely what universities are for: to encourage diversity of viewpoints, help students become comfortable in both airing difficult positions and, frankly, becoming uncomfortable with difficult information. But they also speak to the effects of political polarization in our public sphere, a polarization that causes students to sometimes dig in to political and ideological viewpoints so much that they do not want those viewpoints challenged.

The UW System survey shows that while there is still work to be done, its universities are challenging their students to consider viewpoints different from their own; to understand that being challenged is sometimes uncomfortable, but also absolutely crucial to move beyond merely stating an opinion to being able to support that opinion with facts; and to understand that while the First Amendment protects what people say from the interference of the government, it doesn't protect them from the approval or opprobrium of their peers.

We look forward to digging further into the survey's data, both to understand what it can tell us and what it cannot, and to figure out what we can do to bolster the good work we are already doing.

February 9, 2023