

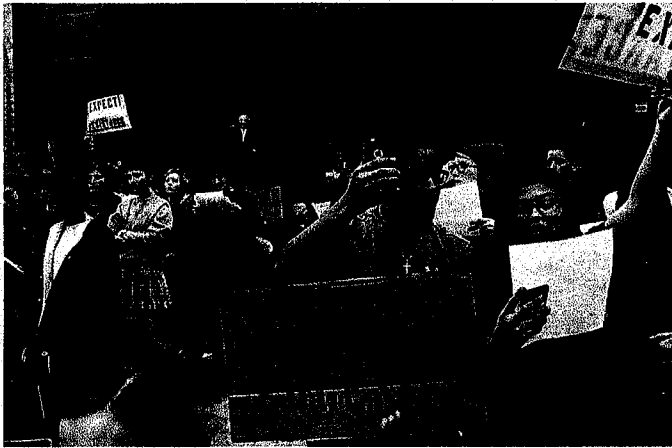
## THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

FACULTY

# The Real Free-Speech Crisis Is Professors Being Disciplined for Liberal Views, a Scholar Finds

By *Chris Quintana* | APRIL 30, 2018

✓ PREMIUM



Lisa Rathke/AP Images

As popularly articulated, the campus free-speech debate is about right-wing speakers' being shut down or interrupted by protesters, as when people interrupted Charles Murray last year at Middlebury College. But one researcher found that professors are more likely to be disciplined for liberal speech than conservative speech.

But a professor of political science at Canada's Acadia University, Jeffrey Adam Sachs, has compiled a new data set that he said suggests the free-speech crisis, as popularly articulated, is overblown, as President Trump put it in March.

In an essay he wrote for a think tank, the Niskanen Center, Sachs found that professors are dismissed more often for liberal comments than for conservative ones, based on his data set of academics who have been fired or otherwise punished in recent years. He said

Many conservative pundits will tell you that one of the most vaunted of American values, free speech, is under siege by undergraduates across the nation. And their prime targets are conservative speakers, among them Milo Yiannopoulos, whose aborted speech last year at the University of California at Berkeley at the hands of riotous protesters still serves as evidence of the intolerant left.

But a professor of political science at Canada's Acadia University, Jeffrey Adam Sachs, has compiled a new data set that he

his essay was a deliberate attempt to quench the fiery rhetoric that engulfs conversations about free speech, and in the process maybe cool off overheated lawmakers.

"I still am alarmed at the way this crisis narrative is driving politicians to do everything from purposely stripping tenure to closing departments to cutting back financing," Sachs told *The Chronicle*. "We need to take a big, deep breath and calm down a bit and not let our own alarm drive the debate."

That argument is one of many in recent weeks that attempts to debunk the idea of a free-speech crisis on campuses using quantitative data. They say critics of colleges have used high-profile incidents, including a handful of canceled and interrupted speeches, to paint an inaccurate picture of what's actually happening on campuses.

(Speeches that go off without a hitch rarely make headlines; for example, Yiannopoulos spoke without incident at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo on Thursday, according to the local newspaper.)

Sachs's essay is just the latest salvo in the battle between those scholars and critics who believe the crisis is real.

A reliable source for the counterargument is the Heterodox Academy, a group of professors who are concerned "that many academic fields and universities currently lack sufficient viewpoint diversity — particularly political diversity," according to their website.

### **'Is That a Crisis?'**

Jonathan Haidt and Sean Stevens wrote in a pair of posts on the site in mid-March that concern is warranted and that attention should be paid to the younger generation of college students because of their changing attitude toward free speech on campuses.

Haidt, who is a professor in the school of business at New York University, told *The Chronicle* on Monday that those who deny there has been a major shift in students' attitudes have made a good contribution to the debate.

But when you look at where the most aggressive and violent shutdowns of free speech have occurred, he said, it's campuses in the Northeast, the West Coast, and Chicago — home to many of the nation's elite institutions.

"And is that a crisis?" Haidt asked. "If the speech dynamic, at many or most of our elite campuses, has changed so that professors are more afraid of being provocative and that administrators are more afraid of inviting a speaker on the right, so that students are more afraid of saying what they think in a seminar class? I would call that a crisis even if it's confined to a few hundred schools."

(Haidt said, however, that he would tone down his use of the word "crisis" in the future.)

Haidt said students graduating from those institutions will have a ripple effect on society. They go on to become tomorrow's politicians and lawmakers. And many of the graduates will join creative or technology industries where, he said, similar culture-war battles have erupted in recent years.

But Haidt did say he agreed with Sachs that legislation isn't the answer, and that well-intending lawmakers may often exacerbate the problem.

Sachs, who appeared to craft his analysis in response to the Heterodox pieces, considered 45 incidents from 2015 to 2017 in which professors were fired, suspended, or otherwise punished. Of the 26 he found in 2017, for example, 19 had made liberal comments. He added the caveat that the finding would make sense given that college faculties lean left.

But he said that some conservative groups, such as Turning Point USA and Campus Reform, can disseminate talking points to the right in a way unmatched by the left. As a result, he said, it's common to hear more about conservative faculty members' being censored. (For what it's worth, Haidt came to a similar finding when he noted that faculty members had to worry about attacks from the left on campus and the right off campus.)

Sachs said the number of contingent faculty members is undercounted in his data set because a college can opt to effectively punish adjuncts by not renewing their contracts, a step that could be chalked up to the normal operating costs and needs of a department.

Sachs also said that in 2017 colleges sharply increased the number of contingent faculty members they terminated or otherwise let go, compared with previous years. He said that he lacked a precise working theory for the rise, but that it could be tied to the fact that many of them had made comments about President Trump or his cabinet.

"I worry that administrations are making the choice to cut these people loose really quickly because it's better to do that than risk having the name of the university splashed over the pages of the Daily Caller or Tucker Carlson's program on Fox," Sachs said. "It's far better to cut these people loose really quickly or bury them in an investigation that is ultimately going to result in a nonrenewal of contract."

*Correction (5/1/2018, 11:15 a.m.):* This article originally reported that Milo Yiannopoulos spoke at Cal Poly at San Luis Obispo on Friday night. He spoke on Thursday. The article has been updated to reflect that correction.

*Chris Quintana is a staff reporter. Follow him on Twitter @cquintanadc or email him at [chris.quintana@chronicle.com](mailto:chris.quintana@chronicle.com).*

*A version of this article appeared in the May 11, 2018 issue.*

© 2019 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037