

Tommy G. Thompson Center: UW-Madison faculty survey reveals ideological imbalance and its consequences

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Study finds conservative viewpoints face asymmetric treatment across hiring and campus climate but challenges the assumption that racial and viewpoint diversity are in tension

MADISON—A new survey of UW-Madison faculty finds that conservative viewpoints face asymmetric treatment in hiring decisions and that conservative faculty who express controversial opinions experience institutional consequences at substantially higher rates than their liberal colleagues.

The study, released today by the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership, was authored by Center Director Alex Tahk, Associate Professor of Political Science. It surveyed tenured and tenure-track faculty across all schools and colleges at the university.

“We designed this study to move past assumptions and get rigorous evidence,” said Tahk. “I don’t think the findings will entirely fit anyone’s preconceptions.”

Key Findings from the Report:

* UW-Madison faculty are substantially more liberal than the general public and Americans with doctoral degrees. Seven in ten identify as liberal; fewer than one in ten identify as conservative.

- * Faculty of color are slightly more likely to identify as conservative than white colleagues—suggesting that pursuing racial diversity need not mean sacrificing viewpoint diversity.
- * Across a range of policy topics, many faculty would be less likely to support hiring a candidate who expressed a conservative view. Faculty were up to 38 percentage points more likely to penalize a conservative view than a liberal one.
- * While liberal faculty are more likely to express controversial views, conservative faculty who do so report experiencing institutional consequences—such as warnings from administrators—at substantially higher rates.
- * Conservative faculty report feeling less welcome on campus, less comfortable expressing their views, and less confident that their speech rights are protected.
- * A majority of faculty demonstrate a reasonable understanding of First Amendment protections. Faculty with lower knowledge were more likely to support university prohibition of hate speech.

“The findings paint a picture of an environment where conservative faculty feel marginalized and face differential treatment,” said Tahk. “But there are also grounds for optimism: large majorities of faculty, regardless of ideology or race, believe it is important for both underrepresented racial groups and conservatives to feel included on campus.”

The full report, *Faculty Perspectives on Academic Freedom, Free Expression and Campus Climate at the University of Wisconsin–Madison*, is available at <https://thompsoncenter.wisc.edu/faculty-survey>.

The Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership is a nonpartisan institute at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. It was established in 2017 by act of the Wisconsin Legislature.