

Remarks as prepared, 2.1.2023

News conference, UW Oshkosh

- **ROTHMAN:** I'm Jay Rothman, president of the University of Wisconsin System. Welcome to UW Oshkosh. Today we are sharing the responses from our survey on free speech. Last fall we invited more than half of the entire UW System student body to participate in this survey and the response was impressive. That tells me that students have a strong interest in speech and expression. I thank them very much for their participation and candor. One of the things I like best about this job is listening to students, and this survey shows that they have something to say.
- Joining me is **Eric Giordano (Jor-DON-o)**, executive director of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service. Eric led the survey and he was assisted by a team

of expert faculty members: **Tim Shiell (SHEEL)**, professor of philosophy and director of the Menard Center for the Study of Institutions and Innovation at UW-Stout; **April Bleske-Rechek [BLESS-key – REE-check]**, professor of psychology at UW-Eau Claire; **Geoffrey [JEFF-ree] Peterson**, professor of political science at UW-Eau Claire; and **Eric Kasper [KASS-per]**, professor of political science and director of the Menard Center for Constitutional Studies at UW-Eau Claire. The team was advised by a diverse group of faculty members, advocates, and others across Wisconsin. Eric.

- **GIORDANO:** Thanks, Jay. As Jay noted, we sent the survey to more than 83,000 students across the UW System and had an overall response rate of 12.5 percent, for a total of 10,445 respondents. This is really impressive. Moreover, the profile of those students parallels that of the UW System student body as a whole. Only three universities

registered fewer than 500 respondents, but in each case the response rate was very strong – 11.4 percent, 12.6 percent, and 16.7 percent. We feel we have a solid, representative sample of the student body with low margins for error.

- We also feel this survey is unique across higher education in the United States in its depth and breadth.
- **ROTHMAN:** We undertook the survey to determine the climate on our campuses surrounding freedom of expression and students' understanding of the First Amendment.
- These are important topics for any institution of higher education. Our universities must be marketplaces of ideas, where students are exposed to various ideas and perspectives that will help them improve their ability to think critically and creatively, analyze issues thoughtfully, and ascertain the accuracy of available information.

These skill sets are important to our long-term economic prosperity, the advancement of knowledge, and the viability of our democracy. They are particularly important in a politically polarized environment in which some sources of information attempt to present themselves as having a monopoly on the truth.

- Our universities also need to be models of civil dialogue, where critical ideas are debated passionately, vigorously, and civilly. The challenges facing our state and nation are complicated and nuanced, and they will not be resolved with sound bites and tweets. They must be discussed and debated to find viable solutions. We must be able to probe deeply and, in good faith, ask questions without fear of being labeled or marginalized. It is essential that we promote an environment in which people can express their views.

- Civil dialogue does not, however, mean that we will all agree; rather, it implies that varying viewpoints and approaches will be shared and debated. We must model that it is acceptable to agree to disagree. Our universities do not exist to change students' minds. The goal of the educational journey must be to inform, offer different perspectives, and provide tools to promote critical thought and creativity. Ultimately, it is up to the student to make up his or her mind on any given topic.
- Now I'd like to offer a few observations and then share some of the results of the survey.
- The first observation: these results aren't surprising to me. We are a divided country – politically, socially, economically, and culturally. And these divisions are reflected in the opinions expressed by our students as well as in their understanding of First Amendment issues. Our students have lived this experience before they step

onto our campuses – in high schools and workplaces, on social media, and with family and friends.

- Two: The data are invaluable. They give us insight into the thinking of our students, provide us a roadmap for helping our students understand the foundational principles of our democracy, and give our university system an opportunity to serve as leaders in helping bridge these political, social, economic and cultural divides. That's why I'm really excited about our Civil Dialogue initiatives, which we introduced last fall when we announced the survey. In fact, after this news conference we'll have a panel discussion on this topic followed by our first "It's Just Coffee" event with students with varied perspectives discussing the results of the survey.
- The third and final observation—and most important: Our students reported that our faculty and instructors are

doing a good job facilitating robust discussion in the classroom – even if students don’t always feel comfortable sharing their own opinions. The data show that a strong majority of students say faculty and instructors “sometimes,” “often,” or “extremely often” encourage students to explore a wide range of viewpoints. [FIGURE 21] I appreciate the work of our faculty and instructors in facilitating student learning in this way. Universities can’t claim to be the standard-bearer for free and open inquiry unless we meet that standard in the classroom.

- On to the other results.
- The survey results indicate that students aren’t that likely to consider viewpoints they disagree with, and that’s even more the case for certain topics like abortion or transgender issues. [FIGURE 2] However, on many issues more students are “very” or “extremely” comfortable

expressing their views compared to “a little” or “not at all” comfortable expressing their views. [FIGURE 3]

- When asked if they agreed that administrators should ban the expression of views they believe cause harm, more than half replied “not at all” or “a little.” By contrast, only one in five believe “quite a bit” or “a great deal” that administrators should ban the expression of such views. [TABLE 17] More self-identified liberals than moderates or conservatives believe such bans are appropriate.
- Nearly half say they agree “not at all” or “a little” that administrators should disinvite public speakers if some students believe the speaker’s message is offensive. But about one in three students think “quite a bit” or “a great deal” that administrators should disinvite such speakers. [SECTION IV: INVITED SPEAKERS]. Again, we see a divergence here based on political beliefs.



- Earlier I mentioned that students say faculty by and large create an atmosphere supportive of free expression. Still, one in three students say they felt pressured by an instructor to agree with a particular viewpoint in class or on an assignment. [TABLE 30]
- We asked those students who do express views in class to explain why they do so. There were a number of reasons that received a very strong response, including that the students felt they knew enough about the topic, that they cared about the topic, and that they were in a class that encouraged discussion. [FIGURE 27]
- We asked a similar question of those students who didn't express views in class. Some worried that other students would disagree with their views, or that the instructor would find their views offensive, or that they would get a lower grade. [FIGURE 28]

- More than half of our students, 57 percent, reported wanting to express their views about a controversial topic in class but decided not to. [TABLE 32] More than 50 percent of the students who consider themselves “somewhat” or “very” liberal didn’t speak up while that percentage increased for students who considered themselves “somewhat” conservative – 69 percent – or “very” conservative – 75 percent.
- We also wanted to gauge what students were learning about the First Amendment. About one-third said they’ve been taught something about the First Amendment in class. [TABLE 35] And only about 11 percent say they believe their First Amendment rights are “not at all” or “a little” protected.
- In addition, we asked students to imagine scenarios about First Amendment protections and violations. In many cases a strong majority understood the scenarios relative

to the First Amendment. But in other cases, students demonstrated that they weren't very well aware of the parameters of their constitutional rights. [TABLE 36]

These scenarios are spelled out in the survey results, which we have shared on my social media accounts and later on our website. I'll note that students who reported having some education on the First Amendment tended to understand better the questions posed by the scenarios.

- Now, what is the UW System going to do with the results?
- We have already started. The first step is that we're going to discuss these results openly. We have to acknowledge that some students at our universities simply don't feel comfortable sharing their views in class or elsewhere on campus. We need to create a culture that more openly values free expression – and make sure students understand their rights under the First Amendment.

- Already, our universities share information about free expression with students at first-year orientation and at least once a year thereafter. And if you look at our annual report on Free Expression, the universities are holding numerous events on campus about the topic. I am asking the new Wisconsin Institute for Citizenship and Civil Dialogue, which is a part of Eric's organization, to identify best practices across universities and share them across the UW System. And I am asking university leaders to review their institution's public engagement around the issues of free speech and free expression; if it is not robust, let's make it robust.
- One reason I took this job is because I believe the UW System can help build a better Wisconsin – and has a role in helping young people understand their rights and responsibilities in our democracy. I am personally investing my time in facilitating Civil Dialogue on campus

by meeting with students across the UW System as part of “It’s Just Coffee” events – the first being held later today here at UW Oshkosh. I learned of this idea from a student at UW-Madison who put together a series of conversations among students of different views and backgrounds. I thought it was a terrific idea and wanted to expand it across the System.

- Now, we can take your questions.