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Article

Censorship in the Sciences: Interdisciplinary Perspectives †

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Abstract: In January 2025, nearly 200 scholars across numerous disciplines gathered on the campus of the University of Southern California to discuss modern-day censorship in the sciences; many more participated virtually. Recordings of the talks and panels, available online, have already been viewed over 300,000 times. The proceedings of the conference are published in this special issue of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*. In what follows, we introduce the topics discussed at the conference and highlighted in this special issue and related publications.

Keywords: censorship; academic freedom; DEI; cancel culture

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1. Introduction

> *Nothing in life is to be feared; it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so we may fear less.*
>
> Marie Sklodowska-Curie

Censorship – the suppression of facts and ideas – is as old as history itself. Censorship has been invoked to protect people's minds from corruption by bad ideas, to shield

religious truths from heresy, to protect the feelings of the faithful from blasphemy, and to ensure the safety of the state in time of war (Krylov & Tanzman, 2025a).

Suppression of facts and ideas is antithetical to the production of knowledge; yet, from its inception, science has been a target of censorship. Despite the key role science plays in reducing human suffering, providing solutions to pressing problems of humankind, and improving the lives of people worldwide, censorship in science is endemic in even the most advanced democratic societies (Krylov & Tanzman, 2025a).

In January 2025, nearly 200 scholars across many disciplines and from countries around the world gathered on the campus of the University of Southern California to discuss modern-day censorship in the sciences at a three-day conference titled Censorship in the Sciences: Interdisciplinary Perspectives.[1] This special issue of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* is dedicated to the proceedings of the conference.

Let us begin with a definition: *Censorship in the sciences* is the suppression of scientific investigation into certain questions or the publication and dissemination of scientific findings on the grounds that such knowledge would be dangerous, undesirable, or contrary to moral, political, or religious beliefs, attitudes, or values adhered to by some segment of the population (Krylov & Tanzman, 2025a).

Who are the censors? While censorship in the sciences has often come from the top down – from government or Church decrees enforcing ideological, moral, or religious codes or advancing a political agenda – today's censorship is increasingly instigated by scientists themselves.

The focus of the conference was on such intra-academic censorship. As illuminated in the numerous conference talks and panels (see also Clark et al., 2023), such censorship in the sciences is occurring in publishing, in university and research labs, in classrooms, in funding, and in science communication.

Intra-academic censorship is not unprecedented. In modern textbooks, Galileo, and his defense of heliocentrism, has been depicted as having been the victim of a vindictive and superstitious Catholic Church, which suppressed his work for contradicting Church teachings. While the Church did sentence Galileo to imprisonment (later commuted to house arrest) his persecution was driven substantially by Aristotelian professors. Fearing that Galileo's theories would ruin their life's work, they appealed to the Church to punish him. (Some accounts suggest that Galileo was also arrogant and disagreeable, which, though irrelevant to the validity of his science, probably did not help his case.)

The practice of mobs appealing to authorities to censor science and punish scientists, which has a long and ugly history, continues to operate with great effect today – as the conference talks and these proceedings illustrate (see also Krylov & Tanzman, 2025a).

Why did the conference focus on the censorship of academics by academics? Should not censorship by the governments be a preeminent concern, especially now?

Indeed, there is no paucity of censorship of academics emanating from outside of academia (Careem & Jussim, 2025; Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression [FIRE], n.d.-a, n.d.-b). In totalitarian regimes, governments can shut down entire areas of research – e.g., genetics and cybernetics in the USSR (Graham, 1991; Krylov, 2021) – by closing research labs, controlling publications, and firing or imprisoning dissenters. In democracies, the mechanisms by which the government can influence academic research

[1] link to the article

are more limited. In the United States, the government cannot fire tenured professors, cannot tell scientific publishers what not to publish, and cannot close research labs in private institutions. However, the government has control over national research labs and can exert significant pressure on universities through federal funding. While restricting funding on specific topics is not censorship per se, it is a concern, especially when such restrictions are based on political considerations. Indeed, since the conclusion of our conference and the start of Donald Trump's second presidential term in January, some efforts by the federal government to restrict research and teaching on topics such as climate change (Sethi, 2025) and gender identity, and to limit funding for some vaccines can be viewed as dangerous politicization of science. Such efforts have even prompted some scientists to leave the United States for other countries (Sherlock, 2025). In a broader context, there is recent history of the government censoring scientists in the public square, such as by exerting pressure on social media platforms to suppress critics of its response to the COVID-19 epidemic (Zweig, 2022; Bhattacharya, 2023; Khatibi, 2025; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, 2025).

These are important issues that could be the subject of a follow-up conference. However, our conference did not venture into this domain and focused primarily on the problem of censorship of academics *by* academics.

This theme was chosen because in democratic societies censorship instigated by academics tends to have more severe consequences on the careers of academics and on knowledge production than those instigated by outsiders (Gulati & Palladini, 2025). Academic jobs and promotions require letters of recommendation from colleagues. Grants necessitate approval from other academics, as do publications. Thus, control over the careers of scientists from within academia influences what subjects are researched and what scientific information is disseminated. In short, it is academics who are the gatekeepers of knowledge production and dissemination – they have the means to block publication, funding, and even employment of their peers.

Thus, the central focus of the conference, and the articles in this special issue, is intra-academia dynamics. Because academia is overwhelmingly populated by people on the political left (Jussim et al., 2023) most of the censorship threats identified here emanate from that direction. That is not because we consider threats from the left more serious than those from the right; it is simply because of who academics are.

Conference participants looked at many facets of scientific censorship. They discussed the mechanisms by which censorship operates, the motivations of the censors, and the potential benefits and harms that censorship entails. In particular, participants tackled a number of complicated questions, such as:

- How does censorship of scientists or scientific ideas manifest?
- What are the philosophical roots of censorship?
- How much of a role, if any, should ethical/moral issues play in deciding which scientific ideas to disseminate?
- What are the mechanisms of censorship? What roles do funding agencies, review panels, editorial boards, professional societies, and scientists themselves play?
- When, if ever, does rejection of manuscripts for publication or grants for funding constitute censorship?
- When and how do university administrations and funding agencies, through either action or inaction, mask censorship by finding ostensibly other reasons to silence scientists?

- Is compelled speech a form of censorship, and, if so, how does it manifest in science?
- How does censorship of scientists in the public square or in discussions of science policy manifest?
- Is censorship in the sciences a part of cancel culture?
- What are the likely costs and benefits of institutionalized censorship? How do we decide, and who decides, when the benefits outweigh the costs?
- What are the tradeoffs between scientific freedom and social responsibility, between pro-social considerations and scientific progress?

By bringing together experts with widely varying perspectives on censorship from within the natural sciences, social sciences, philosophy, humanities, and law – both within and outside academia – the conference organizers were able to host a civil conversation regarding these different perspectives and sharpen the understanding of what is and is not scientific censorship and when it may or may not be justified.

2. Conference Highlights

The speakers and panelists covered a wide range of topics, looking at censorship from different angles: epistemic consequences, quantitative assessments, and examples of how censorship operates in specific domains, such as the social sciences, psychology, medicine, the life sciences, climate science, and even chemistry education.

While some conference participants have published commentaries on scientific censorship elsewhere (e.g., Rauch, 2025; Oransky, 2025; Jussim, 2025; Satel, 2025; Khatibi, 2025), this issue of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* comprises nine new papers (Clark, 2025; Jussim et al., 2025; Maranto, 2025; Morris et al., 2025; Muncy et al., 2025; Burgess, 2025; Cohn, 2025; Stargardt, 2025; Veber, 2025) discussing the topic from a variety of viewpoints. Below, we highlight some of the notable discussions that took place.

2.1. Silencing the Classroom: Censorship by the Numbers

Nathan Honeycutt, a research fellow at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE)[2] presented findings from FIRE's 2024 survey on free speech and campus dynamics (Honeycutt, 2024). The survey was the largest endeavor of its kind to date, querying 6,000 faculty members across 55 universities in the United States. Overall, the survey found significant self-censorship, which constrained the subjects scientists chose to research, skewed the interpretation of scientific findings, and reduced the honesty of classroom discussions. Major findings of the survey included:

1. *There is widespread self-censorship across professional contexts*

Some 42% of faculty reported that they self-censor in classroom lectures and discussions, and 41% said they do so in talks to outside audiences. A majority, 56%, said they self-censor in online communications. Around 27% said they do so in publications, and 20% reported self-censoring research topics.

2. *Conservatives and moderates are disproportionately affected*

[2] link to the article

Conservative and moderate faculty reported significantly higher rates of self-censorship across all professional contexts compared to liberal faculty. Nearly 50% of conservative faculty reported that they "fairly often" (a couple of times a week or more) feel they cannot express their opinions due to potential reactions from colleagues, students, or administration, compared to only 20% of liberal faculty.

3. *Tenure status matters, but tenure doesn't eliminate self-censorship*

Non-tenured faculty evince higher rates of self-censorship than tenured faculty, but importantly, self-censorship persists even among tenured professors. This suggests that pre-tenure habits of restraint may continue after job security is achieved.

4. *Self-censorship levels are at an all-time high, exceeding even those of the McCarthy Era*

When asked about toning down writing to avoid controversy, over 30% of current faculty reported doing so, compared to only 9% during the height of McCarthyism and the Red Scare of the 1950s.

5. *Fears about job security and reputation drive self-censorship*

The two primary motivations for self-censorship are: (i) fear of reputational damage due to misunderstanding (over half of conservative faculty and one-third of liberal faculty), and (ii) fear of job loss due to misunderstanding (about one-third of conservative faculty).

Nearly 30% of faculty reported hiding their political beliefs "fairly often" to keep their jobs, but there were stark differences by political ideology. Over half of conservative faculty engage in this behavior while less than 20% of liberal faculty do so. This has serious consequences for the veracity and neutrality of research and teaching.

"If we're operating in a social reputational system whereby you need positive evaluations from your peers to get into grad school, to get a tenure track job, to get promoted, or to get fellowships and grants, what incentives are there to push the envelope or to have findings that your colleagues may not appreciate?" Honeycutt asks. "All of these things collectively, or also individually, work to undermine the credibility of the academy and the work that we're doing."

6. *Faculty support institutional neutrality as a solution*

A large majority (about two-thirds) of faculty endorse institutional neutrality, believing that colleges, universities, and academic departments should not take positions on social or political issues. This suggests potential support for policies that might reduce self-censorship by creating more-neutral institutional environments.

2.2. Retractions: Do We Need More of Them or Fewer?

Since 2010, the organization Retraction Watch has been tracking retractions of scientific papers.[3] Its database now contains some 58,000 instances. While many retractions

[3] link to the article

stemmed from genuine errors or fraud, others have raised concerns about selective scrutiny, external pressure, and inconsistent standards, particularly on sensitive topics such as abortion, race, gender, and COVID-19. Some authors have even retracted their own papers preemptively to avoid association with politicized topics.

Retraction Watch cofounder Ivan Oransky made the case that, while ideological interference is at times real, in the end the greater issue may actually be the *under-retraction* of unsound papers (Oransky, 2025). Journals drag their feet, whistleblowers face risks, and authors suffer citation losses if they self-report, all leading to fewer problematic papers getting pulled. More humility and transparency, encouraging correction over concealment, could be a boon to science – and might even improve the public's perception of experts.

During the Q&A, Jonathan Rauch, author of *The Constitution of Knowledge* (Rauch, 2021) expressed an opposing view that challenged the fundamental premise of retractions. Rauch pointed out that retractions are relatively new, and that science has traditionally dealt with flawed publications by letting the mistaken or irreproducible results "die on the vine," avoiding damage to the authors' reputations. In Rauch's view, retractions have become too ritualized and politicized, and they should be reserved for cases of fraud.

2.3. Academia: Burn It Down or Reform It?

The question of how to rescue academia from its descent into "propaganda scholarship" and ideological conformity was a frequent subject of debate during the conference. Two camps seemed to emerge, as Lee Jussim, distinguished professor of psychology at Rutgers University, noted in a post-conference essay (Jussim, 2025).

On the one hand, the "Reformers" advocate non-coercive ways of improving the academy, such as eliminating mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements, promoting institutional neutrality, and relying on persuasion rather than legislation. Government interference, they argue, would ultimately undermine academic freedom more than it helps. Those who now applaud President Trump's aggressive efforts to course-correct academia (e.g., Rufo, 2025a; Haque, 2025) may find themselves outraged when a future president uses similar top-down tactics to mandate progressive curricula. These points were succinctly expressed by Jonathan Rauch in his keynote (see Rauch, 2025).

On the other hand, the "burn it down" camp believes academia is too far gone to effectively reform. This camp, perhaps best exemplified by the conservative activist Christopher Rufo and his efforts in the state of Florida, believes that much more aggressive interventions are needed. These can include cutting off federal funding, which directly or indirectly goes towards campus DEI bureaucracies, and auditing universities for ideological discrimination in hiring and admissions (Rufo, 2025b).

Some even advocate shutting down entire humanities and social sciences departments (from which most of the dysfunction emanates), retaining only science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Greg Lukianoff, president and CEO of FIRE, suggested during his presentation that perhaps the solution to Columbia University's woes (Summers, 2025) is to "turn it into a technical college." This captured the hard-liners' view rather succinctly.

Jussim says he leans towards "burn it down," but is willing to support reformers' efforts, partly because revolutions are often worse than the diseased institution itself.

"Revolutions tend to be bad and far more destructive than that which they are revolting against. Even if academia is only 45% good and 55% bad, the history of most revolutions is that we will be lucky if the new state is 30% good and 70% bad, not to mention all the damage that will be done along the way," he writes.

He points out, however, that moderate attempts to reform have been ongoing for decades, with little success. Indeed, reforms may simply give the ideologues within the academy time to retrench, survive the Trump era, and mount a rousing comeback across institutions starting in 2028. That could be the final blow to academia as we know it.

But even if academia is completely enfeebled, science would still continue, says Jussim. Private industry is already the source of much of our newest technology, from electric cars to vaccines. Genuine scholars, those who prioritize truth-seeking, will gravitate towards alternative centers of research and thought. They'll carry with them the means to do important scientific discovery, wherever they may go next.

A number of participants discussed strategies for fighting back against censorship and suppression of academic freedom, suggesting ways to reform academia. Some of these ideas are presented in these proceedings (Maranto, 2025; Muncy et al., 2025; Morris et al., 2025). Muncy et al. describe the Academic Freedom Alliance as a model of effective organizational response to academic cancel culture. Maranto focuses on the question: *Why should censors stop their bad behavior?* He argues that politics often involves coercion: "If one side uses coercion and the other does not, we all know who will win. We can only stop the organized censorship of teaching, research, and speakers by making such behavior risky, by firing the censors, as they have long fired us." Morris et al. (2025) propose a sweeping reform of institutional review boards (IRBs); more on this below.

2.4. Suppression of Research by IRB Red Tape

In 1929, physician and researcher Werner Forssman performed the first successful cardiac catheterization – on himself. Had he done the experiment today, he likely would have had to go through stacks of paperwork to get approval from an IRB. The development of this life-saving procedure would have been much delayed, or possibly even scuttled entirely if the IRB raised objections.

When the IRB system was founded in 1974, it had the noble mission of preventing abusive and unethical experimentation on human subjects. However, the IRB now seems to spend much of its time enforcing increasingly invasive, often nonsensical regulations that hinder scientific progress. Such problems were the subject of a talk by Evan Morris, professor of radiology and medical imaging at Yale University. His own run-ins with the IRB illustrate this point. When Morris attempted to conduct a recent experiment using himself as a subject, the IRB questioned whether he could obtain consent from himself.

Morris proposed a way to improve the performance of the IRB, one he has dubbed the "USC Mudd Code" (named after the building in which the conference was held). The code is aimed at restoring the balance between oversight and research efficiency and productivity. It is organized around three principles: transparency, justification of risk evaluation, and limits of risk-reduction.

The Mudd Code (in brief)

TRANSPARENCY

1. All IRB deliberations should be transparent and open to the public for viewing.

2. All IRB reviews of protocols must be completed rapidly. Three weeks is recommended.

3. All IRB reviewers must be identified by name. All comments must be signed by a reviewer.

4. Investigators shall provide feedback on the performance of the IRB and its reviewers. Summary statistics and performance evaluations of the IRB must be made available to the faculty and the public, yearly.

JUSTIFICATION OF RISK EVALUATION

5. All IRB requirements for submitting a protocol must be justified solely on the basis of autonomy, beneficence, or justice, and must be labeled as such.

6. Autonomy is paramount. A subject's *informed* preferences should be heeded whenever possible.

LIMITS OF RISK-REDUCTION

7. Scientific and medical discovery is the ultimate goal and the reason for the existence of the IRB. Total elimination of risk is not the goal.

8. Practices not exceeding a (pre-defined) minimal-risk threshold are outside the IRB's mandate.

9. Discipline-specific experts should be consulted whenever the IRB is not constituted with sufficient domain knowledge of the discipline to determine minimal risk standards.

10. The re-evaluation of peer-reviewed science is not the purview of the IRB.

In addition to the preceding ten points, Morris et al. (2025) recommend that the composition of the IRB be modified to include a "science advocate" who would be present at all committee meetings to argue on behalf of the value of the science being considered.

2.5. Life Science and (Gender) Pseudoscience

For anyone who might have believed that the bad ideas infecting academia are largely confined to the humanities, the panel "Censorship and Pseudoscience in the Life Sciences" would likely have persuaded them otherwise. The three-member panel provided striking examples of nonsensical ideas that have overtaken the classroom, research, and intellectual organizations in biology. Unlike religious alternatives to scientific theories, such as creationism, these ideological beliefs are being touted and advanced by scientists themselves.

The notion that "sex" is not a useful category (Velocci, 2024) or that sex is a continuum (Ainsworth & Nature Magazine, 2018) are examples of such pervasive ideas. Panelist Luana Maroja, professor of biology at Williams College, says she now asks her students to vote via a classroom poll how many sexes there are. "Two" is now the least popular answer, she says. Her students are primarily biology majors.

Shortly before the conference, panelist Jerry Coyne, emeritus professor of ecology and evolution at the University of Chicago, resigned from the honorary board of the

Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF).[4] The organization had abruptly deleted a blog post (Coyne, 2025) from their website, in which he'd asserted that sex is binary, after FFRF members objected to his stance.

Coyne argues that much of the reasoning behind such ideas as a "sex continuum" arises from the "naturalistic fallacy." People point to examples of certain behavior in nature, such as homosexual interactions, to prove that something is "natural" and therefore must be morally good. Or, people engage in the "reverse naturalistic fallacy," in which they seek out examples in the natural world to justify human behavior, such as the ability of clown fish to change sex, as proof that such behavior has precedent in nature and therefore applies to humans.

Ideological concepts, such as the sex continuum, permeate the funding of life science research and distort what is taught in the classroom. Under the previous administration, the federal government mandated that scientists adhere to certain ideological stances or avoid certain research subjects in order to get grants (Efimov et al., 2024). Today, university administrations demand that faculty teach courses in ways that embrace these new ideologies.

Maroja says much of this is motivated by "avoiding harm." For instance, instructors are advised to avoid stating that obesity is unhealthy out of concerns for "stigmatizing" fat people, and the Biden administration blocked access to a genetic database presumably out of concerns that research using the data could be perceived as disparaging towards certain groups (Lee, 2022). But such attempts to avoid psychological harm have stymied the pursuit of scientific truth, typically without evidence of actual harm.

Censorship in biology has created an "enormous gap" in knowledge for students in particular, says Maroja. If students can't be taught about the sex binary, there's no way for them to fully understand why males and females behave in different ways. This knowledge gap starts long before college. Sex education in high schools focuses increasingly on "gender identity" rather than on the biology of reproduction, which may partly explain the decrease in condom usage and the increase in sexually transmitted disease among teenagers (World Health Organization, 2024), she adds.

When ideology replaces genuine truth-seeking, we end up "chasing ghosts," says Maroja. If we are unable to even acknowledge that men predominate both the high and low tails of the IQ scale (Schrager, 2022), we're prevented from fully examining why men receive more Nobel Prizes than women.

Such ghost-chasing is making America increasingly susceptible to losing its competitive, scientific edge. China, which largely seems to reject this particular type of science denial, has surpassed America for three years in a row in quantity of scientific papers, many of which are highly cited,[5] says session moderator Julia Schaletzky, executive director of the Molecular Therapeutics Initiative at the University of California, Berkeley.

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[4] link to the article

[5] An analysis conducted in 2023 (Wagner, 2023) found that both the quality and quantity of Chinese research papers has risen steadily and that they have now surpassed the United States in citations. This is a concerning change. The US had previously outstripped China in such metrics, despite our significantly smaller population size. We also continue to spend more annually than any other country on research and development, both in academic and private settings.

The topic of gender pseudoscience and its effect on medicine was also discussed in the panel "Censorship around Gender Research and Medicine" (Satel, 2025).

2.6. DEI Statements: Are They Compelled Speech? Can They Be Made Useful?

Perhaps no facet of the DEI movement in universities has been so publicly debated as the requirement for "diversity statements" on faculty job applications and syllabi.

In the panel "Is Compelled Speech a Form of Censorship?" Abigail Thompson, distinguished professor of mathematics at the University of California, Davis, and free speech advocate and author John Wilson discussed whether requiring DEI statements constitutes "compelled speech"; whether such compelled speech would itself be bad; whether banning DEI statements would constitute suppression of a university's free speech; and if persuasion, rather than coercion, could effectively be used in changing approaches to these statements.

In 2019, Thompson wrote an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* in which she called mandated diversity and inclusion statements a new form of "political litmus test" for faculty hiring (Thompson, 2019). Those who may not agree with DEI ideology or even those who simply don't prioritize DEI practices in their professional work are now effectively removed from consideration for academic positions.

After the op-ed's publication, Thompson was accosted with online vitriol and a harassment campaign led by her professional colleagues. "My opinions were regarded as so far beyond the pale that the instigator called for a good old public shaming," Thompson said.

Chad Topaz, professor of complex systems at Williams College, encouraged his followers to flood UC–Davis with complaints and produced a form letter people could use to express their displeasure to the American Mathematical Society, of which Thompson was then vice president. Thompson's own university chancellor and diversity officer published an official response comparing her to historical segregationists (News and Media Relations, 2019).

Wilson concedes that mandated diversity statements often violate best practices regarding free speech. However, he asserts that universities engage in compelled speech regularly. "Compelled speech is perfectly normal in academia," he argued. "We compel students to take tests and write papers. We're really objecting to compelled *viewpoints* about issues unrelated to scientific or academic qualifications."

Further, the rising resistance to mandatory diversity statements, including threats by the Trump administration and state legislatures to strip funding from universities, is itself a violation of free speech, Wilson asserted.

"I think a ban on diversity statements is an equally flawed approach, whether it comes from the university administration or from politicians," says Wilson. "I think many of these approaches to banning diversity statements are giving politicians dangerous control over decisions that should be made by faculty."

Wilson also argued that leaving faculty and departments to decide their own approach may be the most free-speech–orientated approach to the dilemma. For those who oppose their use on syllabuses or in hiring, he argued, persuasion and debate should be employed to move a majority to their side.

And yet, that doesn't solve the concern many participants expressed over the course of the conference that it was simply "too late" to attempt persuasion given the extreme political lean of today's academy.

As one audience member pointed out, a recent inquiry into the political affiliations of Cornell University faculty found that Democrats outnumber Republicans 98 to 1 in the humanities (De La Torre, 2022). "What John is suggesting is that we give the power back to a group of faculty who are 98% of one political persuasion and who have been hired to advance a political mission. How are you going to get back to balance with that kind of mentality?"

Ironically, the same weekend as Thompson's panel presentation at our conference, Topaz, who led the cancelation campaign against Thompson, received the Mary and Elfie Grace Award for Social Justice from the Association for Women in Mathematics (Association for Women in Mathematics, 2025). Behavior that would have once been considered unprofessional is now overlooked, or even celebrated, by academics.

2.7. Taboo Topics

An opening statement by Wilfred Reilly, associate professor of political science at Kentucky State University, arguably summed up much of the conference: in academic and elite spaces today, the most dangerous thing one can do is to make certain claims, even if they are obviously true – if they offend progressive sensibilities.

Facts we are most discouraged from discussing – racial disparities in crime, group differences in IQ scores, or the realities of biological sex – are often, ironically, the ones most backed up by data. "Taboos," Reilly said, "are true things you aren't supposed to mention." Drawing from his book *Taboo* (Reilly, 2022) and subsequent research, Reilly presented a number of core, sacred falsehoods of modern intellectual life.

A particularly sensitive one in recent times has been the claim that police murder unarmed black Americans at high rates, a central belief of the Black Lives Matter movement, which instigated mass civil unrest in 2020. Data from *The Washington Post* and the FBI reveal, however, that fewer than 20 unarmed black men are fatally shot by police annually (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019; The Washington Post, 2024). And yet: "People believed," Reilly said, "that thousands were being killed" (McCaffree & Saide, 2021). Indeed, one study found that 40% of liberals and nearly 25% of moderates surveyed believed 1,000 or more black men were murdered by the police in 2019.

The same disconnect holds for interracial crime. Contrary to the dominant narrative of relentless white-on-black aggression, FBI data show that interracial violent crime is rare, and that blacks murder whites at higher rates than the reverse (The Washington Post, 2024).

Both of these mistaken ideas are emblematic of a larger, troubling pattern. Public perception is shaped by ideological media reporting and social pressure, rather than actual data, which means that what the public believes often bears little to no resemblance to empirical reality. Social science research, which should inform public opinion and policy making, is being hindered by censorship and self-censorship in the discipline.

Perhaps no taboo is more sacred in America than the racial IQ gap. Standardized testing data show persistent disparities in IQ and academic achievement between racial groups (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lasker et al., 2019). "These aren't gaps you can handwave away," Reilly said. "And yet, acknowledging them is often treated as a moral

crime." Indeed, a recent paper (Matthews et al., 2024) accused many who pursued research into IQ gaps of dabbling in "abhorrent science."

These gaps are not explained merely by the enduring effects of "systemic racism" or "white supremacy," as many progressive academics claim. Some of the highest-achieving groups in the United States are Asians, Jews, and African immigrants.

These taboos are enforced not by data or debate, but by social incentives. Violating them can lead not only to extensive public criticism but to having one's paper's retracted (Jussim et al., 2024) and even to professional exile. Roland Fryer, the youngest black professor ever tenured at Harvard, published a study that found that there was no racial bias in police shootings (Fryer, 2017). In response, Fryer was castigated by activists and fellow academics. The university suspended him without pay for two years, banned him from campus, and shut down his research lab based on mere accusations of sexual harassment and for marginally inappropriate behavior such as making "off-color jokes" to subordinates, offenses that even Harvard's own Title IX office considered too minor to justify a two-year suspension (Montz, 2022). The message remains clear: defy a taboo and risk your livelihood and reputation.

Modern censorship has much in common with historical religious suppression, whose core motivation was to stamp out "dangerous" truths, argued Reilly. "The point of censorship," he said, "is not to protect people from falsehoods. It's to prevent challenges to the system."

However, if academia continues to protect its prized progressive narratives at the expense of empirical inquiry, it risks becoming irrelevant. Public trust in academia is plummeting, and as Jussim observed, scientific breakthroughs and technological advancements are increasingly the purview of private industry, not taxpayer funded universities.

During the Q&A, Reilly acknowledged the difficulty of pushing back against prevailing orthodoxy, particularly within academia. But presenting facts still matters, especially for the majority of students and citizens, who are often not familiar with the full scope of the scientific evidence bearing on many controversies. "The people who shout you down aren't the majority," he said. "They're just the loudest."

2.8. Academic Cancel Culture and Attacks on Academic Freedom

Beyond the problems of self-censorship, FIRE's Scholars Under Fire database reveals that attempts to actively censor others are on the rise (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression [FIRE], n.d.-a). According to FIRE's database, there have been over 1,200 cancelation attempts against professors in recent years, with 219 terminations. It's a figure that dwarfs the 100 or so professors who lost their jobs during the decade of anti-communist McCarthyism. There were also 180 suspensions, 74 resignations, and 53 demotions.

According to the database, 2024 was the worst year in history for campus deplatforming. Pro-Palestine groups and scholars were often the perpetrators of cancelation campaigns, and pro-Palestinian students were responsible for the vast majority of speaker disruptions. The disruptions reached intolerable extremes; in one incident, for example, activists interrupted "a Jewish professor who was giving a presentation on black holes" because the professor supported Israel, reported Lukianoff.

A 2024 North Dakota University survey, presented by Lukianoff, showed that some students believe professors should now be reported for asserting the biological reality of two sexes or for arguing that there is no evidence of anti-black bias in police shootings.

It's not just students who won't tolerate dissenting views. FIRE found that one-third of liberal California university faculty are at least somewhat willing to discriminate against conservatives in hiring. About a quarter of professors admitted they would outright discriminate against a Trump voter specifically. And that's just the number who would admit to it (Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017; Kaufmann, 2021).

Of course, both sides of the political aisle engage in censorious campaigns and attempt to either enforce or ban specific ideologies. On the one hand, FIRE successfully challenged provisions of Florida's 2022 Stop WOKE Act as unconstitutional. On the other hand, it is involved in a lawsuit against California's community college system, which requires professors to incorporate concepts from progressive ideology such as intersectionality and anti-racism in their curricula.

"Compelled speech is worse than censorship," Lukianoff asserts. "Saying that all your professors have to actually work concepts you may even be hostile to into your syllabus and into your class – that is tyranny."

Traditional civil liberties organizations that once worked to protect free speech principles have been hijacked by political causes, says Lukianoff, who was formerly a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union. The American Association of University Professors, for example, recently abandoned its long-standing position against academic boycotts (American Association of University Professors, 2024) ostensibly to support boycotts of Israeli institutions, which Lukianoff sees as emblematic of the organization's ideological capture (see also Krylov & Tanzman, 2025b).

Lukianoff outlined some potential measures to counteract censorship culture, but many were essentially ways of circumventing traditional academia, such as reducing degree requirements for jobs, developing alternative credentialing systems, and creating "counter-institutions" focused on rigorous knowledge production. The ultimate goal, after all, isn't to save existing institutions but to ensure reliable knowledge production and quality education for Americans.

"I don't as much care about academia as I care about knowledge production," he said. "We have badly damaged our ability to trust the knowledge we're producing, and we need to be addressing that through a variety of creative means."

Perhaps most troubling for those hoping the crisis will just naturally resolve, Lukianoff's research shows that, compared to their older colleagues, younger professors are more ideological, less politically diverse, and more hostile to academic freedom and freedom of speech. "If people think this problem is just going to go away, they're putting their heads in the sand," he says.

Many more examples of censorship and self-censorship in various institutions and fields – ranging from anthropology to astronomy, biology, and chemical education – were presented by other speakers. In this issue, Wayne Stargardt, the president of the MIT Free Speech Alliance, presents recent survey results documenting the extent of self-censorship at MIT (Stargardt, 2025).

While many speakers presented evidence of cancel culture in academia and the negative consequences it has on dissenters, Matthew Burgess (2025) presented an unexpected take on prevailing self-censorship. He argued that the greater danger lies in academics' own risk aversion – overestimating the personal costs of speaking

up, underestimating the professional benefits of speaking up, and underestimating the professional costs of self-censorship. Drawing on survey data and using an economic lens, Burgess likened the pursuit of neglected but important truths to a high-value market: when supply is scarce and demand is strong, the rewards – intellectual, reputational, and even financial – can be extraordinary. "If you want to do paradigm-shifting research, you'll need the courage to break someone's paradigm," he said, noting that influential people whose paradigms are challenged can be easily angered. His pragmatic conclusion: most academics have far more freedom to speak than they think, and much more to gain than to lose by using it.

2.9. "Consequences Culture": Totalitarianism in Science

This issue of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* also includes the essay by Jussim et al. (2025) "On the Intellectual Freedom and Responsibility of Scientists in the Time of 'Consequences Culture'", a rebuttal to the 2022 essay "Words Matter: On the Debate over Free Speech, Inclusivity, and Academic Freedom" (Herbert et al., 2022). The latter argued that scientific censorship, ostensively in the name of "inclusivity," is a societal good. Herbert et al. (2022) claimed that the methods of "consequences culture" "are nothing at all like the actions of a totalitarian government," as alleged by, for example, Applebaum (2021), Krylov (2021), and Rauch (2021).

Jussim and co-authors (Jussim et al., 2025) describe the central idea of "consequences culture" as follows: "There is a preferred narrative that is defined by activists as 'moral,' 'virtuous,' and 'correct.' Vocal dissent against that narrative is supposed to bring with it adverse consequences to one's career and well-being." Comparing modern examples of how "consequence culture" punishes dissenters to historical examples of how totalitarian regimes operated, Jussim et al. illustrate that "consequence culture" activists impose ideological conformity upon the scientific community and stifle debate on important societal matters in a manner that has been used throughout history by authoritarian regimes.

As an example, Jussim and co-authors cite the case of renowned chemist Tomáš Hudlický, who published a 2020 essay in the journal *Angewandte Chemie,* which stated the author's objection to identity-based preferences in hiring, and thus ran afoul of progressive ideology. In response to an attack campaign by a social media mob, the journal disappeared the essay from its website. Additional consequences included the suspension of editors of the journal, the blacklisting of the article's reviewers, and the refusal of Hudlický's colleagues (under pressure of "consequences" to themselves) to collaborate with him, thus isolating the scientist professionally. The authors point out that disappearing of disfavored works, dismissal from positions, and professional ostracism were precisely the types of consequences suffered by dissidents in the latter years of the Soviet Union. Authoritarian censors from the Roman Catholic Church in Galileo's time, the Bolsheviks of the twentieth century, or the "consequence culture" activists of today, "assum[e] the position of self-ordained moral arbiters entitled to dispense punishment" on the rest of society.

2.10. Why Academic Freedom Is Important

The importance of academic freedom was a recurring theme at the conference. Although some participants argued that censorship may be justified under certain circumstances (e.g., to prevent harms), many more emphasized the harms that censorship does.

In her video address (see Krylov & Tanzman, 2025c), Francesca Minerva, co-editor of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, passionately explained the importance of academic freedom:

> When academic freedom is under threat, we end up hindering the pursuit of truth … We end up with the distortion of the nature of academia … And when we do not pursue the truth ..., we end up failing students … We also fail society at large because non-academics have an interest in benefiting in what academics have discovered when they do their job properly and without restriction.

Hence, censorship undermines the core mission of the university – truth seeking and education.

Minerva also explained that the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* was established to counteract the rising censoriousness of academic publishing and to provide a platform for the free exchange of ideas, including those that might be considered dangerous, harmful, or offensive. As an example, she mentioned a paper with the mundane title "In Defense of Merit in Science," which found a place in the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* because other outlets considered the idea of merit to be shallow and hurtful to minorities (Abbot et al., 2023). It is indeed fitting that the proceedings of a conference on censorship are published here in the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* as well.

3. Conclusions

Perhaps the most difficult question that conference participants struggled with was the intersection between ethics and the pursuit of knowledge. Should there be guardrails set by professional communities limiting what can be studied and communicated? Can knowledge be harmful, and if so, should it be censored? While some participants expressed support for setting boundaries on what is considered "responsible research" or "to prevent harms," we heard no convincing case for censorship at the conference.

While we agree that some extreme cases might exist when censorship is justified to prevent terrible harm, the bar to meet the criterion of terrible harm should be very high. For example, if it were possible to write a paper explaining, at a 7th grade level, how to construct a nuclear weapon, most of us would agree such a paper should not be published (i.e., it should be censored). However, none of the examples of actual censorship discussed at the conference came even remotely close to meeting such a bar.

Given the history of science, we are convinced that censorship is objectionable on both philosophical and pragmatic grounds. On the philosophical side, the notion that the public must be protected from dangerous or harmful knowledge is at odds with liberal Enlightenment values, according to which knowledge is power, which the public is capable of using responsibly. On the practical level, by hiding selected facts, censorship distorts our understanding of the world, thereby undermining our ability to solve challenging

problems (Krylov & Tanzman, 2025a). Censorship also leads to distrust in science (Kahan, 2015).

When scientists hide selected facts to promote their political agendas, the public rightfully perceives them as politically motivated agents rather than objective and trustworthy experts. Such politicization of science over the past several decades created fertile ground for a censorious backlash against academia by the right, a perilous cycle we must stop.

We began our introduction to this special issue of the *Journal* with the words of Marie Sklodowska-Curie. We conclude with a quote reminiscent of Plato:

> *We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.*

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