Scholars Under Fire Database: Methodology

Introduction

Since its founding in 1999, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) has opposed censorship on college and university campuses. One significant form of campus censorship is the public effort to punish scholars for their constitutionally protected expression.

These efforts, known as **scholar sanction attempts**, may involve:
- Demands to investigate, discipline, or fire a scholar for public comments (e.g., on social media)
- Institutional action without external pressure (e.g., contract nonrenewal after critical comments)
- Punitive actions taken by academic institutions, journals, or professional associations

FIRE's **Scholars Under Fire database** tracks these incidents and records detailed information to help identify patterns in this form of campus censorship.

What the scholars under fire database records

For each incident, the database includes:

- **Year** of the scholar sanction attempt
- **Institution** involved, and its type (public, private, religious, community college, or federal service academy)
- **Topic(s)** that led to controversy (e.g., race, religion, Israeli-Palestinian conflict)
- **Context** of the scholar's expression (e.g., social media, classroom, academic publication)
- **Source** of the attempt (e.g., students, faculty, politicians, the public)
- **Demands** made by those calling for sanctions (e.g., investigation, classroom removal, termination)
- **Petitions** circulated in support of or opposition to the scholar
- **Political direction** of the attempt (from the left or right of the scholar's position)
- **Outcome** of the attempt (e.g., investigation, suspension, demotion, termination)
- **Institutional response** (e.g., defense of academic freedom, appeasement of critics)

This dataset is not exhaustive. While not every incident can be documented, FIRE believes the database reflects broader trends in campus censorship.

Detailed methodology

Who is a scholar?

The Scholars Under Fire database does not limit the term *scholar* to faculty members (e.g., professors, lecturers, instructors). The term also includes postdoctoral researchers, Ph.D students, and researchers or research fellows who engage in acts of scholarship within the academic domain and have an official affiliation with a college or university.

The database considers teaching at a college or university, conducting research and submitting the findings to the peer-review process, and/or discussing peer-reviewed scholarship at professional academic events (e.g., conferences, panel discussions) to be ***engaging in scholarship within the academic domain***.

Thus, for the purposes of this database, a scholar ***includes:***
- Professors (assistant, associate, full, emeritus)
- Lecturers (adjunct, clinical, instructors)
- Postdoctoral researchers/research fellows/Ph.D students
- Medical doctors working in university settings
- Medical trainees (medical students, residents, fellows)

On the other hand, the definition of scholar ***does not include***:
- Deans and other administrators who have never held a faculty position
- Researchers working for non-university-affiliated organizations
- Graduate students working towards a Master's degree
- Law students

What is a scholar sanction attempt?

A ***scholar sanction attempt*** is a public effort to punish a scholar for their constitutionally protected expression. It can also include attempts to suppress future expression that would otherwise be constitutionally protected.

The term ***scholar sanction attempt*** also includes instances when the administration of a college or university decides to sanction a scholar for their constitutionally protected expression on its own, in the absence of any public pressure. Or, when an academic journal or professional society is pressured to sanction a scholar by denying publication of an article or book, retracting a publication, or barring them from participating in a professional association (e.g., membership in the American Association of Public Opinion Research).

This definition **does not include** instances in which the scholar is subjected to harassment and/or intimidation, including death threats, but does not face an attempt at being professionally penalized or sanctioned. It also does not include cases where the individual(s) or group(s) expresses opposition to a scholar's speech, but does not make any demands that the scholar and/or institution take action to remedy the situation.

Type of school

Five different kinds of colleges and universities can be found in the Scholars Under Fire database. Table 1 lists how each type of school is coded and provides a definition and an example for each type of school.

Table 1. Types of schools

Type of school	Definition	Example
Community college	A two-year community or county college	Hudson County Community College
Federal Service Academy	One of the five federal service academies.	United States Naval Academy
Public	A four-year state college or university.	University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
Private	A four-year private, secular college or university.	Harvard University
Religious	A four-year religious college or university.	University of Notre Dame

Public, private, and religious schools may or may not have graduate programs.

Characteristics of scholar sanction attempts

Topic(s) of controversy

Scholar sanction attempts usually occur because a scholar expresses something politically controversial. Almost 100 scholars were targeted in the span of two months for comments they made on social media after Charlie Kirk's assassination at Utah Valley University. Nikole Hannah-Jones, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and the creator of The 1619 Project, declined to take a position at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill after the Board of Trustees initially refused to vote on granting her tenure, even though the position typically comes with that status.

Table 2 lists all the controversial topics coded in the Scholars Under Fire database and what kinds of expression that topic includes (e.g., *environment* includes views on climate change and environmental policy).

Table 2. Topics of controversy

__Controversy topic__	__Expression includes__
Abortion	Views on abortion, including partial-birth abortion, the morning-after pill, Plan B, and abortifacients.
Animal rights	Views on animal rights/animal cruelty.
Civil liberties	Views on civil liberties (e.g., freedom of speech, right to bear arms, same-sex marriage, death penalty).
Class or policy issues	Views on class (e.g., poverty) or policy issues (e.g., education, funding, tax rates).
Criminal or other misconduct	Criminal misconduct (e.g., convicted of a crime) or other forms of misconduct (e.g., plagiarism, accusations of sexual harassment).
Elections	Views on previous elections, upcoming elections, voting rights laws, or democracy and democratic institutions.
Environment	Views on climate change and environmental policy.
Foreign affairs	Views on foreign affairs or events in other countries (e.g., Brexit, the Iraq War, human rights violations).
Gender	Views on gender, gender roles, feminism, sexual assault/#MeToo, Title IX, or transgender rights; Accusations of misogyny, sexism or transphobia.
Health	Views on healthcare issues (e.g., COVID-19 vaccines), healthcare policy, the disabled, or mental health.
Immigration	Views on immigration, immigration policy, or immigrants.
Institutional policy	Views on institutional policy or policies at the college or university.
Israeli-Palestinian conflict	Views on Israeli-Palestinian relations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, anti-Zionism, the BDS movement, or Zionism.
Judiciary system	Views about the judiciary system, court decisions, or members of the judiciary (e.g., Supreme Court justices).
Political views	General views on political issues (e.g., speaker is an outspoken liberal or conservative), partisan animosity (e.g., "The speaker is a

	right-wing extremist"), decisions that appear to lack viewpoint neutrality (e.g., denying funding for an event).
Police	Views on policing, police misconduct, or murder of police.
Race	Views on racial issues (e.g., affirmative action, DEI efforts) or racial differences, accusations of racism, antisemitism, etc.
Religion	Views on religion or religious differences, accusations of religious prejudice (e.g., "Islamophobia").
Scientific views	Views on controversial scientific research or work that supports controversial positions (e.g., climate change skepticism, genes and I.Q. differences).
Sexuality	Views on sexual orientation or gay rights, accusations of homophobia.
Terrorism	Views on terrorism, individual terrorist attacks, or the War on Terror, accusations that the scholar has previously engaged in terrorism or has close association with known terrorists.
Other	Views on issues that do not fall into one of the above categories.

Context of scholar's expression

A scholar's expression can occur in different, and sometimes multiple, contexts. Table 3 lists all the contexts coded in the Scholars Under Fire database, and describes what each kind includes.

Table 3. Context of scholar's expression that motivated the sanction attempt

Controversy topic	**Context includes**
Classroom	Expression occurred in the classroom, a virtual classroom, on a course syllabus, and/or on an exam.
Direct interaction	Expression occurred during an in-person or otherwise direct interaction.
Email	Expression occurred in an email, letter, or message to a student, scholar, administrator, or any combination of the above.
Op-Ed/Blog	Expression occurred in an op-ed or a blog post.
Professional duties	Expression occurred during a meeting, resolution, training, event, forum, and/or other professional setting.
Protest	Expression occurred during an on- or off-campus party, protest or

	rally.
Public comments	Expression occurred during a public interview, speech, statement, and/or on a podcast (live or recorded).
Scholarship	Expression occurred in peer-reviewed research or scholarship, in a book, at a conference, on a panel, during a talk, and/or at a symposium.
Social media	Expression occurred on social media.

Sources of sanction attempts

Sanction attempts can be initiated by on-campus sources, off-campus sources, or a combination of both.

On-campus sources include administrators, faculty, stakeholders, parents of current students, student groups, and students (graduate and undergraduate).

Off-campus sources include activists or activist groups, alumni, corporations, members of the general public, politicians, and public figures (e.g., religious leaders).

Attempts can also be made by anonymous or unknown sources. The sources of a sanction attempt can overlap, meaning that there can be more than one source. Table 4 provides more specific descriptions of each source.

Table 4. Sources of scholar sanction attempts

Source of disinvitation attempt	Description of source	Is the source on-campus or off-campus?
Activist(s)	External activist organizations or groups.	Off-campus
Administrator(s)	University officials.	On-campus
Alumni	Graduates or alumni groups.	Off-campus
Anonymous	Source unknown.	Not applicable
Corporation(s)	Businesses or corporations (e.g., Zoom).	Off-campus
Faculty	Academic departments or individual faculty.	On-campus

General public	Community members not affiliated with school.	Off-campus
Politician(s)	Elected or formerly elected officials, political appointees.	Off-campus
Public figure	Religious or non-elected public figures.	Off-campus
Stakeholder(s)/Parent(s)	Donors, trustees, or parents of students.	On-campus
Student group(s)	Student groups or organizations.	On-campus
Students	Individual students.	On-campus
Unknown	Cannot identify source.	Not applicable

Demands

Often, scholar cancellation campaigns feature some kind of demand — like firing the professor — or a series of demands — like firing the professor, hiring more minority scholars, and establishing cultural safe spaces on campus. Demands can be issued in a number of ways, including formal letters or petitions, through the act of protest, or as veiled threats on social media by politicians.

FIRE's Scholars Under Database records when the following demands are made during a scholar cancellation campaign:

- **Apology** from the college or university (or other source, like a peer-reviewed journal) **and condemnation** of the scholar and/or the expression
- **Censorship** of the scholar (e.g., removal of a book authored by the scholar from the library)
- **Demotion** of the scholar (e.g., from an administrative role like dean or department chair)
- **Policy change** by the college or university (e.g., ban hate speech on campus)
- **Retraction or withdrawal** of a published peer-review article
- **Suspension** from professional duties (e.g., removal from the classroom)
- **Termination or forced resignation** from the college or university
- **Training** for the scholar (e.g., bias training; cultural competence training, DEI training)
- **Vague investigation** of the scholar by the college or university

Political motivations for scholar sanction attempts

Scholars are often targeted for sanction by those who have a political disagreement with the scholar's speech or expression. Since we lack the ability to directly survey the sources of the controversial expression on their political views, we judge the political motivations associated with a scholar

sanction attempt based on what can be reasonably inferred about the source or sources of the attempt — not the scholar. We classify the political motivations of deplatforming attempts based on the beliefs of those who initiate them (i.e., "from the left" or "from the right") relative to the controversial expression.

This means that a scholar sanction attempt may target a speaker for their perceived conservative viewpoints, even if the speaker themselves would not identify as politically conservative.

Erika Lopez Prater, a professor of art history at Hamline University, displayed historical artwork depicting the prophet Muhammad in her online global art history class. Before displaying the image, she reportedly warned students multiple times — both verbally and in the syllabus — that images of Muhammad would be shown, acknowledging that some students might find them objectionable. Despite these warnings a student filed a complaint contending that the imagery was "offensive and Islamophobic." The university publicly endorsed this description of the incident and decided not to renew Lopez-Prater's teaching contract, effectively dismissing her. This successful sanction attempt is coded as coming "from the left."

Outcomes of scholar sanction attempts

The Scholars Under Fire database features 12 possible outcomes of a scholar sanction attempt:

Censorship applies when a scholar has their course canceled or otherwise altered, when their publications are retracted, or when they agree not to engage in certain expression again.

Demoted applies when a scholar is removed from a higher position at the college or university, such as serving as the chair of their department, or from a hiring or promotion committee, when they lose their emeritus status, or when they are removed as the editor of an academic journal.

Investigation applies when a college or university places a scholar under investigation because of their expression either in response to public backlash or internal administrative concerns. This also includes Title IX investigations deemed retaliatory for expression.

Lawsuit applies when a scholar files a lawsuit against the college or university for violating their civil rights.

No sanction applies when a scholar is not sanctioned by the college or university during a scholar sanction attempt.

Reinstatement applies when a scholar is reinstated at a college or university following a suspension, reinstated to a higher position after a demotion, or reinstated after termination from the college or university.

Resignation applies when a scholar resigns from the college or university in response to a controversy. This also includes instances when a scholar resigns from a higher-level position (e.g., dean or chair of the department), when a scholar resigns from a hiring or promotion committee, when a scholar resigns from an editorial position at a peer-reviewed journal, or when a scholar voluntarily resigns or retires from the college or university.

Scholarship suppression applies when a scholar is forbidden from conducting research, or when their publications are delayed or denied.

Suspension applies when a scholar is placed on paid or unpaid leave, partially, temporarily, or permanently relieved of teaching their duties, suspended indefinitely or for a certain period of time.

Termination applies when a scholar is fired or terminated, when their contract is not renewed, when a contract offer or extension is rescinded, when their tenure is revoked, when they are forced to resign.

Training applies when a scholar is required by their college or university to undergo additional training.

Unknown applies when FIRE cannot determine the final outcome of a scholar sanction attempt.

Public response

How colleges and universities respond to scholar sanction attempts significantly impacts campus culture. Clear, consistent messages about what forms of protest are acceptable help students understand the boundaries of protected speech. Conversely, inconsistent or selective enforcement can confuse students and may embolden efforts to punish scholars for their expression.

The Scholars Under Fire database categorizes institutional responses into 13 types. These categories reflect how a school publicly reacts to calls for sanctioning a scholar, whether through support, criticism, neutrality, or silence.

Categories of Public Response

The term **appeased protesters** denotes when an institution aligned with the protesters' censorship demands or validated the call for sanctioning the scholar.

The term **condemned expression** means that the school issued a statement explicitly criticizing the scholar's expression, rather than the scholar personally.

The term **condemned speaker** describes when the institution directly criticized the scholar involved, focusing on their character or status rather than their specific expression.

The term **disingenuous** describes when an institution sends mixed messages about its support for free expression. For instance, it may say it supports free speech while simultaneously implying regret for doing so or subtly validating protester demands.

The term **encouraged self-censorship** is used to describe when the institution explicitly or implicitly encouraged the scholar (or others) to censor their views, often under the guise of respect or community standards.

The term **high honors** applies only when the school (or a top administrator) issues a statement that reacts appropriately to the incident listed by both unambiguously expressing a commitment to free speech and explaining why the school is committed to freedom of expression. There cannot be any contradictory statements by other officials or any form of punishment for the speech in question, i.e. no investigation, censorship, or sanction by the administration.

Examples: "We support free expression at this institution because doing so is essential to higher education" and /or "because it is part of helping students become well rounded adults" and/or "because we live in a free society." The "because" part is a **necessary condition** for a "High Honors" designation.

The term **honors** applies when the school (or a top administrator) expresses support for free expression but without an explanation of why free speech is important, i.e. the "because" part necessary for High Honors is missing. An "Honors" designation also applies if a top official admonishes a lower official or school employee for not respecting free speech.

The term **mistaken on the law** describes when a college or university issues a legally incorrect response related to free expression rights.

The term **neutral** describes when a college or university issues a response to a scholar sanction attempt that does not support or criticize the controversial expression.

The term **none** describes when a college or university declines to issue a public response to a scholar sanction attempt.

The term **supported expression** describes when a college or university issues a response to a scholar sanction attempt that indicates its agreement with the controversial expression.

The term **supported speaker** describes when a college or university responds to a scholar sanction attempt by complimenting or defending the person or artist responsible for the controversial expression.

The term **unknown** describes when FIRE cannot determine if the college or university issued a public response to a scholar sanction attempt.

Colleges and universities may issue multiple responses — sometimes conflicting responses — to a scholar sanction attempt.