

Learning Environment Priorities and Free Expression

August 24, 2022

Prepared for UASU Executive Committee



Overview

This supplemental survey report reexamines two questions in our [2019 annual survey](#) (n=3,944). These questions were designed and delivered in the context of conflicting public narratives about free expression on campus. The largest limitation of this survey is that it took place pre-COVID; in the past two and a half years, many students have had educational experiences that may have shaped their priorities and perceptions differently.

When asked about the relative importance of a comfortable, supportive learning environment versus a challenging learning environment:

- Results varied strongly by gender: men tended to consider them equal priorities, while women and gender minorities tended to lean somewhat toward comfort/support.
- Average responses varied widely by faculty, but also varied widely by gender within most faculties. For example, while men in Law were the most likely group to choose a challenging learning environment as a priority, women in Law leaned toward valuing comfort/support.
- As students grow older and progress in their programs, they are often more likely to consider these two priorities as equally important.
- Indigenous, first-generation, LGBTQ+, and neurodivergent students were somewhat more likely than other students to lean toward comfort/support.

When asked whether most students feel free to discuss serious issues even when others might disagree with their perspective:

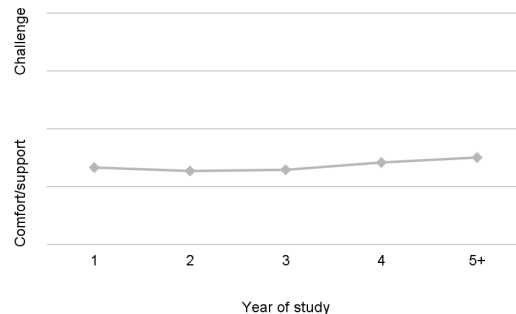
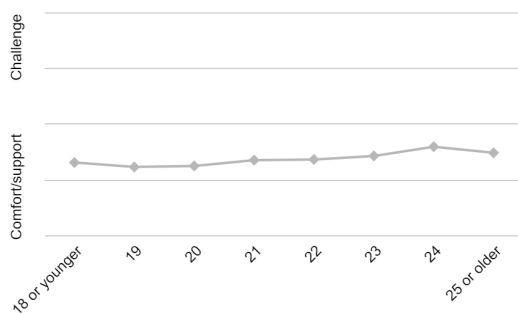
- 48% agreed to some extent; 37% disagreed to some extent; 15% chose the middle ground on a five-point scale.
- Men were more likely than women or gender minorities to strongly agree or strongly disagree, but had similar average responses.
- Variation by faculty was minimal, though Augustana was more likely to agree.
- Indigenous students, first-generation students, and LGBTQ+ students were moderately more likely to lean toward agreeing. Neurodivergent students and students with dependent children were moderately less likely to agree.
- First-year and 18-year-old students were moderately (5-7%) more likely to agree; older students, or those in later years, trended toward the middle.

"What's more important? A comfortable, supportive learning environment or a challenging learning environment?"

This question ran on a five-point sliding scale. The average response leaned somewhat toward comfort/support in this forced tradeoff.

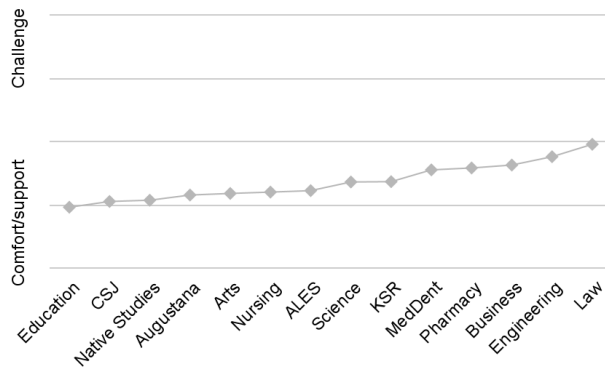
	Respondents	As percent
Comfort/support	820	25%
Leaning comfort/support	1292	40%
Balanced	479	15%
Leaning challenge	538	17%
Challenge	123	4%

However, as students grow older and progress in their programs, they appear more likely to consider these two priorities as equally important.

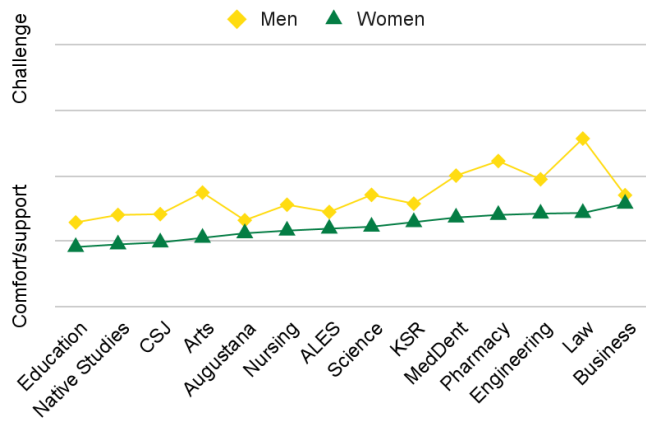


Still looking at averages, men were far less likely than women and gender minorities to put relative value on comfort/support. Indigenous, first-generation, LGBTQ+, and neurodivergent students leaned somewhat toward comfort/support.

A respondent's faculty played a major role: students in Law, Engineering, and Business tended to put approximately equal value on comfort/support and challenge, while students in Education, Arts, CSJ, and Augustana were more likely to lean toward comfort/support.



However, men were disproportionately represented among respondents from Engineering, Business, and Law, while women dominated in Nursing and Education. Women in Engineering, Business, and Law had average responses comparable to most other faculties (i.e. leaning comfort/support). Meanwhile, men in these faculties tended to put equal weight on comfort/support and challenge, or leaned toward challenge outright. In short, gender remained a dominant factor for this question across most faculties.



These results appear to reflect a combination of different faculty cultures and highly gendered preferences regarding priorities for the learning environment.

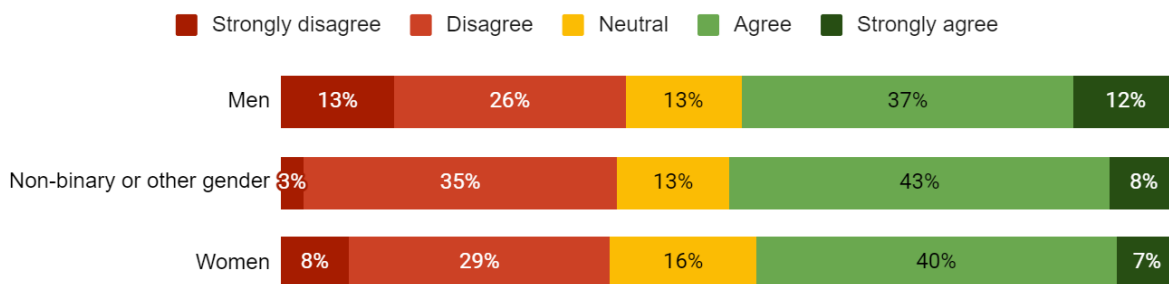
Further research could ask students the reasons for their preferences and expectations, as well as exploring comfort/support and challenge separately rather than as a forced dichotomy. It may well be that many students put a high priority on both, or neither.

"Agree or disagree? 'I think most UAlberta students feel free to discuss serious issues even when others might disagree with their perspective.'"

This question — a straightforward temperature check — ran on a five-point Likert scale. It represents students' subjective impressions of others' feelings, so it should be taken with a large grain of salt.

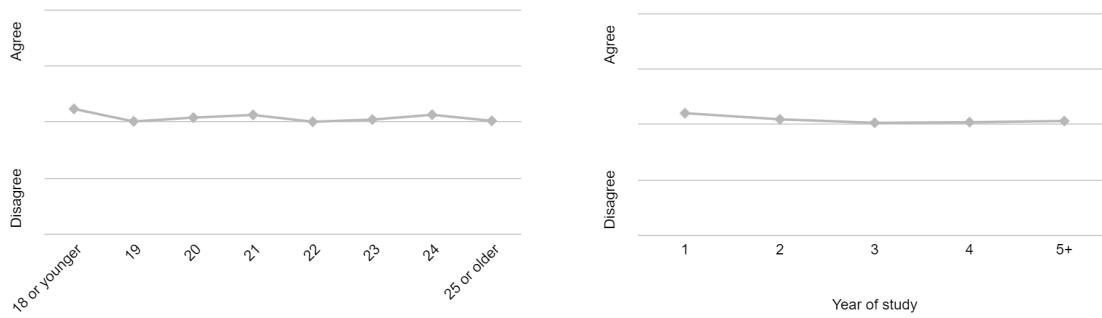
	Respondents	As percent	Combined agree/disagree
Strongly disagree	294	9.1%	37.2%
Disagree	913	28.2%	
Neither agree nor disagree	494	15.2%	
Agree	1273	39.3%	47.5%
Strongly agree	269	8.3%	

Gender played a very different (and far less dominant) role here than in the previous question. Men were more likely than women to have strong opinions in either direction, but had similar average responses.



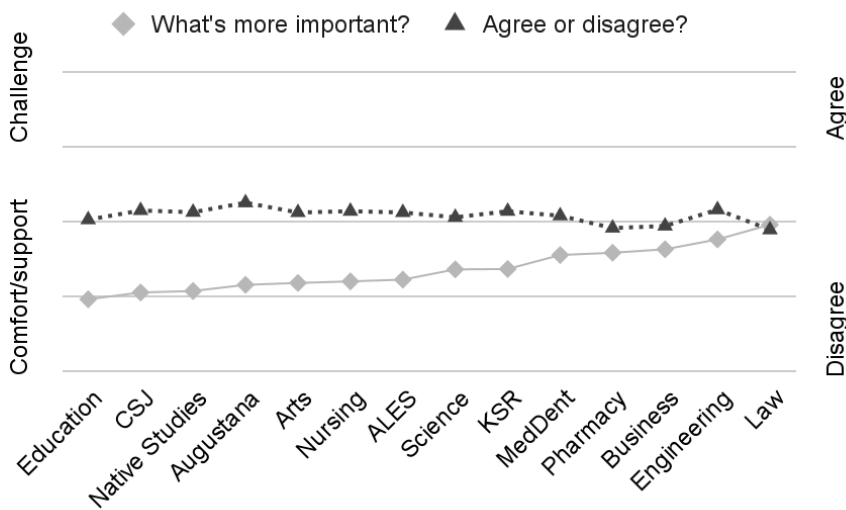
Indigenous students, first-generation students, and LGBTQ+ students were moderately more likely to lean toward agreeing. Neurodivergent students and students with dependent children were moderately less likely to agree.

First-year students and students aged 18 or younger were moderately more likely (around 5-7% more likely) than other students to lean toward agreeing. After the first year or age 18, average answers stayed essentially stable around the middle.



Compared to the previous question, a respondent's faculty had a more limited influence on average responses. One likely factor is that men and women have, on average, similar responses to this question, so faculties' varying gender ratios would not have an impact.

With the caveat that relatively few Augustana students took this survey, Augustana students were more likely to agree.



Further research could explore why men's opinions tend to be polarized on this topic; whether Augustana's formal and informal discussion environment actually differs significantly from other campuses; and what factors actually make a student more likely to agree or disagree (noting that very few picked the middle option).