



# An Uneasy Peace: How STEM Progressive, Traditionalist, and Bridging Faculty Understand Campus Conflicts over Diversity, Anti-Racism, and Free Expression

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**Abstract** In recent years an uneasy peace has descended in U.S. academe between those who feel research universities have done too little to advance the representation of minority groups and women and those who feel that the administrative policies developed to improve representation can and sometimes do come into conflict with core intellectual commitments of universities. Using quantitative and qualitative evidence from interviews with 47 natural sciences, engineering, and mathematics faculty members at a U.S. research university, the paper examines the background characteristics of three sets of protagonists - academic progressives, academic traditionalists, and those whose views bridge the divide - and the way respondents discussed and justified their viewpoints. The paper draws on the theory of strategic action fields to illuminate the structure and dynamics of the conflict and suggests modifications to the theory that would improve its explanatory power for this case.

**Keywords** STEM faculty · Diversity policies · Academic freedom · Anti-racism

## Introduction

In recent years an uneasy peace has descended in U.S. academe between those who feel research universities have done too little to advance the representation of minority groups (Barber et al. 2020; Harper and Simmons 2019) and women

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and those who feel that the administrative policies designed to improve representation can and sometimes do come into conflict with the foundational intellectual commitments of universities (Pinker 2021; Whittington 2018; Wooldridge 2021). This uneasy peace has been marked by many micro-level skirmishes involving activist assertions of continuing inequities and reactive opposition in support of traditional academic and intellectual values, with many faculty members remaining quiet or attempting to bridge the divide. The conditions on campus have also generated what appear to be an increasing number of formal proceedings against those accused of racial or gender bias (see, e.g., German and Stevens 2021). They have also been used to legitimate a wave of restrictive legislation in politically conservative U.S. states (Young and Friedman 2023).

The arguments of proponents and critics of the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and anti-racism policies of universities have become familiar in the United States through well-publicized policy debates (see, e.g., Moreno et al. 2012; Soucek 2022), open letters (Barber et al. 2020; Harper's Magazine 2020; Princeton University Faculty Signatories 2020), near-daily opinion pieces (see, e.g., Butler 2022; McWhorter 2020; Will 2022) and press reports (see, e.g., Powell 2021a, 2021b). These arguments have become familiar also in many European countries (European Parliament 2023). However, we do not know as much about who the protagonists and antagonists are on campus, how they make sense of and justify their positions, or about whether social science theories can help to illuminate the structure and dynamics of conflict.

In this paper, we provide evidence and analysis to begin to fill these research gaps. Our conclusions are based on extensive interviews with 47 academic scientists, engineers, and mathematicians (also known as STEM faculty) concerning campus DEI policies, anti-racism, freedom of expression and inquiry, and meritocratic selection. These are the topics at the heart of the recent campus conflicts in the United States (Honeycutt et al. 2023) and abroad (European Parliament 2023).

Our research questions are as follows:

- 1) Who are the main sets of actors in the campus controversies we analyze?
- 2) What socio-demographic and identity characteristics distinguish those in each of the main set of actors?
- 3) How do those in each group make sense of and justify their positions?
- 4) To what extent can theory aid in the analysis of these conflicts?

We focus on STEM faculty for two reasons. First, the views of faculty members in the humanities and social sciences have been analyzed in greater depth and at a more granular level than those of scientists, engineers, and mathematicians (see, e.g., German 2020; Park and Denson 2009). Second, STEM faculty are of particular interest because they stand at the top of the modern academic status hierarchy. They have access to substantially more funding than other academics, publish much more research than those in other disciplines, are recognized by the most prestigious honors, and are regarded as doing work that on average requires the highest level of intellectual training and rigor (Brint 2018). Their work also

has practical applications that are comparatively rare among practitioners in other disciplines (Cole 2009). Their views consequently have the potential to influence the values of academic institutions disproportionately. Issues of representation loom large in STEM fields, both in the United States (NCSES 2023) and globally (Global Research Council 2021) and the scientific community has been divided by the same conflicts as other academic communities when issues of representation come into conflict with other academic values (see, e.g., Abbot et al. 2023). If scientists and engineers have largely adopted the views of DEI and anti-racism advocates, the future of research universities is likely to be significantly different than it was during the heyday of the “academic revolution” (Jencks and Riesman 1968) when hiring focused more exclusively on those with the most prestigious academic pedigrees and professional accomplishments.

The study was conducted in a liberal state. Where governors and legislatures in liberal states have put weight on the scale in favor of policies to support the aspirations of minorities and women, politicians in several conservative U.S. states have passed legislation with the opposite intent. Several states have now banned DEI offices and others are considering to do so. One state has also banned the teaching of theories concerning systemic racism and sexism and others are considering to do so (PEN America 2023). Whether these restrictions will prove enduring will depend on how U.S. courts rule on challenges to them. It is clear that future U.S. studies will need to pay attention to developments in these conservative states, as well as in liberal states.

We begin with an overview of the policies, movements, and traditions that underlie the conflicts with which we are concerned. We then introduce the theoretical ideas and frameworks on which we draw for analysis. We then discuss our data and methods followed by our results. Our results are organized to address the research questions above in sequential order. We conclude with a discussion of our principal findings.

## **DEI Policies, Anti-Racism, and Traditional Academic Values**

Many university administrators and faculty members consider DEI efforts to be a necessary response to persistent inequalities in representation by race-ethnicity and gender, as well as a means to bring new talent and a broader range of scholarly interests into their institutions (Brint and Frey 2023). According to government statistics, in 2020 only about 12 percent of full-time native-born faculty in the United States were black, Hispanic, Native American, or of mixed-race parentage; the population percentage of Americans old enough to teach in colleges and universities was approximately twice as high (NCSES 2020). The rapidly diversifying population of the United States heightens concern about these discrepancies; fully half of children under the age of 18 in 2020 were members of a minority group or were of mixed-race parentage (ChildStats.gov 2021).

The situation for women has, by contrast, improved much faster but nevertheless gaps remain in women’s representation among students and faculty in the STEM disciplines (AAUW 2021). In science, the increased participation of women

and minorities has been associated also with the uncovering of biases in previous research (see, e.g., Furl et al. 2002; Obermeyer et al. 2019; Woodward 2019).

Although U.S. university documents often highlight the value of many different forms of diversity - including religious, geographic, and socioeconomic diversity - in practice diversity policies now typically focus on racial-ethnic minorities, women, and, to a lesser degree, LGBTQ+ students and faculty. This was also true of the campus we studied.

Administrative efforts to promote more equitable representation include the adoption of diversity as an element in university mission statements; requirements that candidates for appointment and promotion submit statements about their contributions to diversity; administrative guidance on micro-aggressions and trigger warnings; the funding of safe spaces for those who feel marginalized on campus; and trainings on the implicit biases that can lead to inequities in the allocation of opportunities. These policies have been supported by campus DEI offices, which have become widely institutionalized over the last two decades (Kwak et al. 2018) and by the sizeable number of students and faculty who see themselves as diversity advocates (Park and Denson 2009).

The anti-racism movement has been influential over the last decade as a quasi-independent and determined force for social change on campus. It has highlighted examples of systemic racism and has introduced new terms into campus discourse, including “White supremacy,” “White privilege,” and “White fragility.” It has also pioneered new practices for encouraging social change. These include advocacy for “de-centering” Western assumptions, methods, and epistemologies from course materials; the use of campus websites to publicize departmental support for progressive causes; listening sessions to air the concerns of those who perceive themselves to be targets of bias; grading concessions for those who feel the obligation to participate in protests; the renaming of buildings associated with those who have espoused racist or sexist views; and the partial or complete removal of police from campus (see, e.g., Bartlett 2021).

DEI policies and the ideas of the anti-racism movement have raised concerns and, in some cases, faced opposition when they have been perceived to come into conflict with foundational principles of academic professionalism. Opposition has arisen primarily in defense of three values: academic freedom, rationalist inquiry, and meritocratic selection. Academic freedom promises professors unfettered freedom of inquiry and expression within the spheres of their professional competence as a necessary prerequisite to the pursuit of truth (AAUP 1940). Where DEI policies seek to constrain speech and action in ways that are beneficial to marginalized populations, academic freedom encourages professors to speak freely within the sphere of their professional competence. The canons of rationalist inquiry require scientists and scholars to base their truth-claims on evidence systematically collected and analyzed and open to inspection and criticism by members of the relevant specialist community (Pinker 2021; Searle 1994). Where DEI policies and anti-racist activism seek to broaden teaching and curriculum to be more responsive to the contributions of racial-ethnic minorities, women, and those from non-Western cultures, the canons of rationalist inquiry require professors to validate truth-claims in ways that diversity advocates sometimes find unnecessary, using methods they sometimes find to

reflect Western or white male biases. Meritocratic selection refers to hiring and promotion practices based on universalistic criteria of excellence grounded in scholarly qualifications and disciplinary publication, teaching, and service norms (Abbot et al. 2023; Wooldridge 2021). Where DEI policies place an emphasis on representation in university admissions and hiring, the principles of meritocratic selection place an emphasis on evidence of scholarly and professional accomplishment that may be less available to members of socially disadvantaged groups (see, e.g., Espenshade and Radford Walton 2009). Bases for conflict are evident in these contending value strains.

## Theoretical Framework

We have drawn on theory for two distinct purposes. The more limited purpose is to provide aid in the interpretation of the qualitative data we have collected on the issue positions and sentiments of STEM faculty. The other and broader purpose is to illuminate the structures of opposition and the dynamics of conflict in our case. These two purposes require different theoretical frameworks.

### *Cultural Scripts*

For the purpose of aiding in the interpretation of our qualitative data, we use the concept of “cultural scripts.” As we will use the term, “cultural scripts” refers to cognitive schemas that are prominent within social groups. Cultural scripts should not be understood as rigid formulae but rather as flexible, context-dependent frames for understanding situations and for explaining and justifying action based on selection from a set of publicly available ideas and orientations (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004). They can be adopted from sources external to an organization, such as from ideas presented in media discourse or by advocacy organizations, or from sources internal to an organization, such as those drawn from among the commonly held beliefs circulating among campus social circles. In theory, cultural scripts that are widely disseminated in an environment are available for selection by any actor in that environment, but among the available scripts some will resonate to a greater degree with the interests and identities of different sets of actors. In our view, actors’ interests and identities do not determine their selection from among available cultural scripts; rather the connections are variable and based on elective affinities.

Interpretation of personal experiences are also ways of understanding and justifying positions but are based on biographical events. Interpretations of biographical events are, however, frequently influenced by cultural scripts in so far as they follow distinctive culturally approved patterns of interpretation. An example is provided by the professor in our sample who attributed disappointments in her early career to gender discrimination, an interpretation that has become more widespread in American culture over time and one that would contrast, for example, with alternative interpretations based on problems with a research agenda or with productivity.

## *Strategic Action Fields*

For purposes of illuminating the structures of opposition and the dynamics of conflict in our case, we draw on the theory of strategic action fields (SAFs), also known as the theory of fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2012).<sup>1</sup> The theory of fields is a leading theory of intra-organizational conflict. It has been applied in the analysis of numerous cases, including digital transformations in Swiss businesses (Peter et al. 2020), the implementation of community wind energy in Denmark (Mey and Diesendorf 2018), reputational repair following scandals (Bozic et al. 2019), the identification of highly creative groups in science, art, and other endeavors (Parker and Corte 2017) and as a general framework for understanding policy implementation processes (Moulton and Sandfor 2016). We invoke the theory because we have found it valuable for helping us to make sense of our case materials and to provide leverage for understanding the structure and dynamics of the conflict and its possible outcomes.

Strategic action fields are defined by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) as fundamental units of collective action in society. They are constructed meso-level social organizations in which actors are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared understandings about the purpose of the field, relationships to others in the field, and the rules governing legitimate action. The main sets of actors in SAFs are incumbents (those who occupy dominant positions within the field) and challengers (those who often accede to incumbents but also engage in contestation to improve their positions in the field). Incumbents and challengers are motivated by identities and interests. Internal governing units (IGUs) create, regulate, and legitimate existing settlements within SAFs. Jockeying for power and influence between incumbents and challengers is a normal feature of organizational life but rarely disruptive in large part because of the stabilizing influence of IGUs. Very often state actors play the role of IGU but non-state authorities within the field may also do so.

SAFs vary in size and function from small scale (for example, a single academic department) to large scale (for example, the entire U.S. post-secondary education system). Smaller SAFs are embedded in or have other types of relations with larger SAFs. For example, a single campus SAF may be embedded in or be influenced by a coordinating body for a state's higher education institutions, by legislative committees responsible for public higher education, by associations of similarly situated universities, and by other larger SAFs. These larger SAFs constitute important features of the broader environment facing smaller SAFs and often influence the organization and purposes of smaller SAFs.

Under normal conditions, the reproduction of fields (including its power structure and dominant cultural system) is typical, but under specific circumstances fields can enter periods of uncertainty and contestation. These episodes of contention

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<sup>1</sup> Issue of inequality clearly bear on this case, and while we recognize the value of theories concerning the sources and consequences of inequality in education (see, e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 [1970]; Bronfenbrenner 1979), our research more directly concerns the sources of intra-organizational conflict in U.S. higher education.

may be precipitated either by disruptions in nearby SAFs or by exogenous shocks, or by both. Where dependencies are strong, disruptions in nearby and more powerful SAFs will tend to destabilize less powerful SAFs. Exogenous shocks, such as a severe economic recession or a new national political alignment, also disrupt relations within an SAF. For Fligstein and McAdam, changes in power relations within SAFs (and accompanying changes in the dominant cultural system) are usually precipitated by exogenous shocks. These shocks create vulnerabilities for IGUs and incumbents and new opportunities for challengers.

Fligstein and McAdam emphasize that outcomes from these episodes of contention are partly explained by the social skills of the leaders of the IGUs and of the incumbent and challenging groups. They are also partly explained by the incentives in the environment available to the contending groups. By social skill, they mean the ability of leading actors to create strong ties and to mobilize action among those sympathetic to their cause. The interests of emerging conflict groups are constituted culturally in collective action frames. These can be understood as distinctive conceptions of the field reflecting the “self-serving” interests of incumbents and the “oppositional” interests of challengers.<sup>2</sup> By incentives in the environment, they mean the economic, social, and political resources that are available to support the positions of incumbents and challengers. Depending on the social skill of leading actors and the extent to which they access and effectively employ the available incentives in their environment, these disruptions can lead to re-stabilization of the dominant structure, compromises between the contending parties, or entirely new settlements in which challengers emerge as the new incumbents.

Figure 1 provides a representation of Fligstein and McAdam’s theory of intra-organizational conflict.

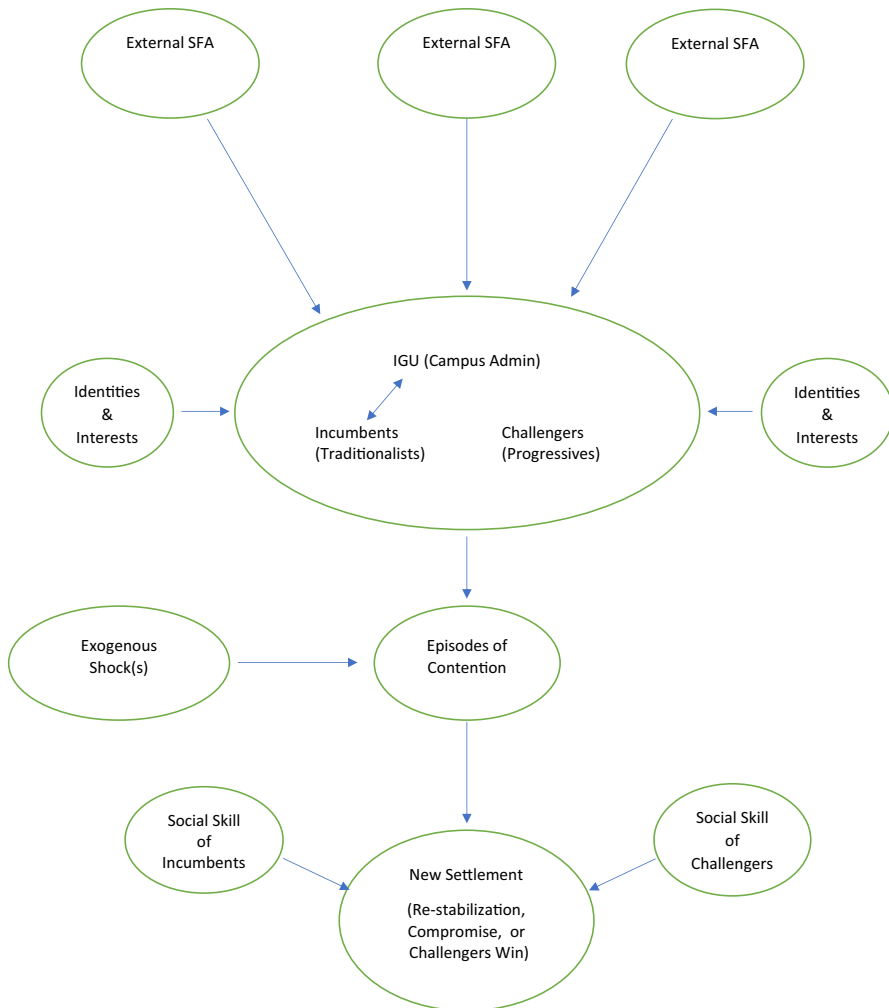
The theory of strategic action fields has clear applications to our case. Ours can be interpreted as an instance of an SAF (the university) experiencing a set of disruptions in which the positions of nominal incumbents (academic traditionalists) and challengers (academic progressives) have become uncertain. The university is embedded in and has relations with other larger SAFs in its environment, including notably the system-wide administration and the state government. The system-wide administration, including the system-wide faculty senate, has been a strong advocate for advancing student and faculty diversity since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Brint and Frey 2023). Many state legislators as well as the current governor have objectives with respect to representation similar to those of the system-wide university administration (Ibid.).<sup>3</sup>

The distinctive socio-demographic characteristics of incumbents and challengers can be known. Identities are the motivating features associated with distinctive socio-demographic characteristics and interests can often be inferred from

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<sup>2</sup> We discuss the differences between cultural scripts and the framing processes and collective action frames emphasized by Fligstein and McAdam at greater length below and argue that the concepts are most relevant at different stages in conflict group formation.

<sup>3</sup> The governorship and both houses of state legislature in the state have been controlled by Democrats, the left-of-center U.S. party, since 2011. The Democrats have held veto-proof supermajorities since 2018.



**Fig. 1** Fligstein-McAdam Model of Intra-Organizational Conflict

the statements of actors. The primary IGU in this case is the campus administration. Its leaders administer policy and attempt to manage conflicts on campus on a case-by-case basis. According to the theory, the IGU will support incumbents unless or until external disruptions lead a new settlement favoring challengers or involving a new compromise between the interests of the contending groups. It is clear that the disruptions caused by demographic change and campus protests over racial and gender inequities have influenced the policies and outlooks of the IGUs and have provided opportunities for challengers (Brint and Frey 2023). The eventual outcome of the disruptions is still unknown but, as we will show, the position of progressives appears to be improving and that of traditionalists declining. While we find the theory of fields to be an important aid in analysis, we



also find features of the theory to require elaborations or modifications in order to more accurately fit our case. We discuss these suggested elaborations and modifications in a later section of the paper.

## Data and Methods

### *Study Site*

This study is based on interviews with tenured and tenure-track faculty members in STEM disciplines at a U.S. public research university. The university is known for attracting a very diverse group of undergraduate students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend a university. The university administration is highly committed to policies to enhance DEI. As a public research university, the faculty face incentives also to admit graduate students and hire faculty who better reflect the population groups that make up the state. In recent years, these incentives have been reinforced by policy initiatives of the governing board and officials in the state government (Brint and Frey 2023). At the same time, as a top 100 American research university, the faculty has incentives to compete successfully for grant funding, to produce important research findings for publication, and to measure themselves on professional achievement criteria such as citation counts and prestigious awards. These incentives are reinforced by a merit system that rewards productivity and external recognition of professional accomplishments.

The research site offered a number of attractive features for the study. To the extent that we find ambivalence about or opposition to DEI policies and the language and practices of the anti-racism movement among scientists and engineers at this very progressive-minded university, we can plausibly infer that ambivalence and opposition are likely to be stronger at universities where the incentives for support are weaker. On the other hand, to the extent we find substantial support for both DEI policies and the anti-racism movement, the findings would suggest a pattern that may unfold over time at less overtly progressive public universities as the diversity of the college-age population increases.

### *Sample*

We obtained lists of all tenured and tenure-track faculty in three academic units: the science college (which includes the departments of mathematics and statistics as well as the physical and life sciences) and the schools of engineering and medicine. In the medical school, we focused exclusively on the biomedical science faculty rather than clinical faculty. We sent out invitations to 143 randomly chosen faculty members, or one out of three professors on the lists we received. Five faculty members responded that they had left the university or retired, reducing the valid sample to 138. Of these 138, 47 agreed to be interviewed, a response

rate of 34 percent. Thirty-seven faculty members declined our invitation, and the remaining 57 did not respond either to the original invitation or to two follow-ups. To check on non-response bias, we asked those who declined for the primary reason(s) why they did not wish to participate. All but three of those who declined our invitation responded to this question; 80 percent said they declined because they were too busy to sit for an interview. A few of those who declined indicated that they were uncomfortable talking about controversial topics about which their colleagues had expressed strong views.

The life sciences (including biomedical) faculty were overrepresented by a statistically significant margin among those who agreed to be interviewed, and physical sciences, engineering, and mathematics faculty were under-represented. Faculty members of Asian descent (including those born in both East and South Asia) were under-represented at a nearly statistically significant level. Given the greater support for progressive politics among biological sciences and White faculty (see below), these distributions suggest that the divisions in the STEM faculty over DEI policies and anti-racism may be somewhat more equal than we found in this sample of participants.

Many surveys of faculty social and political attitudes exist. (See Gross 2013 for an overview of U.S. studies.) The comparative advantage of this mixed-methods study lies in the depth of analysis possible through lengthy, well-focused interviews. According to Yin (2003), the goal of qualitative case studies is to allow researchers to observe and understand complex phenomena. Yin observed that qualitative case studies are particularly useful for understanding why participants believe and act as they do. Using Saldaña's (2014) framework for coding, we were attentive to "values coding," or the attitudes, values, and beliefs participants conveyed in their responses. We were attentive also to "versus coding" or the oppositions these distinctive values conveyed. Our work is a constructivist study, as defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994), in so far as we did not impose a set of pre-existing expectations or hypotheses on participants. At the same time, we aimed to develop meaningful conceptualizations and potentially generalizable hypotheses based on participants' responses, placing the study also in the positivistic category, in Guba and Lincoln's terms. The material we collected is rich in detail and highly suggestive of potentially more general patterns. The sparsity of the existing studies of these important debates, the richness of the qualitative responses, and the potentially generalizable hypotheses and modifications of theory generated by the study fully justify the research and render the results of value, despite the relatively small number of interviewees.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of qualitative methods and case study applications in education, see Merriam (1994).

### *Interview Protocol, Coding, and Data Analysis Strategy*

The interviews took place in academic years 2020-21 and 2021-22.<sup>5</sup> Each of the three members of the research team conducted interviews based on random assignment. Interviews averaged one hour and 15 minutes, with a range from 40 minutes to 2.5 hours.

The interview protocol was designed to probe participants' views of the issues that are at the heart of current campus controversies. We included a number of questions relevant to each of the three major topics: DEI policies, anti-racism, and free expression. Participants' responses to questions about DEI policies also elicited responses relevant to their thinking about the validity of meritocratic selection processes. The interview questions were developed and pilot tested by the research team. In developing questions our primary objective was to identify members of the main sets of actors on campus in relation to the current campus controversies and to use the interview format to collect rich understandings of the sources of participants' views on the topics that are at the heart of these controversies – i.e., DEI policies, anti-racism, freedom of expression, and meritocratic selection processes.

We analyzed STEM faculty views of DEI policies, anti-racism, and free expression together because current tensions and conflicts involve actors who have taken a distinctive set of positions on these subjects. We analyzed several items in each of these three areas to cover the range of issues that have been prominent flash points on the campus we studied. By using multiple questions to investigate participants' thinking in each domain, we anticipated that we would be able to distinguish group identities in a more robust way than would have been possible using just one or two questions. The full text of questions in each of the three main attitude domains are provided in Appendix Table 3.

We draw on four of the sections of the interview protocol in this paper.<sup>6</sup> In part one, we asked respondents about their views concerning a wide range of DEI policies that some U.S. universities have adopted. The questions in this section also addressed respondents' views about free expression as these views relate to campus controversies. The questions concerned the role of race and gender in graduate admissions and faculty hiring; diversity as a mission of the university; the use of diversity statements in hiring and promotion; curricula transformations to incorporate under-represented contributors and topics of interest to communities of color; speech codes and other language related policies such as the required use of student-chosen pronouns; implicit bias training and response teams; the development of campus "safe spaces" for groups whose members feel marginalized; and speaker dis-invitations and disruptions. In a second part, we asked participants about features of the language and practices of the anti-racism movement on campus. This

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<sup>5</sup> The interviews took place after the protests over police killings of unarmed Black people that occurred in many U.S. cities during the summer of 2020. Although these episodes were not mentioned by participants in our interviews, they may have influenced the thinking of some.

<sup>6</sup> In the final section we asked participants about the extent to which scientific and DEI emphases played a role in their teaching and research. In this paper, we do not draw on this section. The interview questions were pilot tested and approved by the campus Institutional Review Board.

section included questions about systemic racism in American society and on campus; the use of terms such as White supremacy, White privilege, and White fragility; the use of listening sessions to address student concerns as opposed to dialogues; allowances in grading for student protesters; the renaming of buildings in cases where the named individual has been credibly accused of racist or sexist views; and whether police should be removed from campus. In a third part, we asked participants about their comfort levels in discussing topics related to DEI, and whether their comfort levels had changed over time. We use this section as an indirect indicator of how confident the main set of actors felt about their standing on campus. In a final section of the protocol, we collected demographic and work-related data about the participants and self-assessments of their political ideologies. We use this information to distinguish the socio-demographic and identity characteristics of members of the main sets of actors.

As we reviewed the interview transcripts, we found that participants' answers could be coded into one of three categories for purposes of statistical analysis: (1) support, (2) opposition, or (3) ambivalent/refraining to take a position. We subsequently went through the answers of each participant to code them using this scheme. The items were coded consistently so that participant mean scores close to one indicated consistently more liberal responses, while participant mean scores close to three indicated consistently more skeptical responses to the items. We use these codes to address our first research question on the identification of the main sets of actors and our second research question on the socio-demographic and identity characteristics of the main sets of actors in our analysis.

Our results also draw extensively on the qualitative data. Specifically, the ways that participants discussed their views were retained to address our third research question on the sources of actors' positions and beliefs. This analysis draws on more than 1,000 pages of transcribed interviews. From the transcriptions, the research team excerpted and categorized 50 single-spaced pages of quotes under 100 headings. We developed the headings through an iterative process of searching for common bases of belief and common sentiments of affiliation and opposition, a process involving both values and versus coding to use Saldaña's (2014) terms. These quotes illuminated important contrasts and themes, and the ways respondents discussed the sources of their viewpoints. All three members of the research team were involved in the compilation, categorization, and analysis of quotes.

## Results

We address our research questions sequentially. First, we identify the primary sets of actors that emerged from the analysis of participants' responses and we describe the socio-demographic and identity characteristics that distinguished these sets of actors from one another. Second, we analyze the cultural scripts and interpretations of personal experience used by actors in each of the categories to make sense of the contemporary tensions in universities over DEI policies, anti-racism, and freedom of expression. In this section, we show how some responses were influenced by individuals' distinguishing socio-demographic and identity characteristics. One of

the most important advantages of qualitative work is its capacity to engage deeply with participants' understandings of their situations (Merriam 1994; Yin 2003). This depth of engagement is an important contribution of the paper and we therefore devote considerable attention to findings in this section. Finally, we show how the theory of strategic action fields can be used to aid in the analysis of this case, noting the features of the theory that require elaboration or modification to fit our case.

### *Identifying the Principal Sets of Actors and their Identity-Related Characteristics*

We begin by addressing our first research question on the identification of sets of actors involved in the recent campus controversies. Three sets of actors emerged from our analysis. We label these groups “academic progressives,” (shortened for purposes of exposition to “progressives”), “academic traditionalists,” (shortened to “traditionalists”)<sup>7</sup> and “bridging faculty.”

We identified the first two of these sets of actors by grouping those who had consistently high or consistently low scores on a subset of 17 interview questions about which nearly all participants had baseline knowledge.<sup>8</sup> STEM progressives were highly supportive of diversity policies, convinced of the existence of systemic racism in American society, supportive of many of the ideas and practices of anti-racist activists, and often supportive of policies that restrict expression to avoid offending under-represented groups on campus. STEM traditionalists, by contrast, tended to be skeptical of or opposed to DEI policies, opposed to anti-racist ideas and practices, and highly supportive of policies protecting free expression. Some were skeptical that systemic racism existed in most sectors of American life and most denied that systemic racism existed on the campus.

We looked for breaks in the distribution of scores to identify STEM progressives and traditionalists. In the borderline cases, we reviewed the transcripts to determine whether the individuals belonged in one of the two categories at the ends or in the middle of the distribution. Through these procedures, we identified 12 STEM progressives, with an average score of 1.57 across the 17 items, and 10 STEM traditionalists, with an average score of 2.40 across those items.

The remaining 25 participants scored in between the progressives and the traditionalists. Our review of the quantitative coding indicated that these individuals could be further subdivided into two groups – those whose views closely followed the most prevalent answers on the same set of 17 questions and those whose answers

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<sup>7</sup> Many of the academic traditionalists had liberal or progressive views on economic and political issues outside of academe.

<sup>8</sup> We did not use the following questions to identify STEM progressives, traditionalists, and bridging faculty: (1) multicultural emphasis in curriculum; (2) use of students' preferred pronouns; (3) formation of implicit bias reporting teams; (4) systemic bias exists on campus; (5) listening sessions in cases of student complaints; and (6) renaming of buildings. Not all respondents had sufficient background knowledge to fully understand these questions. In the case of systemic bias on campus, idiosyncratic personal experiences also seemed to figure too prominently in the responses of some participants. For example, a respondent who heard about a robbery on campus involving a non-student used this incident to generalize about systemic bias on campus.

showed a more idiosyncratic pattern on those 17 questions.<sup>9</sup> We characterize those whose views closely followed the modal pattern as bridging faculty. The 15 bridging faculty were neither consistently progressive nor consistently traditionalist. Instead, they were highly supportive of DEI policies, convinced that systemic racism existed in American society, but also supportive of free speech protections (albeit in some cases with hesitations) and skeptical of or opposed to ideas and practices of anti-racist activists.<sup>10</sup> Our statistical analysis is based not on the full set of 47 subjects but rather on 37 subjects, excluding the 10 subjects whose responses showed no clearly identifiable pattern on the 17 questions.

Mean scores on the 17 items for members of the three groups are provided in Table 1.

We now take up our second research question on the identity-related characteristics of members of the three sets of actors. In Table 2, we distinguish the three sets of actors by their socio-demographic characteristics. Because of the relatively small number of participants in each of the three sets of actors, we focus here on statistically significant bivariate differences.

As indicated in Table 2, STEM progressives were distinguished by their youth, their Anglo-American nationalities, their fields of study, and, not surprisingly, by their “very liberal” political identifications. The average age of the progressives was younger than that of members of the other two groups, and it was statistically lower than the average age of the bridging faculty. Only one progressive claimed a non-Anglo-American nationality, whereas 29 percent of all participants said they were born outside of the U.S. or British Commonwealth countries. Nearly three out of five were life scientists compared to just 10 percent of traditionalists. Nearly all of the progressives characterized their political views as “very liberal” and one characterized his views as “far left.” Only one characterized herself as “moderately liberal” and none said that their political views were centrist or more conservative.

STEM traditionalists were distinguished by their racial-ethnic identities, their nationalities, their fields of study, and their political identifications. Many had significant professional attainments. Given the emphasis among anti-racist activists on White privilege, it is notable that five of the 10 traditionalists were non-White and one was of mixed racial-ethnic background. This was nearly twice the proportion of non-Whites and those of mixed racial background in the total sample. Seventy percent were born outside the U.S. or British Commonwealth countries compared to 29 percent of all participants. Nine of the ten were physical scientists or engineers compared to two out of five progressives and bridging faculty. Traditionalists also tended to characterize themselves as moderately liberal or centrist rather than very liberal.

<sup>9</sup> Those with idiosyncratic views included, for example, one professor who spent nearly all of his time in the lab and expressed confusion about the meaning of several terms used in the interview protocol. Another participant with idiosyncratic views expressed views that were highly attuned to gender inequalities but were much more skeptical about racial-ethnic inequalities. For most faculty interviewed, views on gender and racial-ethnic inequalities went hand in hand.

<sup>10</sup> We confirmed and slightly revised our initial visual classification of those who fit the modal pattern by conducting a K-means cluster analysis.

**Table 1** Views of DEI Policies, Free Speech, and Anti-Racism in Three Campus Groups

Variable	Progressives <i>N</i> =12	Traditionalists <i>N</i> =10	Bridgers <i>N</i> =15
<b>A. DEI Policies</b>			
Grad Admissions – Weight Race	1.00 <sup>2,3</sup>	2.10 <sup>1,3</sup>	1.47 <sup>1,2</sup>
Grad Admissions – Weight Gender	1.08 <sup>2</sup>	1.90 <sup>1,3</sup>	1.27 <sup>2</sup>
Hiring – Weight Race	1.08 <sup>2</sup>	2.70 <sup>1,3</sup>	1.20 <sup>2</sup>
Hiring – Weight Gender	1.17 <sup>2</sup>	2.50 <sup>1,3</sup>	1.27 <sup>2</sup>
Diversity is Public Mission	1.17 <sup>2</sup>	1.90 <sup>1,3</sup>	1.00 <sup>2</sup>
Diversity Statements – Required	1.08 <sup>2</sup>	2.60 <sup>1,3</sup>	1.33 <sup>2</sup>
Diversity Statements – Initial Screen	2.25	2.70	2.80
<b>B. Free Speech</b>			
Hate Speech Ban Okay	2.27	2.90	2.47
Micro-aggression Ban Okay	2.00 <sup>2</sup>	2.80 <sup>1</sup>	2.47
Provide Safe Spaces on Campus	1.33 <sup>2</sup>	2.30 <sup>1</sup>	1.67
Provide Implicit Bias Trainings	1.00 <sup>2</sup>	1.70 <sup>1,3</sup>	1.13 <sup>2</sup>
Disinvite Offensive Speakers	1.83 <sup>2</sup>	2.60 <sup>1</sup>	2.20
Shut Down Offensive Speakers	2.42	2.90	2.93
<b>C. Anti-Racism</b>			
Systemic Racism Exists in Society	1.08	1.50 <sup>3</sup>	1.00 <sup>2</sup>
Anti-Racist Terms Used Correctly	1.42 <sup>2,3</sup>	2.70 <sup>1</sup>	2.20 <sup>1</sup>
Grading Accommodations Allowed for Protesting Students	1.83 <sup>2</sup>	2.80 <sup>1</sup>	2.33
Remove Police from Campus	2.08 <sup>2,3</sup>	2.90 <sup>1</sup>	2.80 <sup>1</sup>

**Note:** Superscript 1 indicates significantly different from Progressives. Superscript 2 indicates significantly different from Traditionalists. Superscript 3 indicates significantly different from Bridging Faculty. Differences are treated as statistically significant at  $p \leq .05$ . Lower scores indicate more support for specific policies or initiatives.

The 15 bridging faculty were distinguished by their age, their fields of study, and especially by their experience in university administration. They were the oldest group among the participants and statistically older than progressives. Like progressives, however, they tended to be life scientists rather than physical scientists or engineers. Most notably seven of these people (47 percent) had served in the university administration, either as department chairs, divisional deans, or chairs of the faculty senate. Another was married to a senior administrator. By contrast, only one of the progressives and only one of the traditionalists had administrative experience. Bridging faculty were somewhat less likely to use scientific terms such as “evidence” and “data” to justify their positions than members of the other two groups, though not by a statistically significant margin.

**Table 2** Bivariate Relationships: Three Sets of Actors

Variable	Progressives <i>N</i> =12 Mean	Traditionalists <i>N</i> =10 Mean	Bridging Faculty <i>N</i> =15 Mean
Age	42.08	51.50	56.87 <sup>1</sup>
Gender (Male)	0.58	0.70	0.60
White	0.83	0.50 <sup>1,2</sup>	0.93
Asian	0.25	0.40	0.07
Hispanic	0.00	0.10	0.07
Life Sciences	0.58	0.10 <sup>1,2</sup>	0.60
Tenured	0.58	0.80	0.93
Full Professor	0.25	0.50	0.53
Political Ideology	2.25	3.10 <sup>1</sup>	2.73
Scientific Terms Used	1.42	1.60	0.87
Administrative Experience	0.08	0.10	0.47 <sup>1,2</sup>

Note: Superscript indicates statistically significant differences between groups at  $p < .05$ . Superscript 1 refers to statistically significant differences with progressives. Superscripts 1,2 refers to statistically significant differences between the designated group and the two other groups.

Neither gender nor tenure status showed statistically significant differences in distribution across the three groups.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Sources of Actors' Positions on the Issues*

We now turn to our third research question concerning the sources of participants' beliefs about the issues. We discuss themes in the discourse of members of each of the three groups below, using quotes from the interviews to illustrate values and beliefs that were prominent and distinctive among members of the groups. Comments relevant to the themes we highlight were not expressed by every person in the groups, but they were expressed by several, and they were also themes closely tied, in most cases, to the identities of members of the groups. For purposes of analysis, we focus on the cultural scripts that actors drew upon. We also show the links, where they are evident, between these cultural scripts and the identity characteristics of participants. The organizational status interests of participants must in most cases be inferred because they are rarely stated directly.

**Academic Progressives.** Prominent themes among progressives concerned the responsibilities of privileged people, caring and compassion as special virtues consistent with these privileged positions, and interpretations of the public mission of

<sup>11</sup> The finding for gender is surprising given the survey evidence that female faculty tend to be more supportive than male faculty of progressive policies and movements on campus (Honeycutt, Stevens, and Kaufmann 2023) and may be due to the limited representation of women in the sample population.



the university in light of these priorities and their own commitments to diversity. This constellation of responsibilities, concerns, and priorities led progressives to support the analyses and prescriptions of anti-racist activists and to take a deferential stance in relation to under-represented minority students. Each of these themes is connected to a publicly available cultural script.

For the STEM progressives, the experience of privileged backgrounds created special responsibilities toward those born into less fortunate circumstances:

“I’m White, I have benefited from White privilege, I absolutely have. And so, I have to be, like, ‘Okay. That’s very uncomfortable.’ But I have to then, wherever I can, use that advantage to help stop this from persisting in the future.” (junior professor, life sciences)

“I’m a representative of the traditional group that’s always been lucky to have these positions. I do try to share the fact that it’s not grades *per se* or whatever that has got me the privilege of being able to have this lifestyle.... These particular issues (of being honest about privileges) are part of building a just society which involves also a responsible and informed society, looking to the future based on our understanding of what actually has happened in the past.” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics).

“I think that we have an obligation to people who have been excluded, not due their own fault, but because of the situations that they grew up in, which may have lacked opportunities others had.” (junior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

The emphasis on the responsibilities of privileged people is a theme resonant for STEM faculty in our sample from White, Anglo-American backgrounds. People with these backgrounds were the only ones to articulate these themes. They are outlooks with obvious religious overtones, but we were unable to determine the extent to which religious upbringings may have been an influence on those who expressed them.

Caring and concern about the views of under-represented minority students were seen as consistent with the responsibilities of privilege:

“When students are from underrepresented backgrounds, they’re experiencing challenges that many of the faculty have no insight into...And so, it’s important for those students to find a space where they can be there, (to) express those frustrations.” (junior professor, life sciences)

“If such a code (against hate speech) was put forward by students, for example, and they made a compelling argument (about it), I could see myself being very much in favor of that.” (junior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

“And I think that the people who believe they have been wronged, should absolutely be heard. Not just people sitting in a room and pretending to listen, but... (in a way so that) you don’t get to argue with what the person says.... You have to hear their perspective.... (I)t helps people who have been the victim of something to name what has happened to them, and just talk about what the negative consequences are for them. And, then, it helps

the person who... conducted the action against this person... how it was interpreted, how it impacted someone else.” (junior professor, life sciences)

Some also drew on scripts about the public mission of the University, interpreted to highlight the centrality of diversity rather than other public missions, such as leadership development or the outreach of academic experts to all institutions and groups in the state. This idea is embedded in university documents on the public mission of the university and is frequently invoked on campus.

“Yes (diversity should be part of the mission of the university). I believe that that’s part of the mission of (the University) as it already exists. We’re a public institution. We’re funded by taxpayers of this state to serve the people of this state and all their diversity.” (junior professor, life sciences)

Given the emphasis on diversity in the university’s public representation, the under-representation of minorities seemed to these STEM progressives to be a special failing and one that required determined actions to counter.

“But I think that there (is), like, the status quo in which certain groups are radically underrepresented in certain fields. (It) is something that you can only really fix with a kind of proactive approach, at least in the interim. And so, as a strategy for addressing an historical imbalance to get it back to something more representative, I think it’s – I don’t see another option, really.” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

“I think it’s pretty well known that we recognize the contributions of the majority successful group more than those of underrepresented groups. So, I think it might take a little more effort to seek out materials that reflect the contributions of minoritized groups, but I think it’s really important to do, particularly considering the student population that we’re serving here...” (junior professor, life sciences)

The responsibilities of privileged people, the emphasis on caring consistent with the responsibilities of privileged people, and the identification of the university’s public mission as diversification led most of the STEM progressives to be receptive to the ideas of the anti-racism movement. These ideas have circulated widely on U.S. university campuses in recent years:

“Structural racism exists everywhere, so it also exists on campus. And so, my understanding of that term is that like all of our systems are founded in systems that are racist. And so, everything is a perpetuation of those systems, really. So, policies that we devise within the university have arisen in white supremacists’ culture, and so even if they’re not explicitly seeming like that, they have origins within that. So, it is worth examining most of our (culture) - most of the things that happen.” (junior professor, life sciences)

“I just don’t view structural racism as like a collection of things. It’s like the terrain itself, and like systems that are still profoundly structured by like the legacy of racism – and slavery in this country.... It’s like if you get used to

walking around ground that's like tilted at this angle, you come to just like view it as flat.... And so, the thing about structural racism is it's hard to see.... It's like layers upon layers of systems that we depend on for society to function, but that are also racist – and that cannot just be like razed to the ground and rebuilt in some way.... Like, it doesn't matter what you feel about being personally racist, you are participating in racism.” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

Whites of Anglo-American origin were the primary supporters of anti-racism as an analysis of the injustices perpetrated by their predecessors. Their sense of the injustice may have been greater, in part, because of the background characteristics they shared with those historically responsible for these exclusions.

Academic Traditionalists. Prominent themes among traditionalists included skepticism about the motivations of authorities and concerns about the priority of academic quality in a diversity-conscious university. Quality concerns, in particular, led to skepticism about, and sometimes outright opposition to, campus administrators and progressive activists. Ideas about the chilling effect of illiberal regimes are publicly available scripts especially prominent among those familiar with authoritarian regimes (Repucci and Slipowitz 2022) while quality issues are an ever-present feature of the discourse climate in American research universities and are regularly reinforced by their merit reward systems (see, e.g., King 2018).

Several of the traditionalists who were born in Europe described direct experiences with cynical or repressive regimes. These experiences led them to distrust elites purporting to act in the interests of the broader community:

“(The bureaucrat’s) job is to now decide what the societal benefits of tipping the scale would be. And perhaps my (understanding) is biased by growing up in (an authoritarian country). I’ve seen ideologically driven bureaucrats. I don’t trust any of them. And before I trust any of them, I would like to hear an answer to a simple question: ‘Please describe me the last day on the job of that person? Will they ever hang a banner (saying) mission accomplished?’ Or will this become a mission creep, where these people will, in order to progress their own careers, will invent further and further ways of measuring, making fine adjustments, readjustments and whatnot to what they’re trying to achieve? I think it’s the latter.” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

“(Politicians and ideologues) are dividing people...Slavery was terrible. I mean, of course you should recognize (that)... but you shouldn’t make people hate...other people. I think that’s what the outcome of (the movement) is... (The activists) are being manipulated by much larger forces. They don’t even realize it, and these forces don’t have minorities or anybody (else’s)... interest at heart. They have (a) much different interest, creating chaos and opposition between minorities, majorities, (and) other(s) who (are) not officially represented in the conflicts.” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

Here nationalities outside the Anglo-American sphere, particularly those more strongly influenced by the experience of repressive authorities, created an elective affinity between scripts skeptical of authorities and the experiences of several of the traditionalists.

The views of the traditionalists were also shaped by their sense that nonacademic values had been elevated above academic values by the campus administration.

“I’m probably in the minority of people on our campus in having quality as really the highest value. Of course, it’s very important to feel like your work is worthwhile and you’re making a difference, and that’s especially true for people in the academic realm, right? I mean, it’s not quite the same if you’re working in a grocery store or whatever .... I don’t think that the environment is very welcoming to anybody who’s going to do anything but be aggressive toward, ‘We got to have more underrepresented groups. We have to have more diversity regardless of what effect that has,’ and placing that value higher than academic quality.” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

The ideal of scholarly quality also served as a positive reference point for other traditionalists:

“...I’m afraid that I don’t recognize myself anymore in academia since two or three years, at least in the (university) because it has changed so much, and it has narrowed its focus so much and its perception of things and its goals. I don’t recognize myself in the goals of this institution anymore because they (have) lost track (of the primary purpose of academic work) ...” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

“It (a diversity statement) doesn’t tie in directly to the job, to do my particular work in my field (I would oppose it). It really doesn’t make a difference what race I am, what gender I am, what sexual orientation I am. What matters is the ideas that I have going forward, so being competent and that is really the ... foremost thing. And if that really is the foremost thing, then it strikes me that a commitment to diversity is an ideological statement that everybody’s being... asked to subscribe to. So...it strikes me that’s outside of the purview of the mission of (a) university...” (senior professor, life sciences)

Senior professors who have been rewarded for their professional accomplishments have an interest in asserting quality concerns because assessments of quality in the university’s merit reward system have been consequential in their careers. The link between institutional scripts about quality and the careers of many of the traditionalists in this sample are evident. In addition, nearly all of the traditionalists were physical scientists, engineers, or mathematicians. It is possible that these fields, with their focus on inanimate objects of research and their search for law-like regularities, tend to reinforce affinities with ostensibly objective, quality-oriented scripts.

Oppositional sentiments were more evident in the responses of traditionalists than in those of progressives. The university administration came in for criticism because of the way it undercut professional judgment in the name of diversity goals:

“(T)hey (the administration) (are) hanging their hat on ... diversity and stuff like that rather than on the quality part. And, gosh, (a senior administrator’s) the worst offender as far as I’m concerned. I know a lot of people who had my attitude, and they’ve all moved to other (campuses).” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

“(T)here actually was a quota imposed by the dean of the college...(I)t prevented the university from making a faculty appointment that would have been a very high-quality scholar. And so, in that sense, it diminishes our stature and our desire to move forward in quality metrics, not just metrics of diversity, equity and inclusion, right? ... Hiring senior people from other institutions is always a very, very challenging matter. And when you apply a very hard quota, then it just becomes impossible. And that was what the dean did in this case... So, that was really counter to the goal of increasing (the) academic reputation and quality of the institution.” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

Some of the traditionalists also expressed disapproval of the influence of younger, politically more progressive faculty members who they saw as imposing an illiberal orthodoxy consistent with the priorities of administrators:

“I think a lot of the faculty ... in my opinion, they (have) become very liberal. They tend to hold very strong views about things, and I’ve been here for, what, close to 30 years, and... I see an evolution of thoughts, where people, younger humanities faculty especially, are becoming more aggressive about holding you to (certain) views, or holding you to (certain) standards, and they become very aggressive about it.” (senior professor, engineering)

“... (M)y sense of comfort in expressing my views has gone down because the reactions of people are so violent and people have stopped being thinking human beings in some cases. But it seems especially with the younger faculty...(it) looks like they’ve been kind of formatted and ready to (use) speech codes and all these things...(T)hey are like policemen and... (they) lose a sense of proportionality and respect (for) people who have had, so far, a lot more achievement than they (have had) ...” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

**Bridging Faculty.** The views of the bridging faculty were strongly influenced by their awareness of the priorities of granting agencies and by their experiences in university administration. Cultural scripts about the priorities of granting agencies are widely circulated on campuses among STEM faculty, and so too are expectations concerning the implementation of university DEI policies. Their concerns about the rhetoric and practices of anti-racist activists may reflect the same managerial priorities in so far as they focus on the potentially problematic consequences of activists’ priorities for the stability of the university’s organization.

Most bridging faculty were senior professors and they were strongly influenced by their experiences in a research environment in which major funders have made it clear that they value diversity:

“Most NSF grants today absolutely demand that there’s some degree of outreach in any program that you have. And usually that means, educating usually younger people in science, and often we’re targeting elementary schools, middle schools that are really very diverse and need to see that science is a career path...It would be hard for me to mandate it, but I see my students doing it without a mandate.” (senior professor, life sciences)

“So, the federal government – and, of course, I also am used to writing about broader impact (as required for federal research grants) – it seems to drive some of the inclusiveness that is affecting the field through these kind of requirements for grants. I mean, now we – for two years now -we’ve had in our department a standing committee on broadening participation in computing.” (senior professor, engineering)

Some were also influenced by their experiences in a university administration that has for many years worked to implement policies responsive to these priorities. Many had participated in the formation of faculty cultures in their own departments to better represent DEI commitments:

“I don’t care what their most important column (in rating applicants for faculty positions) is, but this column (for diversity) is just as important... You create a column called human diversity, and however you score it, that column is just as important as your other most important column. Those are the two most important things, whatever you decide...I am totally convinced that having a diverse faculty improves both the quality of the teaching and the quality of the research and the quality of the training. I’ve read enough that I am totally convinced on that. So, I just tell my faculty that is what you’re going to do. And if I don’t see evidence of it, I don’t sign off on hiring somebody.” (senior professor, life sciences)

“There would have been active discussions (related to racial reckoning), nothing would have been controversial.... I think it’s the nature of my field because it’s always been an international field, and we’ve always had people from all over the world participating in research. And for that reason, you have to embrace diversity because that’s what science is, and has always been, especially in my particular field... And also, to be perfectly honest with you, when we interviewed candidates, people are chosen so they’ll be good citizens. You could have the most brilliant person in the world, and if they don’t have the potential to be a good citizen, they wouldn’t get hired by my department.” (senior professor, life sciences)

The official position of the university is that no conflict exists between academic freedom and diversity policies. The bridging faculty, nearly half of whom had administrative experience, either saw no bases of conflict or were willing to abridge freedom of expression slightly where it came into conflict with the sensitivities of under-represented members of the campus community. Here too the experience of bridging faculty in university administration reinforced a managerial mindset that allowed for the balancing of multiple objectives rather than encouraging choices among them.

“The university needs to be a place where all ideas and all topics are discussable, where it is okay to share things that potentially are offensive or ideas that in polite society would be considered controversial. That’s the point of (academia). It’s for us to be able to discuss any potential topic... At the university, it’s a different environment where ideas are meant to be discussed and challenged. I don’t think we should be putting restrictions on how we interact with each other here.” (senior professor, life sciences)

“I’m a (American Civil Liberties Union) member, right? So, I’m a big proponent of free speech. But I’m not a proponent of hate speech, for example, right? So, I do - the trouble is - ...most reasonable people can agree on a lot of things that should be unacceptable. But there may be a gray area of things where - and this is changing, right? ...Terms that perhaps were acceptable to take on a different connotation and become offensive, right? So, language evolves. And so, I think it’s a little bit tricky.” (senior professor, life sciences)

At the same time, concerns about the use of terms like “White supremacy” and “White fragility” in divisive ways were evident in the interviews with bridging faculty and these concerns sometimes brought out strong emotions:

“In my experience... I (see these terms) used basically as an equivalent to ‘Shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about. You cannot have an opinion. You cannot have anything. Shut up.’ So, I think they’re misused and that’s unfortunate...Especially (the term) White fragility. As you see, that’s a pet peeve...of mine. It’s used indiscriminately by people of color against and in fact against other minorities that seem to them white. And so, I’ve been called that. I take offense to that. I mean, after all, I am a member of a minority. So, in that respect, yeah, I think they are misused...” (senior professor, physical sciences/mathematics)

“(These terms get) used as a crutch, as an argument crutch, when there’s a disagreement about any of the other things that we just got through talking about, ‘If you don’t agree with me, you’re a white supremacist.’ Well, that’s not necessarily the case. There might be a million reasons why I’m disagreeing with you on an issue about race.” (senior professor, life sciences)

Unlike the progressives, the bridging faculty also argued that university policy could go too far by infringing on the faculty’s expertise and prerogatives or by accommodating the most vocal people on campus in problematic ways:

“I don’t think (a diversity statement) should be the initial screen (in faculty hiring), because when you - for most academic positions, they’re defined by a scholarly discipline, and the contribution to the university, say, research environment and things like that. So, you need to be able to fill that role first.” (senior professor, life sciences)

“(T)his whole DEI thing is changing -(It) can be, in some cases, changing people in the wrong way, making them feel entitled, making them feel aggressive.... And it hinders the job we’re trying to do, which is to teach and to promote education and learning. So, there is a limit... I don’t know the solution to

how we can (set the limit). But there has to be a balance...” (senior professor, life sciences)

The experiences of many of the bridging faculty in administering policy and managing conflict may lie behind these interests in establishing the legitimate boundaries of discourse and in their protectiveness toward established prerogatives of the faculty.

### *The Theory of Fields and the Case of Campus Conflict*

We now take up our fourth research question on the usefulness of a leading theory of intra-organizational conflict for explaining our case. In our view, the theory of strategic action fields provides valuable illumination of the case of intra-organizational conflict we have studied. For purposes of showing how it illuminates our case, we draw on the data from our study and also from histories of the university relevant to our case (see, e.g., Brint and Frey 2023; Douglass 2020; King 2018; Smelser 2010 and the literatures cited therein). This evidence also shows what elaborations in the theory may be necessary to fully account for cases like ours.

The case can, in principle, be analyzed as a conflict between traditional academics (the incumbents) and academic progressives (the challengers) moderated and adjudicated by leaders of the campus IGU. State and university policies promoting a stronger emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion have created uncertainty and disruption in the structure of power and meaning. Uncertainty and disruption have been exacerbated by the rise of the anti-racist social movement which has gained supporters within and beyond the university. Building on years of piecemeal change, the national protests that followed the George Floyd murder in June 2020 can plausibly be interpreted as an exogenous shock that disrupted the academic system so that challengers experienced the opportunity for developing a new compromise or a new settlement more conducive to their interests and identities and traditionalists were motivated to come out publicly in defense of the interests and identities they consider fundamental.

The eventual outcome of the conflict remains uncertain but there is a widespread perception, at least among the traditional academics in our sample, that progressives have gained influence over time. Indirect evidence of a compromise settlement tilting toward progressives can be found in the responses that members of the two groups gave to our questions about how comfortable they felt expressing their views on DEI issues. Nine of the 12 progressives said they were “very” or “somewhat” comfortable expressing their views about DEI issues, and the same number said they were “more comfortable” expressing their views now than they had been in the past. By contrast, six of the ten traditionalists said they were “somewhat” or “very” uncomfortable expressing their views, and seven of the ten said they were less comfortable expressing their views now than they had been in the past. These results would, under other circumstances, be considered counter-intuitive, given the seniority and established scholarly reputations of most of the traditionalists in our sample.

More conservative U.S. states are, by contrast, in the process of enacting very different settlements. In these states, governors and legislatures have intervened



to prevent progressives from gaining influence and to reduce the administrative resources they control (Young and Friedman 2022). If these actions withstand legal challenges, the new settlement in these conservative states will put more authority in the hands of the state officials and will undermine the position of progressive academics.

Each of these relationships is broadly consistent with propositions of the theory. The analytical vocabulary developed in the theory is also applicable to our case.

At the same time, certain features of our case do not fit the theory well. We now turn to a discussion of those features of the theory that seem to us to require elaboration or modification to fit cases like ours.

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) emphasized exogenous shocks as precipitators of conflict. In our case, a series of policy decisions beginning at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shifted the balance of power between the nominal incumbents and their challengers (Brint and Frey 2023). Aware of the ascendance of new population groups and the political pressures that have developed in their wake (Smelser 1993), the university administration enacted policy changes to place a higher priority on representation and on the construction of a supportive and protective campus for students and faculty of color (Brint and Frey 2023). These incremental policy changes have, we believe, been more important in the conflict between nominal incumbents and their challengers than any exogenous shocks to the campus or the university system.

In our case, demographic change, accompanied by episodic protests, appears to have been the most important sources of incremental policy changes. University administrators have been aware of the changing demography of the state for many decades (Smelser 1993) and state-level policymakers have encouraged more energetic actions to improve the representativeness of the staff, faculty, and students in the university system to reflect these demographic changes (Brint and Frey 2023). These pressures have led beginning in the mid-2010s to a series of policies to speed the diversification of the campuses. The policies included bias reporting forms, state-funded programs to advance faculty diversity, the use of diversity statements in hiring and promotion, the expansion of DEI offices, the appointment of equity advisors in the academic departments, and curriculum reform efforts to add race and gender-related content to courses (Ibid.)

It seems entirely plausible that incremental policy changes can have a similar influence in other strategic action fields, tipping the balance of power and influencing the outcome of any external shocks that may also arise. Incremental policy changes can be brought on by any number of pressures and incentives in the external environment, including such factors as changes in the market, changes in the regulatory environment, and changes in public priorities. Whatever their source, incremental policy changes can change the landscape for conflict, elevating groups and individuals who support the new policies and creating obstacles for groups and individuals who oppose them (Mahoney and Thelen 2010).

In the theory of fields, exogenous shocks and the destabilization of nearby SAFs create the conditions for episodes of contention. We would make a distinction between skirmishes and potentially destabilizing episodes of contention. Our interviewees reported many skirmishes in their departments over the issues we have investigated, and we know from the literature that these skirmishes have also

occurred on other campuses, as well as in campus and system-wide faculty senate meetings (see, e.g., Brint and Frey 2023; King 2018; Smelser 2010; Soucek 2022). We think it likely that some level of conscious network or party organization is necessary for more momentous, destabilizing episodes of contention to occur. We also think it likely that exogenous shocks can and often do serve as precipitators of organization.<sup>12</sup>

The theory of fields identifies three main types of actors in intra-organizational conflicts: incumbents, challengers, and leaders of IGUs. Groups in the middle like our bridging faculty play a role in managing conflicts but are not explicitly considered in the theory. We think they would be an important addition. In our case, bridging faculty played an important role in managing conflict and defining the boundaries of legitimate discourse. These managerial skills led progressives to experience a receptive environment in their departments while assuring traditionalists that overly-aggressive rhetoric would meet resistance and professional expertise in areas of educational policy would be respected. For these reasons, we interpret bridging faculty as closer to the true incumbents in our case and we think progressives and traditionalists would be better treated as rivals competing for influence.

Cases like ours involve unsettled fields in which collective action frames have not crystallized and socially skilled actors have not attracted the attention and energy of large numbers of colleagues. In such cases, a change of terminology to identify the major groups involved in intra-organizational conflict may be desirable. Instead of the terms “incumbents” and “challengers,” we suggest “competitors.” This term seems apt in so far as neither the academic progressives nor the academic traditionalists dominated positions or cultural understandings in the SAF we studied. Groups in the middle like the bridging faculty in our study can, by contrast, be legitimately identified as “incumbents” if they exercise the dominant cultural framing in the institution and effectively enforce the boundaries of legitimate action. Where these powers are less evident or do not exist, groups in the middle like our bridging faculty would be better identified as a third “competitor” group. It is also possible that groups in the middle may slip back and forth between “incumbent” and “competitor” status, depending on how conflict unfolds.<sup>13</sup>

Further, in cases like ours it is more accurate to use the term “quasi-groups” rather than conflict groups. As defined by Dahrendorf (1959), quasi-groups lack formal organization and have only latent interests in common. Affinities in outlook exist among members of quasi-groups and similar attitudes may develop in relation to disruptive policies or disruptive events, but members of quasi-groups are not necessarily aware of one another as potential allies and do not necessarily act in concert

<sup>12</sup> The anti-racism movement is arguably an example of an organized conflict group. We also see evidence of organization among academic traditionalists in reaction to the anti-racism movement. On many campuses in the U.S., communities of academic traditionalists have emerged under the auspices of a national organization, the Heterodox Academy (see Heterodox Academy 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Because our sample consists exclusively of faculty members, we are unable to explore fully the social skills and power dynamics that come into play during periods of contention, specifically those involving members of the university administration, the group Fligstein and McAdam (2012) refer to as the internal governance unit.

in relation to disruptions. Additional organizational efforts are necessary for quasi-groups to become conflict groups with manifest interests and shared interpretive frames.

The theory of fields emphasizes that both interests and identities provide the motive power for conflict. It is clear that interests and identities are involved in the oppositions we have analyzed, for example in the tensions we found between younger Anglo-American scientists and their older, more accomplished European and Asian born colleagues. Nevertheless, we think the theory's emphasis misses the way conflict is framed culturally and how this cultural framing serves as the proximate source for opposing positions. Specifically, our study suggests that the proximate sources of positioning among the protagonists were rooted in the cultural scripts that protagonists used to understand, explain, and justify their positions. In our case, some of these scripts, such as the ideas of the anti-racist movement and the cautionary literature on authoritarian regimes, were externally created. Some others, such as diversity as a mission of the public university and criteria for evaluating academic merit, were created by agents of the institution and embedded in institutional policies.

Cultural scripts differ from the framing processes and collective action frames emphasized by Fligstein and McAdam (2012). We see the following differences: (1) Framing processes are more strategic and interest oriented than the cultural scripts we find in our data. The cultural scripts we identify revolve to a greater degree around issues of justice and morality than strategy and interest. (2) Cultural scripts are not as tightly tied to the social situation of the members of the groups we identify than collective action frames would be. We see less expressions of widely shared cultural understandings concerning the SAF than the appearance of notable elective affinities between actor's social situations and their cultural scripts. (3) Although framing processes undoubtedly have occurred on our case study campus, they appear to be highly localized; for most of our interview subjects widely shared frames have not supplanted the varied cultural understandings that lead subjects to be identifiable as members of one of the three quasi-groups we have discussed. Our use of "cultural scripts" and Fligstein and McAdam's use of "collective action frames": reflects distinct stages in conflict group formation. In our case, skilled social actors have only begun to emerge and collective action frames have only a weak influence. Fligstein and McAdam are certainly aware of these early stages in intra-organizational conflict, but they tend to focus on cases where intra-organizational conflicts have advanced further, that is, where skilled social actors and collective action frames have emerged.

The theory of fields highlights the role of social skill in the outcomes of intra-organizational conflict. We do not see strong evidence in our interviews that variation in social skill distinguished the relative strength of the two challenging groups. Neither the progressives nor the traditionalists seemed to include individuals with marked organizational or motivational skills. Rather, incremental policy changes mattered greatly to the balance of power between progressives and traditionalists. Policy changes have had the effect of expanding the population of academic progressives and perhaps also of hastening the retirement or separation of many traditional academics.

The institutionalization of these decisions also created a new coalition between university administrators responsible for implementing and monitoring DEI initiatives and the now larger group of academic progressives. Beyond the effects of coalitions created by policy changes, we see the possibility that identity ties between groups can make a difference in the relative power and influence they enjoy. In our case, progressives shared many commonalities in identity with bridging faculty – like the bridging faculty they tended to be White, Anglo-American in nationality, and life scientists. Traditionalists shared many fewer identity characteristics with members of either of these groups. These commonalities and discontinuities in identity characteristics may have helped to reinforce the ascendant position of progressives in our case.

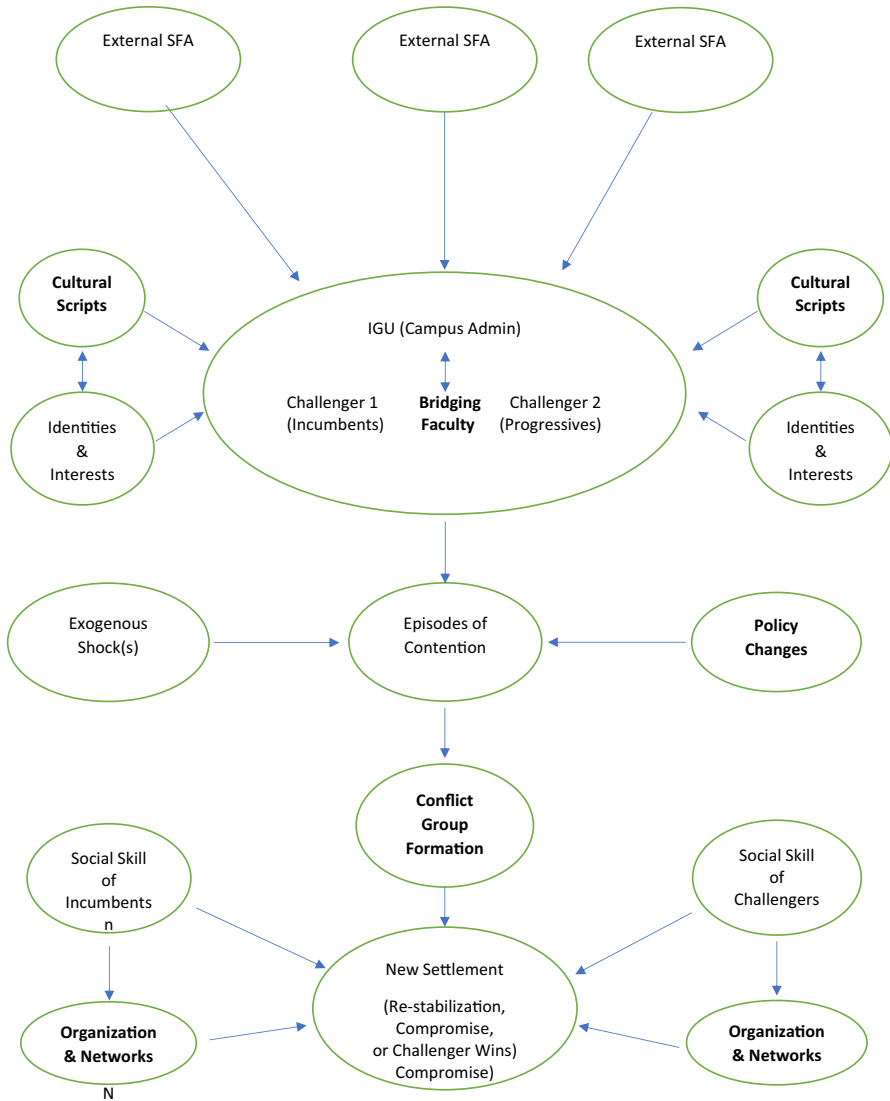
Figure 2 provides a representation of the Fligstein-McAdam model of intra-organizational conflict as elaborated to account for the findings in our case. The Fligstein-McAdam theory of strategic action fields has demonstrated explanatory power and it has been applied effectively to a variety of cases. We consequently propose these elaborations in a provisory spirit. Analysis of many additional case and comparative studies will be necessary to determine the extent to which they are valuable contributions to the development of the theory and, in so far as they are valuable, the kinds of cases to which they can be usefully applied.

## Discussion

In this sample of STEM faculty at a U.S. public research university, progressives were slightly more numerous than traditionalists. This finding tends to contradict those who believe that STEM faculty are more thoroughly embedded in the culture of rationalist inquiry and therefore less likely to endorse policies that could be interpreted to run counter to that culture. Demands for data and evidence related to the controversies were not very evident in the interviews; the average respondent used scientific terms like these to question or support positions less than twice in these hour-long interviews. Instead, STEM faculty appear to be subject to the same currents in the political and social life of universities as are other professors.

The backgrounds of the two opposed groups also confounded expectations. Given the interests with which they are aligned, an expectation would be that progressives are upwardly mobile and traditionalists come from privileged backgrounds. However, in this sample, progressives more often described themselves as coming from privileged rather than disadvantaged backgrounds. Traditionalists, by contrast, were more often from countries outside the Anglo-American sphere and were more often non-White.

We discovered a third important group, one rarely discussed in press reports and opinion pieces on campus conflicts. These bridging faculty tended to be older and more established. They were highly sensitized to the research environment, and they were distinct from the other two groups in their administrative experience. Bridging faculty play an important but largely unacknowledged role in recent campus conflicts. Their support for both DEI policies and free expression,



**Fig. 2** Modified Fligstein-McAdam Model (new variables in bolded type)

their sensitivity to the impact of systemic racism and sexism, and their simultaneous skepticism about the rhetoric and practices of anti-racism activists made them important actors in managing conflicts on campus.

We have emphasized that individuals' world views are not formed in a vacuum. The cultural scripts adopted by progressives appear to come from studies of the positive impact of diversity, from distinctive definitions of the public mission of universities, and from the writings of anti-racism advocates. Their identities as White, Anglo-Americans appear to have influenced their receptivity to these cultural

scripts. The scripts of the traditionalists, by contrast, had to do with the dangers of repressive authorities and the threats to quality of the new policies and movements for social change. Their experiences and identities also appear to be associated with the adoption of the cultural scripts they found resonant. Some traditionalists had been exposed to authoritarian regimes before emigrating and all of the traditionalists identified closely with their professional accomplishments as researchers. The bridging faculty showed a receptivity to the scripts emanating from funding agencies and the university administration. These scripts attempt to balance or fuse the free inquiry and social improvement missions of universities. Lengthy experience in the research environment and past service in the university administration appear to have created affinities for these cultural scripts among the bridging faculty.

Finally, the study has demonstrated the usefulness of the theory of fields as an aid to the analysis of this case of campus conflict. The analytical vocabulary developed by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) is applicable and many of the relationships emphasized in the theory can be applied effectively to our case. At the same time, our research has led us to suggest elaborations to the theory to account for cases like ours. These elaborations focus on the role of incremental policy changes as opposed to exogenous shocks as influences on the prospects of conflict groups; the potential benefit of adding a fourth type of actor, bridging personnel, to the three types of actors currently constituted in the theory; the requirement of organizational development to transform quasi-groups into conflict groups; the proximate influence of cultural scripts on the positioning of the members of quasi-groups; the role of conflict group formation as a prelude to potentially destabilizing episodes of contention; and the influence of identity and network ties, together with social skill, as influences on the prospects of contending groups.

## Appendix

See Table 3.

**Table 3** Question Wording and Mean Scores for Items

	N	Mean	SD
<b>DEI Items</b> (means closer to 1 indicate more support)			
Should the university require implicit bias training?	47	1.23	0.56
Should diversity be part of the mission of the university?	47	1.26	0.57
Should gender be taken into account in graduate admissions?	47	1.51	0.59
Should race be taken into account in graduate admissions?	47	1.62	0.64
Should diversity statements be required of candidates	47	1.62	0.64
Should the university provide "safe spaces" for students who feel marginalized on campus?	47	1.64	0.85
Should gender be taken into account in faculty hiring?	47	1.68	0.73
Should race be taken into account in faculty hiring	47	1.70	0.78
Should the university form implicit bias teams to investigate and adjudicate claims of bias by students/faculty of color?	47	2.45	0.75
Should the university use diversity statements as initial screens in faculty hiring?	47	2.60	0.68
<b>Anti-Racism Items</b> (means closer to 1 indicate more support)			
Does systemic racism exist in society	47	1.15	0.47
Should buildings named after people who expressed racist or sexist views be renamed?	47	1.60	0.58
Does systemic racism exist on this campus?	47	1.89	0.81
Are terms like "white supremacy," "white privilege," and "white fragility" used too broadly by anti-racist activists?	47	2.06	0.73
Should the university employ listening sessions without dialogue for students who feel upset by incidents/events?	47	2.17	0.79
Should universities remove police from their campuses?	47	2.36	0.70
<b>Free Speech Items</b> (means closer to 1 indicate more support)			
Should science faculty expand curricula to discuss topics of particular interest to under-represented students?	47	1.77	0.84
Should the use of students' preferred pronouns be required?	47	1.91	0.90
Should the faculty be required to issue "trigger warnings" before discussing material some students may find uncomfortable	47	2.00	0.88
Should student groups have the power to disinvite speakers whose views they consider to be very offensive?	47	2.09	0.65
Should the university issue a list of terms that constitute micro-aggressions?	47	2.45	0.80
Should the university issue a list of terms that constitute hate speech?	47	2.60	0.65
Should students be allowed to shut down speakers whose views they consider to be very offensive?	47	2.66	0.67

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