Reconciling Self-Censorship:

A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of University Staff and Administrators

A Dissertation Presented for the

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Dedication

To all the university staff and administrators who choose self-censorship but continue to look for ways to influence others in this environment. To the 15 university staff and administrators who so openly shared their experiences with me: Your experiences will help us better understand internal struggles that inhibit free expression and explore how to create a more welcoming space for diverse viewpoints.

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Abstract

In addition to a global pandemic, the past three years have been marked by racial, social, and political unrest. These circumstances add meaningful context to examine and better understand factors that undermine free expression and contribute to self-censorship among university staff and administrators. To date, few studies have holistically explored the unique experiences of university staff and administrators with self-censorship and how this phenomenon affects their experience on college and university campuses. Understanding why staff and administrators choose to self-censor may allow for a deeper discussion about speech climate and the degree to which colleges and universities implement and uphold speech policies. Therefore, this study aimed to understand how university staff and administrators who chose to self-censor described and made meaning of their experience and explored how policies and campus responses to speech influenced the decision to self-censor. A qualitative research design was utilized to explore self-censorship among 15 university staff and administrators at a large research university. Participants represented various backgrounds, years of higher education experience, and religious and political perspectives. Data were collected from two participant interviews and analyzed using Bar-Tal's (2017) conceptual framework for self-censorship. In addition to *a priori* themes from Bar-Tal's framework that highlighted significant reasons for self-censorship (i.e., individual characteristics, context, and circumstantial factors), four additional themes emerged as relevant factors that influenced self-censorship in a higher education setting: 1) power dynamics, 2) workplace relationships, 3) avoidance of negative outcomes and labels, and 4) professionalism. Additional findings in this study revealed that self-censorship is a nuanced decision influenced by many factors to minimize or avoid risk. Overall, self-censorship was shown to be a free speech-related and a workplace-related issue. Though

participants spoke of self-censorship as both positive and negative, all agreed that negative self-censorship impedes their ability to influence others in the workplace. As such, they recommended positive strategies that, if incorporated, could help decrease self-censorship among university staff and administrators. A new model of self-censorship decision-making incorporating both *a priori* and emergent themes was developed as an explanatory tool to help colleges and universities better understand the viewpoint expression of their employees.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Free speech is a core value of a democratic society and is foundational to higher education achieving its purpose. Despite the importance of free speech, the extent to which certain types of speech and conduct should be permitted in public settings remains a decades-long debate, with higher education often at the epicenter. As noted by Chemerinsky and Gillman (2017), "this generation has a strong and persistent urge to protect others against hateful, discriminatory, or intolerant speech, especially in educational settings" (p. 10). While university leaders should be committed to creating an environment where members of the academic community are physically safe, efforts to create emotional and intellectual safety arguably conflict with higher education's purpose. Regulating speech on college and university campuses poses a threat to free speech ("Speech on Campus," n.d.). There are also several recent examples that demonstrate the resulting impact of speech regulation among members of an academic community including the chilling of free speech and self-censorship (Christakis, 2016; Conza, 2022; Jaschik, 2017a; Park & Lah, 2017).

Hayes et al. (2005a) suggested that self-censorship–the act of "withholding one's true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion" (p. 299)–requires an acute awareness and consideration of how others will receive an opinion. Furthermore, self-censorship implies that a person was given the opportunity to speak but made a conscious decision to withhold their actual viewpoints concerning a specific topic or issue (Hayes et al., 2005a; Matthes et al., 2012).

Scholars who have investigated self-censorship have discussed the positive and negative implications of this behavior (Bernstein, 2014; Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Chamlee-Wright; Horton, 2011), describing this behavior as "either lamentable or praiseworthy, depending on the

circumstances" (Tubbs, 2019, p. 522). La Noue (2019) designated the choice to self-censor as necessary in certain social situations, such as at a dinner party or in the typical workplace. Hayes (2007) likewise posited that self-censoring might be essential to "maintain social harmony and the positive face of one's interaction partners while simultaneously minimizing the likelihood of negative evaluation by those partners" (p. 786). Tubbs (2019) highlighted other reasons to self-censor, including out of respect for others as a law-abiding citizen, out of care for a person's psychological well-being, or to help specific projects move forward in a university setting. Relative to social media, Spurgin (2019) suggested that those affiliated with certain professional groups have a "moral obligation to maintain their own privacy that is rooted in the duty to self-censor" (p. 1). In this sense, self-censorship serves as a protection and minimizes burdens for individuals and employers.

La Noue (2019) noted that "academic life is not a dinner party and a campus is not a typical workplace" (p. 577). While a healthy degree of self-censoring is fundamental to creating a productive and respectful work environment, this practice can impede the progress of an academic institution, including the quality and creativity of group decisions that impact strategic goals and strengthen relationships (Perlow, 2003; Perlow & Williams, 2003; Wisman & Duroy, 2020). Just as censorship and other reactions to speech may undermine an institution's commitment to free expression, likewise self-censorship can be antithetical to the purposes of higher education (La Noue, 2019), whose mission is to preserve, discover, and impart knowledge and truth (Whittington, 2018). In a setting that thrives on intellectual curiosity and the free exchange of ideas as a means of discovery, limits imposed on speech as well as the decision to self-censor may ultimately impede progress (Hollander, 1975; Tubbs, 2019; Whittington, 2018).

Examples of Self-Censorship on Campus

Self-censorship could be the preferable response in several situations. The following examples illustrate how staff and administrators could choose self-censorship during interactions where there is actual or perceived intolerance for differing viewpoints.

Self-Censorship Among Colleagues

A team of student affairs professionals at a public university selected a book to read as part of their professional development in 2020. The team decided to read certain sections of the book and then come together for group discussion before moving on to subsequent sections. Team members were provided with reflection questions and were encouraged to consider the text's practical implications on individual contributions to team projects and a broader impact on student success. During the first book discussion, one of the female team members expressed strong disagreement with the book's central tenets, highlighting how her religious and political views influenced her to think differently from the author and other team members. Several team members took personal offense and responded argumentatively toward the female team member's differing perspectives. Another female team member who shared similar religious and political views of the team member who spoke up chose to remain silent due to the group's hostile response. Recognizing that she and the other female team member were in the minority about their viewpoints, she chose to disengage from the first and further book discussions to avoid conflict with her colleagues.

Self-Censorship Among Students

During the 2020 election season, a student at a large public university posted a strongly worded and politically charged comment on social media. Several faculty, staff, and students on campus were deeply offended and hurt by the post and demanded action from university

administration. The university administrator charged with investigating the incident and responding issued a public statement condemning the student's offensive post, reaffirmed the institution's commitment to free speech, and informed offended parties that they could not officially punish the student. Over a thousand faculty, staff, and students felt that the administrator's response was highly insensitive, did very little to show support for the groups who were psychologically harmed by the student's speech, and petitioned the administrator's dismissal. The administrator noted that those who spoke up in his defense were publicly ridiculed and shamed, while others expressed sympathy in private but an inability to speak up because of the professional risks.

Self-Censorship Among the Public

A conservative student group invited a political speaker to campus before the 2020 election and worked with staff to prepare for the event. Several student groups with ideological differences opposed the speaker's invitation and demanded that the University not allow the speaker to visit campus. Likewise, several university alumni, parents of current students, and members of the surrounding community publicly expressed strong disagreement with the choice in speaker, adding pressure to staff and administrators to determine whether to move forward with the event. Recognizing the importance of a timely and appropriate response on behalf of the University with potentially severe implications for external relationships, several administrators met to assess the situation and determine a course of action. Most administrators in attendance recommended a formal disinvitation of the speaker or encouraging the speaker to withdraw. Those who supported the speaker choice were urged to put aside personal opinions and values and consider the optics of inviting the speaker to campus. Ultimately, the speaker was disinvited to avoid negative publicity.

Statement of the Problem

In addition to a global pandemic, 2020, 2021, and 2022 have been marked by racial, social, and political unrest. Events that have occurred on college and university campuses during this time provide a new and meaningful context to examine the climate for free expression and the experiences that lead to self-censorship on campus. Staff and administrator experiences that result in self-censorship and the role/s of policies and responses to speech that drive self-censorship are not well known or documented. This topic is important to explore for several reasons. First, free expression is paramount to higher education's purpose and, more broadly, maintaining a free and civil society (Hollander, 1975). Second, self-censorship threatens not only civil liberties but thwarts higher education's progress. Likewise, it leads individuals to dissociate from personal integrity and purpose (Bar-Tal, 2017). Third, the literature that explores free expression and self-censorship infrequently consider staff and administrators' attitudes and perspectives. Moreover, staff and administrators do not receive the protection of academic freedom, which makes them more susceptible to self-censorship than faculty and students. Fourth, this topic is timely and relevant to our current social and political climate and has implications for higher education policy and practice going forward. Understanding why staff and administrators choose to self-censor may allow for a deeper discussion about speech climate and the degree to which colleges and universities implement and uphold free speech policies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how university staff and administrators who chose to self-censor described and made meaning of their experience and explore how policies and campus responses to speech influenced the decision to self-censor.

Research Questions and Study Design

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience?
2. How do campus policies and attitudes, and responses toward speech on campus influence the decision to self-censor?

To examine these research questions, I applied a basic qualitative research design. Through semi-structured interviews conducted at my research site–Southeast State University–I made meaning of staff and administrators' unique perspectives of and experiences with self-censorship. Furthermore, examining the University's free speech policy and recent incidents on campus where issues have been raised concerning free expression opened the conversation about how the university environment may influence the decision to self-censor.

Theoretical Framework

I used the comprehensive framework for self-censorship authored by Daniel Bar-Tal (2017) to guide this research study. Bar-Tal's conceptual framework outlines the decision-making process that leads to an individual's choice to share or withhold information. Fundamentally, Bar-Tal built this framework around the notion that self-censorship is a socio-political-psychological phenomenon. Individuals possess an innate need to share information and identify with groups. Thus, having information or opinions that one naturally wants to share but may violate group rules or potentially harm individuals pose a dilemma (Bar-Tal, 2017).

Bar-Tal's (2017) conceptual framework for self-censorship suggests that four key variables influence the decision to self-censor. The relationship between these variables and how they fit into Bar-Tal's framework is outlined in Figure 1.1. First, individual characteristics, such as worldview, values, personality traits, social status, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, generally influence the decision to self-censor. Though personal characteristics tend to be

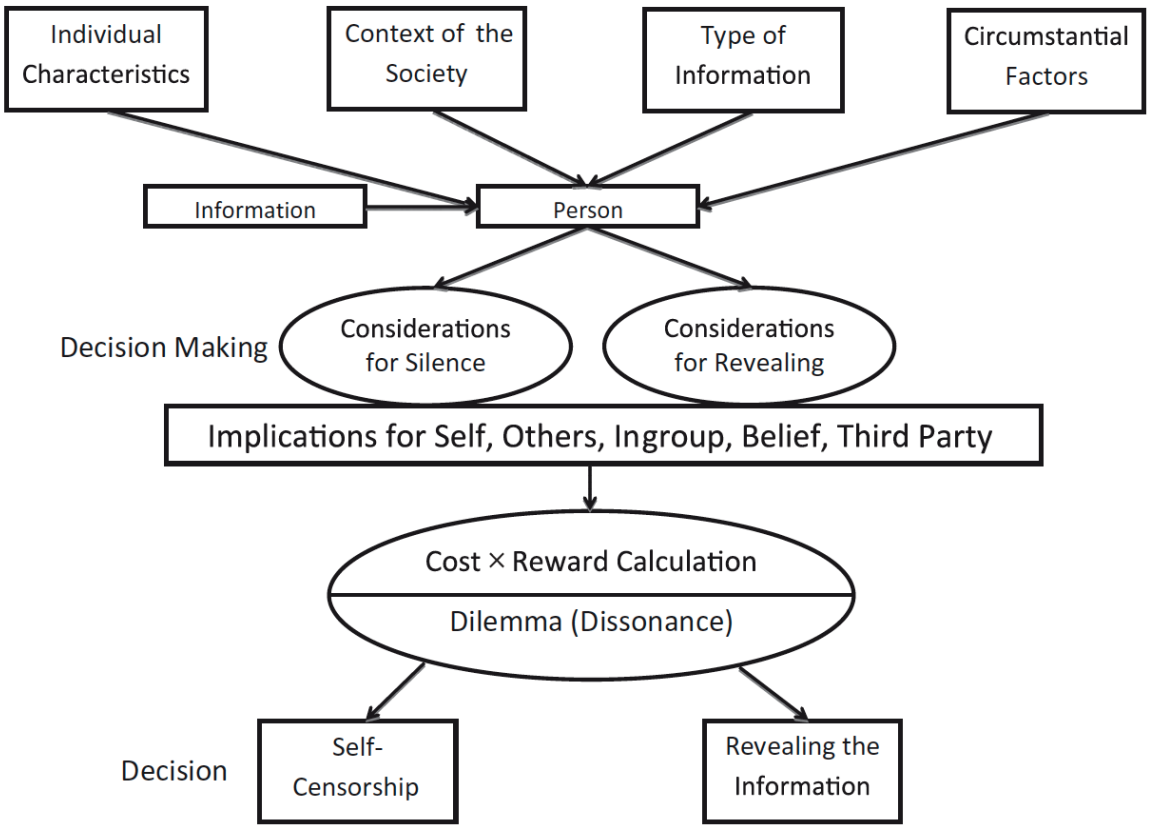

Figure 1.1. Bar-Tal's Conceptual Framework for Self-Censorship

Note. The process of decision-making to self-sensor or reveal information.

somewhat static, specific characteristics that influence the decision to self-censor are only made manifest in particular circumstances. Second, social context is a crucial variable to understanding the decision to self-censor. Social context is "multi-layered" (Ashmore et al., 2004, p. 103), and "dictates the society members' needs and goals, [and] provides opportunities and limitations, stimulations and inhibition, as well as the spaces and boundaries for human behavior" (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 51). When considering context, Bar-Tal encouraged a focus on macro and micro contexts that may influence free expression. Third, Bar-Tal proposed that the type of information one possesses influences self-censorship. When weighing information, one will consider relevance, severity, actions involved, timeframe, and those impacted by the information. Fourth, Bar-Tal identified circumstantial factors–how the information was received, how much time has passed since it was received, and an individual's involvement with the information–as a critical variable.

With each of these variables under consideration, individuals, when confronted with the same dilemma to share or self-censor, may arrive at different conclusions based on differing personality characteristics, context, and other factors. As outlined in Figure 1.1, the four key variables affect self-censoring behavior, causing a person to consider positive and negative implications of the information if it is shared with specific individuals or groups. Ultimately, the decision to reveal or self-censor is reduced to a subjective calculation of cost and reward to the individual to resolve the internal dilemma. Based on the subjective analysis, the person will choose to reveal part of the information, all of the information, or self-censor if the perceived cost is too great (Bar-Tal, 2017).

As an extension of his definition of self-censorship, Bar-Tal (2017) elaborated on a few parameters. First, Bar-Tal made a point of distinction in his self-censorship framework: the

relationship between information and opinions. Information, he suggested, is verifiable, evidence-based, and truthful. Information can be discovered from many sources, including research, documents, personal experiences, and others' experiences. Contrastingly, Bar-Tal described opinions as “personal knowledge that goes beyond the data” (p. 42). Compared to information, which is factual, opinions reflect personal views, assumptions, beliefs, and other evaluations. Though information and opinions appear to be opposites, Bar-Tal suggested a more nuanced relationship between the two, clarifying that “opinions are an expression of a subjective view that may rest on information, with the intention to elaborate and comment on it based on personal understanding” (p. 42). When it comes to self-censoring information, Bar-Tal (2017) posited that the individual faced with the decision-making dilemma must believe the truthfulness of the information they possess and then decide from this stance to self-censor. In sum, the withholding of information, not opinions, is prioritized in Bar-Tal’s conceptual framework.

A second parameter that Bar-Tal (2017) clarified is that self-censorship is voluntary. His definition excludes cases where some formal rules or obstacles prevent the free sharing of information, such as official directives or laws to censor speech. Instead, self-censorship includes circumstances where individuals *perceive* formal or legal obstacles when realistically, none are present to impede free expression. Individuals faced with the dilemma to withhold or share information may consider social sanctions as formal obstacles when, according to Bar-Tal, these are often applied informally and are, therefore, included in his model.

A third parameter involves the content of the information–on a spectrum of positive to negative–that may be shared or withheld. According to Bar-Tal (2017), “in almost all cases [of self-censorship], the person who has or gets information believes that [the information] has negative implications, and this is the crucial thought that leads to a dilemma and potentially, to

self-censorship (p. 43). The individual faced with this dilemma most often considers the negative implications for a particular belief system or ideology or social consequences for individuals or specific groups.

Bar-Tal (2017) designed his framework for communications and journalism, explaining his focus on and the distinction between information and opinions. In higher education, information and opinions are relevant in the pursuit of truth. Given that study participants may have personal experiences to share regarding the self-censoring of both information and opinions, both will be considered in the proposed study connected with Bar-Tal's self-censorship framework.

Bar-Tal's framework was utilized in this study in the following ways. First, the framework itself (see Figure 1) informed the interview protocol. The four key variables (i.e., individual characteristics, context, type of information, and circumstantial factors), considerations during the decision-making process, and the decision to share or withhold information provided a logical progression to more deeply delve into participants' experiences with self-censorship. These variables and other components of the framework were used as *a priori* codes during data analysis. Second, the parameters outlined by Bar-Tal (2017) also informed the interview protocol by helping me identify the nature of the information withheld, if the information was voluntarily withheld, and the negative implications associated with the information that led to self-censorship.

Significance of the Study

The mounting political, social, racial, and cultural tensions specific to 2020 and 2021 add meaningful context to examine and better understand factors that may contribute to self-censorship among university staff and administrators. Administrative action taken in response to speech may influence the climate for free exchange of ideas and may cause members of the

campus community to self-censor on campus, in their local community, and on social media. Currently, little is known of the unique experiences among staff and administrators with self-censorship–the extent to which staff and administrators self-censor their viewpoints; the issues, situations, and contexts that lead to this behavior; and its impact on viewpoint diversity on college and university campuses.

Self-censorship–either choosing silence or conformity–is not easily observed or detected. Therefore, exploring self-censorship through qualitative interviews provides the means to understand the unique perspectives and experiences of staff and administrators relative to both free speech and self-censorship. A closer examination of the lived experiences of staff and administrators will contribute to the body of literature relative to the themes addressed in this research.

Through the findings in this study, I first highlighted factors that influenced staff and administrators to self-censor viewpoints, ideas, and beliefs at Southeast State University. Additionally, I hoped to demonstrate that the decision to self-censor is, in part, influenced by campus policies and attitudes and responses toward speech. Over time, and in subtle ways, self-censorship may significantly impede staff and administrators' ability to engage with each other, with faculty, and with students in critical dialogue that is fundamental to our work. This topic is, therefore, worthy of exploration at this critical time in our history. Second, consideration of the findings may provide an opportunity for a broader discussion about institutional values, policies, and practices that support free expression and tolerance of differing viewpoints in the workplace. Lastly, this study addressed gaps in the literature that has predominantly considered self-censorship in spaces outside of higher education or among conservatives in higher education.

Terminology

The following definitions will be used throughout my research and have been provided to ensure understanding and uniformity.

Academic Freedom: Refers to the "intellectual liberties required to explore, expound, and further knowledge" (Poch, 1994, p. 3); is concerned with the quality of the ideas expressed by both students and faculty (Scott, 2017); grants protections to faculty to conduct research and teach within their field and students to learn without coercion ("Academic Freedom and Tenure," 1970).

Censorship: When private or public groups suppress words, images, or ideas they determine are offensive, or not in alignment with their values or beliefs ("What is Censorship?" n.d.).

Chilling Effect: Describes the climate that may result when speech is censored, controlled, or diminished or when there are negative repercussions for speech (Silverglate et al., 2012; Townend, 2017).

Due Process: Part of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which states that "no person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law" (U. S. Const. amend. XIV); a legal requirement that the state must respect an individual's legal rights and not deprive an individual of their rights under the law.

Free Expression/Speech: The right to one's opinion regardless of the nature of that opinion (Scott, 2017); a constitutionally protected right to citizens guaranteed through the United States Constitution (U. S. Const. amend. I).

Hate Speech: Though there is no legal definition of hate speech, this terms commonly refers to speech "as any kind of communication in speech, writing, or behavior, that attacks or

uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor" ("UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech," 2019).

Institution: Refers broadly to colleges and universities that offer postsecondary instruction and award degrees to students (Meyer et al., 2007); refers to all organizational functions of a college or university including academic affairs, student affairs, and athletics

***Legal Precedent*:** A court decision that is later used to make rulings in future cases involving similar or identical facts or legal issues (Cornell Law School, 2020).

Self-censorship: The act of voluntarily concealing information or one's true opinion–either by choosing silence or conforming to others' opinions–when there is actual or perceived hostility toward that information or opinion, but no formal or legal obstacles to prevent the speech from occurring (Bar-Tal, 2017; Hayes, et al., 2005a, 2005b; Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Speech Code: Defined by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) "as any university regulation or policy that prohibits expression that would be protected by the First Amendment in society at large" ("What are Speech Codes?" n.d.). Since not all speech codes restrict speech, the definition in this research will be broader to include regulations or policies that seek to clarify free expression on campus.

Organization of the Study

In this chapter, I outlined the background and context of this research while providing an overview of the problem, purpose, theoretical framework, and the significance of the study. In chapter two, I provide an extensive review of the literature–including relevant case law–to give essential context for this study. Chapter three outlines the research design for this study, specifically the methods and procedures used to carry out this research. In chapters four through

seven, I present the findings from the study. Lastly, I discuss my findings, implications for this research, and recommendations for future studies in chapter eight.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Stone (2015) declared that "it is imperative…that we never take academic freedom for granted, for the freedom of thought and inquiry we enjoy today in the academy is the product of centuries of struggle...because unless we know how we got to where we are today we may not understand just how unique and potentially fragile our academic freedom really is" (p. 1). Though speaking specifically of academic freedom, Stone's statement is likewise applicable to free speech rights, as they have been previously defined; both freedoms are fragile. Understanding speech-related issues–both the history and the relevant literature–helps frame the discussion about current threats to speech in the academy, including self-censorship.

I will explore four main areas in this chapter: 1) free expression in a higher-education context; 2) an abbreviated historical overview of free speech and academic freedom in higher education; 3) a brief summary of relevant free speech case law; and 3) a review of relevant self-censorship literature. In the first section, I will link free expression to higher education's intrinsic purpose and examine similarities and differences between academic freedom and free speech. The second section will provide a snapshot of free speech in higher education, focusing on the origins and evolution of academic freedom and student activism before the 1960s. Furthermore, the historical significance of the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s will be discussed, including its impact on national policy (Altbach & Peterson, 1971) and personal and political speech outside the classroom (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017). I will conclude the second section with a brief discussion of modern challenges to practicing free speech in higher education. In the third section, I will briefly highlight free speech case law that has set a legal precedent for how public institutions evaluate free speech for public employees. Lastly, a

literature review will explore the contribution from several fields to the body of literature about self-censorship and other speech-related themes to provide a rationale for the proposed research study.

Free Expression in Higher Education

The Purpose of Higher Education

In the opening statement of his 2018 publication, Keith Whittington, Professor of Politics at Princeton University, described "the modern university [as] one of the great achievements of American civilization" (p. 9). Acknowledging systemic flaws and modern-day challenges in higher education with which many institutions grapple, Whittington noted that much of the nation's development and progress could be attributed to modern-day colleges and universities, particularly those of the last one hundred or so years. The variety of educational models and types of institutions from which students can now choose to obtain a postsecondary degree in the United States make American higher education a uniquely sought-after experience. Furthermore, the institutional policies and practices that encourage free expression and intellectual curiosity add value to the American model (Whittington, 2018).

Inherent to the founder's vision of America was the prioritization of higher education. To the founders, education was the key to enlightenment, the way to increase happiness and build moral character, and the means to promote good government (Zeiger, n.d.). Thomas Jefferson, one of higher education's most vocal advocates, stated around the time of the University of Virginia's founding that "this institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so strong as reason is left free to combat it" (as cited in Baker, 1953, p. 378). Jefferson's vision for a public university was to "advance human knowledge, educate leaders, and cultivate an

informed citizenry" ("About the University," 2020). His model for the American university, built on the principles of academic freedom and free expression, has become the "standard of modern intellectual progress" (Sheldon, 2018, para. 1). Since UVA's founding, other American universities have adopted a similar model and purpose to fulfill their mission by preparing individuals to be "better citizens" and "thoughtful and responsible contributors to civic life" (Whittington, 2018, p. 18).

Free Speech and Academic Freedom

Free speech and academic freedom are two related but distinct practices or principles that have historically been viewed as integral to higher education achieving its purpose and mission (Stone, 2015). To grasp the significance and value of academic freedom within higher education, one must first have at minimum, a cursory understanding of free expression as part of the First Amendment to the Constitution.

The First Amendment states "that Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and consult for their common good, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances" (U. S. Const. amend. I). The constitutional right to freedom of speech has implications with how opinions are shared broadly in society and on public college and university campuses. It is important to emphasize that "free speech means the right to one's *opinion* [emphasis added], however unfounded, however ungrounded, and it extends to every venue, every institution" (Scott, 2017, p. 4). As noted by DeGioia (2019), free speech as a constitutionally protected right allows those who are part of an academic community to express their opinions without fear of negative repercussions freely (though there are some boundaries imposed that impact time, place, and manner). Fundamentally, the practice of free speech is viewed as a way to encourage the pursuit of truth,

and that the discovery of truth can only be achieved where there is a "marketplace of ideas" (as cited in Bilgrami & Cole, 2015, p. 12).

Academic freedom in higher education–a related but distinct practice–refers to the "intellectual liberties required to explore, expound, and further knowledge" (Poch, 1993, p. 3). Whereas the "marketplace of ideas" describes speech in a free society both in and outside higher education, academic freedom is concerned with the pursuit of the truth (DeGioia, 2019) and the *quality* of ideas expressed by faculty and students, a curriculum taught in the classroom, and research that contributes to the body of academic literature (Scott, 2017). With strong connections to both education and the law, academic freedom outlines the legal rights afforded to faculty as part of their commitment to teaching and research (Kaplin, 1985). According to John Dewey, co-founder of the AAUP, academic freedom is an integral part of democratic institutions (Dewey, 1916; Fischer, 1977).

The 1940 statement on academic freedom by the AAUP ("Academic Freedom and Tenure," 1970) asserted that the purpose of higher education is to seek the common good (language directly from the First Amendment) of both institutions and individuals. The statement further described the role of academic freedom in achieving that common good:

> The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free expositions. Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspects is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. It carries with it duties correlative with rights (p. 324).

Achieving the "common good" described by the AAUP and outlined in the First Amendment requires free inquiry, particularly by those who have established authority in a given discipline (DeGioia, 2019). Academic freedom provides the conditions whereby knowledge can be pursued, expertise developed, and the truth discovered. Academic tenure and shared governance in higher education institutions are essential practices that preserve and protect faculty voice–both formal and informal–and encourage open dialogue and bold speech that leads to discovering the truth (Curnalia & Mermer, 2018).

Though academic freedom is usually viewed as a faculty privilege, this principle also benefits students. In line with the German university model, academic freedom extended to both professors and students (Poch, 1993). Hofstadter and Metzger (1955) described the freedom of these two groups as *Lernfreiheit* (i.e., freedom of students), meaning that students are free to explore their discipline free of coercion. In contrast, *Lehrfreiheit* (i.e., freedom of professors) describes the freedom to instruct, conduct research, and publish findings. The 1940 and 1966 statements published by the AAUP also assert that academic freedom requires faculty to be highly qualified in their disciplines. Students benefit from receiving instruction from teachers who are experts in their field and have the skills to develop their curriculum (Curnalia & Mermer, 2018).

Free speech and academic freedom are two principles that are often easily conflated. There is a relationship between these two practices within higher education; however, there are areas of distinction that should not be understated. First, it is essential to note that "free speech makes no distinction about quality; academic freedom does" (Scott, 2017, p. 6). If one of the academy's primary purposes is to produce and disseminate knowledge and discover truth (Whittington, 2018), then quality matters in an academic setting. A second distinction is that,

while free speech is a constitutionally protected right through the First Amendment, academic freedom has, according to some scholars, not achieved this status (Poch, 1993). Faculty of public institutions, as citizens, have the constitutional right to express their opinions publicly without fear of censorship; however, academic freedom carries with it an obligation to consider the quality of speech and how speech will benefit–or harm–an educational community (Chemerinksy & Gillman, 2017; Scott, 2017). As such, academic freedom helps to maintain a professional standard. In this way, academic freedom carries with it both a set of obligations and protections for members of an academic community to further the pursuit of knowledge.

In contrast, free speech does not carry this obligation. Chemerinsky and Gillman (2017) described these different "zones of expression" as the *free speech zone* (i.e., society at large that includes college and university campuses; not to be confused with "free speech zones" on campus that limit speech to a geographical area) and the *professional zone* (i.e., an academic community which encourages responsible discourse). Distinctions aside, these two practices work in harmony, each being the key to the other's exercise in an educational setting (Scott, 2017).

Free expression–both the right granted through the First Amendment and as a feature of the academy–has been considered in connection with the fundamental purpose of American higher education for well over two centuries. Reaffirming the link between free expression and higher education's purpose, the AAUP stated in 1992 that "freedom of thought and expression is essential to any institution of higher learning. Universities and colleges exist not only to transmit knowledge. Equally, they interpret, explore, and expand that knowledge by testing the old and proposing the new" ("On Freedom of Expression and Campus Speech Codes," 1992, para. 1).

A college or university that fosters and promotes free expression–both in theory and in practice–across a broad spectrum of ideas and beliefs is one of the keys to achieving higher education's primary purpose, which is "to produce and disseminate knowledge" (Whittington, 2018, p. 13). Practices that preserve and encourage free speech increase students' capacity to think and reason, develop a system of values, and defend differing viewpoints. For faculty and staff, this environment encourages creative thinking and high-quality teaching, research, and scholarship (Wisman & Duroy, 2020). Chemerinsky and Gillman (2017) suggested that free expression is essential to developing disciplined free-thinkers rather than just disciples.

According to this line of reasoning, truth and knowledge are best produced and disseminated–and higher education's mission achieved–when there is the freedom to pursue truth even at the risk of failure. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill supported this rationale. Exploring the relationship between truth and error, Mill stated in one of his well-known writings, *On Liberty* (1859), that "if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true." Noting the potential error with many ideas, Mill further argued that "though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied" (Mill, 1859, p. 50). As discussed by Silverglate et al. (2012), Mill's views on free expression extend beyond the case for legal protections for free speech or the desire to protect and preserve speech for political or historical reasons. Instead, to Mill, free speech "is a philosophy of life, a fundamental way of life for citizens in a pluralistic, diverse community" (Silverglate et al., 2012, p. 8). Though Mill (1859) was making a case for freedom of expression

beyond higher education parameters, his treatise has relevance and application for higher education in a free society.

The History of Free Speech in Higher Education

Academic Freedom, Religion, and Secularism (Pre-1960s)

Dating back to Socrates and Plato, debate, inquiry, and searching for solutions were part of the academy. Some of the world's oldest universities and scholarly communities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, were established on the principle of intellectual freedom as a means to expand knowledge and discover truth (Poch, 1993). Drawing upon the European higher education model, Harvard University and others were successfully established on the American continent as early as the 17th century; however, some aspects of the English university were not easily translated to these institutions in earlier years. In the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, "freedom of thought was neither practiced nor professed" in the academy (Stone, 2015, p. 2).

Scholars suggest that academic freedom and freedom of expression were not present in the early years of American higher education for various reasons (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008). First, being a newly established country, institutions were primarily focused on building communities and establishing American values apart from those of Great Britain (Poch, 1993). Charters of some of these early universities reflect such intentions. Second, religious belief and authority exerted considerable power and influence over the selection of academic leadership and curriculum development (Poch, 1993; Stone, 2015). The expectation among faculty and scholars was that all knowledge disseminated by the university remain consistent with Christian ideals (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Stone, 2015; Thelin, 2011). Third, during earlier periods in higher education, particularly before the 19th century, faculty were regarded strictly as teachers, not

researchers. Students were regarded as naive vessels to be shaped by faculty. These limitations imposed on both groups left little room or need for academic freedom (Stone, 2015).

Though there was a period of secularism in the late 18th century that led to critical inquiry and scientific discovery, periods of religious awakening continued to exert a strong influence over universities, thereby placing regulations and limitations on academic freedom and speech in general (Poch, 1993). The relationship between secularism and religious fundamentalism opened up, at times, new academic fields while at other times restricted them (Hofstadter & Metzger, 1955; Thelin, 2011).

From the mid-to-late-19th century, internal changes brought on by external events and movements shaped American higher education, including the emergence of academic freedom in the academy. One of these critical changes that allowed institutions to distance themselves from religious instruction and orthodoxy was shifting power from internal governance to a lay external authority (Poch, 1993). Though this distanced faculty from institutional decision-making, this shift opened up broader discussion regarding the purpose of higher education and the value of a non-religious education. Other events, including the periods of the Industrial Revolution (mid-18th century to mid-19th century and late 19th century to early 20th century) and the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 (established land-grant universities; allowed for the expansion of the academic curriculum to include the sciences, agriculture, and mechanical arts, growth of technical education, more opportunities for women in higher education, and increased federal aid) (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Thelin, 2011), replaced religious fervor with interest in the application of knowledge. The growth of existing universities marks this period; the founding of universities such as Chicago, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins; the expansion of academic disciplines, particularly those related to science and research; the beginning of graduate instruction; and the

development of a new educational vision (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Poch, 1993; Stone, 2015; Thelin, 2011). Whereas there had been a historical tension between religious and secular instruction, the time between 1860 to 1900 was about achieving a balance between academic tradition and values and discovering new knowledge and new practices (Stone, 2015).

In a history of academic freedom, Brubacher and Rudy (2008) and Stone (2015) highlighted the role of "two key forces" that were critical to the shift toward academic freedom during this period: Darwinism and the German University. The conflict around Darwinism between religious and secular leaders in the academy caused like-minded faculty, scholars, and researchers who believed in evolution to band together and form legitimate academic inquiry standards. To this group of scholars, "all beliefs were tentative and verifiable only through a continuous process of inquiry" (Stone, 2015, p. 4). Over time, clergy's presence decreased because they lacked scientific knowledge (Stone, 2015).

Academic freedom is an essential component of a university borrowed from the German university model (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Poch, 1993; Stone, 2015). German universities (such as the University of Berlin, founded in 1810) were research institutions where professors "enjoyed freedom of teaching and freedom of inquiry" as the means to discover truth (Stone, 2015, p. 4). It was by observing the German university model that William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, stated that "when for any reason the administration of a university attempts to dislodge a professor or punish a student because of his political or religious sentiments, at that moment the institution has ceased to be a university" (as cited in Stone, 2016, para. 3). American academics who received training in Europe and returned to the United States were strongly influenced by the academic freedoms they enjoyed elsewhere. These

scholars helped change the freedoms professors wanted, which eventually led to the official documentation of academic freedom (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Poch, 1993).

The establishment of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1915 is one of the more pivotal moments in academic history that has advanced the cause of academic freedom "to ensure higher educations' contribution to the common good" ("About the AAUP," 2020). Internal and external opposition within higher education institutions regarding academic freedom led John Dewey and Arthur Lovejoy, AAUP's founders, to define and propose parameters to academic freedom through a series of statements. The AAUP Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure initially formed a 1915 *Declaration of Principles*, which outlined academic freedom and tenure principles. Subsequent restatements of the principles set forth regarding academic freedom and tenure were published and endorsed in 1940, followed by a 1970 version that included interpretive comments. The AAUP also issued a *Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students* (1968) declaring that "freedom to teach and freedom to learn are inseparable facets of academic freedom" and that "students should exercise their freedom with responsibility" (p. 258). Today, the AAUP promotes academic freedom for students and faculty and advocates for improvements in other areas that impact higher education.

Student Activism in Higher Education

Chemerinsky and Gillman (2017) noted that "if today we take for granted that the government cannot put people in jail for asserting 'countercultural' attitudes or identities–including forms of expression that challenge traditional religion, prevailing social mores, familiar lifestyle choices, inherited views about sexuality, or historic gender roles–then it is good to keep in mind that this was made possible by the twentieth-century revolution in free speech rights" (p. 46). Student activism has a long history within higher education that has influenced

the evolution of academic freedom and challenged long-held and deeply entrenched practices surrounding free expression on college and university campuses (Altbach & Peterson, 1971; Lee, 2018). This history provides a meaningful context for modern-day challenges with speech. Several scholars over the years (Altbach, 1974, 1979, 1989; Altbach & Peterson, 1971; Burner, 1996/2004) have provided a nuanced history of student activism, emphasizing the twentieth century and the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s. A close examination of these histories reveals overarching characteristics and patterns of student activism that bear significance.

First, student activism is best understood when contextualized. Since the early 1900s, student activist groups have commonly had a strong sense of social responsibility, which has attracted college students who seek affiliation with such movements (Altbach, 1974; Altbach & Peterson, 1971). The twentieth century's student movements were, without exception, aligned with political, social, and cultural events that extended beyond campus environments (Altbach, 1989). One of the first student groups formed in the early 1900s, The Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS), took an interest in controversial topics such as immigration, socialism, and war efforts. However, the group also had a strong interest in educational matters. They actively recruited college students to take part in their movement (Altbach & Peterson, 1971).

Other student movements throughout history with a similar focus gained momentum and prominence as part of the anti-war sentiment reflected in broader society and on college and university campuses (Altbach, 1974; Altbatch & Peterson, 1971). For example, in the 1930s, the main issues on college campuses across the country that united student activists–though predominantly on metropolitan campuses among middle-class students–were the anti-war issue and foreign policy questions (Altbach, 1974; Altbach & Peterson, 1971). For the first time in American higher education history, students engaged in an active political campaign, uniting

with groups such as the American Student Union (ASU), to participate in peace strikes as part of the antiwar movement (Altbach, 1974, 1979).

A second point highlighted by Altbach (1971, 1979, 1989) is that student interest in political, social, and cultural issues and events happening across the globe influenced the overall structure of student activism during the twentieth century. Except for the student movements during the 1930s and 1960s, student activism was typically unorganized, unsustainable due to students' changing interests or enrollment status, and often a reaction to events happening in local communities or other parts of the world (Altbach, 1989; Altbach & Peterson, 1971). Though student movements received public attention, they usually involved a small percentage of the overall student population and could not find or maintain momentum without being linked to adult movements from the surrounding communities (Altbach & Peterson, 1971).

The 1930s has been described as "the period of the most intense student activism prior to the sixties" (Altbach, 1979, p. 612) and was the first time in the twentieth century that student activism became an organized, ongoing movement. With the Great Depression beginning in 1929, one would anticipate that most student issues focused on social and economic challenges; however, there was relatively little student activism during the early part of the 1930s. Foreign policy issues, specifically the rise of fascism in Europe and the involvement of the United States in world affairs, shifted student focus to political activism, but only toward the end of the decade (Altbach, 1974, 1979). Following a short period of structured student movements, the start of World War II in 1939 triggered a dramatic shift in student activism, causing the majority of student movements to collapse. According to Altbach and Peterson (1971), this collapse could have occurred for two reasons: 1) Those who had opposed the war in the 1930s became disillusioned by the division of the anti-war movement and foreign policy issues. 2) Many

students were either drafted or volunteered to serve in the armed forces, resulting in fewer students on campus to carry on with student activism.

The third observation by Altbach (1979) and Altbach and Peterson (1971) is the impact of student enrollment patterns on several student movements' sustainability. With the end of World War I in 1918, the 1920s was a time of great social change, which caused a significant increase in higher education enrollment–roughly an eight percent increase between 1900 and 1930 (Altbach & Peterson, 1971). During this period, higher education saw the formation of several new student activist groups such as the National Student Forum (NSF), the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID), and other Christian groups (Altbach, 1974; Altbach & Peterson, 1971), which established as one of their primary missions to unite students on the political and social issues of the time. Higher education experienced another enrollment surge at the end of World War II; however, the confusion that accompanied the period immediately after the war and the overall lack of organized student groups made it difficult to address challenges on campus adequately (i.e., the overcrowding of residence halls and classrooms, poor living conditions and other issues that returning veterans experienced) (Altbach & Peterson, 1971).

The fourth point of interest identified by Altbach is that student activists during the twentieth century were not strictly a homogenous group. However, there are some common characteristics of those who generally took part in student activism. According to Altbach (1968), the academic disciplines most frequently represented among student activists were the social sciences and humanities. Particularly during the times of political, social, and cultural turmoil, students seeking societal changes who aligned with the political left routinely subscribed to the political, cultural, and social movements of their day (Altbach, 1979; Altbach & Peterson, 1971). Notwithstanding, around the 1930s and in later decades, both students who held to

traditional conservative viewpoints and those seeking reforms participated in student activism, sometimes uniting over campus issues, and at other times becoming more divided due to the political and social climate that extended beyond the campus community (Altbach & Peterson, 1971).

A fifth observation is that students have fluctuated between political apathy and interest over the decades despite student interest in politics. Altbach and Peterson (1971) and Altbach (1974) described the period following World War I in the early 1920s and again in the 1940s and early 1950s as times of political apathy among most college students and those in surrounding communities. The political disillusionment made it difficult for student movements to remain organized and maintain momentum. However, during the 1950s, student activism began to experience a revival that would carry momentum into the 1960s (Altbach, 1979). Students became more politically aware and involved during this period for several reasons. First, they experienced less fear in aligning with radical or controversial political views common in previous decades (particularly during times of war). Second, students shared a renewed concern about foreign policy and the threat of nuclear weapons. Third, liberal students, in particular, were aware of the growing civil rights movement happening in the South (Altbach, 1979). The 1954 Supreme Court decision on segregation marked the beginning of student interest in this vital movement (Altbach & Peterson, 1971).

A sixth and final observation regarding student activism before the 1960s is that universities were often ill-equipped to respond to student activism. Dating back to the 1920s, heavy-handed administrators often expelled students with radical views and prohibited them from inviting radical speakers to campus. Student newspapers were also censored for expressing radical or controversial viewpoints (Altbach, 1974; Altbach & Peterson, 1971). Similarly, in the

1930s, students fought to openly express their political views on college and university campuses across the United States, periodically engaging in national student peace strikes that attracted public attention (Altbach & Peterson, 1971). The reaction of government officials and college and university administrators in response to student speech was often the impetus that caused students to engage in political activism and activism that openly criticized their universities (Altbach, 1974, 1979; Altbach & Peterson, 1971). Furthermore, such responses from campus administrators often shifted the focus of student activism from political and social issues off-campus to protecting free expression on campus. This shift may have historically contributed to the general sense of political apathy that some scholars have noted of particular periods (Altbach, 1974, 1979; Altbach & Peterson, 1971).

The Free Speech Movement of the 1960s

According to Altbach and Peterson (1971), "the three main threads of student activism in the late 1950s were civil liberties, peace, and civil rights, in chronological order" (p. 12). In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a dramatic surge in student activism leading up to the civil rights movement (Altbach & Peterson, 1971). Student enrollment was higher than in previous decades (approximately 3,580,000 students nationwide in 1960 compared to 355,000 in 1910). This enrollment surge was an indication that higher education was no longer an experience reserved for the elite at prestigious universities, but also that higher education was more broadly available to the middle class and more visible to the public (Altbach, 1979; Altbach & Peterson, 1971). A large and diverse student population coupled with the growing civil rights movement and concerns about the possibility of war generated a renewed interest in political and social issues and set the stage for the 1960s Free Speech Movement (Altbach & Peterson, 1971).

In the early 1960s, many students became politically active as the civil rights movement made its way across the United States. Off-campus, students all over the country took part in demonstrations against racial segregation and vocalized concerns over their university's involvement in research for nuclear weapons and other activities that would aid the war effort (Burner, 1996/2004). Concerning on-campus speech, students and faculty expressed grievances that their academic freedom was being overwhelmingly influenced and restricted by left-wing causes (Altbach, 1968; Burner, 1996/2004). Meanwhile, academic administration, politicians, and trustees were committed to "purg[ing] any whiff of 'subversives' from campus (Whittington, 2018, p. 51). The early 1960s was a unique period of student activism because, unlike former periods, students were interested in both political and civil issues and also began to question the university and demand educational reform (Altbach, 1979; Altbach & Peterson, 1971; "The Free Speech Movement," 2005). These and other circumstances led to disruptive, sometimes revolutionary protests by students on many college campuses, with the University of California-Berkeley as the epicenter (Burner, 1996/2004).

At UC-Berkeley, student enrollment between 1963 and 1964 increased by 37 percent, making it nearly impossible for the university to remain committed to acting *in loco parentis* [in place of parents] (Altbach, 1979; Burner, 1996/2004). More students meant less supervision by conservative faculty and created more opportunities for students to be influenced by political and social ideas not traditionally promoted by the university (Burner, 1996/2004). Amid increasing turmoil between students and administrators, student activists at UC-Berkeley in 1964 used a walkway on campus to set up tables, hand out literature covering various controversial topics to students, and sign students up for demonstrations. University administration responded by banning students from handing out leaflets on campus, determining that promoting off-campus

activities was a violation of university policy (Burner, 1996/2004). Students refused to leave, sparking the beginning of a movement of civil disobedience, protests, sit-ins, and arrests for months that came to be known as the Free Speech Movement (FSM) (also the Berkeley Free Speech Movement) (Burner, 1996/2004; Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017). Thousands of undergraduate and graduate students alike participated in the movement that the media publicized on television and in the news. Mario Savio, a student activist, delivered one of the most poignant speech about the administration's attempts to limit student speech, stating that "there is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part... You've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop" (as cited in Whittington, 2018, p. 105).

Many faculty united with student activists, championing their movement and agreeing that the university's response was unnecessarily heavy-handed (Burner, 1996/2004; Smelser, 2010). The movement resulted in several changes with campus leadership and a commitment from UC-Berkeley administration to reevaluate the treatment of differing viewpoints. Furthermore, students were eventually permitted to set up tables and share literature at designated places around campus (Burner, 1996/2004). Faculty, particularly those in the social sciences, experienced a greater sense of freedom to pursue academic interests (Altbach, 1968; 1974).

The Free Speech Movement (FSM) of the 1960s is the most frequently referenced period in free speech history and the only time in history up to that point that impacted national policy (Altbach & Peterson, 1971). The FSM was a critical period in history speech protections in academia. Though the struggle to address the challenges of inclusion and free speech on modern-

day college and university campuses has proven to be a "contentious activity" (La Noue, 2019, p. 577), the FSM "established an expectation that campuses extend full First Amendment protections to personal and political speech outside the professional and civil settings of the classroom" (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017, p. 53). Additionally, this period expanded the focus on free speech scholarship (Arneson & Dewberry, 2006).

Modern Challenges: Free Speech Cases in Higher Education

Whittington (2018) noted that higher education has remained committed to the principles of freedom within the academy over the past two centuries; overall, there is little dispute about the value of free expression in higher education. Despite this commitment, higher education has not consistently supported free expression in all forms and in alignment with the First Amendment. Several historical federal court cases have demonstrated this issue. In the following paragraphs, I summarize a few of these cases within higher education dating back to the 1970s. Specifically, these cases demonstrate various components of free speech in higher education and reveal how at a federal level the United States continues to grapple with the complexities of free speech in a higher education setting.

Healy v. James (1972) clarified that the free speech rights and association of students attending public institutions are constitutionally protected within the community as well as on a state university campus. Widmar v. Vincent (1981) required universities to maintain a position of neutrality toward student religious organizations by granting these groups equal access to university facilities as other non-religious student organizations. A neutral position would maintain alignment with the free speech and free exercise clauses of the First Amendment. In UWM Post v. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin (1991), a federal district court struck down the speech code at the University of Wisconsin, ruling it as governmental overreach

to suppress speech, regardless of the content of the speech. In Rosenberger v. Rectors and Visitors of the University of Virginia (1995), the Supreme Court ruled that the University violated the First Amendment rights of a Christian student organization by denying the group the same funding available to secular student groups.

The United States Court of Appeals declared in Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System v. Southworth (2000) that public colleges and universities may subsidize registered student organizations through mandatory student activity fees if the programs are viewpoint neutral. The court concluded that compelling students to pay activity fees that supported political and ideological expression with which they disagreed violated their free speech rights. Most recently, the ruling by the United States Court of Appeals in Speech First v. Cartwright (2022) concluded that two policies– "discriminatory-harassment" and bias-related-incidents–at the University of Central Florida chill student speech because they impede the expression of unpopular beliefs. These cases and others resulted from institutional-level violations and inconsistencies with the interpretation of First Amendment rights, thereby demonstrating the conflict that often results with protecting and preserving speech in higher education.

Scholars have been outspoken about modern-day challenges and potential threats to free expression on college and university campuses in recent years. Frequently, staff and administrators are those who bear the burden of responding to speech incidents on campus. The principle challenges these groups face concerning speech is how to respond to hateful or other controversial speech that may cause offense or psychological harm to certain campus groups or speech that goes against the institution's values (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017; Harris & Ray, 2014). In recent years, responses have included the disinvitation of controversial speakers

(Jaschik, 2017a, 2017b; Park & Lah, 2017; "User's Guide to FIRE's Disinvitation Database," 2020), the censoring of faculty, staff, or student speech (Christakis, 2015, 2016; Flaherty, 2020; "Foundation for Individual Rights in Education," 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Friedersdorf, 2016), and responding to speech swiftly and without due process (Flaherty, 2016a, 2020; "Foundation for Individual Rights in Education," 2021b). Speech regulation has implications for the climate of campus speech and may lead to self-censorship. According to Chemerinsky and Gillman (2017):

> With the history of free speech, the record shows that restrictions on freedom of thought and expression on campuses have been used to stifle and punish dissenters, social critics, vulnerable and marginalized voices, and the sort of innovative thinkers who fuel social progress. The history shows that campuses cannot censor or punish the expression of ideas, or allow intimidation or disruption of those who are expressing ideas, without undermining their core function of promoting inquiry, discovery, and the dissemination of new knowledge" (p. 52).

Free Speech in Public Settings

Case law that explores the legal dimensions of free speech in and beyond the boundaries of higher education is robust. The First Amendment provides the foundation for speech broadly and the general rule for speech on university campuses. Though university campuses are "bastions of free thought and critical dialogue" (Whittington, 2018, p. 6), the First Amendment does not infringe on campuses' interest in speech on campus. Over the years, the Supreme Court has identified narrow exceptions to speech regulation that go beyond the general rule of the First Amendment and are generally not protected in a public setting: 1) obscenity, 2) defamation, and 3) harassment, true threats, and fighting words (Shanor, 2018). The academic environment is distinct in some ways from other public settings; however, an understanding of speech in public

settings clarifies some of the foundational principles used to evaluate speech in higher education in modern times.

To determine if speech falls within the domain of one of these narrow exception categories, the Supreme Court has created additional tests that aid in determining whether speech is protected or unprotected (Ruane, 2014, Klingerman). For example, the *Miller* test is the primary legal test that emerged from the Supreme Court case Miller v. California (1973) ruling to determine whether a work or speech is obscene. The three-prong test asks:

> "(a) whether the 'average person applying contemporary community standards would find the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value" (Miller v. California, 1973).

Likewise, determining what constitutes defamation–communicating falsehoods about a person to injure their reputation–requires the courts to ask additional questions. An individual whose reputation has been damaged may sue and recover damages; however, requiring an individual to pay damages for their defamatory speech restricts their freedom of speech. The New York Times v. Sullivan (1964) ruling clarified that private officials who claim defamation must prove "actual malice" to recover damages.

Harassment, true threats, and fighting words describe speech along a spectrum. Most private businesses and universities–both public and private–have anti-harassment policies that define harassment and outline procedures for responding to harassment claims in compliance with the law. Assessing what constitutes a true threat and fighting words, however, requires evidence to show that the speech under consideration seeks to "[incite] or [produce] imminent

lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action" (Brandenburg v. Ohio, 1969). In Schenck v. United States (1919), Justice Holmes famously declared that "the most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic...The question in every case is whether the words used...create a clear and present danger."

According to Klingerman (2018), when applied to faculty and staff speech in a higher education setting, these exceptions are relatively easy to handle because speech in these categories is generally unprotected and empowers a university to act without violating an individual's First Amendment Rights. Speech outside of these narrow exceptions requires an employer to examine both the employee's role and the type of speech.

Public Employee Speech

Irrespective of their role, faculty, staff, and administrators at public universities are fundamentally held to similar standards of speech and conduct and experience similar protections through the First Amendment (Klingerman, 2018). The current state of speech doctrine applied to public employees is better understood by examining three key Supreme Court cases: Pickering v. Board of Education (1968), Connick v. Meyers (1983), and Garcetti v. Ceballos (2006). In subsequent paragraphs, these three cases are considered in connection to one another because other legal proceedings that address employee speech draw on one or more of these cases and set the legal precedent for how a judge would assess staff and administrators' speech at a public university in a court of law.

Pickering v. Board of Education (1968). In a letter to the local newspaper editor, Marvin Pickering, a teacher at a local school, criticized the school board's handling and allocation of funds that favored athletics over academic programs. The school board claimed that

Pickering's allegations were false, stated that the letter was "detrimental to the efficient operation and administration of the schools," and terminated Pickering's employment. Claiming First Amendment protection for the letter to the editor, Pickering sued the school board. The Circuit Court upheld the termination and affirmed it by the lower courts. Pickering then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which held that in his letter to the editor, he was speaking "as a citizen, in commenting upon matters of public concern," and not as an employee within the school district. As such, the school board's termination of his employment violated his free speech rights granted through the First Amendment.

Connick v. Myers (1983). District Attorney Harry Connick proposed to transfer Assistant District Attorney Sheila Myers to a different section of the criminal court where she would prosecute cases. Myers strongly opposed the transfer and expressed her views to Connick and other supervisors. Before the transfer occurred, Myers prepared and distributed a questionnaire to the other assistant district attorneys regarding the office transfer policy, office morale, confidence in their supervisors, their views on the need for a grievance committee, and how pressured they felt to participate in political campaigns. Learning of the questionnaire, Connick terminated Myers' employment for failing to accept the transfer and distributing a questionnaire that he viewed as insubordination and disruptive to the workplace. Myers sued in the district court, claiming that her termination violated her free speech rights. The district court and the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled in Myers' favor and ordered her reinstatement as Assistant District Attorney. Connick appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which held that Connick had a legal and justifiable right to terminate Myers' employment following the distribution of the questionnaire for two primary reasons: 1) she spoke as an employee and not as a private citizen, and 2) the issues she presented were of personal interest within the workplace and not issues of public concern.

Garcetti v. Ceballos (2006). Richard Ceballos, Assistant District Attorney in Los Angeles, notified his supervisor that the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department had falsified information to obtain a search warrant. Ceballos spoke with his supervisor and shared his concerns with the prosecuting attorneys, who agreed that the affidavit contained false information. He also shared his belief about the wrongfully obtained warrant with the defense attorneys. The District Attorney's office ultimately refused to dismiss the case and continued forward. Ceballos then sued the District Attorney's office, claiming that his employer had retaliated against him for cooperating with the defense team by transferring him to another division and denying him opportunities for advancement. The District Court ruled that the district attorney was protected by qualified immunity; however, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the ruling, concluding that the First Amendment protected Ceballos' speech because it addressed matters of public concern. The District Attorney appealed to the Supreme Court, which held that Ceballos's speech was unprotected because his speech was part of his official duties. Furthermore, the court clarified that the speech of public officials is only protected if spoken as a private citizen and not in connection with official duties and responsibilities.

The Balance Tests. Following the Supreme Court rulings in Pickering (1968) and Connick (1983), the Pickering-Connick test became the model for evaluating employee speech and determining whether it is protected by the First Amendment (Klingerman, 2018). *Step One* of the balance test considers two questions: 1) Is the employee speaking as a citizen? and 2) Is the employee speaking on a matter of public concern? Answering "yes" to both questions triggers *Step Two*. Responding "no" to both questions indicates that the employee's speech is unprotected and authorizes an employer to act. *Step 2* considers the nature of the employee's speech and how the speech impacted business operations (i.e., was the speech disruptive to the

workplace?). If so, employers with managerial responsibility for the employee have legal grounds to act.

Following the Garcetti v. Ceballos (2006) ruling, the Supreme Court updated the model to a three-part test known as the Garcetti-Pickering test (Klingerman, 2018). *Steps One* to *Three* of the test are as follows:

> *Step One:* Was the speech in keeping with the employee's official job responsibilities? According to the ruling in Garcetti, speech that is part of an employee's official duties and is of interest to an employer is not protected speech. Answering "no" to this question moves the analysis to *Step Two*.
>
> *Step Two:* Was the speech a matter of public concern? Speech that is a matter of public concern, as clarified in Pickering, is protected speech; speech that is a workplace grievance or a personal matter is not protected speech. If the speech under consideration is a matter of public concern, then *Step Three* is triggered.
>
> *Step Three:* Whose interests bear more weight–the employer or the employee–in the context of the employee's speech? An employer is authorized to protect their interests if their interests outweigh those of the employee. An employer with managerial authority may act to preserve those interests. The tension is the balance between the speech rights of individuals (acting as themselves) and the rights of the institutions (and individuals speaking on behalf of the institution).

Though these three Supreme Court cases involve employee speech outside of higher education, they set an important precedent for faculty, staff, and administrators at public universities and provide a framework for both employers and employees within a university setting to evaluate free expression (Klingerman, 2018).

Faculty Speech

Legal precedent for evaluating the speech of university employees can be applied to faculty, staff, and administrators; however, an evaluation of faculty speech requires a balance between the frameworks used by all employees and the principles of academic freedom (Klingerman, 2018). In the 1915 Declaration of Principles, the AAUP defined academic freedom as containing three key elements: "freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the university or college; and freedom of extramural utterance and action" (p. 292). This definition created by an academic body emphasizes that faculty members have the right to pursue truth relative to their discipline on a university campus and the right to express their opinions as citizens outside the university setting freely.

The first step of the Garcetti-Pickering test requires individuals and courts to define if the speech under consideration happened within or outside the scope of employment. However, a proper application of academic freedom minimizes and sometimes may eliminate this distinction because faculty have speech protections to teach and research within the classroom and the right to speak as a private citizen on issues of public concern outside of their status as an employee of the university. Klingerman (2018) recommends a two-step process modeled after the Garcetti-Pickering test as a potential framework for evaluating faculty speech. *Step One* considers whether the speech is within the course of employment. Step *Two* considers whether the university's interests "in an efficient and orderly educational environment outweigh the faculty member's free speech/academic freedom rights" (p. 22). Answers to these questions determine if faculty speech is protected or if universities may legally act to preserve their interests. However, it should be noted that differing interpretation of Garcetti, as found in Demers v. Austin (2014)

and subsequent cases concluded that Garcetti did not apply to the official duties of professors in an academic setting as consistent with the First Amendment.

The literature examining academic freedom's legal protections reveals diverging viewpoints about academic freedom as a constitutionally protected right. Fischer (1977) stated:

> While historic roots of academic freedom are embedded in philosophic commitments, the Constitution provides the legal bases for its assertion and protection. The U. S. Supreme Court recognized on various occasions that academic freedom falls under the protection of the free speech clause of the First Amendment (p. 382).

Contrastingly, Kaplin (1985) and Poch (1993) asserted that free speech has constitutional protections, but that academic freedom has not reached the same status. Whether a constitutionally protected right or not, academic freedom carries certain rights and responsibilities that are legally binding for both universities and individuals.

Over the years, there has been discussion around the issue of whether academic freedom belongs to faculty or institutions (Bilgrami & Cole, 2015). Academic freedom can present a conflict between faculty and institutions when, for example, an allegation that an institution did not uphold academic freedom by denying a faculty member tenure. In such instances, a faculty member may legally sue the university, while the university might defend its actions due to institutional commitment to academic freedom and quality of faculty (Bilgrami & Cole, 2015).

Poch (1993) notes the differences in the legal parameters of academic freedom at public and private universities. Whereas the Constitution protects speech at public institutions, private and independent institutions do not have the same protections. Instead, faculty at these institutions rely on contractual law to preserve academic freedom. Tenured versus non-tenured status likewise impacts the legal protections associated with academic freedom. While the speech

of a non-tenured faculty member has constitutional protections, tenured faculty have legally binding property rights in connection with their employment and, therefore, are afforded due process protection through the law (Poch, 1993).

A critical issue is when public colleges and universities can and cannot take legal action against free speech. Though incidents involving hate speech and other types of offensive speech place institutions in a precarious position, the only steps administrators can take against such action are to condemn the speech. Unless members of the campus community are inciting violence or issuing threats toward individuals or groups, no legal action against offensive speech can be taken (Leckrone, 2020).

Self-Censorship Literature

Research studies conducted in several fields contribute to what is known and understood about self-censorship. This literature review will address the philosophical arguments about self-censorship discussed in public policy, the social sciences, and other fields. Furthermore, the following sections will discuss what we know of self-censorship from empirical research in education, the social sciences, and communications.

Conceptualizing Self-Censorship

Self-censorship is defined inconsistently across the literature; often, it varies in definition and scope based on the disciplinary lens through which it is being explored and the researcher or author's unique perspective and experience. Hayes et al. (2005a) defined this phenomenon as the act of "withholding one's true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion" (p. 299). In contrast to Bar-Tal (2017), who, from a journalistic perspective, discussed self-censoring of information, not opinions, Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b) do not explicitly distinguish between information and opinion. Instead, the authors are concerned with personal viewpoints

and the climate that influences when they are shared openly or suppressed. Hayes et al.'s (2005a) definition is the one that will be operationalized or this research study.

Hayes et al. (2005a) clarified a few assumptions regarding their definition. First, their definition is concerned with "perceptions of the audience and the congruence between the beliefs of that audience and the person's own beliefs" (p. 299). Second, to further unravel its meaning, Hayes et al. (2005a) state that the act of self-censorship implies that an individual has a *conscious choice* (emphasis added) to make when they become aware of actual or perceived hostility toward a personal viewpoint–i.e., they speak out, or they remain silent. Having the choice to speak out and choosing to stay quiet makes this choice an act of self-censorship. If the situation did not allow one to express their genuine opinions around those who disagree, this would not be *self*-censorship, but closer to censorship (Bar-Tal, 2017; Hayes et al., 2005a, 2005b; Horton, 2011). Hayes et al.'s (2005a, 2005b) final point is that their definition can be applied on micro and macro scales, meaning that both individuals and large groups may engage in self-censorship.

To fully conceptualize self-censorship, it is critical to distinguish it from other related terminology as it has been discussed in the literature. According to Hayes et al. (2005a), a person who does not have perceived or actual knowledge of their audience's opinions is *not* engaging in self-censorship when choosing to withhold opinions. Instead, they are engaging in "opinion expression inhibition" (p. 299). Restricting the definition of self-censorship in these ways clarifies the relationship between self-censorship and censorship (i.e., when speech or actions are suppressed by others) and distances self-censorship from constructs such as communication apprehension or shyness (Hayes et al., 2005a, 2005b).

Likewise, self-censorship is also different from self-monitoring, which is more akin to developing an awareness of and acting on social cues (Snyder, 1974). Whereas an individual engages in self-monitoring when determining their speech may not be socially appropriate, self-censorship may be the chosen response when individuals in a group setting perceive or witness social hostility.

Conformity has also been discussed alongside self-censorship across numerous publications in various disciplines (Hayes et al., 2005a; Glynn & McLeod, 1985; Hollander, 1975; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993; Otteson, 2019; Wood, 2019). Some scholars have treated conformity and self-censorship as synonymous terms; however, Hayes et al. (2005a) clarified that conformity, while a *form* of self-censorship, is not the only way to self-censor. For example, in response to social aggression, some individuals will remain silent, while others will express opinions inconsistent with their own to conform with the majority opinion. Conformity may have its appeal in some situations because it helps to minimize differences. Both responses demonstrate self-censorship, though only one involves conforming to an opinion different from oneself (Hayes et al., 2005a, 2005b; Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Horton (2011) also distinguished self-censorship from self-restraint and self-control. Self-censorship carries deep moral undertones and has a negative connotation because it typically generates shame (Chamlee-Wright, 2019) for those who choose it. However, self-restraint and self-control have positive connotations; they are considered to be virtues that are encouraged. Self-censorship may appear to be self-restraint or self-control to some degree; however, developing a habit of self-censoring–at least in the way that Hayes et al. (2005a) have defined it–presents a problem in academic spaces where a marketplace of ideas furthers the work.

In a 2013 publication on the types of self-censorship, political scientists Cook and Heilmann defended the distinction between *private* and *public* self-censorship. Their distinction is derived from assessing the interaction between the censor and the censee. Private self-censorship is when the censor and the censee are the same people. In contrast, public self-censorship describes situations where the censor and the censee are different people. According to Cook and Heilmann (2013), public self-censorship occurs as a reaction to a "public censorship regime" (p. 178). Alternatively, as defined by Cook and Heilmann, public self-censorship is when one person censors another person. This characterization of self-censorship is a distinct contrast to Bar-Tal (2017), who would not call this self-censorship but rather censorship because there are formal rules or obstacles on a public scale that inhibit free expression. However, Cook and Heilmann's conceptualization of private self-censorship more closely mirrors Hayes et al.'s (2005a, 2005b) definition of self-censorship, which is noncoercive and a personal choice based on situational factors. The articulation of private self-censorship most closely aligns with how most researchers broadly discuss self-censorship.

Though the distinction between self-censorship and censorship is evident on the surface, philosophically, these terms can be blurred. Identifying some of the existing philosophical complexities and gaps with self-censorship, Horton (2011) contributed the following explanation:

> Whether or not an action is to count as a case of self-censorship would seem to depend in large part upon the motives or reasons of the agent engaging in it. So, looked at from one point of view, if someone censors what they say only because they plausibly fear others imposing seriously harmful consequences on them, such as torture or imprisonment, then it at the very least raises the question of whether we would really want to call this an

> example of self-censorship at all. This is because it is the actions of others that seem to carry all the effective weight in determining the action to censor rather than the will of the agent: that is, it does not appear as if it is the self that is, in any appropriate sense, truly willing the act of censorship. This is, therefore, very much closer to a straightforward form of censorship by others (p. 98).

In academia, physical torture or imprisonment, or being physically prevented from speaking are not customary. However, one might argue that attempts to silence those who do not align with the popular narrative could be viewed as a form of psychological torture that causes individuals to silence themselves or conform voluntarily.

Self-censorship is a predicament that occurs in the mind; sometimes, there is an awareness of this wrestle, while at other times, it is a sub-conscious experience (Chamlee-Wright, 2019). However, despite one's voluntary choice to self-censor–either by remaining silent or conforming to others' opinions–the relational aspect of self-censorship should not be understated. When conceptualizing self-censorship, both individuals who choose this response and their relationship to others are essential components to consider. The decision to self-censor is strongly influenced by proximity to people, where one must weigh the cost and benefit of sharing viewpoints with a particular audience (Bar-Tal, 2017). Will sharing a differing opinion with a close friend or professional acquaintance change the nature of that association? Will expressing disagreement in small or large groups, among immediate family or professional colleagues, face-to-face or online settings create unwanted conflict or lead to social or professional isolation? Each of these questions highlights considerations that one must quickly weigh out before determining the appropriateness and desirability of speaking up or remaining silent.

Fundamentally, self-censorship is a difficult choice because human beings are social beings and care about sharing information and experiences with others (Bar-Tal, 2017). This is also true of the relationship developed among scholars in an academic setting. In a 2019 article, Chamlee-Wright discussed the gravity of associational life in academia:

> No matter whether we live the "village life" of the small liberal arts college or the "big city cosmopolitanism" or a major university, we feel both the pleasures and pains of associational life. As scholars, we know that our job is to seek new knowledge. As such, we know that challenge and abrasion come with the territory. At the same time, we value the company of our peers from whom we learn, with whom we collaborate, and upon whom we depend for the rewards of academic life, namely our scholarly reputations (p. 540).

How troubling it must be, then, when an academic must weigh the cost of maintaining personal and professional integrity against maintaining these significant professional associations. Sometimes it is not an *either-or* situation, though sometimes speaking out may come at a considerable cost to meaningful professional and personal relationships.

Measuring self-censorship has proven to be a challenge for a few significant reasons. First, as previously discussed, definitions of self-censorship vary across the disciplines, which presents a challenge with the generalization of findings and recommendations for future studies. Second, the literature points to the notion that self-censorship is guided by intrinsic and contextual factors (Filak et al., 2009; Filak, 2012; Hayes et al., 2005a, 2005b; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Matthes et al., 2012). Over the past two decades, research has explored self-censorship both as intrinsic and contextual, revealing the complexity of this phenomenon, which varies situation-to-situation and person-to-person. Third, self-censorship is challenging to replicate, and

therefore, difficult to study. In most research studies, researchers examined self-censorship by proposing hypothetical scenarios that required participants' responses (Gearhart & Zhang, 2018; Hayes et al., 2005a, 2005b; Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Ho & McLeod, 2008). However, a few experimental studies were conducted in an attempt to replicate self-censorship versus willingness to speak out in real-time (Hayes et al., 2010; Matthes, 2015; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017). Fourth, the development of the Internet and widespread use of social media provides newer avenues of exploration as these new communication spaces are compared to traditional, face-to-face interaction (Chan, 2018; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Lee & Kim, 2014; Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017). In subsequent sections, I explore these areas in greater depth.

Prominent Theories Examining Self-Censorship

In addition to Bar-Tal's comprehensive framework of self-censorship (2017)–presented as the theoretical framework for this study in Chapter 1–two other conceptual theories or models are commonly cited in the literature. Noelle-Neumann's (1974, 1984, 1993) "spiral of silence" theory and Hayes et al.'s (2005a) Willingness to Self-Censor model explore both the philosophical complexities of self-censorship as well as ways to measure self-censorship through empirical research.

The "Spiral of Silence" Theory. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) posited that individuals with differing opinions would choose to remain silent about their beliefs rather than face possible negative consequences when their views are perceived as unpopular and/or not in the majority opinion. In the "spiral of silence" theory, Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1993) presented the notion that public opinion is shaped by the actual or perceived opinions and attitudes of the majority or a powerful minority group who can use fear and intimidation to persuade others. The "spiral" refers to the idea that individuals whose views are not supported by the majority may

begin to doubt themselves and the rationale behind their opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The spiral in action describes how individuals whose opinions run contrary to the majority, or a powerful minority group are more inclined to conform to the prevailing viewpoint or remain silent. Contrastingly, those who align with the majority or popular view can express their opinions more often and with greater confidence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). As individuals spiral into silence or conform, a shift in public opinion occurs over time. Describing the process by which public opinion shifts, Noelle-Neumann (1974) explained that:

> The more individuals perceive these tendencies and adapt their views accordingly, the more the one faction appears to dominate and the other to be on the downgrade. Thus, the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent starts off a spiraling process which increasingly establishes one opinion as the prevailing one" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 44).

Noelle-Neumann (1993) suggested that the choice to share or withhold viewpoints is highly intuitive. People have a "quasi-statistical sense" about their social environments–how their opinions compare to those of their neighbors and if opinions should be freely expressed or withheld.

The dependent variable in Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence" research was a willingness to speak out, and the independent variable was the perceived climate of opinion. The "spiral of silence" framework is based on five guiding assumptions, which Noelle-Neumann first hypothesized in her 1974 publication. The first assumption is that individuals develop a picture of the trend of public opinion through observation, noting which views are popular or gaining strength and which are unpopular or declining. Noelle-Neumann posited that as individuals pay close attention to their social environment, they start to determine where they sit on the public-

opinion continuum. The second assumption suggests that one's willingness to share views publicly will vary according to the trends observed. If an individual observes that their opinions align with the dominant or most favored view, then there is a greater likelihood that they will publicly express an opinion. The third assumption asserts that incongruence between an individual's assessment of public opinion and actual public opinion can be attributed to an overestimation or greater visibility of the dominant viewpoint. The fourth assumption describes a positive correlation between present and future public opinion. By that assumption, Noelle-Neumann (1974) means that if individuals perceive an idea to be the prevailing one in the present, there is a likelihood that this will also be the case in the future. Contrastingly, a weak correlation between these two points suggests that public opinion is changing. The fifth and final assumption is that the risk of social isolation is less when one perceives or observes that they align with the trend of public opinion.

A fundamental perspective underlying the "spiral of silence" theory is the role of mass media to influence individuals' opinions and, eventually, large groups. According to Noelle-Neumann (1974), one cannot effectively study public opinion formation without considering the mass media's agenda, messaging, and the urgency with which it operates. Ultimately, it is mass media that "provide[s] the environmental pressure to which people respond with alacrity, or with acquiescence, or with silence" (p. 51).

The legitimacy of the "spiral of silence" theory and Noelle-Neumann's controversial past as a journalist in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s have subjected her and her research to strong criticism since the 1980s. Bogart (1991), Csikszentmihalyi (1991), Griffin (2008) and Simpson (1996), Honan (1997), Shea (1997) brought to light concerns regarding the researcher's past, questioning the origins and potential applications of the "spiral of silence" theory. For

example, in an article published in *The Commentary*, Bogart (1991) criticized Noelle-Neumann's dissertation research. He noted deep flaws and inconsistencies with the "spiral of silence" theory, arguing that the theory "has not been convincingly corroborated" (Bogart, 1991, para. 5). Furthermore, Bogart railed against Noelle-Neumann's approach to public-opinion research, asserting that:

> Noelle makes no allowance for such perennial issues in public-opinion theory as the level of information people have on matters of public debate, their readiness to express opinions on subjects of varying controversy and sensitivity, the sense of personal commitment or responsibility they bring to a subject, and the intensity with which they hold their opinions" (Bogart, 1991, para. 6).

Simpson (1996) corroborated Bogart's accusation that Noelle-Neumann was a Nazi collaborator and also charged that her "research methodologies often reflect[ed] her personal roots at *Das Reich*" (1996, p. 164). According to Simpson (1996), Noelle-Neumann was a Nazi sympathizer, not just complicit, and that her academic work bears the roots of totalitarianism. Moreover, Noelle-Neumann's failure to acknowledge Germany's role in the horrific events of World War II in her work led Simpson to state that her book–*Public Opinion: Our Social Skin*–"not only describes a spiral of silence, it enacts it" (Simpson, 1996, p. 160).

Separate from criticisms related to her journalistic past in Germany, scholars have noted other criticisms related to the "spiral of silence" theory. Whereas Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1993) stated that individuals who spiral into silence are primarily motivated by fear of social isolation, Salmon and Kline (1983) offered an alternative view to explain majority opinion formation. According to Salmon and Kline, individuals may be compelled less by fear of isolation or punishment and more by a desire to reap the benefits inherently connected to group ties.

Moreover, Salmon and Kline (1983) emphasized that people who hold minority viewpoints may oppose the majority when they have strong interpersonal relationships. They are less likely to be driven by impersonal opinions expressed in the media, as Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1993) asserted. Other criticisms of Noelle-Neumann's (1974, 1993) claims include a failure to account for independent variables like interpersonal communication (Glynn & McLeod, 1985), an oversimplification of the conditions which may contribute to self-censorship (Lasorsa, 1991; Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990; Neuwirth, 2000) and a lack of comparison between reference groups with close associations and impersonal public groups (Glynn & Park, 1997).

Willingness to Self-Censor. Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b) and Hayes (2007) argued that the "spiral of silence" functions more as a theory to explain the development of public opinion on a macro scale while not accounting for the nuances of interpersonal and group communication, which may lead to self-censorship. Focusing, therefore, on small group and person-to-person communication, Hayes et al. (2005a) developed the concept of "willingness to self-censor." Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b) suggested that there are individual, perhaps even inherent, differences among people that influence their opinion expression. Moreover, self-censorship may represent an individual characteristic that differs person-to-person, despite the opinion climate. Aiming to measure these differences empirically, Hayes et al. (2005a) developed a new tool for public opinion research called the Willingness to Self-Censor (WTSC) scale.

The guiding assumption behind the Willingness to Self-Censor (WTSC) scale (Hayes et al., 2005a, 2005b; Hayes et al., 2010) is that it is meaningful to consider and measure people's dispositions–i.e., characteristics unique to individuals that remain relatively stable across situations–when considering self-censorship. Dispositions or constructs that could influence

one's willingness to self-censor include self-esteem, tolerance for conflict, shyness, public self-consciousness, and other differences. However, Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b) do not suggest that these dispositions will never change with age.

Hayes et al. (2005a) acknowledged two critical points to understanding self-censoring behavior: First, self-censorship varies person-to-person even when individuals experience the same context, meaning that behavior is not dictated entirely by circumstances alone (i.e., not everyone chooses self-censorship when placed in a hostile opinion climate). Second, an individual's behavior may vary between situations. For example, despite a hostile opinion climate and a disposition that may incline someone to self-censor, a person might be willing to speak out if the issue has personal relevance or importance (Kim et al., 2004; Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Matthes et al., 2010; Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Oshagan, 1996; Willnat et al., 2002). According to Hayes et al. (2005a), "willingness to self-censor…is a characteristic of the person that will enhance the likelihood that the person will refrain from speaking his or her opinion around a dissenting audience across situations, even though there may, at the same time, be some situation-to-situation variability in that person's tendency to self-censor" (p. 304).

To establish the new instrument's validity and reliability, Hayes et al. (2005a) administered the survey to students at two American universities in two waves. During the first wave, 196 students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology responded to 21 initial survey items focused on students' willingness to publicly share opinions with opposing groups, the factors that would influence their decision to speak or not, and their feelings about this type of exercise. They excluded 14 questions because they showed little variability in response or if including them in the final scale lowered Cronbach's alpha. Four new survey items were added to the seven that remained from the first wave during the second wave; the 11 questions were then

administered to 323 students enrolled in a Communications course. Three questions were excluded in the second wave by applying the same exclusion methods, leaving eight questions. The WTSC scale questions are included in Table 2.1. To further establish the reliability of the WTSC, Hayes et al. (2005a) administered the eight questions to four new sample groups and used the data from a national sample to provide a complete picture of willingness to self-censor in broader society.

Next, Hayes et al. (2005a) analyzed the correlation between WTSC scores and other variables (i.e., individual traits), explaining self-censoring behavior among different individuals. Variables included argumentativeness, self-esteem, communication apprehension, social anxiety, shyness, public self-consciousness, and fear of negative evaluation. Based on their findings, Hayes et al. (2005a) concluded that "self-censorers tend to be relatively shy and socially anxious, low in self-esteem, and worry about what others think of them" (p. 314). Moreover, the motivations for self-censoring among those who score high on the WTSC scale may be to avoid uncomfortable encounters that require them to engage with others socially and avoid potential conflict. As such, the WTSC scale may be used by researchers to describe individual differences with opinion expression that exist in actual or perceived hostile opinion climates (Hayes et al. 2005a, 2005b; Hayes et al., 2010).

Validity testing of the WTSC scale revealed that individuals who scored high (i.e., individuals who are more willing to self-censor) tend to worry more about others' opinions in relation to their own, irrespective of the climate of opinion. Furthermore, findings indicated that willingness to self-censor might moderate the opinion climate's effects and a person's willingness to speak out. However, there are likely other moderating variables as well. These

Table 2.1: The Willingness to Self-Censor Scale

Instructions: For each statement, please check or mark with an X only one box per statement that reflects whether you strongly disagree with the statement, disagree with the statement, neither statement. Don't spend too much time on each question. Simply record your first impression.

Q	***Statement***	***Item-total r****	***Factor loading***
1	It is difficult for me to express my opinion if I think others won't agree with what I say.	.65	.73
2	There have been many times when I have thought others around me were wrong but I didn't let them know.	.45	.50
3	When I disagree with others, I'd rather go along with them than argue about it.	.58	.65
4	It is easy for me to express my opinion around others who I think will disagree with me. (R)	.61	.68
5	I'd feel uncomfortable if someone asked my opinion and I knew that he or she wouldn't agree with me.	.48	.54
6	I tend to speak my opinion only around friends or other people I trust.	.54	.60
7	It is safer to keep quiet than publicly speak an opinion that you know most others don't share.	.48	.53
8	If I disagree with others, I have no problem letting them know it.	.58	.66

Statistics from Wave 2 of Scale Development Study.
*Pearson correlation with scale scores (defined as the average of the 8 responses) after removing item from scale; *Note*: R=reverse scored. All statistics are presented after reverse scoring was appropriate.

findings suggest that both personality traits, social, cultural, and psychological factors, and situational factors influence self-censorship. Like all frameworks, the WTSC is not without limitations, one being that it does not attempt to identify the reasons people choose to self-censor, focusing instead on "measur[ing] a person's general willingness versus reticence to speak opinions in a hostile opinion environment" (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 277).

Application of Prominent Theories. Noelle-Neumann's (1974) "spiral of silence" theory in the *Journal of Communication* has been cited over 2,300 times and applied as a theoretical framework across several disciplines, including:

- Business (Bowman & Blackmon; 2003);
- Education (Davis et al., 2020; Dawkins, 2018; Luarn & Hsieh, 2014; Olson & LaPoe, 2018);
- Communications and technology (Chaudhry & Gruzd, 2020; Chen, 2018; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Fox & Warber, 2015; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Gearhart & Zhang, 2018; Hayes, 2007; Lee & Kim, 2014; Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Matthes et al., 2010; Montgomery, 2020; Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2015); and
- Social sciences and public opinion research (Matthes, 2015; Matthes et al., 2018; Scheufle & Moy, 2000; Taylor, 1982; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017).

The themes explored in these studies solidify the "spiral of silence" as one of the most widely recognized models, thereby contributing to what we know about self-censorship. It should be noted that the literature on "spiral of silence" and "willingness to self-censor" is extensive.

Less than ten years after Noelle-Neumann presented the "spiral of silence" theory, Taylor (1982) developed a set of hypotheses to analyze the spiral of silence and the theory of pluralistic ignorance (i.e., a theory to gauge the accuracy of people's perceptions about their environment)

(Miller & McFarland, 1991). Using survey data collected through the National Opinion Research Center, Taylor (1982) aimed to "clarify one's understanding of the conditions and consequences of public (mis)perceptions of public opinion" (p. 313) through the lens of these two theories. Findings from the survey confirmed what Fields and Schuman (1976) called the "looking-glass perception": people tend to believe that others agree with them. This way of assessing public opinion was more accurate for those in the majority than those in the minority; the majority group was more likely to think others shared their views. The minority group was, depending on the issue discussed, more likely to experience greater uneasiness about expressing their viewpoints. Furthermore, Taylor (1982) noted that generally, people are more willing to share beliefs when they perceive greater public support for their perspective.

Bowen and Blackmon (2003) used the "spiral of silence" framework (Noelle-Neuman, 1974) to examine how the perception of a particular issue or disclosure of personal information impacted workgroup dynamics and organizational voice. The researchers argued that fear of isolation due to minority viewpoints could be powerfully linked to self-censoring for "invisible minorities," such as employees who are part of the LGBTQ community. To illustrate the "spiral of silence" in action among these groups, Bowen and Blackmon (2003) proposed that there are two spirals: 1) the "horizontal pressures that the threat of isolation and corresponding fear of isolation exert to keep people from being open and honest about their opinion" (p. 1393); and 2) a "'vertical' spiral of silence, where silences on personal identity escalate over time to a wider silence on other issues" (p. 1404). The authors highlighted the negative implications for workgroup dynamics when invisible minorities conceal or reveal personal identities.

Most of the research applying the "spiral of silence" theory up to the early 2000s investigated an individual's willingness to express opinions, the dependent outcome variable

from Noelle-Neumann's original theory. Hayes (2007) noted the absence of research to explore the forms of self-censorship and strategies typically employed by individuals who choose to remain silent within the context of the "spiral of silence" theory. To investigate these strategies, 815 students enrolled in an introductory communication research methods course were presented with one of three hypothetical scenarios where a controversial topic was discussed. Participants shared how they would respond in their given scenario if a person with whom they disagreed asked for their opinion. Hayes (2007) discovered various strategies participants used to self-censor or avoid opinion expression, including trying to change the topic of conversation, expressing ambivalence, appearing uncertain, and reflecting the question back without providing an answer. In line with Noelle-Neumann's theory (1974), Hayes (2007) also reported the likelihood that individuals will self-censor and use opinion avoidance strategies around audiences who appear to be hostile toward differing opinions.

Noelle-Neumann's (1993) findings led her to conclude that regardless of the hostility of the opinion climate, some "hard-core" individuals from the minority "regard [social] isolation as the price it must pay" (p. 170). Regardless of the opinion climate, there is a distinction between individuals who share their viewpoints and those who do not. Recognizing the need to test the "hard-core" assumption empirically, Matthes et al. (2010) used data from three surveys to examine attitude certainty as a critical variable to identifying hard-core individuals. Data revealed that the climate of opinion *only* correlates closely with opinion expression when individuals express low or moderate certainty with their attitudes. Individuals with high attitude certainty–i.e., the hard-core–the opinion climate does not affect their willingness to speak out. In contrast, individuals who are less sure about their attitudes are more likely to self-censor.

A recent study used the "spiral of silence" to examine fear of social isolation among conservative student affairs professionals around the 2016 United States presidential election (Davis et al., 2020). During interviews, study participants reported a diversity double standard within their department (Davis et al., 2020). Specifically, they described their work environment as collegial up to the point they openly identified as a Christian and/or conservative. Though there were no formal rules to limit their speech, participants described a reluctance to align with conservative viewpoints for fear of being labeled, misunderstood, or prematurely judged. Some even reported fearing that identification with Christianity or conservative values would impact performance ratings or create conflict within their offices. As one participant explained, "We try not to say or do anything that would expose ourselves" (Davis et al., 2020, p. 343). Another said that their "preference [is] not to express opinions even in meetings or group interactions" (Davis et al., 2020, p. 344.

The Willingness to Self-Censor (WTSC) scale emerged out of "spiral of silence" research to address gaps in the research; it should not be thought of as an independently developed instrument to assess opinion expression behaviors. Some studies have applied aspects of both models in the literature to explore self-censorship (Fox & Holt, 2018; Matthes et al., 2012). However, the WTSC developed by Hayes et al. (2005a), as well as their definition for self-censorship, have been used numerous times in the literature separate from the "spiral of silence" to empirically examine the relationship between the opinion climate and individual differences when it comes to opinion expression (Chan, 2018; Etchegaray et al., 2019; Filak et al., 2009; Filak, 2012; Fox & Holt, 2018; Hayes et al., 2005b; Hayes et al., 2006; Hayes et al., 2010; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Matthes et al., 2012).

Seeking to validate further the WTSC, Hayes et al. (2005b) conducted a follow-up study to examine how willingness to express opinions changes when the climate of opinion is manipulated. Similar to the methodology in Hayes (2007), where participants were asked to respond to a hypothetical scenario involving discussion of a controversial topic, results supported the idea that the WTSC may explain individual differences with opinion expression when the climate of opinion remains consistent (Hayes et al., 2005b). Furthermore, results were consistent with their earlier claim that "the weak relationship between perceptions of the climate of opinion and opinion expression can be attributed at least in part to a failure to acknowledge individual differences in how much a person considers and uses information about the climate of opinion when deciding whether or not to speak out" (p. 451). Findings from Hayes et al. (2006) and Hayes et al. (2010) provide additional empirical evidence to support this notion. In Hayes (2006), after controlling for other variables, the researchers found that participants who scored high on the WTSC were less likely to engage in political discussion or activities that would open them to scrutiny. Likewise, Hayes et al. (2010) clarified that those with moderate or high WTSC scores relied heavily on the opinion climate to determine whether to self-censor or speak out. In contrast, those who scored lower on the WTSC appeared to be less concerned with the opinion climate.

To determine if self-censorship is intrinsic or situational, Filak et al. (2009) posed the following research question: "Is the individual desire to express or withhold one's opinion something that can be explained away by practical concerns or does it exist beyond specific situational fears?" (p. 369). Filak et al. (2009) administered the WTSC to high school media advisors representing 45 different states. In addition to the WTSC, media advisors reacted to the controversial topics (e.g., sex, substance abuse, and misdeeds) and expressed how comfortable or

uncomfortable they would be if these topics were to appear in the media outlet they advise. Overwhelmingly, media advisors who scored high on the WTSC scale reported lower comfort levels with the controversial topics if they were to appear in their media outlets, even when accounting for differences in opinion climate and other job-related variables. In other words, participants were more willing to self-censor topics that created discomfort irrespective of other factors. Thus, Filak et al. (2009) concluded that self-censorship is an intrinsic quality that varies person-to-person, and that this phenomenon is not likely to change even when circumstances do. Moreover, Filak et al. (2009) posited based on their findings that media advisors who are more prone to self-censorship (i.e., score high on the WTSC scale) are also more likely to be "surreptitious news censors as well" (p. 378).

Filak (2012), applying the same methodology as Filak et al. (2009), administered the WTSC scale to college newspaper editors and advisors to "determine to what degree internally held and externally driven processes could explain the comfort or reticence" they felt in publishing controversial material. Data collected from a nationwide survey of college media advisors and editors led to two conclusions: First, both willingness to self-censor and perceptual bias regarding advisor's comfort levels explained their comfort with or reticence to publish controversial materials. Second, the researchers noted that while editors and advisors were usually equally comfortable with the same topics, editors perceived that advisors were less comfortable and more likely to self-censor. Thus, Filak (2012) suggested that the editors' perceptual bias could result in a loss of essential stories.

A recent study by Etchegaray et al. (2019) considered how the "impressionable years" hypothesis, which asserts that events experienced between 18-25 years of age disproportionately affect attitudes and experiences later in life (Shuman & Corning, 2006), affects willingness to

self-censor for those who grew up in countries with political turmoil. Data analysis from an adapted version of the WTSC scale (Hayes et al., 2005a) included survey responses from 801 Chileans, all 18 years and older, and divided participants into four cohorts to align with specific events in Chile's political history (i.e., the rise of the dictatorship, decline of the dictatorship, transition to democracy, the new democracy). Results from the WTSC scale showed that individuals who spent their "impressionable years" experiencing the rise and fall of Chile's dictatorship "continue to show–decades later–higher levels of WTSC than Chileans who came of age in less repressive contexts (Etchegaray et al., 2019). Furthermore, data analysis revealed that the generation that experienced the rise of the dictatorship and the generation that experienced the transition to democracy were equally as likely to self-censor. These findings bear significance for self-censorship in highly politicized environments, suggesting that much higher percentages of individuals are more willing to remain silent or conform to majority opinions in such environments.

The "Spiral of Silence" and the WTSC Scale in Online Environments. A newer body of literature explores the "spiral of silence" and "willingness to self-censor" in online environments such as chat rooms and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Many of these studies examine commonalities and differences in face-to-face communication in comparison to off-line behavior (Chan, 2018; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Matthes et al., 2018; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017), while others explore opinion expression exclusively online (Chaudhry & Gruzd, 2020; Chen, 2018; Fox & Holt, 2018; Fox & Warber, 2015; Gearhart & Zhang, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2014; Luarn & Hsieh, 2014; Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2015; Powers et al., 2019; Spurgin, 2019; Stoycheff, 2016). Both opinion climate and discussion topics heavily influence self-censorship. Thus,

scholars examining self-censorship online have tried to replicate hostile opinion climates by assessing participants' responses to political expression (Chan, 2018; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Lee & Kim, 2014; Matthes et al., 2018; Powers et al., 2019; Stoycheff, 2016) and other controversial or divisive themes such as the expression of racist ideology (Chaudhry & Gruzd, 2020), police discrimination (Fox & Holt, 2018), LGBTQ+ identity (Fox & Warber, 2015), same-sex marriage (Gearhart & Zhang, 2018; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Liu & Fahmy, 2011), immigration (Gearhart & Zhang, 2018; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017); and abortion (Gearhart & Zhang, 2018). The literature provides evidence that self-censorship occurs offline and online, but with some important distinctions.

One of these areas of distinction is with fear of social isolation. Fear of social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) that was initially discussed in reference to face-to-face communication, was also a contributing factor to opinion expression in online environments (Fox & Holt, 2018). In a study to examine willingness to express public support for political candidates and parties in online spaces, Chan (2018) found that fear of social isolation negatively impacted political expression through willingness to self-censor, specifically observing that as perceived disagreement over political views increased, expression decreased. Likewise, Matthes et al. (2018) asserted that fear of isolation is strongest in offline and online settings when the topics being discussed matter to the individual. However, according to Liu and Fahmy (2011), social isolation online compared to offline may not look the same. The researchers administered a survey to explore differences in face-to-face and online speech. They discovered that when online users feel isolated because they identify with a minority group, they can simply log off. In contrast, fear of social isolation in offline settings is more difficult to avoid (Liu & Fahmy, 2011).

Another distinction between online and offline expression relates to opinion expression avoidance strategies (Hayes, 2007). Gearhart & Zhang (2015) examined opinion expression avoidance in an online space and found that: 1) individuals are more likely to self-censor when they receive strong adverse reactions to social media comments and posts, and 2) just as in face-to-face environments, social media users are drawn to like-minded thinkers, and are more prone to click the "like" button and post positive comments to posts that align with their views and avoid posts that do not. Whereas silence in face-to-face environments indicates a lack of verbal communication, silence in an online environment means that users refrain from posting or commenting to avoid conflict (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015).

The third area of distinction highlights how relationships online versus in-person differ. While individuals may be inclined to self-censor among both known and unknown groups to avoid punishment or isolation–as discussed by both Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1993) and Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b)–interactions with others on social media or in chat rooms are more likely to be anonymous and unfamiliar. Luarn and Hsieh (2014) found that online users were more likely to self-censor in non-anonymous environments and among unfamiliar members with whom they had not developed a rapport. However, Chaudhry and Gruzd (2020) observed different behaviors in their study to examine racist speech on Facebook. Analysis of 119 news stories about race and racism on a Facebook page showed that non-anonymous account holders were comfortable expressing their views on a moderated platform. In a meta-analysis of 66 "spiral of silence" studies, Matthes et al. (2018) identified that self-censorship is more likely to occur in non-anonymous environments; however, in contrast to Luarn and Hsieh (2014), their findings revealed that self-censorship might be most potent when expressing dissenting or unpopular

viewpoints among those with whom one is usually most familiar, such as family and close friends.

Reasons to Self-Censor

The literature that discusses self-censorship spans across several disciplines and highlights various reasons for which an individual would choose to self-censor. Of the articles I reviewed, 51 explicitly described reasons to self-censor. As I reviewed each piece, I noted qualities, situations, and topics that would cause a person to self-censor in an Excel spreadsheet. In total, there were 153 distinct references to "reasons to self-censor" in the 51 articles. Next, I used NVivo to organize the 153 references into codes and themes. To summarize, my analysis of the literature revealed three overarching themes to explain the reasons why individuals choose self-censorship over free expression: individual or personality-specific traits, the influence of the climate of opinion, and the topic of discussion. Considering these themes separately while also acknowledging their interconnectedness contributes to what we know about situations that result in self-censorship.

Individual or Personality-Specific Traits. Apprehension with public communication often associated with shyness is the most common personality difference that may influence the decision to self-censor (Hayes et al., 2005a; Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Lasorsa, 1991; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993; Willnat et al., 2002). Those who discuss communication apprehension and shyness posit that those who rate high in these qualities are more likely to self-censor. Other personality differences documented in the literature which may influence self-censoring behavior include lack of self-trust (Ramsoomair, 2019), a tendency toward self-doubt when accused (Smith, 1759/1976), and low self-esteem (Hayes et al., 2005). Baltussen and Davis (2015) also explained that some individuals self-censor because they prefer to keep their public and private lives separate, a preference that is separate from the climate of opinion.

The Climate of Opinion. This theme refers to contextual or situational factors which influence an individual's decision to self-censor. Overwhelmingly, the primary reason individuals self-censor is out of fear for how speaking freely could impact personal and professional relationships. Noelle-Neumann, the author of the "spiral of silence" theory, described fear of social isolation as a motivational trigger, a predictor, and a "guiding mechanism leading people to self-censor in a hostile opinion climate" (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p.170). Many other research studies have also linked fear of social isolation to self-censorship (Davis et al., 2020); Fox and Holt, 2018; Glynn and Park, 1997; Hayes et al., 2006; Liu and Fahmy, 2011; Luarn and Hsieh, 2014; Matthes et al., 2012; Matthes et al., 2018; Montgomery, 2020; Neuwirth, 2000; Otteson, 2019; Salmon and Kline, 1983; Wood, 2019). Related to social isolation, Chamlee-Wright (2019) described the fear of being removed from associational life as a strong influence on self-censorship among academics whose reputations and influence rest on the strength of academic association. Other fears that drive the decision to self-censor in hostile opinion climates include:

- Fear of being labeled or misunderstood by peers (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Chamlee-Wright, 2019; Davis et al., 2020; Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993; Otteson, 2019; Ramsoomair, 2019);
- Fear of conflict or hostility (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Chan, 2018; Davis et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2005a; Hayes et al., 2006; Matthes et al., 2012; Montgomery, 2020);
- Fear of punishment, shame, humiliation, and ridicule (Baltussen & Davis, 2015; Chamlee-Wright, 2019; Filak, 2012; Hollander, 1975; Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Manji, 2019; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993; Otteson, 2019; Tubbs, 2019);

- Fear of powerlessness (Hollander, 1975; Ramsoomair, 2019; Wood; 2019);
- Fear of authority (Dawkins, 2018; Horton, 2011; Shen & Truex, 2020); and
- Fear of compromising future work opportunities (Davis et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2005a; Montgomery, 2020)

The literature identifies several reasons to self-censor that are driven by factors other than fear. For example, some individuals choose to self-censor out of concern or respect for others (Chamlee-Wright, 2019; Essed, 1991; Festenstein; 2018; Horton, 2011; Ramsoomair, 2019; Tubbs, 2019) and to avoid unintentionally causing harm (Tallman, 2014). Furthermore, some people are less driven by fear and more by the desire to maintain social harmony or cohesion (Baltussen & Davis, 2015; Chamlee-Wright, 2019; Festenstein, 2018; Horton, 2011; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Mutz, 2002). Thus, self-censorship or conformity can be viewed as ways to maintain social benefits (Hollander, 1975; Taylor, 1982; Wood, 2019).

The Topic of Discussion. The topic itself may influence the decision to self-censor. Factors such as one's knowledge of the matter being discussed (Salmon & Kline, 1983; Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990; Shamir, 1997), as well as the level of confidence in one's knowledge of the topic (Lasorsa, 1991); one's level of interest in the topic (Baldassare & Katz, 1996; Willnat et al., 2002); the importance of the issue to the individual (Hornsey et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2004; Oshagan, 1996; Willnat et al., Zerback & Fawzi, 2017); and how responsible one feels for the topic (Hollander, 1975) influence the decision to self-censor. Thus, when considering why individuals may choose to remain silent is influenced not only by distinct personality traits and the climate of opinion but also by the topic discussed. Accordingly, individuals who may be more prone to self-censor–either because of their disposition and/or the opinion climate–may choose to speak out if the topic has personal relevance or importance. In contrast, individuals

who are less concerned with the climate of opinion and are more likely to share opinions may self-censor simply because they do not feel confident in their knowledge of a particular topic.

According to the literature, certain groups are more likely to self-censor than others. Speaking generally, Chan (2018) posited that individuals with a solid social or familial network are more likely to self-censor around group members because they have more to lose by speaking out. Interviews with conservative student affairs professionals (Davis et al., 2020) and conservative students (Montgomery, 2020) strongly support the notion that those who align with unpopular or minority viewpoints are more likely to self-censor than others. Lee and Kim (2014) presented similar findings involving conservative journalists. Matthes et al. (2010) spoke of self-censorship being more likely among members of political minority groups who were less sure of their attitudes. However, the authors did not limit their focus to political conservatives.

In comparison to males, females are more prone to self-censorship (Fox & Holt, 2018; Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Shen & Truex, 2020). Likewise, individuals from marginalized groups are more likely to self-censor (Shen & Truex, 2020), though data regarding self-censorship among minority groups have not been consistent across the literature. For example, Fox and Holt (2018) did not identify differences in willingness to self-censor among White and Black participants in their study. Contrastingly, a phenomenological study found that Black female doctoral students at a predominantly White institution self-censored to avoid being the "stereotypical Black woman" (Henderson, 2019, p. 69). Findings from each of these studies support the idea that self-censorship is complex and depends on individual characteristics, the broader social context, and the issues or topics under consideration.

Survey Instruments that Evaluate Free Expression

What we know of general speech attitudes, some of which tangentially touch on self-censorship, has more recently emerged through a series of surveys and reports of free expression

on college campuses. Recent survey instruments that seek to examine knowledge and attitudes toward the First Amendment, specifically, free expression on college campuses, are overwhelmingly geared toward student populations. Though each survey is unique in its design and approach to First Amendment issues, some of the topics addressed in the surveys include knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes among college students toward the First Amendment; invitation and disinvitation of guest speakers on college campuses; beliefs and feelings toward hate speech; the use of violence as a form of protest; the use of student fees to support on-campus activities; diversity and inclusion versus free speech; and tolerance of viewpoint diversity (College Pulse, 2019; The Freedom Forum Institute, 2019; Gallup, 2016; Naughton et al., 2017; Naughton et al., 2019; Stevens, Quirk, Jussim, & Haidt, 2017).

Immediately before the 2017 free speech incidents, the James L. Knight Foundation, in partnership with the Newseum Institute and Gallup, administered a survey to college students and adults across the United States. Among the findings summarized in the report were mainly that college students generally believe in the First Amendment but question how their rights are, at times, interpreted. Despite the prevailing belief that their rights are secure, college students believe that some forms of expression should be limited or discouraged to protect vulnerable groups from harmful or offensive rhetoric (Gallup, 2016).

The Knight Foundation conducted a study with College Pulse in 2018 to further explore college student attitudes regarding freedom of expression and inclusion. This follow-up survey highlighted the divide among students concerning the upholding of free speech on campuses and promoting a safe, inclusive environment (College Pulse, 2019). Study findings revealed that most students on college campuses disagree with violence as a form of protest. Furthermore, most college students who participated in the study believe that certain student groups are

especially sensitive to unrestricted speech, while, in general, their peers are too sensitive. Many students also expressed fear at openly sharing their views.

Other reports published by The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) (Naughton, Eastman, & Perrino, 2017; Naughton, Eastman, & Perrino, 2019) investigated students' attitudes toward self-expression, hate speech, guest speakers, and speech censorship. Like the Gallup study (2016), students reported strong support for freedom of speech; however, their support of free speech policy decreased when reporting limitations. These results led FIRE to conclude that most students have a superficial understanding of the First Amendment and the protections is it meant to offer and that there is support for censoring speech on college campuses (Naughton, Eastman, & Perrino, 2017; Naughton, Eastman, & Perrino, 2019).

The research focused on faculty and administrator knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding free speech are few. The American Council on Education surveyed approximately 500 college and university presidents in 2018 to elicit their perspectives on free speech and inclusion on their campuses (Espinosa, Crandall, & Wilkinson, 2018). To date, this might be the only survey that explores these constructs from the perspective of those tasked with protecting free speech and reacting to free speech issues as they arise,

Relevance and Timeliness of Self-Censorship Scholarship in Higher Education

Internal and external challenges with free expression are common on college and university campuses. Appeasing those who provide financial support and may seek to impose limits to free expression (Stone, 2015; Zimmer, 2015); addressing the growing administrative arm of higher education and the erosion of tenure (Curnalia & Mermer, 2018; Ludlum, 1950); carefully navigating the legal parameters of free expression (Bilgrami & Cole, 2015; Fischer, 1977; Kaplin, 1985; Leckrone, 2020; Poch, 1993); and determining when and how to maintain

political neutrality (Stone, 2015, 2016; Zimmer, 2015) have posed severe challenges to free expression for decades. Colleges and universities continue to experience these challenges; however, there are other, more pernicious, concerns in the current political climate that threaten the foundations of free expression in higher education (Whittington, 2018).

Chemerinsky and Gillman (2017) opined that higher education's most significant and current challenge is creating diverse and inclusive learning environments without restricting the free expression of ideas. According to the authors, "if campus leaders allow for calls for 'safe spaces' to suppress the expression of ideas, little will remain of free speech or academic inquiry. But if campus leaders do not find ways to create a conducive learning environment for everyone, they will discover that they have provided free speech to some but not to all" (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017, p. 21). The tension between free expression and a commitment to diversity and inclusivity is made most apparent in how campuses respond to hateful and other forms of controversial speech which may harm or cause offense (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017). Social media adds another layer of complexity to free expression blurring the boundaries between personal viewpoints and professional standards ("Foundation for Individual Rights in Education," 2021a) and the alignment of personal and institutional values (Kast, 2020). Since approximately 2016, responses to hate or controversial speech has included attempts to censors faculty, staff, and students (Christakis, 2015, 2016; Flaherty, 2020; "Foundation for Individual Rights in Education," 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Friedersdorf, 2016), disinvitation of or protests surroundings controversial speakers on campus (Jaschik, 2017a, 2017b; Park & Lah, 2017), the establishment of bias response protocols (Bauer-Wolf, 2019; Miller et al., 2018) and mandatory sensitivity training (Dassow, 2021), the denial of due process in speech-related incidents (Flaherty, 2016a, 2020; "Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, 2021b), and the

adoption of vague or overly broad speech codes (Hudson, 2017; Silverglate et al., 2012). According to La Noue (2019), “no one should be surprised with the extent of self-censorship that will follow” when these practices become commonplace on college and university campuses (p. 579).

In addition to self-censorship, the chilling of speech will also likely result. Dating back to the 1950s, the term “chilling effect” has been used to describe the climate that results when free expression is censored, controlled, or diminished or when there are negative repercussions for speech (Silverglate et al., 2012; Townend, 2017). As certain forms of speech are criticized or ridiculed, fear surrounding speech generates a “chilling effect,” often leading individuals who experience or observe these adverse reactions to self-censor information and viewpoints (Bar-Tal, 2017; Tubbs, 2019). On college and university campuses, those most susceptible to the fear and anxiety associated with speech include 1) groups of faculty, staff, and students who do not align with popular narratives and 2) college and university staff and untenured faculty who do not experience the full protections of academic freedom.

Some researchers argue that there is an increase in the “chilling effect” when speech is left unchecked, particularly for women and marginalized groups (Carlson, 2017; Fox & Holt, 2018; Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Shen & Truex, 2020). Others describe how controlling or censoring speech and the quest to overly protect students and others from risk creates not only a “chilled” speech climate but also poses a threat to free inquiry, open discourse (Jarvie, 2016), and “civil but passionate debate” (Whittington, 2018, p. 93). Among scholars who agree with the latter sentiment, the answer to this predicament is more, not less, speech (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017).

From a legal perspective, there is also a "chilling effect" when free speech codes are interpreted too broadly or vaguely or are inconsistently enforced (Hudson, 2017; Silverglate et al., 2012). Because of unclear parameters and the labeling of particular speech as *good* and other speech as *bad,* members of the campus community may choose to shield themselves and avoid potential conflict with free speech codes and other campus regulations by abstaining from exercising their free speech rights entirely (Hudson, 2017; Silverglate et al., 2012). Silverglate et al. (2012) also suggested that the very existence of free speech codes "signals…that freedom of speech may be limited" (p. 161).

In an examination of political correctness in higher education, Stone (2015) described the current era as one that is filled with accusations that "chill discourse to the bones. It is impossible to take certain positions without inviting a torrent of abuse, protest, and ostracism" (p. 8). Likewise, Poch (1993) and Zimmer (2015) also asserted that the culture within higher education is not always supportive of speech, fostering instead the practice of faculty and student policing and accusation, which, in turn, creates a dilemma within academic communities. Instead of civil debate, academic communities experience silence, intolerance (Stone, 2015), incivility, avoidance of controversy, and stunted critical thinking skills (Scott, 2017). Scott (2017), therefore, posited that "we can respect the rights of free speech without having to respect the ideas being uttered" (p. 8). Learning to tolerate others' diverse viewpoints, even when those views might dramatically differ from one's own, is a step to preserve free expression. Furthermore, it allows one to avoid, as John Dewey described, "be[ing] dressed out with hand-me-down garments with intellectual suits which other people have worn" (Fischer, 1977, p. 380).

Summary and Conclusion

Is self-censorship good or bad? Many scholars have considered this philosophical question. Wood (2019) spoke of governing one's tongue as a virtue often discussed in the Bible. Other scholars have explicitly highlighted the detriments of self-censorship. Festenstein (2018) suggested that self-censorship is needed to maintain certain relationships; however, in a democratic society, "self-censorship seems to pollute the space, constraining citizens' ability to speak to each other, to speak truth to power and freely to express themselves" (p. 325). Bar-Tal (2017) stated that "self-censorship has the potential of being a plague that not only prevents building a better world, but also robs its performer of courage and integrity" (p. 37). Perlow and Williams (2003) identified in their research with senior executives and employees in Fortune 500 companies that "silence can exact a high psychological price for individuals, generating feelings of humiliation, pernicious anger, resentment, and the like that, if unexpressed, contaminate every interaction, shut down creativity, and undermine productivity" (p. 3). In an earlier decade, Hollander (1975) associated withholding one's genuine opinion as a threat to civil liberties and as detrimental to expression in a free society.

Addressing some of the underlying philosophical questions about self-censorship, Horton (2011) and Chamlee-Wright (2019) clarified that this phenomenon is neither inherently good nor bad but rather context-dependent. Rather than view it as naturally one or the either, Chamlee-Wright (2019) suggested that it is "the choices that scholars make under specific circumstances that determine self-censorship's effect on the quality of discourse" (p. 543). It is the "specific circumstances" to which Chamlee-Wright refers that this research seeks to address.

Well over 30 quantitative studies have addressed self-censorship in the last 20 years. Quantitative methods–including an experimental design–have been the traditional approach to

examining self-censorship (e.g., Chan, 2018; Hayes et al., 2005a, 2005b; Hayes et al., 2010; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015, 2018; Lee& Kim, 2014; Matthes, 2015; Matthes et al., 2012; Matthes et al., 2018; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017), freedom of expression, and related phenomena (College Pulse, 2019; The Freedom Forum Institute, 2019; Gallup, 2016; Naughton et al., 2017; Naughton et al., 2019; Stevens, Quirk, Jussim, & Haidt, 2017). Two recent studies utilized a mixed methods approach to examine self-censorship (Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Powers et al., (2019). There is also an abundance of literature across the disciplines to address some of the philosophical concerns and moral implications of self-censorship in an academic environment and in society (e.g., Chamlee-Wright, 2019; Horton, 2011; LaNoue, 2019; Otteson, 2019; Spurgin, 2019; Tubbs, 2019; Wood, 2019). Scholarship focused on self-censorship is robust, spanning several academic disciplines including business, the social sciences, communications, legal studies, and education; however, the literature focused on self-censorship in higher education, including empirical evidence linking it to free expression, is limited.

Few researchers have investigated self-censorship and attitudes toward free expression qualitatively. In one recent example, Davis et al. (2020) attempted to make meaning of the experiences of conservative student affairs professionals who self-censored their viewpoints and beliefs in a higher education setting among liberal colleagues. Findings revealed the perception of a double standard in student affairs mainly that in a profession that values diversity and inclusion, conservative student affairs professionals felt excluded because of their sociopolitical identity. Overwhelmingly, the researchers found that participants chose disengagement and silence because of the perceived consequences of openly sharing their divergent viewpoints in the workplace. Likewise, Montgomery (2020) explored self-censorship among conservatives through qualitative interviews. To date, self-censorship has not been examined as a phenomenon that all college and university staff and administrators may experience, irrespective of political

affiliation. Furthermore, the contribution of campus responses to speech and the enforcement of speech-related policies to self-censorship is unknown. Though the number of free-speech research studies appears to be limited, the topic of self-censoring is not new to the literature. Previously cited studies have examined self-censorship, particularly the willingness to share or withhold opinions that might differ from those expressed by a group depending on speech climate in broader contexts. This research is of particular interest among college and university staff and administrators in higher education and deserves further exploration.

Chapter 3: Methods

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand how university staff and administrators who chose to self-censor described and made meaning of their experience and explore how policies and campus responses to speech influenced the decision to self-censor.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience?
2. How do campus policies and attitudes, and responses toward speech on campus influence the decision to self-censor?

Research Design

I applied a basic qualitative research design to examine the proposed research questions. Historically, sociologists and anthropologists first used qualitative research methods to gather field data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method of understanding behaviors and patterns through interviews and artifacts was eventually adopted by professionals in social work, health, psychology, education, law, and others to understand specific phenomena relative to these disciplines (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and to examine social context and lived experiences holistically (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011).

Fundamentally, qualitative research is distinguished from quantitative analysis by its use of "words as data…collected and analyzed in all sorts of ways" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 3-4). Van Maanen (1979) conceptualized qualitative research as "an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (p. 520). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) in a more recent definition,

"qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6).

In terms of worldview or philosophical approach to discovering the truth, qualitative research is guided by a meaning-making process known as constructivism–the notion that meaning is constructed based on individuals' unique perspectives (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A constructivist, or interpretive, approach to research "assumes that reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single observable reality" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). Thus, the primary objective of qualitative research, then, is to reveal and clarify meaning.

This study attempted to achieve "depth of understanding" (Patton, 1985, p. 1) rather than observing, measuring, and reporting generalizable findings. I am interested in the *emic*, or "insider's perspective" (in contrast to the *etic*, or "outsider's perspective) that is best understood qualitatively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16).

Research Site

The research site for this study was Southeast State University (pseudonym used to mask the name of the research site), a public research-focused land-grant university in the Southeast. The university is one of four campuses in a statewide university system. It is the largest of these campuses, serving an enrollment population of roughly 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a combination of face-to-face, fully online, or hybrid classes. The university employs approximately 9,000 faculty and staff, about 1,600 of which are full-time faculty. Within the university's eleven colleges, students can choose from over 900 programs of study (370 undergraduate programs and 547 graduate programs).

Participants

Using a criterion-based sampling approach, I recruited staff and administrators from Southeast State University to participate in the proposed research study. Criterion-based

selection of study participants, a form of purposeful sampling, requires the researcher to establish a set of purposeful criteria or attributes from within a population for inclusion in the study sample and then seeks out individuals and locations that meet the criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), "the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants and sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (p. 185). This yields qualitative data that is "information-rich" (Patton, 2015, p. 53). By establishing a set of purposeful criteria, screening prospective participants, and interviewing those who align with the pre-determined criteria, I hoped to achieve an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences with self-censorship and how campus policies influenced their attitudes toward speech and the decision to self-censor.

To be included in my study, participants had to be current staff and administrators at the Southeast State University who worked for the institution full-time and had three or more years of experience in higher education. Study participants ideally had decision-making authority and/or supervisory responsibilities, were committed to higher education as their chosen career, and had experience working in more than one area of responsibility in higher education. Ultimately, I hoped to interview staff and administrators who felt a sense of commitment to their institution.

I chose to exclude administrative coordinators (at Southeast State University an administrative coordinator is responsible for scheduling and other clerical duties), part-time employees, and staff and administrators with less than three years of higher education experience. Staff and administrators who fall into these categories are equally prone to self-censor as those whom I chose to include in my study; however, I chose to exclude them for a few key reasons. First, as a full-time staff member with more than three years of experience in higher education, I am fundamentally interested in understanding the experiences of staff and

administrators who are on a similar career path and with whom I share similar experiences. Second, conversations with individuals who fill these roles led me to believe that they self-censor for reasons outside of the scope of the proposed research. Self-censorship may be less of an issue for part-time staff simply because they are not on campus as much as full-time employees. Likewise, they may be less familiar with the opinion climate and/or connected to campus issues. An administrative coordinator may choose to self-censor due to the nature of their job description as administrative support rather than that of decision-maker. Likewise, an individual new to higher education may self-censor out of lack of familiarity with the working environment, including organizational structure, power dynamics, and knowledge relative to their area of focus. Third, I believed that inclusion of these additional types of staff members would add too much variety to my participant sample. Those who fit within the exclusion criteria and self-censor choose this response for reasons that are worthy of further exploration. Therefore, I propose that future research consider self-censorship among groups excluded from participation in this study.

Data Collection

For this study, I collected and analyzed data from one main data source: one-on-one interviews. Essential to interviewing is "an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2019, p. 9). Interviews were the most appropriate form of data collection for my study because they allowed me to examine participants' lived experiences and produced findings that aligned with my proposed research questions.

Before proceeding with data collection, I submitted an application for expedited review to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the research site for approval of my research. I was

prepared to share my IRB approval letter (see Appendix D) with those who requested verification of my research.

Interview Recruitment

To recruit staff and administrators representing a variety of areas to participate in this research study, I compiled a recruitment email list. At this stage, I did not screen prospective participants for alignment with my inclusion criteria; my focus was on staff and administrators broadly. I began by reviewing university contacts and adding names, titles, and email addresses of staff and administrators from my research site to a spreadsheet. Next, I visited the university's main website and compiled a list of departments or divisions. Some of these offices included academic advising, enrollment management, athletics, and student life. After creating a list of these distinct areas on campus, I visited division websites and added team members' names, titles, and email addresses to my spreadsheet. Any email address I was unable to locate often were listed in the university directory, which I accessed as needed.

Staff and administrators identified as potential participants received a recruitment email (see Appendix B) that included an overview of my research and an invitation to share their experiences in two, one-on-one interviews. As I received responses to the recruitment email, I coordinated a meeting via Zoom with each participant. Before conducting each interview, I also emailed each participant a copy of the informed consent statement (see Appendix C) and a brief background survey (see Appendix A) that included a few screening questions, both of which participants were required to submit before their scheduled interview. The background survey helped me screen staff and administrators interested in participating to ensure they met the inclusion criteria for this study. Information gathered through the background survey about each participant also contributed to future data analysis. During the interview process, I hoped to

recruit additional participants by employing the snowball sampling method (Creswell, 2015). Snowball sampling, another form of purposeful sampling, "involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you have established for participation in the study. As you interview these early key participants, you ask each one to refer you to other participants" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98). I included a snowball sampling question in my interview protocol to help me identify participants through this additional recruitment method.

Interview Protocol

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source for this study to better understand staff and administrators' self-censoring experiences at Southeast State University. My research questions and theoretical framework (i.e., Bar-Tal's Conceptual Framework for Self-Censorship) informed the development of my interview protocol, which has been included in Appendix A.

A semi-structured interview contains a mix of structured and unstructured interview questions that allow greater flexibility in the interview process, specifically regarding question order and wording (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This format allowed me to adapt to the "emerging worldview of the respondent and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). Moreover, this interview format provided the flexibility to explore each participant's experience with self-censoring, ask clarifying questions when needed, and go where the conversation leads in a way that is not permitted with structured interviews (Seidman, 2019). A pre-planned interview protocol served as a guide to exploring common issues and themes; however, each interview was unique given the semi-structured format.

The literature relative to qualitative research methods contains a variety of perspectives about the number of participants needed in a study and suggests that sample size depends on the specific type of qualitative design that will be used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Seidman

(2019) recommends two criteria for determining the appropriate number of participants for a research study. The first criterion is sufficiency (i.e., is there a sufficient number of participants to reflect a range of experience). The second criterion is saturation. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "saturation occurs when continued data collection produces no new information or insights into the phenomenon you are studying" (p. 199). Saturation may be a better indicator for when to cease data collection rather than setting a fixed number of interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019)

With these criteria as a guide, I anticipated that I would interview 10-12 university staff and administrators, while maintaining flexibility until saturation was reached. Though I had proposed a basic qualitative research design, this study also contained elements similar to case study research, which typically recommends fewer interviews–usually around five to six cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Fewer interviews encourage the researcher to delve deeper into emergent themes, creating a final product that is richly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given my interest in achieving an in-depth analysis, I discovered that fewer interviews were appropriate and allowed me to achieve saturation.

To achieve depth, I asked each staff member or administrator to participate in two interviews. As part of the first interview, participants were required to submit the Informed Consent Statement approved for this study and complete a short background survey administered via Qualtrics that included questions about their background in higher education and a few screening questions. I began each interview by sharing a brief overview of my research and the purpose of the interviews, the participants' rights, and the steps I would take to mask participants' identity. Specifically, I highlighted the participants' right to decline to answer any questions during the interview process and their right to end the interview at any time if they are uncomfortable with the experience. Steps I took to mask participants' identity that I emphasized

prior to each interview include: 1) the use of pseudonyms to mask participants' identity and institution in the final written report; 2) the removal or masking of other identifiable information that could link parts of the narrative to individual participants; and 3) the methods I used to protect all research materials during the research process.

The first interview centered around my first research question: *How do university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience?* Participants were asked to describe an experience at Southeast State University when they chose to self-censor and the factors that influenced that decision. As appropriate, I asked specific questions to probe into social context, personality characteristics, and other factors that may have influenced their self-censorship. Participants were also asked to reflect on the opinion they withheld, the conditions that would have made it easier to share their viewpoints, and the perceived or actual consequences to both self-censoring versus revealing their viewpoints.

The second interview aligned with my second research question: *How do campus policies and attitudes, and responses to speech on campus influence the decision to self-censor?* Interview questions focused on learning about participants' understanding of and attitude toward free expression and the climate of free expression at Southeast State University. During the interview, participants and I read an excerpt from the campus free speech policy–which is part of the Tennessee free speech legislation for higher education (Campus Free Speech Protection Act, 2019)–and were asked to interpret the policy and discuss university practices surrounding the policy. As appropriate, I referenced specific speech incidents that occurred on campus that may provide additional context for policy interpretation. Lastly, participants were asked to describe how the campus environment has influenced their decision to self-censor.

Each interview was recorded on Zoom, a video-conferencing platform, and lasted on average between 45-60 minutes, with a few exceptions. I took notes during the interview process

to capture additional observations. Seidman (2019) recommends that interviewers take notes as participants share their experiences. This practice encourages active listening and limits interruptions. Furthermore, it allows the interviewer to track observations and points that may need clarification while focusing on what the participant is saying. Seidman's (2019) interview guide for qualitative researchers served as a reference to develop my protocol and prepare for interviews with each participant.

Data Analysis

As a first step of data analysis, I transcribed each interview verbatim and reviewed the purpose of my study, research questions, and theoretical framework. From there, I utilized two coding strategies to conduct my data analysis: One strategy focused on identifying emergent themes and the other relying on *a priori* categories generated by my theoretical framework. Given the purpose of this study, which was to make meaning of self-censorship experiences, the use of *a priori* codes and emergent themes were appropriate coding strategies because they allowed me to both tether my research to a solid theoretical framework while also being open to new findings (Saldaña, 2016). Thus, the use of both strategies generated a richer data analysis.

The first coding strategy or process allowed me to align data findings with Bar-Tal's Conceptual Framework for Self-Censorship (2017). Provisional, or *a priori*, codes are determined before data analysis and are aligned with a study's theoretical framework or paradigm (Saldaña, 2016). Codes borrowed directly from Bar-Tal's framework may include participants' individual characteristics (i.e., an individual's worldview, values, personality traits, social status, attitudes, and behavioral intentions), the context in which the speech was self-censored, the type of information that was self-censored, and circumstantial factors that influenced self-censorship.

Next, I used a second coding strategy to identify emergent themes. Data collection and analysis for qualitative research are dynamic, iterative processes that occur simultaneously (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Putting this into practice, I read through the data making general notes about patterns and observations as I continued to conduct additional interviews. Initially, I began data analysis with an inductive approach to coding before transitioning to a deductive approach (i.e., looking for specific themes in the data) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The following recommendations from Merriam and Tisdell (2016) provide an overview of how I conducted my analysis using inductive and deductive coding methods. To begin, I chose one interview transcription and started the coding process. At this initial stage of review, I engaged in open coding. As stated by Charmaz (2014), the idea of open coding is "to remain open to all theoretical directions indicated by your readings of the data" (p. 114). Reading through the transcription line-by-line I made notations alongside the data which seemed relevant to my research questions (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016), while also keeping an open mind to general trends and other observations I discovered. Notations included direct phrases from interview participants, thoughts, and references to the literature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest thinking of "trees" or "the individual data bits," rather than the whole picture at this phase of analysis (p. 208).

I repeated this process with other interview transcriptions, maintaining a focus on patterns and insights that began to emerge while also remaining cognizant of my research questions and theoretical framework. As I proceeded with the analysis of additional transcriptions, the challenge was to keep in mind the recurring themes that began to emerge across the data. After identifying a variety of data codes, or "trees," Merriam and Tisdell (2016)

stress the importance of stepping back from the data and thinking about the "forest" to observe emerging themes and patterns (p. 208).

With specific themes in mind, I revisited the interview transcriptions and shifted from an inductive to a deductive stance using axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Axial coding is when the researcher starts to group codes together based on their relationship (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Sometimes this method of grouping into themes or categories is also called the constant comparative method. Bogdan and Biklen (2011) made several recommendations for the constant comparative approach to data analysis, such as writing memos to summarize and group preliminary observations, developing analytical questions to inspire deep thinking, and reviewing the literature. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also suggested the idea of creating lists of the topics I observed through open coding so that I could start to connect similar topics and see the overall coding structure. Moving back and forth between individual codes (i.e., pieces of data) and emerging themes, I was able to, over time, combine codes into comprehensive themes or categories.

As I approached the end of my analysis, I transitioned from an inductive to a deductive lens, "looking for more evidence in support of [my] final set of categories" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My goal at this state of analysis was to identify and present the most salient or robust themes that answered my research questions and aligned with my theoretical framework. After I identified and solidified these themes, I refined each theme, created memos that described each one, and choose appropriate names from interview transcriptions to capture their essence (Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To aid me in the data analysis process, I used two resources, in addition to the references I have already cited: 1) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by Saldaña (2016) served as a guide for best practices in coding. This guide contains a comprehensive overview of

coding techniques, types, and examples and will help me engage in a deeper analysis of my data. 2) Though I did some open coding by hand, a software program called NVivo 1.0 (released August 2021) was used early on in the coding process. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis tool that allows researchers to import, organize, and analyze documents. Each transcription will be uploaded into NVivo and coded within the software. This will be a useful tool to help me identify, name, and group codes into broader themes.

Trustworthiness

According to Firestone (1987), trustworthiness "provides the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author's conclusion 'makes sense'" (p. 9) and is, therefore, trustworthy. Trustworthiness is increased when researchers maintain standards for rigor when conducting qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To enhance trustworthiness, I applied several strategies. These strategies included the use of *rich, thick description*; member checking; pilot interviews (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019), and reflexive journaling (Kross & Giust, 2018; Smith, 1999).

First, I used *rich, thick description* to communicate my findings. Rich, thick description refers to highly detailed language that describes the setting and participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method to increase trustworthiness also includes a detailed summary of findings, including quotes from participants (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); Use of *rich, thick description* allowed me to present my findings in a more realistic and meaningful way and contribute to generalizability.

Second, I solicited feedback from interview participants through a process called member checking. Member checking is a strategy used in qualitative research to ensure that researchers interpret and describe participants' experiences in a way that "rings true" to them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). I utilized member checking at two points during data analysis. As noted

by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), conducting more than one round of member checking is appropriate for some research studies. The first member check occurred earlier in the data analysis process. Once I transcribed and coded each individual transcription and conducted my preliminary analysis, I shared a copy of their transcription with each participant along with an initial assessment of my findings. If there were aspects that were unclear from the interview, I sought clarification at this point. I performed the second member check near the end of analysis once I identified the themes I planned to report and requested participants share final thoughts and concerns. Based on the feedback I received from interview participants during both stages of member checking, I adapted the thematic development of my research and revised my writing to ensure that I had captured participants' experiences accurately and respectfully (Creswell, 2009).

Third, I conducted two pilot interviews to test my interview procedures and both interview protocols. Those with expertise in qualitative research encourage a pilot phase to alert the researcher to aspects of the interview process that may not align with the study objectives or are otherwise unclear or unnecessary. Based on the feedback I received during the pilot interviews, I clarified interview questions, changed words or the order of questions, and modified my interview procedures. I conducted pilot interviews and made necessary revisions prior to submitting my research study and protocol to the IRB.

The fourth and final strategy I used to increase trustworthiness was reflexive journaling to identify and clarify my biases as the researcher. Reflexive journaling promotes self-awareness and provides an opportunity to reflect on the research process and the study's outcomes (Smith, 1999). Kross and Giust (2018) recommend this practice to understand my motivations as a researcher and how I arrive at certain conclusions throughout the research process.

Reflexivity Statement

Probst and Berenson (2014) described reflexivity as "the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher. It is both a state of mind and a set of actions" (p. 814). As the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16), I inevitably approached each phase of the research process with preconceived notions, assumptions, and perhaps even biases. Understanding my unique worldview and role as an insider and outsider and acknowledging my viewpoints and experiences relative to the themes I addressed in my research influenced data collection and analysis. Likewise, an awareness of how I affected the research and how I am affected by the process provided context for reaching certain conclusions in my study.

Freedom, accountability, and civility are some of the values at the core of my belief system and worldview. I am a strong advocate of policies and practices that preserve and encourage personal freedom and allow people to exercise their agency. The belief that individuals are free to speak and act for themselves influences how I interact with others, my expectations for personal and professional relationships, and how I view individuals with whom I disagree. I am rarely offended or bothered by others' distinct political, social, moral, or religious beliefs. These differences enrich my experience, challenge me to expand my worldview, and are an invitation to understand myself and others better. I also have a strong sense of personal accountability and hold myself and others to high standards of speech and behavior. I believe that civility, kindness, and respect should be present in personal and professional settings; they lead to stronger relationships and deeper learning. These values are critical in society and higher education.

I am both an insider and an outsider among the staff and administrators who will participate in my study. I have eight years of higher education experience and am currently a full-time staff member within the university system. I am also a Ph.D. candidate pursuing a degree from the research site. This insider perspective has allowed me to work closely with faculty, staff, and administrators at my research site since I joined the university system in 2017. Close interaction with these groups in formal and informal settings lends to my understanding of the opinion climate on campus. It gives me a unique perspective of the complexities surrounding free speech and self-censorship on campus. However, as a system employee, I am also an outsider because the research site in my study does not directly employ me. While I am a staff member at the system level, I am not embedded within an office on campus that responds to free speech incidents and am not privy to campus-level discussions about speech-related concerns. Insider and outsider perspectives are essential to understand as the researcher and will contribute to the rapport I hope to develop with interview participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As I reflect on the racial, social, and political turmoil present throughout the United States and on college and university campuses, I have observed a dramatic change in how individuals communicate agreement and disagreement with others. I tend to self-censor out of fear that others will misunderstand me or no longer want to work with me. I self-censor to avoid potential conflict and offending others. One-on-one conversations with trusted colleagues and other professionals with whom I interact from a broad spectrum of political and religious beliefs lead me to believe that additional staff and administrators choose to self-censor for similar reasons. These conversations, paired with my own experience, motivate me to understand how others make meaning of their self-censorship experiences and how the university environment may be encouraging that response. Reflexive journaling (Kross & Giust, 2018; Smith, 1999)

throughout data collection and analysis helped me better understand myself and others as I reported my findings and arrived at specific conclusions about self-censorship.

Limitations

A qualitative research approach to understand how university staff and administrators described and made meaning of their self-censorship experiences was the appropriate way to examine the proposed research questions, though there are a few limitations associated with the conclusions I reached. First, the participants in this study were all employed by the same university; therefore, it was difficult to determine if the same factors would have emerged if the same study had been performed at another university or with more participants. Additionally, the participants represented a variety of functional areas within the university structure, leading to the conclusion that self-censorship can be experienced at all levels of the university. However, we have limited understanding of how self-censorship affects larger groups of individuals performing in similar roles to the participants from this study. This limitation kept me from identifying patterns of meaning-making by role or concluding that individuals serving in specific roles within the university choose self-censorship more than other groups.

Another possible limitation associated with this study is that participants' may have self-censored or altered their experiences as current employees of the university to protect themselves and others. There were moments during interviews when I perceived that some participants were hesitant to fully disclose certain contextual details. I observed that they would reframe or retell their experiences to maintain anonymity. A few participants acknowledged that they were self-censoring while others seemed to do it unknowingly. Thus, I think that studying individuals while they employed by the university may chill or slightly alter parts of their experiences. Due to the sensitive nature of some of their experiences as well as an ethical duty to protect their

identities, I also masked or removed identifiable data which may contribute to overall authenticity of participants' stories.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), these are standard considerations for qualitative researchers. To account for these, I used *rich, thick description* and recruited staff and administrators with various levels of experience and across different administrative areas to help me present my findings in a descriptive and meaningful way. Capturing a depth and breadth of perspectives contributes to an understanding of self-censorship among university staff and administrators. I believe this strategy helped me overcome these limitations to make my conclusions more broadly applicable as well as authentic and relevant.

Chapter 4: Participant Profiles

To identify relevant themes in my research, I recruited participants from a pool of 475 Southeast State University staff and administrators. Initially, 27 individuals expressed interest in participating in this study and signed up for either one or two interviews once they received my recruitment email. One individual did not meet the eligibility requirements outlined in the background survey, so I removed him from the participant pool. I prioritized the first 15 participants who signed up for interviews and met the eligibility requirements. I placed 11 participants on a secondary interview list with saturation as my goal. I asked for their permission to contact them again if I needed to interview more than 15 participants. I concluded my data collection by having conducted 30 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews–two interviews each with 15 university staff and administrators. The average interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, though a few were shorter interviews (32 to 40 minutes) or longer (90 minutes) as guided by the interview participant.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and shared with interview participants for their review (i.e., member checking) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). At the request of a few participants, specific details in their interview transcripts were omitted or masked to conceal their identity. Additionally, I revised grammatical errors noted by interview participants during their review. Once I finished member-checking for both interviews, I uploaded the transcripts into NVivo and conducted my data analysis as outlined in Chapter 3. To create a richer analysis of participants' experiences, I utilized two coding strategies: One relied on *a priori* categories generated by my chosen theoretical framework, Bar-Tal's Conceptual Framework for Self-Censorship (2017), and the other focused on identifying emergent themes. In addition to the *a priori* categories provided

by Bar-Tal's framework, four themes emerged. *A priori* and emergent themes will be discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

In this chapter, I present a profile and background of each interview participant. Quotations from participants' interviews are included throughout these sections to highlight participant characteristics and describe how university staff and administrators made meaning of their self-censorship experiences. I extracted quotations from audio-recorded interviews that I transcribed verbatim. To improve readability, I have removed filler words such as "um," "like," and "you know." Additionally, I have added ellipses and brackets to clarify participants' thoughts and feelings.

Participant Profiles

Table 4.1 summarizes participants' backgrounds and demographics relevant to this study. The 15 participants in this study represented three primary staff or administrative groups at Southeast State University: Top-level college- or university-level administrators, mid-level staff members or administrators, and support staff members.

College- or university-level administrators refers to participants in top-level leadership positions with responsibility for a particular discipline or division with multiple tiers and supervision of faculty and staff members. Three participants fell within this group. Each was a seasoned administrator charged with furthering the university's academic mission whose decisions impact university faculty, staff, and students. These individuals all held doctoral degrees in their chosen field, were tenured-faculty members, had over three decades of experience in higher education, and had worked at Southeast State University for more than nine years. Each of the three participants taught and conducted research within their discipline, served on internal and external boards, and participated in national organizations before their current administrative roles.

Table 4.1: Participant Demographics from Background Survey

Pseudonym	Gender	Ed Level	Higher Ed (yrs)	SSU (yrs)	Position Level	Politics	Religion
Camilla	F	Ph.D/Ed.D.	20+	11-20	College/univ administrator	Moderate	Moderately religious
Cooper	M	Ph.D/Ed.D.	11-20	1-10	Support staff	Liberal	Not religious
Danielle	F	Master's	20+	20+	Mid-level staff/administrator	Moderate	Not religious
Dustin	M	Master's	20+	11-20	Mid-level staff/administrator	Liberal	Moderately religious
Elizabeth	F	Ph.D/Ed.D.	11-20	1-10	Mid-level staff/administrator	Liberal	Not religious
Kayla	F	Master's	1-10	1-10	Support staff	Liberal	Slightly religious
LeeAnn	F	Master's	11-20	1-10	Support staff	Conservative	Slightly religious
Marlena	F	Master's	20+	20+	Mid-level staff/administrator	Conservative	Very religious
Regina	F	Bachelor's	11-20	11-20	Mid-level staff/administrator	Liberal	Not religious
Rosie	F	Master's	1-10	1-10	Support staff	Far left/ Liberal	Not religious
Sean	M	Master's	20+	20+	Mid-level staff/administrator	Far Left	Moderately religious
Spencer	M	Ph.D/Ed.D.	20+	1-10	College/univ administrator	Moderate	Very religious
Stella	F	Master's	11-20	1-10	Mid-level staff/administrator	Moderate	Slightly religious
Thea	F	Ph.D/Ed.D.	20+	1-10	College/univ administrator	Lib Libertarian	Not religious
Tristan	M	Master's	11-20	1-10	Mid-level staff/administrator	Liberal	Not religious

Most interview participants were mid-level staff members or administrators. Of the 15 participants, eight served in director-level positions and had supervisory responsibilities within their division. Their higher education experience ranged from 12 to 36 years. At the time of our interviews, all had been employed by Southeast State University between three and 27 years. Participants within the group represented various areas across academic and student affairs, including athletics, student success, advising, research, library services, communications, admissions, and outreach and engagement. In terms of the highest degree earned, one participant had a bachelor's degree, six held master's degrees, and one held a Ph.D. Two of the participants in this group had fulfilled roles as adjunct professors and one was a tenured faculty member.

Four participants served as support staff members in the following roles: associate directors, coordinators, analysts from IT and software development, faculty affairs, and library services. Participants within this group reported to mid-level staff members or administrators in areas across campus and did not currently supervise other university employees. Their main tasks were narrower than participants from other groups. They were charged with performing duties relative to their division's specific area of expertise. Three held master's degrees within this group, and one held a doctoral degree.

As part of the background survey prior to interviews, each participant also was asked to characterize their political and religious views by selecting from a list of options (see the Background Survey in Appendix A). Over half of the participants self-identified as Far Left or Liberal on the political spectrum. The remaining participants selected Moderate (four) and Conservative (two) to describe their political views. Based on their interpretations of the levels of religious practice provided, most participants (seven) self-identified as "not religious." Six

participants described themselves as “slightly religious” or “moderately religious,” and two as “very religious.”

Following is a profile of each participant to provide greater context before exploring relevant themes. Profiles consist of a brief description of each participant and an illustration of their self-censorship experience. Several staff and administrators shared self-censorship experiences that linked them to specific campus groups or committees or certain events across campus, within the community, and sometimes nationally. To protect participant identities, I chose to omit the division in which they work and to disassociate–when needed–each individual from the overarching theme of their self-censorship experience. A summary of self-censorship topics discussed in this research is provided in Table 4.2.

Camilla

As a former tenured faculty member and current college- or university-level administrator, Camilla was among the most experienced individuals who participated in this study, with over three decades in higher education and over a decade of administrative experience at Southeast State University. During her interviews, Camilla expressed a deep commitment to excellence and the university’s academic mission, which is “to be able to explore topics that may have inherent sensitivity and may be more delicate to be able to discuss.” Camilla said such topics should be discussed “in an atmosphere of mutual respect.” This perspective coincided with Camilla’s value of diversity and inclusion and the importance of creating a welcoming environment for diverse groups and limiting speech that can damage other people, two points that she repeatedly emphasized throughout her interviews.

When given the opportunity to expand on her political and religious views, Camilla described herself as neither Republican nor Democrat but rather a moderate. She aligned with

Table 4.2: A Summary of Self-Censorship Topics

Self-Censorship Topics	Sub-Topics
Conflict of Interest	Professional standards v. supervisor expectations
	Personal values v. professional values
COVID-19	Classroom instruction
	Flexible scheduling for employees
	Masks and social distancing procedures
	Returning to "normal"
	Vaccination
Diversity and Inclusion	LGBTQ+ advocacy
	Optics of LGBTQ+ relationships
Kneeling during the National Anthem	Attitudes toward the U.S. military
Political elections	
Relationships with peers and supervisor	
A campus event focused on sex education	

principles from both parties, depending on the issue or topic itself, and thought it was a sign of wisdom to avoid political extremes. Camilla self-identified as moderately religious and viewed religious values and practice as "intensely personal," noting the inconsistencies between how some individuals profess and practice their religious beliefs.

Camilla was an administrator with a strong sense of personal and professional values. She described her calling as a faculty member and administrator with the responsibility to educate students as "a sacred one." With a commitment to this responsibility, Camilla was keenly aware of the impact of expressing her opinion within the university setting and broadly across the community. During our time together, Camilla characterized the role of administrator as a public life and stated that once you move into college- and university-level leadership roles, you "have no real realms that you can explore and share your opinion without it being a reflection of the university." With this understanding, Camilla sought to be neutral on some issues. She saw herself as more of an observer and a listener than someone who must always vocalize controversial opinions or take a firm stance on an issue. This approach to leadership led Camilla to avoid specific issues centered on politics and religion in public settings because "they need to stay out of the workplace." She viewed such topics as "intensely private" and "that each person should really keep to themselves." Camilla was driven to speak about diversity-related themes and other issues about which she felt particularly passionate.

Compared to other university roles, Camilla spoke of the importance of administrators understanding their "expanded sphere of influence" when choosing to speak or self-censor. When considering her position and ability to influence, Camilla shared the following during our first interview.

> There are multiple ways to [influence] and everybody has their own style. And I think mine is on a more personal basis. I don't mandate. To me, when you talk with someone and you nudge, it gives them a chance to engage in the change. And if someone engages in a change and embraces it, it's more likely to stick. So, I believe that's a more appropriate way of influencing people.

Camilla viewed her role as an administrator with influence that is better equipped to deal with individuals one-on-one. This approach was reflected in how she chose to define self-censorship and how she made meaning out of the self-censorship experiences she shared during her two interviews. When asked to explain self-censorship in her own words, Camilla described this phenomenon as what occurs when you "have a strong opinion about something and may even have related experience, but [you] don't feel that it's appropriate to share that in a public realm." Camilla shared two separate but related self-censorship incidents from when she was attending leadership meetings facilitated by other administrators. While discussing one of the agenda items, the same administrator in two separate meetings strongly vocalized an opinion relative to the topic of discussion and would not move on from their point despite the facilitator's efforts to move to the next agenda item. The agenda item was related to an issue that was causing a lot of tension on campus during that time and was a topic on which Camilla had some expertise and a strong opinion. Camilla was frustrated about this individual's inability to understand or perceive the prevalent thoughts and emotions in the room and complete disregard for the administrator directing the meeting. She observed that other administrators were rolling their eyes and were ready to move on. She wanted to speak up but determined there "was nothing we could say that would have had an impact" and "it was not the time to influence that person." Ultimately, she chose not to speak up because she didn't want to shame the person, there was a time constraint on the meeting, and several additional agenda items remained for discussion. One

of Camilla's statements that sums up her perspective is that she believed "that a lot more people would benefit if they had a stronger sense of self-censorship."

Cooper

Cooper held a doctoral degree from Southeast State University and served as a support staff member in a division that provides support for faculty members. Though he has been at Southeast State University for less than five years in his staff role, he had over fifteen years of higher education experience. On the background survey, Cooper characterized himself as liberal without a religious affiliation; however, when asked to discuss his religious and political views in greater depth, he provided a full context for his belief system. Cooper expressed frustration with the current political terminology in the U.S., describing it as "chaos." My observation from this portion of our discussion was that labels were complex for Cooper because they were both inconsistent and continually shifting with time. He eventually settled on calling himself a progressive because of his "concern for public welfare," particularly as it relates to the pandemic. In terms of religious practice, Cooper vocally explored the complexities around identifying as "spiritual, but not religious" or "agnostic." He shared that as he has studied different religions, the more he has settled on the belief that "there's a spiritual power that comes with being comfortable with not knowing totally what's going on and an ability to be okay with that."

Cooper acknowledged the value he places on diversity and inclusion and a desire to take part in addressing systemic issues within the university. Above religious practice and politics, these values seemed to guide him as a staff member. He was drawn to the idea that the university setting is the ideal space for exploration and that "people should be free to try things out in a college or university environment that they might not try out in other parts." Like other participants, Cooper added a caveat that individuals should not use speech to harm others intentionally.

During his first interview, when asked to describe his interest in self-censorship and elaborate on why he chose to participate in this research study, Cooper referenced his background in various staff roles and as a contingent faculty member. He noted how his proximity to authority has dramatically influenced his ability to share viewpoints and ideas in the workplace. As a contingent faculty member with less access to administrators in positions of power and less security than a tenured faculty member, Cooper has observed that he is less vocal with administrators than he typically is in work interactions among colleagues. Contrastingly, his past and present staff roles have allowed him to engage with administrators serving in positions of power. As an individual, he felt secure in his identity and personality. However, he noted that in his staff role, particularly when navigating topics that have a political element, it benefitted him to be aware of the context in which he openly shared his viewpoints and beliefs. According to Cooper, the power structures at play within the university, particularly when coupled with topics where politics are involved, have impeded open and honest discussion that leads to creative solutions.

Cooper described himself as an individual who tends to share viewpoints and opinions with others, particularly with colleagues and his supervisor with whom he has developed relationships of trust. However, he was more likely to self-censor around his upper-level supervisor. He defined self-censorship as "deferring to someone else's preferred way to hear" and a response that one chooses to avoid offending someone who holds a position of power. Avoiding the expression of offensive perspectives and the proximity to individuals serving in influential university roles were very evident in the experience Cooper shared with me.

Cooper's self-censorship experience occurred during the pandemic. He described how he and his team were charged with creating some instructional materials for faculty members. The project raised the profile of his team and the level of support they were able to provide across

campus to faculty members from various disciplines. Unlike previous projects, this one brought Cooper closer to upper-level supervisors. During a series of meetings, administrators asked Cooper and his colleagues to prepare materials that did not align with best practices and "encourage faculty to do things that would not be in the students' best interests." As the team and supervisors met to discuss where and how to adjust, it was clear to Cooper that upper-level supervisors were open to some feedback but that not all feedback was welcome. Cooper felt conflicted because of his stance on the topic and the value he placed on open dialogue within the university setting.

Danielle

Danielle was a mid-level staff member or administrator whose role relied heavily on her ability to develop and foster relationships internally with other staff members, administrators, students, and externally with community members. Danielle had a long history with Southeast State University. She had spent most of her professional career within her current division, had experienced firsthand some of the university's most public and historical events, and had personal and professional relationships with a few of the university's most public figures. During her two interviews, Danielle emphasized the importance of personal integrity and respect for others, two principles which she attempted to communicate often to those she supervises and the students with whom she interacts.

From Danielle's responses to the background survey regarding politics and religion and a more in-depth discussion during her interviews, I learned that Danielle was not religious. However, she shared that "religion was kind of forced on [her] as a kid." Beyond religious practice, Danielle's perspective was that "how you treat people is key." She characterized her political views as moderate, though she was "more of an 'issues' person" who did not affiliate

with just one political party. What stands out from my interactions with Danielle was her approach to confronting viewpoints different from her own. When many individuals preferred to watch the news from their political party or read materials that align with their views, Danielle was more likely to read materials and listen to information that spans political parties. It was interesting to her to observe how they cover the same topic so differently. This practice helped her understand her views and the views of others with greater clarity and allowed her to engage with people whose opinions differ from her own. That being the case, Danielle avoided discussion of politics and religion in the workplace because these topics are more sensitive in the current political climate.

Danielle's current role at the university caused her to reflect often on the notion of representation, specifically that when one is connected to the university, community members and others may view your actions and viewpoints as a representation of the actions and viewpoints of the university. Wanting to represent the university favorably, Danielle remained constantly aware of her speech and actions and what they communicate to the public about Southeast State University. Furthermore, she remained vigilant with other staff and students to ensure that they understand the implications of their speech and behavior. Danielle shared that she counsels students to "remember who they represent" while acknowledging that they are adults and can make their own decisions. According to Danielle, conversations with students used to be much easier because students primarily represented family and their school. Students now also represent followers with social media platforms, which she believed has caused a shift in personal values and knowing who and what you represent.

As we discussed self-censorship, Danielle described her perspective that self-censorship applies to speech and may come into play with how individuals dress, what events they choose to

support, and even how they represent themselves on social media. In highly visible roles, people tend to watch and assess or judge one's speech and actions. Danielle's unique perspective reflected how she delicately navigates politically charged situations on campus. Furthermore, this definition informed how she tried to be mindful of how her words and actions might benefit or harm the university.

Danielle found herself self-censoring by minimizing personal views and emphasizing the university's values. Danielle was very aware that events on campus had both internal and external ramifications. People were looking to her to provide guidance, requiring her to carefully and strategically choose how to best speak about sensitive issues. As such, Danielle viewed self-censorship as a necessary tool. As a university representative, Danielle felt loyal to the university. She sometimes chose to put aside her viewpoints and consider what would maintain the university's image and what would preserve its reputation and relationships.

Dustin

At the time of our interviews, Dustin had over 20 years of higher education experience and over 12 years at Southeast State University. As a former adjunct professor and current mid-level staff member or administrator, Dustin had a passion for helping students navigate successfully their university experience. He brought positive energy to his division, where he supervised staff members who work daily to mentor and direct students in need of additional support and encouragement.

When asked to expound on his political views, Dustin described how he was, even in his late 20s, unfamiliar with the distinction between political parties. Though he considered himself moderately religious, earlier in his life, when he was very religious, Dustin often thought, "What would Jesus do?" as a guide to determining what he would and would not support. For a long time, he described himself as "middle of the road" and shared that "the reason we've got two

parties is because they both have good ideas." In our current political climate, Dustin identified more with being a liberal, partly because of the evolution of his beliefs regarding issues of identity and sexuality. These topics have become more significant to Dustin in recent years. He wanted to be known for helping students feel comfortable being their authentic selves "and celebrating them for it."

As a leader, Dustin described himself as a "bridge-builder" across points of difference, a task which "has been harder to do the last six years" due to the current political climate. During my discussions with Dustin, a recurring theme was his value of professionalism and his livelihood as a university employee. When it came to controversial topics or topics with which he disagreed, he self-censored because, as he casually noted during his first interview, "I'm not sure that me espousing my opinions on things is accomplishing my professional task." During our time together, Dustin repeatedly emphasized the importance of his livelihood, "how hard it is to get a job," and what would happen to his family and his life if he were to lose his job. His livelihood has served as the major motivator for Dustin to be mindful of how he uses his voice on campus.

When asked to describe his understanding of self-censorship, Dustin explained that it is "choosing not to fully communicate, and it may be selective in terms of what I do communicate." Additionally, he described self-censorship as "choosing to withhold communication that would be a more true and honest opinion of things." Like other interview participants, Dustin's framing of self-censorship informed the meaning he made of his self-censorship experience. Dustin shared an occasion when he self-censored around a topic that received a lot of attention from the Tennessee state legislature related to diversity and inclusion issues. He disapproved of the language university officials chose to use in statements they released publicly about the topic for two key reasons: 1) He supported the students' right to free expression, despite the opposition of

the state legislature, and 2) With free expression, he drew the line at hostile and threatening speech and viewed the university's actions as perpetuating harm. He thought the university's language denigrated and further marginalized certain groups of students.

Though he was not connected to individuals charged with responding to the incidents on campus, he remained silent about the issue even among colleagues because he was "cognizant of how one conversation can lead to another, and you can wind up being quoted or misquoted." Dustin knew that his opinion was part of the majority; he knew that other colleagues shared his views relative to the topic. And yet, he chose to self-censor to protect his reputation and livelihood. He feared that leadership "would have formed an impression" of him that he did not want them to have had he been more vocal.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth was a current mid-level staff member or administrator and tenured faculty member with over 15 years of higher education experience who assisted faculty and students with research opportunities within and beyond the university setting. Outside of this role, she also was a scholar within her discipline and engaged with communities whose culture and practices were distinct from her own. Her work within these communities greatly influenced her interactions with faculty and students and taught her a profound respect for others, the importance of meaningful communication across areas of difference, and the value of human relationships.

Elizabeth viewed free expression as "the right to think and/or express a very wide range of opinions or thoughts or practices or even falsities;" however, according to her, "that does not mean that that right never has a corresponding guardrail around it." According to Elizabeth, a "social contract" exists for members of a campus community that obligated them to "consider the rights and the feelings and the impact of [our] words on the human beings with whom [we] share

[our] work life." Elizabeth saw the value in free expression as a principle that allows individuals within a campus community to "be reflective human beings" and "evaluate different perspectives, different frameworks, and different points of view." However, as an individual and scholar who values diversity and inclusion, Elizabeth supported efforts "to create a campus environment that is safe and secure where all of our student body feels that they matter and belong." Elizabeth attributed her work with colleagues who are likewise committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion as "a very large part of my happiness and contentment being here."

Elizabeth characterized herself as not religious and liberal. During our first interaction, she described herself as a naturally private person who cautiously approaches discussions unless she is outside the workplace environment and among friends with whom she has a well-established relationship. She explained how she "never want[s] to do something that shuts down a potential collaboration or relationship." Continuing, she described how "sharing details about your political commitment or especially religious commitment could create in the people you're working with a perception of your bias...of how you're going to view them or how you're going to treat them." As we discussed self-censorship, Elizabeth expressed that self-censorship could be a positive tool to deemphasize one's desire or need to be at the center to listen to and internalize the experiences of others. Elizabeth saw this choice as critical to her relational work on campus and in cultures outside of her own. She reconciled her choice to self-censor on occasion by remembering that this is the work she has chosen to do and that this choice requires her to, at times, put aside personal values to align with professional and ethical responsibilities inherent to her role as an educator and mediator.

Elizabeth's definition of self-censorship reflected how she distinguished personal and professional speech. She described it as "the choice about what and where to communicate which pieces of information related to your own beliefs, feelings, experiences or other kinds of

identity markers." Elizabeth frequently separated personal beliefs from professional responsibilities in her current role. She described her preferences for or views about organizations that fund certain types of research. Sometimes students or faculty members would come to her seeking to participate in research with which she may personally disagree. Rather than share personal views about the types of research for which she would or would not personally advocate–even if students and faculty were to inquire–she focused instead on her professional responsibility to support students and faculty in their research endeavors. She consciously tried not to influence their decisions so that they could maintain autonomy in pursuit of their goals and interests.

Kayla

Kayla described herself as slightly religious with liberal political views on the background survey. During our time together, she steered away from discussing religion and focused on political perspectives and how complex higher education politics have become in recent years. With almost five years of experience in higher education and as a support staff member, she has observed some of the complexities around campus free expression during her short time at Southeast State University. She described higher education as a "super interesting microcosm" where instructors have academic freedom to teach and conduct research and students have space to explore new ideas and face individuals who disagree with their perspectives. As she discussed free speech in higher education, she explained her perspective that "I'm not sure we as a society have figured out how to navigate that" because universities also have codes of conduct and behavioral expectations for students and employees.

Kayla self-disclosed that she is part of the LGBT community and participates in queer advocacy efforts on campus. Within the LGBT community, she revealed that she often feels like she is on the outside and that her "opinion and [her] experiences aren't valid because they're not

queer enough." When asked to participate in convenings where the needs of LGBT students or LGBT programming are discussed, she said she frequently wonders, "If they really look at me, what are they going to see and will they want my input?" Her experience of "otherness" is particularly poignant when she perceives she is the new person in the group representing her office. Kayla was well-spoken, thoughtful, and open during our conversations. Still, she expressed a hesitancy and feeling of disempowerment regarding her contribution in group settings where there was potential conflict or disagreement. In these interactions, Kayla was usually afraid to speak up and preferred to disengage.

Kayla's reaction to high-stress interactions was a response that extended beyond the workplace. During her first interview, she discussed her upbringing:

> I grew up with a parent that was very reactive and kind of extreme, and so I grew up being very careful about the words that I say, and it like started with, 'I don't want to get in trouble, and I don't know how she's gonna respond to things.' But from that it grew into, 'I don't want to be one of those people, right?' I want to make sure that the words I say, are the words that I mean and that I want to stand by.

As a non-confrontational individual, Kayla believed in avoiding harmful speech, being kind and considerate of others, and giving people the opportunity to find their voice.

According to Kayla, self-censorship is "where you have something that's like, on the tip of your tongue that you feel contributes to a conversation, and you hold it back…for whatever reason that is...it's definitely like having something to say and not sharing it." Kayla has had numerous experiences where she wanted to contribute and instead self-censored; however, she chose to share a recent experience while serving on a committee at Southeast State University. As part of her work with diversity and inclusion on campus, she was asked to participate on a committee where she could represent the viewpoints and needs of a particular campus group that

I have chosen to keep anonymous to protect Kayla's identity. During the first meeting, the committee began with basic introductions. It became clear to Kayla that several committee members already knew each other and perhaps had already served together in different capacities. She immediately felt like the new person. One of the committee's primary tasks was to develop survey instruments. Because of the complex history of the target audience, Kayla wanted the opportunity to share her input regarding the wording of specific survey questions because the questions already developed were "all very adversarial...like they weren't collaborative." Kayla wanted to speak up but chose to self-censor because she needed time to consider the best way to communicate her concerns with the committee chair. She didn't want to "burn any bridges with this new group of people [she] was trying to collaborate with."

LeeAnn

LeeAnn had over a decade of higher education experience and has provided IT support as a data analyst within her division at Southeast State University for several years. LeeAnn characterized herself as slightly religious and conservative, though she did not reveal more details about her personal beliefs in these areas during our discussion. Relative to workplace interactions, she explained that "you don't talk about politics unless you want to stir something up. And, you know, don't talk about religion, except in a vague way." Avoiding certain topics of discussion suited LeeAnn, who described herself as someone who likes to observe others rather than be front and center. As a naturally reserved person, LeeAnn was more likely to share opinions and viewpoints among individuals with whom she has a personal relationship. According to her, there is less self-censorship "in smaller groups when you know people and have relationships."

When asked to share her views on free expression in higher education during our second interview, LeeAnn shared that free expression allows people to voice their opinions publicly. She

supported the notion that this is “an important part of everyone’s growth in education,” even if there is sometimes discomfort as we hear opinions and perspectives with which we may personally disagree. As LeeAnn and I discussed the climate relative to free expression at Southeast State University, she shared her observation that “higher education says it’s free and open; you know, people can express their opinions freely without fear of retribution or whatever. I don’t think we quite live up to the ideal.” According to LeeAnn, the organizational structure and hierarchy within higher education, mainly when there was not strong leadership, negatively impacted team dynamics and stifled the speech of individuals performing in crucial roles. LeeAnn often felt she had to self-censor in her current position and saw this as a missed opportunity for growth. Furthermore, she felt hindered from asking questions or engaging in an open discussion about work-related issues because of her current office dynamics.

For LeeAnn, self-censorship meant holding back what you think is true “because you are concerned about repercussions.” As she expounded on this definition, she shared that she has been mainly concerned with the work hierarchy and negative repercussions “from higher up the food chain” and being perceived as someone who is not a team player or “one of us.” She worried that openly expressing viewpoints would damage her chances for advancement.

When I asked LeeAnn to share an experience when she self-censored a viewpoint while in a professional setting at Southeast State University, she responded, “I had difficulty thinking of an example because it seems to be a continuous state.” She shared a recent experience while providing feedback on candidates who had interviewed for an open position within her organization. She was pleased that her manager requested her honest feedback; however, she hesitated because she felt strongly about evaluating candidates based on merit. Furthermore, she sensed that her supervisor and colleagues were more focused on taking equal opportunity to an extreme because of their respective views about diversity and inclusion. LeeAnn clarified that

this was an opinion she would never discuss openly with anyone at work. She worried that the document she was asked to submit would be linked to her through her email account or that others would identify her feedback based on her handwriting if she chose to submit a printed copy. She self-censored her written feedback because she feared the potential negative repercussions of giving her honest opinion and evaluating the three candidates. She acknowledged that she may have been incorrect to perceive there would be negative repercussions before concluding with, "But I know the organization I work in."

Marlena

As a mid-level staff member or administrator with almost three decades as a Southeast State University employee, Marlena has been with the university through many periods of transition and change. At the time of our interviews, she supervised other staff members, interacted with college faculty, and frequently engaged directly with students. Throughout our discussion, it was clear that she saw her role as a job and stewardship. As she talked about working with students, she said, "They have a mom at home and a mom on campus." She valued her relationships with students, wanted them to succeed, and was available to provide them the guidance they needed as they navigate their college experience.

Of the 15 interview participants, Marlena was the only person who identified as both conservative and very religious. Religion and politics were very connected for Marlena, who brought up her beliefs very naturally during our two interviews. She did not force her beliefs on others. She respected non-Christians or individuals with contrasting political perspectives, though she openly lamented the "demise of a conservative, Christian viewpoint on campus." She wore a cross to work "mainly so that if students bring it up or students wants to ask [her] something," they know they can. She wished there were a happy medium with religion on campus and did not feel we have yet reached that place.

Though Marlena hinted at some self-censorship around politics and religion, the experience she chose to share which "pop[ped] in [her] mind right away" when she considered participating in my research was related to the global pandemic and certain choices and conversations she has had to navigate as a mid-level staff member who supervises several other staff members. As a supervisor, Marlena learned the importance of leading from the middle during the pandemic, perhaps more than during previous transition periods in her role. She learned how to separate personal opinions from professional responsibilities when discussing COVID-19 protocols, flexible work schedules, vaccination, and many other relevant themes over the past two years. She handled these conversations delicately with leadership above her as she advocated for the team she supervises and among team members relative to their viewpoints. This experience provided both discomfort and growth. Though Marlena was prone to self-censorship naturally, she reconciled this decision by learning to separate personal values and viewpoints from what is required of her professionally. However, she wished we lived in less tumultuous times.

Regina

Regina was a mid-level staff member and supervisor who worked in public relations and marketing. Her primary responsibility was to promote the university through social media and other forms of communication. Her role at the university kept her attuned to free speech-related concerns across Southeast State University and the public's reaction to campus occurrences.

Regina has become very familiar with the university's responsibilities regarding free speech during her time in higher education. Because of her role–and both positive and negative responses to how the university represents itself publicly–she understood the politics of working for a public institution and how the university must operate within certain legal boundaries. She wished there was more the university could do to prohibit certain types of speech; however, she

valued free expression. When discussing social media and the parameters within which she operates, she clarified that “just because we don’t like something doesn’t mean we can delete it.” She acknowledged that some things are “hurtful to our community and it’s hurtful to a lot of other members of our audience, but they’re really not breaking any rules or laws and I don’t get to delete it just because I want to.”

Politically, Regina characterized herself as liberal. She attended a Southern Baptist college for her bachelor’s degree and grew up in a religious family. However, when asked to describe where she fell on a religious spectrum, she chose “not religious.” During her first interview, she clarified that even though she is not religious in the traditional sense, she does have her own beliefs and considers herself a “person with faith” despite not “subscrib[ing] to any specific denomination.” Regina grew up outside Tennessee in a very politically and religiously diverse area. She had a deep regard for differences of belief and did not want others to feel like “outsiders” when they misaligned with the majority. This perspective influenced her interactions in the workplace, though, on principle, she tended to avoid religious conversations in the workplace and political discussions when possible.

Regina described herself as someone who was not one to be “silent on [her] views.” Instead, she chose when it was appropriate to “weigh in on the conversation.” She was motivated to be a good employee: “I do think that I’m good at [my job], and I want other people to think that I’m good at it.” For Regina, being good at her job required her to separate personal from professional opinions to fulfill her responsibilities and be a good representative of the university. She reconciled this separation because her personal opinions were not work-related.

When asked to define self-censorship, Regina described it as “making sure that the things I’m saying or the ways in which I’m expressing myself are appropriate for our broader audience.” She went on to share the context for her self-censorship over a period. Regina’s role

required her to represent the university neutrally. Thus, she described how there is typically self-censoring around politics, particularly during an election season. During the 2016 election, Regina and other employees in public relations stayed informed of political protests on campus. University employees–with exception–and students were not on campus at specific points of the pandemic, which limited political activity on campus more so than in previous political elections. However, Regina noticed that colleagues self-censored more during this last election than during previous ones. She explained, "I didn't want to make anyone else feel uncomfortable, or really like you don't want someone to think differently of you if you have different leanings in those areas." Regina described that, with few exceptions, she was much more guarded during this time and much more consciously put personal views to the side.

Rosie

Rosie was a support staff member with less than five years of higher education experience as a data analyst who provided research support within her division. She began working for Southeast State University during the pandemic, a transition which she described as "easier than moving during *not* a pandemic because I have no fear of missing out." However, Rosie discussed the pandemic's impact on integrating into the university and developing relationships with her new supervisor and colleagues. At her previous institution, she engaged with her colleagues regularly and usually in person, which created a deeper personal connection. Naturally, as she developed relationships with colleagues, she became familiar with their opinions and viewpoints. She knew when she could "push back on things" because she knew how to relate to them. Contrastingly, Rosie's integration into Southeast State University has occurred principally via Zoom and other technologies. At the time of her interviews, all Rosie's interactions with her supervisor and others who worked in her division had only been virtual. Her knowledge of organizational structure was also limited due to the short time she had been a

support staff member at Southeast State University and because she had yet to have on-campus experience.

Rosie described herself as outspoken, though the lack of in-person engagement, being a relatively new employee, and being aware of some regional political differences between her former and current place of residence, caused her to self-censor with greater frequency. Relative to politics in the United States, she characterized her views as far left; on the entire political spectrum, she described herself as liberal. When asked to explain if religion and politics influenced her decision to self-censor, Rosie clarified that she does not self-censor around religion because "[she] is not religious." Self-censorship tended to be a better choice for Rosie around political issues because of the influence politics has on higher education.

Though not a faculty or administrator, Rosie had a strong understanding of the role of free expression on a university campus. As a data analyst who worked with faculty members, Rosie was a strong advocate of academic freedom and freedom of expression for staff, administrators, and students. She did, however, recognize that free expression "becomes more complicated" for administrators because they are both university leaders and public figures who represent the university.

Rosie described self-censorship as "biting my tongue." She went on to elaborate that self-censorship is a decision that one chooses when "you sort of feel like [you] really want to say something, but it's either not [your] place, or it's not going to be received well." That inner feedback has led her to the decision to "keep [her] mouth shut." She believed that there had been an increase in self-censorship because of how politicized discussions on college campuses had become. At the time of our interview, Rosie shared how she was actively avoiding an email in her inbox that required her attention. A leader in her division decided to plan an in-person event with faculty and staff during the pandemic. This leader asked for confirmation of attendance

from people within their area. Up to that point, Rosie had been extremely cautious about the pandemic and monitored the increasing COVID-19 numbers in the area. She did not feel safe attending an in-person event and grappled with how to communicate her hesitancy best. She was afraid that it would reflect negatively on her as a newer employee or her division if she chose not to participate; however, she did not know if she could express her concerns. Rosie felt uncomfortable that leadership was selecting this approach to the event without consulting her and others. She knew she was not alone in her fears about meeting in person. Ultimately, she self-censored her concerns and decided she had no other choice but to attend. The cost of not attending outweighed the benefit of openly expressing her views.

Sean

During Sean's first interview, we quickly discovered that we both recently read "The Coddling of the American Mind" by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018). In this book, the authors explored how overprotection from ideas on college and university campuses is setting up current students for failure. Though we shared different political and religious viewpoints, Sean and I bonded over our mutual interest in free speech and viewpoint diversity as critical elements of higher education. Sean was exceptionally well-read; when I asked what I perceived were simple, straightforward questions, he responded by answering my questions and adding historical and other details to provide a richer context for his responses.

Sean had over 25 years of higher education experience and had spent most of his career since completing his master's degree at Southeast State University. He was a mid-level staff member who supervised a small team. His primary responsibilities were to work with faculty and other scholars within the university and set a strategic vision for his division to "keep pace with technological and communications change" within his area of expertise. University leadership recently integrated Sean and his team into a different university area that included new

supervision. This transition, coupled with changes during the pandemic, made this a time of immense change and adjustment, though Sean was very optimistic about what laid ahead for him and his team.

Sean identified with far-left politics, though he described himself as "sort of a libertarian socialist" who believed, like John Locke, that "human beings are basically good, and if left to their own devices, they would eventually form associations and figure out how to not have an oppressive government." He loved liberty and saw the value of engaging with individuals who hold different viewpoints; however, he supported "some restrictions on free speech," mainly when speech is used to inflame and does not add any real value to the university environment. According to Sean, "free speech isn't really free speech if all you're doing is emoting." Beyond just reacting, it requires engaging.

Regarding speech within the classroom, Sean believed "there needs to be a way for teachers and students to have an exchange about things that are potentially controversial or that challenge students and challenge professors to teach better." He described free speech in higher education as "really a good thing." In terms of religious practice, Sean identified as moderately religious, though he did not elaborate more on his religious beliefs and preferences during our discussion.

Sean defined self-censorship as "suppressing an initial impulse you might have to respond to a particular issue." As he saw it, self-censorship could then be either positive or negative. As we began to discuss self-censorship, Sean described the last couple of years as generally difficult; however, he said he has not "had to self-censor [himself] very often" compared to those who hold higher administrative positions. He characterized the higher education climate as "markedly more polarized since the Trump era," therefore, a more

significant issue for him than self-censorship was recognizing that "[he is] not really open to people who have dramatically different viewpoints than [he does]."

When asked to share a recent self-censorship experience with me, Sean described a recent conflict of interest he experienced. A ranking administrator asked him to complete a task involving a well-known retired faculty member at Southeast State University. Sean felt pressure to complete the task at the administrator's request and produce a particular outcome, even though this would require him to put aside professional standards within his area of expertise. In similar circumstances, Sean would have immediately turned down the task and explained his reasoning; however, "because of the power dynamic that was in place," he self-censored and agreed to take on the job. At the time of our interview, Sean had not yet followed up with the administrator. However, he was preparing to share an outcome that differed from the original expectations of the administrator.

Spencer

Spencer was a tenured faculty member in his discipline and current top-level college or university administrator supervising faculty and staff within his division. He has industry experience, over three decades of higher education experience, and roughly a decade at Southeast State University. As a faculty member and administrator, Spencer viewed his primary responsibilities as "learning from others" and "enabling the success of others." One-on-one, Spencer was engaging and well-spoken. We spoke of religion, politics, economics, and other relevant topics within the context of my research and his professional and personal background. When he discussed theories, philosophies, or different themes which he has spent time pondering, he vocally explored the nuances and provided excellent insight into complex topics.

When asked to elaborate on his political views, Spencer described the complexities of choosing a political identity. Spencer was an active participant within his religious community,

which tended to lean more conservative, though he leaned "a little bit to the left" and classified himself as a moderate.

While teaching at a church-affiliated university one summer, he was sure he was labeled as a "flaming liberal" by some of the students. Among public figures with which he sometimes interacts, he has grown accustomed to the perspective that "Trump is a smart guy." Though he did not share this perspective, he "has never engaged in these conversations." Spencer acknowledged the complexities around certain topics (abortion is one of the topics he mentioned during his first interview) and said, "I don't know that there's anything that I tend to avoid in a conversation." This reaction is especially true among individuals with which he has developed a close relationship and positive rapport. During my interactions with Spencer, I noted his ability to take a topic with complex political and religious components and dissect the issue, showing how each way of viewing the topic has validity. In this context, "moderate" seems like an apt political label.

I asked Spencer to describe himself some of his most stable, defining characteristics. He highlighted how he "tr[ies] to associate with organizations that [he] has a natural affinity to." Though he has had a successful career as a leader in higher education, he did not "have a great need to be out in front and public." He viewed his role within the organization as an influencer and someone who can enable other people's success by "work[ing] the back channels." He found satisfaction in "enabling the success of others in such a way that they don't realize [he] was involved." This type of humble, non-assuming influence guided the way Spencer interacts with others on campus. Though he was not prone to self-censorship, he preferred to engage individuals with whom he disagreed in private rather than public conversations to show respect and preserve dignity. Speaking about his communication style, Spencer explained, "If I have a

strong opinion and one that's different than the leader, [or] the mainstream, I'll express that in private, as opposed to going head-to-head with somebody in a public meeting."

Spencer described self-censorship as a "situation in which one has a particularly strong view or point of view...about the topic, but then...reads the room, or has a sense of what individuals in positions of authority...what their views are on that issue." Noting a difference between one's opinion and the opinion of others may lead to the decision to "keep one's mouth shut." I asked Spencer to describe a time within the past couple of years when he self-censored in a professional setting at Southeast State University. He told me of some self-censoring that occurred as he discussed procedures around returning to the classroom with university leadership. During a certain period of the pandemic, there was a big push to return to normal university operations, which included resuming entirely face-to-face instruction. One of Spencer's concerns was that "we not lose what we gained or what we learned" during the experience of offering fully online courses, particularly when the university strategically offered specific courses online before the pandemic. Spencer held strong opinions about what was best for his division because of his perspective that it would be counterproductive to "swing the pendulum" too far back. As such, Spencer self-censored, when appropriate, in public settings and opted to share his opinions with leadership in private.

Stella

Stella was a mid-level staff member/administrator with roughly 20 years of experience in higher education. She was hired at Southeast State University less than five years ago to supervise a team in enrollment management. In terms of politics, Stella described herself as moderate, though she aligned with perspectives from both political parties. When it came to economics, she leaned more conservatively; however, she aligned more with liberal peers on topics of diversity. Though she was raised Catholic, Stella did not practice religion at the time of

our interviews. She expressed during our discussion that she "value[s] most every other religion that's out there and tr[ies] to understand it. She believed in a "higher being" and did not feel that "there's a right or wrong" way to practice religion. She believed in leaving this up to individuals.

As Stella and I got to know each other during her first interview, I asked her to share why she wanted to participate in my research and her interest in self-censorship. Stella related her experiences moving from the north to the south a few years ago, adjusting to a different way of life, and being surrounded by individuals with different political perspectives. She has felt the need to self-censor more at Southeast State University than at her previous institution and described the experience as oppressive at times.

Describing her former institution in the northern United States, Stella explained that "you're in this position because you're an expert." When collaborating with leadership, the expectation was to share the good and the bad– "what could be impeding the institution from moving forward and achieving its goals." Stella discovered that she self-censored more at Southeast State University because of the difference in state politics. She "quickly realized you don't bring up the issues." She occasionally has felt "hushed" in meetings because, according to Stella, they only want to know the good things, and they don't want anything negative to go up the tracks." This created an inner conflict for her because she has felt that it is her professional duty to lay out the "good, the bad, and the ugly" and address whatever issues exist. Unfortunately, she has observed that "those kinds of conversations are stifled."

Stella described self-censorship as "having to hold back." As we ventured into her self-censorship experience, I expected her to delve into one specific experience; however, she began with, "When do I not?" Upon further reflection, she clarified that she often speaks her mind at the university regarding her role; however, Stella also acknowledged she has also had to conform in many ways.

Like the experiences of other participants, the self-censorship experience Stella shared centered on returning to campus during the COVID-19 pandemic and adjusting to new procedures and flexible work schedules. She felt an internal struggle to know how to best advocate for her team. She considered their ideal work environment and balance with other personal responsibilities and often felt like she was self-censoring. Her goal was to "present things that [were] going to be supportive of [her] team" while "at the same time not rock the boat." Sometimes Stella felt like leadership conveyed interest in hearing concerns and other issues. Still, she noted that she and others who vocalized disagreement or concern felt compromised and that it would have been better not to speak up. Determining when to conform and when to share her perspectives was a tricky balance.

Thea

Thea was a tenured faculty member in her discipline and top-level college or university administrator with roughly four decades of higher education experience. Like other top-level college or university administrators who participated in this study, Thea supervised both faculty and staff in her role. She influenced some of the key areas impacting the student experience. Thea described her interviews as "psychological therapy sessions." She was unaccustomed to speaking so openly about her experience at Southeast State University but appreciated the opportunity to contribute to what she viewed as timely and relevant research. She expressed an eagerness to participate in my research because she was a strong proponent of free speech in higher education and had unique insight and experiences with many speech-related incidents on campus in recent years. Additionally, Thea was troubled by the amount of self-censorship that she and others experienced at Southeast State University.

As a naturally introverted person who was shy as a child and teenager, it took Thea many years to find her voice. When asked to describe the topics she tends to avoid in a professional

setting, Thea replied, “There is no topic that I’ll avoid with everybody. There are people–colleagues–that I’ll talk about anything with.” Thea tried to avoid being perceived as a problem in her current role but has been unsuccessful at times.

During our first interview, she reflected on the context of the past several years at Southeast State University. She noted that there is more political tension leading to self-censorship on campus than in previous periods of her career. According to Thea, the increased political tension she described was common across higher education. However, she thought that “when we’re talking about speech and the control of speech,” it “clearly happens here (I.e., at Southeast State University) in a way that [she] never experienced as a faculty member” at her previous institution.

Thea valued honesty, strong leadership, and consistency three principles that she believed would make her role easier. When Thea accepted her current position at Southeast State University, she was under the impression that faculty and those serving in specific administrative roles “were always free to speak about whatever they wanted to speak about within some constraints.” However, Thea experienced the contrary. She discovered that as she maneuvered from a faculty to an administrative role, her ability to speak about politics and other relevant topics diminished. She perceived a fear among university administrators that she and others who held similar positions would share too freely with external constituents. Therefore, she found that superiors counseled administrators in certain roles not to interact with state officials. The message Thea received was that you “keep your mouth shut. Period.” Being one of few female administrators among a predominantly male administrative population and of a minority religious group also has, at times, made her feel like she had to be outspoken for others to hear her.

Thea described self-censorship as coming to "a point where you realize that saying more is not going to help. It isn't going to get better. They're not going to agree with you, so you might as well just stop." Thea's perception of self-censorship was reflected in the experiences shared with me about several recent interactions and meetings with her administrative counterparts and her superiors. The organizational structure of her division, in comparison to that of her peers, was much more complex because it included a greater number of academic departments and staff offices. When her superiors made requests, her counterparts rarely, if ever, protested. She often felt isolated by her concerns because the task would require more time than anticipated or would be more complicated in other unforeseen ways than university leadership understood. She was frustrated that her counterparts did not vocalize their concerns more freely because it "ha[d] actually created the sense that it's okay to ignore the variation between us." Thea was very outspoken during her first couple of years and "got beat up so often" that "[she] gave up disagreeing with anything." She explained, "I have learned to just sit there and let them say whatever and not object because it does me no good to object." Thea reasoned it was a better strategy to self-censor and then to consider how to communicate following meetings to not be perceived as the problem.

Tristan

Tristan was an alumnus of Southeast State University who was recruited approximately five years ago to fill a mid-level staff role. With over a decade of higher education experience, his current position within a college at the university included service on committees with faculty and staff members, supervision of a small team, collaboration with recruitment and communications staff, and coordination of projects and events with a diversity and inclusion focus. In addition to his staff responsibilities over the past few years, Tristan has taught courses as an adjunct professor to undergraduate students within his college.

Tristan was not religious. When asked to elaborate on his religious perspectives, he struggled even to label himself. He said, “I don’t have a desire for that or have a need to sort of connect to or engage in that.” The desire to disengage from religious (mainly Christian) practices impacted his experience at Southeast State University, a university that still permits prayer before certain annual celebrations and sporting events. Engagements of this nature were highly uncomfortable for Tristan. He shared how he was more likely to support a Muslim or Jewish student or “speak out on their behalf” if it would “bring down the...heavy Christian overtone.”

Politically, Tristan characterized himself as liberal or progressive. He mentioned that he considered himself “active” and invested in politics. He had a background in social justice and feels committed to social justice work at Southeast State University. He sought opportunities to contribute to this work and advocated for students representing specific backgrounds who lacked a strong voice.

As a staff member and adjunct professor, Tristan learned to designate certain opinions as his own versus representative of the university when interacting with students. He supported the idea of free speech with the caveat that “it doesn’t mean it’s freedom without consequences.” Because of his work with students and his social justice-informed work, he believed that hate speech, though not legally defined, “should be restricted” and should not be tolerated by anyone on campus.

Tristan characterized self-censorship as “realizing that certain politics are at play and sort of just needing to stay within a certain box.” He added that self-censorship occurs as “an oppressive force” when “people wish they could express themselves in certain ways and don’t feel able to do that.” Though Tristan is naturally outspoken, he alluded to having had several experiences at Southeast State University where he felt compelled to self-censor as a tactic to avoid adverse outcomes. He shared an ongoing experience that has caused him some internal

angst. His supervisor asked him to attend college faculty meetings to stay informed of all information within the college to aid with planning. There have been times in these meetings when faculty or other staff have asked Tristan to take on a task exclusively for faculty, so he has typically declined. Other times he has volunteered to participate in certain efforts–mainly related to diversity and inclusion–and has not been permitted to participate because of his role as a staff member. In addition to unclear expectations for his participation in these meetings, he has found himself "only sharing maybe 10%" of what he could contribute because of "the egos of the faculty members" and his fear of jumping in. Tristan shared, "I find myself constantly thinking, 'Just don't say it. It doesn't matter.'"

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a profile of each university staff member and administrator who participated in this study. Each profile consisted of a description of each participant, how they generally defined self-censorship, and a brief illustration of their self-censorship experiences. Participants in this study were generally left-leaning or liberal in their political beliefs and not specifically religious. Most had over 20 years of experience in higher education and ten years or less at Southeast State University. The majority of participants were mid-level staff members or administrators at the time of their interviews. In subsequent chapters, I will present my findings relative to how university staff and administrators made meaning of their self-censorship experiences and the role of campus policies and speech-related incidents to create this response on campus.

Preface

In Chapters 1 to 3 of this research study, I argued that self-censorship is a free speech issue and threatens higher education's overall mission and purpose. I designed my research protocols and conducted interviews with university staff and administrators, anticipating that I would discover a strong link between free speech and self-censorship. My analysis of the data through the *a priori* themes in Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework revealed similar findings to some of the legal perspectives I included in my literature review and showed some connection to free speech and self-censorship. However, a secondary analysis using open coding revealed several emergent themes that demonstrated self-censorship in higher education beyond free speech.

The emergent themes I discovered through this secondary coding strategy are not speech-related but describe workplace attitudes and conditions that influence self-censorship in a higher education setting. In contrast to the legal perspectives shared in the literature relative to self-censorship, the emergent themes align with the contributions of self-censorship scholars from other disciplines, including communication, psychology, and education. Consideration of the factors influencing self-censorship through both *a priori* and emergent themes creates a more holistic understanding of why university staff and administrators choose to self-censor.

These unexpected findings led me to deviate from the traditional dissertation format. To aid the reader, given the length and depth of my research, I reorganized my findings into three chapters. Chapter 5 contains *a priori* themes (e.g., individual characteristics, context, type of information, and circumstantial factors) linked to Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework. In Chapter 6, I describe emergent themes. I identified four emergent themes through open coding: power dynamics, workplace relationships, avoidance of negative outcomes and labels, and

professionalism. Combined, both chapters answer my first research question: *How do university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience?* In Chapter 7, I integrate *a priori* and emergent themes to answer my second research question: *How do campus policies and attitudes, and responses toward speech on campus influence the decision self-censor?* First, I highlight participants' understanding and attitudes toward free speech in higher education. Second, I analyze the self-censorship decision-making process by synthesizing four participants' experiences across *a priori* and emergent themes.

In Chapter 8, I discuss my findings, propose a new model and broader definition for self-censorship in higher education, and share recommendations for future self-censorship research. My overarching goal in expanding my findings is to help the reader connect certain themes from my literature review to my research findings and holistically understand how university staff and administrators experience self-censorship. I believe these tasks can be best accomplished by viewing self-censorship as speech-related *and* workplace-related issues rather than maintaining a stronger focus on the connection between free speech and self-censorship.

Chapter 5: *A Priori* Themes

This qualitative study aimed to understand how university staff and administrators who chose to self-censor described and made meaning of their experience and to explore how policies and campus responses to speech influenced their decisions to self-censor. In this chapter, I present the significant thematic findings in alignment with the first research question through the lens of Bar-Tal's (2017) conceptual framework for self-censorship:

1. How do university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience?

Bar-Tal's framework presents four key factors that influence one's decision to self-censor: 1) individual characteristics, 2) context, 3) type of information, and 4) circumstantial factors. As part of my interview protocol, I included questions that allowed participants to expound on how these factors influenced their decision to self-censor within the context of the experiences they shared with me. Table 5.1 contains an overview of themes, sub-themes, and associated concepts aligned with Bar-Tal's conceptual framework.

Theme 1: Individual Characteristics

In Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework, individual characteristics represent values, personality traits, social status, attitudes, behavioral intentions, and worldview. During each participant's first interview, I asked them to comment on whether they were prone to self-censorship and clarify how stable characteristics or personality traits that were innate to them as individuals may have influenced their decision to self-censor in the experience they shared. Furthermore, throughout both interviews, each participant freely discussed their attitudes and values and highlighted aspects of their worldview. Since there is overlap, I will address these themes with greater specificity in the emergent themes section.

Table 5.1: A Summary of *A Priori* Themes, Sub-Themes, and Associated Concepts

***A Priori* Themes**	**Sub-Themes**	**Associated Concepts**
1. Individual Characteristics	A Natural Tendency to Outspokenness	
	A Preference for Self-Censorship	
	Value Congruency	
2. Context	Macro Context	
	Micro Context	Community context; campus context
	Macro and Micro Contexts in Small Groups	Topics to avoid and topics that are comfortable to discuss in divisions, small groups, and among individuals
3. Type of Information		
4. Circumstantial Factors	The Medium of Communication	
	Timing	
	Level of Involvement	

A Natural Tendency Toward Outspokenness

Eight participants described themselves as individuals with a natural inclination to be outspoken about their viewpoints and beliefs. Danielle described herself as a naturally direct person and commented on her experience growing up as a coach's daughter. She acclimated to an environment of directness while also being exposed to a variety of viewpoints. In many regards, her upbringing shaped how she engages with various constituents–members of the community, the media, faculty, staff, students, and administrators–and has helped her learn to navigate difficult conversations productively and respectfully. Danielle continued: "I've learned just to sometimes let somebody talk, and you find out a lot about them, and then you can see which way you're going to go from there."

Likewise, Regina shared how she is prone to share viewpoints and opinions. She often has allowed her respect for others and the settings in which she interacts professionally to dictate her level of openness. Regina is not silent about sharing viewpoints, though she expressed a desire to not make others feel uncomfortable or disrespected. She is also motivated to use her voice wisely out of professional responsibility.

> I never want anyone to think that my opinions sort of outside of work are going to impact my work. I guess that's something that I feel strongly about...like I really like my job. I do think that I'm good at it, and I want other people to think that I'm good at it. I want to be seen as someone who cares about their work.

When asked to describe himself, Sean shared how he is not particularly prone to self-censorship. I was curious to hear more about this and asked him to continue. He elaborated:

> Generally speaking, I do think that I am willing to offer my opinion. I may not be the first person to jump in with an opinion, but if I think something hasn't been expressed, I won't generally be afraid to do that.

Though inclined to share his opinions and values, Sean described his self-censorship as a "strategic tool." According to him, "sometimes it's better to listen first and hear what people are saying and that gives you an opportunity to gauge whether your first impression was really the right one."

Tristan characterized himself in similar terms when asked to describe himself as an individual within the context of self-censorship.

> My willingness is always there. If you ask my opinion about something and I think that it's wrong, I'll tell you it's wrong. Or, you know, if I think that we're not promoting rights in a certain way, or if someone is saying something that's homophobic or racist, like I don't mind to call that out.

Tristan, though prone to speak up when the university is "not promoting rights in a certain way," like Sean, strategically considered when and how he to vocalize his viewpoints to produce a favorable outcome.

In like manner, Cooper was acutely conscious of the risks that attend speech in professional contexts, though he recognized his tendency to offer his input without much hesitancy.

> I was always *that* student. In the course of my doctoral program, I had mentors who would advise me to shut up in ways that were political to some extent, in the sense that 'you don't want to be that loud person. You don't want to be someone who's known for saying things in this way.' And so, in my professional life, I kind of oscillate back and forth. I will be the person in the meeting who talks a lot, and I'll share opinions and offer advice. I have to kind of make sure that I don't do that too much just so I don't annoy people.

Though he usually has been unafraid to interact in professional settings, Cooper has learned to pick up on nuances that help him determine when best to speak and when it would be better to refrain.

Three participants described their frustration with choosing to self-censor because withholding viewpoints or values or disengaging from conversation goes against their nature. Interestingly, each of these participants previously worked at universities in the northern United States that were more supportive of left-leaning viewpoints and fostered a speech environment that was, according to Stella, less oppressive. Stella said, "I will say I've always probably been an outspoken person. I think I've learned more about self-censoring, more so here." Rosie also shared:

> I tend to, within reason, sort of voice my opinions and make myself heard. It's not a super common thing that I find myself self-censoring, but I have a lot more at [Southeast State University] also because I'm an at-will employee.

As an employee who began working at the university during the pandemic and has had little opportunity to develop relationships with colleagues, Rosie's tendency toward outspokenness has been less pronounced because of the newness of professional associations, her status as an at-will employee, and a difference in state politics.

During her first interview, Thea spoke of her life growing up in a family with one sister and four brothers and described herself as a shy child who eventually found her courage to speak more. Despite being one of the few women in a discipline dominated by men, she discovered that deep down she had something to contribute. In this environment, she learned to assert her viewpoints. Reflecting on the lessons she has learned while finding her voice, she said:

> I mean, it's like my whole life I feel like I've been fighting to be seen and heard for the things I actually care about. I have a strong sense of what's fair and just...and have since I was young.

Like Rosie and Stella, Thea cannot help but compare her experience at Southeast State University–where she has "been told that [she] could not or should not speak about things"–to former institutions that allowed her greater freedom to lead and influence.

A Preference for Self-Censorship

The remaining participants expressed a natural preference for or inclination to self-censor not only as a communication tactic but as an individual characteristic. Three participants attributed their self-censorship to their preference for privacy and not a choice stemming from fear. Marlena preferred to keep her Christian values private by nature, though she was open to sharing her faith with colleagues and students who inquired about her background and beliefs. Camilla distinguished between her personal and professional life as a former researcher and faculty member. She explained her private nature, "Sharing data is more comfortable for me. Sharing feelings is not because...that's a very personal thing. My family teases me all the time because they say they don't know what's going on inside my head." As a faculty member and researcher who has worked with many groups outside of her own culture, Elizabeth has grown accustomed to self-censoring out of professional necessity. Moreover, she has used self-censorship as a tool to connect with individuals from communities outside of her own.

> I am [prone to self-censor]. And I think that comes from a lifetime of working in between communities I'm not quite a part of. If you're going to inhabit that sort of interstitial space, you're going to learn really quickly that a really important skill is to shut up and listen to hear what the communities you're serving have to say about their experience. I

> think there's something important about the work we do with other human beings, where we see them without having to insert ourselves as the topic or the center of attention.

Similar to Camilla, Elizabeth was naturally a private person who was not likely to discuss certain personal matters or viewpoints unless she was beyond a professional setting. She added that she would be guarded about certain viewpoints unless she was with familiar individuals whose opinions she knew well, and they knew hers. Elizabeth described the environment in which open interactions were more likely to occur with individuals she knew well: "We've already established that there can be a free exchange of ideas or communication in a safe way."

Though several participants might be described as introverted or quiet, Spencer was, in my estimation, the most soft-spoken and reserved of the group. He valued honesty and integrity, "but [he] also consciously strive[s] to not be brutally honest." Reflecting on himself as an individual and on his role as a top-level university administrator, the "underlying philosophy is that [he] should do everything [he] possibly can to support [his] rank and file leader." For Spencer, that means that he was not often the one to offer his viewpoints or opinions voluntarily.

> In [meetings], I typically am not very...vocal. I'll give my opinion if directly called upon, or, you know, I often kind of listen for a long time and then weigh in towards the end of the conversation, as opposed to being kind of the active protagonist...upfront.

Though Dustin naturally favored keeping his worldview and values to himself, especially when he was not sure that espousing personal opinions was going to accomplish the professional task at hand. Doug, however, expressed that he was evolving with time and was becoming more open to expressing personal viewpoints in the workplace. Though naturally inclined to self-censor, this change has occurred gradually during his higher education career.

> I think for the longest time, I wouldn't have spoken up about anything. I mean, I'll speak up a lot on things that are unifying topics. If a room is negative, I will try to bring out the positive.

Despite the caution with which he approached his speech in the workplace overall, in recent years, Dustin has become more motivated to discuss topics and conversations he finds personally relevant, such as issues impacting the LGBTQ community. Growing up, Dustin said he had a "counterculture mind" because "[he] was the only one who talked about Jesus" while also confused as to why topics like sex and homosexuality were not discussed more openly across Christianity. When they were examined, it was not in a favorable way. As a father and staff member who works closely with students, he said, "I'm involved and evolving as a person."

Kayla also felt influenced by her experience in the present. Growing up around a parent who was very reactive engendered a sense of caution around her speech. Reflecting on the present, she shared: "When I find myself in situations where a conversation is moving quickly, or people are heated, I definitely am less likely to jump in." Kayla was not a confrontational person and was less likely to speak up in stressful interactions if no one was being harmed. She sometimes lamented that she ass not always quick to advocate for something important to her where, according to her, she could have made a difference. She said she sometimes felt paralyzed during confrontation or conflict. Kayla would, however, let others know if a topic was upsetting or if she did not have the knowledge to engage.

LeeAnn's friend called her "the analyst" because she tended to overanalyze. She believed her propensity for over-analysis influenced her choice to self-censor because she considered a variety of possibilities that could arise based on what she chose to express: "Well, if I say *this*, then *this* will happen, which might not be true." LeeAnn naturally preferred to "sit back and

observe until [she got] more information about a situation or about a person." LeeAnn believed she may be misunderstood in a professional setting because she can appear to be withdrawn or disinterested. She recognized that others may misinterpret her lack of engagement, so she clarified what is happening in her mind: "It might appear that I am detached or not involved, but I'm just gathering information."

Value Congruency

Several participants were motivated to openly share their opinions during a discussion when they perceived alignment with their values. Participants in such circumstances were more motivated to express value alignment and thus self-censored with less frequency. Some participants overtly spoke of congruency with values, while others discussed their values by describing topics or circumstances about which they are passionate.

A core value guiding Thea's expression was fairness. As a faculty member and administrator who has held various leadership positions, Thea was often most outspoken when she perceived unfairness. She has always had a strong sense of fairness and has, since childhood, been motivated to "come to the defense of somebody who was getting bullied." Reflecting on how this deep-rooted value of fairness plays out in her professional life, Thea shared, "A lot of what drives me to speak out is if what's happening is, I feel, unfair and is in some way going to harm somebody else." Thea connected this sense of fairness to the self-censorship experience she shared during our first interview and clarified that she likely chose to self-censor in this case because, though she disagreed with an administrative decision, it did not conflict with her values. In addition to valuing fairness, Thea felt compelled by a deep sense of professional responsibility to use her voice to advocate for others. She was passionate about her role and ability to effect change among individual faculty members within her division.

> One of the reasons I like my job is that I actually get to stand up for other people and their rights and have helped many times individual faculty succeed when they were in a situation that was really tough on them."

Participants throughout the interview process shared unfavorable viewpoints about or disagreement with the state legislature. Thea was one of the more outspoken administrators who described how her conflict with state leadership relative to several key issues compelled her to speak. Her values have driven the passion that fuels her to speak out.

> We're in an academic environment where speech is supposed to be prized, and academic freedom is a thing, but 'Oh, by the way, don't do that because the legislators will get mad at you.' I speak out. That's what makes me mad–when we don't follow our own principles. Inside, I'm always still that scared 15-year-old who's like, 'Okay, I'm gonna have to talk about this. I'm going to have to tell people this doesn't make sense, and it's not good, and we're stepping in a mess. We're going to make it worse by doing this.' And then I'll say my piece. Then, so I'm the [administrator] who has a big mouth.

Camilla shared, "If I am extremely passionate about something, then I'm likely not to self-censor." Much like Thea, Camilla spoke out when she observed unfairness; however, "if [she didn't] see something that was blatantly wrong, [she] would have a tendency to watch and wait and listen and learn." Camilla clarified, "Injustice is one of those things that sets me off." As she reflected on the times when she self-censored and wished she had not, Camilla recognized that she made the decision self-censor or not to be congruent with her values. "I guess I checked my internal thermometer for ethics and said it was the right thing to do. I can live with myself. And that's okay."

Tristan described himself as naturally willing to engage and often feels comfortable sharing his opinions when asked. His self-censorship was less about the natural inclination and

more about *how* and *when* to best engage. However, he recognized within himself the tendency to speak out with greater confidence and put aside the decision to self-censor when he values or is passionate about a topic. “If I think that we’re not promoting rights in a certain way, or if someone is saying something that’s homophobic or racist, I don’t mind to call that out.”

Contrastingly, some participants chose self-censorship so they could pause and consider how to express viewpoints that reflected their values or passions. As Kayla stated, “I want to make sure that the words I say are the words that I mean and that I want to stand by.” Cooper would have preferred that university leaders aligned with best practices regarding the return to classroom instruction for what he felt was in the students’ best interests. He felt a little less comfortable as the implementation of his team’s presentation approached and would have preferred that the university adapt its practices and messaging to be more congruent with his values. A desire to be strategic about how he expressed his values and viewpoints surrounding this issue caused him to self-censor.

Though his values were a factor in his self-censorship experience, they were not ultimately the most compelling factor to force him to speak up about his viewpoints. In this regard, Danielle's experience was similar to Cooper’s because they both had to navigate complex scenarios. Danielle believed in the importance of showing respect for the flag and the people who fought to give athletes the opportunity to compete. Her respect for the military and the symbols one often associates with freedom informed her opinion that sporting events are not the ideal time to protest. Danielle sought alignment with her values and passions while also being conscious of how internal and external constituents would likely disagree with her differing viewpoints surrounding this issue. I asked Danielle to elaborate on her values and explain the conflict she felt.

> I do think it's more about what are you going to do when you have time to make a difference? 'Why are you kneeling?' was the first conversation I brought up with each athlete. 'Why are you kneeling, and what are you doing to make that situation better?' And so that one was hard. I was asked point-blank. I feel for the [students] that kneeled that couldn't answer those two questions.

Four participants spoke of value congruency and being passionate about their viewpoints concerning self-censorship in more general terms. Considering her years of experience at a public land grant institution, Marlena said, "I think it's important to think about what's of value to you, and what you won't compromise on and what you will." As it relates to the execution of her professional responsibilities, Marlena said that "what you see is what you get;" however, her Christian values have remained private unless she has observed a congruency with her values among colleagues and students. Marlena has worked at university for many years and was troubled by the shift away from outward expressions of religious belief in public settings. "We used to pray before football games. We used to pray at graduation. I'm a person who believes in the power of prayer, and I think our students need to be prayed over." Recognizing that people may have different religious beliefs, Marlena looked for a "happy medium." She kept a Bible at work in her office and wore a cross so that if students started a religious conversation, she could engage in a conversation about her beliefs without forcing her beliefs on others.

As her first interview shifted into a discussion about individual characteristics and values, Marlena freely discussed her religious background and beliefs and how they have framed her preference to self-censor.

> I personally am a Christian. I'm a follower of Jesus Christ and the Bible and tend to be more conservative. I don't tend to be confrontational, though, with my beliefs. I tend to

> hold them more personally and feel that prayer is the best tool that I have in my arsenal to use in any situation that I come upon.

Regina shared how there have been times when she has lobbied the university to issue public statements related to issues she felt were important. She reflected, “When I feel that something is important, I’m going to state my case.” Spencer has been prone to seek value alignment as he makes professional connections: “I try to associate with organizations that I have a natural affinity to, in terms of what they're...trying to accomplish. You need to be true to yourself and who you are.” Aligning his values in this way has helped Spencer decide to self-censor or speak up with greater authenticity.

Elizabeth described the nature of some of her work as hard because “you’re doing things that may or may not align with your own personal view” or passions. This misalignment for Elizabeth and others contributed to self-censorship. Thus, she recommended seeking balance and proactively pursuing work at the university “that gets you closer” to those passions.

> There’s also things that we can do that align really well, and so I think you have to have both, right? I think you have to find ways to make your workplace environment as much as possible align with the things that you already think are really important or significant or consistent with your value system.

Additionally, Elizabeth discussed how having lived personal experiences contributed to her values and the degree to which she felt passionate about particular topics. She reflected on her own experience and what she has observed through working with others: “People have these very personal experiences, and so when you have an emotional or a personal experience, even if you've decided that self-censorship is the right choice, it may make it a different kind of experience for you.”

Theme 2: Context

The second factor in Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework explores context. Context is “multi-layered” (Ashmore et al., 2004) and creates parameters and opportunities around human interaction (Bar-Tal, 2017). Bar-Tal and Sharvit (2008) suggested that the embeddedness of individual characteristics–historical, social, political, and cultural–allows us to understand how individuals operate as human beings. Bar-Tal's explanation of this factor highlighted macro and micro contexts that influence free expression and self-censorship. Depending on the point of reference, macro and micro contexts could be classified differently; however, my engagement with participants and discussion of the role that context plays in their self-censorship led me to distinguish between macro and micro contexts in the following way. As I share participants’ insights in this section, macro context will refer to national- and state-level influences that created boundaries and opportunities around open dialogue. The micro context will refer to forces within the local community, on campus, and within individual divisions that provided insight into participants’ comfort level with sharing their viewpoints and beliefs openly. Several participants highlighted macro-and micro-level contexts that influenced their choice to self-censor and how they made meaning of their experiences.

Macro Context

During September and October 2021, when I was conducting these interviews, each participant was uniquely experiencing the impact of international, national, and state-level events. We were approximately a year and a half into a global pandemic, COVID-19. During that time, many personally suffered from or knew individuals who suffered from the impact of COVID-19. Regardless of one’s proximity to its effects, all the participants experienced a dramatic disruption in day-to-day routines, a shift in boundaries between work and home life, and changes in the frequency and medium of connecting with loved ones and colleagues. Many

were isolated or cut off from social and professional activities that had previously been part of their routine. COVID-19 information–updates on the spread of the virus; proper safety protocols, including the wearing of masks and social distancing; availability of and different viewpoints about vaccines; and how communities around the world were navigating this challenging time–had dominated most news outlets and social media since early 2020. Majority conservative versus liberal states reacted to the pandemic in distinct and sometimes controversial ways making the response to the pandemic a politicized issue.

Within higher education–both nationally and at the state level–administrators have grappled with how to best deliver classroom instruction at times when it has been recommended to limit face-to-face instruction. Faculty and students have experienced classroom instruction face-to-face, online, and in hybrid formats at various points over the past two years. Those who work in higher education have had to adjust to regular changes with safety protocols required by state and local governments that impact student engagement and the student experience following the state of emergency declared in the state in March 2020.

Marlena, Rosie, and Stella all discussed the pandemic's macro-level context on their self-censor decisions. Marlena referenced the confusion she felt due to conflicting information about vaccination and other related topics that she regularly viewed on social media and the news. As a proponent of vaccines and one who believes in the power of choice, she struggled to know how to talk to those she supervises about putting themselves before others and how you should "give way to the greater good."

Rosie has experienced protocols around the pandemic in two different states and said that the context of the pandemic at the state level has made her angry and frustrated. During this portion of our discussion, she became flustered and said, "I'm not happy with the way that anyone is responding to this." Referencing her self-censorship experience from earlier in our

conversation, she continued: “If the state or university had some larger policy about how they’re approaching the pandemic, I wouldn’t be put in this situation at all.” The greater context of the pandemic and how it has affected her current working arrangements have left her concerned that others who have the power to influence her work are not taking the pandemic as seriously as they should. This reaction has resulted in her feeling unsafe.

Beyond COVID-19, topics such as race, diversity and inclusion, immigration, LGBTQ rights, appropriate ways to show patriotism, the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, and other topics contextualized each self-censorship experience disclosed during the interview process. When I first inquired about context during her interview, Kayla immediately noted the layers of complexity we collectively experienced over the past two years.

> If you zoom out all the way to like America and society, and even I'm sure to an extent, globally through the pandemic, and everything that was happening that first summer with like Black Lives Matter, the focus on activism and making change and really looking at ourselves is so much in focus. It's more intense, I feel, than it has been in the past.

For Kayla, the high stress and high stakes of her work with the LGBTQ community on campus were influenced by the macro-level context. As she discussed involvement with LGBTQ and queer advocacy in the past, she noted the hurt within this community on a national level that trickles down and impacts her contribution to issues on campus. Her work with the university’s center that provides LGBTQ support has brought to light how closely the state monitors what is happening on its flagship campus and targets different or controversial issues. She reminded me that “[Southeast State University] is voted one of the worst universities in America for LGBT people,” though she also believed that the campus is making improvements. This ranking has created a heightened sense of urgency on a macro scale as she engages with LGBTQ efforts on campus. Likewise, the micro-level context in which participants work currently affects LeeAnn.

Her perspective is that “we fear the different and unknown” as human beings. She described our communities and nation as fragmented because “there’s a lot of fear of the difference in the other.”

The intensity seems to come most directly from the state context for a few participants. As Spencer noted, “Universities are often seen as a hotbed of liberalism and all those sorts of things, and particularly suspect in a state like Tennessee.” Elizabeth shared that the state context weighs heavily on her mind as a university employee. She proceeded to describe the state as “a [place] where it can feel like very dry timber, and it only takes one match.” She often questions who is listening and watching when it comes to university-related issues and how the context of the state impacts them. Continuing, she added, “If you take that position...you know what your job is going to require. If that causes a problem for you, you’re probably not going to do the position, to begin with, right?” In other words, Elizabeth recommended awareness of the state context before accepting positions and thought that “some of these self-censorship pieces are endemic to the kinds of jobs we agreed to do.”

Referencing the macro context of the state legislature, Dustin pointed out that the predominantly conservative legislature already determined they are against a campus event focused on sex education. Therefore, when it came to the decision to self-censor or more openly discuss his views about this event in connection with the state context, he added: “I don’t approach this as, ‘Gosh, if I add a voice to this, I could really make a difference with the legislature.’ That thought never crosses my mind.”

Cooper made some connections about the impact of the state on the university. Referring to the way the university has responded to the pandemic, he noted:

> I think some of the unwillingness to speak up comes from the broader context. I think that one of the reasons why I wouldn't bother to make waves about this is that the [state]

> legislature has a particular opinion on this, and that opinion is devolving upon the [SSU] leadership structure, beginning with the President rather than the Chancellor and that this sort of downward propagating pressure related to the pandemic means that individual voices from individual employees, when voiced in these kinds of individuated contexts. I mean, they might get you in trouble, or they might not.

Bar-Tal's (2017) discussion of macro context suggested that "self-censorship serves as a barrier, blocking information that could potentially facilitate various constructive and functional processes of improving the society" (p. 38). Applied in a higher education context, Cooper and other participants observed that a macro context that holds to certain ideals and not others added pressure to self-censor–by conforming or remaining silent–in micro contexts.

Micro Context

Micro context refers to the influences on self-censorship that occur within the surrounding community, on campus, and within smaller groups. As I explored context with participants, there was natural gravitation toward discussing contextual factors that may influence their self-censorship on a macro scale; much of what has occurred in higher education over the past two years has extended beyond the local community. However, a few participants highlighted the micro context of their self-censorship experiences–influences within the local community and at Southeast State University–that were less connected to the macro-level context. Their insights affected the choice to self-censor within divisions and interpersonal communication in a professional setting on a granular level.

Community Context. Southeast State University is the state's flagship university and is geographically connected to the city's downtown area. Residents of the state, university alumni, and current and prospective students and their families remain informed on university issues through the local news and social media.

Though social media is a communication tool through which individuals globally communicate at a macro scale, it is an extension of the campus community within the context of higher education. Regina, whose role has her attuned to face-to-face and social media interactions at the university, described how the local political landscape affects campus engagement. In Regina's recent experience, politicized topics have included local discussion of the vaccine and other procedures related to COVID-19 (e.g., protocols surrounding masks and social distancing within the community and expectations for on-campus engagement and classroom instruction).

Regina experienced the weight of the macro and micro contexts of the pandemic that influenced how she engaged in her role and how she chose to vocalize her viewpoints. She and others who work with social media abide by guidelines to ensure that what is communicated to the local community and other followers on social media platforms regarding political, social, and cultural viewpoints appropriately represents Southeast State University. Elaborating on the university's different social media platforms, Regina shared more about the types of individuals and groups who tend to interact online through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter:

> The Facebook audience tends to skew a little older. They don't always like the jokes, though. Sometimes they just want the news. We can be a little funnier on Twitter and Instagram because we know that those audiences are a little younger. Our Instagram audience tends to be more current and prospective students. Our job is to promote the university. It's to show what life is like here; it's to give a glimpse of what's happening [at Southeast State University], promote the strategic mission of the university.

Learning to navigate social media has been a learning experience for Regina, who said that she often does not worry about free speech unless it is a question of how the university's audiences respond in return. She continued:

> When people are commenting on Facebook, those are public comments. If someone is replying to a tweet, I have no control over what they're saying here or really who's seeing it. Somebody may come in and use the N-word, say something terribly racist, but that's not a violation of free speech. It's hurtful to our community, and it's hurtful to a lot of other members of our audience, but they're really not breaking any rules or laws, and I don't get to delete it just because I want to.

As she considered the times when she has self-censored over the past couple of years, Regina recognized instances where the micro context of the pandemic in the surrounding community has influenced how she discusses the vaccine and COVID-19 protocols.

As previously discussed, Regina was not naturally inclined to self-censor and often did not hesitate to share her viewpoints and beliefs with her colleagues; however, when it came to social media, she wanted to ensure that "the ways in which [she is] expressing herself is appropriate for [the] broader audience" and reflected the university's stance on a particular issue, even if her personal views were different. She tried to ensure that despite her personal views or the pressure to respond to issues in a particular way that she maintained consistently with the way the university communicates about current events. Like Regina, Stella, Marlena, and Rosie experienced the influence of the pandemic's macro and micro contexts. However, Regina's position uniquely positioned her to sometimes communicate on behalf of the university in ways that the other participants did not experience.

Danielle's role allowed her to connect with various constituents both in and outside the university. The issues that she often has navigated, sometimes without warning, have become very public and have draw scrutiny from the surrounding community. Thus, how she uses her voice is significantly impacted by the micro context surrounding various issues. Danielle has had to address several politically-charged issues with external constituents, including students kneeling during the national anthem and LGBTQ relationships among students and staff members. Residing in a conservative state and community and performing in a public-facing role made these issues more visible and potentially risky for university relationships. Danielle shared:

> Even though we have the whole chain of command, it still is a situation where if you deal with the public, some of them feel more comfortable coming and asking you or telling you how they feel. And you have to respect their opinion. But at the same time, they are making a commitment to us financially. I always tell people, 'It's your decision. But I'm just going to tell you that we're all not always going to agree.'

Danielle was mindful of the fragility of community relationships, particularly those where there was a financial commitment involved. Noting the complexity of specific conversations, she shared: "Some people may threaten to take away their tickets or their donation or not come to another event."

She has learned to advocate for students and her staff by self-censoring her speech to be viewed as neutral and unbiased. Additionally, Danielle has encouraged those she supervises and students with whom she interacts to have controversial conversations *before* a problem to be prepared for complex interactions if and when they occur.

As an individual who has been with the university for almost three decades, Danielle was also cautious about how she presented herself publicly within the local community, knowing that

she would be associated with the university. For example, some of her staff members asked her to support a local LGBTQ event. Reflecting on that conversation, she shared, “If I wanted to show my true self and go to a protest or go to a [LGBTQ] function, I could do that. I probably wouldn’t show up in all my [SSU] gear, you know.” Her response to such invitations has typically been, “No. I support you, but I’m not going to support the masses.”

Campus Context. An additional layer of the micro context that may inform the decision to self-censor is the climate toward speech at Southeast State University, including speech-related occurrences and campus policies that support free expression. Like the macro context previously outlined and other micro-level influences, what transpires on campus could influence open dialogue or self-censorship.

During each participant’s second interview, I asked them to describe the climate toward free expression at Southeast State University based on their past and current experiences. Responses were uniquely personal and reflective of each participant’s role, relationship with colleagues, and their supervisor; individual characteristics; years of experience in higher education, including the types of roles they have filled; and political and religious viewpoints that inform their worldview. Danielle and Kayla viewed this question through a political lens. Kayla noted that, in her experience, there are very few outwardly conservative individuals in comparison to those with liberal beliefs. Danielle was initially interested in self-censorship because she observed the contrast between a liberal campus surrounded by a fairly conservative area. She viewed campus as “a protected bubble” and that overall, free expression was “a lot more accepted on campus than it is in other areas of our city or community.”

Several participants shared the perspective that there is a positive climate on campus toward free expression, generally speaking. For example, Camilla has been with the university

for decades, both as a faculty member and now as a top-level college or university administrator. She shared how she thinks the climate toward speech has improved over time.

> We felt a little bit uncomfortable expressing our opinions about minority support, the office of equity and diversity, about things like LGBTQ rights because the relationship with the legislature was difficult. And I think [now] we're more of a posture of, 'This is what's right. We're going to do it if it's ethical. This is what we're going to be supporting.' And if I had to say it, there's more moral courage perhaps with the administration that we have now. Not afraid to confront difficult issues.

Though his feeling toward campus climate regarding speech was generally positive, Tristan believed there was room for improvement. He observed that there has been a push for more openness and transparency in recent years. Dustin's contribution to free expression on campus mirrored Tristan's sentiments. "We're open to diversity. When it comes to all things gender and sexuality, when it comes to cultural inclusiveness. And so, are we open to all viewpoints? I guess we're not open to a viewpoint that's not [inclusive]."

Elizabeth, a participant with faculty and administrative experience, expressed a similar sentiment: "We do a really good job with the tools that we have." Regarding free expression, she added that on campus, "there is never a desire to limit the productive exchange of information or ideas," that people are "pretty hospitable to a variety of viewpoints," and that she has never observed, what she considered to be an oppression of an idea or an opinion. She acknowledged, however, that there are two sides to how one may perceive campus climate.

> It's a really complicated environment. You've got a lot of smart people who love the students, they love the community, they love [the state]. They want to do their work. They're there working incredible hours to support all the different kinds of initiatives on

> campus, but when we are put as a campus in the position where we have to deal with those gray areas, it's very difficult. And often, nobody's happy because none of the answers are especially satisfying to any of the parties.

A few participants described the climate toward free expression in a negative sense. Thea attributed some of the adverse environment on campus to a broader lack of tolerance for speech that extends beyond the university setting.

> I think this generation of students right now, in part because of the use of social media, some of them have no tolerance for anybody not fitting, seeing the world the way they see it. And they jump on it. They jump right on the teacher and complain about them. Some of that has gone on in the past but didn't have such serious consequences.

Similar to Elizabeth's observation that some groups do not feel welcome, Kayla prefaced her remarks by saying that, though she did not have much higher education experience under her belt, she has felt like speech is not accepted here. She described the speech climate at Southeast State University as "a little bit toxic."

> You very much have to be buttoned up and play by the rules that come down from the top. And people who don't...fit that mold end up leaving, and it's sad because a lot of them are really good at what they do, and they leave, and they go to other universities who appreciate that they do really good work. And so, at [SSU], they're really strangling their resources and pushing it down; they get left with the crappy people who aren't doing cutting-edge stuff. At every turn, the system's reaction is always bad.

Compared to her experience at another university in the north, Stella described the climate toward free expression at Southeast State University as less open. Though she acknowledged that this perspective can vary depending on your role on campus, she arrived at

this conclusion because she felt unable to express negative feedback that would lead to growth and progress within her division.

Cooper answered my question about speech climate by pointing out two opposing ways to describe the environment toward free expression: anxiety and stridency. As a staff member in a supporting role and as an adjunct professor, "[he] has seen both the anxiety moment and the stridency moment." He went on to list topics in which these opposing gestures have appeared, including conversations around COVID-19, curriculum, managing university business, and how to best respond to student issues.

Like a few other participants, LeeAnn was disappointed in the state of free expression at Southeast State University. She has struggled to identify how to best contribute her voice as a staff member.

> It hasn't been positive to feel like you don't have a voice. It's been disappointing in a place that purports to be open to free speech. And I really don't feel comfortable expressing opinions or questioning, 'Why did we do this this way?' or 'What is the goal?' or 'Do we have a strategic objective that we're trying to meet?' So, yeah, aspects like that have been negative and disappointing. Disappointing is the strongest word I can come up with because a university is not supposed to be a place where people don't feel comfortable being active partners.

In addition to the campus climate toward free expression, I reviewed some of the university's more recent free-speech-related incidents with each participant. Specifically, I inquired about participants' level of familiarity with incidents on campus that had free-speech-related elements and their thoughts about the response from the community and campus to these incidents. Broader tensions relating to race and ethnicity on a national scale (i.e., macro context)

also may have impacted the response within the community (i.e., micro context) to these incidents. The following sections provide a brief overview of these incidents and participants' reactions to what occurred on campus.

Hate Speech on the University Message Board. Southeast State University's campus message board has been used to display hateful messages targeting certain racial and ethnic groups. Between December 2017 and September 2019, the message board was painted with hate speech at least three times, displaying text such as "white pride" and anti-Jewish symbols and comments.

According to Thea, who has been with the university for roughly a decade, the message board has been an issue. She and others considered better ways to monitor speech on the message board because of how disruptive it was on campus when students or unknown community members painted harmful messages.

> There was a several-year period where the university felt like administrative people could not ask the facilities people to go paint over [the message board] when something terrible happened because it was stopping free speech in a public space. And it's like, 'No, [the message board] isn't a public space. It belongs to the campus. It's for students.' And so, they had a student group that would be called on, and they would get out there, and they would all paint over it to cover it up. And, of course, eventually, the students were like, 'Why the hell are we having to do all the work?' I had one student telling me she was driving around with buckets of paint in her car all the time so that she could be called at any minute to come over and help cover up Nazi symbols or hate speech and whatever. It has died down.

In response to the speech on the message board, Tristan thought that "sometimes the administration of the university hides behind policies, interpretations of policies to avoid things that they don't want to do." He noted the university's stance on the message board: "It's a free speech zone, so people can...write whatever they want on there." He added that he believed the university can do more. In response to the anti-Semitic speech painted on the message board in 2018 and 2019, Dustin shared his perspective "that the university didn't speak soon enough, or clear enough about that we support all of our students," noting that since then, the university has responded with greater urgency.

The Traditionalist Workers Party. In February 2018, the Traditionalist Workers Party, a group that "fight[s] for the interests of white Americans," reserved space on campus to hold a lecture falsely under the name of a local church. The group promoted the event resulting in the organization of campus protests and tightened security. In response to this group's presence on campus, Elizabeth asked: "Should we allow our campus buildings to be rented by organizations that aren't connected with a faculty, staff, or student on campus?" Thea shared details about the changes in campus policy that resulted from the presence of the white supremacist group on campus:

> What we ended up doing afterwards was figuring out a way to make it really hard for an external group to rent a space on our campus. And we did that by saying that you can only...if you're an external group, someone on the campus, some organization–student group, department, higher-level administrative organization–has to sponsor you.

When the Traditionalist Workers Party came to campus, one of Regina's responsibilities was to identify the best way to communicate what was occurring with the campus community. Regina was well-versed in free speech and knew that "whether or not we liked it, they had a right

to be here." She decided to reach out to a contact who has a similar role at his university to find out how they dealt with the group's presence on their campus. Unfortunately, there was a lawsuit at her contact's campus because the university did not want to allow the group on campus. In speaking with counterparts from other universities, she learned tactics to help her and others care for the campus community in the best way that they could.

Tristan recalled how he appreciated the official word from the Chancellor in response to the Traditionalist Workers Party coming to campus, which was essentially, "Don't engage. They'll die in the darkness. Just leave it alone." He also appreciated that campus administration supported those who chose to actively protest.

The "Blackface" Incident. Individuals and organizations have used social media to transmit hateful messages targeting certain groups on campuses around the country. In February 2019, university administrators became aware of a screenshot of a Snapchat photo of four university students–two of whom were wearing blackface–circulating on social media. The image included a caption about blacks earning free college because of their race and the hashtag *#blacklivesmatter*. As a top-level college or university administrator, Spencer had some involvement in the blackface incident on campus and provided additional details that may not be public knowledge.

> Whether it's true or not, [the student's] story on that one is that the...blackface was actually a charcoal-based acne treatment medication that he put on his face. A roommate took a picture of him with it. The roommate then shared it with another friend, and it was that friend who added a caption to it related to racial relationships or situations and sent it out. So, if you believe that storyline, then the kid is, in essence, saying, 'You know, I'm an innocent victim in this situation, and this is what happened and no action on my part.'"

> But yet, you know, that kind of picture just immediately causes all kinds of reactions among people and among the university.

Spencer was supportive of the institution's decision not to expel the student involved, noting that he also understood why the student no longer felt safe on campus and chose to finish his education elsewhere.

As we discussed the blackface incident, Tristan expressed frustration that he and other staff members received very little guidance on how to act or respond when these incidents occur on campus. Following the incident, several students visited his office and asked if he would attend a protest with them. Though reluctant at first, he chose to participate. He shared his internal conflict with me.

> And I felt very torn in the fact that students, I think, should be the number one priority, and so I felt like I needed to support the students. But I didn't know really what the boundaries were as far as how I would be supported if I ended up with my face on the news. Are they going to fire all the staff people that came? Or are they going to ask to check our timesheets and see if we were clocked in or out at a certain time? I just didn't feel like I knew 'officially' what I was allowed and supposed to do versus what risk I was willing to take myself.

Marlena cared a great deal for students and chose to show support for them during the blackface and other social media incidents by attending campus listening sessions. In her experience, these sessions were powerful because they provided "opportunities for students to come together and be heard." Emotions were high during these sessions. Thus, Marlena recommended that a counselor should have been present in the future students were being asked to relive painful situations.

The Spirit Team Incident. In June 2020, following the death of George Floyd, a newly admitted student was dismissed from the Spirit team after a fellow high school classmate dug up a video clip of her saying a racial slur years before. Following the loss of the opportunity to join the Spirit team, the student chose to withdraw from the university.

Spencer described the student's actions as "the follies of youth." Elizabeth raised the following issue as we discussed the student's social media post and the way the university reacted: "Some of them are things that happened before the student was a student at UT, so there's the question of how much of a student's past should be held against them in their future." Other participants shared a similar reflection. Cooper agreed that what the student posted was inappropriate and should be addressed. He also wondered if a mistake from the past during an immature period of life should lead to such dramatic consequences. Cooper proceeded to describe how a "restorative justice response, where you get people to dialogue with each other, and you try to get people to talk to each other," makes it possible for "a certain kind of healing [to] take place and a certain kind of education can take place." Stella spoke of how heated the discussion around this incident was in her department. Similar to Elizabeth and Cooper's, her personal view was that perhaps we should consider giving the student a chance.

Kayla discussed the complexity of this incident, noting how as an administrator, it would be tempting to keep the student from attending the university. However, she believed in the possibility of another response from an educational institution: "Yes, come to us, let us help you be exposed to the world and learn and challenge those ideas." Contrastingly, LeeAnn acknowledged how the incident may have "ruin[ed] her academic career and her goals;" however, she believed that the university responded appropriately by saying, "We don't want that here."

> I can't run my mouth and say things that are unkind, inappropriate in today's age, especially because someone is going to video and put it all over social media. Even if that's not me, if I say something stupid, it's going to be out there for the world to see, and the result may be, 'Oh, I lose my scholarship at the school I wanted to go to.' And other people will see that and say, 'Hmmm, maybe they really are serious at [Southeast State University] about not allowing that kind of behavior, and we don't want people who think that way here.'

LeeAnn, an advocate of free speech, identified inconsistencies in her argument. On the one hand, she agreed that campuses should support and protect everyone; on the other hand, she believed that institutions should not shield campus community members from offensive speech. "But that's effectively what we did with the student who wanted to join the Spirit team," she observed.

The Racist Twitter Post. During the same month as the Spirit team social media post, a male student from the College of Engineering recorded himself saying violent and racist comments toward black women. The video was posted on Twitter, resulting in the student's departure from the university.

The student's threatening remarks online prompted Camilla to act quickly by clarifying her division's stance on diversity and inclusion.

> We put out a declaration of how we felt about diversity and welcoming diversity and our feelings about that all people should feel welcome at the university, that no one should feel excluded, and that this kind of speech did nothing but alienate people who should be comfortable here, should feel safe here. I'm very proud of the fact that the campus has taken kind of a 'no tolerance' policy toward that crap. And I warned all of my office staff

that everything they post on Facebook, even though it's private, still represents us. I will not tolerate it. So that kind of hatred or negativity has no place in the workplace.

A Racial Acronym on the Whiteboard. Lastly, in February 2021, a lecturer in the College of Arts and Sciences wrote a racially charged acronym from a popular mid-1990s rap song on the whiteboard as part of a lecture. Someone from the class posted a screenshot on social media, and students demanded that the university terminate the lecturer's appointment. The professor was placed on leave for some time and asked to work with the Office of Teaching and Learning Innovation to improve her teaching methods. She made the personal choice not to return to the university once the investigation concluded.

Several participants were familiar with this incident on campus. They expressed sympathy for the professor involved while acknowledging how she could have avoided the situation had she chosen a different pedagogical approach or if the students had not posted a picture of the racial acronym on social media. Referencing social media in this instance, Cooper shared his observation that "the proliferation and virality of things on social media are not necessarily socially constructive forces, socially beneficial to people." Regina's perspective was like Cooper's. She opined that the professor could have avoided the incident simply by not writing the word on the board. Regina was more interested in the social media component of this incident and the discussion that happened online regarding the professor's racial identity. She reviewed comments about the incident on the university's social media platforms. She reflected: "We...heard from a lot of people of color who are upset for a lot of different reasons, but everyone is reacting to the snapshot of what they see being shared on social media."

Thea knew the professor personally and was able to share specific details about the incident based on her involvement behind the scenes.

> Social media from one person created an uproar that really just made [the professor's] life a living hell. And she didn't come back. I don't know if she wanted to come back, whether we would have hired her or not. On the one hand, I would have felt like it was the right thing to do because, ultimately, she didn't do anything wrong.

In each of these cases, campus officials issued quick responses on social media and other media, apologizing to those emotionally injured, denouncing hate, and clarifying the university's position on diversity and inclusion. The university rarely was legally authorized to terminate, expel, or take other action because the First Amendment protected the speech in question.

Commenting on the university's response to the previously described incidents, Sean, both knowledgeable of and a strong advocate for free expression and academic freedom within the university setting, shared how he has recognized "a tendency to overreact...in the name of protecting people's feelings." According to Sean, feelings are important and should not be dismissed; however, "part of what we're doing here is challenging you to not always fall back on the things that you fall back on." Sean advocates for a balanced approach to these two areas.

Cooper acknowledged the difficult position in which these incidents often position the university. "I think they have to deal with it. I think it's almost impossible to deal with well. I'm a believer in the double bind: You can't not, but you're not going to do a good job." Cooper fully supported the university's pattern of denouncing harmful speech but has observed that "by itself that kind of reaction doesn't do much" to amend the issue or promote healing within the community. He likewise thinks that the "that's not us" reaction is problematic.

Dustin shared similar concerns about the university's responses; however, he recognized these incidents are fraught with difficulty and appreciated that the university is learning to speak out sooner and with greater force. Danielle described the university's response as a three-prong

process. First, she appreciated that the university acknowledges what has happened without inciting further uproar, if possible. Second, Danielle thought that acknowledging the complex feelings of community members has become crucial. Lastly, she described an essential part of the process as learning to deal with people who don't agree with the response.

Thoughts about the University's Response. Not all participants were complimentary of how the university responds and acts following free speech incidents. Thea was baffled by "the amount of time and effort we spend managing the outrage." As Kayla reflected on the aftermath of speech incidents, she noted the common themes of racism and hate speech. She complained that these incidents receive so much media attention. From her perspective, [the university] does so little to support people that when these things happen, and they say, 'Hey, it's free speech; we really can't do anything,' nobody buys it." Additionally, she described the memos issued by the university following hate speech as formulaic because they do not communicate in a way that shows they care.

When Tristan learned of incidents involving hate speech on campus, he described how he goes through a mental checklist, thinking about students, the college response, and the response from the administration.

> How are our students going to be impacted by this? And what are they going to be demanding in 10 minutes? Because I know they will. And then, at the college level, who at our college is impacted by this directly? What will my role be in this? And will I be supported if I need to speak out in some way? Which I know that I will. What does the dean need to do, or where is [the dean] on this? Do I need to help [the dean] get up to speed in some way? And then at the administration level, to be really honest, I'm already

> scanning to see how they are going to screw it up because I know they're going to. I don't really trust...I want to, but I don't yet trust the administration.

During Regina's time at the university, she has become familiar with a university response pattern to when incidents happen on campus. First is a response such as, "We're looking into it. Thanks for letting us know that this happened. We're going to learn as much as we can about the situation." Then, the university also typically condemns the actions or message that is under investigation. Second, the university issues a response that includes resources and a statement such as, "If you see something, you can complete a bias report, you can talk to the dean, you can do whatever," along with a statement expressing "we're going to do better." The issue that Regina has discovered is that "there's not usually a lot of consequence. We have a large community; we can't make everybody do better all the time."

Campus Policies. In addition to these speech-related incidents that significantly impact their level of openness for some staff and administrators, the state requires all university campuses by law to comply with legislation reaffirming free speech on college and university campuses. The Campus Free Speech Protection Act (2019) was signed into law in May 2017. An excerpt from the law included on Southeast State University's website (2022) clarifies, "It is not the proper role of an institution to attempt to shield individuals from free speech, including ideas and opinions they find offensive, unwise, immoral, indecent, disagreeable, conservative, liberal, traditional, radical, or wrongheaded." Furthermore, the law states that members of the campus community can within their rights share their viewpoints and disagree with the speech of others; however, "they may not substantially obstruct or otherwise substantially interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe."

During our discussion about campus free speech policy and values, Elizabeth referenced the university's civility code, a set of principles drafted by a campus task force on Civility and Community as part of the codes of conduct in 2011. The university president charged the task force with the following tasks: "Define civility, come up with a list of guiding principles, and recommend ways we can further civility on our campus" (Southeast State University, 2010a, para. 1). The final task force report defines civility and community and recommends a set of principles for all university community members, including inclusivity, diversity, dialogue, collegiality, respect, knowledge, integrity, and learning (Southeast State University, 2010b).

The Campus Free Speech Protection Act–and in some cases, the Civility Code–were central discussion points during the participants' second interviews. I discuss these policies in connection with the micro context because they add layers of meaning to the workplace environment, creating opportunities for openness and self-censorship. In the following sections, I share positive and negative reactions and feedback to the Campus Free Speech Protection Act.

Several participants agreed with the sentiments expressed in the Campus Free Speech Protection Act, both with the intent and how the campus abides by the policy. Marlena was struck by how broad the statement was and that it encompasses all kinds of speech. After reading the policy and briefly discussing it, she said, "I think I agree with it." Spencer expressed similar agreement with specific statements in the legislation, including the sections clarifying the "proper role of an institution" and that members of a community should not "obstruct" or "interfere" with the free expression of others. Sean was equally as supportive of the same language and added that, in his limited classroom experience, the university aligns with the legislation. LeeAnn's interpretation of the policy is that according to statute, Southeast State University "cannot prohibit people from expressing ideas that are the various flavors of stupid.

And then other individuals on campus have a right to disagree with things that they find stupid. Neither one of us should try to prohibit the other...from expressing ourselves, and it's not [SSU's] place to play mother" and say, "Sit down and shut up."

As Thea and I read through the legislation and she reflected on her experience, a big smile came across her face. "I know this; I use it all the time. I love it. We were pleased as punch. We, on campus, thought this was the best thing they ever published. It allows us to do all the things we wanted to do." She then shared additional context surrounding the acceptance of this statute.

> When this came out, the purpose of it from the legislation was to protect conservative speech because they think that we disallow that. But we don't disallow it. What we disallow is things like posting Nazi symbols on dormitory bulletin boards with nobody's name on it. That's not speech. There's no name assigned to it. There's no right. So, those will get torn down.

The statute allowed the campus event focused on sex education to happen, from Thea's recollection, "and so, now they're winding up to tell us we can't teach about critical race theory on campus. This says we can."

Some participants weighed in on the positive and negative aspects of the legislation. Many were bothered by the specific language used to convey the state's stance on free expression. Camilla thought that the word "wrongheaded" was "so vague that it's almost meaningless." She questioned how one determines wrongheadedness– "In whose mind?" Rosie also described the policy as vague and added that she did not know how the university would hold someone accountable with the drafted language. Kayla labeled the statute as "contrarian

instead of collaborative" because "conservative" appeared on the list before "liberal." She added, "There they go again."

Cooper likewise commented on the use of language; however, his focus was more on the power built into particular words.

> I often feel as though the people writing the law have found a way of speaking or a piece of language that they have discovered has leverage to allow them to do what they want to do. It's an articulation of power. It bugs me to see this kind of language used to justify or carry out this kind of agenda. You try to use it to defend people who are making statements that I think go a little beyond what the language and this law actually justifies.

Spencer's opinion had less to do with the statute itself–because he was supportive of the message it affirms–and more to do with the lack of consistency in how the state and the university live by the expectations outlined in the legislation.

> I'm not sure that we, as a community, do a particularly good job of living by that, nor am I particularly convinced that the writers of said legislation do a particularly good job of living consistent with their rule. If you take that at face value, then on what basis could a state legislature decide to remove funding for the [university's center that provides LGBTQ support] or something of that sort? Is that not 'substantially obstruct[ing]' or 'otherwise... interfer[ing]' with the freedom of a group of people?

Tristan's position was the most extreme of all participants who expressed negative feedback regarding the Campus Free Speech Protection Act.

> I don't like the statement that the university puts out every year about free speech. I hate it. This is like, 'Just make all the space and don't have any boundaries.' Partly this feels

> unnecessary because, at least in my experience, we've made lots of room for all viewpoints.

According to Tristan, the notion that all viewpoints should be tolerated goes against both his personal and professional values.

Two participants–Marlena and Sean–were generally supportive of the Campus Free Speech Protection Act and the ideas conveyed, though they openly shared their unfamiliarity with the legislation. Marlena was supportive, though she had never read the statement. Sean shared positive feedback about the statute once we reviewed it, and then commented, "I would say we could probably do a better job on the policy side. I mean, the fact that I didn't know about this state law, that's probably a problem."

Macro and Micro Contexts in Small Groups

The macro and micro context filters down within the university setting to influence communication within divisions, small groups, and between individuals. Without prompting, each participant referenced aspects of the overarching context that influenced how they made meaning of their self-censorship experiences. Interviews reflected topics or themes that participants tend to avoid discussing in the workplace and topics or themes they feel comfortable discussing under certain conditions.

Topics to Avoid in Divisions, Small Groups, and Among Individuals. Participants identified specific topics or themes one should avoid in the workplace because they generate conflict or are associated with potential adverse repercussions. I grouped participants' responses related to avoidance into three overarching themes: the pandemic, religion and politics, and topics with which they have less familiarity.

Dustin expressed discomfort with talking about the leadership's decisions regarding the pandemic. He acknowledged that many have had a difficult time over the past couple of years; however, he has been frustrated by the lack of clarity around expectations for him and his team members when it comes to working schedules. First, they were told, "you cannot go into campus unless you have permission to do so." When it was time for him and his office staff to return to campus, one staff member–a person of color–moved for her husband's job and worked remotely during the pandemic. Because "she had pretty much been [working remotely] all last year and did a bang-up job doing that," Dustin requested that she remain with the team working remotely. His supervisor denied the request due to the efforts to bring everyone back to campus. This reaction resulted in the loss of an employee "who embodied everything that this office was about." For this and other reasons, Dustin self-censored when speaking of the pandemic.

Cooper's self-censorship experience also was related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As an individual who did not naturally self-censor, Cooper reflected on how self-censorship varies according to the domain in which he is communicating, whether on the broader campus, his immediate workplace, or on social media. Of all the themes he could avoid, he said, "I don't think there's a topic that rises to that level for me, other than this topic" (i.e., the pandemic). Kayla, who works in a public-facing office on campus, did not express her feelings toward the pandemic in terms of outright avoidance but rather that a discomfort that has developed over time. Like others, Kayla has grown wary of discussing certain themes in general, particularly in the workplace.

Most participants also avoided conversations about religion or politics. Aside from superficial conversation and questions between close colleagues, Kayla revealed that religion and

politics are usually off-limits topics, except for the occasional presidential joke. She noted the change that has occurred mainly since the 2020 presidential election.

> After 2016 and the presidential election, we could have an interaction with a patron and come back and talk to our colleagues and be like, ‘Dude, this guy...’ But now I don't know that those conversations really happen that way anymore. Now it's like you don't even broach the subject on things like misinformation. And if you do, you have to know where your colleague stands. Misinformation is a big umbrella, so you have to know where they stand on vaccines and voting rights and all of these little pieces...to know whether you can bring up misinformation before it becomes like a crazy spiral of gobbledygook that you weren't prepared for emotionally. So, I think it's cut down on our freedom of expression, but it's also cut down on how safe we feel.

LeeAnn also avoided all discussions of the past and current president to prevent creating additional tension in her office.

> There was a quite a lot of self-censorship regarding the election. Nobody really talked about that because you didn't want to stir that up. Politics and religion are the things that are going to get people heated and you might say something that could destroy a friendship or work relationship.

Danielle also tended to avoid political discussions despite her interest in politics. She did this out of respect for her colleagues and with concern for how she represented the university. Regarding religion, she was less inclined to participate in discussions because she was not a church-goer and had observed that she was in the minority within the South regarding her church attendance.

Similar to other participants who discussed religion and politics, Regina shared discomfort with discussing these themes in the workplace because they are irrelevant and unrelated to her work. As an individual who values privacy, Camilla saw religion and politics as profoundly personal and "approach[ed] them with more caution." Elaborating, she shared, "To me, that's something that needs to stay out of the workplace, so I don't share those." When unable to simply disengage, she tried to prepare herself beforehand. She described how the greater level of discussion and depth of conversation about politics and other topics has overall increased her awareness of a variety of topics. She added, "We can all be taught even if we're old administrators."

Rosie's perception that "atheists are the most hated religious group" caused her to avoid the topic of religion in the workplace. Though she was much more comfortable discussing politics and feels of their importance, she likewise avoided political discussion in the workplace because it "doesn't really matter in terms of [her] day-to-day work life" and "never goes anywhere productive." Additionally, she described the climate right now as heated, which has influenced her to self-censor more often.

The third category of topics that participants commonly avoid discussing in the workplace deal included topics with which they had less familiarity or did not share agreement. A few participants described how their relationship to a topic influenced the decision to self-censor or speak up. Specifically, being familiar with an issue that others discussed in the work environment allowed participants to put aside other competing factors, which would, under certain circumstances, lead to self-censorship. Synthesizing across interviews, I discovered that participants opted to self-censor on occasion because they lacked vital knowledge or topical familiarity to contribute in a meaningful or comfortable way. Contrastingly, participants

expressed a decreased likelihood of self-censorship when they were familiar with the topic being discussed or had knowledge to contribute when considering other relevant variables.

For example, Marlena shared that she would perform professional responsibilities that involve serving on LGBTQ committees but would otherwise stay clear of discussions due to her religious beliefs. Though he found some topics intriguing, Spencer expressed discomfort with discussing specific issues. Naturally more of an observer, Spencer would share viewpoints openly; however, he hesitated to share perspectives relative to topics, lifestyles, or experiences that characterized others but were unrelated to his life and experience.

> I probably feel, in some sense, less comfortable in some of those conversations because so many of those conversations are or can delve into lifestyles with which I have so little familiarity and life experiences. And you're always a little bit concerned that you're going to be kind of characterizing the life experiences of others when you have absolutely no foundation, no basis.

Spencer did not feel as informed about diversity and avoids related discussions. Likewise, Tristan avoided discussing specific themes of which he lacked knowledge because "[he does not] want to misstep and seem like an idiot." Reflecting generally on self-censorship, Tristan self-censored when he was unfamiliar with a topic: "I don't feel comfortable with things that I don't feel like I know fully about."

Kayla's role at Southeast State University and her educational background have taught her the importance of information integrity and citing her sources. She shared how a coworker, whom she described as toxic, would often provoke her to argue about politics. Her main reason for choosing self-censorship when interacting with this coworker was because she was bothered by the topic, and also because "[she did not] have any facts to refute what [he was] saying. For an employee with her professional background, backing down due to lack of topic familiarity

was the only option: “I didn’t have any statistics to fight his viewpoint, and so that paralyzes me sometimes.”

Comfortable Topics in Divisions, Small Groups, and Among Individuals. When asked to describe issues they felt comfortable discussing in the workplace, participants shared themes across a broader spectrum. Camilla’s division has made significant changes in messaging and action around diversity and inclusion. As an advocate of these efforts, Camilla expressed, “I feel proud of that, and I will share that more because maybe those best practices can be adopted by other people.” While certain participants actively avoided discussing the pandemic with colleagues and leaders at Southeast State University, others expressed that they were comfortable engaging in these discussions. Sean, for example, made sure he stayed informed about COVID-19 so that he could serve as a resource for the team he supervises by encouraging preparedness and vaccination when appropriate. He believed the university had effectively communicated about the pandemic, which he assumed could not have been an easy task. Camilla was equally comfortable discussing the pandemic and campus response as a supporter of the science behind vaccination. Though she no longer has children in the K-12 system, LeeAnn still has several friends with younger and teenage children. Their influence and how they regularly share information with her have helped her become more comfortable sharing opinions about the pandemic. If all the politicized topics he could discuss in the workplace, Tristan shared that he was most comfortable talking about health issues related to COVID-19 and race issues on campus.

For other participants, a comfortable discussion was less about the topic itself and more about the individual with whom they were communicating. In other words, relationships with

individuals determined whether issues were discussed or avoided. When I asked Elizabeth to describe her approach to engaging in or avoiding conversation, she shared the following.

> It depends on the colleague. If we have a relationship of trust, then I am more likely to talk about things. If I don't know you well, or you don't know me well, or if I sense that the person could be uncomfortable…I think part of the background if you're in education and you deal with religion is that you're constantly looking at the 'other;' you're trying to figure out, 'Is this person comfortable? Are they not? Are they shutting down? How are they feeling?

Like Elizabeth, Kayla prioritized trust over specific topics when determining how to vocalize her opinions. Thea, one of the more outspoken participants, stated, "There is probably no topic that I avoid with everybody. There are people–colleagues–that I'll talk about anything with." She shared her engagement in conversations around critical race theory and social justice. According to Thea, "People who are experts ought to be able to talk about their expertise, and it has happened multiple times that that gets discouraged here, and we end up walking a fine line."

Theme 3: Type of Information

The third factor in Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework is the type of information to which an individual has access. Within this category, Bar-Tal includes sub-themes such as "severity of the information, relevance to the present, type of activity that the information involves, time that the information relates, objects of the information, and issues raised in the information" (p. 53). According to Bar-Tal, all these components "have an effect on the way a person may handle the held information" (p. 53).

Before discussing this theme further, I would like to note a difference between Bar-Tal's intended use of his framework and the purposes for which I am using it. Gatekeepers

operationalize Bar-Tal's (2017) research that investigates self-censorship. Pettigrew (1972) described gatekeepers as individuals "who sit at the junction of several communication channels, are in position to regulate the flow of demands and potentially control decisional outcomes" (p. 190). In connection with his research, Bar-Tal (2017) suggested that journalists, politicians, and filmmakers could be classified as gatekeepers because at the core of their role is a responsibility to disseminate information to the public. Though some of the participants in my study did, on occasion, act as gatekeepers (e.g., top-level college and university administrators such as Thea, Spencer, and Camilla), they are part of a system that relies on authorization, shared governance, influence, and collaboration. Aside from the lines of authority common to many organizations, higher education has other structural layers that influence how information is disseminated including faculty governance, accrediting bodies, ethical standards within disciplines, state and federal governing bodies, and a board of trustees (Lombardi, 2013). My experience has been that, perhaps with a few exceptions, those who work in higher education do not independently possess or fully dictate the flow of information apart from the university structure. The participants in my study did not come upon information so severe or relevant that they grappled with the risks involved in sharing it with others. Instead, participants collectively found themselves in situations within the parameters of their roles where they had to consider to what degree they were willing to reveal *themselves*–their opinions, beliefs, values, and viewpoints–within the environment in which relevant information was often already circulating.

Some of these self-censorship themes participants shared were related to the pandemic, political elections, and diversity and inclusion (see Table 4.2). All self-censorship experiences were relevant to the participants during the time in which they found themselves self-censoring. However, the type of information as a factor in the decision to self-censor did not provide a helpful lens through which to examine participants' experiences in my study. Apart from LeeAnn

(who expressed disagreement with certain aspects of affirmative action) and Marlena (who was very outspoken about her religious beliefs), the choice to self-censor among the participants in this study was not because they held particularly controversial viewpoints or beliefs. Their choice was also not because they were afraid that others would disagree. Instead, there were other factors, some of which I have previously presented and others that I will explore in the emergent themes section.

Theme 4: Circumstantial Factors

In Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework, circumstantial factors relate to the circumstances surrounding how information was collected, how it was received, how many people know about it, and relevant characteristics of the potential audience (e.g., identity, status, and role). Bar-Tal also discussed the importance of timing surrounding the delivery of information and an individual's involvement with the information. Considering Bar-Tal's description of circumstantial factors and participants' responses to my inquiries about their self-censorship experiences, I identified three sub-themes that influence self-censorship: 1) The medium of communication (i.e., the channel through which the information was received), 2) timing, and 3) the level of involvement.

The Medium of Communication

Toward the end of Cooper's first interview, I asked if he had any final thoughts to share as he considered the different themes we had explored for the day. His concluding thought was that "medium matters." He reflected on how his level of openness and self-censorship varies depending on the means through which information is sent and received. Continuing, he shared:

> I exert a lot more control over things that I say in public venues. I think, maybe, there have been times when I might say something in a Zoom meeting that I might not say in an in-person meeting. I do think I'm more reluctant to speak up in an in-person context

> than a Zoom context, but I also feel more comfortable in Zoom contexts…than I do in meeting rooms with physical people around the table. And that's just me. I mean, I know people have had the reverse experience. But the mediation of the communication, I think, makes a difference.

Though Cooper's reflection was a more generalized reflection of his decision to self-censor on occasion, Kayla highlighted a similar practice within the context of her self-censorship experience at Southeast State University. Kayla's experience occurred through two different mediums–email and Zoom–among individuals with whom she had not previously formed an in-person rapport. These factors caused her to have to navigate additional layers of complexity around expressing her concerns as a contributing committee member. Attending committee meetings on Zoom was uncomfortable for Kayla, who described how those in attendance would often talk over each other making it difficult to know how to interject comments. She described how she was more likely to self-censor on Zoom and during in-person meetings. Communicating via email afterward provided her with time to think through her concerns and react in a way she felt comfortable with her response. She reflected, "I just had to sit down and write [the email] and then be okay and send it and not wait for a response. And try not to care about it because it was very tense, and I was very afraid." To her surprise, the person to whom she had written the email responded, thanked her for her contribution, and was very open to hearing her concerns. Having the option to respond through a medium of communication that was less stressful caused her to self-censor less than during the Zoom meeting.

Danielle's public-facing role at the university regularly involved communication across different mediums; besides in-person communication and email, she also considered her expression on social media and television. She chose what to discuss openly and what she self-

censored depending on the medium itself. Danielle shared her tendency to self-censor regarding personal use of social media:

> I feel like your social media is not just private anymore; it's associated with where you work or who you work with, and people read into so many things. It can be just one word in something that you've 'liked' and, all of a sudden, they think that you are behind that idea.

Danielle was personally involved in discussions around athletes kneeling during the national anthem. She described the complexities on campus surrounding the issue and the media's portrayal of athletes on social media and on television due to their personal choice to stand or kneel. Most conversations around this issue occurred in person; however, there was also a big concern about how the media conveyed a preference for kneeling or standing. Danielle encouraged her student-athletes and coaches to carefully consider 1) their reasons for kneeling and 2) how they intend to make a difference. She reflected:

> I feel for the kids that kneeled and couldn't answer those two questions, and then the picture was put out all over social media. It may come back at another time in their life, and that picture was a millisecond in their time and doesn't represent them, but it lives forever.

Two of the top-level college or university administrators who participated in my study–Thea and Spencer–described how they strategize their communication around the medium itself. For example, depending on the viewpoint, Spencer withheld his viewpoints among other leaders, opting instead to choose the best setting in which to openly discuss his stance on an issue. Primarily, out of a sense of defeat, Thea communicated less and self-censored more in leadership meetings. She preferred to send an email afterward with her concerns and alternative solutions. According to Thea, this strategy helped her prevent uncomfortable or unexpected conversations,

which happened frequently during her first few years at the university. She shared that having a chance to think things through following a meeting and sending a follow-up email has worked well for her and that usually, her request or alternative solutions are honored.

Timing

A second circumstantial factor outlined within Bar-Tal's (2017) framework, and evidenced by several participants during their interviews, was related to the effect of time on self-censorship. Time was a significant factor in Camilla's decision to self-censor. When asked to elaborate, she shared:

> I think some of it is because we had a packed agenda. We had a limited time to meet, and that was expressed at the beginning of the meeting, and this meeting was going to go pretty fast. We knew what was coming up, and then when [a faculty member] got into his thing and kept going over and over the same things, there was frustration on behalf of everybody at the table because we wanted to move on with the meeting. That was really a wasted 10 minutes. And I think when you're in an administrative role, you know how precious time is, right? It slips through your fingers. And I thought, 'If I say anything here, it is just delaying it further, and how effective could it be?'

Camilla wanted to speak up but added that the meeting would have been completely derailed and they would not have accomplished the purposes of the meeting.

Like Camilla, Tristan considered timing when choosing to speak up or self-censor. Often his decision was dictated by a meeting agenda. "We're trying to cram everything into three hours or two hours. And I just think, 'Shut up, [Tristan]. Just let this meeting go on and be over.'" Thea has become more attuned to timing as well. She described how a lot goes through her head as she weighs her options, but overall, she has become sensitized to timing while at the university.

Timing was also a theme Rosie, Kayla, and Sean discussed about their self-censorship experience, though they described this sub-theme differently from the previous participants. Their experiences revealed how they felt pressure to respond in a certain way within a particular time frame; their experiences were not influenced by meeting agendas but rather by other factors such as deadlines or expectations from leadership surrounding the timing of their responses. Sean, for example, felt pressure to produce the outcome that an administrator expected and within a specific timeframe. This task created a conflict of interest that caused him to weigh the cost of carefully expressing his views or self-censoring.

During her first interview, Rosie prefaced her self-censorship experience by mentioning an email sitting in her inbox that was waiting for her attention. She actively self-censored and weighed out the pros and cons of the response she intended to provide, knowing that time would ultimately force her to respond. As we discussed her self-censorship experience, she expressed angst because she was still not sure if or how she would communicate her concerns.

Kayla was appreciative of the opportunity to provide feedback via email following a committee meeting. She was aware that "it takes [her] time to react to something, to look at how [she's] reacting to it, to be sure [she wants] to say something and think about the consequences of saying it." Responding on the spot was difficult for her because she had often found that by the time she had found the courage to share her viewpoints openly, the moment to participate had already passed. Kayla sometimes lamented this quality about herself; however, she was beginning to embrace her preference for choosing her words carefully in the amount of time that is most comfortable. In the specific self-censorship experience Kayla shared, she had up to a week to share her feedback and concerns through email. She used that time to draft an email and review it with a mentor. "I could take time, think about the words that I shared, and then I knew

that if and when they got back to me, I would also have time to sit and think and react to what they said."

Level of Involvement

This sub-theme, like *Theme 3: Type of information*, did not add depth to my understanding of how participants make meaning of their self-censorship experiences. However, I would like to note some relevant points I observed during the data analysis. Except for one participant–Dustin–all other participants were highly involved in the issues surrounding their self-censorship experience, though at varying degrees of decision-making authority. All participants shared experiences in which they played a particular part in an area with sensitive components (see Table 4.2). As can be expected, individuals in higher-level college or administrative roles, by virtue of their responsibilities as leaders, experienced a greater depth of personal involvement in addressing challenges on campus than mid-level staff and those who serve as support staff. However, all participants considered their direct involvement and relevancy of the topic when weighing the costs and benefits of self-censoring or revealing their viewpoints. Dustin was the only participant who chose to share a self-censorship experience in which he experienced a low level of personal involvement. In his experience, he opted to remain silent about his views and could make that choice with little consequence because he "did not swim in the circles of people who were making those decisions."

Summary

In this chapter, I presented an analysis of my findings through the lens of Bar-Tal's (2017) conceptual framework for self-censorship. *A priori* themes included individual characteristics, context, type of information and circumstantial factors. An analysis of self-censorship using Bar-Tal's factors suggested a connection between university staff and administrators' motivations for self-censorship and free speech within the university setting. In

Chapter 6, I continue to explore my first research question by providing an analysis of emergent themes.

Chapter 6: Emergent Themes

Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework contributed to an understanding of self-censorship behavior in various contexts and allowed me to consider relevant themes–both those related to personal characteristics and those related to the environment–that influence self-censorship at Southeast State University. However, by removing the framework's parameters and engaging in open coding, I discovered additional themes and patterns that did not naturally fit within Bar-Tal's framework or align with the notion that self-censorship is wholly a free-speech issue. These other themes provided a greater understanding of how staff and administrators made meaning of their self-censorship experiences in a higher education setting and were predominantly focused on workplace issues. The data I collected through one-on-one interviews with 15 university staff and administrators and a thorough analysis of all participants' self-censorship experiences revealed five major themes to answer my first research question:

1. How do university staff and administrators make meaning of their self-censorship experiences?

These themes centered around factors or circumstances that influenced the decision to self-censor and provided justification for the personal choice to self-censor in particular interactions on campus, and included the following: 1) power dynamics, 2) workplace relationships, 3) avoidance of negative outcomes or labels, and 4) professionalism.

In the following sections, I present the thematic findings–themes, sub-themes, and associated concepts–in order of prevalence and prominence as they emerged during the coding process. I explored themes and sub-themes in each subsection by utilizing evidence from participants' responses. An outline of emergent themes is also provided in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1: A Summary of Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes

Emergent Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Power Dynamics	Power Within Roles
	Privilege
2. Workplace Relationships	Proximity and Trust in a Work Setting
	Discernment of the Ability to Influence Others
	Allowing Space for Others
	Efforts to Minimize Harmful or Uncomfortable Speech
	Being the New Person
3. Avoidance of Negative Outcomes or Labels	Avoiding Threats to Job Security and Advancement
	Avoiding Damage to One's Reputation and the Reputation of the University
	Avoiding Negative Repercussions
4. Professionalism	Separating Personal and Professional Speech
	Speaking When Topics Relate to Official Duties
	Navigating Unclear or Inconsistent Expectations

Theme 1: Power Dynamics

Cooper was drawn to participate in my study because of his perception that COVID highlighted the ways in which power operates in the university system. Power dynamics is a concept used by several participants in this study to describe interactions with leaders, groups, and peers within higher education where one side has more power–actual or perceived–than the others. The notion of power within roles and among privileged groups were sub-themes that emerged within this theme to describe the reasons that individuals within the scope of this study chose to self-censor.

Power Within Roles

During their first and second interviews, each participant had the opportunity to reflect on how exercising free speech rights may differ for the employee groups that make up a college or university campus–faculty, staff, and administrators. Notably, many participants identified a varying degree of power inherent within each of these roles that may influence one's level of openness or self-censorship when interacting within the university setting or representing the university externally. Moreover, each participant expressed an awareness of the free-speech parameters within their given role compared to others with whom they interact from other positions. Among each of the participants in this study, there was a perception based on lived experience that they have less power or protection attached to their speech than other groups on campus. In subsequent paragraphs, I highlighted participants' perceptions of the power within faculty, staff, and administrative roles based on their responsibility within the university environment.

Of the participants in this study, four were tenured faculty members who currently hold staff and administrative positions at Southeast State University; an additional two participants have served as contingent or adjunct faculty members in addition to their staff roles during their

careers. Despite current and former roles, the tenured and adjunct faculty members who participated in this study shared the perspective that faculty speech holds more power than staff and administrator speech. Speaking of the power that faculty have inherent within their roles, Spencer, a tenured faculty member and now top-level college or university administrator, discussed how faculty and students experience greater freedom of expression than staff and administrators. He described the freedom and power that accompanies faculty speech. “I think faculty members are there to teach [their] discipline, but [they’re] also trying to teach students to think critically.”

Camilla, who has served in faculty and administrative roles at the university, reflected on the role of faculty and the power they may have to vocalize their viewpoints. They have power because “they’re in a position where they’re respected, their opinions are sought out, they're unofficial mentors, they shape people’s beliefs and ideas.” Speaking from experience, she added, “I think that carries a pretty heavy responsibility.” Thea’s experience as a faculty member and now administrator informed her perspective that faculty members have significant leeway within the university setting because of the value they add to an academic community.

> Individual faculty can publish anything they want, ever, on any topic. We will defend them, and we have on this campus defended people very often for publishing things that were either too far to the right or to the left. That's their opinion, that's their work, that's their resume, and that's their world. And they have the right, as long as they're not cheating. That's not free speech; that's fraud.

Among mid-level and support staff members, there was a perception that tenure carries power and makes faculty members untouchable within an academic setting. Regina, who has had to monitor speech internally and externally on social media platforms, shared her understanding that professors have free speech rights *and* academic freedom. In the classroom, “[faculty are]

representing themselves and their bodies of work when they speak." Therefore, according to her, they can post on social media something that others might find objectionable or controversial, but they have a right to express that viewpoint.

Stella likewise spoke of faculty tenure as protection from losing one's job or being unnecessarily interrogated for the content of one's speech. Dustin, a former adjunct faculty member at another university, supported faculty members in being wise about their speech while acting in an official capacity. He agreed with other participants that faculty enjoy more liberty than those serving in other roles in terms of their speech. Dustin believed that faculty members do not have "free reign to espouse" opinions on subjects outside their specific disciplines despite this additional liberty.

Though not a faculty member, Sean was well-versed in the principles of academic freedom and free expression. Viewed with this perspective, he believed that student and faculty speech is vital and that there should be a greater exchange of ideas than it currently is. Like several other participants, Sean believed that it is fundamental to learning that a professor can instruct and challenge students. As an ardent supporter of academic freedom, Rosie thought that the most freedom and power to speak openly should be given to faculty members. She is conditionally supportive of "very little restriction on faculty members to say whatever they want" and "to do whatever type of research [they] want."

Reflecting on faculty speech compared to student speech, LeeAnn and Thea spoke about current challenges that faculty face that may influence their decision to self-censor despite the protections of academic freedom. LeeAnn shared:

> If you're a faculty member and you express yourself, even though as a person, that faculty member has the same rights as the students to express themselves, they may fear retribution from the students in their classroom. And retribution is strong, but they may

> worry about what the students in their classroom think, or the other people in their department, or their dean, or the administration. So, I think faculty members, while they have the same rights, may not feel as comfortable expressing themselves as a student would.

As a former faculty member, Thea was keenly aware of the power of faculty speech; however, she acknowledged the challenges imposed on faculty by the political climate that has evolved over the last decade. In her experience, she had more leeway because she worked with faculty and staff in a more extensive division on campus. Other top-level college or university administrators leading smaller divisions are "much more limited in what they can say or do." Thea believed that these and other factors created a troubling situation on campuses for all faculty, tenured and non-tenured.

Kayla and Tristan recalled the details of experiences on campus where they became aware of the difference between their roles as staff members and those of faculty members. The power dynamics, in many cases, caused them to self-censor or cautiously approach their work with others who had more power within the university setting. Kayla was working on a project at Southwest State University in collaboration with the office of equity and diversity, an office that had received negative attention from the state legislature. When the office lost funding, Kayla was unsure about how to continue with the project in a way that would not put her employment with the university at risk. Fortunately, a tenured faculty member with whom she was working on the project put her mind at ease– "Don't worry. It falls under my academic freedom...so it's fine," he shared.

Tristan, a staff member, had an experience where a faculty member used racially charged language toward him. When he shared this experience with his supervisor, he was informed that his supervisor was unable to act because that person was tenured, but that "if they were a staff

person [his supervisor] could be all over them." In addition to this troubling encounter, Tristan struggled to be a contributing member of a committee primarily comprised of faculty members. Describing his participation, he recalled:

> I also realized that my opinion is not very valid in faculty meetings. And there's been a number of times where I've been asked things, like if I would serve as a faculty mentor for a student, and I have to remind them I'm not a faculty member.

On another occasion, Tristan signed up to participate in a committee but was told that "[he] wasn't allowed to serve on the committee because [he] was a staff person. And the curriculum belongs to the faculty, so [he] was asked to leave." Experiences such as this have influenced how Tristan expresses his viewpoints when asked to serve on committees, particularly with faculty members present.

Several participants, both mid-level staff and support staff members, agreed that staff members and administrators have less speech protection than other groups. Dustin confided that he has "a palpable feeling that [he] is not faculty." Elizabeth discussed differences in free expression between faculty and other groups in terms of vulnerability.

> I think on our campus, on the [Southeast State University] campus, staff feel very vulnerable, the most vulnerable of the groups that I work with. There is no security if you share something and other people don't like it, if you share something and it's picked up by the media. If you share things for any number of reasons, and the response is negative, staff do not feel that there is support for them in those circumstances.

LeeAnn provided additional context in terms of advocacy:

> You've got faculty organizations that exist to advocate for people in that role. So, if you're teaching a class, if you're a research faculty, it appears–now I may be mistaken–that they have a little more protection and advocacy than just the general staff member.

The three participants who currently serve in top-level administrative roles provided insight into the freedom of expression for those acting as administrators. Their remarks highlighted a loss of free speech power that informs their self-censorship. According to Spencer, one's relationship to the university determines the strength of their speech. Self-censorship among administrators is, in part, a recognition that as individuals "speaking for the university," they must guard their speech in ways that faculty and students do not. Furthermore, Spencer noted that department heads and deans "can be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as speaking for the institution" because their roles are more managerial. In this regard, Spencer viewed administrative and staff roles as different than those of faculty because they are "representative[s] of the institution," which justifies reasonable constraints on speech.

For Camilla, self-censorship meant you "have a strong opinion about something and may even have related experience, but [you] don't feel that it's appropriate to share that in a public realm." Camilla has experienced these constraints during her time as an administrator. She was keenly aware that "once you are an administrative leader, your life becomes very public. You really have no realms that you can explore and share your opinion without it being a reflection of the university." Camilla believed that administrators have the "highest responsibility for being aware of what kind of impact expressing your opinion would have...because of their expanded sphere of influence." The weight of this responsibility caused Camilla to carefully approach her use of social media and even encourage self-censorship in specific settings. As a private citizen, she typically felt comfortable sharing ideas or opinions or comments about politics on Facebook; however, her administrative responsibilities have encouraged her to "become more of an observer than someone who is influencing in public." She was cautious about what she put in writing for fear that it "could be discovered or interpreted by somebody else." To protect herself,

Camilla said, “I try to make sure that everything I write or becomes public record has the complete rationale of the setting behind it, so it can’t be misinterpreted.”

Thea, the third top-level administrator, shared the change, and even loss, of power she experienced as she transitioned between roles–from faculty to department head and eventually into other administrative functions. Unlike her former roles, which were focused on department-level interactions, once you move into administrative positions beyond the department “deal with the structure of the university, and part of your job is to reflect [the] flow of information back and forth.” Reflecting on the transition from faculty to administration, she recalled:

> What I discovered here is that...I have less ability to maneuver [in my current role] than I did as a department head. I am no longer surprised, but it still really bothers me that the role I sit in is told to ‘keep your mouth shut, period.’

Despite these constraints, Thea has discovered ways to communicate the information she receives and occasionally shared what she did and did not like about university leadership’s decisions and how they affect her and her staff members. Though she sometimes has felt disempowered and made the conscious choice to self-censor, she has identified opportunities to voice her opinions because she does not “believe in happy talk.”

Though currently a staff member with no administrative experience, Rosie highlighted some key points relative to administrative speech. She recognized that administrators, such as the President and the Chancellor, must be cautious about their speech and actions because “these are people that can be recognized by the public. People assume that when they speak, they’re speaking on behalf of the university.” According to her, the university would be within its rights to restrict administrative speech to protect the university.

Privilege

A second concept within power dynamics that a few participants discussed is the notion of privilege and how it may influence self-censorship. Those who referenced privilege with power saw themselves as recipients of privilege and, therefore, viewed their occasional choice to self-censor as a positive choice to make room for the speech of others within the university setting. Cooper spoke of how he has "benefited a good deal from what they're calling *privilege* or *unearned advantage*." He has observed that his privilege has made it so that he "didn't receive push-back on things the way that some of [his] colleagues did." Additionally, Cooper has noticed that his privilege has created the occasional need to self-censor certain aspects of his identity and personality. Cooper's remarks imply that when individuals who do not experience the same amount of privilege interact in the workplace, they may choose to self-censor because of their perceived lack of power.

Elizabeth's sentiments aligned closely with Cooper's. She reflected:

> I think that if you're self-censoring out of choice, that also implies a certain amount of privilege that you have. That there are certain things I can keep to myself that other people don't know about and that, in a way, is a privilege I have.

Elizabeth saw it as a privilege and a power dynamic that influences her identity in the workplace to "choose to disclose or not certain kinds of things that relate to [her] identity...that [her] colleagues from different racial or ethnic backgrounds don't have a choice about." Elizabeth, then, saw her occasional decision to self-censor as a positive influence in the workplace. "I don't think it's a terrible thing, especially those of us in positions of privilege, to have to think harder about what we say. So, I don't experience that as bad or as self-censorship in a bad way."

Like Elizabeth, Regina sought to make space for others as a person who recognizes her privilege. During our conversation, she paused and reflected. Regina clarified how she is focused

on, “How do I just enter into a conversation respectfully so that I can listen? I think that’s where a lot of my self-censorship comes in.” When working with colleagues of color, she shared her effort to allow them to be able to speak freely. Though she did not think she is prone to offend others with her speech, she wanted to communicate that “[she] know[s] her place.” Likewise, with experience, she recognized that she has a lot to learn about her privilege and how she can use it to benefit others. “I want to be very clear that I don’t have the knowledge or the cultural competency to deal with a lot of these situations, so I just want to learn.”

Dustin said, “I am working my way through whether I speak up or not, and I’m becoming more outspoken.” He then expressed gratitude for the privilege he enjoys and that “there are a lot of things that don’t go through [his] head each day.” He was mindful that individuals who do not enjoy the same privilege may experience difficulties that cause them to withhold their genuine opinions and viewpoints. Dustin recalled a recent experience when he was participating in a search to fill a vacant position in his office. He specified that he was hoping to hire a person who was “low maintenance” and “zero drama.” During our conversation, Dustin reflected on that statement and asked: “Is that my privilege? Is that kind of just a statement of privilege? There is an element of self-censorship that I worry I encourage with a statement like [that].”

Theme 2: Workplace Relationships

The second most prevalent theme that emerged during data analysis to explain why or circumstances surrounding the decision to self-censor deals with relationships in the workplace. Five sub-themes emerged as I discussed workplace relationships with the participants in this study. These sub-themes are not focused on power–which is also relational–but rather on the importance of relationships, the factors that motivate participants to defer to others, and the desire to influence others in a professional setting. Overall, I observed that participants’ relationships with individuals with whom they interact, their perceptions of others’ openness, and

their mindfulness of others' feelings influenced the decision to self-censor, positively and negatively.

Proximity and Trust in a Work Setting

A recurring sub-theme I observed as participants spoke of their workplace relationships connected with their self-censorship experiences was the notion of proximity to others and the role of trust in creating meaningful workplace interactions. As Tristan expressed, "I think that developing a relationship and trust enables more openness and less self-censorship." Participants who discussed workplace relationships in their interviews divulged that they were less likely to self-censor their viewpoints among their immediate supervisors and colleagues. In other words, self-censorship decreased when associating with those they shared closer proximity.

Cooper was part of a team that often collaborates on professional tasks. During the pandemic, when the university charged Cooper and his team with creating instructional materials for faculty, he felt comfortable expressing to his immediate supervisor some of his reservations. He observed an openness among his colleagues to engage in dialogue as they worked together to reach solutions. Regarding the dynamics on his team, he shared that he did not recall times when he had chosen to self-censor with his immediate supervisor or colleagues. Kayla realized that she was also less likely to self-censor among those with which she interacts regularly. Sean described the group that he supervises as "a really tight-knit group" that has developed a fair amount of tolerance for one another as they have worked together. According to Sean, the proximity to one another, despite agreement and disagreement, has helped his team accept viewpoints different from their own and create an environment where they feel comfortable arguing with one another in a safe way. Despite being a top-level administrator, Thea said that she had spent time fostering relationships with her colleagues with whom she can now discuss anything.

As a newer employee at Southeast State University, Rosie compared her current experience with workplace relationships to those at her former institution in the north. In her previous role, she knew her coworkers well because they saw each other regularly and developed relationships in person. Rosie said,

> I knew them better, and I knew who I could say what to and what kind of response I would get. It was easier to know how to push back on things because I understood people, and I knew how to frame things in a way that they could relate to and understand.

Rosie started working at Southeast State University during the pandemic. At the time of her interview, she had only had minimal in-person contact with her new colleagues. Describing the contrast between her former and current roles concerning relationships, she elaborated: "I'm getting used to how much I feel a need to self-censor. I don't know a lot of my coworkers well; who can I say what to and in what ways will they respond?" Despite the newness of her workplace relationships, she described herself as someone who typically feels comfortable discussing most topics, especially with colleagues. Currently, she "just [doesn't] know [her] colleagues well enough to really know how strongly they feel about things," though she imagined that with time and proximity, she would come to know her colleagues more and would self-censor less.

In contrast to a lower level of self-censorship among immediate supervisors and colleagues, several participants spoke of an increase in self-censorship when interacting with upper-level administrators or others outside of their division. Cooper, who felt comfortable engaging in open dialogue with his immediate supervisor and colleagues, expressed reticence when interacting with the upper level of supervision." In particular, he has most strongly felt the urge to self-censor among upper administrators related to campus response to the pandemic. In his self-censorship experience, he expressed concerns about the tasks given to him and his team

by upper administrators. As he reflected on why he chose to self-censor, he recalled, “You don’t want to be the person who’s trying to put the brakes on this. You don’t want to be identified as somebody who is going to resist.”

Kayla expressed similar sentiments as Cooper. She shared: “If I was to meet with someone like outside of my little microcosm here, I am very careful about how I present myself.” Kayle reflected on when she met a former Chancellor at Southeast State University, someone to whom she rarely, if ever, was in proximity.

> I was so nervous...because I feel like if I was to say something that they didn’t like, then would it come back on [my division] and the people that I work with, and have consequences for them? You never really know because things get around here.

Sensing the influence and authority of upper administrators and knowing that she did not typically have relationships with that level of leadership, Rosie shared that she was “less concerned about what [her colleagues] think and more concerned about what leadership thinks” because “it’s the nature of working.”

Stella confided that her interactions with upper management and leadership have been positive overall; however, concerning her self-censorship experience in her first interview, she has found herself self-censoring more outside of her division. Those who work in leadership have said to Stella, “If you have any concerns or issues, please share them.” However, she has found herself in uncomfortable situations where there was minimal interest in her viewpoints despite the invitation to share. Leadership’s reaction has diminished the potential for positive collaboration between Stella and upper-level administrators and has increased her opportunities to self-censor.

When asked to describe the factors that distinguished their relationships with immediate supervisors and colleagues from individuals outside of their divisions and upper-level

administrators, participants commonly shared two factors: Trust and openness. They observed that working in proximity to others provided the potential for transparency and trustworthiness and decreased the decision to self-censor. Contrastingly, the absence of transparency and trustworthiness–found in relationships with upper administrators and unknown colleagues–increased self-censorship in the workplace.

Though a private person, Elizabeth was also profoundly empathetic toward others and their circumstances. Despite her tendency to separate personal and professional viewpoints, she was likely to be more open with people whose opinions she knew well and with whom she had "already established that there can be a free exchange of ideas or communication in a safe way." She was also more likely to converse openly with others when trust was present. Though Elizabeth was likely to self-censor to set appropriate professional boundaries, she and her colleagues knew each other well, giving her the sense that they could more openly discuss even politicized topics. One topic she discussed recently with colleagues was vaccination.

Cooper often discussed potentially controversial topics with his colleagues. He could do this because "there has been a strong kind of trust and understanding that, even if we're not going to pursue a given angle or viewpoint or something, the viewpoint itself is welcome. We'll talk about it." The relationships Cooper has developed with his colleagues have caused him, in turn, to self-censor less. In contrast, the same discussion topics among individuals outside his circle would lead to self-censorship.

As an introvert prone to self-censorship, Kayla valued trustworthiness and transparency among individuals with whom she shared proximity. When determining how to communicate with others, she considered, "Okay, I know this person well enough to know they're open and they're trustworthy." LeeAnn shared similar thoughts but in a way that resonated more with her experience: "When you know people, you know them, and you're not afraid of them." When

speaking about proximity and office relationships, LeeAnn distinguished between small groups and the bigger or broader community as she clarified parts of her self-censorship experiences. She described her reluctance to say what she really thinks freely. Likewise, she has observed similar behaviors in others. LeeAnn described the broader community as "fragmented, because as humans, we fear the different and unknown."

LeeAnn suggested that we self-censor beyond our circles because we inherently "put people and things in boxes so that [we] can better understand them." Continuing, she said, "if a person looks like this, they must be like the other people that are like this, and it's sad; it's a mistake." The antidote, according to LeeAnn, was to devote time to getting to know people personally and in small groups. For this reason, she felt comfortable among close colleagues, at church, and with family. In her experience, proximity and trust engendered less self-censorship.

Discernment of the Ability to Influence Others

The second relational sub-theme dealt with participants' ability to discern how their words will influence others. As several participants considered the costs and benefits of self-censoring their viewpoints versus speaking up in connection with other factors, they often spoke in terms of the ability to influence or change the dynamics within their work environment. Those who believed they could influence for good vocalized their beliefs or viewpoints with less hesitation. In contrast, those who thought they would lose something of value by speaking up–time, capital, or energy–usually chose to self-censor by remaining silent or conforming to the dominant speech of others.

The three top-level college or university administrators who participated in this study spoke at length about the ability to influence others within their self-censorship experiences. They described it as a defining characteristic of how they make meaning of these experiences. As Camilla explored the circumstances surrounding her self-censorship experience, she arrived at

two critical points she considered as she thought about her ability to influence others: Is the other person open to feedback? When is the best time to influence someone else?

> A lot of times, you also consider how open the person is to even receiving the input. There's a point when you wonder, 'Am I wasting my time because the words will not be perceived?' And you don't like to give up on people, but some people are so entrenched in their beliefs or their misperceptions that I don't think they'll ever come out of those unless there's something really dramatic or traumatic that impacts them.

Camilla also shared that the other major factor pushing her to self-censor was that she knew "it was not the time to be able to influence that person." Rather than speak up and create an unfavorable situation–offending her supervisor or colleagues or causing the meeting to run longer than planned–she chose an alternate way to influence by talking to the person later when there was less tension and no other impeding factors.

Thea, like Camilla, prioritized her ability to influence others and considered the degree to which her contribution would create a desired outcome. Knowing the person with whom she disagreed would not hear what she had to say caused her to self-censor, despite her usual outspokenness. Her reasoning for choosing to self-censor was simple: "I'm not gonna work myself up." Over the past few years, a dynamic has developed when Thea attends meetings with her administrative counterparts and superiors at the university. She has felt disempowered and apathetic about expressing her viewpoints during meetings. Thea often has felt that decisions directly impacting her work were made without consulting her or her counterparts. She recalled the times she has self-censored among her counterparts and superiors: "[They] should have at least talked to our [division]. And they didn't, so I know that nothing I'm going to say is going to make it *not* happen. I might as well not complain about it. We're doing it." Though engaged otherwise, she said of her interactions in these meetings, "I cannot solve this problem because

they're not gonna let me, and so I'm just going to do what they tell me to do, and we'll see what happens." Time and experience helped Thea discern when she could influence and when it would be best to self-censor to preserve her relationships and energy.

Thea also recounted the experience of being one female among many "white guys who used to be politicians...who just rattle on" and did not leave space for others to express their views. Like her experience in leadership meetings where it did not seem worth her time and energy to speak up without validation, Thea shared, "I don't say anything. I mean, there's just no point in saying anything in the meetings. It's not going to serve any purpose."

As a top-level college or university administrator who has remained focused on leaving a positive mark on the university, Spencer shared his thought process for discerning his ability to influence a particular situation or outcome.

> Here's what I think about this issue. Will sharing that in the context of this current meeting have any positive impact, or will it be a positive contribution to the ongoing conversation? If I feel it would help move the conversation in a particular direction or not, then nine times out of ten, I'll jump in and voice it. If, on the other hand, my determination is that it would be the equivalent of throwing a grenade in the room, nothing to be accomplished by that, better to keep a pin in it and then share the thought with the person afterward.

Spencer desired to limit conflict and dissonance; therefore, he was prone to self-censor when he discerned that his contribution would either generate negatively to a meeting or would not dramatically change the direction of the conversation.

Two mid-level staff members were similarly motivated to speak or self-censor within the context of their work at the university, depending on their perceived ability to create positive change. Dustin, who has been working on speaking up more, shared that he typically spoke up

when he perceived he has an ability to influence others. Similarly, Tristan reflected on his self-censorship experiences and realized his motivation to speak up diminished when he did not see the possibility of positively affecting an outcome. “Partly, I didn’t say anything because I knew it wouldn’t matter. I felt like it wouldn’t make a difference at all because it was going to play out just the way that it played out.”

Two support level staff members–LeeAnn and Cooper–considered how their viewpoints would affect outcomes and, from there, chose to speak up or self-censor. Referencing the search committee experience in which her supervisor asked her to provide honest feedback about interview candidates, LeeAnn debated whether she wanted to provide feedback at all. She did not want others to perceive her as a “Debbie Downer” but had determined from prior experience that there was limited space for all viewpoints in her division. She lamented during our conversation: “I know my organization, and in it, one doesn’t feel like one really has a voice. So why share it?” LeeAnn did not discern that her feedback had value or positively influences change, so she often felt motivated to self-censor.

When Cooper and his colleagues were tasked with creating instructional materials for faculty members during the pandemic, he described “a certain amount of openness on the part of everybody in the room to adjustments” they recommended. However, he became acutely aware as they were preparing the presentation and training of specific areas where “it’s probably not a good idea to push,” specifically when it came to providing face-to-face classroom instruction. Cooper weighed his options. He determined that he could share his views about the risk of returning to the classroom, knowing that “this [would not be] very well-received.” Contrastingly, he could self-censor, knowing that “they’re not going to change anything,” regardless of his perspective. Discerning that his ability to influence was limited, he chose to self-censor in this circumstance. Reflecting on this choice, Cooper shared, “Oh just don’t see the benefit of making

a stink about this. They're not going to do anything about it." According to Cooper, it was hard for leadership to be receptive during a period such as the pandemic. Knowing this, he recalled, "If I had a sense that raising my voice would have an effect, that there was a way that people would listen and reconsider the course of action, that would influence my decision to speak or not."

Allowing Space for Others

The third sub-theme describes when individuals were conscious of those with whom they shared space and choose to self-censor to allow space for the viewpoints of others. Several participants framed the notion of withholding judgment and being present and open to others' thoughts as allowing or holding space for others. Participants who self-censored to make space for the views of others tended to do so for positive reasons–concern for others and a desire to listen to and learn from others.

In the public-facing aspects of her work, Danielle was often approached with questions about the lives and lifestyles of the students and employees with whom she works. She learned to self-censor in this context rather than speak for her students and those who report to her. "It's their story to tell, and that's the approach that I've always taken," she shared. During her decades of experience at the university, Danielle has discovered that self-censoring to allow space for others empowers them to be thoughtful about the details of their lives they wish to share with others. This approach also helped many of them feel better about their decisions and how they choose to live their lives and has promoted remarkable growth.

As a lifelong learner, one of Elizabeth's strengths was trying not to intervene prematurely in the learning process of others. She consciously chose to self-censor in some interactions so as not to harm or interfere with the learning process out of "respect for the work that [she's] doing with the other human beings." In the self-censorship experience she shared, she described her

decision to self-censor despite her professional interests and personal opinions that differed from those of the student to allow space for that student. “I think there’s something important about the work we do with other human beings where we see them without having to insert ourselves as the topic or the center of attention.” She saw herself as “far more useful as an interlocutor” participating in a “sacred process...at this really important moment in life.” Her goal was not to “curtail, control, or negatively influence the [learning] process.” Self-censorship was the way for her to accomplish these goals.

Several participants spoke of self-censoring as a way to elevate the voices of specific groups within the university setting, including people of color and women. Spencer found issues related to various aspects of diversity intriguing; however, he admitted he felt less comfortable participating in certain conversations, particularly those that “delve into lifestyles with which [he has] so little familiarity and life experiences.” Spencer feared that if he spoke, he would be “characterizing the life experiences of others when [he has] absolutely no foundation, no basis.” Therefore, when Spencer found himself in such circumstances, he was willing to defer to others. Similarly, when Regina interacted with a colleague who was a person of color, she wanted to cautiously present information. Ultimately, she self-censored so her colleague did not feel uncomfortable and so that her colleague is able to speak freely. As a self-identified white male, Tristan believed “it’s really easy to have [his] voice heard and to take [his] space.” In his division, he said that he and other leaders are more consciously considering ways to allow space for others and “make sure that people’s voices are heard at the table.” He has had the opportunity to practice this during committee meetings where he may even be the only staff member. Specifically, Tristan shared that he has, on occasion, chosen to self-censor to ensure there is space for people of color and women faculty members.

Dustin's division was also very focused on diversity and inclusion. He recently pondered the need to self-censor.

> I really need to be careful not just about my language but what the use of certain language says about my perspective and that my perspective might be too limited. Ours is a very diverse office, and we have put a lot of time over the last year into trying to give people space who are hurting.

From Dustin's perspective, there needed to be a healthy "give and take" in collaborative environments that may, at times, required him to remain silent to allow others to voice their opinions.

Efforts to Minimize Harmful or Uncomfortable Speech

The fourth sub-theme expounds on participants' efforts to minimize harmful or uncomfortable speech. During participants' interviews, I considered the profound influence of relationships on self-censorship behavior. I observed a shared awareness of how harmful speech affects others, though participants' loose definitions of *harm* varied. Participants carefully considered reasons universities would restrict or regulate speech. They highlighted how damaging some views might be–particularly those targeting particular identity, racial, or ethnic groups–within society and on a college or university campus. Within the context of participants' self-censorship experiences, some found themselves speaking up to defend recipients of harmful speech, while the majority who self-censored did so to avoid causing harm or discomfort for others.

Camilla–the top-level college or university administrator who self-censored during a leadership meeting–spoke candidly of how she felt about the individual who continued to derail the discussion despite efforts to move forward with the agenda. "It was very obvious that everyone was very sick and tired of listening to him; people were rolling their eyes. If he were

my child, I'd say, 'Hey, shut up and listen a little bit!'" I asked her why she ultimately chose to self-censor, to which she replied, "I didn't want to shame the person."

The nature of Elizabeth's work and her personality compel her to carefully consider "the other" and consider questions such as "Is this person comfortable? Are they not? Are they shutting down? How are they feeling?" During her time as a faculty and staff member, she has concluded that "you can't feel like you're backed into a corner and have a productive conversation at the same time." Concerned with avoiding situations that cause harm and create discomfort, Elizabeth thus gauged the depth and context of her relationships with others as she determines the appropriateness of sharing viewpoints or self-censoring.

During the past two years, Kayla has deepened her commitment to being mindful of others' feelings and how she engages in conversation within the workplace. "Everybody feels like everything is the end of the world all the time." Thus, her goal was to consider productive ways to use her voice while also limiting harm. As we explored her experience serving on a committee to address issues related to diversity and inclusion, Kayla chose to self-censor out of concern that people would be hurt or become defensive by listening to her dissenting views. She explained, "I try not to get into things that I think are harmful to people's psyches." Kayla then provided a clarifying example to highlight how has engaged in difficult conversations. Kayla tried not to catch people with whom she interacts off guard to prevent creating harm or discomfort in her interactions.

Likewise, LeeAnn expressed a desire to avoid hurting others by brutal honesty. To avoid hurting others, she believed, "it's better just to keep your mouth shut...then stir things up and make people upset." According to LeeAnn, self-censorship protected both the person who self-censored and the feelings of others; however, she also understood the importance of balancing self-censorship with honesty and authenticity. "I think if you're in a situation where you're

constantly suppressing, self-censoring, you feel like you can't be your authentic self, and I think that would be a problem, personally and in the workplace."

Like Kayla and LeeAnn, Regina was motivated to self-censor to avoid creating discomfort on occasion. She reflected, "I never want to make anybody feel uncomfortable. I especially don't want to make a student feel uncomfortable around me." Like other participants, her goal was to honor her viewpoints–what was true for her and the topics about which she held strong opinions such as healthcare and women's rights–while self-censoring topics around individuals that she could harm by the content or timing of her perspectives. Regina was not religious; however, she expressed respect for the religious beliefs of others. She stated, "I would never want anyone to feel that I looked down on them." Regina made a conscious effort to be mindful of others' feelings so that they were not the recipients of harm in the workplace.

Being the New Person

A final sub-theme that emerged to explain how participants make meaning of their self-censorship experiences was the idea of being the new person in the scenario in which there is an opportunity to speak. As previously described, Rosie began working at Southeast State University during the pandemic. Not knowing her new colleagues, working remotely, and adjusting to the politics of a new state caused her to often feel like the new person stepping into a space where others were fully acclimated socially and professionally. Initially, her newness compelled her to self-censor more than she usually would choose.

The university hired Stella to build out a new team shortly before Rosie began working at the university. Stella was immediately asked to present a strategic plan for her division during her first two weeks. Being the new person influenced how she communicated–the follow-up questions she asked and the report's content. She wanted to say, "Well, wait a second. I need to assess the environment," but ultimately chose to do the work rather than risk upsetting her

superiors. Tristan was also highly motivated to self-censor when working with his former supervisor, who did not have the best relationship with the provost. Tristan was new at the time and worried that his connection to his former supervisor would tarnish his reputation. His newness led to the decision to self-censor on several occasions when he realized that it would serve him more to sit and observe.

Two participants provided deeper insight into what it was like to be a new employee and how that affected their decision to self-censor or openly share their viewpoints when they interacted with others. Cooper has learned to speak up; however, when he was asked to attend diversity meetings on campus (the specific committees will remain anonymous), he opted to stay silent, recognizing that he "wasn't a member of those bodies and yet was sitting in on them." In addition to being new, he acknowledged some related factors: "I would not tend to say much out of a consciousness of the unfamiliarity of the social situation and the sort of ambiguity of the roles."

Kayla was struck by how her newness to a diversity committee strengthened her resolve to self-censor despite being asked to serve on the committee because of her expertise and experience. As the committee meeting began, "it was clear that they all already knew one another, had worked on other things, and had been part of the committee before." But Kayla had not. Concerns that crossed her mind as she began to feel more isolated included:

> How will that dissenting opinion feel in a group where they've all worked together before, and they're all very focused on this issue? I felt like I was caught in this weird place where I didn't want to burn any bridges with this new group of people I was trying to collaborate with. I don't know them well enough to know what kind of allies and what kind of beliefs they have.

As these thoughts occurred to Kayla, she determined it was best not to jump in and share her true feelings–that the committee needed to "take a step back" and consider additional factors impacting their work. As Kayla recounted this experience, she noted that "when people don't know you, you kind of have to force your way in." Being new was difficult enough for Kayla. Sometimes she also worried for people like her who have communication styles that are more withdrawn. She contemplated: "We've got to get the courage to say the thing, and then when you say it, it comes out all frazzled and aggressive and weird because that's how you feel in your head." Kayla and others who experienced newness in their roles strategically self-censored out of discomfort with how they perceived themselves in relation to other group members.

Theme 3: Avoidance of Negative Outcomes and Labels

The third theme that emerged during data analysis that elucidated why participants self-censored dealt with avoiding negative outcomes they perceived would occur or negative labels that others could connect to them if they shared their actual viewpoints. Though some participants were less concerned with potential adverse outcomes of their speech, all participants discerned the potential for negative outcomes and were thus influenced to self-censor to minimize risk.

Avoiding Threats to Job Security and Advancement

Participants in this study valued their employment with Southeast State University and choose to self-censor to avoid situations that they perceived posed a risk to their job security or future opportunities for advancement within the university. Cooper attributed his self-censorship in certain settings to job security. As a staff member, he was aware of his status as an at-will employee and did not "have the kind of protections afforded to tenured faculty members." According to Cooper, if you valued your job, "engaging in particular topics is just something you don't do because you might offend the wrong people." Like Cooper, Rosie also self-censored at

Southwest State University because she was an at-will employee. Weighing the cost and benefit of expressing her actual concerns about the in-person event her supervisor asked her to attend, Rosie noted, "I value my job more than being able to say, 'I don't want to do this; this makes me feel unsafe and uncomfortable.'" She was trying to avoid an outcome where "somebody decides that they don't like [her] anymore" and fires her "for no reason at all whenever the university so chooses."

Regina highlighted how the satisfaction she had with her job motivated her to protect her job security. She shared, "I never want anyone to think that my opinions outside of work are going to impact my work." Thus, she carefully guarded her speech and even self-censored to avoid situations where others might view her speech as inappropriate or in need of disciplinary action. Whereas Regina actively protected her speech, Thea, who was not prone to self-censor, looked for ways to compensate for her blunt nature. She did this by trying to be helpful to those around her. When I asked her to elaborate on the connection between being helpful and self-censorship, she stated, "I'm trying to make sure that I don't get fired or have to quit." This fear led her to go above what was required by being helpful to others.

Dustin was highly motivated to self-censor to avoid threats to his job security. There was a period in Dustin's professional life where he said he was "on the outside looking in and it shaped everything." According to Dustin, losing his job would be devastating for him, so he tended to "play it much more close to the vest" as he considered opinions and viewpoints he could express in the workplace.

> I am always thinking about my livelihood, how hard it is to get a job, and if I were to lose my job what that would do to my family, what that would do to my life. There are all kinds of people who would say, 'Well, if I left this job today, I could find five more down

> the road.' I don't feel that way. I've seen people get gone in jobs because they've expressed opinions.

Of all the reasons Dustin said he could self-censor, job security is at the top of his list of reasons for being careful about his speech. Making light of the conversation, he added, "I don't envy anybody else's job on campus, but I like mine."

In contrast to the other participants who spoke more of job security, Marlena and LeeAnn were more concerned about how their viewpoints would impact their opportunities for advancement when shared in particular settings. Marlena worried about her speech in general, "Oh gosh, if I said something, I'm not gonna get promoted." LeeAnn worried that speaking up during the search committee experience and in other settings with her team would negatively impact her job in the future. "When opportunities for advancement are available, people will look back at that and say, 'Oh, I remember that time when she said *fill-in-the-blank*?'" LeeAnn did not worry as much about how others would perceive her because, according to her, "they know I'm a bit crazy anyway." She did, however, care about the "work hierarchy" and the opportunities for professional advancement she could experience in the future. The possibility for advancement caused her concern and led her to self-censor.

Avoiding Damage to One's Reputation and the Reputation of the University

Closely related to preventing threats to job security and advancement was avoiding damage to one's reputation and the university's reputation. According to Cooper, "if you get the wrong kind of reputation as an employee, you might have trouble finding a job in the future."

A few participants spoke of their decision to self-censor in relation to their fear of damaging their reputation. This fear applied to both the self-censorship experience they shared and broadly to their experience at the university. LeeAnn self-censored on occasion because she was worried that she would not be "perceived as a team player." She avoided asking questions,

particularly when interacting with her supervisor, to avoid labels like “a pest, a troublemaker, a stirring-the-pot kind of person.” LeeAnn did not feel like she was alone with these fears. “I think people are reluctant to say things that might be perceived in a negative manner, true or not.”

Marlena believed that avoiding damage to one’s reputation would contribute to competitiveness. Describing the university culture she has observed in different divisions, she shared that sometimes you have to remain silent so that colleagues and supervisors can observe your work ethic and dedication. To preserve one’s reputation, Marlena believed that commitment and dedication may, unfortunately require university employees to not complain if they are asked to work beyond normal business hours.

Dustin has viewed silence as his best and safest option on several occasions and the best way to preserve his reputation. The scenario he imagined was that the president of Southeast State University could form an impression of him that was inaccurate. Recalling the thoughts he had during his self-censorship experience, Dustin said, “I’m always cognizant of how one conversation can lead to another, and you can wind up being quoted or misquoted.” Rather than risk the damage to his reputation for sharing his viewpoints more openly, Dustin thus chose to self-censor.

Rosie, reflecting on her dilemma–to attend an in-person event during the pandemic or not–expressed her desire to ultimately avoid damaging her colleague’s perspectives of her as a new person in the office. Rosie was conflicted out of fear that her colleagues would be frustrated or angry with her if she chose not to attend the in-person event. She was especially concerned about how division leaders would perceive her. Ultimately, one of the factors that caused her to self-censor was to avoid damaging her reputation despite feeling unsafe going to the event.

Regina’s self-censorship experience was not one single event but a series of frequent interactions. She likewise experienced a similar internal conflict to Rosie. She recalled the

options she weighed when considering if or how to share her viewpoints: “I want other people to think that I’m good at [my job]. I want to be seen as someone who cares about their work, but I definitely think that I would be viewed differently.” To clarify, Regina thought the consequences of more openly sharing political viewpoints in the workplace and disagreeing with the views of particular individuals would affect her reputation as a staff member in her division.

In contrast to Rosie, and Regina, Thea was less concerned with her reputation; however, she intuited that she would have to exercise caution when determining with whom to speak, “so that you’re not perceived as a problem.” Thea perceived that she was a problem because is, under certain circumstances, naturally prone to tell people what she thought.

In contrast to other participants’ focus on maintaining a positive reputation within the university setting, Danielle’s self-censorship was influenced more by avoiding damage to the university’s reputation. As a staff member in a public-facing role, her concern for the university’s reputation was paramount. Danielle’s tactic for preserving the university’s reputation within the community and nationally required her to self-censor in two ways: 1) on social media and 2) by removing herself from certain activities or social movements. As she liked to say, “We want to stay on message with what the university is saying.” She shared, “I feel like your social media is just not private anymore; it’s associated with where you work or who you work with, and people read into so many things.” Danielle noted how with social media, “it can change so quickly that you have to be ready to deal with it and then know the consequences.” Having witnessed the damage that social media can cause to individuals and the university, Danielle erred on the side of caution and preferred self-censorship online. These days, she only “post[s] things that either promote an event that [she is] going to or [her] dogs” to avoid messaging that could harm the university. Danielle was likewise cautious with the events and even protests in which she chose to participate on her own time. “I probably wouldn’t show up in

all my [SSU] gear, you know?" When asked to attend events, she reserved the right to decline if she felt attendance would risk her reputation or that of the university.

Aside from carefully navigating her speech to protect the university's reputation, Danielle has tried to instill in the students and employees with whom she works that they can make their own decisions. Still, they should "remember who they represent." In former years at the university and before social media, Danielle recalled defining who one represents as an easy task. According to Danielle, "it's not that easy anymore."

Avoiding Negative Repercussions

Several participants spoke of consequences that could occur if they were to express their true feelings. Some participants spoke of the fear of negative repercussions or ramifications in general terms, while others shared more specific outcomes that could transpire that they would prefer to avoid. Participants who spoke of avoiding adverse outcomes or negative repercussions often identified more significant issues–damaging professional relationships, losing legislative support, disappointing a supervisor or colleagues, or drawing negative attention to the university. My analysis of responses relative to this concept was that self-censoring occurred independently of participants' natural inclinations to self-censor. Instead, it was a choice based on contextual factors that outweighed the personal preference for self-censorship or openly sharing viewpoints.

In her role at the university, Elizabeth worked with "opposite communities" in which there is a historical tension. Elizabeth experienced both an internal conflict–because she did have her views to consider–and was aware of the need to avoid external conflict between these opposing groups. Elaborating on this conflict, she shared, "Both sides want you to make strong statements about their own political engagement, and you can't. You cannot do that and do the job that you've chosen to do." To preserve peace between these opposing communities and her

professional integrity, Elizabeth believed that self-censorship would be the safest route to avoid potential adverse outcomes that conflict would cause.

Kayla's referenced her involvement with LGBTQ initiatives on campus as "high stakes." Internally, Kayla explained that as she has worked with members of the LGBTQ community, "you run into so many people who have been hurt so much that they don't have a lot of give left. Historically, if you've worked at [SSU] and you've done this kind of advocacy, you've been dismissed or censored." There are also external pressures beyond the university. Referencing the defunding of the university's center that provides LGBTQ support, Kayla described the pressure she and others who worked with the LGBTQ community felt because "there's always legislators [who] are paying so much attention to [SSU] all the time." Internal and external factors created a situation where "the area for making a mistake is so small. It's high stress and high stakes, and it's people's lives...it's a lot of pressure." Due to the volatile nature of her work and the potential for conflict, Kayla has learned to approach her advocacy work with caution and often has self-censored to avoid negative outcomes. I asked Kayla to comment on the specific negative repercussions she wanted to avoid, and she shared a list of potential negative consequences.

> I had this feeling if I dissented in this group, that I would be written up, I would be excluded from things, and my opinion would be kind of disregarded because I wasn't supportive or part of the team. I felt like it should have been said, but I was afraid of what would happen to my goals and the committee if I said anything.

LeeAnn feared negative repercussions "from higher up the food chain" if she provided an honest evaluation of the candidates that she was asked to review as part of the search committee: "It was difficult in evaluating the candidates because of the fear that it would be tied back to me. I felt unable and unwilling to be completely honest because of fear of repercussions." Speaking in more general terms of self-censorship, LeeAnn conjectured:

> That's another reason I think why people self-censor. They either know or believe that whatever they have to say [will] not be accepted or recognized, [or] thought upon, and it might be actively rejected, or there'll be ramifications. So, I think people are reluctant to say things that might be perceived in a negative manner.

It was evident that Rosie did not want to attend an in-person event when her supervisor expected her to do so during the pandemic. What kept her from proactively sharing her concerns was fear of causing conflict and experiencing other unforeseen negative outcomes. In Rosie's mind, several things would have transpired if she had chosen to vocalize her preference for not attending an in-person event.

> Now I'm causing conflict in the workplace. Now I'm disagreeable. And I don't want those things either, so it's a struggle. Now I've made some of my coworkers irritated with me, my department suffers because we're not adequately represented at this event with faculty members. I don't want to deal with that. It's unnecessary conflict.

In Rosie's case, fearing these adverse outcomes served as a direct impetus for self-censorship. She shared that she would attend despite her strong opposition to the in-person event during our conversation. "I've already decided. I can't say no. I probably would, but we need two people from each subunit. So, I'm going to keep my mouth shut."

Tristan recalled the fear that existed around a former supervisor that directly affected his experience in the workplace and the confidence he felt in openly sharing viewpoints and recommendations for the work within his division. Though he thought he was on her good side, he knew that others had unfavorable relationships with her. But he "didn't know where the boundary was," so he approached his interactions with caution and fear and often chose self-censorship to avoid the uncertainty of adverse outcomes. To avoid being caught in a situation with his supervisor where he was the recipient of negative feedback or even yelling, Tristan

"rehearsed how [he] would respond when and if she yelled at [him]. "I can't deal with that," he shared. "I'm not going to have somebody yelling at me in the workplace. It doesn't matter who they are. And so, we practiced it. It didn't happen, which was good, but I was definitely prepared for that."

Theme 4: Professionalism

The fourth and final theme contributing to understanding how university staff and administrators made meaning of their self-censorship experiences was professionalism. I use the term *professionalism* to describe the associated concepts related to how participants prioritized professional duties and expectations and how professionalism among university staff and administrators influenced the decision to self-censor at Southeast State University. A strong sense of professionalism compelled study participants to choose self-censorship during specific professional interactions. For example, Stella recalled, "I think I've always self-censored to the point of professionalism." Likewise, Dustin noted that "the word professionalism can mean some level of self-censorship or coding or 'not keeping it real.'" According to Dustin, self-censorship for the sake of professionalism happens in many professions and definitely in higher education.

Separating Personal and Professional Speech

Within the theme of professionalism, a pattern that emerged among study participants to justify self-censorship was the notion that their roles as staff and administrators require them to separate personal opinions and viewpoints from professional speech. In professional settings, self-censoring by conscientiously considering personal and professional views has enabled university staff and administrators to maintain an appropriate professional image. According to Cooper, prioritizing professional speech in the university environment has been a fairly common experience for people in professional lines of work. He shared, "We see a lot of counterexamples all the time that lend us to say, 'I'm not gonna say anything now.'"

Elizabeth described herself as a private person who values the free exchange of ideas and communication in a safe way; however, when sharing personal viewpoints in the workplace, she was "probably going to be guarded." First, she did not "ever want to do something that shuts down a potential collaboration or relationship." Second, during a time of increasing polarization, she felt compelled to "keep some of [her] cards on her chest." Elizabeth made peace with separating personal values and professional responsibility and declared adamantly, "I wouldn't have taken a job in the university if I weren't willing to do that." She found a balance by choosing her words with intention.

> I've always been really clear about if I am working in an official capacity. I think that there is a certain amount of personal information that I don't need to share with students or with other human beings because I think it could hurt, rather than help, the mission of the university. That's maybe a different perspective than some of the other people you might interview who might find that to be a shackle. I've always considered it can be part of the service or part of what's going to be required if I want to play the roles that I'm playing at the university.

As an example, Elizabeth shared a conflict she experienced between her personal views and professional responsibilities. She had preferences or views about organizations that fund research that may differ from the preferences of the university or faculty and students; however, one of her main duties was to help students and faculty participate in research opportunities. She explained, "If [someone on campus] comes to me with students who want to participate in [research that contradicts my personal views], it is not my place to tell them whether or not that is an appropriate venue for their creative talents." She has learned to separate personal preferences and causes for which she would or would not advocate from "support[ing] faculty and students in pursuing those research opportunities that are central to their own career

outcomes." I asked Elizabeth to connect this personal and professional speech separation to self-censorship. She replied:

> I wouldn't share–even if asked–my own opinion. I would just simply not respond, or I would find another way to shift the conversation away from my own opinion. You don't necessarily attempt to try and influence those decisions, especially with students, right? It really has to be student driven.

Camilla was also motivated to self-censor because she is "intensely private;" however, she was also motivated by a strong sense of professionalism. It behooved her in the university environment and when acting as a public figure to separate personal and professional viewpoints. Whereas she was inclined not to withhold her views at home, she did not feel comfortable airing political and religious beliefs in person or on social media, given her role at the university. She reflected:

> Maybe we're not teaching professionalism anymore or expectations of being human and having just fundamental respect for other people. I've got faculty who are Facebook friends. And I have to be careful what I share on Facebook. I can't call out someone for being stupid or misinformed or ignorant or having cone vision. I restrain myself.

Marlena, like Camilla, self-censored by separating personal and professional viewpoints to accomplish her goal of remaining neutral. She acknowledged during her interviews that "individual[s] have rights and responsibilities regarding free speech and self-representation. We don't leave that at the classroom door when we walk into work." However, to Marlena, being a leader required her to be approachable and an advocate for others. She believed in her ability to influence students for good and that she was "representing something larger than herself." For Marlena, this meant self-censoring or deemphasizing her religious beliefs unless students

initiated deeper conversation. “I have to watch and make sure I’m representing whatever my name tag says I'm here for.”

Regina revealed that in her role in communications, there were often opportunities to separate personal feelings from the work she and her colleagues were asked to perform. She explained, “I want to be professional, and I want to be able to set my personal opinions and feelings aside.” As an employee who supervises a team and has some public-facing responsibilities, she wanted to be seen as professional and respectful and capable of “separating out the other part.” Self-censorship enabled her to do her accomplish these goals. Regina has had the opportunity to interact with students more frequently in recent semesters. Her approach to sharing details about her profession has been to be as candid as she can with students, while separating personal political viewpoints from relevant information about her work.

Speaking When Topics Relate to Official Duties

As participants discussed how their focus on professionalism influenced their decision to self-censor on occasion, a second related concept emerged. Setting aside other factors that led to self-censorship, some participants reported that when weighing the costs and benefits of expressing a particular viewpoint, their perspective simply fell outside the parameters of their job at the university. In other words, some views were easily reconciled as worthy of self-censorship because they were unrelated to official duties within the scope of one’s role. As Sean explained, “Maybe it gets the job done to avoid certain things, and that’s appropriate.”

Dustin, one of the participants who was strongly motivated to self-censor to preserve his professional image and reputation, sarcastically stated, “Unless my job is opinion espouser, I'm not sure that me espousing my opinions on things is accomplishing my professional task.” On a more serious note, he clarified his desire to adhere to basic rules of professionalism and do a good job within his realm of responsibility. “There’s probably a lot that I don’t talk about unless

it falls in line with my job, which is the success of students here." Though several factors influenced Dustin's decision to withhold his actual viewpoints relative to how the university responded to a diversity and inclusion issue on campus, he ultimately self-censored because he did not have a personal or professional investment in the event.

Reflecting on the times when she has self-censored at Southeast State University, Rosie has been able to justify her decision because her viewpoints did not align with her work. Though she was passionate about some of the political themes that surfaced in her work environment, she opted to remain silent or conform because political discussion often led to unnecessary tension or disagreement" and was "mostly irrelevant to our jobs." Regina shared a similar perspective–that certain political viewpoints are her opinions alone. She stated, "It doesn't impact the work that I do, so I just think there's not much reason for me to bring it up."

When considering the viewpoints or beliefs that she would like to share in the workplace, Marlena shared two questions that have helped her determine the appropriateness of self-censorship: "What is my role? What is it I'm trying to accomplish in my role?" As a mid-level staff member with supervisory responsibilities, Marlena knew she was "not the highest link in the chain." She acknowledged, "I know the organizational structure; I know where I fall on there." Within her responsibilities was a need to advocate for her team. Marlena expressed, "I am willing to go to bat for them." Outside of these guardrails, she identified opportunities to self-censor because the viewpoints she could share are unrelated to her fundamental responsibilities at the university.

Navigating Unclear or Inconsistent Expectations

Though participants were motivated to perform professional duties, a few expressed how performing their professional duties was sometimes hindered due to unclear or inconsistent expectations within the work environment. This lack of clarity affected their interactions with

leadership and served as an impetus for self-censorship. For example, Sean divulged that at the time of his interview, though working under favorable circumstances, he was still trying to acclimate to a new office space and new supervision. He shared:

> Part of that is having my supervisors educate me about how they like things to go, but me also convincing them that this [task] is something that I am experienced enough to know to be able to tell you that maybe we shouldn't spend too much time on this, you know? I think part of it is just really a learning curve.

Navigating unclear expectations that would likely resolve themselves with time created a situation where Sean was uncertain about how to best articulate his concerns, so he opted to self-censor.

Thea observed while performing her administrative duties that sometimes the university missed opportunities to be consistent. Referencing the times when she had chosen to self-censor because her viewpoint would not make a difference, she stated adamantly, “We already have a rule. I’ve been saying it for ten years–‘Let’s enforce the freaking rule.’ But they did nothing. They didn’t tell anybody. They didn’t figure out a way to enforce.” From Thea’s perspective, the inconsistency made her less willing to engage. Instead, she refrained and found her own way of identifying solutions.

Tristan was the participant who attributed his self-censorship to a lack of clarity surrounding expectations. He cited numerous instances where he simply did not know how to add his voice despite his professional motivations because he “didn’t know the rules.” His former supervisor assigned him a series of tasks, which he discovered were part of other employees’ job descriptions.

> And so, I called the meeting, and I brought other people around the table, and one woman was really mad, and she was like, 'I don't understand why this was given to you. It's my job, and it's been my job for six years.' I had no idea.

But he was afraid to talk to his supervisor, who was known throughout the college for making people cry. Tristan was well-liked by this supervisor but confessed, "I didn't know where the boundary was. I didn't want to bump into it." This fear made it preferable to self-censor.

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided an analysis of the emergent themes that relate to how university staff and administrators at Southwest State University made meaning of their self-censorship experiences. Open coding of participants' experiences revealed that self-censorship is a workplace issue entirely separate from free speech. The emergent themes I presented, in order of prominence and prevalence, included power dynamics, workplace relationships, avoidance of negative outcomes and labels, and professionalism. In Chapter 7–the last chapter where I present findings–I will address the second research question associated with my research and provide a synthesis of *a priori* and emergent themes to demonstrate how participants engaged in the self-censorship decision-making process.

Chapter 7: Analysis of the Self-Censorship Decision-Making Process

This chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section, I revisit the second research question associated with this study and explored participants' attitudes toward and understanding of the First Amendment and free speech on college campuses. In the second section, I present participants' feedback regarding the effect of campus policies and free speech-related incidents on their decisions to self-censor. Lastly, I analyze the self-censorship decision-making process from four participant cases that were richer in detail to highlight the significance of both *a priori* and emergent themes when considering self-censorship in the higher education environment.

Participants' Understanding of Free Speech

The research question that guided the second interview was:

2. How do campus policies and attitudes, and responses toward speech on campus influence the decision to self-censor?

To prepare for an exploration of the themes associated with this question, I designed my protocol to focus first on participants' understanding of free speech as outlined in the First Amendment– how they view the practice of free expression in higher education, and the degree to which they believe the university should regulate free speech. Table 7.1 includes a quotation from each participant highlighting their understanding and knowledge regarding the First Amendment in higher education.

Overall, the staff and administrators who participated in this study supported free speech and viewed it as a critical element within higher education that, when properly exercised, grants space for faculty to engage in scholarly pursuits and allows students to challenge diverse viewpoints and grow through open dialogue. Notably absent from their comments was a reference specifically to free speech for staff and administrators.

Table 7.1: Participants' Attitudes and Understanding of the First Amendment in Higher Education

Participant	Quotes
Camilla	Ultimately, I think people have freedom of speech, but they have to be aware of what those words engender.
Cooper	I'm drawn to the idea that people should be free to try things out in a college or university environment that they might not try out in other parts. The idea that there's a space where you can try things out, where we ought to be able to have a conversation that's edifying and valuable to the participants, even if the topic is difficult or comfortable.
Danielle	I think it's important to hear different viewpoints, or read different authors, or go see the movie that everybody's talking about that's controversial and see what you think about it. I think it's just the ability to make your own decision. But then, if you don't agree with it, what are you going to do about it?
Dustin	I don't think hate speech is free speech. Or at least threatening speech is not free speech. One time that speech should be restricted is in times of hate speech, period. I just don't think that should be tolerated from anybody–student, faculty, staff, or administration.
Elizabeth	I think we, and [SSU] especially, deal with the same tension on our campus and there is the importance of being able to think and speak about significant issues that some people may find difficult or uncomfortable. That does need to happen on college campuses. We need to be capable of evaluating different perspectives, different frameworks, different points of view and assessing them, not only for their accuracy, but also, we want our students to be able to be thinking, reflective human beings.
Kayla	[Higher education] is a super interesting microcosm because you have the free speech of your instructors and their academic freedom. At the same time, you want to make sure that they're actually doing a good job and their whole job is to give information. I guess it's necessary. And then for students, the same thing. You want them to have that academic freedom to express ideas and then be faced with people who may not agree with those ideas. This is a space to challenge those things in a way that's not aggressive to that person. It's about the ideas. But, you come to a university and you have a handbook and in the handbook it says, "This is how we expect you to conduct yourself." And so, you have to abide by that to be part of the community.
LeeAnn	If you grow up or you live in an echo chamber, you don't grow, you don't expand your thoughts. You think that your way is the only way of thinking of things. But if in a university setting or otherwise you hear other people's perspectives, which they have the right to freely express, then it's a win-win. Sometimes people will express things that make other people uncomfortable. You would like to not be uncomfortable, but in discomfort we grow sometimes.

Table 7.1 Continued

Participant	Quotes
Marlena	Because we're in America, you have the right for free speech, but it cannot be hateful or harmful kinds of speech. I think of student incidents where students are slinging slurs out of windows as students walk past like from the dormitories and things, that's not the environment we want to have students in. It's hurtful. It's not mature. But I feel like students should still have the right to express themselves and that's where I think the educational arena can be paramount in teaching young adults and others how to have dialogue that is volatile, but in a healthy, educational kind of way so that all viewpoints are heard, nothing is squelched.
Rosie	I am part of a large extension of the government and so if Congress can't make laws restricting speech, does that apply also to the states and does that apply to whatever we are in relationship to the state? Maybe not the state itself, not like state legislature, but state-funded institutions? I don't know.
Regina	Hate speech is not actually a legal term, at least that's my understanding of it. Hate speech is protected because what *you* think is hate speech and what *I* think is hate speech may be different. But I think that's a thing that a lot of colleges have to deal with.
Sean	There needs to be a way for teachers and students to have an exchange about things that are potentially controversial or that challenge students and challenge professors to teach better.
Spencer	My own view is that university campuses should be bastions of free speech. That if there's any place in our society where an individual should be able to be exposed to or choose to be exposed to a wide diversity of viewpoints, that should be the domain of universities. In my view, yes, a student should be exposed to Critical Race Theory. Is that the only model of social interaction or social history that they should be exposed to? And the answer there is no. But they should be exposed to many, many different theoretical representations or understandings of our society and how we got to where we are, but to throw something out is not the way we should act.
Stella	[Free speech is] the ability to communicate or voice one's opinion open without prosecution. We have the ability and flexibility to be a little bit more open with voicing our opinions, I think probably more so from a student's standpoint. I think there's more protection and the ability to speak up than with faculty or staff because there's other things that we are aware of, or political climate that we have to watch what we do or do not share. But I think it's open.
Thea	Part of what government is for is to regulate things for the good of the community. Individual faculty can publish anything they want, ever, on any topic. We will defend them, and we have on this campus defended people very often for publishing things that were either too far to the right or to the left. That's their opinion, that's their work, that's their resume and that's their world, and they have the right. It's okay to spew nonsense, as long as I have a disclaimer, "This is nonsense. I just like to say it."
Tristan	[Free speech is] I think just the idea of being allowed to speak one's own beliefs or opinions on things. I think two parts of that that I keep in mind professionally: one is sort of being aware of like the designation of "this is my opinion, not speaking on behalf of the university," if I'm at the university in that role. And then the other, and I hate to say this, but I tend to always think freedom of speech, freedom of anything, it doesn't mean it's freedom without consequences.

Though there is general support for free speech in higher education, and participants were able to provide tangible examples of its value and importance, most participants advocated for free speech regulation or restriction in a higher education setting. They attempted to articulate those parameters during their interviews. A few were supportive of restricting harmful or hurtful speech, specifically. According to Camilla, "there's a limitation on free speech that when it damages other people then it's the same thing as a weapon." She described this as a "fine line" and presented the following question when determining speech regulation: "Is this speech respectful of the other person?" Cooper also discussed the notion of hurtful or harmful speech in the context of free speech regulation.

> There's a strong interest in allowing people to present their authentic selves and to bring the full range of experiences into play in any given conversation. But that doesn't justify people who want to say hurtful things and treat that as though it's an expression of their authentic self. The question for the university, I think, is to figure out what are our containment procedures and what is the kind of connection to harmful practices that we want to invoke as we allow or disallow certain kinds of speech.

Sean, who supported some restrictions on speech, discussed harmful speech as overtly antagonistic speech that does not add value to an academic community. In such circumstances, Sean believed the university must respond. He explained, "Restrictions, I think should be applied to people whose intent is to cause antagonism and it's hard to tell what the content of the antagonism is." He then referenced an incident on campus a couple of years ago.

> There are times when I think the university has maybe gone a little too far in restricting certain speakers from coming to campus and being allowed to have a forum. On the other hand, there are times when I think they probably haven't gone far enough. I remember when we had sort of an outcry about the Neo-Nazi group that came here, and they were

> allowed, as I recall, to speak, but there was a pretty big protest that went on. I think that that might be an example of a group that's really here in order to inflame passion first, and there certainly are some ideas they have, and maybe those should be discussed. But I don't know that that's the right forum for it. I do definitely support some restrictions on free speech. No right is absolute.

A question posed by LeeAnn during our discussion about speech restriction and regulation is an important one to consider: "Where do you draw the line?" Several participants expressed the need for speech restriction while drawing attention to "gray areas" that make this work cumbersome when discussing this theme. Like LeeAnn, Regina drew attention to these areas where it is "not black and white." Her role has caused her to reflect on these areas.

> You have the right to express yourself, but if what you're expressing makes another student feel unsafe, they have a right to a safe education. There are laws about that. But how do you draw that line? You don't have to be directly threatened to feel unsafe.

Thea and Rosie noted the tension between the official speech of the university versus the unofficial speech. Above Thea's role, she said, "there's this whole other layer of the university administration needing to regulate the official speech of the university. The whole question is, 'What is official speech and what isn't?'" According to Thea, this is an important question to clarify because "it upsets the legislators, and then they get mad at us." Rosie has also attempted to identify this line between professional and personal speech. While operating in an official capacity, she expressed that it makes sense "for [her] speech to be restricted somewhat." Outside of her professional role, she admitted, "I don't know where that line is. Maybe it only applies to Presidents and Chancellors" and others who serve in highly visible positions to the public. For individuals in these roles, she said, "I don't know if the university does impose restrictions on them, but I think it should be well within their ability to do so."

To remove the ambiguity surrounding speech regulation or restriction, Elizabeth emphasized the importance of the context in which speech occurs and clarifying policies that may be in conflict. She explained, “If you’re really going to look at people’s speech, then you really have to look at people’s speech in the context that it’s in and really understand it.” Rather than speaking of speech in terms of regulation or restriction, she recommended creating guardrails around free speech because “there are certain things that you cannot do.” She believed free expression and the public good is constantly negotiated and that we should not talk about “freedom of speech without talking about those other contextual pieces that work in tandem.” Elizabeth also advocated for identifying and clarifying policies that may create conflict around speech and speech regulation on campus. For example, the Campus Free Speech Protection Act clarifies that speech should not be silenced even if reprehensible; however, the university civility code outlines respectful speech expectations. Elizabeth noted the conflict and lack of clarity between these two policies and that it’s a “really hard thing to navigate.”

The Effect of Policy and Speech Incidents on Self-Censorship

Understanding participants’ knowledge of and attitude toward free speech and their opinions toward speech regulation prepared them for a more focused discussion about campus policies and speech-related incidents and how these areas influenced the decision to self-censor. The participants and I transitioned into a discussion targeting the second research question by reviewing an excerpt from the Campus Free Speech Protection Act (2019) publicly available on the Southeast State University website. Participants had varying levels of familiarity with this legislation. Six participants–Camilla, Cooper, Elizabeth, Regina, Thea, and Tristan–were familiar with the bill, knew some of the context in which the legislation was developed, and had read through it before. Three of these participants had faculty experience and considered the language in the legislation more through a faculty lens. The other three participants familiar with

the legislation worked in roles that required a certain level of familiarity with the legislation. The remaining participants–predominantly support and mid-level staff members–were unfamiliar with the Campus Free Speech Protection Act, but knew it existed, or did not know it existed. Our review of the language during their interview was the first time they had the chance to read through and consider the implications of such a law at Southeast State University.

After discussing the Campus Free Speech Protection Act, participants and I explored the details of several speech-related incidents that transpired on campus between 2017 and 2021. I shared a brief overview of each incident. I prompted participants to share what they heard about the incidents, their opinions about how campus leadership responded, and additional details if they were personally involved in decision-making or responses surrounding the incidents on campus or in the community (see interview protocol in Appendix A).

After exploring campus policies and speech-related incidents, we revisited the notion of self-censorship to discuss connections between the decision to self-censor and the free speech environment at Southeast State University. Overall, participants did not attribute their self-censorship to campus policies or free speech incidents, though admittedly, some participants noted how these areas added to the micro context that, on occasion, influenced their decision to self-censor. Though participants had feedback to share about the policy and campus incidents regardless of prior familiarity, the context provided by these incidents was only one of several other factors that led to their decisions to self-censor. Reflecting on how policy and campus speech incidents influence his decision to self-censor, Dustin shared:

> Honestly, I don't think of [self-censorship] in terms of the free speech policy. I think of it more along the lines of things that we talked about last week: Professionalism and enjoying the benefits of a paycheck. Maybe after this conversation, I will reframe that a little differently, but right now, that's not the driving factor in my self-censorship.

Regarding campus policies and speech incidents, Thea clarified, “These incidents have not made me self-censor my speech. In fact, I think for me, it's created the opportunity to be courageous.”

Contrastingly, Cooper and Spencer believed that campus policies and speech incidents have affected self-censorship, though they did not identify a way to measure the impact. Cooper expressed adamantly, “Well, I don’t see how it can’t, how it wouldn’t.” Citing his involvement with the professor from Arts and Sciences, he lamented what this experience taught him:

> The university will not step in to help faculty members when they’ve said something out of line or done something problematic. The fear is that the university won’t be helpful about things, and the university won’t defend what they do in terms of the way they carry out what they would see as professional speech.

Spencer believed campus policies and speech incidents have undoubtedly created a “chilling effect on conversations” where members of the campus community observe how the university responds and then conclude, “Well, rather than risk it, it’s probably best that I just not go there.”

An Analysis of Self-Censorship Cases

As I discussed in the section where I reported findings related to Bar-Tal’s (2017) *a priori* themes, context–occurring at both macro and micro levels–contributed to participants’ decision to self-censor. Campus policy and speech-related incidents were part of the micro context; however, these were only two of many factors that influenced participants’ decision to self-censor. I assumed that campus policy and speech-related incidents would have played a more influential role in self-censorship. However, during each participant’s second interview, I observed that participants might not have naturally taken their responses in that direction had I not guided us into a discussion about policy and incidents. Though these areas influenced self-censorship, other more significant social and environmental factors led participants to engage in

self-censorship. Other factors influencing self-censorship outside of Bar-Tal's framework–including power dynamics, workplace relationships, professionalism, and avoidance of negative outcomes and labels–were previously outlined in the emergent themes chapter.

Having explored *a priori* and emergent themes that provide crucial insights into how university staff and administrators made meaning of their self-censorship experiences, the following sections contain a synthesis of four participants' experiences whose cases were especially rich in detail. Specifically, I analyzed their processes that led to the expression of viewpoints or self-censorship in the speech incidents they shared using the structure that Bar-Tal's self-censorship model provides. Viewing the factors that influenced the decision-making process from the participants' perspective rather than by theme revealed other patterns.

Camilla: A Top-Level College or University Administrator

Camilla chose to self-censor in a leadership meeting where she and other administrators discussed issues around classroom instruction and vaccination. Several factors influenced her decision. First, Camilla, by disposition, was prone to self-censor in a professional environment unless she observed injustice or unfairness. She was motivated to seek congruency with her values and used her influence to create alignment with those values. In the self-censorship experience she shared with me, she chose self-censorship because–sensing no injustice or unfairness–she recognized an opportunity to listen and learn.

Second, the macro and micro context of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a rich backdrop to the leadership meeting that Camilla attended and created a greater depth of sensitivity for her and others and influenced how she expressed her viewpoints. Third, timeliness played an influential role in Camilla's self-censorship experience. As a participant in a meeting in which she was not the facilitator, she was aware of a "packed agenda" and several issues to address. She recognized that speaking up and sharing her viewpoints to oppose the individual

who had dissenting views would have created the need for subsequent meetings and left certain agenda items unresolved.

Fourth, though not a dominant factor in this specific self-censorship experience, Camilla shared her perspective on power dynamics and how her role required neutrality and caution when expressing her viewpoints. Likewise, she saw how her role could influence others for better or for worse. Though her speech has power, the nature of her role caused her to withhold her viewpoints in specific settings, particularly those which were more public. Fifth, Camilla carefully considered her relationship with individuals with whom she interacted and was guided by their level of openness and her ability to influence. She often chose self-censorship when she perceived that expressing her viewpoints would fall on deaf ears. Sixth, in terms of professionalism, Camilla was an administrator who understood her responsibilities and sought to separate personal and professional viewpoints to better align with the university in a public space.

Ultimately, it was the assessment of the risk of speaking up, which I observed as the critical factor that led to Camilla's decision to self-censor. In other words, she had to consider–whether consciously or subconsciously–the risk of speaking up and a negative outcome that she wanted to avoid. In her case, she was trying to prevent further derailing the meeting even though she knew that others would have agreed with her had she chosen to speak up. The fear of creating a negative outcome outweighed all other factors. Table 7.2 includes excerpts from Camilla's self-censorship experience that align with these *a priori* and emergent themes.

Elizabeth: A Mid-Level Staff Member of Administrator

Elizabeth and Camilla shared some individual characteristics: They both valued privacy, sought out work that aligned with their values, and preferred observation and listening, to speaking.

Table 7.2: Camilla's Self-Censorship Experience

Theme	Quotes
Individual Characteristics	I would say, if I am extremely passionate about something then I'm likely not to self-censor. But most of the time if I don't see unfairness, if I don't see something that is blatantly wrong, I would have a tendency to watch and wait and listen and learn. Injustice is one of those things that sets me off, though.
Context	We were at the leadership meeting and [the chancellor] was trying to talk about moving ahead and getting students in the classroom and what it was going to take to do that. And the shift was from us protecting students to students taking responsibility for themselves because the vaccines are available. And you don't like to give up on people, but some people are so entrenched in their beliefs or their misperceptions that I don't think they'll ever come out of those unless there's something really dramatic or traumatic that impacts them. The pandemic and those people who get sick with COVID and they're dying and they say, "I wish I'd gotten the vaccine." Well, that's a pretty dramatic change of mind. So, I think when you influence people as an administrator, there are multiple ways to do it and everybody has their own style. And I think mine is on a more personal basis.
Circumstantial Factors	I think some of it is because we had a packed agenda. We knew what was coming up and then [a faculty member] got into his thing and kept going over and over the same things; there was frustration on behalf of everybody at the table because we wanted to move on with the meeting. And he kept repeating the same thing over and over and over again. You could see everybody wanted to move on. And, as it was, we didn't even get to finish with the entire agenda. And I think when you're in an administrative role, you know how precious time is, right? It's slips through your fingers. And so, I think that was the frustration that was on everybody's faces and I thought, "If I say anything here it is just delaying it further, and how effective could it be?"
Power Dynamics	I think that probably the highest responsibility for being aware of what kind of impact expressing your opinion would have probably resides with administrators just because of their expanded sphere of influence. And then I think next, probably faculty because they're in a position where they're respected, their opinions are sought out, they're unofficial mentors, they shape people's beliefs and ideas. Once you are an administrative leader, your life becomes very public. You really have no realms that you can explore and share your opinion, without it being a reflection of the university.
Workplace Relationships	A lot of times you also consider how open the person is to even receiving the input. There's a point when you wonder, "Okay am I wasting my time because the words will not be perceived?" It was not the time to be able to influence that person.
Professionalism	Maybe we're not teaching professionalism anymore or expectations of being human and having just fundamental respect for other people. I've got faculty who are Facebook friends. And I have to be careful what I share on Facebook. I can't call out someone for being stupid or misinformed or ignorant or having cone vision. I restrain myself.
Avoidance of Negative Outcomes or Labels	I think other [administrators] would have chimed in. Yeah, and then the meeting would have been completely derailed and we would never have gotten through anything.

Several excerpts from my discussions with Elizabeth are included in Table 7.3 to highlight the alignment between her experiences and the themes discussed in this study.

However, an analysis of Elizabeth's experience, though focused on the same themes, revealed some nuanced differences. First, Elizabeth was significantly influenced by the context of the state legislature as she considered her work with faculty and students. She saw self-censorship as a tool that can help her successfully work within that framework. Second, circumstantial factors, particularly her level of involvement with certain political and religious issues, influenced the degree to which Elizabeth revealed or did not reveal herself to those with whom she regularly interacts. Third, as a current mid-level staff member with faculty experience, she recognized how power and privilege influenced the degree to which she and others were willing to engage in difficult conversations.

As a staff member, Elizabeth has noted the power dynamics between roles and navigated that space between her staff and faculty appointments with delicacy and discretion. Fourth, Elizabeth chose self-censorship and often elected to self-censor because of her value for human relationships. She wanted others to have space to speak and was willing to listen and learn from them. Fifth, Elizabeth's separation of personal and professional views was not irreconcilable. Instead, she chose to self-censor in a higher education environment as a professional responsibility and as a way to remain aligned with the university's expectations for her role. As an individual who worked with sensitive topics, often across communities, Elizabeth understood the risk of voicing her viewpoints at the wrong time. The adverse outcomes she wished to avoid were strongly influencing the direction of faculty and student research based on her personal opinions–a violation of her ethical and moral values–or creating further tension in particular political and religious communities by taking sides.

Table 7.3: Elizabeth's Self-Censorship Experience

Theme	Quotes
Individual Characteristics	I am [prone to self-censor]. And I think that comes from a lifetime of working in between communities I'm not quite a part of. If you're going to inhabit that sort of interstitial space, you're going to learn really quickly that a really important skill is to shut up and listen to hear what the communities you're serving have to say about their experience. I think there's something important about the work we do with other human beings, where we see them without having to insert ourselves as the topic or the center of attention.
Context	We live in a state where it can feel like very dry timber and it takes only one match. So, there is always the question of who is listening, who is watching, how would they perceive a situation that might be quite different than the way an individual intends. The state context weighs heavily on my mind, and my heart as a university employee, I want to make sure that we're always doing what's best for our students.
Circumstantial Factors	I may have a political perspective, I also have a lived experience and so I guess you could say that, in some cases, it's not my choice to censor or not; it might be the way I process the situation. Maybe the processing is a heavier lift if it relates. I see this all the time with people on campus when I'm doing discussions. People have these very personal experiences, and so when you have an emotional or a personal experience, I think that it makes it–even if you've decided that self-censorship is the right choice in that situation–it may make it harder for…it may just make it a different kind of experience for you.
Power Dynamics	I think on our campus, on the [Southeast State University] campus, staff feel very vulnerable, the most vulnerable of the groups that I work with all of the time. There is no security if you share something and other people don't like it, if you share something and it's picked up by the media. If you share things for any number of reasons, and the response is negative, staff do not feel that there is support for them in those circumstances.
Workplace Relationships	I'm listening, I'm processing, I'm trying not to intervene in that process, because I don't want to harm the process, right? I think it comes from a space of respect for the work that you're doing with the other human beings.
Professionalism	I've been always really clear about if I am working in an official capacity, I think that there is a certain amount of personal information that I don't need to share with students or with other human beings, because I think it could hurt, rather than help, the mission of the university. So, that's maybe a different perspective than some of the other people you might interview who might find that to be a shackle. I've always considered it can part of the service or part of what's going to be required if I want to play the roles that I'm playing at the university.
Avoidance of Negative Outcomes or Labels	I work with opposite communities, right? So, talk about tension. And both sides want you to make strong statements about their own political engagement and you can't, you just can't. You cannot do that and do the job that you've chosen to do.

Tristan: A Mid-Level Staff Member or Administrator

I have included several excerpts from my conversations with Tristan in Table 7.4 to demonstrate themes relevant to this study. When I asked Tristan to assess the risk of engaging more openly in the leadership meetings he attended with his former supervisor, he described trying to avoid getting yelled at or reprimanded. The unclear expectations around his work and his frustration surrounding the university's stance on diversity and inclusion created uncertainty about how to engage best, making self-censorship the better and safer choice.

Though Tristan was not prone to self-censorship, his work environment–power dynamics that favor faculty perspectives, unclear expectations, and his relationship with leadership–created a level of uncertainty that compelled Tristan to choose self-censorship over freely expressing his viewpoints. Tristan, however, was a very involved university employee who actively engaged in social justice work and efforts to increase diversity and inclusion within his college. His self-censorship appeared to be context-bound rather than broad across all interactions across the university. In the self-censorship experiences he shared regarding interactions with a previous high-ranking supervisor and his participation in a committee comprised predominantly of faculty members, the context for some of his self-censorship was that he observed inconsistencies between the message the college or university sends out and how policies and practices actually play out.

Relative to circumstantial factors that influenced his self-censorship, like Camilla, he was often influenced by the timeliness of his engagement. He opted to self-censor when he perceived that there was not sufficient time to make a meaningful contribution or that his comments would prolong a meeting. He, too, has observed and experienced firsthand the power dynamics between faculty and staff. Like Elizabeth, he has perceived that staff are more vulnerable when it comes

Table 7.4: Tristan's Self-Censorship Experience

Theme	Quotes
Individual Characteristics	Yeah, I think generally my personality and even in a professional setting, I'm realizing that there's two different things for me. One is when do I say stuff and the other one is versus my willingness to say stuff. And I think my willingness is always there. I'm comfortable; I don't care. I'm going to tell you if you ask my opinion about something and I think that it's wrong. I'll tell you this wrong. Or if I think that we're not promoting rights in a certain way, or if someone is saying something that's homophobic or racist, I don't mind to call that out. But the other thing is then "when" and "how," and I find that's when I just pull all that in. It's not that I'm not willing to say it, but that I just sort of choose not to in that moment or I feel like the time is not right, I guess. So, my personality is more just to call it out, say the thing, and then just sort of, I guess, figure out where that plays out in the context.
Context	Sometimes the administration of the university hides behind policies, interpretations of policies to avoid things that they don't want to do.
Circumstantial Factors	We're trying to cram everything into you know, three hours or two hours. And I just think, "Shut up, Tony. Just let this meeting go on and be over."
Power Dynamics	I think, in my experience, faculty members have more room to speak than staff members to do, and specifically, tenured faculty members have the most. It's very specific from my own experience with someone using really, really negative language that was super racially charged to me, and then the Dean saying, "Well that person is tenured, and I can't really do anything about them. If they were a staff person, I could be all over them." So that tells me that staff have a much more rigid boundary as far as what they're allowed to say.
Workplace Relationships	We talk a lot in the college about sort of making room for everybody, making sure that people's voices are heard at the table. And as a white male, it's really easy, I think, to have my voice heard and to take my space. But then, you know, in the context of the faculty meeting...I think that's why I'm just, I'm only going to just drop in one little thing here and there. But I want to make sure there's plenty of room for the women on faculty, for the people of color on faculty, for the junior faculty, specifically.
Professionalism	I didn't know the rules.
Avoidance of Negative Outcomes or Labels	There was also this sort of, let's say fear. We rehearsed how I would respond when and if she yelled at me. Because I was like, "I can't deal with that." I'm not going to have somebody yelling at me in the workplace. It doesn't matter who they are. And so, we practiced it. It didn't happen, which was good, but I was definitely prepared for that.

to their speech, while faculty have more liberty and leeway to express a variety of controversial viewpoints. A desire to make space for others in meetings because he values relationships influenced Tristan. In this context, self-censorship for Tristan was a form of respect because it provided an opportunity for individuals who might not otherwise be heard to have space for their viewpoints.

Kayla: A Support Staff Member

The fourth and final analysis is an exploration of Kayla's self-censorship experience. Table 7.5 includes examples from Kayla's experience to illustrate relevant themes in this study. As an advocate within the LGBTQ community on campus, Kayla was attuned to how the macro and micro contexts of LGBTQ-related discussions influenced her involvement on campus and created a "high stress" and "high stakes" experience for herself and others. Despite a natural inclination toward self-censorship, this context overshadowed her participation on a committee focused on LGBTQ issues. When paired with additional factors such as being the newest member of the committee, navigating complex power dynamics, and striving to maintain a neutral and professional presence, this led to a decision to self-censor.

In Kayla's experience, her ultimate fear was that, as a new committee member, she would damage professional relationships if she chose to express dissenting or contradictory viewpoints or provide open and honest feedback about a specific direction they were pursuing. Specifically, she was concerned that she would be excluded from later discussions and that she would not be able to move forward with her professional goals at the university. Fear of these outcomes, despite other complex issues, ultimately compelled Kayla to self-censor by withholding her viewpoints during meetings. Fortunately, she had the opportunity to connect with a mentor and draft an email to the committee chair expressing her concerns once she had had time to reflect.

Table 7.5: Kayla's Self-Censorship Experience

Theme	Quotes
Individual Characteristics	I want to make sure that the words I say, are the words that I mean, and that I want to stand by. And so, I take it kind of seriously, and so when I find myself in situations where a conversation is moving quickly or people are heated, I definitely am less likely to jump in for a few reasons. It takes me time to react to something, to look at how I'm reacting to it, to be sure I want to say something and think about the consequences of saying it. And, by the time you get through all those processes, and it could just be ten seconds, the conversation has moved on, right?
Context	[SSU] is voted like one of the worst universities in America for LGBT people; we're just kind of getting back on track, from where [the university's center for LGBTQ support] was defunded and that whole debacle. And there's always legislators that are paying so much attention to [SSU] all the time. If you're in that kind of work, it's high stakes, and the area for making a mistake is so small.
Circumstantial Factors	No, the meeting was an hour long, so I knew that was the space in which we were communicating. It ended up that they wanted to continue the conversation via email, and so I did have time to react, but that was just luck. By the end of the meeting, I'd pretty much decided I wasn't gonna say anything. It was just your normal, everybody talks at once, because I don't know how they did it actually because Zoom is so hard to do that.
Power Dynamics	You very much have to be buttoned up and play by the rules that come down from the top. And people who don't fit that mold end up leaving, and it's sad because a lot of them are really good at what they do, and they leave and they go to other universities who appreciate that they do really good work. And so, at [SSU], they're really strangling their resources and pushing it down; they get left with the crappy people who aren't doing cutting-edge stuff.
Workplace Relationships	My team here at work, they know me well enough to know that there's like a face that I make when I'm pondering something, and so, sometimes they'll stop and they'll be like, "What are you thinking about? like if you have something to say, here is your break for it," which I really appreciate. But when people don't know you, you kind of have to it feels like you have to force your way in. And I think that's so hard sometimes for a person with a communication style, like me, because we get so worked up.
Professionalism	I feel like in my role as a public-facing staff, we also have to be very careful to be completely neutral because we're representing the university all the time.
Avoidance of Negative Outcomes or Labels	I had this feeling if I dissented in this group, that I would be written up, I would be excluded from things, and my opinion would be kind of disregarded because I wasn't supportive or part of the team. I felt like it should have been said, but I was afraid of what would happen to my goals and the committee if I said anything. I have this idea of how campus as an entity is going to respond to things. There's a research project I want to do that has to do with microaggressions and racism on campus. And I'm afraid to develop it and put in because I'm afraid that it would get attention and get squashed down because I don't think that it would have good outcomes for campus. I think it would say kind of problematic things, but I'll never know, and I could be totally wrong, but I'm too afraid to test that, which is bad for me and it's bad for [SSU].

Synthesis of Findings

Fifteen participants, all employed by Southeast State University serving in staff or administrative roles, contributed perspectives on self-censorship to this study. Three participants were top-level college or university administrators with faculty experience. Eight participants served in mid-level staff or administrative positions, some of whom also had teaching experience. The remaining four participants served in support staff positions across university divisions.

I began Chapter 4 by providing participant profiles; details about their educational, political, and religious backgrounds; and an introduction to their individual self-censorship experiences. In Chapter 5, I examined participants' experiences through the framework provided in Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship model. Three of the four *a priori* themes–individual characteristics, context, and circumstantial factors–were relevant to examining self-censorship in this study and demonstrated a relationship between self-censorship and free speech climate on campus.

After analyzing *a priori* themes, I identified four emergent themes from each participant's interviews in Chapter 6. The four thematic findings focused primarily on participants' reasons for self-censoring or the circumstances that led them to self-censors in the workplace beyond speech climate. In order of prominence and prevalence, the themes included were power dynamics, workplace relationships, avoidance of negative outcomes and labels, and professionalism. Significant aspects of participants' self-censorship experiences accounted for individual differences across these factors. The emergent themes revealed that self-censorship is a nuanced decision influenced by many factors and ultimately chosen to minimize risk or avoid perceived negative outcomes or labels.

Furthermore, campus policies such as the Campus Free Speech Protection Act (2019) and the Civility Code (2010b) were not shown to significantly influence the decision to self-censor among the staff and administrators who participated in this study, though policies were important to consider within the context of this study. The factors mentioned earlier–both *a priori* and emergent themes which I explored in Chapter 7–played a more influential role in the decision to self-censor demonstrating that self-censorship is both a free speech-related and a workplace-related issue.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to understand how university staff and administrators who chose to self-censor described and made meaning of their experiences and to explore how policies and campus responses to speech influenced the decision to self-censor.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience?
2. How do campus policies and attitudes and responses toward speech on campus influence the decision to self-censor?

To investigate these research questions, I applied a basic qualitative research design to achieve "depth of understanding" (Patton, 1985, p. 1) of the "insider's perspective" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16). I analyzed data by employing two different coding strategies: One relied on *a priori* categories or factors that were conceptualized in Bar-Tal's Conceptual Framework for Self-Censorship (2017), and the other relied on identifying emergent themes by inductive (open or axial) and deductive (closed) coding methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this chapter, I will present a summary of findings, followed by a discussion, recommendations for future research, and concluding thoughts for researchers, higher education practitioners, and other interested parties.

Summary of Findings

The 15 participants in this study represented university employees at Southeast State University serving in one of three categories: 1) Top-level college or university administrators, 2) mid-level staff members or administrators, and 3) support level staff members. Both *a priori* and emergent themes informed my first research question. Three of the four *a priori* themes

included in Bar-Tal's framework provided insight into how university staff and administrators made meaning of their self-censorship experiences. Those themes included individual characteristics, context, and circumstantial factors. Some participants self-identified as more likely to self-censor; however, the macro and micro context within specific interactions often influenced their inherent decision to remain quiet or reserved. Additionally, circumstantial, or outside factors such as medium of communication, timing, and level of involvement in a particular issue often moderated individual decisions to self-censor, allowing participants to push against natural inclinations when compelled. Overall, when viewing self-censorship through the lens of Bar-Tal's (2017) framework, I observed that the decision to self-censor is a free speech-related issue.

In addition to the four *a priori* themes from the framework, I identified four emergent themes that extended beyond Bar-Tal's (2017) conceptualization and provided a deeper understanding of self-censorship and free speech attitudes in a higher education setting. These emergent themes include power dynamics, workplace relationships, avoidance of negative outcomes and labels, and professionalism. I discovered that beyond Bar-Tal's framework, university staff and administrators' self-censorship was significantly influenced by power embedded with roles and structures, the value they placed on fostering meaningful workplace relationships, their efforts to avoid adverse experiences actively, and their commitment to fulfilling the duties associated with their role. In comparison to the *a priori* themes that were more speech-related, the emergent themes demonstrated a relationship between self-censorship and workplace environment.

I answered the second research question by analyzing participants' feedback regarding the role of campus policies and free speech incidents and providing a deeper analysis of the

richer self-censorship cases and the decision-making process. Though a small number of participants, when prompted, acknowledged broadly how campus policies and speech-related incidents could and likely did influence their self-censorship, they did not specifically attribute policies and incidents to their self-censorship experiences. Considering *a priori* and emergent themes and participants' feedback regarding campus policies and speech-related incidents at Southeast State University together reveals several common factors influencing university staff and administrators' decisions to self-censor. I observed that despite these factors, self-censorship was a distinct and nuanced decision that was both a free speech- and workplace-related issue.

Discussion

In this section, I discuss findings and observations from this study and include connections from relevant research in Chapter 2. Findings will be discussed in the following order: 1) *A priori* themes from Bar-Tal's (2017) framework, 2) emergent themes, 3) the role of campus policy and speech-related incidents, and 4) the self-censorship decision-making process. As noted in the following sections, I discovered several areas of agreement and disagreement within my study compared to the existing literature. I anticipated this dissonance, as this study was one of the few self-censorship-focused projects focused exclusively on higher education professionals.

A Priori Themes from Theoretical Framework

Individual Characteristics. The first factor Bar-Tal (2017) attributed to the decision to self-censor in his framework was individual characteristics, including worldview, values, personality traits, social status, attitudes, and behavioral intentions. Of particular interest to me were how participants' political and religious views and personality traits would influence the likelihood of self-censorship. The background survey revealed participants' political and

religious views. I was surprised to discover a strong interest in self-censorship among staff and administrators without a declared faith who described themselves as liberal or progressive. As I began my interviews, I anticipated that more participants would identify as conservative and religious. Though there is literature to support self-censorship among conservative staff members in higher education (Davis et al., 2020), this was a reminder that I may have disproportionately associated self-censorship with politically conservative issues and religious values in the higher education setting. Participants in this study were eager to share their experiences with me, despite representing a variety of political and religious backgrounds and unique self-censorship experiences spanning distinct topics and circumstances. This variety suggested that self-censorship is not owned or experienced by a single political or religious group. Just as the experiences of individuals are unique and complex, so too is self-censorship. This realization led me to conclude that we may understand self-censorship best by examining the individual characteristics of distinct groups in a higher education setting, the opinion climate (macro and micro), and the circumstances that contribute to the decision to self-censor. Each of these areas are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

During the initial interviews, I inquired about each participant's tendency to self-censor. Aside from the specific experiences they related to me when promoted, approximately half (seven) were naturally prone to self-censor. In contrast, the others described a tendency toward outspokenness even in a professional environment. As I journaled during the interview process, I recognized my preconceived expectation that I would discover a connection between shyness, introversion, and self-censorship among participating staff and administrators. I also anticipated that I would find that those less prone to self-censor would describe themselves as outspoken and extroverted. My data analysis did not support these findings.

I discovered that shyness and introversion were not synonymous with self-censorship and did not fully align with the decision to self-censor. Self-described shy and introverted participants sometimes decided to self-censor; however, the decision was rarely related to individual characteristics alone. An inclination to self-censor as an individual characteristic sometimes made self-censorship more natural or desired and, on occasion, caused more internal turmoil. However, participants always assessed other factors that led to self-censorship or outspokenness despite natural inclinations. This finding corresponds to Hayes et al.'s (2005a) research, which described how individuals who expressed a greater willingness to self-censor also were more likely to "refrain from speaking his or her opinion around a dissenting audience across situations" and to worry more about others' opinions (p. 304). However, Hayes et al. also acknowledged the variability of the self-censorship response depending on the unique context and other circumstantial factors.

Several participants demonstrated this phenomenon. For example, Danielle described herself as a direct person who naturally spoke her mind. Despite not being prone to self-censor, she explained how on occasion, self-censorship was a better choice than outspokenness to protect the reputation of the university. Individual characteristics alone, though they played a role in Danielle's interactions, did not ultimately produce the outcome of self-censorship. Danielle placed a greater emphasis on how she represented the university and managed external partnerships than the potential risk associated with her own opinions.

In contrast, Camilla and Elizabeth described themselves as private individuals naturally prone to self-censor. Their self-censorship was not related to fear, however. Instead, they were guided by a strong sense of professionalism, thoughtfulness toward the feelings of others, and the openness of others to receive their input. When they chose to vocalize their opinions, they did so

because they were passionate about the topic being discussed, identified congruency with their values, observed injustice or unfairness, or recognized an opportunity to influence someone else. They put aside natural inclinations to achieve a higher goal or purpose through self-censorship or outspokenness.

Another observation relative to individual characteristics was that, though often stable, individual characteristics evolved with time and effort. I noted this possibility for change with Thea and Dustin, who described themselves as shy, unassuming individuals early in their lives and careers due to their upbringing and other factors. During her college experience, Thea gained courage and began to speak her mind more often. As a college or university administrator with decades of higher education experience, she learned to assert herself in professional circles where women are not usually the dominant voice. Dustin likewise shared how his perspective evolved with time and how he become more outspoken about his viewpoints regarding diversity and inclusion. He actively tried to stand up for unfairness and lamented times he did not take a firmer stance on issues he valued. Though he still self-censored, overall, he did so less often.

In some ways, this observation is not wholly consistent with the literature. Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b) identified individual characteristics as fixed rather than changing over time and evaluated the willingness to self-censor within that framework. Likewise, Filak et al.'s (2009) findings using the willingness to self-censor (WTSC) scale led the researchers to conclude that self-censorship is an intrinsic quality or characteristic that is unlikely to change even when accounting for other variables which could influence self-censorship behavior. Participants in this study did not complete the WTSC scale, so I could not verify the accuracy of this conclusion within the context of my research. However, it is interesting to note participants' perceptions of how their behavior and thinking evolved over time relative to self-censorship.

Context. Participants–both those who were prone to self-censor and those who were not–strongly considered Bar-Tal's (2017) second factor, context, when internally evaluating their decisions to self-censor. For the purposes of this study, I defined the macro context as national- and state-level influences that affect open dialogue. I defined the micro context as influences within the community, campus, and individual divisions that affected participants' attitude toward and comfort with viewpoint expression. Participants referenced the macro context within their self-censorship experiences as contextual influences related to political elections and the COVID-19 pandemic at the national and state levels. They described how these circumstances influenced how to best communicate with others in the university environment. This macro context added meaning to their self-censorship experiences. The events of the previous two years affected every individual–personally and professionally–in different ways.

In my estimation, the macro-level context–politics, race, social, and cultural factors–informed or influenced the micro-level context. Most described how the context of issues discussed within their offices or with other staff and administrators more directly affected their assessment of whether speaking openly or self-censoring would be the better decision. In other words, the tension created by the macro context was already present; the micro context–events and interactions locally and on campus and the perception of how those conversations would play out–ultimately determined an individual's comfort level with discussing viewpoints openly.

The self-censorship experiences of Cooper, Rosie, and Stella make the relationship between macro and micro contexts more visible. The macro context of the pandemic played a role in each of these participants' self-censorship decisions. It influenced their personal views and professional expectations surrounding how campus leaders responded to pandemic safety measures. If the macro context of the pandemic been less present or stressful, each of these

participants would have felt less angst when communicating and making professional decisions about pandemic safety measures. In addition, the micro context of the pandemic's effects within the community, on campus, and within divisions was unavoidably present for these individuals and encouraged self-censorship. In a higher education setting, these findings revealed that macro and micro contexts matter and influence self-censorship; however, a staff member's or administrator's ability to navigate the micro context determined whether self-censorship or openness was the optimal *personal* choice.

Circumstantial Factors. The third factor from Bar-Tal's (2017) framework–circumstantial factors–was also discussed by participants as they considered their reasons for choosing self-censorship. Circumstantial factors–including the medium of communication, timing, and level of involvement–were shown to play a significant role in the decision to self-censor in conjunction with individual characteristics and context. In my estimation, circumstantial factors provided an outlet for participants to disconnect emotionally from stressful encounters when they considered self-censorship. Their decisions were based on multiple factors, each carrying different meaning and sometimes based on fear. Thus, the circumstances surrounding the interactions described in participants' self-censorship experiences often gave them final permission to choose self-censorship. In Bar-Tal's framework, there is a point at which individuals weigh the cost and benefit of self-censorship versus speaking up. I observed that as participants described this internal struggle–to speak up or self-censor–those who chose to self-censor based on circumstantial factors detached themselves from the experience. They determined that it wasn't the ideal time to speak up, that they would take time to think and respond via another medium, or that their level of involvement simply did not justify sharing their true viewpoints.

When I consider this pattern, come to mind Camilla and Kayla come to mind. Camilla's experience revealed that she was an administrator prone to self-censor and had felt the weight of the macro and micro context over the past two years. Circumstantial factors, such as timing, ultimately provided the greater impetus for her self-censorship experience. She put aside other factors and concluded that it was not the appropriate time for her to speak up. Beyond individual characteristics and context, Kayla was likewise impacted by circumstantial factors, specifically the medium of communication. She consciously thought through the costs and benefits of vocalizing her concerns about the direction of a committee in which she was participating. Having the option to respond via email rather than during the meeting she referenced would have left her able to take the time and respond more thoughtfully. This realization allowed her to self-censor in a stressful moment.

A Synthesis of *A Priori* Themes. I observed overlaps between Bar-Tal's (2017) focus on individual characteristics and context and well-established self-censorship theories that also focus on these two factors. In their spiral of science research, Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1993) tracked the evolution of public opinion when self-censorship is present (macro-focused) and coincides with Bar-Tal's emphasis on context as a factor that influences self-censorship. Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b), noted that the spiral of silence did not account for interpersonal communication or differences among individuals and developed the WTSC scale (micro-focused). Hayes et al.'s primary assumption in the WTSC scale was that inherent differences between individuals influenced their opinion expression *despite* opinion climate or context and should be considered to understand self-censorship behavior better. Using the WTSC and controlling for other variables, Hayes (2006) found that those with high WTSC scores (i.e., those who are more willing to self-censor as part of their inherent nature) were strongly influenced by

the opinion climate, were more likely to disengage from political and other controversial discussions, and were more likely to refrain from speaking up in general. Hayes discovered some variability across situations. Those who scored high on the WTSC also were more likely to worry about the repercussions of their speech and to spend more time engaged in self-reflection to understand their motivations. In a later study Hayes et al. (2010) clarified that those with low WTSC scores expressed less concern with the opinion climate or did not rely on it as heavily to inform the decision to self-censor or speak out.

Factoring in both Bar-Tal's (2017) framework and the relevant literature, my research findings deviated from and added to an understanding of self-censorship. Though I did not examine self-censorship quantitatively like Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b) and Hayes et al. (2006), nor did I administer the WTSC scale, I observed that *all* participants, regardless of the natural inclination to self-censor, were likely to do so when factoring in macro- and micro-focused contextual factors. Additionally, circumstantial factors (i.e., medium of communication, timing, level of involvement) and emergent themes–discussed in the next section–played a role in self-censorship decisions. Hayes et al. (2006) acknowledged the limitations of the WTSC, noting that it was concerned with opinion climate and reluctance to express opinions, not additional reasons which could influence that decision.

Additionally, reflecting on the literature and my analysis of participants' experiences revealed an underlying tension between individual characteristics as compared to context and circumstantial factors. There is a tendency to want to attribute the decision to self-censor to one element over another. This led me to consider a few additional questions: *Are individuals naturally prone to self-censor going to make that choice despite the opinion climate and other*

contextual and circumstantial factors? To what degree do individuals not naturally inclined to self-censor consider the opinion climate and other contextual and circumstantial factors?

During my analysis, I found consideration for individual characteristics and context separately *and* jointly yielded the most significant understanding of participants' self-censorship experiences. Participants' reflections of their self-censorship experiences and an application of *a priori* themes in Bar-Tal's (2017) framework led me to conclude that there are intrinsic factors as well as contextual and circumstantial factors that guide the decision to self-censor. Researchers in the early 2000s, whose work spanned over two decades (Filak et al., 2009; Filak, 2012; Hayes et al., 2005a, 2005b; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Matthes et al., 2012), likewise explored and concluded similarly, that self-censorship is intrinsic and contextual and often varies between individuals and situations. My research supports this phenomenon's complexity in a higher education setting.

Another area in which I identified alignment with my research and previously published studies related to the tendency of individuals to speak out on topics of greater relevance and importance. Researchers have made this connection over several decades (Kim et al., 2004; Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Matthes et al., 2010; Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Oshagan, 1996; Willnat et al., 2002). In my study, participants expressed *relevance* and *importance* in terms of *value congruency* and *passion*. For example, Camilla discussed how being passionate about a topic created a greater desire to speak out, despite her natural tendency to watch and listen. Likewise, Thea spoke of how she valued fairness. When observing what she perceived to be "unfairness," she felt compelled to speak up. Following this pattern led me to conclude that additional context and factors outside of individual characteristics (or inherent qualities as often referred to in the literature) can override natural inclinations toward outspokenness or self-censorship. However,

variability exists person-to-person and situation-to-situation, as hypothesized by Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b) in their research.

Emergent Themes

Beyond the congruence with Bar-Tal's (2017) framework I found in the *a priori* analysis, I identified four emergent themes relevant in a higher education setting. They included power dynamics, workplace relationships, avoidance of negative outcomes and labels, and professionalism in order of prominence and prevalence. These themes were less speech-focused and more workplace-focused. In the following sections, I discuss my observations of these emergent themes in relation to the phenomenon of self-censorship.

Power Dynamics. Across interviews, I noted a recurring sentiment among participants that I believe extends beyond Southeast State University. Staff and administrators who participated in this study advocated for restricting or monitoring harmful speech on campus while also broadly describing the value and importance of free speech and academic freedom in higher education. Many universities, including Southeast State University, are currently struggling to find this delicate balance between making campus a safe space and encouraging free expression (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017), thus creating tension or a power struggle within and beyond the university as it relates to speech. In my observations and data analysis, this power dynamic was reflected in roles and structures across the university.

First, staff and administrators described how power dynamics often led to the conclusion that self-censorship was the best or safest response based on their role, in comparison to the roles of others. Among participants, there was an overwhelming belief that staff and administrators possessed less power to openly share viewpoints than faculty and students because of their roles and received less protection or support from the university to do so.

Overall, participants chose to self-censor in the university setting, particularly when specific politicized topics were discussed (e.g., the pandemic, political elections, LGBTQ+ rights, and other issues). In such cases, self-censorship became a default or comfortable way to adapt to discomfort. Participants chose to self-censor during university interactions–consciously or subconsciously–by assessing the power of other present individuals in comparison to their own based on individual roles.

Second, examining the unique roles of staff, and administrators within the overall leadership structure of higher education provided additional insight into power dynamics that influenced self-censorship and affected one's level of openness when performing professional duties. Commenting on this structure, Spencer suggested that the strength of one's speech is determined by one's "relationship to the university." Danielle added that the power of a staff member or administrator's speech is also determined by their relationship with the public and constituents beyond the university. Thea, one of the top-level college or university administrators, also noted this structure. Describing the transition from a faculty member to an administrator, she was struck by how as she moved into administrative roles, she had to "deal with the structure of the university." She added, "Part of your job is to reflect that flow of information back and forth."

Staff members and administrators perceived their roles and the structure of the university limited their free expression compared to the speech of other groups. Participants indicated this might be an accurate assessment in some instances; however, examining these roles in parallel provided additional insight. Cooper and other participants who were staff members described both hesitancy *and* confidence in speaking among colleagues and within their teams. Openly sharing viewpoints was multi-faceted and depended on the topic, context, and additional

circumstances. Spencer and Thea described their understanding that staff member roles were less publicly visible and that less visibility could increase freedom to express viewpoints openly. Several staff member participants noted this freedom within their roles because they often did not speak officially on behalf of the university. In this context, while staff members may have had more free expression power internally, they had less power to make decisions.

In contrast, administrators have greater decision-making authority than staff members and usually supervise larger teams of faculty and staff members. In this sense, they have more influence by virtue of the higher education power structure. However, because of the public nature of their roles and their relationship with the university, administrators who participated in this study often experienced a decrease in the expression of personal viewpoints. Spencer, Camilla, Danielle, and others directly spoke of the public nature of their roles. As representatives of the university, they were hesitant that their speech would be interpreted as being on behalf of the university and guarded their speech so as not to misrepresent the university or conflate personal speech with the viewpoints of the university.

Lastly, participants, including Cooper, Dustin, Elizabeth, Regina, and Tristan, directly spoke about personal awareness of power outside of roles and structures because of the unique features of their identities. These participants expressed how their privilege within the university environment improved their understanding of others. Regina described the importance of "knowing your place" within the structure of higher education and how this awareness of power allowed her to consciously make space for the voices of others. Participants who spoke about their privilege expressed a desire to choose self-censorship as a tool to give power to other individuals.

Workplace Relationships. In a 2019 publication, Chamlee-Wright (2019) discussed the importance of associational life in higher education, a field built on knowledge-sharing, collaboration, shared governance, and collective and individual growth irrespective of one's role. In an academic environment, "we value the company of our peers" (Chamlee-Wright, p. 540) and recognize that the success of our work is often contingent on our ability to lead and influence within this unique environment. Damaging those relationships–as can result from harmful speech–affects our ability to accomplish our overarching mission.

It is not surprising that workplace relationships emerged as a significant factor in staff and administrators' self-censorship experiences in this study. Specifically, several subthemes across participants' responses demonstrated the relevance of this theme. Subthemes included the increase or decrease of self-censorship based on proximity and trust, the ability to influence others, a desire to create space for others and minimize harmful speech, and the discomfort of being the new person among individuals who already shared professional interactions.

Three of these relational subthemes had a unique overlap. I observed that as proximity to individuals in the higher education hierarchy increased, in many instances, trust between individuals also increased. As proximity and trust grew, the tendency to self-censor decreased. Second, as participants weighed the cost and benefits of speaking up or self-censoring and perceived that their ability to influence the behavior or viewpoints of others was probable, the likelihood of them speaking up also increased. On the contrary, some, such as Camilla who perceived their ability to influence someone would be low in a particular circumstance, were more likely to self-censor. Lastly, a few participants experienced discomfort over being the new person in the office or on a committee. In these cases, I found the tendency to choose self-censorship over outspokenness increased as a feeling of "newness" increased. The opposite also

would be true. As individuals felt more like they belonged and had developed meaningful relationships with others, their tendency to self-censor often decreased.

The remaining two subthemes demonstrated a relational or social deference out of care for the feelings of others. Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study were driven by a desire to impact others positively within their specific spheres of influence. Participants expressed empathy for the feelings of others and a willingness to listen, observe, and learn. These subthemes repeatedly emerged during my conversations with Camilla, Elizabeth, Danielle, Spencer, and others. These participants were motivated to self-censor to allow others the space to express viewpoints. If there were times when they perceived topics of conversation could harm others, some self-censored so as not to contribute or spoke out to redirect others away from hurtful dialogue.

In her spiral of silence research, Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1993) hypothesized participants who self-censored were strongly influenced by fear of social pressures or isolation. In other words, individuals either self-censored or conformed their speech to fit with the majority to avoid social rejection. This finding did not emerge prominently in my data analysis. Instead, participants often were motivated by other fears (which will be discussed in Theme 3). Sometimes, regardless of the risk of social pressures, certain participants–particularly those driven by value congruency, passion, or advocating for others and those naturally prone to outspokenness–spoke up regardless of the cost to relationships. This finding, in part, contrasts what Davis et al. (2020) discovered in their research investigating self-censorship among conservative student affairs professionals. Individuals who participated in their study were highly motivated to self-censor due to fear of social isolation. This observation may vary among different participant groups and would require additional study.

Avoidance of Negative Outcomes and Labels. The third theme that emerged from my data analysis related to specific outcomes and labels university staff and administrators actively worked to avoid. Adverse outcomes participants wanted to avoid included threats to job security and advancement, damage to their own reputation or to the university, and other negative repercussions (e.g., disappointing others, harming their relationship with colleagues and supervisor(s), losing legislative support). Additionally, some participants were motivated to avoid negative labels such as being a "problem" (Thea) or not a "team player" (LeeAnn). Though some participants spoke openly of the outcomes and labels they feared by *not* self-censoring, others spoke indirectly of outcomes and labels in terms of avoidance.

As participants described outcomes and labels they actively avoided, I observed the strength of their perceptions about what *could* potentially occur if they expressed specific viewpoints. Each negative outcome and label was not an overt threat they had personally experienced at Southeast State University. In some isolated cases, participants described witnessing others experience negative repercussions–particularly regarding damage to reputation and relationships. Overall, they maintained a strong *perception*–whether rational or not–that there were real threats to speaking up that could best be avoided by choosing self-censorship. Therefore, self-censorship often was used as a tool to avoid whatever outcome or label caused participants the most concern. As with other themes, understanding the relationship between self-censorship and avoidance of negative outcomes and labels also was clearer when compared with other factors. Many of the themes explored in this study were embedded within the fears participants discussed during their interviews. This led me to conclude again that self-censorship is best understood when observed and examined in connection with multiple factors.

As anticipated, avoidance of negative outcomes and labels as a fear response emerged early during data collection and analysis. Fear and avoidance were themes referenced throughout the literature as justification for the decision to self-censor. Fear of social isolation has been described often in the literature as one of the most common reasons that individuals self-censor (Baltussen & Davis, 2015; Davis et al., 2020; Fox & Holt, 2018; Hayes et al., 2006; Matthes et al., 2012; Matthes et al., 2018; Montgomery, 2020; Noelle-Neumann, 1973, 1994; Otteson, 2019; Tubbs, 2019; Wood, 2019). This theme did not appear excessively during data analysis; however, it was referenced several times within the subtheme "avoidance of negative repercussions." Participants used self-censorship to avoid several perceived negative repercussions, one of which bore impactful social implications (e.g., fear of harming relationships with colleagues or supervisor(s)). Concern or fear for current and future job opportunities (Davis et al., 2020; Horton, 2011; Montgomery, 2020), damage to one's reputation (Montgomery, 2020), and fear of labels or misrepresentation (Chamlee-Wright, 2019; Davis et al., 2020; Manji, 2019; Otteson, 2019; Ramsoomair, 2019; Wood, 2019) also were themes frequently cited in the literature that also emerged as significant themes in this self-censorship research. A few other themes commonly cited in the literature did not emerge in this study as significant factors in influencing self-censorship (e.g., avoidance of confrontation, fear of public communication; fear of disrupting proceedings, fear of authority); however, these themes might emerge more prominently in a higher education setting if I increased the number of participants, broadened my eligibility requirements, or conducted a study beyond one university.

Overall, the avoidance of negative outcomes and labels is unique and operates differently within a framework to describe the decision to self-censor. Apart from this, all other themes related closely to participants' values and preferences, aspects of the university climate that

influenced behavior, and unique ways of being that drive self-censorship or outspokenness along a spectrum. In other words, the degree to which participants were influenced by power dynamics, workplace relationships, and professionalism (subsequent section) related to their decision to self-censor situation-to-situation. Contrastingly, the theme of avoidance of perceived outcomes and labels was inherently negative and fear-based; it was not about engaging with but rather disengaging from a particular conversation or situation. This observation was significant to note when considering Bar-Tal's (2017) framework and how it might be adapted to assess self-censorship in higher education specifically.

Professionalism. The fourth and final emergent theme–professionalism–described the prioritization of professional duties and responsibilities among university staff and administration and the related factors that influenced their perceptions of their self-censorship experiences. Within the theme of professionalism, three significant subthemes emerged: the separation of personal and professional speech, an assessment of how one's speech related to professional duties, and the effect of unclear and inconsistent expectations on participants' self-censorship experiences. Though professionalism was the least prevalent of the four emergent themes, it played an integral role in clarifying participants' intentions and the factors that influenced their self-censorship. Previously researchers (Baltussen & Davis, 2015; La Noue, 2019) also have pointed to this theme as playing a significant role in the decision to self-censor.

Sevenof the participants in this study had over 20 years of higher education experience and had worked for two or more colleges or universities during their careers. An additional six participants had worked in higher education for over a decade. The participants in this study were individuals who each expressed a strong commitment to their chosen profession in higher education, a desire to influence others by performing within their role, and occasional

dissatisfaction when they perceived it was unsafe to vocalize their viewpoints on campus. As such, I anticipated that their professional commitments would play a role in how they made meaning of their self-censorship experiences.

Of the three subthemes participants discussed, I noted an emphasis on and reconciliation of the separation of personal and professional values and speech within the context of the professionalism theme. Recognizing this contrast between positive and negative motivators for separating speech contributes to an understanding of self-censorship. For example, Camilla and Elizabeth described how separating their personal and professional lives was a professional and moral obligation. Though linked to their inherent natures as private individuals, this separation served a dual purpose for them: to protect personal values and identity and to preserve professional relationships. In other words, self-censorship was a positive strategy that allowed these participants better to fulfill professional duties and responsibilities within their current roles. Other participants such as Rosie, Kayla, and Tristan, struggled to establish such boundaries, particularly those with fewer years of higher education experience and those who had served primarily in staff (rather than faculty or administrative) roles. Thus, self-censorship in professional settings seemed more often to be fear-based and processed as a negative experience, rather than a necessity or obligation with positive benefits.

A Synthesis of A Priori and Emergent Themes

My observations and data analysis relative to the three factors from Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework (i.e., individual characteristics, context, and circumstantial factors) aligned with several scholarly contributions and self-censorship theories that I discussed in Chapter 2. Though participants had an opportunity to make meaning of their self-censorship experiences in the in-depth interviews, there were still aspects of their experiences they likely

have not shared or even internally processed. Chamlee-Wright (2019) observed this phenomenon as well, noting that because self-censorship is a process that originates in the mind, there are aspects of the experience of which the conscious mind is aware and other elements that are subconscious.

Previously, Noelle-Neumann (1993) also discussed the intuitive nature of the self-censorship experience, describing how people have a "quasi-statistical sense" about their social environments. She concluded that individuals cannot always articulate why they share viewpoints openly or choose to self-censor. Subconscious aspects of some participants' experiences were manifested through slight contradictions in their stories or inconsistencies in their self-awareness.

The contradictions and inconsistencies I observed indicated perhaps this was the first opportunity many had been given to thoughtfully process their motivations for speaking up or self-censoring or to describe themselves within the context of self-censorship. I noticed this pattern with Marlena, one of the mid-level staff participants, who described herself as prone to self-censorship in the university setting because her Christian beliefs are becoming less publicly acceptable (e.g., prayer at university functions). However, when later reflecting on her self-censorship experiences, she explained how she tended to "give [her] opinion pretty freely, which isn't always a good thing," and "what you see is what you get." I noted this contradiction or inconsistency during my data analysis and attributed it to the need for further reflection and self-awareness. I also recognize that self-censorship is complex and requires higher-level thinking.

Though there were variations in how all participants reconciled the decision to self-censor, my findings overall indicated that self-censorship in higher education affects staff and administrators irrespective of background, years of experience, or the nature and scope of their

role. Furthermore, *a priori* and emergent themes contribute to our understanding of why individuals in higher education choose to self-censor. The reasons university staff and administrators chose to self-censor were both free speech and a workplace issues. This contribution suggested that it is more beneficial to view the decision to self-censor beyond individual circumstances and the climate towards diverse opinions and consider other motivations within a higher education setting that compel university staff and administrators to make the decision to speak out or not.

Reconciling the Decision to Self-Censor

One of my interview questions inquired about how participants reconciled their self-censorship experiences. The data I collected in response to this question did not align with previously presented themes. For this reason, I have chosen to include a brief section focused on reconciliation because it provided a more complete picture of participants' self-censorship experiences and revealed details about participants' behavior that is likely to inform future interactions within the university setting.

I used the word *reconcile* to describe how university staff and administrators made amends with the decision to self-censor in the experiences they chose to share. I observed how they ultimately viewed their self-censorship experience as positive or negative and how this conclusion influenced subsequent interactions and their level of satisfaction relative to their current role.

A pattern I observed was that participants whose reasons for self-censoring were motivated by inherent qualities, maintaining positive working relationships, a timeliness issue, or a conscious choice made for the sake of professionalism often had reconciled or come to a place of understanding about their self-censorship experiences. Participants who experienced this sort

of reconciliation felt content with their decision or could justify their choice to withhold their viewpoints in a professional setting. For example, when asked to discuss how she had reconciled her choice to self-censor, Elizabeth elaborated, “I’ve chosen to do this life, and to me, that means that I don’t want to do things that would impede my ability to carry out the work I think is central.” Camilla also made peace with the occasional decision to self-censor, viewing it as an opportunity to be a better listener. “I will speak up to get clarification or if I’ve got something that it’s really of value to share. But I don’t talk just for the sake of being heard. It’s not necessary.” Like Camilla, Marlena’s response to my inquiry regarding reconciliation highlighted the importance of listening rather than always speaking. Referring to a recent university forum for students, Marlena shared, “I typically don’t share my own perspective because I’m typically there to listen. I personally feel okay with that. I don’t feel like I’m being limited in any way as an employee.”

Participants who felt compelled to self-censor either to avoid potential adverse outcomes or to disrupt an existing power dynamic spoke indirectly of their reconciliation in a negative sense throughout their interviews. However, when asked to comment specifically on reconciliation of their self-censorship experiences, it became clear that several participants had created some emotional distance despite their frustrations. For example, LeeAnn and Cooper reflected on their self-censorship experiences and responded with similar observations. LeeAnn said:

> I think for some people, if they feel like they’re self-censoring, they may not feel like themselves. They may not feel comfortable at work. I don’t have that much of a problem with it. I find it frustrating at times, but it’s not really coloring my perception of self and my comfort in the workplace. But I know a lot of people talk about how that’s definitely

> an issue. If you feel like you can't be your authentic self, you can't say what you really think it's like this weight [that] is dragging you down.

Also speaking in terms of authenticity, Cooper elaborated: "I don't have the sense that I can't bring my authentic self to work with me. Some of my colleagues have said in so many words that they don't feel as if they can do that." My observations about the theme of reconciliation are that most participants experienced both positive and negative reconciliation, though some have been able to move beyond their self-censorship experiences more than others.

A New Model of Self-Censorship Decision-Making in Higher Education

Considering the *a priori* themes provided through Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework and the emergent themes previously discussed to examine self-censorship, I propose a new model of decision-making that applies to a higher education setting. This model joins together both free speech- and workplace-related themes that influence self-censorship and may also be adaptable to other professions with similar values and structures to those found in higher education.

With this new model, I first propose an expanded definition of self-censorship that encompasses aspects of the definitions previously provided by Bar-Tal (2017), Hayes et al. (2005a, 2005b), and Noelle-Neumann (1974), while accounting for new observations specific to this study. Previous definitions emphasized that an individual's primary motivation for choosing to self-censor when there is actual or perceived hostility toward their actual viewpoints or opinions. My findings real or perceived hostility is *one* reason university staff and administrators may self-censor; however, as previously discussed, the decision to self-censor among the participants in this study was more nuanced. Often, study participants self-censored despite perceived agreement or alignment *or* disagreement, or misalignment with the viewpoints of

others. Instead, university staff and administrators considered several additional contextual, circumstantial, and personal factors, sometimes subconsciously. Weighing these factors and the presence of actual or perceived hostility led participants to choose the appropriateness of self-censorship or outspokenness.

Therefore, I propose a definition that accounts for nuances beyond actual or perceived disagreement. Based on the findings in this study, I define self-censorship as *withholding one's viewpoints or opinions from an audience when there is a perception that the personal or professional cost of sharing outweighs the personal or professional benefits.*

The proposed model in Figure 8.1 is an adaptation of Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework. I have used this basic structure because it still applies within a higher education setting. I have added emergent themes and minor modifications to represent more accurately the self-censorship decision-making process described by participants in this study. The decision-making process begins with input from several factors. The first three factors listed–individual characteristics, context, and circumstantial factors–are three of the four relevant *a priori* themes in Bar-Tal's original framework that align with existing free speech literature. The fourth factor–type of information–was not observed consistently within the context of this study. The remaining three factors in the new model–power dynamics, workplace relationships, and professionalism–are themes that emerged during an open analysis of the data. These described workplace-related reasons university staff and administrators chose to self-censor. In subsequent paragraphs, I will elaborate on each section of the proposed model.

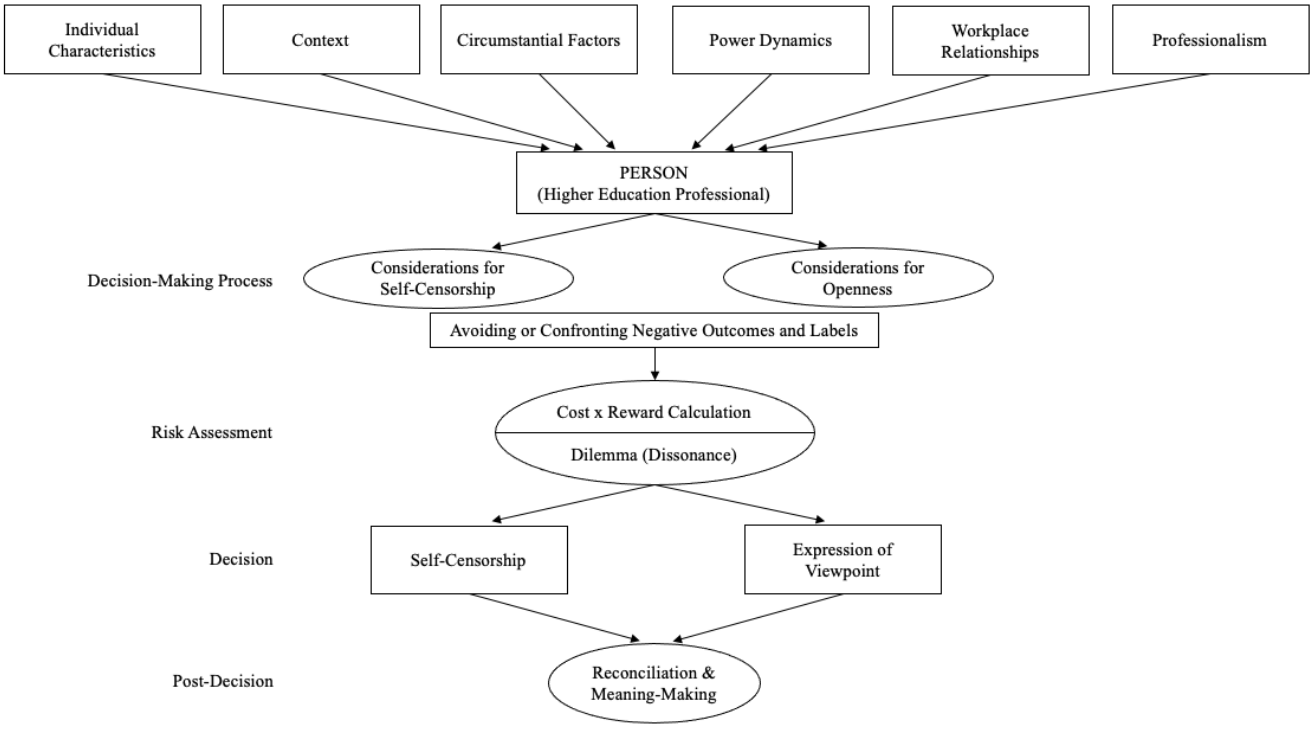

Figure 8.1. **A New Model of Self-Censorship Decision-Making in Higher Education**

Note. This model is an adaptation of Bar-Tal's (2017) Conceptual Framework for Self-Censorship (see Figure 1.1).

The six factors in the new model influence higher education professionals during workplace interactions where their input may be required and cause them to enter a self-censorship decision-making process. During this stage of the decision-making process, higher education professionals consider the effect of each factor relative to the decision to self-censor in a specific situation. Further, they begin to consider more holistically the previously described six factors, fears, potential negative outcomes, and labels they may want to avoid. I would describe this part of the model as circular rather than linear. This stage is often entirely intellectual, occurring when one sets aside time to think through a challenge or while other tasks are simultaneously being performed (i.e., participating in a meeting or conversation with colleagues).

Avoidance of negative outcomes and labels, though an emergent theme identified in this study, is unlike other themes. Whereas other themes explain participants' values, preferences, and behaviors that influence their decision to self-censor, fears and potential negative outcomes and labels span each of the six factors included in the model. Also, as participants described their self-censorship experiences, I observed a progression in their reasoning that began with fundamental principles *before* consideration of potential risks associated with negative outcomes and labels. As such, I have included this theme within the context of the decision-making process.

Once a higher education professional considers factors and potential negative outcomes they may wish to avoid through self-censorship, the model transitions into what I refer to as risk assessment. During this phase of the model, individuals weigh the personal and professional costs and benefits of self-censoring their viewpoints or openly sharing their views. Ultimately, to make a decision, participants must resolve any dissonance, having weighed other factors.

The last part of the model addresses reconciliation and meaning-making. Though these elements were not present in Bar-Tal's (2017) self-censorship framework, I included them in this new model for two key reasons. First, interviews naturally evolved into discussions about reconciliation and meaning-making following self-censorship decisions, which suggested a final step beyond the choice to self-censor. Second, I observed how reconciliation and meaning-making of self-censorship experiences directly influenced future behavior relative to self-censorship within the higher education setting. Thus, I have included a post-decision element to help higher education professionals understand their self-censorship decision-making process.

Recommendations for Decreasing Self-Censorship

Interviews with 15 university staff and administrators at Southeast State University revealed that university leadership, while not entirely responsible for the degree to which individuals choose to self-censor, can intentionally promote specific strategies and practices to decrease self-censorship. Participants explicitly recommended the following adaptations within the university setting to reduce fear and hesitancy surrounding the expression of diverse viewpoints:

- Allow space for open dialogue and disagreement
- Build trust and respect
- Clarify support and expectations
- Create supportive structures
- Increase listening
- Limit unilateral decision-making
- Maintain confidentiality

In addition to these strategies, participants highlighted practices that they would like to see Southeast State University embed within the institution to improve the climate toward diverse speech. Specifically, participants recommended an increased focus on civility and engaging in productive conversation surrounding controversial issues. Marlena believed the university should not focus on "making rules about what can be said or not be said." Similarly, Elizabeth supported the notion that the best way to counter hateful speech is to promote better speech. Regina would also like the university "teach some more civility and public responsibility."

Tristan, Rosie, and Stella spoke of improvements to campus speech in terms of learning how to engage in productive conversations. Tristan, who has witnessed student activism on campus, noted the need for explicit instruction to improve the productivity of these conversations. His view was that university staff and administrators should instruct students on how to engage in productive forms of activism "versus just getting and screaming your lungs out and feeling better because you got to do that, and nothing changed." Rosie advocated for learning to "be offensive in a productive way." She added: "If people are always censoring themselves, then we can never have those conversations that actually get us to a productive, helpful point." Referencing the campus speech incident involving the student who wanted to join the Spirit team in 2020, Stella believed that university leadership made decisions without seeking the feedback of key staff members and administrators, resulting in a missed opportunity to instruct students and consider other ways of navigating a complex circumstance. According to Tristan, the implications for missing opportunities to teach civil, productive speech are severe. He suggested: "I suspect that the more people are encouraged or required to self-censor, the less students are going to feel supported and heard."

Suggestions for Future Research

This study is one of the first to consider how university staff and administrators who chose to self-censor made meaning of their experience and to examine the role of policies and campus speech incidents in the decision to self-censor. Thus, there are several opportunities for future research to expand, test, and better understand this phenomenon.

First, I recommend expanding this study to include the perspectives of university staff and administrators from another university or across multiple universities to verify the consistency of the findings and to examine the contribution of the new model for self-censorship decision-making I proposed. Second, I recommend a mixed-methods approach to explore self-censorship further. A survey administered across one or multiple universities such as a revised version of the willingness to self-censor (WTSC) scale (Hayes et al., (2005a, 2005b) that incorporates my findings in addition to interviews would allow for greater generalizability across higher education.

Third, I recommend a broader examination of self-censorship that includes additional staff and administrative personnel as well as faculty members. Fourth, I recommend a broader examination of the degree to which higher education professionals self-censor, considering those who do and those who do not. Lastly, I recommend future studies continue investigating the influence of campus policies and speech-related incidents on self-censorship. Though the participants in this study did not report a strong link between their decision to self-censor and the impact of campus policies and speech-related incidents on their expression, further exploration may yield a greater understanding relative to this connection that will inform the work of university leadership across higher education.

Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to understand how university staff and administrators made meaning of their self-censorship experiences and to examine how campus policies and speech-related incidents influenced the decision to self-censor. Influential factors identified in this study included individual characteristics, context, circumstantial factors, power dynamics, workplace relationships, avoidance of negative outcomes and labels, and professionalism. The results of this study suggested that self-censorship is circumstantial depending on the underlying motivations and factors that compel university staff and administrators to self-censor in a professional setting. Both *a priori* and emergent themes suggested that self-censorship was both a free speech- and workplace-related issue. Further, results indicated that university staff and administrators do not generally attribute their decision to self-censor to campus policies and speech-related incidents. However, many acknowledged that policies and incidents could impact speech on campus.

Overall, the findings in this study revealed that self-censorship is a nuanced and deeply personal decision, spans religious and political groups, and is influenced by many factors to minimize risk and avoid perceived negative outcomes and labels. Self-censorship is both a free speech- and workplace-related issue that should be investigated further. A new model of self-censorship decision-making was developed as an explanatory tool to help institutions of higher education better understand the viewpoint expression of their employees. Participants shared the perspective that self-censorship impedes the university and recommended specific strategies that university leadership can implement to decrease negative self-censorship, particularly during periods of political, social, and cultural polarization.

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Appendices

Appendix A Interview Protocol

Interview Procedures and Protocol
ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS
Self-Censorship Among University Staff and Administrators

INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

Inclusion Criteria:
To participate in an interview, participants must meet the following eligibility requirements:

1. Must be a staff member* or administrator who at the time of their interview is employed by the University of Tennessee-Knoxville.
2. Must be a full-time employee at the University.
3. Must have a minimum of three years of experience in higher education.
4. Must complete a background survey with the informed consent statement prior to the interview.

*Exclusion criteria: Administrative coordinators (i.e., staff members who are responsible for scheduling and other clerical duties).

Purpose:

1. To understand how university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience.
2. To explore how policies and campus responses to speech influence the decision to self-censor.

Participant's Rights and Strategies to Mask Identity:
If you feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, you have the right to decline to answer any question and/or to end the interview. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. A potential risk is the inadvertent release of sensitive information from the interview. To minimize any potential risks, the researcher will take the following measures:

- Use pseudonyms to mask participants' identities and institution in written reports;
- Remove from or mask other identifiable information in participants' responses, as appropriate;
- Conduct interviews via Zoom or at an on-campus location of the participants' choosing so that the participants may comfortably share responses;
- Protect all research materials on password-protected devices; and
- Delete interview recordings after the completion of the study.

Time Commitment and Expectations:
I will conduct two, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with several University of Tennessee-Knoxville staff members and administrators. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom or in-person and will be recorded and transcribed verbatim to aid with data analysis. Each participant will

have the choice to review their transcript and preliminary data analysis for accuracy. It is expected that each interview will last 60-90 minutes.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background Survey

Prior to the first interview, participants will be asked to complete a short background survey that will be administered via Qualtrics. Included in the survey is the Informed Consent Statement. By selecting "I consent to participate," interview participants grant their consent to participate in the research study and advance to the next section of the background survey.

Screening Questions (to ensure alignment with inclusion criteria):

- Are you a current UT-Knoxville staff member or administrator?
- Do you work for UT-Knoxville as a full-time employee?
- Are you an administrative coordinator (i.e., do you perform clerical duties and scheduling for a specific department or division?)
- Have you worked in higher education for a minimum of three years?

Background Information/Survey:

1. First and last name
2. Education Level
3. Title/Role
4. Years of experience at UT-Knoxville
5. Years of experience in higher education
6. Areas of responsibility or roles in higher education
7. How would you characterize your political views?
    a. Far Left
    b. Liberal
    c. Moderate
    d. Conservative
    e. Far Right
    f. Other
    g. I don't know.
8. To what level do you consider yourself to be religious?
    a. Not religious
    b. Slightly religious
    c. Moderately religious
    d. Very religious
    e. I don't know.

INTERVIEW #1

Alignment with RQ1: How do university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience?

Self-censorship Defined:

- The act of withholding one's true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion.
- Self-censorship can refer to both remaining silent and conforming to the viewpoints of others.
- There are positive and negative consequences of self-censorship

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Self-censorship Experience:

1. Tell me more about your role at the university.

2. Why did you decide to participate in this interview?

3. Tell me about a time within the past year and a half when you self-censored a viewpoint or belief while in a professional setting at UT-Knoxville.

   PROBE(S):

   a) In this situation, did you self-censor by remaining silent or by conforming your viewpoint to align with actual or perceived viewpoints of others?

4. Describe the factors that influenced your decision to self-censor in the experience you shared.

   PROBE(S):

   a) How did social context influence your decision to self-censor?
      a. Macro (i.e., society, including racial, social, political context)
      b. Micro (i.e., university or small group within the university)
   b) What individual characteristics may have influenced your decision to self-censor?
      a. Examples: Personality traits, general and specific worldviews, values, ideology, emotions, anxieties, personal expectations, role/status, level of experience, attitudes, motivations, behavioral intentions, and other relatively stable characteristics
      b. Would you describe yourself as someone who is prone to self-censor viewpoints or beliefs in a professional setting? Tell me more.
   c) How did the type of information or the viewpoint influence your decision to self-censor?
      a. Examples: Severity of the information/viewpoint, relevance to the present, type of act that the information/viewpoint involves, other issues raised by the information/viewpoint
   d) What circumstantial factors influenced your decision to self-censor (e.g., the timeliness of the information/viewpoint you considered sharing, level of personal involvement)?
   e) How have your political and religious views influenced your decision to self-censor?

5. How would you characterize attitudes (from colleagues, your department, the university, the community) toward the opinion you withheld?

   PROBE(S):

   a) What has led you to this belief?

6. What themes/topics do you tend to feel comfortable discussing with others on campus? What themes/topics do you tend to avoid?

7. What do you think would have happened (i.e., what was the cost) had you chosen to express your viewpoint?
   PROBE(S):
   a) Why do you think that would have been the outcome–for yourself and others?
   b) How do you know there would be a negative reaction or repercussions for sharing this opinion?
   c) Have you or others experienced negative consequences for expressing a similar viewpoint? How may this have affected your decision to self-censor?

8. Under what set of circumstances would you have felt more comfortable sharing your viewpoint/belief?

9. As you reflect on this experience and our discussion today, how do you ultimately think and feel about your decision to self-censor in this particular circumstance?

10. Have you observed any positive or negative consequences from your decision to self-censor in this circumstance and/or other circumstances? Explain.

11. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share about self-censorship and your experience that may contribute to my research?

12. Do you know other UT-Knoxville staff or administrators who may feel comfortable sharing their personal experience with self-censorship?

INTERVIEW #2

Alignment with RQ2: How do campus policies and attitudes, and responses toward speech on campus influence the decision to self-censor?

Free Speech/Expression Defined:

The legal right to express one's opinion freely. This right is guaranteed by the First Amendment which states that: *"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."*

Free Speech in Higher Education (broad):

1. Describe your understanding of what free speech means.

2. What does free speech mean on a college or university campus?

3. Think about the various roles that make up a college or university campus–faculty, students, staff, administrators. How does the practice of free speech look for each of these roles?

4. Should a university regulate/restrict speech? Why or why not? If so, under what circumstances?

Free Speech at UT-Knoxville:

5. Describe the climate toward free speech/expression on the UT-Knoxville campus.
   PROBE(S):
   a) Are faculty, staff/administrators, and students open to differing viewpoints?
   b) What are the consequences of these groups exercising their free speech rights?
   c) Where does free speech fit in among UT-Knoxville's priorities?

6. What are some of the challenges staff and administrators face when it comes to protecting/preserving/practicing free expression at UT-Knoxville?

7. In May 2017, the Campus Free Speech Protection Act was signed into law by the Tennessee State Legislature. The following is an excerpt from the legislation that is on the UT-Knoxville website. "The state law says: *'it is not the proper role of an institution to attempt to shield individuals from free speech, including ideas and opinions they find offensive, unwise, immoral, indecent, disagreeable, conservative, liberal, traditional, radical, or wrong-headed.'* Further, the law states that although members of the campus community are free to state their own views and contest what others are saying, *'they may not substantially obstruct or otherwise substantially interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe.'"*
   a) What is your understanding of this legislation?
   b) Does UT-Knoxville uphold this legislation? Be specific.

8. According to your background survey, you have worked in higher education for X years and X years at UT-Knoxville. There have been several free speech-related incidents on the UT-Knoxville campus in the past couple of years. Did you hear about these incidents when they transpired? If so, what was your initial reaction when you heard about these incidents on campus?
   EXAMPLES:

Incident	**Response from admin**	**Campus reaction**	**Result**
Hate speech on the Rock (December 2017)	Posted on social media in response to messages on the Rock reaffirming free speech. Encouraged the Vol community to take care of the Rock quickly.	Condemned the message and asked UTK to do more to condemn hate speech.	Chancellor placed cameras on the Rock to monitor speech.
Blackface (March 2019)	Issued several statements denouncing the incident and reaffirming	Attended campus forum.	Students involved withdrew.

	institutional values. Implemented new resources and trainings (sensitivity/bias training, review of code of conduct, updates to FYS curriculum). Held public forum.	Demanded that students be expelled. Protested at a basketball game.	
Newly admitted cheerleader used a racial slur in a private Snapchat before prior (June 2020)	Issued public statements about diversity and inclusion and support of black students.	Posted screenshots of the Snapchat on Twitter. Athletics made the decision to not allow her to join the cheerleading team.	Student rescinded her application.
Engineering student posted racist video on Twitter (June 2020)	Placed the student on immediate interim suspension during investigation. Encouraged students to submit bias response reports. Issued public statements	Incident shared via social media.	The student withdrew or was expelled.
UTK Africana Studies professor wrote a racial slur on the whiteboard during a lecture (February 2021)	Issued multiple apologies. Roundtable discussion with the Chancellor. DEI involvement.	Students posted the image on Twitter during class. SGA involvement. Meetings with community leaders.	Professor placed on leave for two weeks and asked to work with Office of Teaching and Learning Innovation to improve presentation.

9. I would like you to think about the legislation we reviewed and these incidents.
   a) Do the responses to the incidents that have transpired at UT-Knoxville in the past couple of years reflect a commitment to this legislation and the First Amendment?
   b) What is your reaction to how UT-Knoxville responded to these incidents?

10. How has UT-Knoxville's response to <u>free speech incidents</u> influenced your decision to self-censor or openly share your viewpoints in a professional setting?

11. How has UT-Knoxville's interpretation of <u>free speech policy</u> influenced your decision to self-censor?

12. How has the racial, social, and political tension of the past year and a half influenced your decision to self-censor as a university staff member/administrator?
    PROBE(S):
    a) Prior to 2020, would you have expressed your viewpoints more openly?
    b) What are some of the reasons why staff and administrators (and others) would choose to self-censor their viewpoints on the UT-Knoxville campus?

13. How does self-censorship among university staff and administrators impact the university as a whole?

14. How has self-censoring your viewpoints/beliefs (in this instance and others) influenced your experience at the university?

15. As you think about our two interviews, what question(s) should I ask that I haven't asked yet? Is there anything that I have missed that would help me better understand your experience that you haven't shared yet?

16. Do you know other UT-Knoxville staff or administrators who may feel comfortable sharing their personal experience with self-censorship?

Appendix B Recruitment Email

RECRUITMENT EMAIL FOR STAFF AND ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEWS

Subject: Interview opportunity: Share your experiences with self-censorship

Dear _____,

My name is Leigh Cherry and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. As a current UT-Knoxville staff member or administrator, I invite you to participate in my dissertation research about self-censorship.

In addition to a global pandemic, 2020 and 2021 have been marked by racial, social, and political unrest across the nation. Events that have occurred during this time provide a new and meaningful context to examine the climate of free expression and the experiences that lead to self-censorship (i.e., the act of withholding one's true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion) in higher education. The purpose of my study is to understand how university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience and explore how policies and campus responses to speech influence the decision to self-censor. I hope the findings from my dissertation research will inform practice at UT-Knoxville—and beyond—based on empirical data.

I invite you to participate in two, one-on-one interviews via Zoom (or in person, if that is your preference) to discuss these important themes. To schedule your interviews, click here to select a time that works with your schedule.

Please find the attached letter of informed consent which will provide you with additional information about my dissertation research and your rights and protections as a participant. I sincerely hope you participate! Please do not hesitate to contact me via email if you have questions about this research.

Thank you,

(EMAIL SIGNATURE)

Appendix C Informed Consent Statement

Informed Consent Statement

Self-Censorship Among University Staff and Administrators

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a research study because you have been identified as a current staff member or administrator at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The purpose of this study is to understand how university staff and administrators who choose to self-censor describe and make meaning of their experience and explore how policies and campus responses to speech influence the decision to self-censor.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

Study Procedures:

The researcher, Leigh Cherry, will conduct interviews with several University of Tennessee-Knoxville staff members or administrators. By choosing to participate, participants agree to engage in two, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. It is expected that each interview will last 60-90 minutes. Spacing between interviews will vary depending on participants' availability and the researcher's discretion during data collection. The researcher will keep all data collected from participants, those who complete one or two interviews. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and video-recorded in the platform. Each interview will be transcribed verbatim using Zoom transcription to aid with data analysis. Participants may opt for in-person interviews, which will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai. Each participant will have the opportunity to review their transcript for accuracy.

Inclusion Criteria:

To participate in an interview, participants must meet the following eligibility requirements:

5. Must be a staff member* or administrator who at the time of their interview is employed by the University of Tennessee-Knoxville.
6. Must be a full-time employee at the University.
7. Must have a minimum of three years of experience in higher education.
8. Must complete a background survey with the informed consent statement prior to the interview.

*Exclusion criteria: Administrative coordinators (i.e., staff members who are responsible for scheduling and other clerical duties).

RISKS

All research carries risk. Participation in this study will incur minimal risk. The standard for minimal risk is that which is found in everyday life. Anything more than minimal risk or discomfort is not anticipated; however, if you feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, you have the right to decline to answer any question and/or to end the interview. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. A potential risk is the inadvertent release of sensitive information from the interview. To minimize any potential risks, the researcher will take the following measures:

- Use pseudonyms to mask participants' identities and institution in written reports;

- Remove or mask other identifiable information in participants' responses, as appropriate;
- Conduct interviews via Zoom or at an on-campus location of the participants' choosing so that the participants may comfortably share responses;
- Protect all research materials on password-protected devices; and
- Delete interview recordings after the completion of the study.

For in-person, audio-recorded interviews only: Note that the use of Otter.ai for transcription of in-person, audio-recorded interviews presents some security risks. The researcher cannot promise that data transcribed in Otter.ai will remain confidential or that the data will only be used by the researcher if audio files are transcribed through this service.

BENEFITS

You may not directly benefit from your participation in this research study. This research will, however, shed light on the factors that influence staff and administrators to self-censor viewpoints, ideas, and beliefs at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Additionally, this research may demonstrate that the decision to self-censor is, in part, influenced by campus policies and attitudes and responses toward speech. Consideration of the findings may provide an opportunity for a broader discussion about institutional values, policies, and practices that support free expression and tolerance of differing viewpoints in the workplace.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept confidential and will only be available to the researcher. Data will be stored securely throughout the course of the study. Study materials with identifiable information will be deleted at the conclusion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to the study. Please refer to the "Risks" section to review the strategies the researcher will employ to minimize risks by participating in this study. By signing the informed consent, you agree to have your verbal responses recorded and transcribed for further analysis with the understanding that your responses will not be linked to you personally in any way.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Your materials/information will not be used or shared with other researchers for future research, even if identifiers are removed.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Leigh Cherry, at lcherry4@tennessee.edu, or (865) 974-8849. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee IRB Compliance Officer at utkirb@utk.edu or (865) 974-7697.

CONSENT

By clicking the NEXT button, I indicate that I have read the above information and that I agree to participate in the research study.

___ I consent to participate in this research study.
___ I do not consent to participate in this research study.

Appendix D IRB Approval Letter

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE

September 09, 2021
Leigh Allyson Cherry,
UTK - VP-Acad Affrs and Std Success
Re: UTK IRB-21-06543-XP
Study Title: Self-Censorship Among University Staff and Administrators

Dear Leigh Allyson Cherry:
The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), Categories 6 and 7. The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application (version 1.3) as submitted, including the following documents that have been dated and stamped IRB approved:

- Letter of Informed Consent_ v 2.1
- Leigh Cherry_Dissertation_Interview Protocol_7.31.21_V2_ v 2.0
- Leigh Cherry_Dissertation_Recruitment Email_ 8.2.21_V3_ v 3.0
- Leigh Cherry_Dissertation_Interview Protocol_6.18.21_V1_ v 1.0

You are approved to enroll a maximum of 25 participants. Approval of this study will be valid from September 09, 2021 to 09/08/2022.

The requirement to secure a signed consent form is waived under 45 CFR 46.117(c)(1). Willingness of the subject to participate will constitute adequate documentation of consent.

Any revisions in the approved application, consent forms, instruments, recruitment materials, etc., must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, re-approval of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,

Lora Beebe, Ph.D., PMHNP-BC, FAAN
Chair

Vita

Leigh Cherry Morales was born in Memphis, Tennessee. She grew up primarily in Middle Tennessee where she graduated from Riverdale High School in May 2000. After high school, she attended Brigham Young University and began taking immersive Spanish courses. Following her second year at the university, Leigh briefly paused her studies to serve as a Spanish-speaking missionary in the McAllen, Texas area located on the Texas-Mexico border. Leigh later returned to Brigham Young University to complete a bachelor's degree in Spanish Teaching and TESOL and graduated in December 2007. After teaching high school-level Spanish in Houston, Texas for two years, Leigh returned to Brigham Young University to pursue a master's degree in Spanish Pedagogy. She graduated in August 2011 and accepted a job with Middlebury Interactive Languages, an online language course development company, in Utah before transferring to the main office in Vermont. In 2014, Leigh was introduced to Dr. Rich Lloyd, the president of a small liberal arts college in Vermont, who offered her an opportunity to open a student success office. Having always wanted to work in higher education, Leigh accepted the role of student success coordinator at the College of St. Joseph in Rutland, Vermont. She remained at the college for two years and moved to Knoxville, Tennessee in May 2017 to work for the University of Tennessee System Office of Academic Affairs and Student Success. She continues to work in student success. Leigh was admitted as a student in the Higher Education Administration Ph.D. program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in Spring 2018 and began her studies in the Fall 2018 semester.