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What's AHEAD Poll # 11: Academic Freedom, Tenure, and Shared Governance

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Additional commentary is available at <https://ahead-penn.org/whats-ahead/commentary-october-2016>

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Keywords

Academic freedom, tenure, academic governance, decision making, college campuses, perceptions of college and university leaders

Comments

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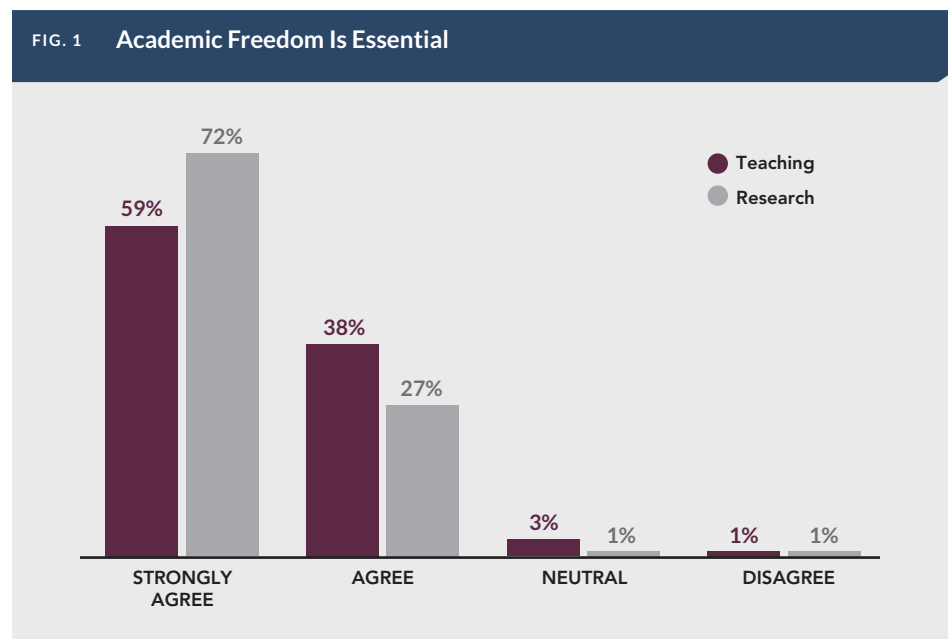
What's AHEAD draws on the expertise of higher education trend-spotters to offer insights into important issues in higher education management. In this poll, spirited by the 50th Anniversary of the [1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities](#) we asked higher education leaders to share their views about academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance. Developed by the American Association of University Professors, American Council on Education, and Association of Governing boards, this Statement articulates the interrelated roles and responsibilities of the governing board, president, and faculty in the governance of colleges and universities in the United States.

Academic freedom and tenure have long been fundamental to higher education in the United States. Formalized by the American Association of University Professors' Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure in 1915 and revisited several times thereafter, what is known as the [1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#) continues to articulate the purposes and parameters of these constructs, as understood by the many scholarly and education groups that endorse the Statement.

Virtually all higher education leaders responding to this poll agree that academic freedom is essential, but most believe that the meaning of academic freedom is not consistently understood. Although a majority of responding leaders agree that academic freedom is under threat in some other nations, respondents are more divided in their views of the status of academic freedom in the United States. Higher education leaders disagree about whether the growth in non-tenure-line faculty is a problem, but few feel that tenure is required to ensure academic freedom. Higher education leaders generally agree that faculty should play a role in at least some types of institutional decision making and disagree that unionization of faculty and graduate students is a good idea.

Academic Freedom Is Essential

Virtually all respondents agree or strongly agree that academic freedom is essential in teaching (97%) and research (99%), with more respondents strongly agreeing that academic freedom is important in research (72%) than teaching (59%).



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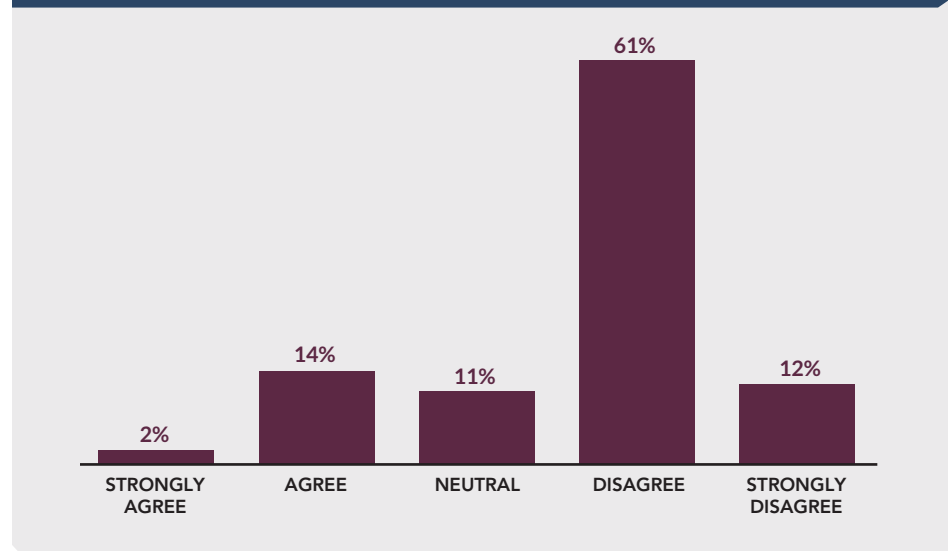
Academic Freedom Is Not Consistently Understood

Only 16% of respondents agree or strongly agree that there is clear and consistent understanding of what academic freedom means; 61% disagree and 12% strongly disagree.

Several respondents offered comments to the effect that academic freedom is “misunderstood and sometimes abused by faculty members.” One respondent wrote that “many in higher education have lost sight of the reasons why” academic freedom is “essential.” Another respondent stated that higher education needs to improve understanding of academic freedom, writing:

I see the crux of the issue as being a lack of effort on the part of institutions to clearly define, in partnership with faculty, what “academic freedom” and “shared governance” means within the context and culture of the institution. A shared understanding among all concerned is necessary.

FIG. 2 There Is Clear and Consistent Understanding of What Academic Freedom Means



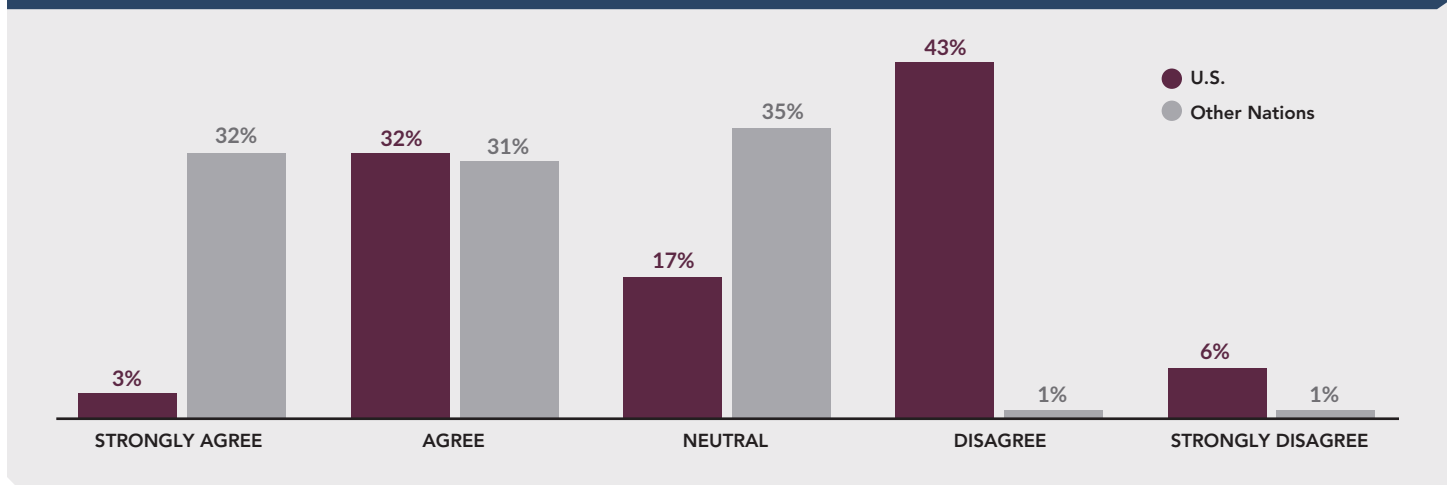
Respondents Disagree About Whether Academic Freedom Is Under Threat in the U.S.

While a third (32%) of respondents strongly agree and another third (31%) agree that academic freedom is under threat in some other nations, respondents hold divided opinions about the status of academic freedom in the U.S. About a third (35%) of respondents agree or strongly agree that academic freedom is under threat in the U.S., while 49% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree.

One respondent articulated concerns about academic freedom in the U.S. and in other nations, commenting:

I'm tremendously concerned about the future of academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance at for-profit universities. Similarly, but to a lesser extent, I perceive an ongoing erosion of academic freedom among colleges and universities that have expanded with multiple campuses, and especially those institutions of higher learning from America who have moved to launch branches in countries where freedoms—academic or democratic—are lower in quality than in the USA.

FIG. 3 Academic Freedom Is Under Threat in the U.S. and Other Nations

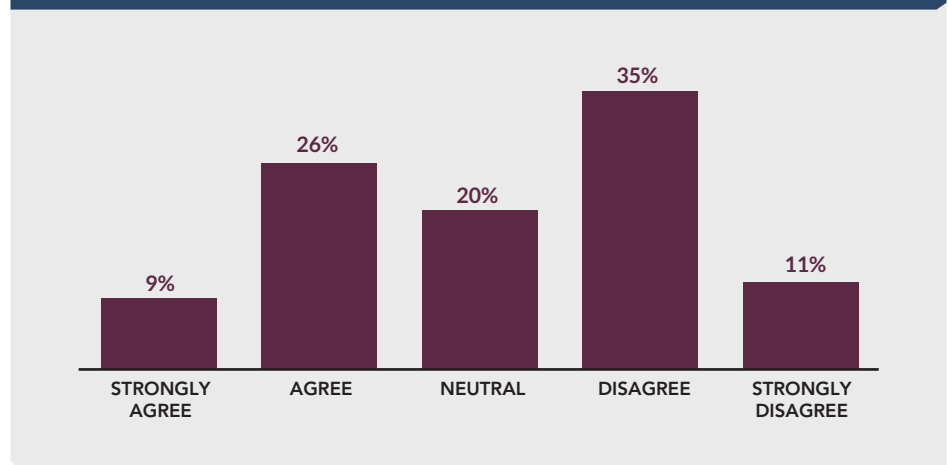


Respondents Are Divided in Their Views on the Growth in Non-Tenure-Line Faculty

A third (35%) of respondents agree or strongly agree that the growth in non-tenure-line faculty is problematic, but 46% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree.

A few respondents offered explanations for the growth in non-tenure-line faculty. One higher education leader commented that “contracted faculty ... allow for more institutional flexibility in adding or dropping courses, [which] is essential as the curriculum needs regular updates to address the workforce changes.”

FIG. 4 The Growth in Non-Tenure-Line Faculty in the U.S. Is Problematic



Few Respondents Agree that Tenure Is Required to Ensure Academic Freedom

Only 25% of responding higher education leaders agree or strongly agree that tenure is required to ensure academic freedom; slightly more than half (56%) of respondents disagree or strongly disagree.

A few respondents commented on the importance of academic freedom while others described the difficulties associated with tenure. One higher education leader articulated these views, writing:

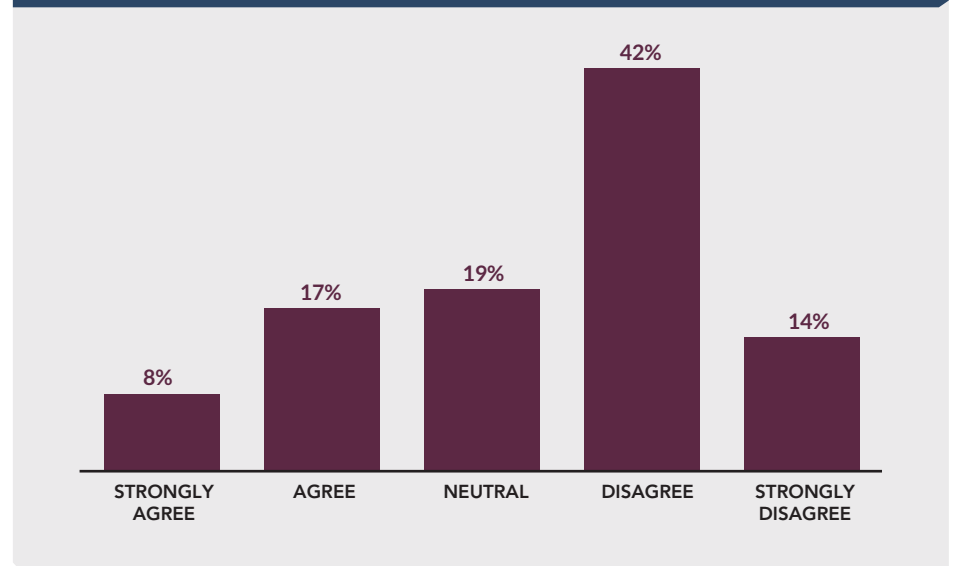
I have zero interest in stifling academic freedom. The challenge I have with tenure is that it becomes a de facto lifetime contract (and I don't want to hear about post-tenure review, unless someone can share with me actions that resulted from it), making fixed what might otherwise be variable costs and making flexibility in the academy very difficult to achieve.

Another higher education leader identified administrative challenges, stating:

Tenure is one of the reasons many small liberal arts colleges are closing—they can't bring in new blood with new engagement teaching practices and the tenured faculty who are at retirement age or even over are hanging on to their jobs for dear life, strangling the life out of potential growth.

Summarizing these views, a third higher education leader succinctly stated, “Tenure is an outdated concept in the United States that I believe is actually hurting higher education today more than helping.”

FIG. 5 Tenure Is Required to Ensure Academic Freedom



Most Agree That Faculty Should Play a Role in Institutional Decision Making

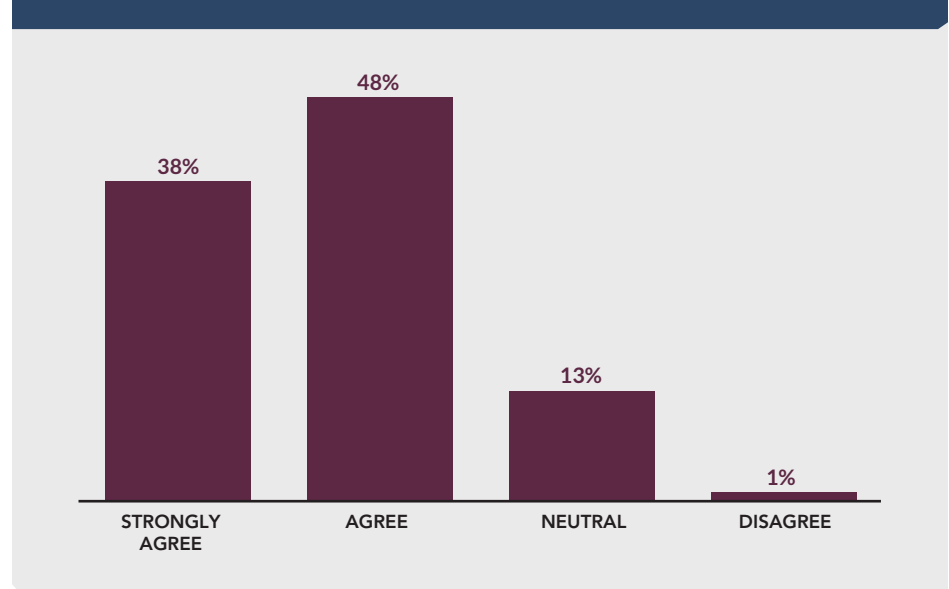
Most respondents agree or strongly agree (86%) that faculty should play a role in institutional decision making.

Comments from a few respondents suggest that the actual role of faculty in institutional decision making may be limited. One higher education leader wrote that, “Shared governance may sound positive and inclusive, [but] in my opinion it may actually bring about more conflict in moving processes forward.” Another leader suggested that faculty should be involved only in matters that are directly related to the activities of faculty, commenting:

There are often unclear lines about the extent to which shared governance includes faculty input in institutional decisions that are not directly related to teaching, research, and clinical operations. This lack of clarity often leads to the perception that shared governance is under attack, when in reality it may more accurately represent misunderstandings about the appropriateness of faculty input in these types of decisions.

A third respondent suggested that the role of faculty in shared governance may be changing over time, writing: “Academic institutions are behaving more like corporations and less like traditional academic institutions with faculty governance.”

FIG. 6 Faculty Should Play a Role in Institutional Decision Making



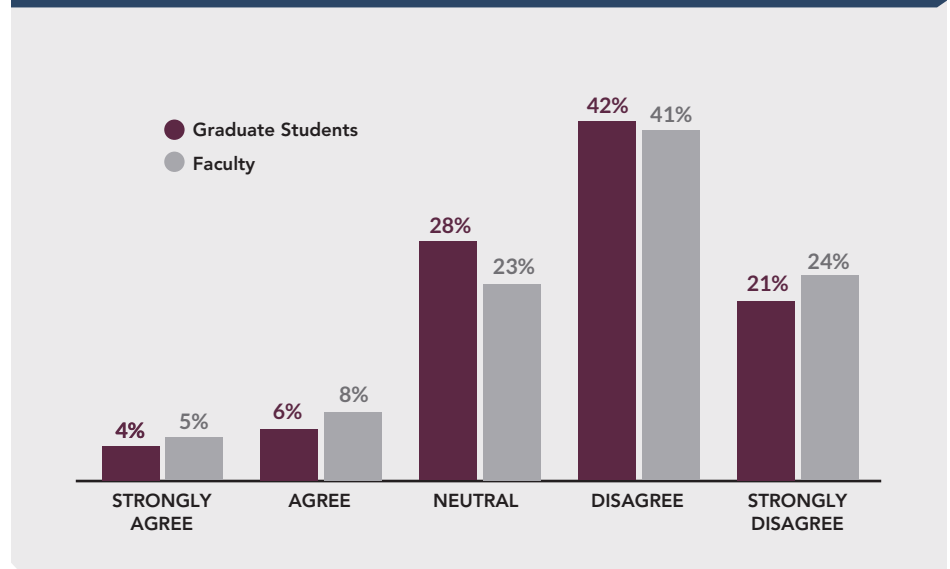
Most Respondents Disagree that Unionization Is a Good Idea

Small shares of responding higher education leaders agree or strongly agree that unionization is a good idea for graduate students (10%) or faculty (13%). About a quarter of respondents are neutral on these issues.

Comments from one respondent suggest why at least some higher education leaders do not agree that unionization is a good idea:

[U]nionization promotes an us vs. them atmosphere during the collective bargaining process and when dealing with poor performance. In addition, given the evolving nature of education and research, tenure and unionized workforces can inhibit the organization's ability to innovate or change direction based on needs.

FIG. 7 Unionization Is a Good Idea for Graduate Students or Faculty



About This Poll

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