"I Prep Longer, Worry More, and Don't Talk about Potentially Controversial Topics in My Field": The Impact of Student Complaints on Faculty Work

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Abstract

This research examines the faculty experience of student complaints about their courses and instruction and the impact on faculty work. Using a mixed method approach of a survey and interviews of faculty on a large, public university campus, we evaluated the impact of complaints or the fear of such complaints on instructional practices, and examined differences based on faculty gender, race, and rank. We found that the impact of student complaints on faculty work included faculty becoming more cautious and conscientious, reducing rigor, self-censoring, and feeling demoralized. Faculty confidence in the administrative response to student complaints was also explored. Our findings indicate that the experience of student complaints, coupled with the administrative response to them, is a sign of the deprofessionalization of the faculty.

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I n recent years there has been considerable media attention on troubling classroom interactions between faculty and students. Some examples include: "Viral Video Gives 'Distorted' Picture of Pro-Police Class Confrontation, California Professor's Defenders Say" (Sforza); "A Blackface 'Othello' Shocks, and a Professor Steps Back From Class" (Schuessler); "At N.Y.U., Students Were Failing Organic Chemistry. Who Was to Blame?" (Saul) "Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis Signs Bill Permitting College Students to Record Professors in Class" (Betz) and "A Lecturer Showed a Painting of the Prophet Muhammad. She Lost Her Job" (Patel).

By contrast, our literature review reveals that higher education scholarship and commentary about troubling classroom interactions focuses on professional practices of classroom management, the effect of bias on student evaluations of teaching (SETs), and issues such as diversity and inclusion in the classroom, student-consumer orientations, the role of academic freedom in teaching, faculty review and tenure, and institutional accountability. Only rarely, however, does any of this material touch on the experience of faculty members as they carry out their responsibilities related to the instructional process.

To fill this gap, our study focuses on faculty responses to student complaints or the fear of student complaints about pedagogy and course content. We examine how student complaints are situated in the aforementioned larger conversations. Moreover, we consider how complaints shape the classroom as a workplace and influence the pedagogical choices of faculty members.

Literature Review

While there is a developed body of literature on student complaints made on the end-term student evaluations of teaching, there is not the same kind of robust examination of the impact of student complaints on faculty work. Rather, the impact of student complaints is often situated in explorations of topics other than academic labor. The academic literature most directly related to student complaints about their instructors appears in studies on student incivility. This work examines a range of conduct, including expressions of dissatisfaction with the instructor's course, course policies and assigned grades as well as intimidation and challenge behaviors (Bantha et al.; Boice; Burke; Feldmann; Fitch et al.; Goodboy and Myers; Holdcroft; Knepp; Morrissette; Weimer). Laverghetta suggested that student incivility may result from a consumer mentality that encourages students to view faculty as service providers and gives students license to expect their needs will be satisfied. Similarly, Chowning and Campbell found that students with a greater sense of academic entitlement are more likely to complain to professors or engage in email or face-to-face conversations that are demanding, overly informal, and/or presumptuous. Cox et al. observed that students with consumer orientations proved more

prone to lie about faculty on end-of-term student evaluations of teaching (SETs).

Some evidence indicated that women faculty, faculty of color, younger faculty, and those with less experience and/or credentials reported more incidents of incivility and bullying from students (Alexander-Snow; Burke et al.; Johnson-Bailey; Keashly and Neuman; Knepp; Lampman). This evidence corresponded with studies that point out the potential for bias based on gender, race, and age in SETs (Esaray and Valdes; Hoorens et al.; Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman; Murray et al.; Reid; Wallace et al.; Zipser et al.). Other research, however, pointed not to greater incidents of student incivility for women faculty but instead to significantly more negative outcomes of student incivility for women faculty members (Lampman et al.; Lampman et al.). Similar findings appeared in studies on both the emotional and job advancement consequences of SETs for women faculty and faculty of color (Carmack and LeFebvre; Cox et al.; Elkins and Hinkle; Gelber; Lilienfled; Ray et al.; Roseboro) as well as in more general work on the relationships between students and faculty (Tormey; Webber).

In terms of the faculty work experience, several studies do examine the impact of classroom issues on faculty dissatisfaction (see, for instance, Baker et al.; Reybold). Heffernan and Gates connected negative workplace emotions for faculty with greater degrees of perceived student academic entitlement as well as with expectations that instructors become more oriented to serving students as customers. Similarly, Edgar et al. determined that faculty felt pressured to respond to student demands associated with entitled behaviors (i.e., fast response to emails, grade inflation to ensure good SETs). More recently, Redstone and Villasenor discussed how a student's ability to use social media to broadcast any disagreement can create a more fraught classroom environment and could result in faculty self-censorship. Finally, Santoro helpfully contrasted two forms of faculty dissatisfaction, namely burnout and demoralization, with the former characterized by being exhausted and overwhelmed and the latter being more about an inability to embody the values that drew a faculty member to the profession.

Another approach to the issue of the impact of student complaints on faculty work is rooted in a framework that emphasizes the purpose of the university itself, specifically the nexus of the pursuit of truth, academic freedom, and free speech (Alger and Piper; Dutt-Ballerstadt and Bhattacharya; Fish; Furedi; Hutchison; Lackey; Lukianoff and Haidt; Rauch; Reichman; Reichman). This approach underscores the necessity for faculty to engage in their teaching and research without fear of sanction or retaliation, including finding ways to balance intellectual and social abrasion with civility and determining when to self-censor and why (Chamlee-Wright). If these norms represent an ideal academic environment, a series of explorations of both faculty and student self-censorship demonstrated how classrooms in the current political and

educational climate fall short of these standards (Chamlee-Wright; Cohen; LaNoue; Larson et al.; Mercer; Redstone and Villasenor; Tubbs; Whittington; Wood).

In addition, the influence of an external political climate on faculty teaching and research, as well as faculty fear of reputational damage from politically-motivated allegations, is hardly new (Hamilton; Lazarsfeld and Theilends; Schrecker). At present, there is increasing recognition that both campus initiatives like bias response teams (LaNoue) as well as numerous and more pervasive forms of media (Redstone and Villasenor) can generate negative attention and thus provide distinct challenges for faculty and university administrators, including curtailing traditional rights for faculty and students. Kwestel and Milano, for example, found that university social media policies (SMPs) value university reputation and brand management over academic freedom (see also Cooper and Marx). Nonetheless, LaRoche indicated that environments that lack clear guidelines, particularly about extramural statements, raised concern among faculty about whether their university would support them if controversy ensues. Other work focused on students. DuMont and Hutchens, for example, examined the balance of students' rights to free speech and the responsibility of the university to monitor online learning environments as well as issues such as harassment.

Finally, there are a number of first-person and journalistic accounts of faculty members' experiences with student complaints about instruction in addition to an extensive array of practical pieces geared toward faculty, department chairs, or other administrators. These articles focus on strategies for preventing or responding to student complaints when they arise (Buller; Gambescia and Donnelly; Gedye et al.; Goldstein; Heator) as well as longer thought pieces designed to prompt consideration with focus on a specific case or cases (Gerson; Pettit).

This body of literature, however, lacks empirical scholarship about faculty experiences of student complaints. There is a need to understand how student complaints impact the ways in which faculty members do their work and how they feel about their work. This effort must include faculty members' experiences of the institution's responses to student complaints, particularly in an era of deprofessionalization in which administrators are facing pressure to satisfy students and prevent reputational damage to the institution (Gerber).

Study Objectives and Methods

In order to meet the primary study objectives and align them with our review of the literature, we designed a mixed methods approach using both a survey and follow-up interviews with volunteer respondents. The study was determined to be exempt from review by the IRB Administration. The survey instrument was developed for the purposes of this study and was piloted in order to check for clarity and online functionality. Survey responses yielded quantitative data on the experience of faculty members

with student complaints about pedagogy as well their general perceptions of, and any concerns regarding, such complaints. Survey responses also yielded comparative data (e.g., comparisons by gender, race, rank, and rigor). Follow-up interviews with a subset of 41 faculty members provided rich descriptions of faculty experiences with student complaints and how such complaints were handled.

The anonymous survey was sent to 1,370 members of the faculty at a regional state university with 20,000 students in April 2021. Five hundred ninety-six (596) faculty members completed the survey, resulting in a 43% response rate. The respondents made up a representative sample from each of the university's academic divisions and were generally representative of the university totals in terms of rank (42% tenured, 16% tenure-track, 42% non-tenure-track [NTT]) and underrepresented minorities (8%). Women were somewhat overrepresented (61% of survey participants vs. 53% of university faculty).

We intentionally left the definition of "complaint" open, except for excluding any comments received in end-of-course student evaluations of teaching. Thus, the first survey question posed:

> To your knowledge, since joining the faculty at [this University], have any students made a complaint regarding your courses or your instruction? (Note we are asking about complaints students made **other than** in an end-of-course survey/formal student evaluation of teaching.)

This openness enabled us to understand and code the range of experiences that faculty reported as student complaints. Faculty who answered that they had experienced a complaint were then asked a series of questions to elaborate on a single complaint or, if they had experienced multiple complaints, to report on the most challenging one. Faculty who answered that they had not been the object of a student complaint were directed to the remaining survey questions.

In order to determine whether any observed differences in faculty responses were predicted by gender, race, and rank, we analyzed the data using the chi-square (χ^2) test of the statistical significance of group differences. We also used this method to examine differences across other variables such as different types of complaints, the seriousness of complaints, effects on teaching, and faculty confidence in the administrative response to student complaints. Finally, we employed this test for comparisons of faculty who were teaching controversial subject matter (including content that might make students uncomfortable or content that might be considered political in nature) or teaching a course that would be considered academically rigorous with faculty who were not teaching those types of courses.

Results

Quantitative Data

Of the 596 survey respondents, 231 (39%) reported being the object of a student complaint. Those faculty were asked to indicate the basis of the complaint(s) by choosing from a list of 10 statements (checking all that applied). Among the 231 complaints, 147 were classified as expectations-based (e.g., concerning a grade, enforcing a policy, course difficulty) and 66 were classified as expression-based (e.g., faculty statements, course materials/content). Twenty-eight complaints were reported to be based in both expectations and expression and in 46 cases, the basis of the reported complaint was something other than these factors (e.g., class format, claim that the faculty member was unresponsive to email, etc.). For respondents experiencing complaints, 82% said they were able to address the student's complaint effectively.

Several survey questions were designed to capture elements that could potentially point to the seriousness of the complaint. Twenty-five percent of complaint cases indicated that officials beyond the department chair were involved with the complaint in some way. In most of these instances, it was the college dean alone. Twenty-nine percent of the complaint cases involved one or more troubling behaviors on the part of the student; most frequently, it was the student misrepresenting the facts of the situation to others. In 18% of complaint cases, faculty believed their professional reputation was harmed as a result of the complaint experience. Finally, 7% of the reported cases led to some other specified consequences for the faculty member (e.g., professional development plan, letter of reprimand).

Most notably, nearly half (48%) of all faculty respondents said that knowledge of or worry over student complaints affects their teaching. Faculty members who responded "yes" to this question were asked to describe how it had impacted their teaching. These open-ended replies fell into four main categories which we coded as follows: (1) increased caution and conscientiousness (28%); (2) self-censorship (20%); (3) a reduction in rigor (20%); and (4) demoralization (19%). Some respondents experienced two or more of these effects, as in one faculty member's statement that "I prep longer, worry more, and don't talk about potentially controversial topics in my field." These responses also suggested that a greater proportion of women faculty members who were impacted by complaints reported low morale than men (26% vs. 15%).

Gender, Race, and Rank

In comparing faculty who had a student complaint and those who did not, women were not significantly more likely than men to report experiencing a single complaint or multiple complaints.[1] Likewise, for the factors potentially indicating more serious complaints, there were no significant differences between women and men for the involvement of other officials (beyond the department chair) in the complaint, troubling behaviors on the part of the student, or perceived reputational harm.[2] Gender did prove to

be a significant predictor of the likelihood of an expression-based complaint.[3] In this case, men were more likely than women to have a complaint that was expression-based (37% and 25%, respectively).

By contrast, underrepresented minority faculty were more likely to report a complaint than majority faculty members (50% vs. 36%, respectively).[4] As a result of the small numbers of cases of underrepresented minority faculty, meaningful tests of differences based on faculty race could not be conducted to see if race relates to factors such as troubling behaviors on the part of the student and the involvement of other officials beyond the chair.

With regard to rank (faculty status and nature of faculty appointment), those holding the rank of associate professor and professor were more likely to report having student complaints than those at the assistant professor rank and those in NTT positions (54%, 38%, 27% and 32%, respectively).[5] We found no significant differences based on faculty rank for the factors indicating potentially more serious complaints (involvement of other officials or troubling behaviors on the part of the student).

Complaints Related to Controversy and Rigor
Two additional factors were considered in evaluating student complaints– whether the faculty member teaches potentially controversial subject matter (including sensitive content that might make students uncomfortable or content that might be considered political in nature) and academic rigor (i.e., whether the faculty teaches a particularly rigorous course or teaches with rigorous academic expectations). We found that teaching potentially controversial material did not predict student complaints.[6] There was, however, a significant difference in the complaint rate associated with those who reported teaching particularly rigorous courses. In this case, faculty who reported that they teach a particularly rigorous course or impose particularly rigorous expectations were more likely to have had a student complaint in comparison with those teaching with less rigor (39% vs. 28%).[7]

Impacts on Teaching
Of the 48% of faculty who said that knowledge of or worry over student complaints affected their teaching, those faculty members who had experienced a complaint were more likely to report some impact on their work in the classroom (59% vs. 41% for those not experiencing complaints).[8] Additionally, faculty who indicated that they taught potentially controversial content were significantly more likely to say that knowledge of or concern about student complaints had an impact on their pedagogy (57% vs. 39% for those not teaching controversial material).[9] Being an underrepresented minority faculty was another factor predicting impact on teaching (64% vs. 46% for faculty who are not racial minorities),[10] as was faculty rank.[11] Here, the majority of assistant and

associate professors reported that student complaint concerns had impacted their teaching (59% and 56%, respectively), in contrast to the majority of NTT faculty and faculty in the rank of professor, who indicated that student complaint concerns had *not* impacted their teaching (54% and 59%, respectively).

Uncertainty about the Administrative Response
When asked if the faculty member had confidence that the university administration would respond appropriately to a student complaint, half of responses (50%) indicated they were not sure. Faculty members in tenured and tenure-track ranks (professor, associate professor, and assistant professor ranks), however, expressed *no* confidence more often than confidence (39% vs. 14%, 44% vs. 7%; 24% vs. 15 %, respectively).[12] Among NTT faculty, however, the findings were reversed: 19% not confident vs. 33% confident in the administration.

Qualitative Data
Navigating Tensions Between Care and Complaint
Qualitative data also revealed that most faculty see handling student complaints as a routine part of the job and that they feel capable handling student complaints. Indeed, most faculty members expressed that they care about their students' learning and overall welfare, both of which they see as important aspects of their professional duties. As such, they indicated strong support for mechanisms allowing students to report unprofessional or illegal behaviors, as well as for having channels to handle more routine complaints. The following comments are representative: "Students should be aware of the proper channel of communication for complaints, starting with the instructor and going up the chain of authority"; "Student complaints should be taken seriously and investigated objectively"; and "I am glad we have a process for students' concerns to be heard."

For many faculty, student discomfort is an inevitable part of a productive learning environment and thus complaints should not be particularly surprising. In the words of one faculty member, "Perhaps great classrooms should be spaces where students and teachers feel safe to be a bit uncomfortable. As a teacher I suppose some student complaints are a healthy part of discomfort toward learning." This view of the classroom runs directly counter to that of other faculty members who spoke about creating a caring classroom environment as key to avoiding complaints. Among this group, some suggested that their own pedagogical approach prevents student complaints:

> I have never in 10 years had any formal complaints from students. I feel this is thanks to the authentic and personal relationship I foster with them in my classroom and the efforts I put in to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment for learning to take place.

Likewise, another faculty member described: "I offer mid-semester [sic] check-ins/evaluations where I solicit feedback from students and try to make changes in my courses even during the semester to better meet their needs."

These discussions reflect larger concerns about difficult-to-manage issues in pedagogy and, notably, frequently resulted in self-blame. One faculty member, who had been complained about by a "coalition" of students, expressed the inherent dilemma in navigating between care and complaint, saying:

> Maybe that's my own contribution to the problem–if I had been sterner to begin with maybe they wouldn't have run with it the way they did. I'm still figuring out how I could have done this better–what is my responsibility in this. . . . I tried so hard to be as available as possible to the students in this (course). I felt like I was doing everything and it's still not enough.

That same tension was captured by one faculty member's experience with an academic integrity violation. Following the procedure meant calling the student in with another faculty member present, which the instructor recognized could feel overwhelming to the student. In this case, however, the student arrived with a parent and the situation became one of complaint because the parent made claims about the faculty member's instruction based on the student's reporting that were not true. This situation put the untenured interviewee's reputation in question in front of a colleague. While the faculty member did not face professional repercussions, in the end there was still a feeling of personal responsibility even though it was the process that put the student in a position where complaint felt like a viable alternative. The faculty member concluded: "I liked that there's a procedure in place because . . . I can rely on it… [But] I feel like I failed [the student] by following the process, because then [the student] withdrew and didn't finish the class." The opportunity to educate the student about academic integrity and for the student to complete the class successfully was thus lost.

Navigating Tensions around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
The qualitative data were also striking with regard to some of the challenges women faculty experienced with student complaints. Although female faculty did not report receiving more student complaints on the survey, when asked to talk about such experiences, many women raised gender as a factor. One respondent summed up the tenor of these comments, saying:

As a female professor, I have to overcome certain issues with students that my male counterparts do not. Students judge me more harshly in general because I do not think they are used to seeing women in leadership roles and expect us to just be "nice" vs enforcing standards and rigor.

In interviews, women were also more likely than men to report student incivility and intimidation associated with complaints, recounting being called derogatory names, experiencing physical aggression such as being cornered in their offices, and being bullied by students who coordinated complaints. Women further expressed concern that being the object of student complaints could adversely affect perceptions about their professional competence and thus their progression through the ranks. For example, an untenured female interviewee who had been targeted by multiple students with complaints that were ultimately determined to be unfounded reported feeling that she was "on the Dean's radar in a way that you didn't want to be."

Faculty members categorized as underrepresented minorities similarly linked student complaints to student perceptions regarding competence. One respondent stated the issue succinctly: "As a non-white faculty member, I have to overcome low student expectations about my performance and professionalism." To address this issue and avoid student complaints, multiple underrepresented minority faculty members reported developing a highly authoritative classroom persona. At the same time, they often lamented the fact that they could not be as open or unguarded with their students as their colleagues. Fear of student complaints also produced an unwillingness to tackle controversial issues, especially if they did not have tenure. "You cannot be seen as 'pushing' an agenda" and "You do not want to rock the boat" were common sentiments.

These comments were related to a general faculty concern about navigating mixed messages about the university's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals. To offer some context, this concern was not surprising given the highly charged nature of teaching about racism and sexism, and the fact that this historically predominantly white university has recently seen steady growth in its percentage of underrepresented minorities among students (as of Fall 2020, 19% of 20,023 students as opposed to 11% of 17,587 in 2012), while the percentage of underrepresented faculty members has remained low (8% to 11% over the same period). The appointment of DEI liaisons across campus and a Chief Diversity Officer, as well as a focus on culturally responsive teaching and diversifying the curricula, all reflect the campus emphasis on DEI.

While our participants expressed support for the University's efforts in this regard, our respondents often spoke about the challenges of teaching about racism and sexism. For instance, faculty members said: "I try to limit discussions on topics related to issues (race, gender, justice, etc.) that could lead to a student becoming offended"; and "If I'm being

honest, I am very concerned about being accused of racism. I tip toe and I know I shouldn't, but an unfair accusation could ruin someone's career and livelihood." Other faculty members told us that they decided not to continue teaching units about race and courses of particular interest to underrepresented students due to fear that the administration would automatically validate student perceptions. One faculty member said:

> In two of my classes that used to have a race unit, I dropped it…. Frankly I don't think you're going to get any support from the University at all on anything racially oriented if a student files a complaint, period.

Another added: *"*It's fraught subject matter and I have seen that this administration will not protect academic free speech and academic freedom and anything you do on any given day in that course–at least the way I was teaching it–is risky." This respondent went on to note the incongruity between the University pushing DEI goals when faculty members perceive a real risk of doing that work: "I don't see how [the university] can keep demanding faculty create a more diverse, inclusive curriculum and then . . . turn the complaint process over to be driven by student feelings." The fear in these cases is not simply of student complaints *per se* but of what the administration will do when a student complains.

Uncertainty about the Administrative Response
Many participants in this study expressed an uneasiness about administrative response to student complaints. As one faculty member stated, "The balance between protecting students and protecting due process for faculty has always been difficult . . . The answer lies in checks and balances, the presumption of innocence, and a confidential process."

Faculty members routinely emphasized the importance of the department chair in the complaint process, as the following comment indicates: "If you're lucky they go to the chair" rather than "[going] straight to the dean, provost, chancellor." Still, this assessment was often about trust: "My former chair was the one who responded wonderfully well; I doubt that our current chair would do the same." Faculty members describing good experiences with chairs in complaint situations highlighted procedural fairness as key (e.g., seeking faculty input and guaranteeing both sides are heard). By contrast, one faculty member, whose student's complaint against them was backed by multiple levels of the administration, described the process that unfolded as "capricious" and "arbitrary." Indeed, a lack of faith in procedural fairness was especially noteworthy as respondents described complaints going up the chain of command, as the following comments suggest: "As I see my colleagues deal with student complaints, regardless of whether they are founded or

unfounded, I see that the university—deans, Office of Student Conduct, college lawyer, Title IX officers—always backs the student" and

> The general feeling among my faculty colleagues is that IF a situation arose where a student did make a complaint against a faculty member, the faculty feel absolutely certain that the University would invariably rule on the side of the student (AGAINST the faculty member).

This skepticism over procedural fairness also results in an overall sense of institutional vulnerability, which for some was exacerbated by being untenured, as in this NTT faculty member's statement: "As an NTT faculty member I worry about the impacts of student complaints/evaluations as it could jeopardize my position."

Still, it is notable that in making assessments of administrator response, faculty members were also cognizant of the various constituencies to which administrators must respond as well as the factors that shape administrator options. For instance, they identified thorny issues with parents: "That one student who's going to make a real big stink about it, then parents get involved, and it really just makes everyone's job more difficult, where I think sometimes it may just be easier to side with the students." Additionally, faculty members routinely mentioned the role of social media and the university's management of its reputation: "Loud social media complaints prompt anxious and accommodating responses from administrators"; "Students have been out of bounds with the use of social media to punish professors who they do not like or disagree with rather than use institutional processes. The administration, by not formulating an appropriate response, has encouraged this behavior"; and

> [A student complaint] would suddenly become all about perception and . . . it wouldn't matter what I had to say about it as much as what would public opinion be. I would not be their priority and the student wouldn't even be their priority–public opinion would be their priority [as in] how does this make [the University] look as this gets out on social media and becomes a thing.

Indeed, a faculty member who became the target of a student's social media campaign that called for their firing described it as an "extra-judicial process" which resulted in a loss of trust in the administration: "The university was willing to throw me under the bus to make it stop. I thought at some point the university would stand up for me but it never happened."

Impacts on Teaching
Not surprisingly, comments indicated that the fear of administrative reproach was directly tied to the four impacts on teaching that we

identified as stemming from the fear of student complaints: increased caution and conscientiousness, self-censorship, the reduction of rigor, and demoralization. These results proved intriguing because they reflected how a faculty member's perception of the teaching environment (whether it be on campus or in the larger political world) shaped their approach to the classroom. We take each of the four impacts in turn.

Increased Caution and Conscientiousness
Faculty members often framed increased conscientiousness as a positive. For instance: "I make sure that students feel they can approach me and talk about issues before they become problems" or even "I just make sure to be extra mindful of how I phrase and present things." For some faculty members, however, this degree of caution was experienced as burdensome. One typical respondent said: "I spend a lot of time and energy trying to preemptively avoid student complaints, rather than spending that energy truly working towards equity in the classroom." Another talked about the level of work both within and outside the classroom: "I burn myself out (e.g., trying to respond to all their emails, meet their varied expectations, etc.) so as to avoid student complaints."

Self-censorship
Faculty members consistently reported extreme care with their choice of material or a decision to exclude particular units, as detailed in this comment: "There are some topics that I think would be valuable to discuss, but I'm afraid to touch them. The nature of my field involves controversial issues, but hyperpartisanship makes it perilous." Others detailed a reluctance to speak frankly; most bluntly, one respondent said, "I have to be careful about everything I say. It's like walking through a minefield every day." Notably, these behaviors often were characterized as stemming from fear of student reaction: "I worry about upsetting students"; "the complaints that I worry about are political"; "students will be resentful when . . . their views are challenged"; and "I'm afraid to say anything of substance in class and tiptoe around topics because of how students might react, that they may be offended and make a big issue out of it."

Other faculty members went a step further by adding concerns about administrative response: "I'm reluctant to challenge some students in some situations because I know that if a student files a complaint or takes to social media to complain, the administration will not support me" and "It is depressing, but the risks of being canceled are significant and I think the administration would cave." Additionally, some faculty members linked their self-censorship directly to their lack of faith in the administration to defend academic freedom if a student complained; one faculty member said: "My chair and Dean put students' concerns over academic freedom."

Reduction in Rigor

Reductions in academic rigor were commonly mentioned by respondents, and not always in response to student complaints or fear of them. Typical comments included: "I have reduced the academic rigor of my courses; "I'm too lenient"; and

> I inflate student grades, offer banal and pointless commentary on subpar work, and generally do not consider myself a professor any longer but a minor obstacle in the path of students' sense of entitlement to both praise, exceptionality, and finally, a college degree.

Sometimes, however, the link between a reduction in academic rigor and complaints or fear of complaints was direct: "Course standards and academic rigor has been sacrificed for sure in the interest of not causing trouble for myself"; "I have to be more lax and forgiving when students are clearly abusing the academic system. No protection for faculty"; and

> I am afraid that by failing students that really should have been failed that I threaten my job. I do think about it, and so what I had to do is think about how to manage this in a way that wasn't giving them the grades they didn't deserve but also not having their grades be so low they go and complain.

Even though the survey asked respondents to exclude student complaints on SETs, many faculty members described a connection between SETs and rigor. One respondent summed up that link in this way: "Student evaluations initiated the demise of academic rigor in higher education. Student complaints are just a byproduct of student evaluations, which have reduced the student and teacher hierarchy to that of a buyer and seller with Yelp™ reviews." For others, a lack of administrative support for anything

other than student satisfaction undercut rigor, as heard in comments such as:

> If the University and Colleges would support faculty more in student complaints, this would tremendously help with rigor, work satisfaction, and retaining employees. It is hard to do our job when we fear student complaints and no administrator support. Moreover, student customer satisfaction culture does not promote academic rigor.

Demoralization

The mention of work satisfaction and faculty retention explains a related finding: faculty demoralization. Faculty expressed demoralization when

they felt that they could no longer do the work they entered the profession to do. Some comments reflected a sadness toward this perceived shift in the academic environment, as with this observation: "I have lost trust in students' good will and/or desire to learn mostly because of hearing of other faculty experiences with complaining and aggressively unhappy students who act out." Another faculty member described a student complaint about a professor going viral on social media, saying "a million people saw it—and that's a scary place to be in." Others lamented the deprofessionalization of the faculty, including a loss of academic freedom and a rise in student academic entitlement: "I don't feel like I have academic freedom anymore, despite the fact I have prided myself on being relevant, inclusive, and informed as it pertains to today's student. Looking forward to retiring soon." Others were blunt:

> I don't like teaching anymore. I feel like students are constantly judging what I say in class against what their social media feeds tell them. . . . They seem to want to believe that they are just as knowledgeable about a subject as the professor. . . . There's no respect for expertise.

Notably, the women faculty we interviewed were more likely than men to express anguish when describing receiving complaints using words such as "devastating," "hurt," "astonished," "crushed," "beaten down," and "intense and emotional."

Discussion

Our findings suggest that many faculty members consider student complaints to be a routine part of faculty work and feel capable of responding to them effectively. Confirming the work of Morrissette, Mukherjee et al., and Knepp, among others, most faculty respondents–including those who had been the subject of a complaint–place value on practices designed to create a learner-centered, collaborative classroom environment, including maintaining a climate of student support, developing and communicating clear classroom expectations and policies, and being open to students voicing concerns. Still, our findings further confirmed Pettit's assertions that faculty members worry about the negative consequences of changing classroom norms and they expressed concern that what Scott characterizes as good administrative response would be lacking should a complaint arise.

Following Santoro, faculty respondents in this study often pointed to a conflict between their vision of higher education, which includes good teaching, and institutionally driven pedagogical policies, learning initiatives, and administrative enforcement processes. The discrepancy between faculty members' commitment to the traditional open-minded liberal ethos on campus (Furedi vi) and what they see happening on campuses today may well explain our finding that faculty members reduce

rigor and self-censor. Faculty members often reported feeling pressured to cater to students and that finding the tipping point between creating a learner-centered environment and a "customer is always right" service mentality was challenging. This effort was particularly fraught for women, whose students often expect greater care and support from women faculty (Webber).

Our study confirms Redstone and Villasenor's speculation that faculty self-censor, and points to one cause as a sense of mistrust in procedural fairness when student complaints arise. Particularly if complaints were made public on social media and brought the University negative publicity, faculty members perceived that the university would prioritize the institution's reputation and "brand" above all else (Kwestel and Milano). With such deep skepticism about administrators' willingness to support open inquiry and academic freedom, which are hallmarks of a professionalized faculty, it is not surprising that many faculty members approach their teaching with trepidation. Moreover, faculty members' concerns over the university's apparent willingness to validate student complaints of being harmed by their choice of subject matter or presentation method means that instructors struggle to balance an ethics of care with the discomfort inherent in robust discussions of fraught subject matter. Faculty members who fear job-related consequences for working to fulfill the university's mission pull back, depriving students of both exposure to and debate of important educational materials and appropriate levels of collegiate challenge.

Finally, our findings indicated that, contrary to work showing bias against women on SETs (Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman), women were no more likely to report having received complaints than men. Still, as with Alexander-Snow and Lampman, women did report experiencing serious incivility and intimidation more often than men did, which could explain why a greater proportion of women faculty members reported demoralization and described the impact of student complaints as distressing. Nonetheless, what ultimately stands out in our findings is just how pervasive the impact of student complaints is for all faculty members– men and women, junior and senior, tenure-track and non-tenure-track.

Implications
Our findings suggest that all members of the university would benefit from having a consistent process for addressing student complaints that is clearly communicated and followed. Faculty and administrators might, for example, work together to develop complaint-response protocols geared to specific categories of typical complaints. Proper training of all university personnel and students in those protocols would give members of the university greater confidence in procedural fairness. To complement this effort, student support staff should consider emphasizing, at new student orientation and in other venues, the values of open inquiry and free expression that guide the higher education environment. Letting students

know that some emotional discomfort should be expected in college classes might mitigate expression-based complaints. Similarly, helping students understand the faculty role in determining course content, conduct, and methods of evaluation might mitigate expectation-based complaints (Whittington). All of these efforts are part of a broader push for reinvigorating the professionalization of the faculty.

Faculty members could benefit from professional development to build skills for handling controversial issues and setting academic and behavioral boundaries. Given faculty members' worries about being the object of complaints, they need support in finding ways to improve teaching that underscore a steadfast and explicit commitment to academic freedom, without which faculty might avoid teaching controversial and sensitive material. Our finding of faculty demoralization should motivate universities to investigate more fully faculty satisfaction with the teaching role. The COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, for instance, connects faculty satisfaction in the classroom with "quality of students." A more comprehensive evaluation of faculty satisfaction with teaching would include consideration of faculty perceptions of the university's commitment to processes of procedural fairness in the adjudication of student complaints.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions
Although we found some variance in faculty members' operational definitions of "complaint," which may have impacted our ability to conclusively determine complaint rates, measure the seriousness of complaints, or test for potential differences in complaint rates by gender and race, we learned about the full range of experiences faculty have had with formal and informal complaints. Our interviews led us to conclude that our survey data likely underreports the number of faculty who have experienced student complaints outside of SETs. For example, one study participant who had answered "no" to the question of experiencing complaints on the survey recalled, in the interview, having been embroiled in a grade dispute that went through the university's formal grade appeal process. For subsequent research, complaint could be defined more specifically using the categories of complaint we identified.

Also, because we chose not to limit the time frame on what could be reported, some faculty (e.g., professors, associate professors) simply had more time to experience student complaints than others (e.g., assistant professors, contingent faculty). Extensive teaching experience on its own may explain our findings regarding faculty rank, and may well explain the different faculty responses and/or perceptions of administrative responses. Accounting for years of teaching experience in subsequent work would be beneficial for understanding the dynamics of student complaints.

Further, while we asked faculty members if they taught controversial material and considered themselves rigorous teachers, we did not ask about class size or whether or not faculty members use

inclusive pedagogical techniques. It is possible that controlling for these variables would tell us even more about faculty experiences of student complaints and faculty reactions to them. Exploring this question is particularly important given the faculty members who told us that they believe they avoid student complaints by being particularly good and/or inclusive teachers.

Additionally, the timing of the survey was toward the end of a full year of classes shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. A sudden shift to online learning under extremely stressful circumstances could have given rise to some student complaints and/or lowered faculty morale. Multiple faculty members spoke about an increase in student complaints in this period, although others spoke about an uptick in complaints for a variety of reasons. If this study were replicated, greater attention could be given to the impact of course delivery mode on student complaints and faculty responses to them.

While we did not examine or measure a breakdown in faculty authority vis-à-vis students, our qualitative findings suggest, and future research should examine, a potential connection between student complaints, students' academic entitlement, and a diminished respect for faculty authority. Conceivably, the move toward an institutional emphasis on student satisfaction, however well-intended, could enable student academic entitlement and increase the frequency of student complaints.

While our findings reveal that student complaints against women may take distinct forms and also impact women differently than men, further research should explore these questions in greater depth. Comparing case studies of student complaints and examining gender in connection with age, rank, race, class size, and subject matter taught could shed further light on the role of gender.

Finally, replication of this study at other institutions, such as historically minority-serving institutions, private liberal arts schools, community colleges, and those with more diverse faculty populations would be worthwhile. This would add to our understanding of faculty responses to student complaints in different institutional settings.

Endnotes

[1] $\chi^2 = 1.13$, $p > .15$; $\chi^2 = 0.93$, $p > .30$, respectively.
[2] $\chi^2 = 1.43$, $p > .20$; $\chi^2 = 0.23$, $p > .60$; $\chi^2 = 0.62$, $p > .40$, respectively.
[3] $\chi^2 = 3.35$, $p < .05$
[4] $\chi^2 = 3.42$, $p < .05$
[5] $\chi^2 = 16.44$, $p < .01$
[6] $\chi^2 = 0.31$, $p > .50$
[7] $\chi^2 = 4.98$, $p < .05$
[8] $\chi^2 = 16.81$, $p < .0$
[9] $\chi^2 = 17.65$, $p < .01$
[10] $\chi^2 = 4.92$, $p < .05$

^{11} $\chi^2 = 8.71$, $p < .05$
^{12} $\chi^2 = 50.41$, $p < .01$

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