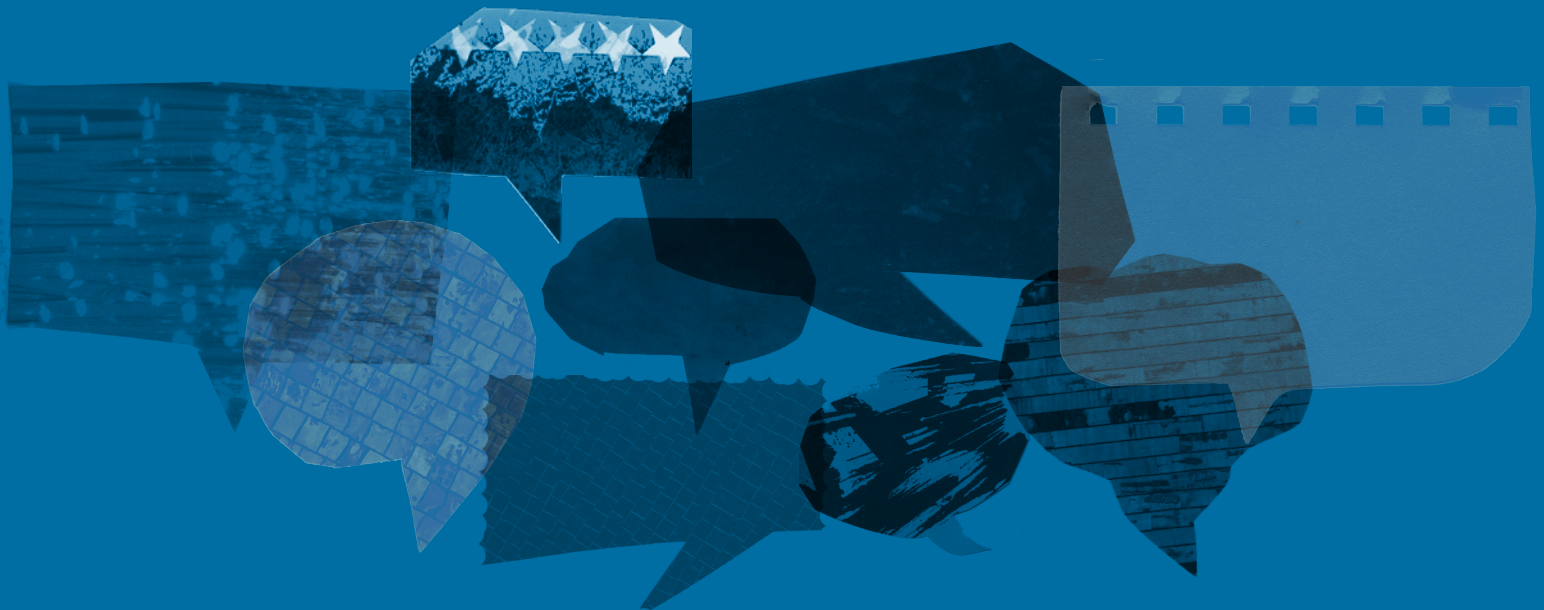# STICKS + STONES

Language + Speech

In A Diverse Society

Sticks + Stones:
Language and Speech in a Diverse Society

Introduction

Each year, The Posse Foundation, in conjunction with its partner colleges and universities, hosts weekend-long events called PossePlus Retreats (PPRs). The PPRs are intended to spark dialogue among college students, faculty and administrators on a topic of current national significance.

In 2016, 50 colleges and universities hosted PPRs entitled "Sticks & Stones: Language & Speech in a Diverse Society" for almost 5,000 participants nationwide. The topic was selected, in part, in response to a larger public discourse and heightened media attention about language and free speech at institutions of higher education. Retreat workshops were designed by Posse to facilitate conversations on how freedom of speech, microaggressions, and trigger warnings, to name a few, play out today on college campuses.

Before retreat workshops began, attendees completed a 60-question survey created by The Posse Institute—the research arm of The Posse Foundation. In total, 4,602 surveys were completed anonymously by 4,031 students, 448 faculty members and administrators, and more than 100 other participants.

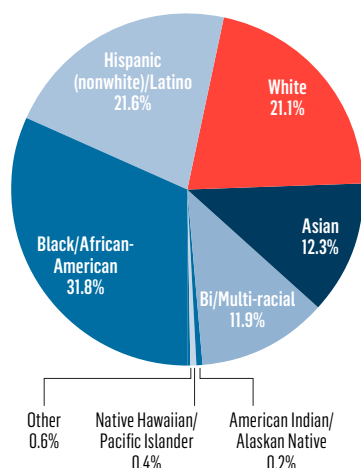**The student respondents had the following characteristics:**

- 48 percent were Posse Scholars.
- The average age was 20 years old.
- 60 percent identified as female, 39 percent as male and 1 percent as other.
- 80 percent were born in the United States.

The following report summarizes the results of student attendees' 2016 PPR survey responses. In general, these students show a sensitivity to the ways language is used today, especially as it relates to personal and cultural identities. Key findings from the survey indicate that most students:
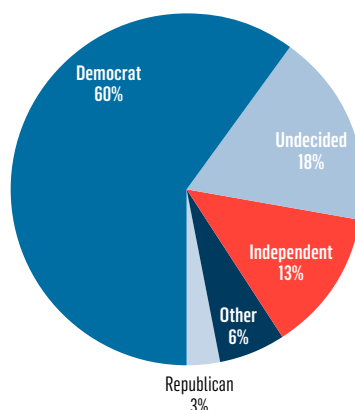
- **Do not believe today's college students are overly sensitive about offensive speech (59%)**
- **Aim to be politically correct in private (54%) as well as public (84%) situations**
- **Think that colleges and universities should prohibit or limit the use of offensive speech by faculty and administrators (76%) and by students (89%)**
- **Have experienced microaggressions (87%), mostly due to their race**
- **Believe that microaggressions are generally harmful (84%)**
- **Think professors should use trigger warnings when introducing potentially offensive or traumatic subject matter (88%)**
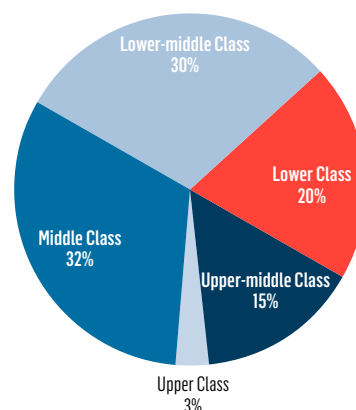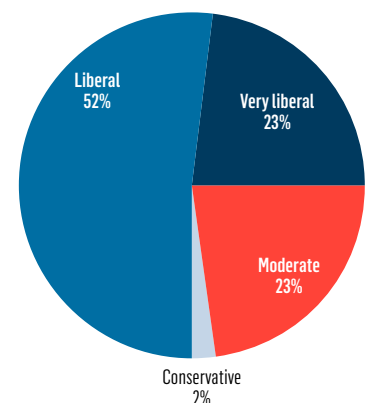
Group Characteristics

Race

- Hispanic (nonwhite)/Latino 21.6%
- White 21.1%
- Asian 12.3%
- Bi/Multi-racial 11.9%
- Black/African-American 31.8%
- Other 0.6%
- Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander 0.4%
- American Indian/ Alaskan Native 0.2%

Political Affiliation

- Democrat 60%
- Undecided 18%
- Independent 13%
- Other 6%
- Republican 3%

Socio-economic Class

- Lower-middle Class 30%
- Lower Class 20%
- Upper-middle Class 15%
- Middle Class 32%
- Upper Class 3%

Political Philosophy

- Liberal 52%
- Very liberal 23%
- Moderate 23%
- Conservative 2%

Context

PPRs were facilitated by Posse staff, who set the context with the following introduction:

The title of our retreat is **Sticks and Stones? Language and Speech in a Diverse Society**. "Sticks and Stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me." Is that true? Can words hurt? Does language have power? If you were to ask the thousands of students who participated in protests that erupted recently on college campuses across the country, they would say language is indeed powerful. They would agree that words can hurt and that the outright slurs to the microaggressions they experience are the latest manifestation of hundreds of years of racism, sexism and oppression. Additionally, students have demanded trigger warnings on content that could be damaging or traumatic, especially as it relates to sexual assault. They've called out universities for allowing language that they say contributes to a hostile environment for traditionally marginalized students.

Another side has emerged in response, contending that these protests represent a wave of over-sensitivity or, as the now-famous Atlantic article put it, "The Coddling of the American Mind" (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). This side argues that these demands stifle free speech, putting our First Amendment rights at risk. This debate certainly extends beyond campus boundaries. Illegal vs. Undocumented. Refugees vs. Migrants. Black Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter. Gay vs. Queer. Our arguments about language reach into all levels of our social, cultural and political life. How can it be that the same words mean such different things to different people? Who is allowed to say what? How should we learn about language that might be considered offensive or harmful? Is there a "right" way to deal with offensive speech? What about free speech? Are our values around open expression and academic freedom at stake? Or is this just the latest chapter of a struggle between the younger generation and its elders? Where do you think you stand on these issues? Can being "real" co-exist with being socially conscious about the words we use? What role does intent play in the discussion? If you didn't mean to hurt anyone, then does it count in the same way? Have you ever said something and immediately wished you could take it back? Have you ever been told something that you wish people were not allowed to say? Ultimately, how do our identities affect how we use, understand and experience language?

For many years, the PossePlus Retreats have been about the big "isms"—around race, sex, gender, class, etcetera. This year's retreats, happening across the country, are very much about how language can divide or unite us—how we talk to one other and why that may be the most basic place to start bridging our differences.

College + University Partner Retreat Participants

Agnes Scott College
Babson College
Bard College
Boston University
Brandeis University
Bryn Mawr College
Bucknell University
Carleton College
Centre College
Colby College
Connecticut College
Cornell University
Davidson College
Denison University
DePauw University
Dickinson College
Franklin & Marshall College
Grinnell College
Hamilton College
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Kalamazoo College
Lafayette College
Lawrence University
Middlebury College
Mount Holyoke College
Northwestern University
Oberlin College
Pepperdine University
Pomona College
Sewanee: The University of the South
Smith College
St. Olaf College
Syracuse University
Texas A&M University
The College of Wooster
Trinity College
Tulane University
Union College
University of California, Berkeley
University of California, Los Angeles
University of Pennsylvania
University of Rochester
University of Southern California
University of Texas at Austin
University of Virginia
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Vanderbilt University
Vassar College
Wesleyan University
Wheaton College

Campus Protests + Free Speech

90% of students agree with the motivations behind the student-led nationwide campus speech protests.

In the year leading up to the retreat, many student-led protests took place on campuses across the United States in response to perceived racist, discriminatory, or otherwise offensive language (Jaschik, Race Matters, 2015) (The New York Times, 2015). These protests gained national media attention and spurred debate among scholars and nonexperts alike about the merits of limiting certain types of speech at colleges and universities (Jaschik, What the Protest Mean, 2015).

While the public seemed divided about the legitimacy of these protests, some colleges and universities took responsibility by accommodating some of the students' demands and taking steps to address issues of bias at their institutions. Harvard Law School, for example, voted to replace its official shield, which contained symbols of slavery (Svrluga, 2016). Georgetown University renamed two campus buildings that exhibited its ties to slavery (Shaver, 2015). Harvard College, Princeton University and Yale University stopped the use of "master" in the title of the heads of student residential housing (Salovey, 2016) (Hartocollis, 2015). And in reaction to several racial incidents on campus, Claremont McKenna College's president authorized the creation of a leadership position focusing on diversity and inclusion (New, 2015).

Student protests of racial bias on campus and of inadequate administrative responses to racist incidents have also led to the resignations of several college administrators. President Timothy Wolfe of the University of Missouri system resigned in November 2015 in response to criticism that he failed to properly address a number of racial incidents on campus. During this same time, Dean of Students Mary Spellman at Claremont McKenna College stepped down in response to language she used in an email to an underrepresented student deemed offensive (Eligon & Perez-Pena, 2015) (Watanabe & Rivera, Amid racial bias protests, Claremont McKenna dean resigns, 2015).

Those opposing the protests and the concessions of the colleges argue that, while offensive to some, most of the incidents that occurred should be protected by first amendment free-speech rights. On this view, students on campuses should be engaging in civil debate and conversation about the issues at hand rather than holding protests and issuing demands.

The majority of PPR student respondents feel differently. Eighty percent were familiar with the recent campus protests and 90 percent agreed with the motivations behind them (see Charts 1A and 1B). In their qualitative responses, many students indicated that the protests were useful for raising awareness of the issues and in helping to eliminate discrimination. Another widely held opinion was that remaining silent about issues of discrimination and racial bias implies acceptance or approval. Interestingly, some students cited the First Amendment in defending the protesters, stating that they are exercising their right to free speech and to peaceful assembly.

Recently, campus protests have risen across the country in response to perceived racial, discriminatory, and/or offensive language made against specific groups.

Chart 1A
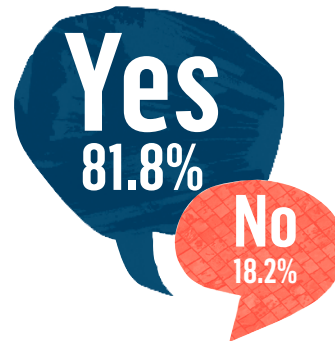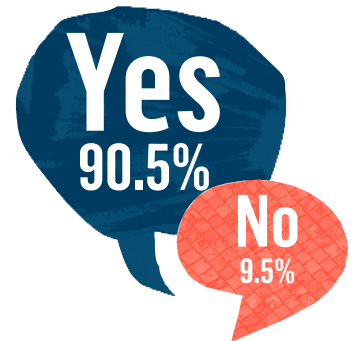Are you familiar with these protests and demonstrations?

Yes 81.8%
No 18.2%

Chart 1B
If yes, do you agree with the motivations behind these protests?

Yes 90.5%
No 9.5%

The small percentage of students who did not agree with the protests expressed that the movements were misguided. Some felt that their peers are too sensitive and strive for political correctness on campus instead of accepting others' points of view and acknowledging a shared right to free speech. They concede that racism and discrimination still exist, but that the protests are too emotionally driven and do not allow activists an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue that could lead to progress.

Majority of students agree with motivations behind nation-wide campus speech protests.

"Students are tired of being hurt by administrations who promise to provide and protect them."

"There is growth of consciousness in demanding universities move beyond liberal 'discourse' and into an intentional practice & model of social justice."

"People of color are still marginalized in the U.S. and this is mirrored on college campuses."

"These are serious problems that need to be addressed. We should not silence anyone who speaks out against oppression, fancied or real."

"First Amendment in the U.S. marginalizes minority groups and preserves power and control for others."
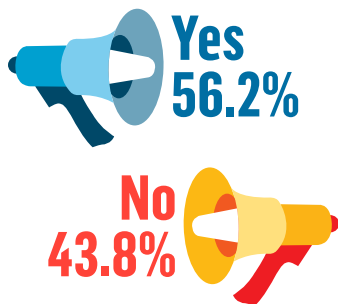
While most students (85 percent) indicated that freedom of speech should fully apply to college campuses, their responses to more specific questions around speech suggested otherwise. For example, most students believe it is sometimes okay (69 percent) to impose regulations limiting speech at colleges. When asked whether they would be willing to restrict their own freedom of speech if it would result in a more considerate campus, just over half (56 percent) of students said yes (see Chart 2). They also believe that students who use hate speech should be expelled.

Chart 3C

If yes, which consequences do you think could be appropriate?

Verbal/written reprimand	55.0
Paying a fine	14.3
Suspension	35.3
Getting fired	18.3
Mandatory counseling	61.4
Community servioce	35.8
Other	10.6

Chart 2

Would you be willing to restrict your freedom of speech if it would result in a more considerate campus environment?

Yes 56.2%

No 43.8%

56% of students would be willing to restrict their freedom of speech if it would result in a more considerate campus environment.

The survey revealed that students think colleges and universities should prohibit or limit the use of offensive speech by faculty, administrators and students and that policies should be instituted to protect students from offensive speech on campus with defined consequences for the offenders (see Charts 3A-4C). These findings resemble those of a recent Gallup survey that found that 69 percent of U.S. college students believe that colleges should be able to have policies that limit intentionally offensive language including slurs (Gallup, Knight Foundation, & Newseum Institute, 2016). If speech codes or restrictions to speech are imposed on campus, 72 percent of PPR student survey respondents claim they would trust an equal combination of their peers, faculty members and administrators to judge any violations (see Chart 5).

Chart 4A

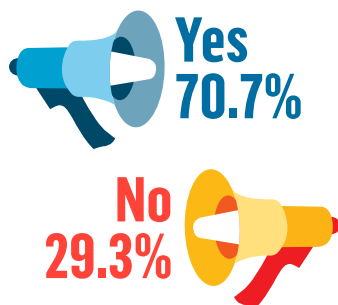Should colleges and universities prohibit or limit the use of offensive speech by **faculty** or administrators on campus?

Yes 75.9%

No 24.1%

Chart 4B

Should there be consequence(s) for **faculty** or administrators who use offensive speech on campus?

Yes 88.9%

No 11.1%

Chart 4C

If yes, which consequences do you think could be appropriate?

Verbal/written reprimand	51.1
Paying a fine	17.6
Suspension	41.7
Getting fired	25.1
Mandatory counseling	53.8
Community servioce	25.0
Other	10.8

Chart 3A

Should colleges and universities prohibit or limit the use of offensive speech by **students** on campus?

Yes 70.7%

No 29.3%

Chart 3B

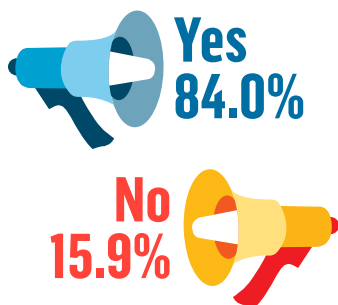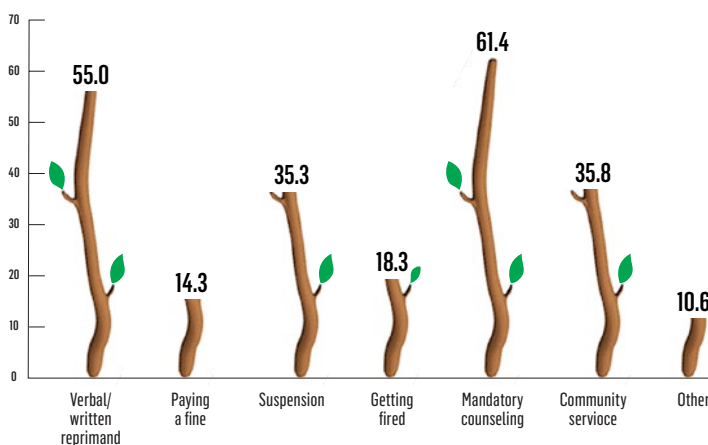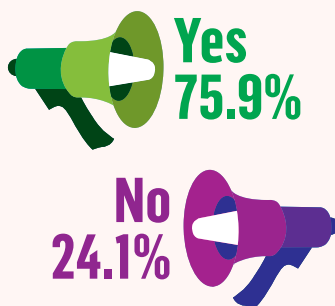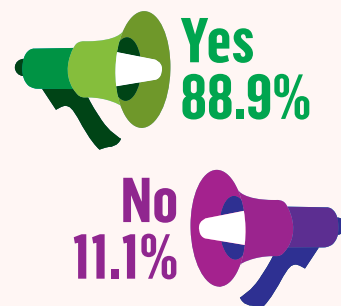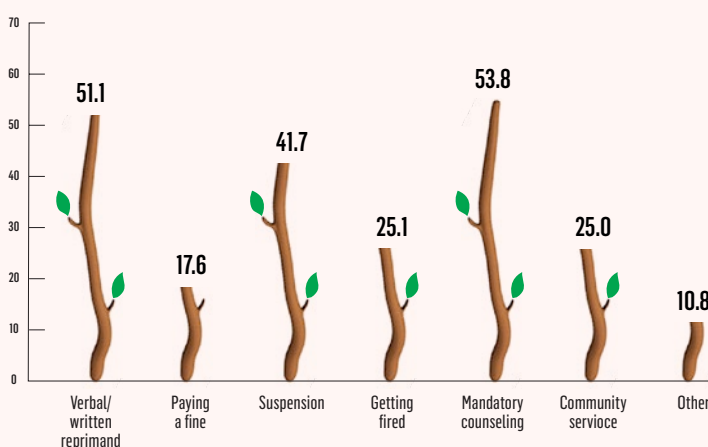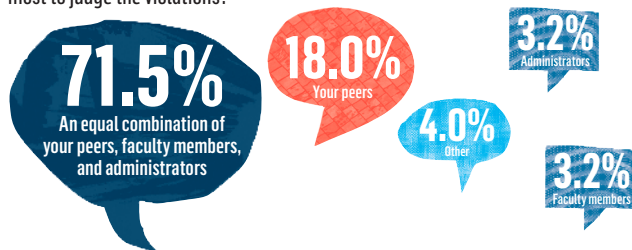Should there be consequence(s) for **students** who use offensive speech on campus?

Yes 84.0%

No 15.9%

Chart 5

If speech codes/restrictions to speech are imposed on campus, who would you trust most to judge the violations?

71.5% An equal combination of your peers, faculty members, and administrators

18.0% Your peers

4.0% Other

3.2% Administrators

3.2% Faculty members

68% of students believe policies should be instituted to protect students from offensive speech on campus.

Student protests and debate about free speech on campus have often surrounded commencement speaker invitations (Urbina, 2013). The PPR survey found that only 20 percent of students believe that college commencement speakers should always be "non-controversial," and 93 percent believe there is value in having someone they are "vehemently opposed to" speak on their campus. This does not indicate a belief that anyone should be allowed to speak on campus, however, as 80 percent believe the student body should approve commencement speakers and 71 percent believe it is appropriate to ban certain speakers from campus (see Chart 6).

Most students qualified their response by stating that a ban is fitting for speakers who intend to spread hate speech. Even some of the respondents who indicated they believe everyone has the right to free speech and that it is beneficial for students to be exposed to opposing points of view saw the spread of hate speech as unacceptable. Most faculty and administrator respondents share the students' view, with 79 percent believing it is appropriate to ban certain speakers from campus. These respondents believe that a speaker ban would be justified if done out of concern for the safety and well-being of the campus community. In addition to hate speech, going against the values and morals of the college was also seen by some students, faculty and administrators as grounds for rejecting a potential speaker.

Most students think it is appropriate to ban certain speakers from campus commencement/graduation ceremonies:

"The campus' first priority is the student. This includes their safety. Certain speakers are unsafe for students."

"Some speakers only spread offensive, inaccurate information rather than fueling academic discourse."

"I don't think generally you should ban people because you can learn from them but sometimes people are completely disrespectful and say terrible things which are never okay."

"If their ideology goes against the values of the institution."

"If someone who has been scheduled to speak has consistently been using racist, homophobic, transphobic or misogynist remarks, then why would they be asked to speak in the first place?"

Faculty/Administrators agreeing with a ban:

"Those that are in direct opposition of the institutional mission."

"Speakers who promote hate speech and violence."

"By inviting a speaker to campus, the college gives them a platform and credibility, and not all speech deserves that."

"If the speakers are unwilling to engage in an open, respectful dialogue with people who hold differing views, a ban might be appropriate."

Chart 6

Is it ever appropriate to ban certain speakers from campus?

Yes 70.6%

No 29.4%
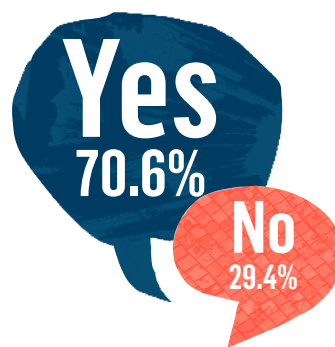
Political Correctness + Microaggressions

59% of students do not believe today's college students are overly sensitive about offensive speech.

National campus protests around free speech have also led to debates about political correctness and whether the current generation is more sensitive to issues of speech and language than older generations (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). While more than 70 percent of students do think that their generation is more sensitive about offensive language than older generations, only 41 percent believe that today's college students are overly sensitive, and only 34 percent believe their generation is "too politically correct." Many students argued that their generation is simply more aware and knowledgeable than older generations about social issues, and that this increased awareness and their positions on controversial issues is mislabeled by others as "overly sensitive." **Additionally, most students (57 percent) believe that the description of their generation as "coddled" is unfair.**

"This 'coddling' is actually a movement to help marginalized, victimized students be more comfortable to grow and learn."

"Being raised to be culturally sensitive does not equal being coddled."

"Our generation, like every generation that comes from the previous, has been exposed to a plethora of totally new, unprecedented things, particularly emphasized by the Information/ Digital Age. We have had to deal with things other generations never had to. We've had to, in many ways, teach ourselves how to grow. We haven't been coddled."

"We are in debt, with no jobs, 60 grand worth of tuition to pay, and with discrimination. What is there to be coddled about?"

73% of students say their generation is more sensitive about language than older generations.

Most students believe political correctness, in general, is a good thing for society (75 percent) and attempt to be politically correct when they are in public and in private (see Charts 7 and 8). However, most (74 percent) still admitted to saying things at home or in private that would be considered publicly offensive, which included comments about race, politics, sex and gender. Nevertheless, over half of the students (56 percent) indicated that if "saying it like it is" means being culturally insensitive, they would rather people use "culturally sensitive language" instead.
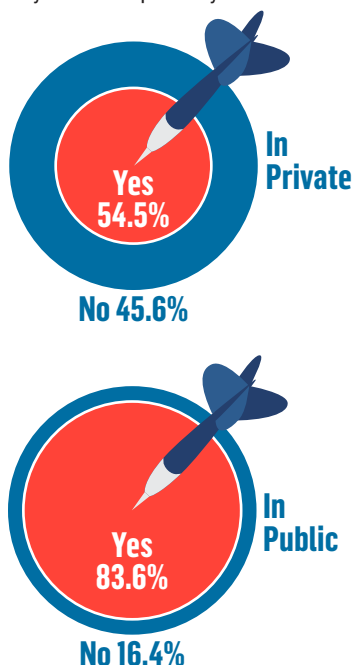
Chart 7

In general, is being politically correct a good or a bad thing for society?

A GOOD THING **75.0%**

25.0% A BAD THING

Chart 8

Do you aim to be politically correct?

In Private
Yes **54.5%**
No **45.6%**

In Public
Yes **83.6%**
No **16.4%**

Sometimes speech is not blatantly discriminatory or intentionally offensive, but still offends or marginalizes. A microaggression is a "statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority" (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). Most of the PPR students surveyed (almost 90 percent) have experienced microaggressions, which were mostly directed at their race, appearance, sex or gender (see Charts 9 and 10). The American Psychologist describes *racial* microaggressions, those identified as most commonly experienced by PPR student respondents, as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color" (Sue, et al., 2007).
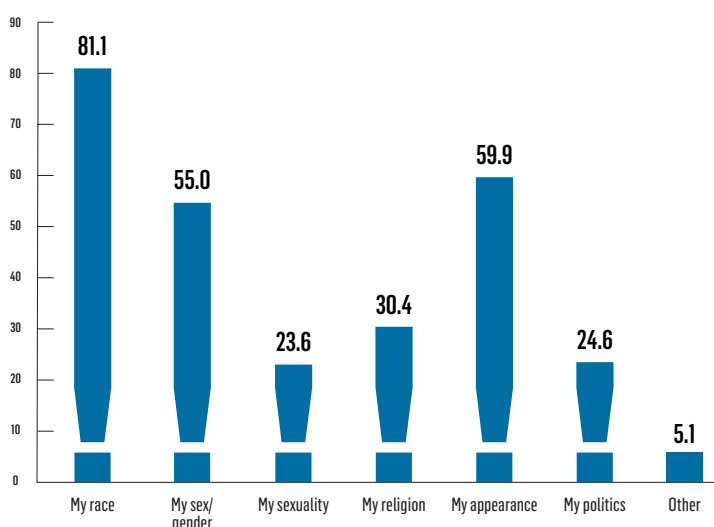
Chart 9

Have you ever experienced microaggressions?

Yes **87.0%**
No **13.0%**

Chart 10

If yes, check the category(ies) these microaggressions were directed against

Category	Value
My race	81.1
My sex/gender	55.0
My sexuality	23.6
My religion	30.4
My appearance	59.9
My politics	24.6
Other	5.1

87% of students have experienced microaggressions.

While some argue that microaggressions are harmless, most students believe they are "harmful" (see Chart 11). These students say that the harm is caused by the accumulation of hurt and loss of self-esteem caused by successive microaggressions, whether intentional or unintentional.

Chart 11

In your opinion, microaggressions are generally:

Harmful **84.3%**
Harmless **15.7%**

Students who believe microaggressions are harmful:

"Microaggressions can be very harmful depending on the topic and person affected. Microaggressions are very cumulative so you never know when you could push someone over the top."

"Microaggressions are small slip-ups representative of larger racial bias."

"Microaggressions are harmful in part because they can be so easily 'brushed off' which diminishes and belittles the experience of the victim."

"There is not a reason for microaggressions. They are used to intimidate someone for their ideas, race, sexuality, or other characteristic of their life."

"One time may be fairly benign, but accumulated over time they take a toll on the victim. It's especially hurtful when it comes from a person of authority since there's nothing you can do about it."

"They all compile to modern day discrimination. It alters the way you think about a group of people."

84% of students think microaggressions are "harmful."

Students were asked about the appropriateness of several acts that could be considered microaggressions. These students made some allowances for otherwise "micro-aggressive" speech off campus or in the context of a professional practice. They believe it is acceptable for comedians to make offensive jokes, for songs to have offensive content and for fine art to be offensive, for example. However, they do not think it is permissible for a student to hang a Confederate flag in his or her dorm window, for racial slurs to be used when joking around, or for Halloween costumes to depict a particular race, culture or ethnicity (see Charts 12 and 13).

A recent Gallup survey reported that a similar percentage of U.S. college students (63 percent) believes colleges should be able to stop students from wearing costumes that stereotype racial or ethnic groups (Gallup, Knight Foundation, & Newseum Institute, 2016). Several Halloween-related incidents involving perceived microaggressions occurred on campuses during the fall prior to PossePlus Retreats. These included Yale University students banning non-white girls from a Halloween party, Claremont McKenna students wearing Mexican sombreros and mustaches, and University of Wisconsin-Stout students wearing blackface (Jaschik, Racial Tensions Escalate, 2015) (Watanabe, Backlash brews against student race protests at Claremont McKenna College, 2015).
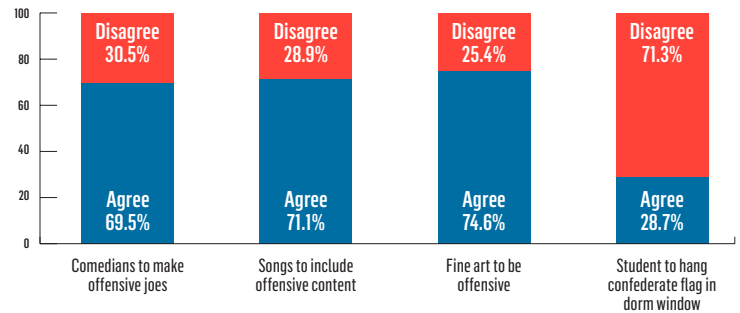
Chart 12

It is okay for...

Comedians to make offensive joes	Songs to include offensive content	Fine art to be offensive	Student to hang confederate flag in dorm window
Disagree 30.5%	Disagree 28.9%	Disagree 25.4%	Disagree 71.3%
Agree 69.5%	Agree 71.1%	Agree 74.6%	Agree 28.7%

Chart 13

Halloween costumes depicting a particular race, culture or ethnicity	Use of racial slurs when joking around
Never Okay 62.0%	Never Okay 61.2%
Sometimes Okay 31.1%	Sometimes Okay 35.1%
Okay 6.8%	Okay 3.6%

Use of Trigger Warnings

In academic settings, trigger warnings "are written or spoken warnings given by professors to alert students that course material might be traumatic for people with particular life experiences" (Brown, 2016). Debate about trigger warnings in college and university classrooms was lively during the year leading up to Posse Scholars' selection of the 2016 PPR topic. Much of the discussion about flagging academic content also led to material being published by students proposing a need for trigger warnings (Brown, 2016) (Johnson, Lynch, Monroe, & Wang, 2015; Flaherty, Trigger Warning Skepticism, 2015) (Wythe, 2014) (Flaherty, Not So 'Fun Home', 2015). One such essay contributed to a national debate on the value and use of trigger warnings. Four students at Columbia University published a piece in their campus newspaper suggesting that Ovid's Metamorphoses (a work which contains language depicting violence and sexual assault) contains, "triggering and offensive material that marginalizes student identities in the classroom" (Johnson, Lynch, Monroe, & Wang, 2015). These students recommended that Columbia's Office of Multicultural Affairs release "a letter to faculty about potential trigger warnings and suggestions for how to support triggered students" (Johnson, Lynch, Monroe, & Wang, 2015).

88% of students believe that professors should use trigger warnings when introducing potentially offensive or traumatic subject matter

While some of the public response to the debate expressed outrage and ridicule at the thought of providing warning labels to classic literature, almost 90 percent of student survey respondents believe that professors should use trigger warnings when introducing potentially offensive or traumatic subject matter (see Chart 14). For those students who agree with using trigger warnings, most indicated that sexual assault, violence and race are considered generally offensive subjects requiring a warning. Faculty and administrators who agree with trigger warning usage also most frequently listed race, violence and sexual assault as specific topics they believe require a warning. Eighty-eight percent of students also believe that mandatory use of trigger warnings by professors is "okay" or "sometimes okay." These respondents explained that students should be given the opportunity to mentally prepare themselves for distressing topics or to stop participating in discussions of these topics. Overall, participants expressed a strong desire for the classroom to be a comfortable and considerate environment.

The minority of students (12 percent) who do not agree with the use of trigger warnings, reasoned that the college educational experience is not intended to be comfortable. Several stated that being challenged in college helps prepare students for life after graduation, and because life does not provide trigger warnings before possibly distressing occurrences, neither should professors. Many from this group also believe that what is considered offensive is too subjective and varied to effectively accommodate everyone's triggers. Whether students agree or disagree with trigger warnings, 73 percent feel that it is "okay" or "sometimes okay" for a student not to attend class because s/he is uncomfortable with the class material.

Chart 14

Should a professor use trigger warnings when introducing potentially offensive or traumatic subject matter?

YES	NO
87.9%	12.1%
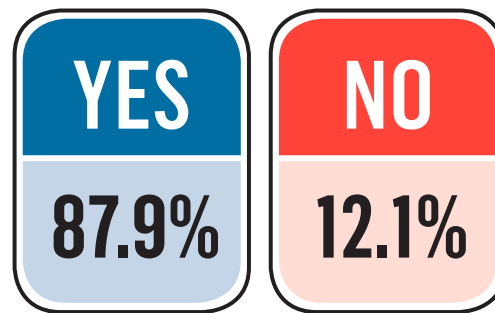
The majority of students believe that professors should use trigger warnings:

"There should always be a disclaimer made in order to acknowledge difficult subject matter."

"It establishes awareness that the point made will be controversial and not of the professor's personal views."

"Some people may find the material inappropriate and because students pay for their education they have a right to know."

"We should be able to learn about triggering material because it's valuable to understand the issues in our society, but it should be treated as sensitive info."

"They're necessary in order to create a safe environment for students with PTSD, anxiety, or any mental illness."

"For certain topics such as rape and sexual assault, language can trigger very real PTSD/memories of trauma. Survivors have a right to decide whether they are prepared to relive their trauma in a given moment. To withhold this right is to compound their experiences of traumatic violations."

Most students have encountered trigger warnings in their college classes; 76 percent have had a professor provide a trigger warning at least once or twice and 13 percent claim that their professors use trigger warnings regularly (see Chart 15). Less than 20 percent report that they or other students have complained to a professor or administrator about a failure to use trigger warnings and only 18 percent have themselves requested trigger warnings or noticed other students requesting them from professors. According to a National Public Radio survey of college and university faculty members, approximately half of respondents say they have "used a trigger warning in advance of introducing potentially difficult material" and most stated they did so "of their own volition, not because of a student's request or an administrative policy" (Kamenetz , 2016).[1] Just over 3 percent shared that students had requested a warning (Kamenetz , 2016). Another national survey of college and university educators by the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) found that 58 percent of respondents had "voluntarily provided warnings about course content" at least once or twice and that almost 15 percent taught a student who requested that a trigger warning be provided at least once or twice (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2015).[2]

Chart 15

Have your professors ever provided warnings about course content?

Yes, once or twice **39.3%**

Yes, several times **24.2%**

No, never **23.6%**

Yes, regularly **12.9%**
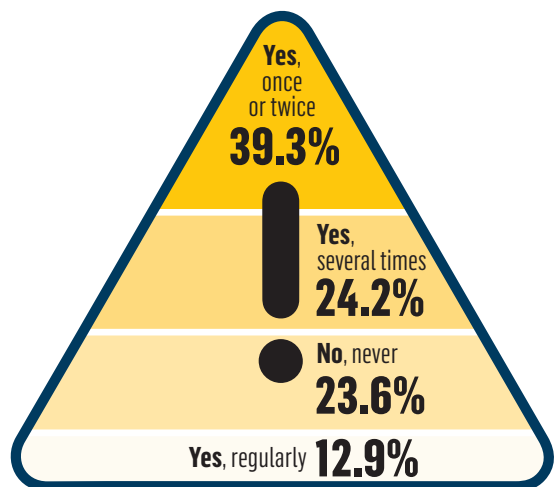
74% of students believe that professors should be expected to anticipate what may offend students

Sixty percent of students believe that trigger warnings have positive effects on classroom dynamics. However, students were less sure about their effect on academic freedom or learning in the classroom (see Chart 16). These results both align and misalign with the beliefs of educators. The NCAC study found that only 17 percent of educator respondents believe that using trigger warnings has a positive effect on classroom dynamics and less (7% percent) think that using trigger warnings has a positive effect on academic freedom (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2015).

Most students believe that trigger warnings generally make others more aware of students' sensitivities (92 percent), help professors not offend students (81 percent), and support safer classroom discussions (85 percent). In general, most students (65 percent) do not believe trigger warnings are being misused due to students' over-sensitivities.

Chart 16

What effect, if any, do you think the use of trigger warnings has or would have on...
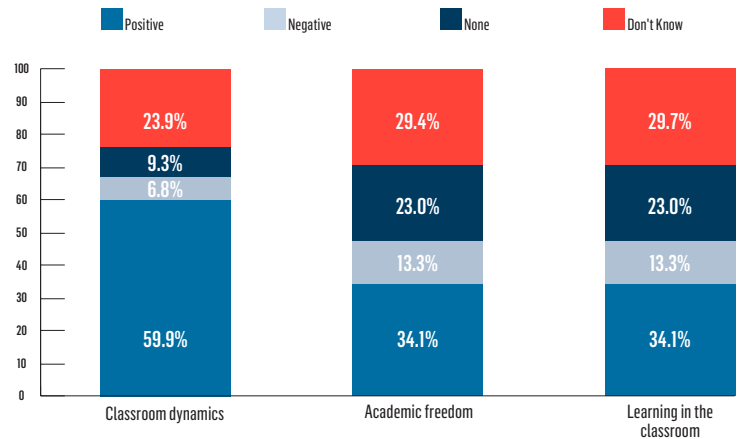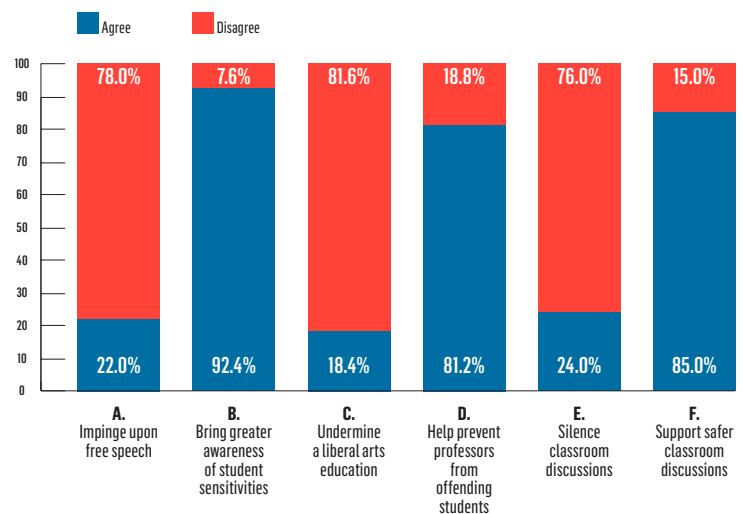

A small but significant number of students, however, still believe trigger warnings impinge on free speech and may undermine the foundation of a liberal arts education (see Chart 17). A greater number (close to half of students) think trigger warnings could lead to censorship (see Chart 18). Some students expressed concern that trigger warnings may act as the first step to censorship of classroom content by causing students to avoid discussion of difficult material if too many topics are introduced with a warning. Others were concerned that professors would tailor their syllabi to avoid content perceived to be triggering for their students. Several also shared that trigger warnings may discourage people from sharing opinions and deep conversations for fear of upsetting others.

While a small percentage of students (14 percent) believe that content that is "offensive enough" should be banned from course syllabi altogether, most students disagreed with this (see Chart 19). Those that do not see trigger warnings resulting in censorship emphasized that trigger warnings are announcements about content, not restrictions to content.

Chart 17

Agree or Disagree. Trigger warnings generally...

Statements from students who do not believe trigger warnings could lead to censorship:

"It is okay to warn people that the content can be controversial, but that does not mean it should lead to controlling what is in the content."

"A trigger warning just provides a way for students to leave a conversation that may affect them personally, however the topic may still be an important one to discuss."

"Movies give content warnings in case audiences need to navigate content that could be traumatic or inappropriate for an audience. Trigger warnings function similarly."

Statements from students who believe trigger warnings could lead to censorship:

"If you use a trigger warning you are already setting up a barrier about a topic. You spend more time dancing around an issue rather than talking about it."

"Trigger warnings ARE censorship!"

"By adopting the "oh, I'm triggered" mentality, people will close their ears instead of opening their mind. In an attempt to avoid offending the vocally offended people will allow themselves to be censored."

Chart 18

Do you think trigger warnings could lead to censorship?
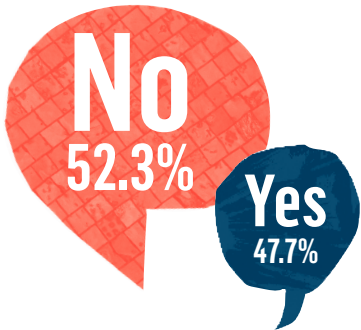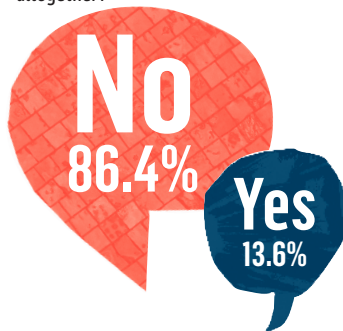
No 52.3%
Yes 47.7%

Chart 19

If course material, for example a work of literature, is offensive enough, should it be banned from college/university syllabi altogether?

No 86.4%
Yes 13.6%

Conclusion

PPR student respondents expressed a clear desire for language on campus to be considerate and respectful of all people. They agree with the sentiments of recent student-led protests around the country that challenge the acceptability of language that is discriminatory and offensive. The majority have experienced microaggressions because of their identities, giving them an especially acute understanding of what it feels like to be on the receiving end of offensive speech. In their opinion, their desire for a more collegial, respectful campus community stems less from a heightened, excessive sensitivity and more from having a richer understanding of the social issues that exist in today's society. Overall, students believe that freedom of speech should apply to college campuses, but within certain boundaries. They recognize the need for policies that place limits on what can be said in the context of a shared learning environment and favor the use of trigger warnings to ensure that students are protected.

What is one thing you wish people on your campus understood about these issues?

"Everyone has a right to speak their mind, but if they say something offensive then others have the right to voice their disagreement. Any punishment for offensive speech/behavior should be decided on a case-by-case basis."

"I wished people understood that I belong at [my school] as much as they do, that I am as intelligent as they are and that who I am and where I come from should not mean they have the right to mistreat me or view me as 'different.'"

"I wish that people could understand how hurtful their words can be and the lasting impact they have."

"We may never achieve 100 percent mutual understanding and acceptance but we can try to work on these issues by educating ourselves."
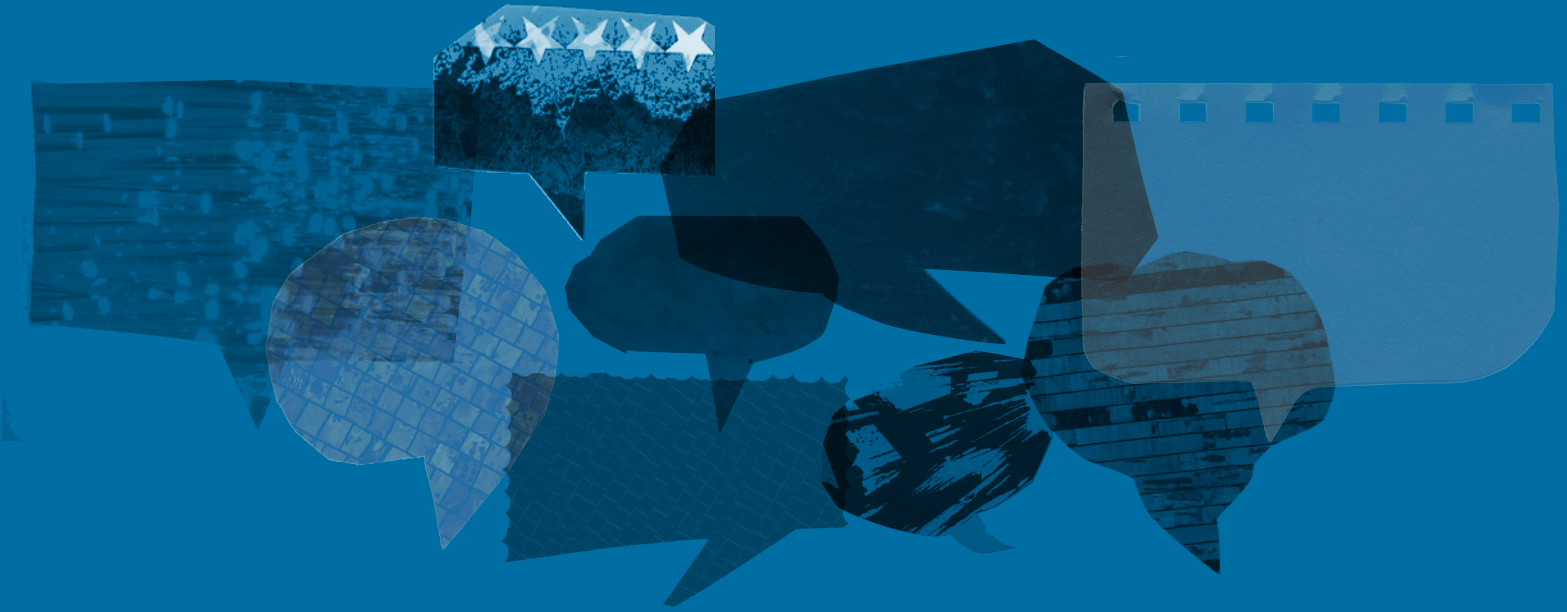
"Everyone has free speech, but that doesn't mean they're free from the consequences of their words."

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