

College faculty are under pressure to say and do the right thing – the stress also trickles down to students

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Published: October 22, 2025 8:15am EDT



Professors and other faculty were under a lot of strain even before the Trump administration took office.

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Heavy teaching loads, shrinking university budgets and expanding workload expectations have fueled stress and burnout among professors and other university employees in recent years.

Now, an increasingly polarized political climate, as well as emerging concerns around university funding cuts, self-censorship and academic freedom, has created new pressures for university and college employees.

The result is an academic profession caught in the crosscurrents of culture and politics, with implications that extend far beyond the classroom.

What faculty say

Since June 2025, I have spoken with 33 faculty members across disciplines and institutions in the U.S. about how they are managing their careers and day-to-day lives at work and home.

Their accounts reveal common themes: persistent anxiety about job security, uncertainty around how to teach controversial subjects, and frustration that institutional support is often fragmented or short-lived.

“We’re asked to make room for students’ struggles, but are rarely acknowledged when we crack under the same weight,” one professor told me.

A 2024 National Education Association survey found that 33% of 900 public administration faculty are “often” or “always” physically exhausted, while 38% of faculty say they are “often” or “always” emotionally exhausted.

Another 40% of faculty from this survey say they are simply “worn out.”

Other research shows that growing workloads and constant role juggling are taking a toll on faculty members’ well-being and ability to teach effectively.

Burnout among educators can have ripple effects on the university and college students they teach, leading to students feeling less motivated and engaged in school.

As a scholar of education, health and behavior studies, I know that when universities and colleges invest in supporting their faculty’s mental health and well-being, they’re not just helping their employees. They are protecting the quality of education that their students receive.



Faculty members and professors attend a rally outside Columbia University in New York for academic freedom in September 2025.

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When politics enters the classroom

Surveys spanning 2017 through 2021 found that 6,269 faculty members have increasingly self-censored and avoided controversial topics or moderated their language when talking with their students and colleagues in order to avoid backlash from legislators, university boards or school administrators.

The result is a form of burnout, in which protecting one's mental health and job security can mean speaking more carefully when teaching.

A January 2025 Inside Higher Ed survey published shortly before President Donald Trump's second inauguration found that over half of 8,460 surveyed U.S. professors have altered what they said or wrote, whether it was course materials or emails, to avoid expressing a possibly controversial opinion.

Nearly half of surveyed professors have also withheld opinions in the classroom entirely, according to the same survey, which was conducted from December 2023 to February 2024.

Scholars call this a "chilling effect" on academic freedom, where self-censorship becomes part of daily decision-making.

In the current political climate, faculty in many institutions continue to express reluctance to speak openly, citing concerns about professional or public repercussions. Even though comprehensive research since January 2025 is still emerging, early findings already suggest a further narrowing of what feels safe to say.

One-third of faculty reported in January that they feel they have less freedom to express their views, reflecting an environment in which faculty members' voices are increasingly constrained

Faculty I spoke with over the past few months described “navigating sensitive boundaries” in their lectures, avoiding having any discussion about race, gender and religion. They also talked about not using terms like diversity, equity and inclusion.

Watching what you say

For professors on contingent contracts – meaning they are not on a track to receive tenure, a secure work position that typically lasts a lifetime – the fear is heightened. The same is true for other faculty members like adjunct professors, who depend on short-term or renewable contracts.

Without the protection of tenure, even a single complaint or potential controversy can jeopardize a professor's position – and recent cases of tenured professors suggest that even tenure no longer offers the same level of security it once did.

One adjunct professor put it bluntly: “When your next contract depends on staying in bounds, watching what you say is survival.”

For many instructors, the need to continually reassess how a comment, reading or assignment might be received changes the experience of teaching in subtle but meaningful ways.

Faculty members I spoke with described heightened anxiety, sleepless nights and a persistent fear that a misstep could derail their careers. This psychological strain, compounded by workload and financial stress, leaves little space for creativity, innovation or joy in teaching.



Many faculty members report that they are increasingly self-censoring in order to avoid potential controversy.

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The downstream effects on students

Faculty members' well-being is inseparable from how students experience college. Burnout and disengagement ripple outward, reducing students' motivation and eroding the quality of students' classroom interactions, as noted in a 2025 study.

When professors self-censor, students can also lose exposure to complex or controversial perspectives that might challenge their thinking and deepen discussions.

Restrictions on free expression and debate can also stifle students' intellectual curiosity, curb engagement and hinder critical-thinking development.

Equally concerning is the long-term impact on innovation.

When academic freedom is restricted or self-censored, there is a greater potential that research questions will become more narrow, classroom discussions will flatten, and students will lose exposure to the breadth of perspectives that higher education promises.

A new kind of academic life

Faculty mental health is a pressing concern across higher education.

Expanding workloads, shifting public expectations and uncertainty around job security have created an environment of sustained strain.

The professors I have spoken with say they feeling caught between professional demands and personal limits, navigating burnout, self-censorship and ongoing attention to what they teach and say.

The cumulative effect is reshaping academic life, altering how faculty teach, communicate and engage with students, with a very careful eye on how others are perceiving them.

Lee Ann Rawlins Williams does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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