

How International Students Experience Freedom of Expression at Cornell

Survey conducted in April 2024 | Summary of Results

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

International students come from 130 countries and comprise 26% of Cornell's student population. All students at Cornell have the right to free expression, but there is reason to believe that international students understand and experience freedom of expression differently than students who are U.S. citizens.

Many international students have been raised in cultures with different attitudes toward political action and individual expression. They may also be particularly anxious about social acceptance in a non-native culture or speaking English as a second language. Significantly, international students may be subject to monitoring and disciplinary action by their home governments. Perhaps most notably, China is known to monitor students abroad and take disciplinary action when their words or actions are deemed unacceptable. A growing number of studies have examined these pressures as a form of **transnational repression**.¹

This survey aimed to investigate transnational repression as one of many factors that affect international students' freedom of expression at Cornell. It was conducted by the [Reppy Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies](#) and the [Office of the Vice Provost for International Affairs](#) (OVPIA), with support from President Martha Pollack's Freedom of Expression initiative.

The primary findings are as follows.

- Students from China were more likely than any other national group to view freedom of expression as “much better” or “a little better” in the United States than at home, with 78% of students expressing this view.
- International students engage in significant rates of self-censorship, but these rates do not differ significantly for students from different nations. The most likely reason for this lack of variation is that the dominant reason for self-censorship among all groups is fear of judgment from peers. For the most part, this is not a nation-specific fear.
- The potential consequences of speaking freely are greater for some international students than others. Students from China were more likely than students from any other nation to self-censor because of fear of disciplinary action from their home nation. Chinese students were underrepresented in the sample, which suggests that fears of repression may be even more prevalent among Chinese students than these results suggest.
- Geopolitical tensions in other parts of the world affect how international students engage in classroom discussions at Cornell. For example, multiple students from Taiwan expressed anxiety about how students from China might respond.
- The results are somewhat limited by small numbers of respondents from particular regions, as well as multiple kinds of selection bias. Chinese students were less likely than other groups to participate. Additionally, the survey took place at a time of growing activism around violence in Israel and Palestine, and students who were dissatisfied with Cornell's policies toward activism may have been more likely to respond than others.

¹See for example Yana Gorokhovskaia and Grady Vaughan, “Addressing Transnational Repression on Campuses in the United States,” January 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/TNR_UniversityReport_2024F.pdf Accessed September 17, 2024.

At Cornell, we unequivocally condemn any attempt by foreign governments or interests to censor our students through remote or proxy surveillance and reporting. Our policies on [Academic Integrity](#) and the [Student Code of Conduct](#) prohibit students from recording classmates or classroom activities without permission, and this prohibition should extend into informal and private spaces.

METHODS

On April 5, 2024, OVPIA invited all international Cornell students to participate in an anonymous and voluntary survey. The email invitation and survey are attached as an appendix. We collected 318 responses over 10 days between April 5 and 15. Chinese students were underrepresented in the survey, with only 28% of respondents from China, whereas 44% of Cornell's international student body is from China. The percentages of students from India and Canada who completed the survey were similar to the percentages of students from those countries.

The results were analyzed individually for the four countries from which over 10 students responded (Canada, China, India, and South Korea). Responses from students from other countries were grouped into an "Other" nationality category.

FINDINGS

Freedom of expression in the U.S. versus international students' home countries:

Students from different nations responded quite differently when asked to compare freedom of expression in the United States to that in their home nation. Chinese respondents were more likely to rate the U.S. as "much better" (42%) than were students from any other country (see Table 1). About 78% of Chinese respondents viewed the U.S. as much better or a little better than their home nations, compared with 52% of respondents from India and 45% from South Korea. Canadians were the only group more likely to feel that freedom of expression was worse in the United States than in their home country (59%).

Table 1. Relative freedom of expression. Answers to the question: "How would you compare freedom of expression in the United States to freedom of expression in your country of origin?"

Country	Much worse	A little worse	The same	A little better	Much better	Total
Canada	24% (4)	35% (6)	35% (6)	0%	6% (1)	17
China	2% (2)	5% (4)	15% (13)	36% (32)	42% (37)	88
India	7% (3)	7% (3)	34% (15)	32% (14)	20% (9)	44
S. Korea	9% (1)	18% (2)	27% (3)	27% (3)	18% (2)	11
Other	6% (9)	23% (37)	22% (35)	24% (38)	25% (39)	158
Total respondents	19	52	72	87	88	318

Who self-censors and why:

Students from all nations expressed a significant level of self-censorship, as shown in Table 2. The relatively small number of respondents makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about differences between students from different nations. What may be most striking is that there are not enormous differences between the answers that different groups give to the question.

Table 2. Prevalence of self-censorship about social and political issues. Responses to the question: “During your time at Cornell, how often have you felt that you could NOT say what you were really thinking about a social or political issue?” Percentages refer to prevalence of the response within each national group (rows add to 100%).

Country	Never	Rarely	Situationally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Total
Canada	6% (1)	24% (4)	18% (3)	18% (3)	24% (4)	12% (2)	17
China	2% (2)	24% (21)	18% (16)	27% (24)	23% (20)	6% (5)	88
India	11% (5)	16% (7)	20% (9)	20% (9)	18% (8)	14% (6)	44
S. Korea	18% (2)	0% (0)	18% (2)	36% (4)	27% (3)	0%	11
Other	4% (6)	19% (30)	21% (33)	19% (30)	26% (41)	11% (18)	158
Total	5% (16)	19% (62)	20% (63)	22% (70)	24% (76)	9.8% (31)	318
Students worried about monitoring by home govt.	3% (2)	22% (14)	20% (13)	23% (15)	22% (14)	11% (7)	65

Interestingly, students concerned about being reported to their home government do not appear to be significantly more or less likely to self-censor than other students (see the final row of Table 2). This likely reflects that most students tend to self-censor out of relatively "local" concerns (a desire to be accepted by their peers and instructors). Across all student groups, the primary reason reported for self-censorship is fear of judgment by other students (73%), followed by fear of judgment by instructors (38%) and fear of being reported to their home government (20%), as shown in Table 3 and the following chart.

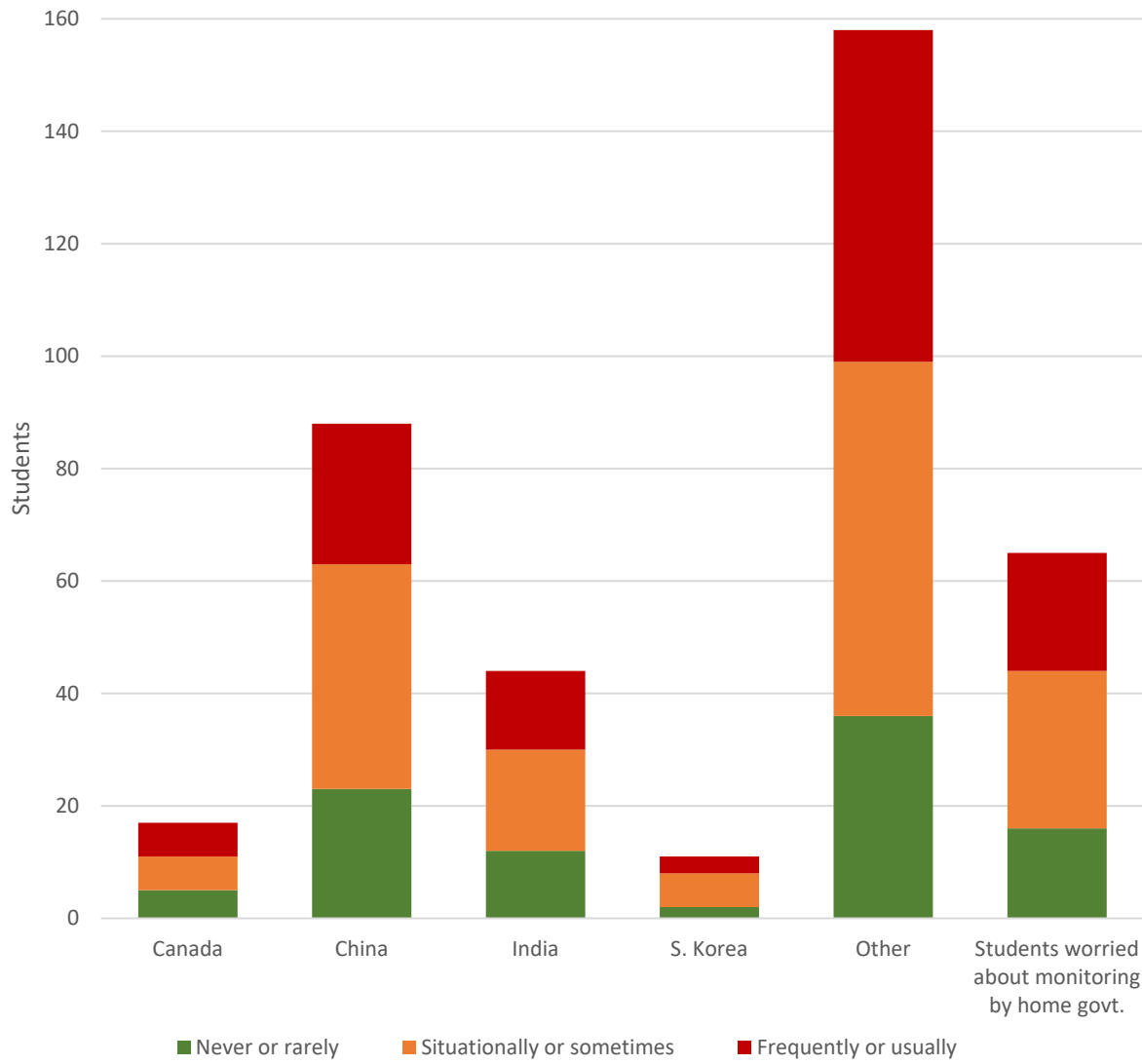
Nonetheless, it is significant that Chinese students were far more likely to report fear of being reported to their home government—approximately 30% of Chinese students expressed this concern, compared to only 18% of South Koreans and 6% of Canadians.

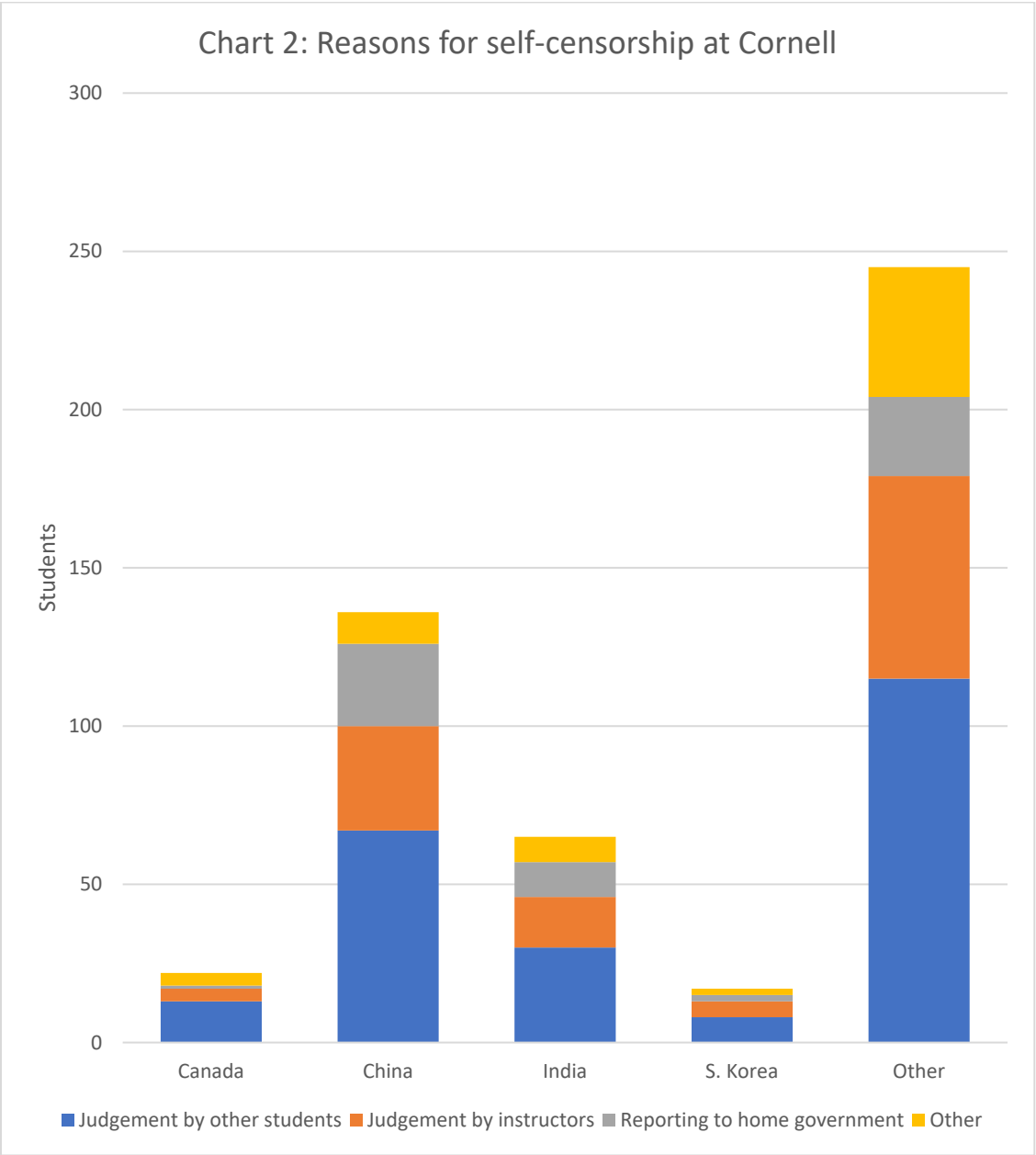
Students were also given the option to select "other" and provide a different reason for self-censorship; 54 provided alternate reasons. These were analyzed qualitatively for themes. The most common theme expressed was fear of Cornell University reporting, disciplinary action, or other retaliation (20 students, 6.3% of the total sample), followed by fear of more general discrimination, harassment, retaliation, losing friends or colleagues, problems with the U.S. government, job loss, social or cultural inhibitions.

Table 3: Stated reasons for self-censorship. Percentages refer to prevalence of each type of concern within each country group. Students could indicate multiple concerns, so rows add to more than 100%.

Country	Fear of judgement by other students	Fear of judgement by a professor or other instructor	Fear of being reported to your home government, and resulting disciplinary action	Other	Total
Canada	76% (13)	24% (4)	6% (1)	24% (4)	17
China	76% (67)	38% (33)	30% (26)	11% (10)	88
India	68% (30)	36% (16)	25% (11)	18% (8)	44
S. Korea	73% (8)	45% (5)	18% (2)	18% (2)	11
Other	73% (115)	41% (64)	16% (25)	26% (41)	158
Total	73% (n=233)	38% (n=122)	20% (n=65)	20% (n=65)	318

Chart 1: Prevalence of self-censorship





Geopolitics and freedom of expression at Cornell:

Despite relatively slight between-country variation in self-censorship, it is significant that Chinese students are much more likely than any other group to fear being reported to their home government (30%), compared to 25% of Indian students and only 6% of Canadian respondents (one student, so the statistical uncertainty is high). This finding aligns with evidence that the Chinese government monitors its citizens at home and abroad, suggesting that students from China are likely to be inhibited in ways that students from other nations are not.

Qualitative responses also confirm this finding. Only six respondents mentioned China in their qualitative remarks, but all these students noted political sensitivities. One student wrote: "I tried to put posters on the wall to support protests in China, and people wrote offensive comments on the poster or even took it out." By contrast, another student expressed defensiveness about criticisms of the Chinese government and stereotypes of Chinese students: "I cannot say anything good about China, otherwise, people believe the government [sic] already brainwashed my mind."

Some Taiwanese students also expressed views about their relation to China. Some of these were positive, such as: "I appreciate Cornell's recognition of Taiwan as an independent entity, which gives me a strong sense of belonging. It means I don't constantly have to defend my identity." However, Taiwanese students also expressed concern about relationships with other Chinese students. As one suggested, "I only feel uneasy when discussing my home country with people from China, as I'm unsure of their stance on China-Taiwan relations." Another wrote: "Sometimes there are some concerns when discussing the regional conflicts and political issues between Taiwan and China. Especially when there are some Chinese students in the discussion group or in class." One student acknowledged that the legal environment of China and other Asian nations could be extremely restrictive of political speech, unlike the United States, but also criticized "cancel culture" at Cornell and in the U.S., stating "people are afraid of their "unwelcome" views being known to others."

By contrast, 27 respondents commented on current issues related to Israel-Palestine, suggesting they were much more likely to be vocal and concerned about this topic than about politics in East Asia." This may also indicate selection bias, as Chinese students were underrepresented in the survey, and it's possible that activists on Israel-Palestine, who were concerned about university policies towards protesters, were over-represented. The survey was completed before students encamped on the Arts Quad to protest Israel's military operation in Gaza, leading to the suspension of some students who lost their visas. Nonetheless, interest in participating in such activism may be one reason that the most common "other" reason that respondents expressed for self-censorship was fear of actions by Cornell. Concern about losing visas was also a significant issue in qualitative remarks.

Current state of freedom of expression at Cornell and opportunities for improvement:

Survey-takers were prompted to "write a few sentences (or more, if you'd like) about your experiences or perspectives on freedom of expression at Cornell." The results were coded, finding that students were slightly more likely to express negative comments than positive ones, with 45.9% (146 students) making negative remarks, 39.3% (125 students) making positive remarks, 11% (36 students) expressing neutrality, and 13% (40 students) making no comment.

Nearly a third (102 students) indicated that they feel that freedom of expression is good at Cornell and/or that they feel safe expressing their opinions here.

The most common concern (88 students, 28%) expressed was that students need to self-censor and/or worry about their visa status. As noted, 8% of student responses specifically mentioned Israel-Palestine.

When asked if Cornell could do anything better to protect free expression at the university, respondents (73 students, 3%) indicated that Cornell is doing as much as it can or should. Other respondents had many ideas for how Cornell can better protect freedom of expression on campus, including:

- Allowing freedom of speech and peaceful protest (50 students, 16%)
- Fostering dialog, awareness, and diversity (40 students, 13%)
- Enforcing rules and treating people more uniformly (29 students, 9.1%)
- Holding training and lectures (24 students, 7.5%)
- Clarifying Cornell's definition of freedom of expression and its expressive activity policies (16 students, 5%)
- Creating a safer feeling on campus (12 students, 3.8%)
- Providing more opportunities for anonymous comments and reporting (12 students, 3.8%)
- Holding people accountable for hateful behavior and doxing (6 students, 2%)
- Protecting student visas and immigration status (5 students, 2%)
- Other ideas expressed (55 students, 17%)

APPENDIX

Survey Recruitment and Questions:

On April 5, 2024, OVPIA emailed all international Cornell students the following prompt.

You are invited to participate in an anonymous survey about what freedom of expression at Cornell means to you as an international student. This survey should only take 4-5 minutes of your time to complete. The results of this survey will be used to raise awareness of how international students at Cornell understand and experience freedom of expression, which can, in turn, ensure that Cornell's programs and policies support freedom of expression for all. All responses to this survey will be kept anonymous; no potentially identifying information in the responses will be revealed. Participation is completely voluntary; there is no penalty for not participating. However, as an incentive, the first 100 participants to complete the survey will receive a \$10 gift certificate to the Cornell Store.

Questions

1. Home country [dropdown]
2. Gender [M/F/non-binary/prefer not to state]
3. How would you compare freedom of expression in the United States to freedom of expression in your country of origin?
 - Much better
 - A little better
 - The same
 - A little worse
 - Much worse
4. During your time at Cornell, how often have you felt that you could not say what you were really thinking about a social or political issue?
 - Usually (almost every day since you arrived)
 - Frequently (1-3 times per week, throughout your time at Cornell)
 - Sometimes (1-3 times per month, throughout your time at Cornell)
 - Situational (often in particular classes or other contexts, but not in others)
 - Rarely (only a few times since you arrived at Cornell).
5. Which of the following factors have made you feel unable to speak freely about social or political issues? [check all that apply]
 - Fear of judgment by a professor or other instructor
 - Fear of judgment by other students
 - Fear of being reported to your home government, and resulting disciplinary actions
 - Other [fill in the blank]
6. How free do you feel to express yourself in each of the following contexts? (Likert scale from not at all free to completely free) for each of the following.
 - One-on-one conversations with professors
 - Student groups outside of the classroom
 - In-person classroom discussions
 - Online class discussions
 - Social media

-Public events on campus

7. Please write a few sentences about your experiences or perspectives on freedom of expression at Cornell. [fill in the blank]
8. Is there anything Cornell could do differently to help you feel more freedom to express yourself freely? If so, what? [fill in the blank]