



IMPACT REPORT
2023



ADAM MARTINEZ. PHOTO CREDIT: NYCOLE KNOXX.

Adam Martinez's child survived the tragic shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Martinez, concerned about his children's safety, became a vocal critic of some of the Uvalde school district's decisions as it rebuilt its police department. But after Martinez questioned the police chief about the school district's hiring of an officer who had previously been declared ineligible for rehire, Martinez was banned from school property for two years and threatened with arrest if he showed up at another school board meeting.

Thankfully, that's not where the story ends. After FIRE's intervention, the district backed down, lifting its ban. Now, Martinez can not only attend school events but also exercise his right to be a voice for his children and the students of the Uvalde school district.

Sadly, what happened to Martinez is far from an anomaly. All across the nation, public officials are violating the free speech rights of everyday Americans. What's worse, a culture of censorship and illiberalism has strangled many of our most powerful institutions. That's why, this year FIRE has continued aggressively expanding our efforts to defend free speech through **advocacy**, **education**, and **mobilization** programs aimed at upholding free expression in the law and in our culture.

We are pleased to report the success of these efforts in 2023.

Advocacy

Through public advocacy, litigation, and legislative efforts, we are directly defending individuals whose expressive rights have been violated, working to protect and secure First Amendment precedent, and promoting rights-friendly public policy and social outcomes.

In 2023, we took on **20 new litigation cases and secured significant victories in nine cases.**

Highlights of that work include:

- Suing to challenge [diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility regulations](#) in California, which require more than 54,000 professors in the California Community Colleges system to incorporate the state's views on DEIA into their teaching.
- Suing on behalf of two middle school students who were ordered to take off sweatshirts displaying the slogan "[Let's Go Brandon.](#)" The incident was part of a pattern of political favoritism by their school district, which allowed students to wear apparel with other political messages, including gay-pride-themed hoodies.
- Suing on behalf of [animal rights advocates](#) Dr. Faraz Harsini and Daraius Dubash after Dubash was arrested for peacefully supporting their cause in a public park in downtown Houston.
- Securing a \$91,000 [settlement](#) from Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, and getting its parks and recreation department director to end the county's unconstitutional ban on protected speech in county parks.
- A federal judge [halting enforcement](#) of a New York State law that unconstitutionally forced website hosts, including social media platforms, to address online speech that someone, somewhere finds "humiliating or vilifying."
- The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit [ruling](#) that Clovis Community College must abandon the unconstitutional flyer policy it used to silence the conservative student group we represented.



FIRE PLAINTIFFS DR. FARAZ HARSINI AND DARAIUS DUBASH. PHOTO CREDIT: SATURN PHOTOGRAPHY.



ALEJANDRO FLORES, DANIEL FLORES, AND JULIETTE COLUNGA, FIRE PLAINTIFFS AT CLOVIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE. PHOTO CREDIT: ALVAREZ PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO.

FIRE also leveled up our efforts to influence First Amendment law by filing *amicus curiae* briefs in strategic free speech cases we aren't directly litigating. This year, **we filed 39 briefs** — more than ever before — which addressed a wide range of issues including the right to speak on [public sidewalks](#), the unconstitutionality of [public officials blocking critics on social media channels](#) they use as tools of governance, the [speech rights of K-12 students](#) and their [parents](#), and much more.

Our biggest *amicus* win came in [Counterman v. Colorado](#), in which the Supreme Court correctly ruled that to convict a speaker for a “true threat,” the government must prove that the speaker consciously disregarded a substantial risk that their speech would place another in fear of serious physical harm.

Direct litigation and *amicus* briefs are core efforts of FIRE's **Litigation** team. But the team also coordinated other initiatives to position ourselves as First Amendment thought leaders, like building our **Legal Network** to nearly 500 members. Our attorneys also continued training the next generation of free speech legal talent through our **Arthur D. Hellman Fellowship in First Amendment Litigation**, a paid, 10-week opportunity for current law students. This year, we welcomed four talented Hellman Fellows, who worked directly with FIRE's attorneys on our litigation efforts. Arthur Hellman, whose support enables this opportunity, is a nationally recognized scholar of the federal courts and the First Amendment.

Outside of the courts, our **Public Advocacy** team coordinates FIRE's off-campus non-litigation advocacy, defending Americans facing rights violations and articulating how a robust culture of free expression can benefit everyone.

The department — founded just a year ago — has already notched several significant victories:

- After staff at the Yolo County Library in California [shut down a Moms for Liberty event](#) when one of the event's speakers referred to transgender women as “biological men,” FIRE wrote the library to make sure it understood this cancellation was unconstitutional. The library responded by offering Moms for Liberty a refund or credit for a future event and assured FIRE that it would review its policies to ensure they are implemented in compliance with the First Amendment.
- Following a letter from FIRE and the National Coalition Against Censorship, the city of Bristol, Tennessee, revised a policy that [unconstitutionally restricted comments on the city's social media pages](#) based on viewpoint.
- After FIRE's intervention, the city of Groveport, Ohio, lifted its [ban on the sale of “faith based items”](#) at the city's Apple Butter Day festival. The city is also initiating a formal review of its vendor policy, including the other unconstitutional restriction on items containing “socially offensive language.”

Meanwhile, our **Campus Rights Advocacy** team tackled an unprecedented level of demand and achieved **109 campus victories** this year. Highlights of this work include:

- Encouraging Stanford University Law School to uphold its commitment to free speech after a federal appellate judge was shouted down by student protesters. An associate dean of DEI also allowed the hecklers to go on unchallenged for 10 minutes before assuming the podium to question whether Stanford should uphold freedom of expression. After we wrote the school, Stanford Law School Dean issued [a strong statement condemning the hecklers](#) and reaffirming the school's commitment to free speech.
- Defending a professor at New College in Florida who was [fired for having “left-wing” views](#) and criticizing the college's leadership.
- Helping persuade Cornell University not to [require faculty to use trigger warnings](#) when teaching potentially upsetting content.
- Successfully standing up for [a Troy University professor's right to criticize](#) Alabama's economic incentive programs and suggest they unfairly benefit Alabama's politicians and large businesses.



JENNY MARTINEZ, DEAN OF STANFORD UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL. PHOTO CREDIT: STANFORD UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL.

In 2023, our **Legislative and Policy team helped pass four rights-protective bills, while helping defeat nine bills** that threatened individual rights in states across the country. For example, in Florida the team defeated a bill that would have widened the range of public commentary that could become subject to a successful defamation lawsuit and would have determined that speech from anonymous sources would be presumed false.

Education

FIRE believes that by generating awareness about free speech, we can jumpstart a national movement to protect it. Through media engagement, cutting-edge research, and strong networks and partnerships, we did just that this year — telling powerful stories about the importance of expressive rights and magnifying FIRE's pro-free speech message to millions of Americans.

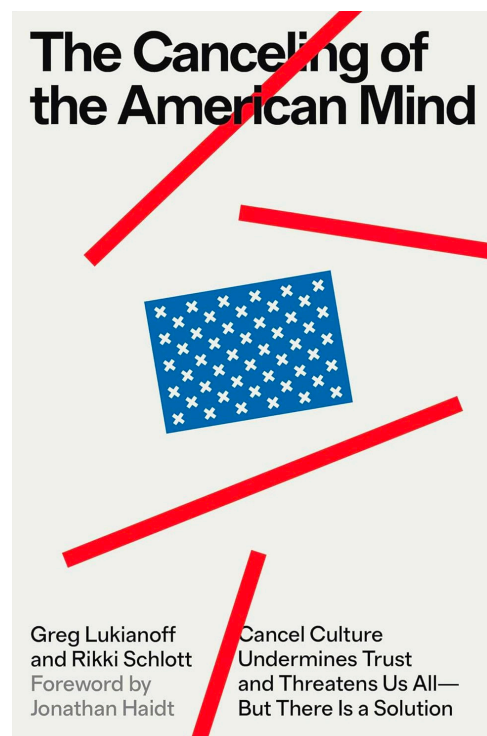
First, our **media outreach** grew substantially. In 2023, we received more than 13,000 mentions in a wide variety of outlets including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, People Magazine, Time Magazine, and more — blowing past last year's record of about 4,400 media mentions. What's more, **FIRE is becoming the nation's authoritative voice on free speech**. Articles by FIRE leaders were published in [The Daily Beast](#), the [LA Times](#), [The Hill](#), and on [Time.com](#), among other places.

Our creative content continues to attract attention as well. This year, we produced more than 250 videos for YouTube and TikTok, and our channels on these platforms collectively received more than 13 million views.

Changing hearts and minds requires data that clearly demonstrates how free speech is under attack and how we can respond. That's where **FIRE's research initiatives** come in, fueling all of our efforts with bulletproof data on the nation's free expression climate. FIRE has a talented **Research** team engaged in a number of projects:

- Our **Policy Reform** team proactively and systematically documents and exposes campus policies that violate college students' free speech rights. This year, the team reformed 43 policies on 22 campuses with an enrollment of more than 215,000 students.
- Our annual **College Free Speech Rankings** offers a comprehensive assessment of the student experience of free speech. This evaluation is based on the insights of over 55,000 currently enrolled students across 248 campuses. This data has an incredible, real-world impact.
 - Alumni at [Bucknell University](#) used our rankings to track the effectiveness of their work promoting open inquiry at Bucknell.
 - Both Georgia Tech and [DePauw University](#) made major policy changes explicitly in response to the rankings.
 - The rankings inspired student [projects](#) and [events](#).
 - They've made a huge splash in the media, receiving more than 1,100 hits in a wide spectrum of outlets. They've been cited by [Bill Maher](#), [Elon Musk](#), and the popular "[All-In](#)" podcast, and have been endorsed by renowned statistician [Nate Silver](#).
- The research team released reports on what [faculty think about free expression](#) on campus, the skyrocketing levels of [faculty censorship](#), and [institutional health](#) at MIT.

FIRE's research was heavily used in our President and CEO Greg Lukianoff's new book, "[The Canceling of the American Mind](#)," which was co-authored by Gen-Z journalist and former FIRE Fellow Rikki Schlott. The book demonstrates that cancel culture is real and of historic scale, and it lays out how we can defeat it. "Canceling" has been covered by [The Economist](#), [POLITICO](#), [The Wall Street Journal](#), and more. Greg and Rikki have appeared on dozens of podcasts and shows to discuss the book, including the "[Megyn Kelly Show](#)" and the "[Lex Fridman Podcast](#)."



Meanwhile, we continued educating the next generation of free speech advocates through student outreach:

- The **FIRE Student Network** grew to more than **7,600 currently enrolled students** and hosted its biggest summer conference yet, which brought together 115 student free speech advocates.
- We hosted eight talented [2023 summer interns](#), who spent 10 weeks at FIRE’s Philadelphia office gaining hands-on free speech advocacy experience.
- Our [Campus Scholars](#) program continues to provide resources and guidance to help students execute pro-free speech [projects](#) on campus, which have included organizing a free speech conference at the University of Washington and relaunching the Yale Free Press, an independent, pro-free speech campus paper at Yale University.



FIRE'S CAMPUS SCHOLARS

We also continued our education and outreach efforts to faculty and alumni. This year:

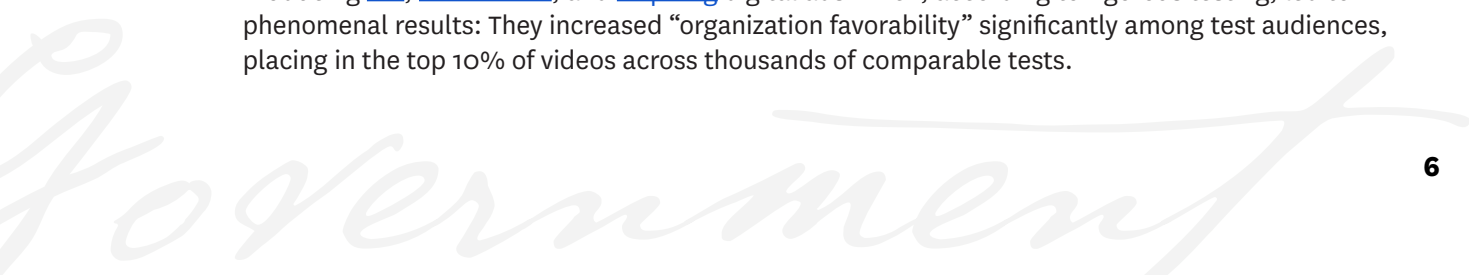
- The **FIRE Faculty Network** now boasts more than 4,200 members and hosted a successful conference bringing together more than 50 pro-free speech faculty and luminaries like Steven Pinker.
- We helped establish **pro-free speech alumni groups at 15 schools, meaning we've now established alumni groups on 30 campuses**. Our Alumni Network grew from about 2,200 to more than 6,000 members nationwide.

Mobilization

To save free speech, we have to reignite it as a fundamental value in our culture and build a new movement to defend it. This year, we continued this crucial work by recruiting new followers and mobilizing them into an army of active supporters, giving them the tools and opportunities they need to change our culture.

To start, we're getting our name in front of new audiences through creative public awareness efforts. Highlights of that work include:

- Teaming up with SPIN Magazine to launch a new video interview series, “Free Speech + Other Dirty Words,” which features artists like Rage Against the Machine guitarist [Tom Morello](#) and singer-songwriter [Melissa Etheridge](#) speaking about free expression.
- Producing [fun](#), [informative](#), and [inspiring](#) digital ads which, according to rigorous testing, led to phenomenal results: They increased “organization favorability” significantly among test audiences, placing in the top 10% of videos across thousands of comparable tests.



- Airing a [two-minute sports-themed ad](#) nationally on NBC during a Saturday night USC vs. Notre Dame college football game, which was viewed by 6.8 million people. That weekend, we received more than four times as many email signups and donations as the weekend before.

Our marketing and acquisition work has enabled us to recruit huge numbers of followers and subscribers. This year:

- We gained nearly **200,000 new email subscribers, reaching a total of nearly 400,000**, meaning we are well on our way to meeting our goal of 500,000 email subscribers by the end of 2024.
- We gained nearly **180,000 new followers across our social media channels, reaching a total of more than 440,000**.

This means we've amassed a base of more than 830,000 followers and subscribers, blowing past our goal of 700,000 for 2023.

All of our marketing and acquisition campaigns are only the first step in building a movement to defend free speech. We are also mobilizing our followers to take direct action on behalf of our mission. That's where FIRE's **Engagement and Mobilization** team comes in, which coordinates take-action campaigns and other movement-building work.

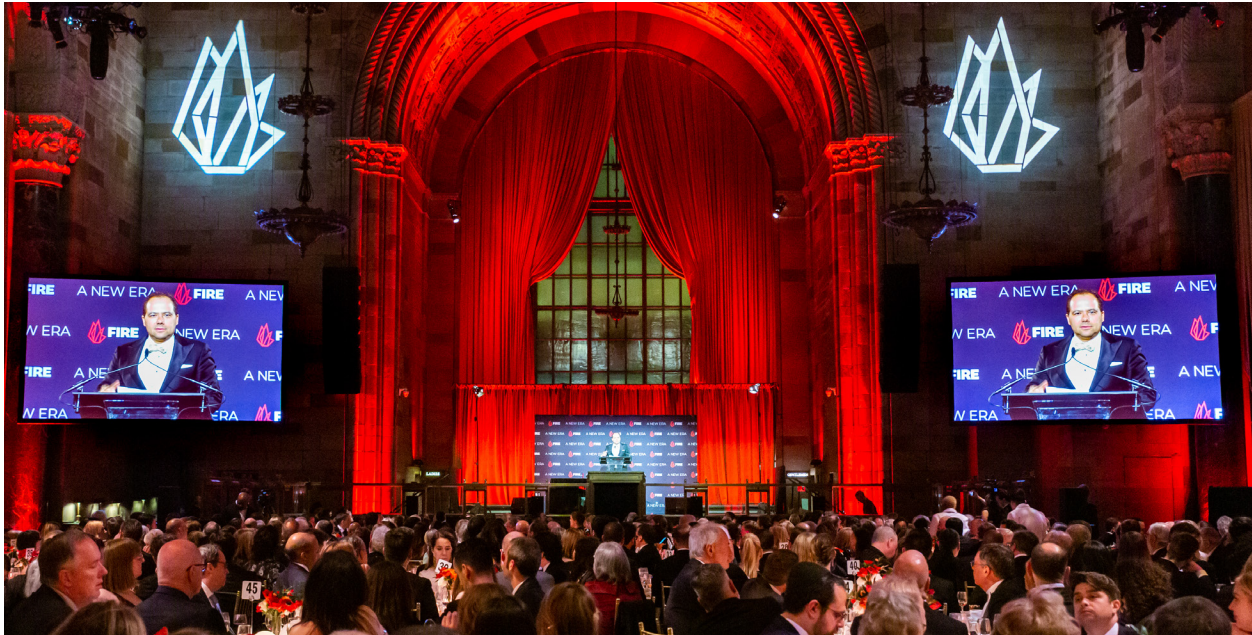
This year, the E&M team **launched 37 take-action campaigns**. Highlights include:

- Rallying nearly 1,700 people to email Puffin Books to dissuade it from scrubbing [Roald Dahl's classic children's books of language that today's readers might find offensive](#). We were proud to be part of the chorus of voices that pressured Puffin to preserve the original edition alongside a "sensitized" version.
- Securing a victory in Franklin, Tennessee, where we [rallied hundreds of concerned citizens to warn against the dangers of a proposed Community Decency Policy](#) that would endanger free speech. Franklin proposed this policy as the town was considering whether to approve a permit for the town's yearly Pride festival. After FIRE intervened, the policy was withdrawn.
- Launching an email campaign to [call out Harvard for coming in dead last in our 2024 College Free Speech Rankings](#) and urging reform. This campaign was accompanied by a mobile billboard and flyers posted across Harvard's campus. We launched similar campaigns for the other four lowest-ranked schools.



STILL FROM FIRE AD FEATURING HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST KESHIA THOMAS. IMAGE CREDIT: LONGWELL PARTNERS.

2023: A Milestone Year



CONSTITUTIONAL SCHOLAR ILYA SHAPIRO DELIVERS A SPEECH AT FIRE'S APRIL GALA. PHOTO CREDIT: ANTHONY COLLINS.

By almost any measure, 2023 has been a milestone year for FIRE. With much to celebrate, FIRE hosted a gala in New York City last April, which brought together more than 500 friends, allies, and free speech luminaries who, in the words of FIRE President and CEO Greg Lukianoff, have relentlessly fought for the “[eternally radical idea](#)”: free speech.

The energy in the room that evening was palpable — a powerful reminder of the burgeoning strength of our movement and of our success from the past year. We are confident that this success provides a strong foundation for 2024, when we’ll celebrate our 25th anniversary.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the incredible support of our donors and allies. Your generosity is directly responsible for the impact detailed in this report, and we couldn’t be more grateful to have you in our corner. Together, we’ll continue to fight for our ultimate vision: an America in which people overwhelmingly believe in the right of others to freely express views different from their own, and demand their laws, institutions, and society to embody this belief.