2025 College Free Speech Rankings
Princeton University

223
OVERALL
RANK

BELOW
AVERAGE
SPEECH
CLIMATE

RED
SPOTLIGHT
RATING

FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

2025 College Free Speech Rankings
Princeton University

Executive Summary

FOR THE FIFTH YEAR IN A ROW, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), a nonprofit organization committed to defending and sustaining the individual rights of all Americans to free speech and free thought, and College Pulse surveyed college undergraduates about their perceptions and experiences regarding free speech on their campuses.

This year's survey includes 58,807 student respondents from 257 colleges and universities. Students who were enrolled in four-year degree programs were surveyed via the College Pulse mobile app and web portal from January 25 through June 17, 2024.

The College Free Speech Rankings are available online and are presented in an interactive dashboard (**rankings.thefire.org**) that allows for easy comparison between institutions.

Key findings from Princeton University:

- Princeton continues to drop in the rankings, from 169 in the 2023 rankings and 187 in the 2024 rankings, this year Princeton comes in at 223 overall, with an overall score of 34.49 and a "Below Average" speech climate.

- Among Ivy League schools, Princeton was toward the front of the pack behind Yale University (155) and Cornell University (215) but ahead of Dartmouth College (224), Brown University (229), the University of Pennsylvania (248), Columbia University (250) and Harvard University (251).

- Princeton scores well on a number of survey metrics, ranked 7 on "Mean Tolerance," 18 on "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers," 24 on "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers," 22 for "Openness," and 29 for "Administrative Support."

- Princeton performed mediocrely on "Disruptive Conduct" (129) and "Tolerance Difference" (164).

- Princeton was penalized for the termination of tenured professor Joshua Katz, its cancellation of an art exhibit in 2021, and three separate incidents where no-contact orders were granted against student journalists for engaging in protected conduct at protests over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Princeton received a bonus for supporting a scholar in 2022.

- Princeton continues to maintain speech policies that earn it a "red light" rating from FIRE. If Princeton had earned a "green light" rating, it would have been 48 overall in this year's rankings.

Full Report

IN 2020, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), College Pulse, and RealClearEducation published the first-ever comprehensive student assessment of free speech on 55 American college campuses: the College Free Speech Rankings. For the first time, prospective college students and their parents could systematically compare current students' understandings of the level of tolerance for free speech on campus.

This year FIRE and College Pulse surveyed 257 schools, ranking 251 of them.[1] Princeton University ("Princeton"), with a score of 34.49, has a "Below Average" speech climate and ranks 223 overall in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings. This is similar to their ranking last year, as Princeton was 187 overall, with a score of 39.02 and possessed what, based on their score, we considered a "Below Average" speech climate.

Princeton's scores on most of the survey-based components were consistent with last year, with some slight movement. Princeton rose on the "Openness" component (22 out of 251 compared to 34 out of 248 last year). Princeton's ranking on "Administrative Support" continues to dip as fewer students feel the administration would clearly protect free speech or is likely to protect a speaker.

HOW OFTEN ARE PRINCETON STUDENTS SELF-CENSORING ON CAMPUS?

> *"I always censor what I say around others, especially my peers who have backgrounds that are different than mine."*

Princeton University ranks 59 overall in the "Self-Censorship" component.

8 out of 10 Princeton students only "occasionally" (once or twice a month)," rarely," or "never" self-censored in all the contexts asked about: with other students on campus (77%), with professors (86%), and during classroom discussions (82%). Princeton students tend to feel more comfortable in classroom settings than their peers nationally.

- 15% of Princeton students say they self-censor a couple times a week or more in conversations with their professors compared to 25% of students nationally.

- 18% of Princeton students say they self-censor a couple times a week or more in classroom discussions compared to 26% of students nationally.

These rates are a small improvement over last year when 1 in 5 Princeton students said they self-censored once or twice a week or more in conversations with their professors (19%) or during classroom discussions (21%).

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1   Six of the schools surveyed received a "Warning" rating from FIRE for their speech policies. An overall score was calculated separately for these schools, comparing them only to each other.

Princeton students say they self-censor a couple times a week or more in conversations with other students, the same rate as students nationally (24%). This is a slight uptick from last year, when 19% of Princeton students said the same.

HOW COMFORTABLE ARE PRINCETON STUDENTS EXPRESSING THEIR VIEWS ON CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS?

Princeton University ranks 88 overall in the "Comfort Expressing Ideas" component.

Compared to students nationally, Princeton students feel less comfort in the following situations:

- Only 43% of Princeton students say they feel "somewhat" or "very" comfortable disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic in a written assignment compared to 50% of students nationally.

- Only 21% of Princeton students say they feel "somewhat" or "very" comfortable expressing an unpopular political opinion to peers on social media compared to 34% of students nationally.

The percentage of Princeton students who responded that they were "somewhat" or "very" comfortable expressing themselves in different campus settings has declined since 2022, with the exception of publicly disagreeing with a professor.

FIGURE 1 Students Who Feel "Very" or "Somewhat" Comfortable Expressing Views by Context (%)
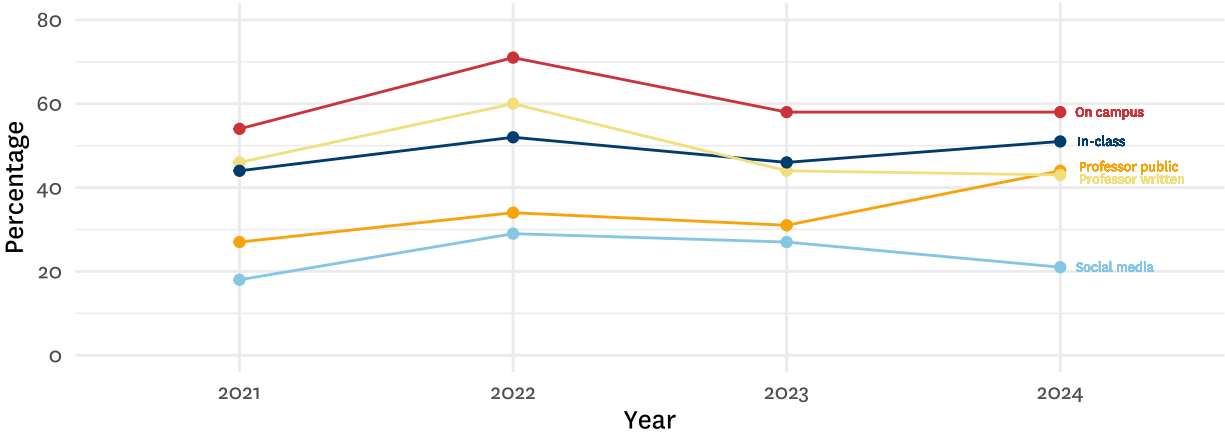
WHAT TOPICS ARE DIFFICULT FOR PRINCETON STUDENTS TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT?

> *"On Palestine protest discussions, since I felt I would be personally attacked by people on the far right or the far left."*

Princeton's "Openness" ranking rose from 34 last year to 22 this year.

Two-thirds of Princeton students (67%) say the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a difficult topic to have an open and honest conversation about on campus, up from 45% last year; 54% of students nationally say this.

Students were given a list of 20 topics and asked to select the ones they felt are difficult to have an open and honest conversation about on their campus. Three topics were identified as difficult to discuss by one-third of students: abortion (34%), affirmative action (33%), and transgender rights (34%). The percentage of Princeton students identifying affirmative action as a difficult topic to discuss continues to decline.

FIGURE 2 **Students Who Find These Topics Difficult to Talk About (%)**
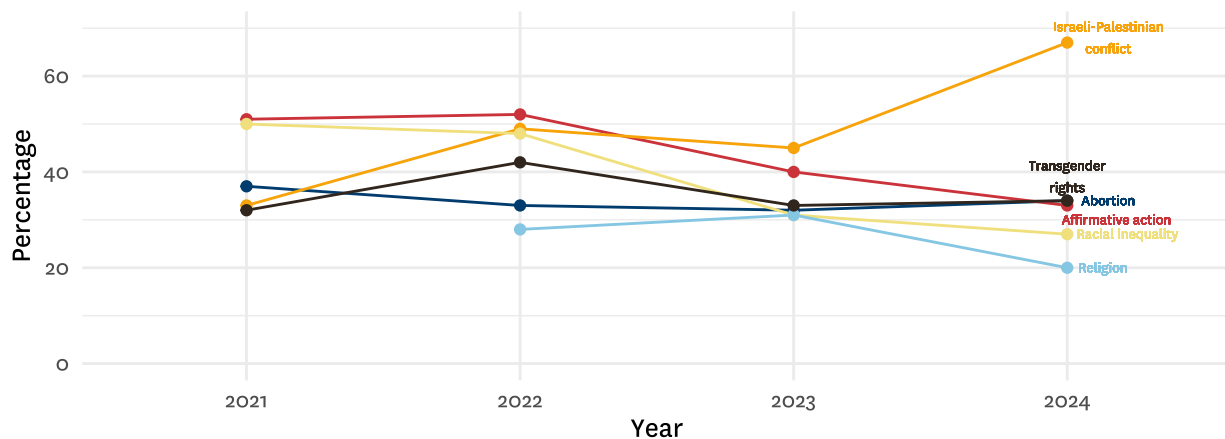
WHICH SPEAKERS DO PRINCETON STUDENTS CONSIDER CONTROVERSIAL?

> *"The recent decision by the Charter Club to place restrictions on outside guests bc Ben Shapiro tried to eat there for dinner. I saw many students call anyone who opposed the actions of the Charter Club homophobes, racists, etc."*

Princeton students were fairly tolerant of allowing controversial speakers on campus, ranking 19 on "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers," 24 on "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers," and 7 on "Mean Tolerance." Still, students displayed a bias towards allowing controversial liberal speakers on campus compared to conservative ones as evidenced by their ranking of 164 on the "Tolerance Difference" component.

To assess speaker tolerance, students were instructed that:

> *Student groups often invite speakers to campus to express their views on a range of topics. Regardless of your own views on the topic, should your school ALLOW or NOT ALLOW a speaker on campus who has previously expressed the following idea?*

They were then presented with six different previously expressed ideas (three liberal, three conservative) in random order. The percentage of students who said they would "probably" or "definitely" allow each of the three controversial liberal speakers on campus ranged from 58% ("The police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan") to 75% ("Children should be able to transition without parental consent").

Although Princeton was ranked relatively well on "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers," conservative speakers were met with slightly more resistance from Princeton students. The percentage of students who said they would "probably" or "definitely" allow each of the three controversial conservative speakers on campus ranged from 35% ("Transgender people have a mental disorder") to 55% ("Abortion should be completely illegal"). Princeton's greater tolerance for controversial conservative speakers is evident when compared to percentages of students nationally who said they would "probably" or "definitely" allow these conservative speakers (32%-45%).

At the same time, the percentage of Princeton students who would allow these speakers was low in comparison to the percentage who would allow the controversial liberal speakers to speak on campus. This strong favoritism towards allowing controversial liberal speakers on campus might be due to the ideological makeup of the student body. Of the Princeton students surveyed, 65% identified as liberal, 16% identified as conservative, and 11% identified as moderate.

WHAT KINDS OF DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT DO PRINCETON STUDENTS CONSIDER ACCEPTABLE?

Princeton ranked 129 on "Disruptive Conduct," one of the components on which Princeton performed poorly. This year Princeton's ranking improved but its overall score declined, mostly because students nationally became more accepting of forms of illiberal protest.

As can be seen in the figure below, last year 30% of Princeton students said shutdowns were "never" acceptable, while 23% say that this year. Last year, 46% of Princeton students said that blocking entry to an event was "never" acceptable, compared to 42% this year. Additionally, last year 74% of Princeton students said violence was "never" acceptable compared to 63% this year.

FIGURE 3 Students Who Say a Disruptive Conduct is Never Acceptable (%)
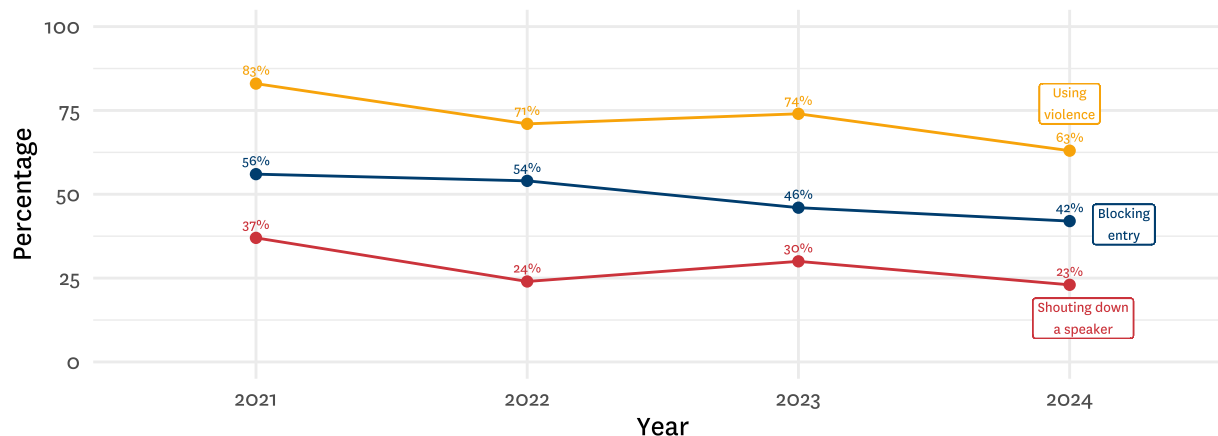
The national trends are similar. However, more students find these forms of illiberal protest never to be acceptable. Last year 37% of students nationally said shoutdowns were "never" acceptable, while 32% say that this year. Last year 55% of students nationally said that blocking entry to an event was "never" acceptable, compared to 48% this year. Additionally, last year 73% of students nationally said violence was "never" acceptable compared to 68% this year.

HOW IS PRINCETON'S ADMINISTRATIVE STANCE ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH PERCEIVED?

> *"At a protest people were threatened by the administration for holding flags and using microphones, which other students have done with no issue from the administration."*

> *"I wanted to join a peaceful protest but it seemed the admin would arrest anyone regardless of the level of activity."*

Princeton's "Administrative Support" ranking dropped from 6 last year to 29 this year.

Just 38% of Princeton students said that the administration's protection of free speech on campus is "very" or "extremely" clear — a decrease from last year (50%) — and another 41% said that it is "somewhat" clear. When it comes to whether the administration will defend a speaker's rights during a controversy, 36% of Princeton students said this is "very" or "extremely" likely — down from 48% last year and 55% in 2022 — and another 38% said that it is "somewhat" likely.

FIGURE 4   Student Perceptions of the Administration
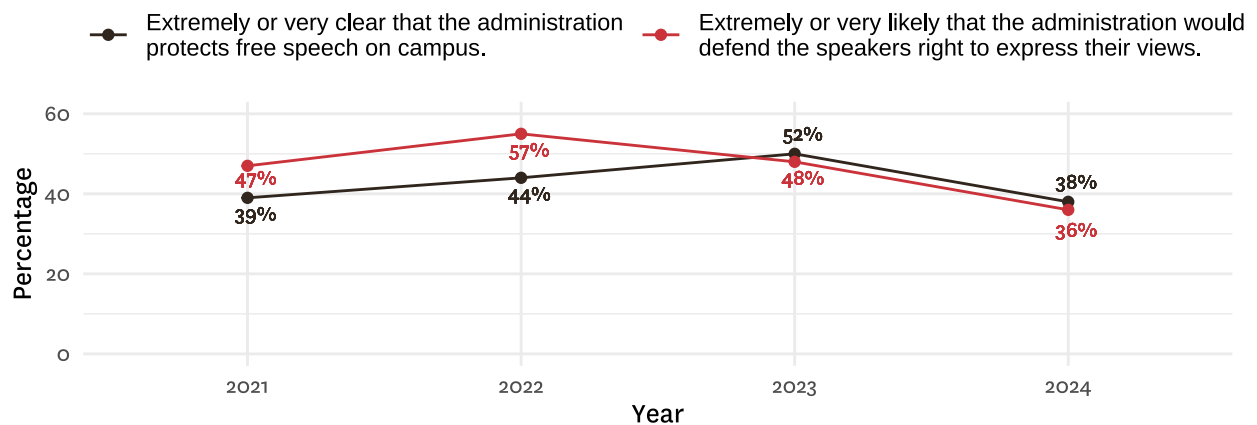
A 'RED LIGHT' SCHOOL WITH A MAJOR CONTROVERSY

FIRE gives Princeton's regulations on student expression our worst, "red light" rating, flagging one policy that clearly and substantially restricts student expression and five policies that earn a "yellow light" rating for posing either impermissibly vague or clear but narrow restrictions on protected speech. Princeton earns a red light rating for maintaining a computer use policy prohibiting the "display" or "transmitting" of "inappropriate images, sounds or messages" that "could create an atmosphere of hostility." This sort of policy language sweeps far beyond a prohibition on sending genuinely threatening or harassing messages via email. Instead, the policy encompasses expressions as innocuous as emailing memes or tweets with off-color jokes to friends. And, indeed, even if the recipient of the joke takes no offense, if a third party were to see the joke displayed on the student's computer screen and found it inappropriate, the sender could be subject to punishment. Princeton must revise this and their other policies to reduce the chilling effect they impose on the campus speech climate.

Princeton received a bonus for their handling of a campus speech controversy involving a faculty member. In 2022, visual arts professor Joe Scanlon used a racial slur during a classroom discussion about Jonah Mixon-Webster's poetic anthology "Stereo(TYPE)" in his Words as Objects seminar. According to multiple students, Scanlon's use of the term was not a direct quotation. Scanlon disagreed, citing Mixon-Webster's poem "Black Existentialism no. 8: Ad infinitum; Ad Nauseum." Scanlon was not sanctioned for this incident and the Princeton administration concluded that the word was used in an academic context and stated that "[w]hile the word used was offensive, it was clearly within the context of academic freedom and, therefore, protected expression. For these reasons, this office cannot initiate an investigation of your complaint."

However, that bonus is outweighed by several penalties for the handling of other situations. Princeton was penalized for a deplatforming incident in 2021 in which the university encouraged the library to cancel an art exhibit because the centerpiece of the exhibit, a sculpture titled "Faith," was created by a soldier who served in the Confederate Army. The library canceled the exhibit.

Princeton received three penalties for situations involving the abuse of no-contact orders against student journalists. In 2022, Danielle Shapiro, a journalist with The Princeton Tory, was covering a protest by the campus group Princeton Committee on Palestine and communicated with one of the organizers while writing her story. The contacted student told administrators that Shapiro made them feel "distressed" and

asked for a no-contact order — a request which administrators granted. Another Princeton Tory journalist, Myles McKnight, received a no-contact order following an argument with a protestor at that same protest. A year later, in 2023, Alexandra Orbuch, another student journalist with The Princeton Tory, was physically obstructed from covering a pro-Palestinian campus protest by a graduate student. After that same graduate student filed a complaint, administrators issued Orbuch a no-contact order and told her not to publish articles mentioning that graduate student by name. In each case, the no-contact orders were eventually rescinded and, after pressure from FIRE and the Anti-Defamation League, Princeton amended its no-contact order policy. However, these sorts of actions live long in student memory and can have a protracted chilling effect.

Another significant factor in Princeton's ranking was its handling of another campus controversy, one involving tenured Classics professor Joshua Katz. In the summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, more than 350 Princeton faculty members signed an open letter demanding that the university adopt a number of anti-racist policies on campus — some of which were not even legal.[2] Four days later in an op-ed, Katz supported his colleagues' right to sign a petition to the university but criticized its "dizzying array" of demands. Katz also criticized a defunct student group, the Black Justice League, as a "small local terrorist organization that made life miserable for the many (including the many black students) who did not agree with its members' demands."

Princeton President Christopher Eisgruber subsequently criticized Katz for his description of the Black Justice League, suggesting that what Katz said was not protected by the First Amendment:

> *While free speech permits students and faculty to make arguments that are bold, provocative, or even offensive, we all have an obligation to exercise that right responsibly[.] Joshua Katz has failed to do so, and I object personally and strongly to his false description of a Princeton student group as a 'local terrorist organization.' By ignoring the critical distinction between lawful protest and unlawful violence, Dr. Katz has unfairly disparaged members of the Black Justice League, students who protested and spoke about controversial topics but neither threatened nor committed any violent acts.*

Katz was placed under investigation by the university. The next year, in 2021, The Daily Princetonian published an investigative report into three alleged instances of inappropriate conduct with female students. One of these alleged instances was a relationship Katz had in the mid-2000s with a female undergraduate student. Katz acknowledges that this relationship violated Princeton's rules and that he was previously given a yearlong unpaid suspension for his conduct.

Later that spring, the undergraduate student Katz acknowledged having a relationship with submitted a detailed complaint to the Princeton administration and a second investigation into Katz was opened. Following the Spring of 2021, Katz was removed from the classroom. He was dismissed from his tenured faculty position on May 23, 2022 and never taught another class at Princeton. For firing a tenured professor, Princeton received the harshest penalty a school can receive in the rankings.

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2   Burnett, D. (July 21, 2020). We waited with bated breath for Princeton to affirm faculty free expression. What took so long? Available online: **https://www.thefire.org/news/we-waited-bated-breath-princeton-affirm-faculty-free-expression-what-took-so-long**.

HOW CAN PRINCETON UNIVERSITY IMPROVE?

Princeton can improve its rating by revising its red light speech policy regarding acceptable use of information technology resources. Currently, the policy states that university IT and digital resources may not be used to transmit malicious, harassing, or defamatory content. It also requires students and faculty to be sensitive to the public nature of shared facilities, and to take care not to display on workstations in such locations inappropriate images, sounds, or messages which could create an atmosphere of hostility or harassment for others. Princeton also maintains a number of yellow light policies, including regulations on sexual misconduct; protests and demonstrations; tolerance, respect, and civility; posting and distribution; and harassment.

One fairly easy way to improve Princeton's ranking is to revise these red and yellow light policies so that Princeton earns a green light rating. Doing so would have landed Princeton a spot at 48 in this year's College Free Speech Rankings.

Doing this publicly, with a push to make students aware of these changes, might signal that Princeton is starting a new chapter, one where it unequivocally supports freedom of speech and is poised to defend it when controversy arises. Such revisions could be a helpful way to communicate what activities and behaviors are acceptable for protest, which could lead to an improvement in Princeton's "Disruptive Conduct" ranking.

Obtaining a green light rating however does not by itself guarantee that a school actively supports free speech. And student perceptions of an administration's support for free speech on campus are just that — perceptions — which are subject to their own idiosyncrasies and could change quickly year-to-year simply due to the turnover in undergraduate students. The proof of whether a school truly supports free expression as a core value comes when that core value is inevitably tested by controversy. Despite a number of positive results on FIRE's survey components, including substantial improvements in Princeton's worst components last year, Princeton's response to speech controversies continues to drag down its ranking.

The decisions administrators make in response to campus speech controversies are likely to have a more lasting influence on an individual school's climate for free expression than its policies or its students' perceptions of "Administrative Support." When a decision is made unequivocally in defense of free speech it sends one kind of message to a school's students and faculty. When a response is tepid or, worse, violates someone's speech rights, it sends a very different kind of message. Defending the speech rights of students, scholars, and invited speakers on campus would therefore provide Princeton with a boost, instead of a penalty, in the College Free Speech Rankings.

Methodology

THE COLLEGE FREE SPEECH RANKINGS SURVEY was developed by FIRE and administered by College Pulse. No donors to the project took part in designing or conducting the survey. The survey was fielded from January 25 through June 17, 2024. These data come from a sample of 58,807 undergraduates who were then enrolled full-time in four-year degree programs at one of a list of 258 colleges and universities in the United States. The margin of error for the U.S. undergraduate population is +/- 0.4 of a percentage point, and the margin of error for college student sub-demographics ranges from 2-5 percentage points.

The initial sample was drawn from College Pulse's American College Student Panel™, which includes more than 850,000 verified undergraduate students and recent alumni from schools within a range of more than 1,500 two- and four-year colleges and universities in all 50 states. Panel members were recruited by a number of methods to help ensure student diversity in the panel population. These methods include web advertising, permission-based email campaigns, and partnerships with university-affiliated organizations. To ensure the panel reflects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the American college population, College Pulse recruited panelists from a wide variety of institutions. The panel includes students attending large public universities, small private colleges, online universities, historically Black colleges such as Howard University, women's colleges such as Smith College, and religiously-affiliated colleges such as Brigham Young University.

College Pulse uses a two-stage validation process to ensure that all its surveys include only students currently enrolled in two-year or four-year colleges or universities. Students are required to provide an ".edu" email address to join the panel and, for this survey, had to acknowledge that they are currently enrolled full-time in a four-year degree program. All invitations to complete surveys were sent using the student's ".edu" email address or through a notification in the College Pulse app, available on iOS and Android platforms.

College Pulse applies a post-stratification adjustment based on demographic distributions from multiple data sources, including the Current Population Survey (CPS), the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The "weight" rebalances the sample based on a number of important benchmark attributes, such as race, gender, class year, voter registration status, and financial aid status. The sample weighting is accomplished using an iterative proportional fitting (IFP) process that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables to produce a representative sample of four year undergraduate students in the United States.

This year College Pulse introduced a similar post-stratification adjustment based on demographic distributions from multiple data sources, including the Current Population Survey (CPS), the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The "school universe weight" rebalances the sample based on a number of important benchmark attributes, such as race, gender, class year, voter registration status, and financial aid status. The sample weighting is accomplished using an iterative proportional fitting (IFP) process that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables to produce a representative sample of four year undergraduate students from the 257 colleges and universities surveyed.

College Pulse also applies a post-stratification adjustment based on demographic distributions from the Current Population Survey (CPS), the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). This "school weight" rebalances the sample from each individual school surveyed based on a number of important benchmark attributes, such as race, gender, class year, voter registration status, and financial aid status. The sample weighting is accomplished using an iterative proportional fitting (IFP) process that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables to produce a representative sample of students at each individual school.

All weights are trimmed to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the final results and to ensure over-sampled population groups do not completely lose their voice.

The use of these weights in statistical analysis ensures that the demographic characteristics of the sample closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the target populations. Even with these adjustments, surveys may be subject to error or bias due to question wording, context, and order effects.

For further information, please see: **https://collegepulse.com/methodology**.

FREE SPEECH RANKINGS

The College Free Speech Rankings are based on a composite score of 14 components, seven of which assess student perceptions of different aspects of the speech climate on their campus. The other seven assess behavior by administrators, faculty, and students regarding free expression on campus. Higher scores indicate a better campus climate for free speech and expression.

Student Perceptions

The student perception components include:

- **Comfort Expressing Ideas:** Students were asked how comfortable they feel expressing their views on controversial topics in five different campus settings (e.g., "in class," or "in the dining hall"). Options ranged from "very uncomfortable" to "very comfortable." Responses were coded so that higher scores indicate greater comfort expressing ideas. The maximum number of points is 20.

- **Self-Censorship:** Students were provided with a definition of self-censorship and then asked how often they self-censored in three different settings on campus (e.g., "in a classroom discussion"). Responses were coded so that higher scores indicate self-censoring less often. The maximum number of points is 15.[3]

- **Tolerance for Liberal Speakers:** Students were asked whether three speakers espousing views potentially offensive to conservatives (e.g., "The police are just as racist as the Klu[*sic*] Klux Klan.") should be allowed on campus, regardless of whether they personally agree with the speaker's message. Options ranged from "definitely should not allow this speaker" to "definitely should allow

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3   The self-censorship component was introduced this year and is a composite score of responses to the three questions that are presented after self-censorship is defined. In previous years other questions were used to measure self-censorship and they were factored into the "Comfort Expressing Ideas" component.

this speaker" and were coded so that higher scores indicate more tolerance of the speaker (i.e., more support for allowing the speaker on campus). The maximum number of points is 12.

- **Tolerance for Conservative Speakers:** Students were also asked whether three speakers espousing views potentially offensive to liberals (e.g., "Black Lives Matter is a hate group") should be allowed on campus, regardless of whether they personally agree with the speaker's message. Scoring was performed in the same manner as it was for the "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers" subcomponent, and the maximum number of points is 12.

- **Disruptive Conduct:** Students were asked how acceptable it is to engage in different methods of protest against a campus speaker, including "shouting down a speaker or trying to prevent them from speaking on campus," "blocking other students from attending a campus speech," and "using violence to stop a campus speech." Options ranged from "always acceptable" to "never acceptable" and were coded so that higher scores indicate less acceptance of disruptive conduct. The maximum number of points is 12.

- **Administrative Support:** Students were asked how clear it is their administration protects free speech on campus and how likely the administration would be to defend a speaker's right to express their views if a controversy over speech occurred on campus. For the administrative clarity question, options range from "not at all clear" to "extremely clear," and for the administrative controversy question, options range from "not at all likely" to "extremely likely." Options were coded so that higher scores indicate greater clarity and a greater likelihood of defending a speaker's rights. The maximum number of points is 10.

- **Openness:** Finally, students were asked which of 20 issues (e.g., "abortion," "freedom of speech," "gun control," and "racial inequality"), if any, are difficult to have open conversations about on campus. Responses were coded so that higher scores indicate fewer issues being selected. The maximum number of points is 20.

Two additional constructs, "Mean Tolerance" and "Tolerance Difference," were computed from the "Tolerance for Liberal/Conservative Speaker" components. "Tolerance Difference" was calculated by subtracting "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers" from "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers" and then taking the absolute value (so that a bias in favor of either side would be treated the same).

Campus Behavioral Metrics

Schools received bonus points — described in more detail below — for unequivocally supporting free expression in response to speech controversies by taking the following actions indicative of a positive campus climate for free speech:

- Supporting free expression during a deplatforming campaign, as recorded in FIRE's Campus Deplatforming database.[4]

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4   A full list of all the deplatforming incidents that impacted the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings is available here: **https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1i5h8y1M4GFv5FQzyx6lLZqHj10Oa1YQJOYvozCqAzE8/edit?gid=1964386004#gid=1964386004**. The full Campus Deplatforming database is available on FIRE's website at **https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/campus-deplatforming-database**.

- Supporting a scholar whose speech rights were threatened during a free speech controversy, as recorded in FIRE's Scholars Under Fire database.[5]

- Supporting students and student groups, as recorded in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings behavioral metrics documentation that is available online.[6]

Schools were penalized — described in more detail below — for taking the following actions indicative of poor campus climate for free speech:

- Successfully deplatforming a speaker, as recorded in FIRE's Campus Deplatforming database.

- Sanctioning a scholar (e.g., placing under investigation, suspending, or terminating a scholar), as recorded in FIRE's Scholars Under Fire database.

- Sanctioning a student or student groups, as recorded in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings behavioral metrics documentation that is available online.

To be included in this year's rankings, an incident that resulted in a bonus or penalty had to have been recorded by June 15, 2024, and had to have been fully assessed by FIRE's research staff, who determined whether the incident warranted inclusion.

In response to the encampment protests, FIRE and College Pulse reopened the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings survey on any campus with an encampment. This allowed us to collect survey data from students while the encampments were taking place.[7] That means that this year's College Free Speech Rankings provide a treasure trove of data on the evolving state of free expression at American colleges and universities.

FIRE's Spotlight ratings — our ratings of the written policies governing student speech at nearly 500 institutions of higher education in the United States — also factored into each school's overall score. Three substantive ratings are possible: "red light," "yellow light," and "green light." A "red light" rating indicates that the institution has at least one policy that both clearly and substantially restricts freedom of speech. A "yellow light" rating indicates that an institution maintains at least one policy that places a clear restriction on a more limited amount of protected expression, or one that, by virtue of vague wording, could too easily be used to restrict protected expression. A "green light" rating indicates that an institution maintains no policies that seriously threaten speech, although this rating does not indicate whether a college actively supports free expression.[8]

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5   A full list of all the scholar sanction attempts that impacted the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings is available here: **https:// docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1i5h8y1M4GFv5FQzyx6lLZqHj1oOa1YQJOYvozCqAzE8/edit?gid=1204583933#gid=1204583933**. The full Scholars Under Fire database is available on FIRE's website at **https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/scholars-under-fire**.

6   All data reported in this section reflect the Students Under Fire database as of June 15, 2024. A full list of all the student sanction attempts that impacted the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings is available here: **https://docs.google.com/ spreadsheets/d/1i5h8y1M4GFv5FQzyx6lLZqHj1oOa1YQJOYvozCqAzE8/edit?gid=472255842#gid=472255842**. The full Students Under Fire database is currently internal to FIRE but will be released in full in early 2025.

7   Schools were not penalized for how they handled the encampment protests. As this report demonstrates, the impact of the encampment protests on the campus speech climate is captured by responses to survey questions that ask students about their confidence in that their college administration protects speech rights on campus; their comfort expressing controversial political views; and, their frequency of self-censorship. Deplatformings that occurred during the encampment protests were also still included in the calculation of the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings.

8   See: Using FIRE's Spotlight Database. Available online: **https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/using-fires-spotlight-database**.

Finally, a fourth rating, "Warning," is assigned to a private college or university when its policies clearly and consistently state that it prioritizes other values over a commitment to free speech. "Warning" schools, therefore, were not ranked, and their overall scores are presented separately in this report.[9]

For this year's rankings, the cutoff date for assessing a school's speech code policies was June 15, 2024. Any changes to a school's Spotlight rating that occurred since then will be reflected in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings.

Overall Score

To create an overall score for each college, we first summed the following student subcomponents: "Comfort Expressing Ideas," "Self-Censorship," "Mean Tolerance," "Disruptive Conduct," "Administrative Support," and "Openness." Then, we subtracted the "Tolerance Difference." By including the "Mean Tolerance" (as opposed to including "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers" and "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers" separately) and subtracting the "Tolerance Difference," the score accounted for the possibility that ideologically homogeneous student bodies may result in a campus that *appears* to have a strong culture of free expression but is actually hostile to the views of an ideological minority — whose views students may almost never encounter on campus.

Then, to further account for the speech climate on an individual campus, we incorporated behavioral components. A school earned two bonus points each time it unequivocally defended free expression during a campus speech controversy — a rating of "High Honors" for its public response to a speech controversy. For instance, when the student government at Arizona State University opposed a registered student group's invitation to Mohammed el-Kurd to speak on campus, and other members of the campus community petitioned the university to disinvite el-Kurd, a university spokesperson responded:

> *The university is committed to a safe environment where the free exchange of ideas can take place . . . As a public university, ASU adheres to the First Amendment and strives to ensure the fullest degree of intellectual freedom and free expression. All individuals and groups on campus have the right to express their opinions, whatever those opinions may be, as long as they do not violate the student code of conduct, student organization policies, and do not infringe on another student's individual rights.*

el-Kurd spoke successfully on campus, and we awarded ASU two bonus points.

A school earned one bonus point for responding to a speech controversy by making a public statement that strongly defends the First Amendment but is not as full-throated a defense as a "High Honors" statement. These statements received the rating of "Honors." For instance, at New York University, NYU Law Students for Palestine and Jewish Law Students for a Free Palestine called for the cancellation of an event featuring Robert Howse and Michal Cotler-Wunsh, because Cotler-Wunsh supports the occupation of Palestine. The event was co-sponsored by a student group, NYU's Jewish Law Students Association, as well as the president's office and the Bronfman Center for Jewish Life. NYU did not cancel the event, and protesters interrupted Cotler-Wunsh several times during his remarks before voluntarily leaving, allowing the event to resume and conclude successfully. The dean of the law school said the following in response:

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9   The Spotlight Database is available on FIRE's website: **https://www.thefire.org/resources/spotlight/**.

> *The principles of free speech and inquiry are complemented by debate, challenge and protest . . . While dissent may be vigorous, it must not interfere with the speaker's ability to communicate — which is exactly why, should those interrupters not have left on their own accord, they would be subject to discipline.*

We awarded one point for this response, which occurred in 2024, then we set this bonus to decrease by one-quarter of a point for each year that passes.

We also applied penalties when a school sanctioned a scholar, student, or student group, or deplatformed a speaker.

A school lost up to five points each time it sanctioned (e.g., investigated, suspended, or terminated) a scholar. When the sanction did not result in termination the school received a penalty of one point, which we set to decrease by one-quarter of a point each year: This meant penalizing a school a full point for sanctioning a scholar in 2024, three-quarters of a point for sanctioning a scholar in 2023, half a point for sanctioning a scholar in 2022, and one-quarter of a point for sanctioning a scholar in 2021. However, if the administration terminated the scholar, we subtracted three points, and if that scholar was tenured, we subtracted five points. We applied full penalties for termination for four years, then set them to decline by one-quarter of a point each year. So, a penalty for termination that occurred in 2020 has just now started to decay.

A school lost up to three points for sanctioning students or student groups. When the sanction did not result in expulsion, the revocation of acceptance, the denial or revoking of recognition, suspension, or termination of a student's campus employment (e.g, as a resident assistant) the school received a penalty of one point. Like with scholar sanctions that did not result in termination, we set these penalties to decrease by one-quarter of a point each year. If a school suspended a student or terminated their campus employment, we penalized it two points. We also set these penalties to decrease by one-quarter of a point each year. However, if a school denied or revoked a student group's recognition, expelled a student, or revoked their acceptance, it was penalized three points. We applied these penalties in full for four years, and then set them to decline by one-quarter of a point each year.

Regarding deplatforming attempts, a school was penalized one point if an invited speaker withdrew because of the controversy caused by their upcoming appearance on campus or if an event was postponed in response to a controversy. We set this penalty to decrease by a quarter of a point each year. Schools where an attempted disruption occurred received a penalty of two points. We applied this penalty for four years, then set it to decrease by one-quarter of a point each year. Schools with deplatforming attempts that resulted in event cancellations, preemptive rejections of speakers, removal of artwork on display, the revocation of a speaker's invitation, or a substantial event disruption were penalized three points. We applied these penalties in full for four years, then set them to decline by one-quarter of a point each year.

After we applied bonuses and penalties, we standardized each school's score by group — "Warning" schools and other schools — making the average score in each group 50.00 and the standard deviation 10.00. Following standardization, we added one standard deviation to the final score of colleges who received a "green light" rating for their speech codes. We also subtracted half a standard deviation from the final score of colleges that received a "yellow light" rating, one standard deviation from the final score of schools that received a "red light" rating, and two standard deviations from schools that received a "Warning" rating.

$$Overall\ Score = (50 + (Z_{Raw\ Overall\ Score})(10)) + FIRE\ Rating$$

Topline Results

How clear is it to you that your college administration protects free speech on campus?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	17	5
Not very clear	50	16
Somewhat clear	127	41
Very clear	82	26
Extremely clear	37	12

If a controversy over offensive speech were to occur on your campus, how likely is it that the administration would defend the speaker's right to express their views?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all likely	8	3
Not very likely	46	15
Somewhat likely	145	46
Very likely	86	27
Extremely likely	28	9

How comfortable would you feel doing the following on your campus? [Presented in randomized order]

Publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	55	18
Somewhat uncomfortable	118	38
Somewhat comfortable	107	34
Very comfortable	32	10

Expressing disagreement with one of your professors about a controversial political topic in a written assignment.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	39	12
Somewhat uncomfortable	137	44
Somewhat comfortable	101	32
Very comfortable	35	11

Expressing your views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	44	14
Somewhat uncomfortable	108	35
Somewhat comfortable	119	38
Very comfortable	40	13

Expressing your views on a controversial political topic to other students during a discussion in a common campus space such as a quad, dining hall, or lounge.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	22	7
Somewhat uncomfortable	110	35
Somewhat comfortable	133	43
Very comfortable	47	15

Expressing an unpopular political opinion to your fellow students on a social media account tied to your name.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	108	35
Somewhat uncomfortable	138	44
Somewhat comfortable	49	16
Very comfortable	17	5

On your campus, how often have you felt that you could not express your opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	28	9
Rarely	102	33
Occasionally, once or twice a month	134	43
Fairly often, a couple times a week	42	14
Very often, nearly every day	5	2

This next series of questions asks you about self-censorship in different settings. For the purpose of these questions, self-censorship is defined as follows:

Refraining from sharing certain views because you fear social (e.g., exclusion from social events), professional (e.g., losing job or promotion), legal (e.g., prosecution or fine), or violent (e.g., assault) consequences, whether in person or remotely (e.g., by phone or online), and whether the consequences come from state or non-state sources. [Presented in randomized order]

How often do you self-censor during conversations with other students on campus?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	33	11
Rarely	90	29
Occasionally, once or twice a month	116	37
Fairly often, a couple times a week	59	19
Very often, nearly every day	14	5

How often do you self-censor during conversations with your professors?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	33	11
Rarely	124	40
Occasionally, once or twice a month	109	35
Fairly often, a couple times a week	35	11
Very often, nearly every day	11	4

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	33	11
Rarely	107	34
Occasionally, once or twice a month	114	37
Fairly often, a couple times a week	41	13
Very often, nearly every day	16	5

How acceptable would you say it is for students to engage in the following action to protest a campus speaker? [Presented in randomized order]

Shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	7	2
Sometimes acceptable	92	30
Rarely acceptable	140	45
Never acceptable	72	23

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	7	2
Sometimes acceptable	56	18
Rarely acceptable	119	38
Never acceptable	130	42

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	3	1
Sometimes acceptable	35	11
Rarely acceptable	76	24
Never acceptable	197	63

Student groups often invite speakers to campus to express their views on a range of topics. Regardless of your own views on the topic, should your school **ALLOW** or **NOT ALLOW** a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea? [Presented in randomized order]

Transgender people have a mental disorder.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	79	25
Probably should not allow this speaker	123	39
Probably should allow this speaker	72	23
Definitely should allow this speaker	39	12

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	32	10
Probably should not allow this speaker	108	35
Probably should allow this speaker	104	33
Definitely should allow this speaker	68	22

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	64	20
Probably should not allow this speaker	138	44
Probably should allow this speaker	74	24
Definitely should allow this speaker	37	12

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	16	5
Probably should not allow this speaker	110	35
Probably should allow this speaker	128	41
Definitely should allow this speaker	58	19

The police are just as racist as the Klu Klux Klan.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	16	5
Probably should not allow this speaker	116	37
Probably should allow this speaker	113	36
Definitely should allow this speaker	67	22

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	13	4
Probably should not allow this speaker	65	21
Probably should allow this speaker	156	50
Definitely should allow this speaker	78	25

Collateral damage in Gaza is justified for the sake of Israeli security.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	43	14
Probably should not allow this speaker	112	36
Probably should allow this speaker	102	33
Definitely should allow this speaker	55	18

From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	7	2
Probably should not allow this speaker	68	22
Probably should allow this speaker	151	48
Definitely should allow this speaker	85	27

Some students say it can be difficult to have conversations about certain issues on campus. Which of the following issues, if any, would you say are difficult to have an open and honest conversation about on your campus? [Presented in randomized order with none of the above always listed last]

Abortion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	203	65
Yes	107	34

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	207	66
Yes	104	33

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	281	90
Yes	30	9

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	290	93
Yes	21	7

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	276	88
Yes	35	11

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	251	80
Yes	60	19

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	257	82
Yes	54	17

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	244	78
Yes	67	21

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	259	83
Yes	51	16

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	276	89
Yes	34	11

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	223	71
Yes	88	28

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	252	81
Yes	59	19

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	102	33
Yes	208	67

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	245	79
Yes	65	21

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	252	81
Yes	59	19

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	228	73
Yes	83	27

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	249	80
Yes	62	20

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	253	81
Yes	58	19

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	280	90
Yes	31	10

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	206	66
Yes	105	34

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	281	90
Yes	30	10

Which of the following groups on your campus should be able to register as student organizations and receive student activity fees? [Presented in randomized order with none of the above always listed last]

Asian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	99	32
Yes	209	67

Black or African American student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	102	33
Yes	206	66

Hispanic/Latino student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	107	34
Yes	200	64

Sororities or fraternities

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	201	65
Yes	106	34

LGBTQ+ student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	108	35
Yes	199	64

Christian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	33
Yes	205	66

Jewish student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	97	31
Yes	211	68

Muslim/Islamic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	33
Yes	205	66

Hindu student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	105	34
Yes	203	65

Atheist/agnostic/secular student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	116	37
Yes	191	61

Republican student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	113	36
Yes	195	63

Democratic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	102	33
Yes	205	66

Politically conservative student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	113	36
Yes	195	63

Politically liberal student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	115	37
Yes	193	62

Black Lives Matter student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	116	37
Yes	192	61

Pro-Israeli student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	153	49
Yes	154	49

Pro-Palestinian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	128	41
Yes	180	58

Other student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	151	49
Yes	156	50

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	266	85
Yes	41	13

How often, if at all, do you hide your political beliefs from your professors in an attempt to get a better grade?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	104	33
Rarely	113	36
Occasionally	53	17
Fairly often, a couple times a week	26	8
Very often, nearly every day	9	3

Have you ever been involved in publicly calling out, punishing, or "canceling" someone or a group for inappropriate statements or actions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	28	9
No	278	89

Thinking of the last incident where someone was publicly called out, punished, or "canceled" for their statements or actions, would you say the consequence or impact on the person was. . .

Response	Frequency	Percent
Too lenient	35	11
About right	175	56
Too harsh	96	31

How often, if ever, have you personally been offended by perspectives shared by peers or classmates when in the classroom?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	55	18
Rarely	147	47
Occasionally	83	27
Fairly often, a couple times a week	18	6
Very often, nearly every day	3	1

From what you know about the situation in the Middle East, do your sympathies lie more with the Israelis or more with the Palestinians?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Israelis	51	16
Palestinians	114	36
Both equally	60	19
Neither	9	3
Don't know	73	23

Regardless of your overall feelings toward the Israelis and the Palestinians, who do you think is more responsible for the 2023 outbreak of violence in the Middle East: Israel or Hamas?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Israel	67	22
Hamas	101	32
Both equally	39	12
Don't know	99	32

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	98	31
Less than once a year	34	11
Once or twice a year	34	11
Several times a year	50	16
Once a month	20	6
2-3 times a month	5	2
About weekly	21	7
Weekly	23	7
Several times a week	20	6

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	6	2
No	300	96

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	2	1	1
No	303	97	99

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	9	3	18
Less than half the time	17	5	31
About half the time	19	6	35
Most of the time, nearly every day	6	2	12
Always	2	1	4

How often would you say that you feel lonely or isolated?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	13	4	20
Less than half the time	32	10	50
About half the time	9	3	14
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	1	6
Always	6	2	10

How often would you say that you feel like you have no time for yourself?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	4	1	6
Less than half the time	20	7	34
About half the time	19	6	32
Most of the time, nearly every day	14	5	24
Always	2	1	4

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	12	4	23
Less than half the time	27	9	50
About half the time	6	2	11
Most of the time, nearly every day	6	2	11
Always	3	1	5

How often would you say that you feel stressed, frustrated, or overwhelmed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	6	2	7
Less than half the time	26	8	34
About half the time	32	10	42
Most of the time, nearly every day	7	2	9
Always	6	2	8

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Foundation for Individual
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510 Walnut Street
Suite 900
Philadelphia, PA 19106
T: 215.717.3473
www.thefire.org

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