

2025 College Free Speech Rankings University of South Carolina

34

OVERALL
RANK

SLIGHTLY
ABOVE
AVERAGE

SPEECH
CLIMATE

GREEN

SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

Executive Summary **1**

Full Report **2**

How Comfortable Are USC Students Expressing Their Views on Controversial Topics? **2**

How Often Are USC Students Self-Censoring on Campus? **3**

What Topics Are Difficult for USC Students to Have Conversations About? **5**

Which Speakers Do USC Students Consider Controversial? **5**

What kinds of Disruptive Conduct Do USC Students Consider Acceptable? **6**

How Is the USC's Administrative Stance on Freedom of Speech Perceived? **7**

A 'Green Light' School With Some Controversy **7**

How Can the University of South Carolina Improve? **8**

Methodology **10**

Free Speech Rankings **11**

Student Perceptions **11**

Campus Behavioral Metrics **12**

Overall Score **14**

Topline Results **16**

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.

University of South Carolina (USC) was one of the 257 schools surveyed. Key findings from this school include:

- A ranking of 34 with an overall score of 56.81 and a “Slightly Above Average” speech climate — a dramatic improvement from last year's ranking of 246.
- Excellent performance on “Tolerance Difference” (5), a good performance on “Administrative Support” (72), and a middling performance on “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (110) and “Disruptive Conduct” (116).
- Fifty-four percent of students believe it's at least rarely acceptable to block other students from attending a campus event compared with 51% of students at public universities nationally.
- While, similar to other schools, the percentage of students identifying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as difficult to discuss dramatically increased this year, unlike other schools, abortion remains the most difficult topic for students to discuss at University of South Carolina.
- USC ranked worse on its speaker-based components compared to last year, with both “Tolerance for Liberal Speakers” (248 compared to 138 last year) and “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers” (133 compared to 83 last year) dropping significantly.
- USC had four speech controversies since 2021.
- Maintaining speech policies that earn it a “green light” rating from FIRE.

Full Report

IN 2020, FIRE, in collaboration with College Pulse and RealClearEducation, launched a first-of-its-kind tool to help high school students and their parents identify which colleges promote and protect the free exchange of ideas: the College Free Speech Rankings. The response to the rankings report and corresponding online tool was overwhelmingly positive.

This past year FIRE and College Pulse surveyed 257 schools, ranking 251 of them.¹ The University of South Carolina (USC), with a score of 56.81, has a “Slightly Above Average” speech climate and ranks 34 overall in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings.

This represents monumental improvement from last year’s rankings when USC was in the bottom ten, ranking 246 with a “Very Poor” speech climate.

The USC’s ranking increased dramatically because of its policy improvements, becoming a “green light” institution this year. The university also improved on “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (110 compared to 160 last year), “Administrative Support” (72 compared to 142 last year), and “Openness” (193 compared to 217 last year). Its “Disruptive Conduct” ranking remained steady (116 compared to 115 last year). On the other hand, its speaker-based components dropped significantly with both “Tolerance for Liberal Speakers” (248 compared to 138 last year) and “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers” (133 compared to 83 last year) falling.

Notably, only one-third of the improvement in the rankings is attributed to the improvement to green light policies. The remaining two-thirds is due to an improved climate felt by the students. We believe this is a testament to the power of a strong administrative commitment to free expression and its impact on the ground.

Compared to ranked public universities in South Carolina and the surrounding states, the University of South Carolina ranks in the lower half. It came in before University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (62), Georgia State University (45), and University of Georgia (141). However, it ranks behind Georgia Institute of Technology (5), North Carolina State University (7), University of North Carolina Charlotte (9), Clemson University (21), University of North Carolina Greensboro (22), and Appalachian State University (24).

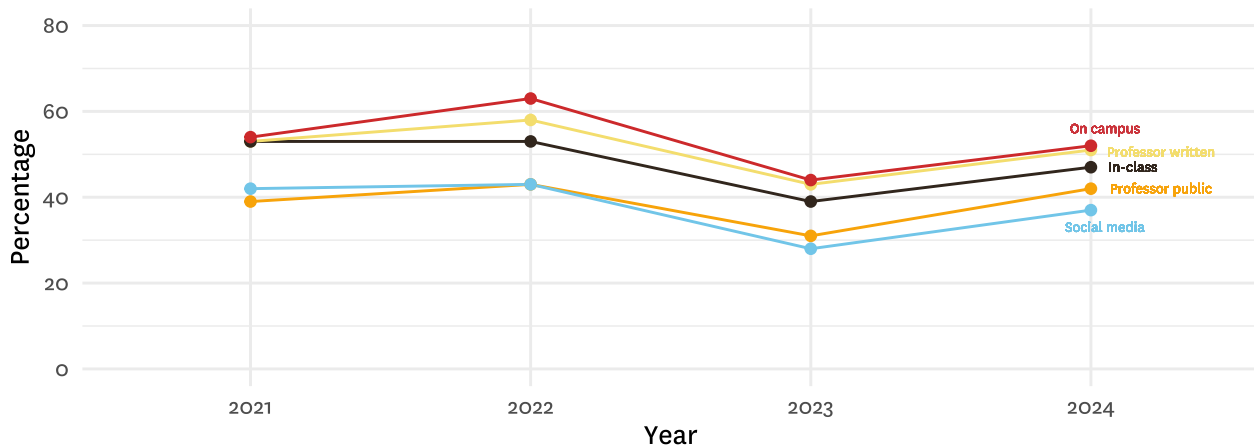
HOW COMFORTABLE ARE USC STUDENTS EXPRESSING THEIR VIEWS ON CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS?

University of South Carolina ranks 110 on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component, a notable improvement from a rank of 160 last year.

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.

Last year USC experienced substantial drops in the percentage of students indicating they were comfortable expressing themselves in various campus settings. This year, the university gained back some of the lost ground and was fairly similar to students nationally.

FIGURE 1 Students Who Feel Comfortable Expressing Views by Context (%)



Nationally, 39% of students are “somewhat” or “very” comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic publicly with a professor, 50% in a written assignment, 47% during an in-class discussion, 50% to other students in a common campus space, and 34% to other students on social media.

HOW OFTEN ARE USC STUDENTS SELF-CENSORING ON CAMPUS?

University of South Carolina ranks 136 on the “Self-Censorship” component.

Before being presented with key questions on self-censorship, participants were provided with the following definition of self-censorship:

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.”

This definition was then followed by three questions asking about self-censorship during conversations with other students on campus, conversations with professors, and self-censorship during classroom discussions. USC students who self-censor “a couple of times a week” or more include:

- 13% during conversations with other students on campus compared to 24% of students nationally.

- 24% during conversations with professors compared to 25% of students nationally.
- 25% during classroom discussions compared to 26% of students nationally.

These numbers are striking. Similar proportions of USC students appear to self-censor during conversations with professors and during classroom discussions as do students nationally. But, somewhat surprisingly, few USC students frequently self-censor during conversations with other students. This pattern slightly mirrors numbers on the comfort component. Higher percentages of students report being “somewhat” or “very” comfortable expressing their views to other students compared to expressing their views to faculty. Specifically, 52% report being comfortable expressing their views to other students on campus compared to 42% who are comfortable disagreeing publicly with a professor.

Earlier in the survey, USC students were asked a general question of self-censorship without a definition and were asked: “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?” Responses to this question do not factor into the rankings but are noted here as a point of comparison. Only 8% of USC students report they self-censor “a couple of times a week” or more because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond, compared to 17% of students nationally.

When considering the prevalence of self-censorship, it’s worth considering the political composition of USC students. Among those sampled, 32% identify as liberal, 18% moderate, 39% conservative, and 11% something else. As such, USC is one of only 29 campuses sampled where more students identified as conservative than liberal — it is one of the most ideologically diverse campuses surveyed. At many other universities surveyed, liberal students outnumber conservatives by at least 4:1.

On the topic of self-censorship, compared to other universities, differences along ideological lines at USC are reversed and modest in size. At other universities, substantially larger percentages of conservative students report self-censoring frequently. For example, at Yale, 49% of conservative Yale students report self-censoring “a couple of times a week” or more during classroom discussions compared to 12% of liberal Yale students. This is not the case at the USC. Instead, slightly larger percentages of liberal students report self-censoring. However, the gap between the percentage of liberal and conservative students reporting this is ten percentage points or smaller across the key questions.

That said, while the question did not factor into the rankings, students were also asked “How often, if at all, do you hide your political beliefs from professors in an attempt to get a better grade?” Overall, 20% of USC students report doing this at least “a couple times a week” compared to 18% of students nationally. Unlike the other self-censorship questions, this effect appears to be driven primarily by conservative students. While 10% of liberal USC students report hiding their political beliefs from professors in an attempt to get a better grade “a couple of times a week” or more, this jumps to 32% among conservative USC students.

Thus, while the USC does a little better than average on the “Self-Censorship” component, there appear to be some unique differences along ideological lines.

WHAT TOPICS ARE DIFFICULT FOR USC STUDENTS TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT?

University of South Carolina's ranking on the "Openness" component continues to sit low, at 193.

Similar to students nationwide, many USC students (50%) identify the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a topic difficult to have an open and honest conversation about. However, unlike most other schools, for the second year in a row at the USC, abortion is identified by the largest proportion of students (60%) as a topic difficult to have an open and honest discussion about — dropping from a high of 67% last year.

No other topic at the USC was identified by a majority of students as difficult to have an open and honest conversation about. Additionally, with the exception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, most topics have fewer students indicating difficulty having an open and honest conversation compared to last year. For example, topics such as gender equality (29%; 49% last year), racial inequality (38%; 51% last year), economic inequality (15%; 27% last year), climate change (11%; 22% last year), the Supreme Court (10%; 20% last year), and police misconduct (36%; 45% last year) experienced double-digit percentage point declines. However, large percentages of University of South Carolina students still identify transgender rights (48%), gun control (46%), gay rights (40%), and religion (40%) as topics difficult to have an open and honest conversation about.

WHICH SPEAKERS DO USC STUDENTS CONSIDER CONTROVERSIAL?

University of South Carolina ranks 248 on "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers," 133 on "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers," and 231 on "Mean Tolerance." Despite extremely poor rankings for "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers" and "Mean Tolerance," USC students show little bias toward allowing controversial liberal speakers on campus compared to conservative ones (or the reverse) as evidenced by the ranking of 5 on the "Tolerance Difference" component.

USC students were presented with eight different previously expressed ideas (three liberal, three conservative, and two related to Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which did not impact the rankings) in random order. Across the key six controversial speakers, there is not one controversial speaker that a majority of USC said should "probably" or "definitely" be allowed. Specifically, the percentage of USC students who say they would "probably" or "definitely" allow each of the three controversial liberal speakers ranged from 28% ("The police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan") to 38% ("The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution"). Far larger percentages of students nationally support allowing all three controversial liberal speakers on campus — support by students nationally ranged from 47% ("The police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan") to 56% ("Children should be able to transition without parental consent").

USC ranks better on "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers," but is still middling. The percentage of USC students who say they would "probably" or "definitely" allow each of the three controversial conservative speakers on campus ranged from 27% ("Black Lives Matter is a hate group") to 39% ("Abortion should be completely illegal"). Additionally, similar or larger proportions of students nationally indicated they would allow all three of the controversial conservative speakers on campus. Support by students nationally for the three controversial conservative speakers ranged from 32% ("Black Lives Matter is a hate group") to 45% ("Abortion should be completely illegal").

The lack of preference toward either controversial liberal or conservative speakers is reflected in USC's extremely positive ranking on the "Tolerance Difference" component (5). However, given the low levels of tolerance discussed earlier, this ranking points more toward similar *intolerance* toward both liberal and conservative controversial speakers rather than similar tolerance toward both.

Finally, this year we also asked about tolerance toward two controversial speakers on Israeli-Palestinian conflict-related topics. For a speaker expressing that "Collateral damage in Gaza is justified for the sake of Israeli security," 35% of USC students say they would "probably" or "definitely" allow this controversial speaker (compared to 40% of students nationally). For a speaker expressing "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," 60% of USC students say they would "probably" or "definitely" allow this speaker (compared to 71% of students nationally). Thus, for these questions, there appears to be a clear demarcation in the type of controversial speaker USC students would be accepting of related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict though support for both — particularly the first — are low.

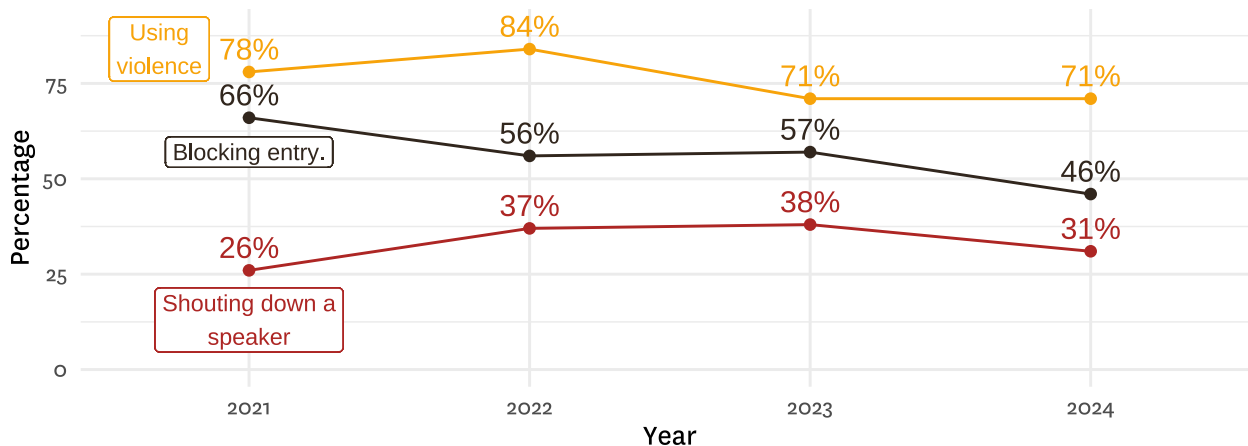
WHAT KINDS OF DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT DO USC STUDENTS CONSIDER ACCEPTABLE?

University of South Carolina ranks 116 on the "Disruptive Conduct" component — a similar position to its ranking of 115 last year.

As can be seen in the figure below, even though USC remained static in its ranking on this component, the percentage of students reporting that they never engage in illiberal disruptive conduct behaviors experienced an unfortunate drop on two factors. This year, only 31% of USC students say shoutdowns are "never" acceptable, a decline from the 38% of USC students who said that last year. Similarly, 46% of USC students say blocking entry to an event is "never" acceptable compared to 57% last year. For violence, 71% of USC students say this is "never" acceptable, the same as last year.

Compared to students nationally, similar numbers of USC students indicate these forms of disruptive conduct are "never" acceptable. Nationally, 32% of students say "shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus" is "never" acceptable, 48% say "blocking other students from attending a campus speech" is "never" acceptable, and 68% say "using violence to stop a campus speech" is "never" acceptable. All of these percentages for students nationally experienced notable drops since last year.

FIGURE 2 Students Who Say a Disruptive Conduct is Never Acceptable (%)



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

University of South Carolina ranks 72 on the “Administrative Support” component, a significant increase from its middling ranking of 142 last year. The substantial improvement is likely attributable to positive and publicly-advertised initiatives the university engaged in this past year to bolster free speech and free speech protections on campus (as discussed below in this report).

Thirty-nine percent of USC students say that their administration’s protection of free speech on campus is “very” or “extremely” clear — a notable uptick from 34% last year — and another 47% say that it is “somewhat” clear. When it comes to whether the administration will defend a speaker’s rights during a controversy, 22% of USC students say this is “very” or “extremely” likely — the same as last year — though another 59% say that it is “somewhat” likely. Overall, these numbers reflect USC students’ somewhat positive confidence in the administration on their campus to protect and defend free speech.

A ‘GREEN LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH SOME CONTROVERSY

FIRE awards the University of South Carolina our highest, “green light” rating for maintaining no regulations on student expression that seriously imperil speech. As their demonstration policy makes clear, University of South Carolina:

supports the free exercise of constitutionally protected expression. ... Even when expression occurs that may not be in line with the university’s values, the university recognizes that an essential part of our educational mission is to encourage individuals to engage in the responsible and civil exchange of ideas.

The policy also adopts the core principles of the University of Chicago’s “Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression,” better known as the “Chicago Statement,” a model free speech policy statement that affirms their commitment to free expression.

Since 2021, the USC has been involved in four speech controversies. First, in 2021, a guest lecture on Ethiopia’s war on its Tigray region by Kjetil Tronvoll, Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at Norway’s Oslo New University College, was indefinitely postponed by the inviting professor after Tronvoll was criticized on social media. The online critics alleged a racial basis for Tronvoll’s opposition to the Ethiopian regime.

The next year, students petitioned for Anna Kelley, a member of the student senate, to resign from her position or be impeached because she liked a message saying there were “too many women and feminine men in the [student senate] body” during a student senate debate. Additionally, because members of Turning Point USA were involved in the chat, a petition was launched calling for the group to be banned from campus. Students complained to the administration, but a university spokesperson publicly defended free expression, stating: “On our campus, Constitutionally protected speech is never infringed upon.”

Additionally, in 2023, USC administrators denied recognition to Uncensored America, a student free speech group, on the grounds that it was too similar to another group on campus. After a letter from FIRE, the university recognized the group and updated its policies to include a “returned for revision” status to clarify to prospective student groups that applications deficient in ways not warranting denial can be corrected or supplemented and resubmitted. Later in the year, Uncensored America hosted an event featuring conservative activist Laura Loomer. The event was disrupted by student and off-campus protesters who shouted slogans like “fascist free USC.” Student Affairs staff intervened and required the disrupters to leave the lecture location or to sit quietly and permit Loomer to finish her comments. Loomer was then able to speak until the end of the event’s scheduled time, and the university released a statement defending student groups’ rights to bring a variety of speakers to campus and affirming others’ rights to protest in a non-disruptive manner.

While the university was penalized for its response to the denial of recognition to Uncensored America, the disruption of the event, and the cancelation of Tronvoll’s speech, the USC’s score was positively impacted by its strong statements in support of free expression in response to the attempted disruption of Loomer and the petition to impeach Kelley.

HOW CAN THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA IMPROVE?

The University of South Carolina has shown a desire to protect free expression through its decisions to amend its speech policies to support free expression and its statements supporting free expression in response to speech controversies. This led to a massive improvement in its overall ranking — many universities could learn from USC’s example. However, the university’s survey-based components could use some improvement.

First, the university could potentially improve its “Disruptive Conduct” and “Administrative Support” components by publicizing its speech policies and making clear the activities and behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable forms of protest. This could lead to higher survey scores and a decrease in disruptions, which also negatively impact the university’s ranking. Additionally, teaching students *why* free expression is important and valuable on campus could help improve the USC’s speaker-based components and “Openness” component, which are currently its worst rankings.

The university also still has room for improvement in its response to speech controversies. The USC should always support free expression, even when the speech is unpopular or support for free expression could lead to backlash. Creating a strong culture of free expression on campus could lead to fewer free speech controversies, and responding in a speech-protective manner to those controversies positively impacts the university's ranking — as it did in the cases of Anna Kelley and Laura Loomer.

The overall story of the USC in the rankings is a dramatic improvement in a relatively short time. Our expectation is that the strong administrative support for free expression will continue to pay dividends and pave the way for future improvements.

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 (IPF) 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 15.²
- **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

² 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.

speaker's message. Options ranged from "definitely should not allow this speaker" to "definitely should allow 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.³

³ 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/1ish8y1M4GFv5FQzyx6lLZqHj10Oa1YQJOYvozCqAzE8/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.⁴
- Supporting students and student groups, as recorded in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings behavioral metrics documentation that is available online.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷

4 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>.

5 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.

6 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.

7 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.⁸

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:

⁸ 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.

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

Topline Results

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	5	3
Not very clear	21	11
Somewhat clear	88	47
Very clear	57	30
Extremely clear	16	9

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	11	6
Not very likely	24	13
Somewhat likely	111	59
Very likely	37	20
Extremely likely	4	2

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	49	26
Somewhat uncomfortable	61	33
Somewhat comfortable	51	28
Very comfortable	26	14

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	34	18
Somewhat uncomfortable	57	31
Somewhat comfortable	68	36
Very comfortable	28	15

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	45	24
Somewhat uncomfortable	54	29
Somewhat comfortable	64	34
Very comfortable	24	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	38	20
Somewhat uncomfortable	53	28
Somewhat comfortable	74	40
Very comfortable	22	12

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	49	26
Somewhat uncomfortable	68	36
Somewhat comfortable	51	27
Very comfortable	19	10

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	39	21
Rarely	74	40
Occasionally, once or twice a month	59	31
Fairly often, a couple times a week	13	7
Very often, nearly every day	1	1

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	16	9
Rarely	59	32
Occasionally, once or twice a month	86	46
Fairly often, a couple times a week	20	10
Very often, nearly every day	6	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	13	7
Rarely	64	34
Occasionally, once or twice a month	65	35
Fairly often, a couple times a week	30	16
Very often, nearly every day	14	8

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	14	8
Rarely	56	30
Occasionally, once or twice a month	69	37
Fairly often, a couple times a week	35	19
Very often, nearly every day	12	6

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	10	6
Sometimes acceptable	64	34
Rarely acceptable	55	30
Never acceptable	57	31

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	4	2
Sometimes acceptable	37	20
Rarely acceptable	61	32
Never acceptable	86	46

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	5	3
Sometimes acceptable	20	11
Rarely acceptable	30	16
Never acceptable	132	71

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	65	35
Probably should not allow this speaker	56	30
Probably should allow this speaker	44	23
Definitely should allow this speaker	21	11

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	45	24
Probably should not allow this speaker	67	36
Probably should allow this speaker	52	28
Definitely should allow this speaker	21	11

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	55	30
Probably should not allow this speaker	79	42
Probably should allow this speaker	39	21
Definitely should allow this speaker	12	6

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	55	30
Probably should not allow this speaker	60	32
Probably should allow this speaker	51	27
Definitely should allow this speaker	20	11

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	68	36
Probably should not allow this speaker	67	36
Probably should allow this speaker	43	23
Definitely should allow this speaker	9	5

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	39	21
Probably should not allow this speaker	81	43
Probably should allow this speaker	54	29
Definitely should allow this speaker	13	7

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	44	23
Probably should not allow this speaker	76	41
Probably should allow this speaker	52	28
Definitely should allow this speaker	13	7

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	25	13
Probably should not allow this speaker	50	27
Probably should allow this speaker	80	43
Definitely should allow this speaker	32	17

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	73	39
Yes	112	60

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	146	78
Yes	39	21

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	165	88
Yes	21	11

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	167	89
Yes	18	10

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	158	85
Yes	27	14

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	160	85
Yes	26	14

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	148	79
Yes	37	20

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	55
Yes	82	44

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	128	69
Yes	57	30

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	97	52
Yes	88	47

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	136	73
Yes	50	26

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	132	71
Yes	53	28

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	92	49
Yes	93	50

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	117	63
Yes	68	36

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	119	64
Yes	66	35

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	109	58
Yes	76	41

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	104	56
Yes	81	43

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	124	66
Yes	61	33

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	163	87
Yes	22	12

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	85	46
Yes	100	54

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	170	91
Yes	16	8

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	77	41
Yes	106	57

Black or African American student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	69	37
Yes	114	61

Hispanic/Latino student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	75	40
Yes	108	58

Sororities or fraternities

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	62	33
Yes	121	65

LGBTQ+ student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	78	42
Yes	105	56

Christian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	63	34
Yes	120	64

Jewish student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	78	42
Yes	105	56

Muslim/Islamic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	78	42
Yes	105	56

Hindu student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	76	41
Yes	107	57

Atheist/agnostic/secular student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	95	51
Yes	88	47

Republican student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	86	46
Yes	97	52

Democratic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	81	43
Yes	102	54

Politically conservative student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	91	49
Yes	92	49

Politically liberal student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	89	47
Yes	94	51

Black Lives Matter student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	84	45
Yes	99	53

Pro-Israeli student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	104	56
Yes	79	42

Pro-Palestinian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	98	52
Yes	85	46

Other student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	96	51
Yes	88	47

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	158	85
Yes	25	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	57	30
Rarely	47	25
Occasionally	41	22
Fairly often, a couple times a week	19	10
Very often, nearly every day	18	9

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	18	10
No	164	88

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	16	9
About right	93	50
Too harsh	73	39

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	51	27
Rarely	78	42
Occasionally	40	21
Fairly often, a couple times a week	10	5
Very often, nearly every day	3	2

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	18	10
Palestinians	52	28
Both equally	28	15
Neither	12	7
Don't know	71	38

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	24	13
Hamas	30	16
Both equally	34	18
Don't know	94	50

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	38	20
Less than once a year	21	11
Once or twice a year	32	17
Several times a year	43	23
Once a month	9	5
2-3 times a month	19	10
About weekly	8	4
Weekly	10	5
Several times a week	2	1

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	1	1
No	180	97

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	1	1	1
No	181	97	99

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	4	20
Less than half the time	7	4	21
About half the time	12	6	32
Most of the time, nearly every day	5	3	15
Always	4	2	12

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	6	28
Less than half the time	14	8	36
About half the time	11	6	29
Most of the time, nearly every day	3	2	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	4	2	9
Less than half the time	11	6	27
About half the time	22	12	52
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	2	10
Always	1	0	2

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	4	21
Less than half the time	18	9	53
About half the time	7	4	22
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	0	3
Always	0	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	1	5
Less than half the time	5	3	16
About half the time	11	6	35
Most of the time, nearly every day	3	2	10
Always	11	6	34



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

**DOWNLOAD THE 2025 COLLEGE
FREE SPEECH RANKINGS REPORT**

rankings.thefire.org



@thefireorg