

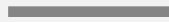
2025 College Free Speech Rankings

University of Southern California

245

OVERALL
RANK

VERY POOR



SPEECH
CLIMATE

RED



SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

Executive Summary **1**

Full Report **2**

**How Comfortable Are USC
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?** **4**

**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?** **6**

**A 'Red Light' School
with a Lot of Controversy** **8**

**How Can the University of
Southern California Improve?** **9**

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 Southern California was one of the 257 schools surveyed. Key findings from this school include:

- A ranking of 245, with an overall score of 19.79 and a “Very Poor” speech climate.
- A good performance on “Tolerance for Liberal Speakers” (54) and a middling performance on “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers” (101).
- A poor performance on “Disruptive Conduct” (184) and “Self-Censorship” (178).
- USC’s rankings on “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (187, down from 61 last year), “Openness” (118, down from 33 last year), and “Administrative Support” (228, down from 151 last year) all dropped significantly.
- USC was involved in six speech controversies over the last five years, responding in a speech-protective manner in none of them.
- USC continues to maintain speech policies earning it a “red light” rating from FIRE. If USC revised these policies and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 196 overall.

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 University of Southern California, with a score of 19.79, has a “Very Poor” speech climate and ranks 245 overall in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings after ranking 109 last year.

USC’s scores on a number of the survey-based components dropped significantly, resulting in a corresponding drop in ranking. Its “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (187 compared to 61 last year), “Openness” (118 compared to 33 last year), and “Administrative Support” (228 compared to 151 last year) rankings fell significantly. Additionally, its “Disruptive Conduct” ranking (184) noticeably decreased from last year’s ranking (128). On the other hand, USC’s speaker-related rankings improved significantly, as reflected by its higher “Tolerance for Liberal Speakers” ranking (54 compared to 147 last year) and “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers” ranking (101 compared to 206 last year). However, perceptions that administrators do not support free speech and student support for illiberal protest remain serious issues.

Compared to its peers, USC ranks toward the back of the pack. It came in behind Boston University (162), University of Notre Dame (167), Tufts University (182), Northwestern University (238), and Georgetown University (240). However, it ranks higher than New York University (249).

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

University of Southern California ranks 187 on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component.

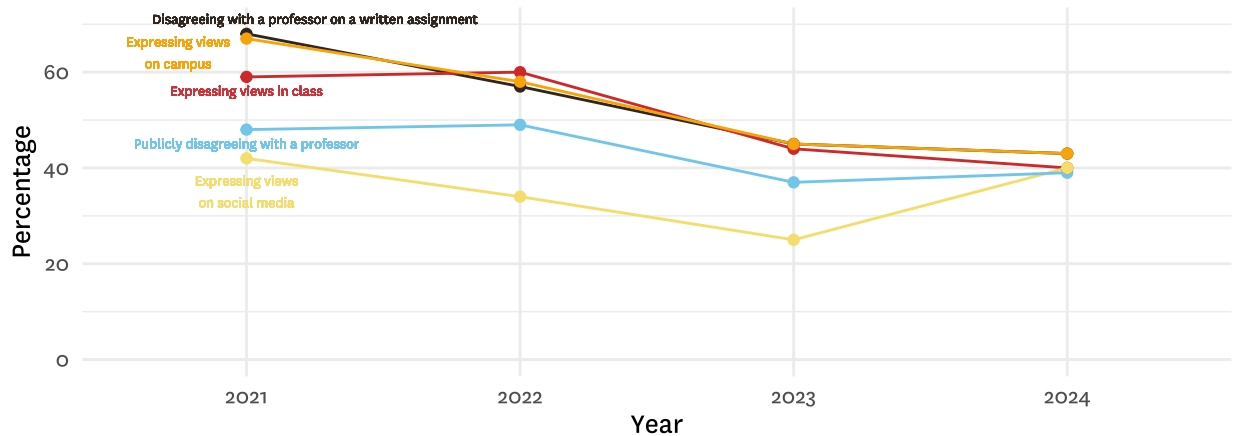
Students at USC feel similar levels of comfort:

- publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial topic (39%).
- expressing disagreement with one of their professors about a controversial political topic in a written assignment (43%).
- expressing their views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion (40%)

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.

- expressing their 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 (43%).
- expressing an unpopular political opinion to their fellow students on a social media account tied to their name (40%).

FIGURE 1 Students Who Feel Comfortable by Setting (%)



Since 2021, the percentage of USC students who feel comfortable expressing themselves both in and outside of class has decreased substantially. With the exception of publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic and expressing an unpopular political opinion to their fellow students on a social media account tied to their name, USC students have reached the lowest level of comfort in self-expression since 2021.

HOW OFTEN ARE USC STUDENTS SELF-CENSORING ON CAMPUS?

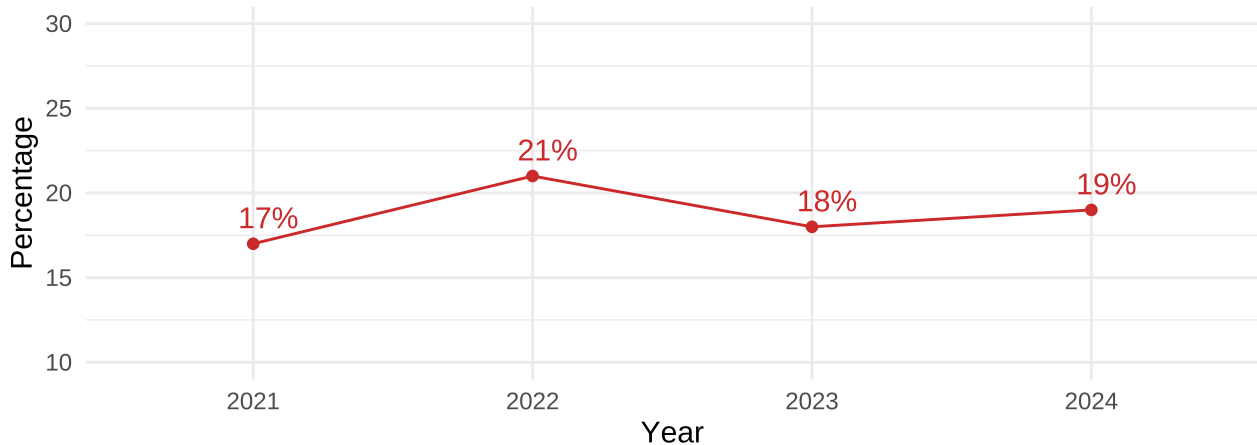
University of Southern California ranks 178 on the “Self-Censorship” component.

USC students report self-censoring in conversations with professors and other students less often than students nationally except during classroom discussions.

- 20% report self-censoring “fairly” or “very” often during conversations with professors compared to 25% of students nationally.
- 27% report self-censoring either “fairly” or “very” often during conversations with other students on campus compared to 24% of students nationally.
- 29% report self-censoring either “fairly” or “very” often during classroom discussions compared to 26% of students nationally.

Self-censorship by USC students remains consistent since 2021. Three years ago, when asked how often they could not express their opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond, 17% of USC students felt that way “very” or “fairly” often. This percentage was 21% the following year, 18% last year, and 19% this year.

FIGURE 2 Students Who Could Not Express Their Opinion on a Subject Because of How Students, a Professor, or the Administration Would Respond (%)



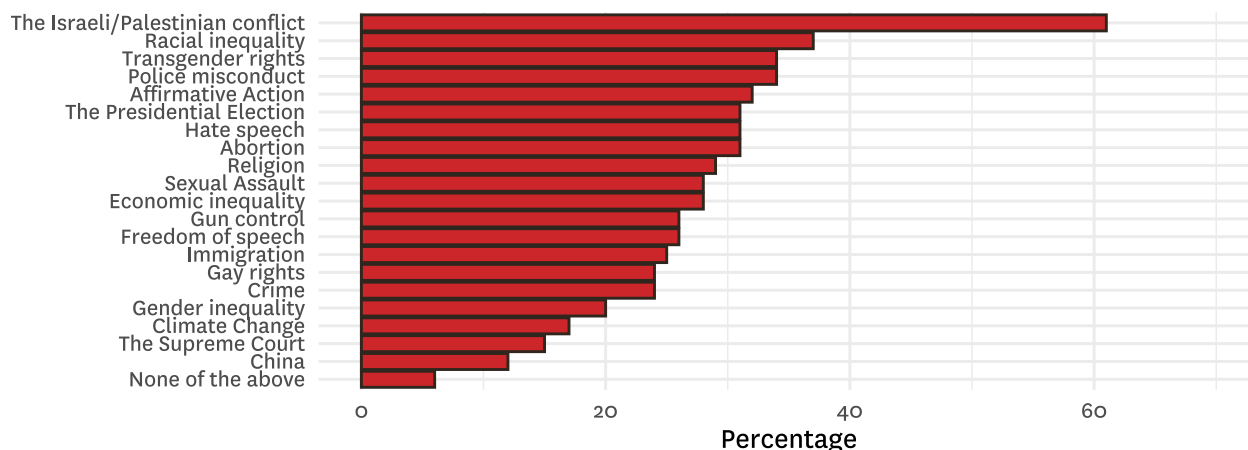
WHAT TOPICS ARE DIFFICULT FOR USC STUDENTS TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT?

University of Southern California ranks 118 on the “Openness” component.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is identified most frequently as a topic that is difficult for students to have an open and honest conversation about on USC’s campus (61%). In 2021, 40% of USC students reported having difficulty having an open and honest conversation about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on their campus. This percentage increased in 2022 to 43% before decreasing to 32% in 2023.

USC students report less difficulty discussing other topics compared to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the lowest percentage (6%) of USC students reporting none of the listed topics being difficult to discuss.

FIGURE 3 Students Who Have a Difficult Time Talking About Each Topic (%)



WHICH SPEAKERS DO USC STUDENTS CONSIDER CONTROVERSIAL?

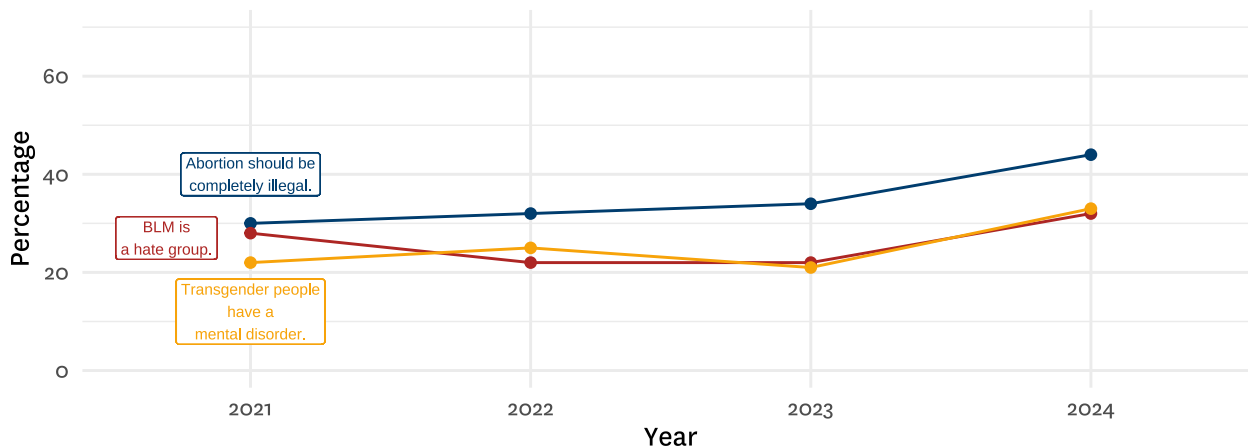
University of Southern California ranks 54 on “Tolerance for Liberal Speakers,” 58 on “Mean Tolerance,” 101 on “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers,” and 170 on the “Tolerance Difference” component.

When it comes to allowing controversial liberal speakers on campus, USC students are tolerant. More than half (52%) would allow a speaker on campus who said that “The police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan,” and 57% would allow a speaker on campus who said that “The Catholic Church is a pedophilic institution.” Allowing a speaker on campus who said that “Children should be able to transition without parental consent” receives the most support (67%).

Conservative speakers, on the other hand, are not as tolerated by USC students. Thirty-two percent of students would allow a speaker who said that “Black Lives Matter is a hate group,” 33% would allow someone who said that “transgender people have a mental disorder,” and 44% would allow someone on campus who said that “abortion should be completely illegal.”

Additionally, this year’s survey asked about two speakers relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though responses did not affect rankings. Thirty-six percent of USC students report that a speaker who said that “collateral damage in Gaza is justified for the sake of Israeli security” should be allowed on campus while 67% report that a speaker who said that “from the river to sea, Palestine will be free” should be allowed on campus.

FIGURE 4 Students Who Would Allow Each Conservative Speaker on Campus (%)



WHAT KINDS OF DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT DO USC STUDENTS CONSIDER ACCEPTABLE?

University of Southern California ranks 184 on the “Disruptive Conduct” component.

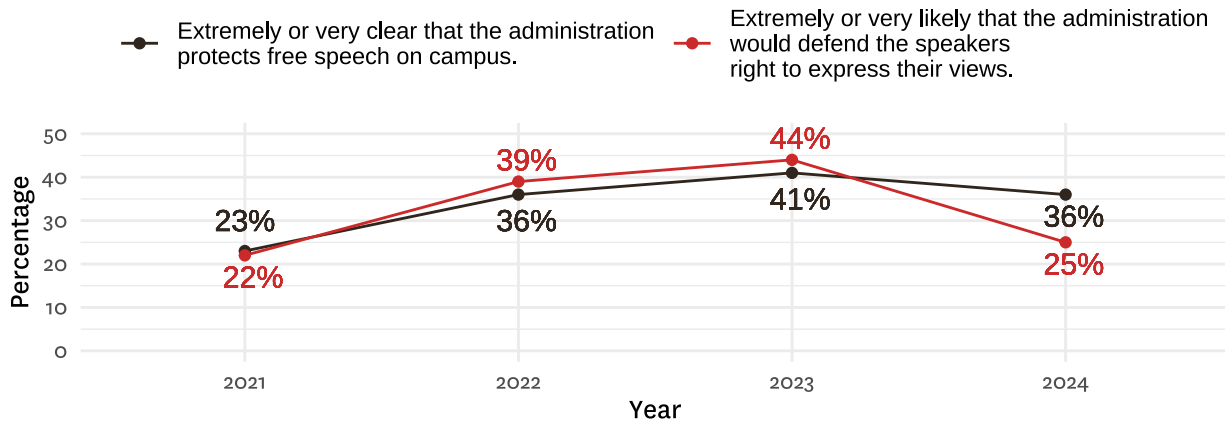
When compared to students nationally, USC students are more likely to say that students using disruptive conduct to stop a campus speech is acceptable to some degree. Specifically, 62% of USC students find blocking other students from attending a campus speech at least “rarely” acceptable compared to 52% of students nationally, and 41% view violence to stop a speech as acceptable compared to 32% nationally. Sixty-seven percent of USC students find shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus acceptable compared to 69% of students nationally.

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

University of Southern California ranks 228 on the “Administrative Support” component.

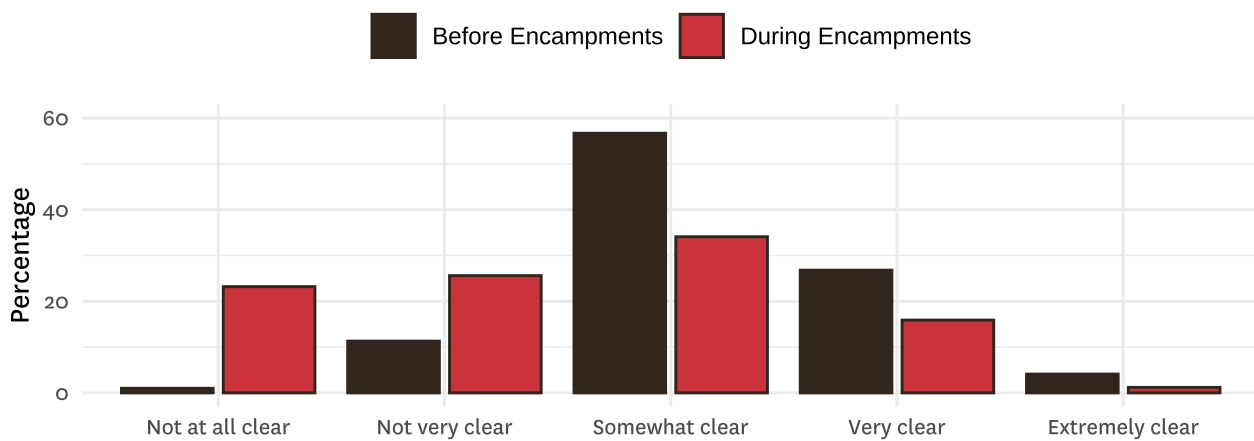
Twenty-five percent of USC students find the administration either “very” or “extremely” clear in protecting freedom of speech, with an additional 46% considering it “somewhat” clear. In terms of the administration’s willingness to defend a speaker’s rights during controversies, 16% of USC students believe that it is “very” or “extremely” likely, while 39% see it as “somewhat” likely. These percentages have declined since last year.

FIGURE 5 Student Perceptions of the Administration



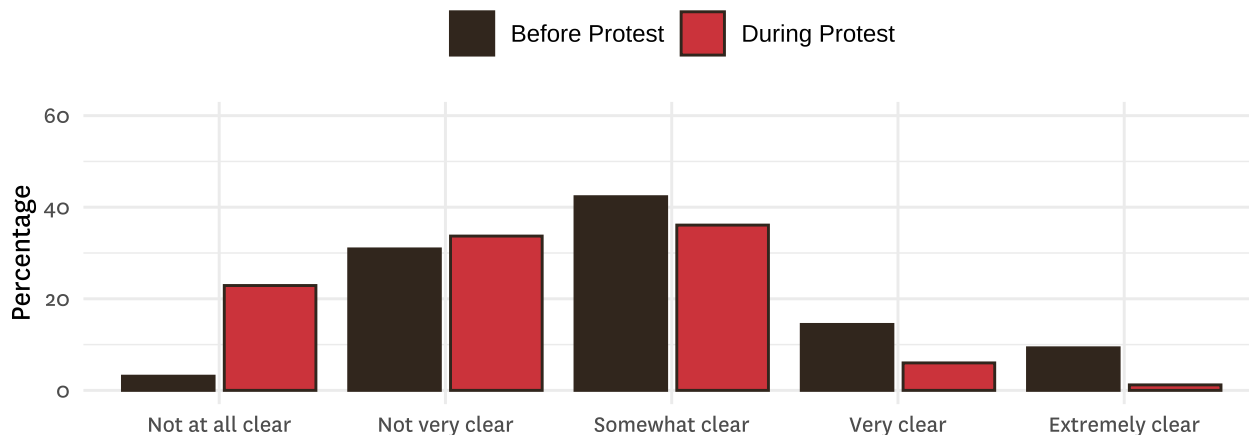
Prior to the encampments, the percentage of students who thought it was “very” or “extremely” clear that the administration protects freedom of speech was at 31%; this perception dropped to 17% after the encampments started.

FIGURE 6 Student Perceptions That the Administration Protects Free Speech



Likewise, more students thought it was “very” or “extremely” likely the administration would protect speakers’ rights (24%) than after the encampments started (7%).

FIGURE 7 Student Perceptions That the Administration Protects Speakers' Rights



A 'RED LIGHT' SCHOOL WITH A LOT OF CONTROVERSY

FIRE gives USC's regulations on student expression a "red light" rating as a result of maintaining an overbroad computer use policy that both clearly and substantially restricts freedom of speech. The computer use policy, in addition to having other concerning provisions, prohibits emailing "offensive jokes," "inappropriate information," and "chain letters" or "spam emails." To put it mildly, students should not fear punishment for sharing jokes with their friends because a campus administrator may find them "offensive."

FIRE also flags six other policies that earn a "yellow light" rating for posing impermissibly vague or clear but narrow restrictions on protected speech. These include a requirement that students planning any expressive activity obtain approval six weeks in advance; a prohibition on posting flyers anonymously; a policy sharing the expectation that students behave with civility; a harassment policy that fails to sufficiently track the legal standard for peer harassment in an educational setting; and a policy stating that disrespectful behavior may prevent student organizations from reserving space for expressive activity. USC must revise these policies to reduce the chilling effect they impose on the campus speech climate.

Over the past five years, USC was involved in six different controversies over free expression which negatively impact the university's ranking. In July 2020, after protests from alumni, students, and the public, the university removed an exhibit about John Wayne from its School of Cinematic Arts. In December 2019, the school initially decided to revise the exhibit to include elements related to Indigenous filmmaking, feminism, and critical race theory. After continued protests that Wayne was a "blatant racist" and the racial reckoning after the murder of George Floyd, the university decided to move the exhibit to a library rather than the main School of Cinematic Arts building.

Then in 2021, USC Professor James Moore came under fire by students for hanging a Blue Lives Matter flag on his office door. When administrators asked Moore to take the flag down, he refused. He later claimed that the university held up granting him emeritus status because he would not remove the flag.

In 2023, USC placed Professor John Strauss on administrative leave and required him to teach his courses remotely after he criticized pro-Palestinian protesters, telling them “Shame on you” and calling Hamas “murderers.” After seven months, the university ended its investigation of Strauss, finding he did not engage in harassment or discrimination. Additionally, in September 2023, an Armenian student group and others protested a campus speech by Turkish Ambassador to the United States, Hasan Murat Mercan, objecting to his pro-Turkish stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The protesters urged the university to disinvite Mercan prior to the event and then attempted to disrupt the event when it was not canceled. The university refused to cancel the event and responded by removing disruptive protesters from the venue, but Mercan was physically accosted by protesters after he left.

This past spring, USC’s administration canceled Asna Tabassum’s valedictorian speech at commencement because of “substantial risks relating to security and disruption at commencement.” The cancellation of the speech appears to have been motivated by her criticism of Israel on social media. The university provided no evidence that it received threats or took any steps to secure the event to prevent cancellation of Tabassum’s speech. After publicity of USC’s cancellation of Tabassum’s speech and sharp criticism from students and faculty, the university decided to cancel commencement altogether, resulting in the cancellation of speeches by tennis legend Billie Jean King, filmmaker Jon Chu, National Endowment for the Arts Chair Maria Rosario Jackson, and National Academy of Sciences President Marcia McNutt.

USC was penalized for each of the six speech controversies because, in each case, the university did not adequately defend expressive freedoms on campus.

HOW CAN THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IMPROVE?

The easiest thing USC can do to improve its ranking in next year’s College Free Speech Rankings is to revise its red and yellow light speech policies. If USC revised these policies and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 196 overall. Publicizing its policy changes, specifically to students, could also increase students’ trust in the administration’s support of free expression on campus. This could, in turn, improve the university’s “Administrative Support” survey ranking, which is currently its worst rankings.

Improving and publicizing the university policies could also be a helpful way to indicate to students the activities and behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable forms of protest, which could potentially lead to fewer campus disruptions and may change the culture of the university toward less acceptance of violence and shutdowns. The university can also teach students more directly that disruptions will not be tolerated or why disruptions are bad for free expression to improve its “Administrative Support” and “Disruptive Conduct” rankings.

Additionally, to improve its ranking, USC could increase its support for those involved in speech controversies. If USC had supported each individual targeted in a speech controversy by preventing disruption and defending student and faculty expressive freedoms, the university would have benefited from its responses rather than been penalized for them.

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 (IPF) 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 (IPF) 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	20	11
Not very clear	33	18
Somewhat clear	83	46
Very clear	40	22
Extremely clear	5	3

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	21	12
Not very likely	58	32
Somewhat likely	71	39
Very likely	20	11
Extremely likely	10	5

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	27
Somewhat uncomfortable	62	35
Somewhat comfortable	54	30
Very comfortable	15	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	41	23
Somewhat uncomfortable	61	34
Somewhat comfortable	57	31
Very comfortable	21	12

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	42	24
Somewhat uncomfortable	65	36
Somewhat comfortable	55	30
Very comfortable	18	10

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	34	19
Somewhat uncomfortable	69	38
Somewhat comfortable	53	30
Very comfortable	24	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	58	32
Somewhat uncomfortable	49	27
Somewhat comfortable	64	35
Very comfortable	9	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	22	12
Rarely	63	35
Occasionally, once or twice a month	60	33
Fairly often, a couple times a week	21	12
Very often, nearly every day	13	7

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	17	10
Rarely	56	31
Occasionally, once or twice a month	58	32
Fairly often, a couple times a week	38	21
Very often, nearly every day	11	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	17	9
Rarely	53	30
Occasionally, once or twice a month	72	40
Fairly often, a couple times a week	27	15
Very often, nearly every day	10	5

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	11	6
Rarely	52	29
Occasionally, once or twice a month	64	36
Fairly often, a couple times a week	44	24
Very often, nearly every day	8	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	14	8
Sometimes acceptable	44	24
Rarely acceptable	63	35
Never acceptable	59	33

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	7	4
Sometimes acceptable	50	28
Rarely acceptable	54	30
Never acceptable	68	38

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	5	3
Sometimes acceptable	22	12
Rarely acceptable	46	26
Never acceptable	107	60

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	59	33
Probably should not allow this speaker	62	34
Probably should allow this speaker	36	20
Definitely should allow this speaker	23	13

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	41	23
Probably should not allow this speaker	60	34
Probably should allow this speaker	46	26
Definitely should allow this speaker	32	18

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	60	33
Probably should not allow this speaker	62	35
Probably should allow this speaker	38	21
Definitely should allow this speaker	20	11

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	21	12
Probably should not allow this speaker	57	32
Probably should allow this speaker	65	36
Definitely should allow this speaker	37	21

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	33	18
Probably should not allow this speaker	52	29
Probably should allow this speaker	61	34
Definitely should allow this speaker	33	18

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	24	14
Probably should not allow this speaker	34	19
Probably should allow this speaker	85	47
Definitely should allow this speaker	37	20

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	45	25
Probably should not allow this speaker	70	39
Probably should allow this speaker	42	23
Definitely should allow this speaker	23	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	15	9
Probably should not allow this speaker	44	24
Probably should allow this speaker	64	35
Definitely should allow this speaker	57	32

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	125	69
Yes	55	31

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	122	68
Yes	58	32

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	159	88
Yes	21	12

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	150	83
Yes	30	17

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	137	76
Yes	43	24

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	130	72
Yes	50	28

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	132	74
Yes	48	26

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	137	76
Yes	43	24

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	143	80
Yes	37	20

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	133	74
Yes	47	26

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	125	69
Yes	55	31

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	135	75
Yes	45	25

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	70	39
Yes	110	61

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	124	69
Yes	56	31

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	119	66
Yes	61	34

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	113	63
Yes	67	37

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	128	71
Yes	52	29

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	130	72
Yes	50	28

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	152	85
Yes	28	15

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	119	66
Yes	61	34

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	170	94
Yes	10	6

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	79	44
Yes	101	56

Black or African American student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	80	44
Yes	100	56

Hispanic/Latino student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	72	40
Yes	108	60

Sororities or fraternities

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	91	51
Yes	89	49

LGBTQ+ student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	74	41
Yes	106	59

Christian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	76	42
Yes	104	58

Jewish student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	79	44
Yes	101	56

Muslim/Islamic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	81	45
Yes	99	55

Hindu student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	80	44
Yes	100	56

Atheist/agnostic/secular student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	85	47
Yes	95	53

Republican student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	87	48
Yes	93	52

Democratic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	82	46
Yes	98	54

Politically conservative student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	88	49
Yes	92	51

Politically liberal student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	82	45
Yes	98	55

Black Lives Matter student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	81	45
Yes	99	55

Pro-Israeli student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	57
Yes	77	43

Pro-Palestinian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	90	50
Yes	90	50

Other student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	107	60
Yes	73	40

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	162	90
Yes	18	10

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	32
Rarely	58	32
Occasionally	39	21
Fairly often, a couple times a week	18	10
Very often, nearly every day	5	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	38	21
No	138	77

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	28	16
About right	90	50
Too harsh	58	32

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	35	19
Rarely	70	39
Occasionally	58	32
Fairly often, a couple times a week	9	5
Very often, nearly every day	4	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	20	11
Palestinians	80	44
Both equally	33	18
Neither	13	7
Don't know	30	17

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	52	29
Hamas	50	28
Both equally	21	12
Don't know	53	30

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	66	36
Less than once a year	26	15
Once or twice a year	21	12
Several times a year	21	12
Once a month	4	2
2-3 times a month	15	9
About weekly	5	3
Weekly	12	7
Several times a week	5	3

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	7	4
No	169	94

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	5	3	3
No	171	95	97

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	5	3	15
Less than half the time	10	6	32
About half the time	9	5	29
Most of the time, nearly every day	6	3	19
Always	1	1	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	6	31
Less than half the time	12	6	32
About half the time	10	6	29
Most of the time, nearly every day	2	1	4
Always	1	1	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	1	6
Less than half the time	10	5	39
About half the time	10	6	40
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	1	6
Always	2	1	9

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	12	7	27
Less than half the time	16	9	34
About half the time	9	5	20
Most of the time, nearly every day	9	5	20

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	0	2
Less than half the time	16	9	43
About half the time	5	3	13
Most of the time, nearly every day	12	7	32
Always	4	2	10



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