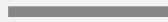


2025 College Free Speech Rankings **University of Texas at Austin**

244

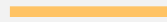
OVERALL
RANK

POOR



SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW



SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

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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.

The University of Texas at Austin was one of the 257 schools surveyed. Key findings from this school include:

- A ranking of 244 overall, with an overall score of 23.39 and a “Poor” speech climate.
- Among other schools ranked in the University of Texas system, UT Austin ranks last, behind the University of Texas at El Paso (47), the University of Texas at San Antonio (88), the University of Texas at Arlington (143), and the University of Texas at Dallas (166).
- Among other ranked state schools in Texas and nearby states, UT Austin also ranks last, behind the University of Oklahoma (51), Texas Tech University (68), Texas State University (76), the University of Arkansas (105), Texas A&M University (130), Louisiana State University (199), the University of North Texas (205), and the University of Houston (230).
- A poor performance on every survey component measuring student perceptions of the expression climate on campus.
- After police were preemptively called to campus to stop the establishment of an encampment, students at UT Austin reported less comfort expressing controversial political views with their professors. They also reported self-censoring more frequently in conversations with professors, and in order to get a better grade. In contrast, students at UT Austin reported more comfort expressing controversial views to their peers after police were called to campus.
- UT Austin's overall score was penalized for the outcomes of seven different speech controversies that have occurred since 2020.
- Maintaining speech policies that earn it a “yellow light” rating from FIRE. If UT Austin revised these to earn a “green light” rating it would have ranked 206.
- Many students told FIRE that the UT Austin administration has been hostile to Middle Eastern students, particularly Palestinian ones, and pro-Palestinian students — and that this has chilled speech on campus.

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 Texas at Austin, with a score of 23.39, has a “Poor” speech climate and ranks 244 overall in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings.

HOW COMFORTABLE ARE UT AUSTIN STUDENTS EXPRESSING THEIR VIEWS ON CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS?

“It’s hard to guess where the professors or administration lie on their political spectrum so when I’m in classes or during discussions, it feels like I need to be guarded when covering these opinions. I think an example is the treatment of pro-Palestinian groups on UT campus and of people who individually support Palestinian plight. It’s difficult to speak out because the university is not necessarily suppressing, but it is clear that the administration is not supportive of these groups.”

UT Austin ranks 228 on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component.

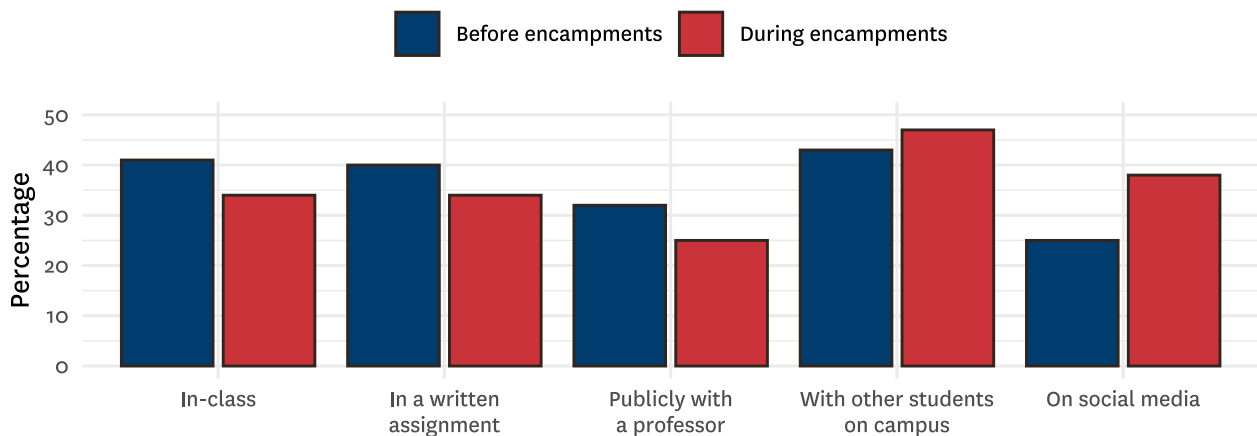
Fewer than half of UT Austin students say they feel comfortable expressing controversial political views in all five of the contexts they were asked about.

- 44% say they are “very” or “somewhat” comfortable 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.
- 38% say they are “very” or “somewhat” comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion. The same percentage say they are “very” or “somewhat” comfortable disagreeing with a professor on a controversial political topic in a written assignment.
- 30% say they are “very” or “somewhat” comfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor on a controversial political topic. The same percentage say they are “very” or “somewhat” comfortable expressing an unpopular political opinion to their fellow students on a social media account tied to their name.

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.

After university President Jay Hartzell called state police to prevent student protesters from establishing an encampment on campus, resulting in the initial arrest of 57 protesters (charges were later dropped against 46 of them), UT Austin students' comfort expressing controversial political views in contexts involving professors dropped, while student comfort expressing controversial political views to their peers increased.

FIGURE 1 Students Who Are Comfortable Expressing Controversial Political Views by Context (%)



HOW OFTEN ARE UT AUSTIN STUDENTS SELF-CENSORING ON CAMPUS?

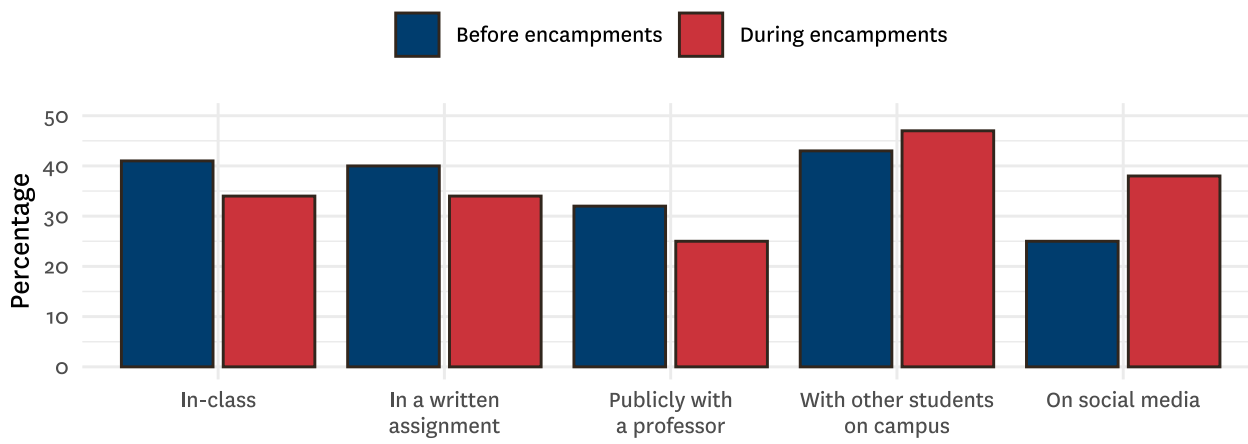
“A couple TAs were recently released from their positions for providing mental health resources for Palestinian students affected by the war in the Gaza Strip. Since then, I have been concerned about my political views and personal beliefs on the matter being used against me if I were to speak them.”

UT Austin ranks 156 on the “Self-Censorship” component.

Roughly one fifth of UT Austin students say they self-censor “very” or “fairly” often in conversations with other students on campus (20%), during classroom discussions (22%), and in an attempt to get a better grade from their professor (20%). UT Austin students self-censor more frequently in conversations with their professors, with 30% saying they do so “very” or “fairly” often.

The frequency of students' self-censorship increased after police were called to campus to prevent the establishment of an encampment. Before the nationwide encampment protests began and UT Austin students were arrested, roughly a quarter said that they self-censored “very” or “fairly” often in conversations with their professors compared to 39% after the nationwide encampment protests started. Additionally, 18% of UT Austin students said they hid their political beliefs from their professors “very” or “fairly” often in order to get a better grade before the nationwide encampment protests began, compared to 27% afterwards. UT Austin students' frequency of self-censorship in contexts involving their peers did not increase after the nationwide encampment protests began.

FIGURE 2 Students Who Self-Censoring “Very” or “Fairly” Often by Context (%)



The percentage of UT Austin students who said they “very” or “fairly” often felt that they could not express their opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond also increased after the nationwide encampment protests began. Prior to the encampment protests, 19% of UT Austin students said this. Afterwards, 24% did.

WHAT TOPICS ARE DIFFICULT FOR UT AUSTIN STUDENTS TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT?

UT Austin ranks 223 on the “Openness” component.

Roughly two thirds (65%) of UT Austin students say that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is difficult to have an open and honest conversation about on campus. This is a record high at UT Austin. In the previous three years, the percentage of UT Austin students that identified the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as difficult to discuss ranged between 31% and 38%. This is also a record high for any topic — with the previous high being the 59% of UT Austin students who said racial inequality was difficult to discuss in 2022.

Notable portions of UT Austin students also identify abortion (45%), transgender rights (44%), and racial inequality (42%) as difficult to discuss, and roughly a third (35%) say this about police misconduct.

WHICH SPEAKERS DO UT AUSTIN STUDENTS CONSIDER CONTROVERSIAL?

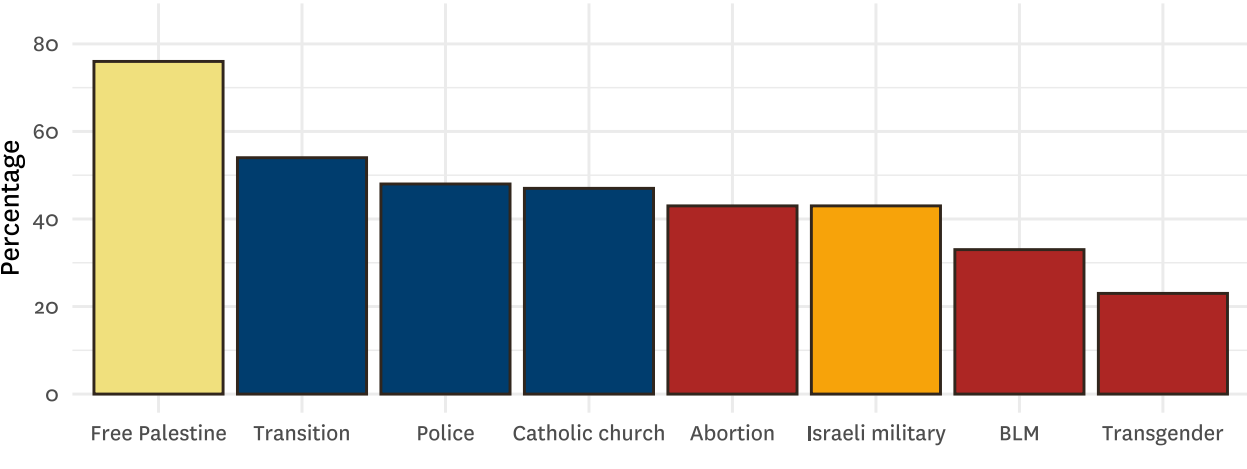
UT Austin ranks 135 on “Tolerance for Liberal Speakers,” 143 on “Tolerance Difference,” 154 on “Mean Tolerance,” and 155 on “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers.”

A majority of UT Austin students support allowing just one of six controversial speakers on campus that factor into the rankings— 54% say that someone who said “Children should be able to transition without parental consent” should “definitely” or “probably” be allowed on campus. Additionally, though this

doesn't factor into the rankings, 76% of UT Austin students say that a speaker who said "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" should "definitely" or "probably" be allowed on campus.

Support for allowing the remaining five speakers that impact the rankings ranges from a low of 23%, for someone who said "Transgender people have a mental disorder," to 48%, for someone who said "The police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan." Additionally, when UT Austin students are asked about a speaker who said "Collateral damage in Gaza is justified for the sake of Israeli security," just 43% say the speaker should "definitely" or "probably" be allowed on campus.

FIGURE 3 Students Who Would Allow Each Controversial Speaker on Campus (%)



WHAT KINDS OF DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT DO UT AUSTIN STUDENTS CONSIDER ACCEPTABLE?

UT Austin ranks 191 on the "Disruptive Conduct" component.

Two thirds of UT Austin students say that students using violence to stop a campus speech is "never" acceptable, similar to the 68% of students who say this nationally. UT Austin students stand out on the other illiberal protest tactics asked about compared to students nationally, and not in a good way. Roughly one third (35%) of UT Austin students say it is "never" acceptable for students to block other students from attending a campus speech, and roughly one fifth (22%) say it is "never" acceptable for students to shout down a speaker. Nationally these percentages are 48% and 31%, respectively.

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

"on monday april 29th, I along with 78 other people, many of whom were UT students or alumni, were arrested for voicing our opinions on the current genocide in Gaza. the police were called in by Jay Hartzell personally, and assaulted students resulting in two hospital relocations. The administration has shown that it cares more about Abbott's opinions than its own students' safety."

“Palestine peaceful protests were disrupted by university, university admin contacted police that violently attacked protesters”

UT Austin ranks 240 on the “Administrative Support” component.

After the police were first called to campus, protests continued. More than 100 students were ultimately arrested. Student and faculty backlash was strong. More than 800 graduate students signed a petition demanding that President Hartzell resign, and more than 600 faculty members expressed their loss of confidence in his presidency. Student protesters even showed up at the president’s house on campus.

This year’s College Free Speech Rankings survey picks up on this student sentiment about the administration, particularly the president.

Prior to the start of the nationwide encampment protests, 39% of UT Austin students said that it was “not at all” or “not very” clear that their administration protects free speech on campus. After the nationwide encampments began, 43% of UT Austin students say this.

Confidence that the UT administration will defend a speaker’s rights during a controversy over offensive speech on campus also declined after the nationwide encampment protests began. Prior to the encampment protests, 38% of UT Austin students said that it was “not at all” or “not very” likely that their administration would do so. Afterwards, 45% of UT Austin students say this.

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH A LOT OF CONTROVERSY

“UT Austin is very biased against the Free Palestine movement and although multiple instances of hate crimes or other hostility toward Palestinians has occurred on or near campus the school refuses to respond appropriately. They also fired a TA for offering links to mental health resources in an announcement directed toward Palestinian students because they claimed it was unfair to students who support Israel when the announcement was actually very neutral and just acknowledged that this could be a difficult time for Palestinian students.”

FIRE awards UT Austin’s regulations on student expression a “yellow light,” flagging four policies that earn that rating for posing either impermissibly vague or clear but narrow restrictions on protected speech. These include two harassment policies that fail to track the legal standard for peer harassment in an educational setting and an internet usage policy with an overbroad definition of “spam” that could be abused to target protected speech. Perhaps of greatest concern, however, is a posting policy that requires prior administrative approval before student organizations are permitted to put flyers on a bulletin board. Policies of this sort can have a chilling effect on campus expression and UT Austin must revise this and each of its other policies to reduce the chilling effect they impose on the campus speech climate.

Since 2020, UT Austin has been involved in seven speech controversies excluding its handling of the encampment protests. In 2020, the university released a statement that Spencer Wells, who was previously an adjunct professor at UT Austin, was no longer affiliated with the university following Wells’ statements that Iran should bomb Israel. It appears Wells’ contract was not renewed likely because of his statements.

UT Austin had a big year in 2022, having been involved in *four* speech controversies:

- In his 2023 lawsuit, Professor Richard Lowery alleged that leaders in the UT Austin business school threatened his career the previous year because he denounced the university’s funding and support of “left-wing” causes.
- Lowery’s lawsuit also claims Business School Dean Lillian Mills threatened to remove Carlos Carvalho as the Salem Center for Policy’s executive director for not disciplining Lowery for his comments.
- During an on-campus tabling event about abortion attended by Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk, student protesters attempted to drown out Kirk with music.
- Later, during his speech at the university, students heckled Kirk as he began his remarks, attempting to disrupt the speech. Kirk was able to finish his remarks, but some protesters were arrested for vandalizing university property.

The next year, UT Austin withheld funding to the National Association of Black Journalists fearing that SB17, a bill that would limit certain diversity, equity, and inclusion practices and programs — which was not yet in effect — would prohibit some of the association’s activities.

And earlier this year, after SB17 had taken effect, administrators used the law to withhold funding to the Black Student Alliance when members wanted to attend an annual conference that they had attended in previous years.

HOW CAN UT AUSTIN IMPROVE?

The easiest thing UT Austin can do to improve its rating in next year’s College Free Speech Rankings is revising its yellow light speech policies to obtain a “green light” rating from FIRE. If UT Austin modified its speech policies to obtain a green light rating, it would rank 206 in this year’s College Free Speech Rankings with an overall score of 38.39.

Obtaining a green light rating does not itself guarantee that a school actively supports free speech. Student perceptions of an administration’s support for free speech on campus are just that — perceptions — which are subject to their own idiosyncrasies and could quickly change year-to-year due to the turnover in undergraduate students or because of how a school handles a controversy over speech on campus. The proof of whether a school truly supports free expression as a core value is revealed when that core value is inevitably tested by controversy.

UT Austin’s students reacted strongly and negatively to the university president calling the state police to preemptively cancel a protest, ostensibly to prevent the establishment of an encampment on campus. Confidence that the UT administration protects speech on campus and that it is likely to do so during a controversy declined after the nationwide encampment protests began, and more than 100 UT Austin students were arrested.

The decisions administrators and other school leaders make in response to campus speech controversies are likely to have a more lasting influence on a school’s expression climate than its policies. When a

decision is made unequivocally in defense of free speech, it sends one kind of message to a school's students and faculty. When a response is tepid or, worse, violates someone's expressive rights, it sends a very different kind of message — one that usually chills the campus speech climate.

As one UT Austin student put it: “My views on Israel-Gaza do not represent the stance my university has taken and those who have shown the same views have faced swift and severe action by admin.”

Many students also expressed that the UT Austin's administration has been hostile to Middle Eastern students, particularly Palestinian ones, and pro-Palestinian students. One student told us: “Recently with the Israeli Palestinian conflict, I have felt that the UT admin has been unjust towards Palestinian people on campus.” Another said “It's hard to guess where the professors or administration lie on their political spectrum so when I'm in classes or during discussions, it feels like I need to be guarded when covering these opinions. I think an example is the treatment of pro-Palestinian groups on UT campus and of people who individually support Palestinian plight. It's difficult to speak out because the university is not necessarily suppressing, but it is clear that the administration is not supportive of these groups.” These are clear indications that UT Austin students have lost trust in their administration to protect their free speech rights and, worse, that some students fear for their physical safety on campus.

UT Austin's administration has work to do if they want to earn back their students' trust.

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	40	12
Not very clear	91	28
Somewhat clear	127	39
Very clear	55	17
Extremely clear	13	4

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	38	12
Not very likely	93	29
Somewhat likely	140	43
Very likely	46	14
Extremely likely	9	3

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	108	33
Somewhat uncomfortable	122	37
Somewhat comfortable	78	24
Very comfortable	18	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	70	22
Somewhat uncomfortable	131	40
Somewhat comfortable	88	27
Very comfortable	37	11

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	65	20
Somewhat uncomfortable	136	42
Somewhat comfortable	99	30
Very comfortable	26	8

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	55	17
Somewhat uncomfortable	127	39
Somewhat comfortable	121	37
Very comfortable	24	7

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	121	37
Somewhat uncomfortable	109	33
Somewhat comfortable	88	27
Very comfortable	8	3

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	48	15
Rarely	126	39
Occasionally, once or twice a month	85	26
Fairly often, a couple times a week	39	12
Very often, nearly every day	28	9

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	34	10
Rarely	106	33
Occasionally, once or twice a month	122	37
Fairly often, a couple times a week	51	16
Very often, nearly every day	13	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	31	10
Rarely	95	29
Occasionally, once or twice a month	103	32
Fairly often, a couple times a week	70	22
Very often, nearly every day	27	8

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	32	10
Rarely	90	28
Occasionally, once or twice a month	133	41
Fairly often, a couple times a week	45	14
Very often, nearly every day	25	8

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	15	5
Sometimes acceptable	112	34
Rarely acceptable	129	40
Never acceptable	71	22

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	10	3
Sometimes acceptable	73	22
Rarely acceptable	129	39
Never acceptable	114	35

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	9	3
Sometimes acceptable	36	11
Rarely acceptable	65	20
Never acceptable	216	66

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	128	39
Probably should not allow this speaker	119	37
Probably should allow this speaker	56	17
Definitely should allow this speaker	21	6

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	93	28
Probably should not allow this speaker	91	28
Probably should allow this speaker	109	33
Definitely should allow this speaker	32	10

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	103	32
Probably should not allow this speaker	113	35
Probably should allow this speaker	70	22
Definitely should allow this speaker	37	11

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	45	14
Probably should not allow this speaker	126	39
Probably should allow this speaker	106	32
Definitely should allow this speaker	48	15

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	72	22
Probably should not allow this speaker	96	29
Probably should allow this speaker	119	36
Definitely should allow this speaker	39	12

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	39	12
Probably should not allow this speaker	110	34
Probably should allow this speaker	126	39
Definitely should allow this speaker	49	15

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	89	27
Probably should not allow this speaker	98	30
Probably should allow this speaker	110	34
Definitely should allow this speaker	29	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	22	7
Probably should not allow this speaker	57	18
Probably should allow this speaker	136	42
Definitely should allow this speaker	111	34

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	170	52
Yes	147	45

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	207	63
Yes	109	34

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	262	80
Yes	55	17

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	239	73
Yes	77	24

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	260	80
Yes	56	17

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	224	69
Yes	92	28

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	233	72
Yes	83	25

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	218	67
Yes	98	30

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	212	65
Yes	104	32

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	193	59
Yes	123	38

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	204	63
Yes	112	34

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	210	64
Yes	107	33

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	32
Yes	213	65

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	228	70
Yes	88	27

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	201	62
Yes	115	35

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	178	55
Yes	138	42

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	209	64
Yes	108	33

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	208	64
Yes	108	33

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	250	77
Yes	66	20

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	173	53
Yes	143	44

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	289	89
Yes	27	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	81	25
Yes	235	72

Black or African American student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	84	26
Yes	232	71

Hispanic/Latino student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	84	26
Yes	232	71

Sororities or fraternities

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	125	38
Yes	191	59

LGBTQ+ student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	93	29
Yes	223	68

Christian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	112	34
Yes	204	63

Jewish student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	101	31
Yes	215	66

Muslim/Islamic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	107	33
Yes	210	64

Hindu student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	102	31
Yes	214	66

Atheist/agnostic/secular student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	114	35
Yes	203	62

Republican student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	126	39
Yes	190	58

Democratic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	126	39
Yes	191	58

Politically conservative student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	129	40
Yes	187	57

Politically liberal student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	128	39
Yes	189	58

Black Lives Matter student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	114	35
Yes	202	62

Pro-Israeli student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	166	51
Yes	151	46

Pro-Palestinian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	125	38
Yes	191	59

Other student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	154	47
Yes	162	50

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	296	91
Yes	20	6

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	112	34
Rarely	94	29
Occasionally	42	13
Fairly often, a couple times a week	46	14
Very often, nearly every day	19	6

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	34	10
No	281	86

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	54	16
About right	149	46
Too harsh	111	34

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	16
Rarely	142	44
Occasionally	89	27
Fairly often, a couple times a week	25	8
Very often, nearly every day	9	3

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	31	9
Palestinians	162	50
Both equally	56	17
Neither	21	6
Don't know	44	13

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	103	32
Hamas	75	23
Both equally	54	16
Don't know	83	25

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	111	34
Less than once a year	35	11
Once or twice a year	46	14
Several times a year	44	13
Once a month	24	7
2-3 times a month	14	4
About weekly	17	5
Weekly	16	5
Several times a week	6	2

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	2	1
No	310	95

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	2	1	1
No	311	95	99

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	2	1	4
Less than half the time	23	7	36
About half the time	18	6	28
Most of the time, nearly every day	15	5	24
Always	5	1	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	4	1	6
Less than half the time	28	9	51
About half the time	15	5	27
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	1	8
Always	4	1	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	0	2
Less than half the time	3	1	5
About half the time	26	8	47
Most of the time, nearly every day	12	4	22
Always	13	4	23

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	21	7	34
Less than half the time	21	6	33
About half the time	15	5	24
Most of the time, nearly every day	5	2	8
Always	1	0	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	2	0	2
Less than half the time	15	5	19
About half the time	36	11	45
Most of the time, nearly every day	19	6	24
Always	8	2	10



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