2025 College Free Speech Rankings
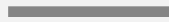## University of Pennsylvania

248

OVERALL
RANK

VERY POOR

SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT
RATING
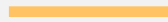
2025 College Free Speech Rankings
University of Pennsylvania

Executive Summary

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

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

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

Key findings from the University of Pennsylvania:

- With an overall score of 12.50 and a "Very Poor" speech climate, UPenn ranks 248 overall after finishing 247 last year.

- A slight rise in "Administrative Support" (219 compared to 235 last year) and a substantial drop in "Comfort Expressing Ideas" (245 compared to 135 last year).

- 80% of UPenn students say it is at least "rarely" acceptable to shout down a speaker, compared with 68% of students nationally.

- A dismal record of supporting speakers during deplatforming attempts, with four sanctioned scholars, three event deplatformings, and three sanctioned student groups.

- Ranking among the lowest compared to its peer Ivy League institutions.

- A "green light" rating would have taken UPenn's score up from 12.50 to 27.50, which would have improved its overall rank from 248 to 239.

Full Report

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

This year FIRE and College Pulse surveyed 257 schools, ranking 251 of them. University of Pennsylvania (UPenn), with a score of 12.50, has a "Very Poor" speech climate and ranks 248 overall in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings after finishing 247 last year.

While UPenn's scores on a number of the survey-based components improved, others noticeably declined. UPenn experienced a strong rise in rank on "Openness" (69 compared to 126 last year) but experienced a sharp decline for "Comfort Expressing Ideas" (245 compared to 135 last year). It additionally experienced a slight rise in "Administrative Support" (219 compared to 235 last year) and remained relatively steady in "Disruptive Conduct" (226 compared to 228 last year), but still has a lot of room for improvement. While UPenn experienced a significant improvement in "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers" (107 compared to 220), its "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers" ranking dropped (56 compared to 32 last year).

Among Ivy League universities, UPenn ranks among the worst. It comes in behind Yale University (156), Cornell University (215), Princeton University (223), Dartmouth College (224), and Brown University (229). However, it scores higher than Columbia University (250) and Harvard University (251), the two lowest ranked schools in the rankings.

HOW OFTEN ARE UPENN STUDENTS SELF-CENSORING ON CAMPUS?

The University of Pennsylvania ranks 152 on the "Self-Censorship" component.

Students at UPenn self-censor about as often as students nationally in each setting asked about in this year's survey.

- 27% self-censor either "fairly" or "very" often during conversations with other students on campus compared to 24% of students nationally.

- 23% self-censor either "fairly" or "very" often during conversations with professors compared to 25% of students nationally.

- 24% self-censor either "fairly" or "very" often during classroom discussions compared to 26% of students nationally.

Levels of self-censorship at UPenn have remained mostly steady over the past four years. In 2021, 20% reported that either "fairly" or "very" often they felt as if they could not express their opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond. In the three years since, 23%, 21%, and 18% have said the same.

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

University of Pennsylvania ranks 245 on the "Comfort Expressing Ideas" component after being ranked 135 last year.

Students were asked how comfortable they would be expressing their ideas in five contexts, in random order. Not only are a majority of UPenn students uncomfortable in all five settings, but percentages in each are well above those of students nationally.

Seventy-seven percent of UPenn students say they are uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic compared to 61% of students nationally. Though discomfort levels dropped from 75% in 2021 to 64% in 2022, they have risen each year since. Nearly a third (30%) of UPenn students say they are "very uncomfortable" in this setting.

Sixty-seven percent of UPenn students say they are uncomfortable expressing disagreement with one of their professors about a controversial political topic in a written assignment compared to 50% of students nationally. Discomfort levels have risen in each of the past four years from a low of 47% in 2021. Nearly 1 in 4 (23%) UPenn students say they are "very uncomfortable" in this setting.

Sixty-nine percent of UPenn students say they are uncomfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion compared to 53% of students nationally. Though discomfort levels dropped from 62% in 2021 to 36% in 2022, they have risen each year since. More than a quarter (26%) of UPenn students say they are "very uncomfortable" in this setting.

Fifty-nine percent of UPenn students say they are uncomfortable expressing 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, compared to 50% of students nationally. Unlike the settings above, discomfort levels in this setting have fluctuated over the years. Sixteen percent of UPenn students say they are "very uncomfortable" in this setting.

Finally, 78% of UPenn students say they are uncomfortable expressing an unpopular political opinion to fellow students on a social media account tied to their name compared to 66% of students nationally. Unlike the other settings, discomfort levels have remained consistent over the past four years. Thirty-eight percent of UPenn students say they are "very uncomfortable" in this setting.

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

The University of Pennsylvania ranks 69 on the "Openness" component, improving from 126 last year.

Students were presented a list of 20 topics and asked which, if any, they felt were difficult to have an open and honest conversation about on campus. Because two topics were replaced this year, a comparison to last year is possible for only 18 topics. Of these, 15 were identified less frequently this year by UPenn students.

The topics with the greatest reduction in frequency since last year were sexual assault (-15 percentage points), gender inequality (-12 percentage points), gun control (-12 percentage points), economic inequality (-11 percentage points) and immigration (-10 percentage points). Unsurprisingly, the topic seeing the greatest increase in frequency was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (+31 percentage points).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was identified far more frequently at UPenn (72%) than among students nationally (54%), as was affirmative action (39% versus 24%). However, other topics were identified far less frequently by UPenn students than by students nationally, such as gay rights (13% versus 29%), abortion (29% versus 45%), gun control (20% versus 36%), and gender inequality (18% versus 29%).

Unfortunately, the percentage of UPenn students selecting "none of the above" fell from 17% last year to 6% this year, while the percentage identifying the topic of freedom of speech as a difficult topic to have an open and honest conversation about rose from 21% to 30%.

WHICH SPEAKERS DO UPENN STUDENTS CONSIDER CONTROVERSIAL?

The University of Pennsylvania ranks 64 on "Mean Tolerance," 56 on "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers," 107 on "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers," and 172 on "Tolerance Difference."

To assess speaker tolerance, students were asked the following question:

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

When it comes to allowing controversial liberal speakers on campus, 47% of UPenn students support allowing a speaker who said that "The police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan"; 51% support allowing a speaker who said that "The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution"; and 66% support allowing a speaker who said that "Children should be able to transition without parental consent." The percentages of UPenn students who say each speaker "definitely should not" be allowed are well below those of students nationally (-8, -11, and -9 percentage points, respectively).

Conservative speakers, on the other hand, are much less tolerated. Twenty-seven percent of UPenn students support allowing a speaker who said that "Black Lives Matter is a hate group"; 30% support allowing someone who said that "Transgender people have a mental disorder"; and 47% support allowing someone who said that "Abortion should be completely illegal." Encouragingly, support for all three has risen since last year (+6, +9, and +16 percentage points respectively) after minor fluctuations

from 2021 to 2023. What's more, the percentage of students saying each speaker "definitely should not" be allowed has plummeted since last year (-21, -26, and -13 percentage points respectively).

FIGURE 1 Students Who Support Allowing Each Controversial Speaker on Campus (%)
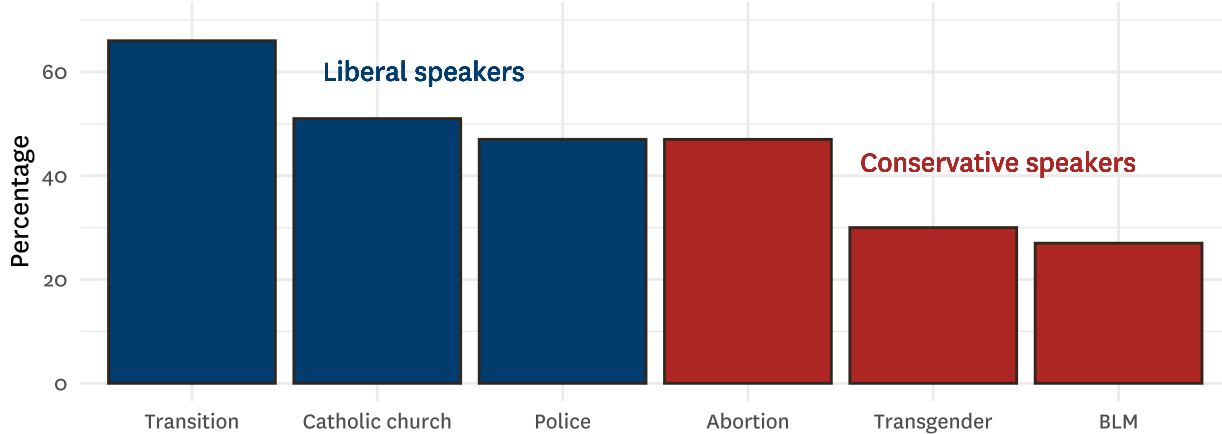
This year's survey also asked about two speakers related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though responses did not impact rankings. Forty-three percent of UPenn students support allowing a speaker who said that "Collateral damage in Gaza is justified for the sake of Israeli security" while 64% say the same about a speaker who has said "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

WHAT KINDS OF DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT DO UPENN STUDENTS CONSIDER ACCEPTABLE?

Once again, UPenn is among the worst when it comes to the "Disruptive Conduct" component, ranking 226 after finishing 228 last year.

4 in 5 UPenn students say it is acceptable, even if only rarely, to shout down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus. Though acceptance among UPenn students is basically unchanged since last year (79%), it is much greater than among students nationally (68%).

Sixty-five percent of UPenn students say it is acceptable, even if only rarely, to block other students from attending a campus speech. Not only is acceptance much higher at UPenn than among students nationally (52%), but these levels have risen in each of the past three years.

Thirty-nine percent of UPenn students say it is acceptable, even if only rarely, to use violence to stop a campus speech. Once again, acceptance is higher at UPenn than among students nationally (32%) and has risen in each of the past three years.

FIGURE 2 Students Nationally and At UPenn Who Say Disruptive Conduct is Acceptable (%)

■ Students at UPenn   ■ Students nationally
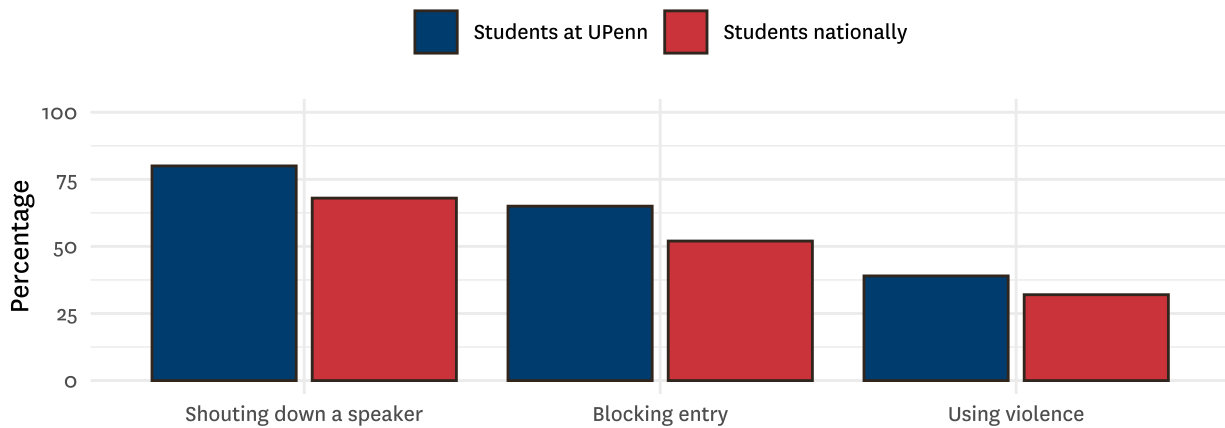
These results are disturbing though not necessarily surprising given that since 2020, UPenn has been involved in nine different speech controversies which negatively impacted its overall ranking.

HOW DO UPENN STUDENTS PERCEIVE THE ADMINISTRATION'S SUPPORT FOR FREE SPEECH?

The University of Pennsylvania ranks 219 on the "Administrative Support" component after finishing 235 last year.

Compared to 34% of students nationally, only 16% of UPenn students say it is either "very" or "extremely" clear that their administration protects free speech on campus (down from 26% in 2023). An additional 47% say it is only "somewhat" clear.

Compared to 25% of students nationally, 20% of UPenn students say it is either "very" or "extremely" likely that their administration would defend a speaker's expressive rights during a controversy (slightly down from 22% last year). An additional 43% say it is only "somewhat" likely.

A 'YELLOW LIGHT' SCHOOL WITH A LOT OF CONTROVERSY

FIRE awards Penn'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 one harassment policy that fails to track the legal standard for peer harassment in an educational setting, a vague bias incident reporting policy that encourages students to report one another to administrators, and a posting policy that prevents students from posting materials

anonymously. Perhaps of greatest concern are guidelines for demonstrating on campus that mandate students "be respectful" and not "advocate violence." Both are vague and overbroad restrictions on speech that is typically protected under First Amendment standards making the guidelines ripe for administrative abuse. Penn must revise each of these policies to reduce the chilling effect they impose on the campus speech climate.

Since 2020, UPenn has been involved in nine different speech controversies that negatively impacted its ranking because it did not react in a speech-protective manner to any of the controversies. In 2020, the university delayed the approval of a Hunting, Archery, and Shooting Club due to the "nature of the group's mission." While it claimed the delay was necessary because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the university recognized several similar clubs during the same period.

In 2021, UPenn was involved in the sanctioning of two scholars. First, Professor Robert Schuyler retired after having his course canceled because he sarcastically gave a Nazi salute during a Society for Historical Archaeology conference. During the January conference, Shuyler raised his arm in a Nazi salute and said "Sieg heil to you" after a speaker refused to answer a question he asked that the speaker judged to be off-topic. In response, UPenn canceled Schuyler's class and condemned him. Then, in August, a petition circulated demanding Visiting Scholar María Paula Romo's removal because she "was [censured] and dismissed by the Ecuadorian Assembly as a Minister of Government accused of crimes against humanity, attempted bribery, among other charges," according to the petition to remove her. In response, the university conducted an investigation into Romo and did not find grounds for terminating her position.

The next year, UPenn was involved in three separate speech-related controversies. Following an appearance on "The Glenn Show" with Glenn Loury, Professor Amy Wax wrote on Loury's Substack that, "as long as most Asians support Democrats and help to advance their positions, I think the United States is better off with fewer Asians and less Asian immigration." The law school dean issued a statement condemning Wax's statements while also recognizing that she has expressive freedoms. On the same day as the dean's statement, 2,566 UPenn students signed an open letter calling for an "investigation into Wax's continued employment at the University." Two weeks later, the dean capitulated and announced that he would become the complainant in bringing disciplinary charges against Wax.

A couple of months after the disciplinary proceedings began, Wax said, during an interview with Tucker Carlson, "I think there is just a tremendous amount of resentment and shame of non-Western peoples against Western peoples for Western peoples' outsized achievements and contributions." A new petition was circulated — garnering 24,644 signatures — demanding UPenn fire Wax. The dean refused to publicly comment, citing the ongoing investigation of Wax.

Also in 2022, protesters critical of the university's part in gentrifying the surrounding neighborhood in Philadelphia chanted and sang, interrupting a speech by then-President Liz Magill at a convocation ceremony. While the university released a statement that it was "unfortunate that protesters disrupted convocation," it does not seem to have taken action against the disrupting students.

Then, in 2023, on- and off-campus groups, a member of Congress, and students petitioned the university to cancel certain speakers from an on-campus literature festival celebrating Palestinian culture. The university released a statement condemning many of the invited speakers' views but affirming that it supports the free exchange of ideas. While the event took place, some speakers were disinvited. The same year, the university asked Penn Chavurah, a progressive Jewish student group, to postpone a screening of the film *Israelism*, citing safety concerns, after facing pressure from students and members

of the public. Faced with administrative threats of disciplinary action, the student group showed the film anyway.

And this past spring, after a faculty member accused Penn Students Against the Occupation of Palestine of discriminatory social media content, UPenn administrators launched an investigation into the group, compelled it to change the name of its Instagram account, and suspended it from organizing events in campus spaces until the investigation concluded. Ultimately, administrators revoked the group's registered student group status, stating that the group "failed to comply with policies that govern student organizations."

UPenn was penalized for each controversy because, in each case, the university did not adequately defend expressive freedoms on campus.

HOW CAN UPENN IMPROVE?

For the third year in a row, UPenn has ranked among the five worst universities in the College Free Speech Rankings — both last year and the year before, it ranked second worst. What's worse is that in the five years that FIRE has released the College Free Speech Rankings, UPenn has ranked in the bottom quartile of schools in four of them. Put differently, five years of data indicate that UPenn has a poor speech climate.

UPenn can improve its ranking in next year's College Free Speech Rankings by revising its "yellow light" speech policies. A "green light" rating would have taken UPenn's score up from 12.50 to 27.50, which would have improved its overall rank from 248 to 239. Though a small move, publicizing those 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 among its worst rankings.

Improving UPenn's policies and supporting free expression more vocally could be extremely beneficial for UPenn's ranking and culture. For example, 80% of UPenn students say it is at least "rarely" acceptable to shout down a speaker, compared with an already high 68% of students nationally. Emphasizing what kinds of protests are acceptable and unacceptable on campus could teach students that it is never okay to shout down speakers on campus.

Additionally, to improve its ranking, UPenn could increase its support for those involved in speech controversies. If UPenn had responded in a speech-protective manner to the many attempted deplatforming events that have occurred on campus, then 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 (IFP) process that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables to produce a representative sample of four year undergraduate students in the United States.

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

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

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

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

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

FREE SPEECH RANKINGS

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

Student Perceptions

The student perception components include:

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

- **Self-Censorship:** Students were provided with a definition of self-censorship and then asked how often they self-censored in three different settings on campus (e.g., "in a classroom discussion"). Responses were coded so that higher scores indicate self-censoring less often. The maximum number of points is 15.[1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Campus Behavioral Metrics

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

- Supporting free expression during a deplatforming campaign, as recorded in FIRE's Campus Deplatforming database.[2]

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2   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/1i5h8y1M4GFv5FQzyx6lLZqHj1oOa1YQJOYvozCqAzE8/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.[3]

- ▪ Supporting students and student groups, as recorded in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings behavioral metrics documentation that is available online.[4]

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.[5] 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.[6]

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3   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.

4   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.

5   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.

6   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.[7]

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

Overall Score

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Topline Results

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	16	6
Not very clear	74	30
Somewhat clear	117	47
Very clear	33	13
Extremely clear	8	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	11	5
Not very likely	80	32
Somewhat likely	107	43
Very likely	38	15
Extremely likely	12	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	74	30
Somewhat uncomfortable	116	47
Somewhat comfortable	40	16
Very comfortable	17	7

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	58	23
Somewhat uncomfortable	110	44
Somewhat comfortable	60	24
Very comfortable	20	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	65	26
Somewhat uncomfortable	108	43
Somewhat comfortable	55	22
Very comfortable	20	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	41	16
Somewhat uncomfortable	106	43
Somewhat comfortable	81	33
Very comfortable	21	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	94	38
Somewhat uncomfortable	98	40
Somewhat comfortable	42	17
Very comfortable	14	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	28	11
Rarely	89	36
Occasionally, once or twice a month	87	35
Fairly often, a couple times a week	36	15
Very often, nearly every day	9	3

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	14	6
Rarely	80	32
Occasionally, once or twice a month	88	35
Fairly often, a couple times a week	62	25
Very often, nearly every day	4	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	17	7
Rarely	87	35
Occasionally, once or twice a month	86	35
Fairly often, a couple times a week	48	19
Very often, nearly every day	10	4

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	18	7
Rarely	89	36
Occasionally, once or twice a month	81	33
Fairly often, a couple times a week	49	20
Very often, nearly every day	11	4

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	6
Sometimes acceptable	94	38
Rarely acceptable	90	36
Never acceptable	50	20

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	14	6
Sometimes acceptable	54	22
Rarely acceptable	92	37
Never acceptable	88	36

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	6	3
Sometimes acceptable	35	14
Rarely acceptable	55	22
Never acceptable	152	61

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	72	29
Probably should not allow this speaker	101	41
Probably should allow this speaker	52	21
Definitely should allow this speaker	23	9

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	51	20
Probably should not allow this speaker	79	32
Probably should allow this speaker	84	34
Definitely should allow this speaker	33	13

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	72	29
Probably should not allow this speaker	108	44
Probably should allow this speaker	44	18
Definitely should allow this speaker	23	9

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	22	9
Probably should not allow this speaker	100	40
Probably should allow this speaker	86	35
Definitely should allow this speaker	39	16

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	22	9
Probably should not allow this speaker	108	44
Probably should allow this speaker	81	32
Definitely should allow this speaker	37	15

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	14	6
Probably should not allow this speaker	72	29
Probably should allow this speaker	111	45
Definitely should allow this speaker	51	21

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	45	18
Probably should not allow this speaker	96	39
Probably should allow this speaker	74	30
Definitely should allow this speaker	33	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	17	7
Probably should not allow this speaker	73	29
Probably should allow this speaker	94	38
Definitely should allow this speaker	65	26

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	176	71
Yes	71	29

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	150	60
Yes	98	39

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	215	87
Yes	33	13

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	218	88
Yes	29	12

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	211	85
Yes	36	15

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	188	76
Yes	60	24

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	173	70
Yes	74	30

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	215	87
Yes	32	13

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	202	81
Yes	45	18

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	197	79
Yes	50	20

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	177	71
Yes	70	28

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	196	79
Yes	51	21

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	70	28
Yes	178	72

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	190	77
Yes	57	23

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	168	68
Yes	80	32

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	151	61
Yes	97	39

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	177	71
Yes	70	28

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	197	79
Yes	50	20

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	223	90
Yes	25	10

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	169	68
Yes	78	32

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	232	93
Yes	16	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	66	27
Yes	175	70

Black or African American student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	71	29
Yes	169	68

Hispanic/Latino student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	75	30
Yes	165	67

Sororities or fraternities

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	89	36
Yes	151	61

LGBTQ+ student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	72	29
Yes	168	68

Christian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	96	39
Yes	144	58

Jewish student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	77	31
Yes	164	66

Muslim/Islamic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	83	33
Yes	158	64

Hindu student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	82	33
Yes	159	64

Atheist/agnostic/secular student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	91	37
Yes	149	60

Republican student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	84	34
Yes	157	63

Democratic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	81	33
Yes	159	64

Politically conservative student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	85	34
Yes	156	63

Politically liberal student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	87	35
Yes	153	62

Black Lives Matter student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	82	33
Yes	159	64

Pro-Israeli student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	109	44
Yes	131	53

Pro-Palestinian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	98	40
Yes	142	57

Other student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	110	44
Yes	131	53

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	225	91
Yes	16	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	68	27
Rarely	83	34
Occasionally	57	23
Fairly often, a couple times a week	21	8
Very often, nearly every day	10	4

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	26	10
No	214	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	32	13
About right	106	43
Too harsh	102	41

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	33	13
Rarely	119	48
Occasionally	73	29
Fairly often, a couple times a week	15	6

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	28	11
Palestinians	99	40
Both equally	44	18
Neither	13	5
Don't know	54	22

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	56	22
Hamas	74	30
Both equally	33	13
Don't know	77	31

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	100	40
Less than once a year	29	12
Once or twice a year	27	11
Several times a year	30	12
Once a month	9	3
2-3 times a month	10	4
About weekly	12	5
Weekly	18	7
Several times a week	2	1

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	2	1
No	235	95

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
No	237	96	100

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	4	2	8
Less than half the time	16	6	32
About half the time	16	6	31
Most of the time, nearly every day	13	5	26
Always	2	1	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	3	15
Less than half the time	27	11	59
About half the time	9	4	20
Most of the time, nearly every day	2	1	4
Always	0	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Less than half the time	9	4	25
About half the time	20	8	55
Most of the time, nearly every day	5	2	14
Always	2	1	6

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	5	19
Less than half the time	31	12	51
About half the time	9	4	15
Most of the time, nearly every day	8	3	14
Always	1	0	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	1	3
Less than half the time	19	8	39
About half the time	15	6	31
Most of the time, nearly every day	12	5	25
Always	1	0	2

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