

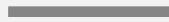
2025 College Free Speech Rankings

Vanderbilt University

140

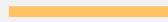
OVERALL
RANK

AVERAGE



SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW



SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

Executive Summary **1**

Full Report **2**

How Often Are Vanderbilt Students Self-Censoring on Campus? 2

How Comfortable Are Vanderbilt Students Expressing Their Views on Controversial Topics? 3

What Topics Are Difficult for Vanderbilt Students to Have Conversations About? 4

Which Speakers Do Vanderbilt Students Consider Controversial? 5

What Kinds of Disruptive Conduct do Vanderbilt Students Consider Acceptable? 5

How Do Vanderbilt Students Perceive the Administration's Support for Free Speech? 6

A 'Yellow Light' School with a Major Controversy 7

How Can Vanderbilt University Improve? 8

Methodology **9**

Free Speech Rankings 10

Student Perceptions 10

Campus Behavioral Metrics 11

Overall Score 13

Topline Results **15**

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 Vanderbilt University:

- With an overall score of 45.96 and an “Average” speech climate, Vanderbilt ranks 140 overall after finishing 89 last year.
- Vanderbilt did see a significant improvement to its rank on the “Openness” component, from 151 last year to 91 this year.
- Vanderbilt saw little movement to its rank for “Administrative Support,” placing 163 after finishing 154 last year.
- Once again, Vanderbilt is among the best institutions when it comes to “Tolerance for Liberal speakers” at 24 overall (20 last year). However, the university fell from 84 last year to 134 this year on “Tolerance for Conservative speakers.” It also ranks 52 on “Mean Tolerance” (23 last year) and 212 on “Tolerance Difference” (202 last year).
- After finishing 169 on the “Disruptive Conduct” component last year, Vanderbilt has fallen to a disastrous 211.
- The steepest fall came on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component. After ranking 76 last year, Vanderbilt has plummeted to 196 this year.
- Vanderbilt was penalized in this year's rankings for removing a proposed Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions amendment from the Student Government's funding referendum before it could be voted on.
- Improving its “yellow light” rated policies to “green light” ratings would have taken Vanderbilt's score up from 45.96 to 60.96, which would have improved its overall rank from 140 to 21.

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. Vanderbilt University, with a score of 45.96, has an "Average" speech climate and ranks 140 overall in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings after finishing 89 last year.

HOW OFTEN ARE VANDERBILT STUDENTS SELF-CENSORING ON CAMPUS?

Vanderbilt University finished 176 in the "Self-Censorship" component.

Students were presented with the following definition of "self-censorship" before being asked about their habits in three different contexts, in random order:

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.

About 1 in 4 students nationwide (24%) say they self-censor either "very" or "fairly" often during conversations with other students on campus, while 12% say they "never" do. Though private institutions as a group see similar numbers among their students, things are far worse at Vanderbilt, where more than 1 in 3 (35%) say they self-censor "very" or "fairly" often and only 5% say they "never" do.

Next, students were asked to what extent they self-censor during conversations with their professors. Here, Vanderbilt's numbers are closer to national averages. Twenty-two percent of Vanderbilt students say they self-censor either "very" or "fairly" often (versus 25% nationally and 23% at private institutions), while 10% say they "never" do (versus 12% nationally and 11% at private institutions).

Finally, students were asked how often they self-censor during classroom discussions. Once again, levels at Vanderbilt are slightly lower than elsewhere. Twenty-four percent of Vanderbilt students say they self-censor either "fairly" or "very" often (versus 26% nationally and 25% at private institutions), while 6% say they "never" do (versus 11% nationally and 9% at private institutions).

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

Vanderbilt has fallen to 196 on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component after ranking 76 last year.

Students were asked how comfortable they would be expressing controversial views in five contexts. A majority of Vanderbilt students report that they would be uncomfortable doing so across all five. Additionally, the percentage of Vanderbilt students saying they would be uncomfortable expressing controversial views is higher than among students at private institutions and among students nationally for all five contexts, by an average of six percentage points.

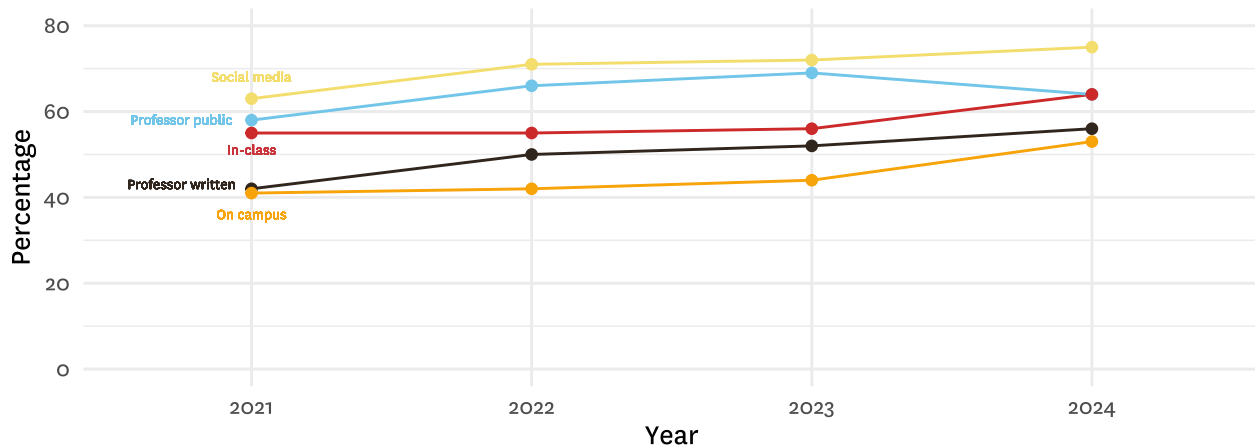
A majority of Vanderbilt students say they would be uncomfortable:

- “Publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic” (64%).
- “Expressing disagreement with one of your professors about a controversial political topic in a written assignment” (56%).
- “Expressing your views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion” (64%).
- “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” (53%).
- “Expressing an unpopular political opinion to your fellow students on a social media account tied to your name” (75%).

Not only are Vanderbilt students more uncomfortable than those nationally or at private institutions, but they are also more uncomfortable than they were last year. A year-to-year comparison shows a growing discomfort in four of five contexts, particularly in-class discussions (+8 percentage points) and discussions with other students in common campus spaces (+9 percentage points). The only context in which students are more comfortable this year is publicly disagreeing with a professor (-5 percentage points).

Vanderbilt’s student body is more uncomfortable this year than they were in 2021 across all five contexts by an average of 11 percentage points. While last year’s survey added the word “political” before the word “topic” to the items that ask about expressing disagreement with one’s professor and before the word “opinion” to the item asking about expressing views on social media, results for these questions were nearly identical to the year before.

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



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

Vanderbilt ranks 91 on the “Openness” component, a substantial improvement over last year’s rank of 151.

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. Overall, the top five most frequently identified topics this year are the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (69%), transgender rights (44%), abortion (42%), racial inequality (33%), and hate speech (31%). Eight percent of students said “none of the above.”

Because some topics have changed over the years, this year’s results can be compared to 2023’s for 18 topics, to 2022’s for 15 topics, and to 2021’s for only 12 topics. These comparisons show that:

- 16 of 18 topics were identified by fewer students this year than in 2023 (by an average of seven percentage points).
- 13 of 15 topics were identified by fewer students this year than in 2022 (by an average of ten percentage points).
- 10 of 12 topics were identified by fewer students this year than in 2021 (by an average of thirteen percentage points).

While Vanderbilt has seen little change in frequency since 2021 for the topics of abortion, climate change, and immigration, it has seen an enormous reduction in frequency for the topics of affirmative action (-16 percentage points), China (-17 percentage points), economic inequality (-22 percentage points), gender inequality (-15 percentage points), racial inequality (-25 percentage points), and sexual assault (-16 percentage points). The only two topics to see an increase over this time are transgender rights (+8 percentage points) and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (+32 percentage points).

WHICH SPEAKERS DO VANDERBILT STUDENTS CONSIDER CONTROVERSIAL?

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?

Students were then presented with six different speakers who had previously expressed a controversial idea (three liberal, three conservative) in a random order. While the conservative speakers were the same as last year, all three liberal speakers were new. This year's survey also asked about one pro-Israeli speaker and one pro-Palestinian speaker, though results were not factored into the rankings.

Vanderbilt ranks 24 overall on "Tolerance for Liberal speakers" (slightly down from 20 last year), 134 on "Tolerance for Conservative speakers" (down from 84 last year), 52 on "Mean Tolerance" (down from 23 last year), and 212 on "Tolerance Difference" (202 last year). A majority of Vanderbilt students oppose all three conservative speakers while supporting all three liberal speakers. Additionally, while students are evenly split for the pro-Israeli speaker, they overwhelmingly support the pro-Palestinian speaker.

When it comes to conservative speakers, a majority of Vanderbilt students oppose allowing someone who said that "Transgender people have a mental disorder" (67%); "Abortion should be completely illegal" (54%); and "Black Lives Matter is a hate group" (66%). Percentages are in line with students nationally and slightly below students at private institutions.

Liberal speakers, on the other hand, are much more welcome. A minority of Vanderbilt students oppose allowing someone who said that "The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution" (39%); "The police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan" (40%); and "Children should be able to transition without parental consent" (27%). Compared to students nationally, those at private institutions are only slightly less opposed to all three liberal speakers, whereas Vanderbilt students are far less opposed to each (by 12, 13, and 17 percentage points respectively).

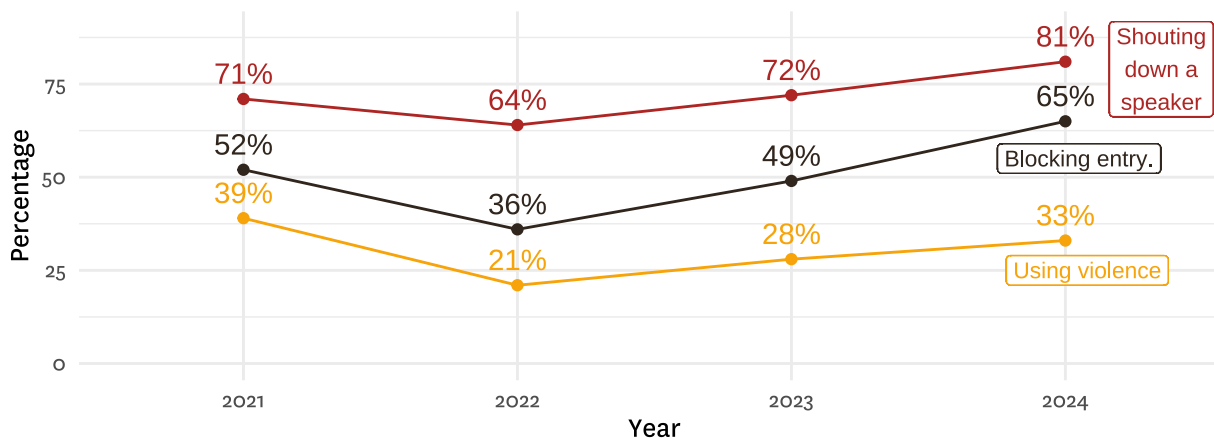
As for a speaker who said that "Collateral damage in Gaza is justified for the sake of Israeli security," 50% of Vanderbilt students are opposed to allowing them to speak on campus, whereas around 60% of students nationally and those at private institutions are opposed. Meanwhile, only 24% of Vanderbilt students oppose allowing someone who said "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" compared to just under 30% among both students nationally and those at private institutions.

WHAT KINDS OF DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT DO VANDERBILT STUDENTS CONSIDER ACCEPTABLE?

After finishing 169 on the "Disruptive Conduct" component last year, Vanderbilt has fallen to a disastrous 211.

For this component, students were asked how acceptable it would be to engage in three acts of illiberal protest: shouting down a speaker on campus, blocking students from attending a campus speech, and using violence to stop a campus speech. For all three acts, levels of acceptance at Vanderbilt dropped between 2021 and 2022 but increased in both 2023 and 2024.

FIGURE 2 Students Who Say a Disruptive Conduct is at Least Rarely Acceptable (%)



One-third of Vanderbilt students say it is acceptable, even if only rarely, to use violence to stop a campus speech, up from 28% last year. This is similar to both students nationally and those at private institutions. While the percentage of Vanderbilt students who are at least rarely accepting of violence is concerning, things are far worse when it comes to blocking other students from attending a campus speech. Whereas levels are nearly identical between students nationally and those at private institutions (52% and 53%, respectively), they are significantly higher at Vanderbilt (65%). Since last year, acceptability of blocking students at Vanderbilt has increased by 16 percentage points.

Things are worse still when it comes to shouting down a speaker. Eighty-one percent of Vanderbilt students say it is acceptable to shout down a speaker, even if only rarely. This is an increase of nine percentage points over last year and 13 percentage points more than students both nationally and at private institutions.

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

Vanderbilt ranks 163 on the “Administrative Support” component after finishing 154 last year.

1 in 3 Vanderbilt students say it is either “very” or “extremely” clear that the administration protects free speech on campus (compared to 30% last year), 33% say it is only “somewhat clear” (compared to 46% last year), and 35% say it is either “not very” or “not at all” clear (compared to 24% last year).

Twenty-nine percent of students say that it is either “very” or “extremely” likely that the administration would defend a speaker’s right to express their views should a controversy occur on campus (compared to 27% last year). An additional 40% said it is only “somewhat” likely (compared to 47% last year), while 31% say it is either “not very” or “not at all” likely (compared to 27% last year).

For both questions, the percentage of students saying it was only “somewhat” clear or “somewhat” likely has fallen since last year. Unfortunately, over the same period of time the percentages saying it is either “not very” clear and “not at all” likely have risen. On the bright side, for both questions, more students perceive the administration as supportive this year than in the past three years.

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH A MAJOR CONTROVERSY

FIRE awards Vanderbilt’s regulations on student expression a “yellow light” rating, flagging 3 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 sufficiently track the legal standard for peer harassment in an educational setting. Perhaps of greatest concern, however, is a policy in the student handbook requiring that any distributed information, including flyers, leaflets, informational sheets, or electronic media, include the name and contact information of the individual or student organization responsible for the information. This prohibits students from anonymous postings. By preventing students from posting anonymous materials or materials that use a pseudonym, this policy could be used to punish protected speech and could have a chilling effect on the speech of students who feel they can only express their thoughts anonymously, which is typically protected under First Amendment standards. Vanderbilt must revise each of these policies to reduce the chilling effect they impose on the campus speech climate.

Vanderbilt’s policies were not the only thing to hurt its ranking. The university was penalized for censoring its student government in 2024. On February 23, the unregistered student organization Vanderbilt Divest Coalition petitioned the student government to amend section 5.3 of the Statutes to the Constitution of the Vanderbilt Student Government (VSG) by adding the following text:

5.3.7 None of the expenditures from the VSG Budget may be spent on the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement’s consumer and organic boycott targets or spent in collaboration with organizations who spend student service funds on BDS movement’s consumer and organic boycott targets.’

Over spring break, the administration removed the BDS referendum from an upcoming VSG ballot. In an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal,² Vanderbilt Chancellor Daniel Diermeier addressed the decision, writing:

“[T]he university had disallowed [the vote] because following those restrictions would put Vanderbilt in violation of Tennessee law. The student government isn’t legally separate from the university, and student-government funds are university funds... Implementing the BDS restrictions with university funds also potentially conflicts with federal laws governing boycotts of countries friendly to the U.S.

Student government referenda are protected political speech, as is the content of the proposed amendment. Vanderbilt censored student speech based on an expansive interpretation of state and federal boycott laws, which generally don’t apply to student governments. Regardless of whether enforcement of such a policy would be permissible, students should have still been allowed to vote on it.

This censorious decision sparked a wave of disruptive student protests which violated viewpoint-neutral time, place, and manner restrictions. First, on March 26, students with the coalition pushed past a security guard as they made their way into Kirkland Hall to stage a sit-in inside Chancellor Diermeier’s office in protest of the proposed amendment’s removal, which led to the arrest of four students – three

1 Ezri Tyler. "Divest VSG From Genocide." *Roadmaps Today*, February 23, 2024. <https://roadmaps.today/?p=30>

2 Daniel Diermeier. "Free Speech Is Alive and Well at Vanderbilt University." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 2, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/free-speech-is-alive-and-well-at-vanderbilt-university-023884d1>

of whom were expelled.³ Shortly thereafter, the coalition established an encampment in support of those protesters, which lasted 40 days.⁴

HOW CAN VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY IMPROVE?

For starters, the administration must not censor student's protected expression. It can also demonstrate its commitment to free expression by improving its policies to a green light rating, which alone would have catapulted Vanderbilt up from 140 to 21 overall in this year's rankings. Furthermore, Vanderbilt's administration could better educate students on what is and isn't protected expression by incorporating lessons on freedom of speech into its freshman orientation and first-year experience programs if it has not done so already. Together, these actions would signal a commitment to protecting student voices while also providing urgent and necessary education to students.

Students can have misconceptions about the First Amendment and what is and is not protected expression. These misconceptions can in turn impact their perceptions about campus climate and the administration. Still, Vanderbilt should try to understand students' beliefs if it wants to reverse its 51 spot fall in this year's rankings.

Compared to 24% of students nationally, 35% of Vanderbilt students self-censor "very" or "fairly" frequently during conversations with other students on campus. Furthermore, a majority of students report self-censoring across all five contexts asked about in the "Comfort Expressing Ideas" component. These sentiments are likely the result of the tension brought forth by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

When asked which topics were difficult to discuss on campus, Vanderbilt students this year identified 16 of 18 at a lower frequency than last year, by an average of seven percentage points. The topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on the other hand, saw a massive increase of 24 percentage points. While this was the topic most frequently identified as being difficult to discuss by students nationwide (55%), it is especially challenging at Vanderbilt (69%).

With the war in Gaza likely to continue, the administration must prepare for another semester of student activism. As last spring's events showed, students are willing to engage in illiberal (and illegal) activity. This is further evidenced by Vanderbilt's rank of 211 on "Disruptive Conduct," with a large percentage of students expressing at least some degree of acceptance for shouting down a campus speaker (81%), blocking students from attending a campus speech (65%), and using violence to stop a campus speech (33%). This can only be addressed if the administration leads by example and gets serious about free speech.

3 Angele Latham. "Vanderbilt University Claims a Commitment to Free Speech. But Does It Deliver?" *The Tennessean*, April 11, 2024. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2024/04/11/vanderbilt-university-touts-free-speech-israel-student-protest-reporter-arrest/73168828007/>

4 Brina Ratangee. "Palestine Solidarity Encampment Ends, Students Intend to Return in Fall." *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, May 8, 2024. <https://vanderbilthustler.com/2024/05/08/palestine-solidarity-encampment-ends-students-intend-to-return-in-fall/>

Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FREE SPEECH RANKINGS

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

Student Perceptions

The student perception components include:

- **Comfort Expressing Ideas:** Students were asked how comfortable they feel expressing their views on controversial topics in five different campus settings (e.g., “in class,” or “in the dining hall”). Options ranged from “very uncomfortable” to “very comfortable.” Responses were coded so that higher scores indicate greater comfort expressing ideas. The maximum number of points is 20.
- **Self-Censorship:** Students were provided with a definition of self-censorship and then asked how often they self-censored in three different settings on campus (e.g., “in a classroom discussion”). Responses were coded so that higher scores indicate self-censoring less often. The maximum number of points is 15.⁵
- **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

⁵ 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.⁶

⁶ 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.⁷
- Supporting students and student groups, as recorded in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings behavioral metrics documentation that is available online.⁸

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

7 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>.

8 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.

9 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.

10 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.¹¹

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:

¹¹ 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	12	7
Not very clear	51	28
Somewhat clear	61	33
Very clear	47	25
Extremely clear	14	8

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	23	12
Not very likely	35	19
Somewhat likely	74	40
Very likely	40	22
Extremely likely	14	7

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	44	24
Somewhat uncomfortable	75	40
Somewhat comfortable	52	28
Very comfortable	15	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	38	21
Somewhat uncomfortable	65	35
Somewhat comfortable	60	32
Very comfortable	23	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	36	19
Somewhat uncomfortable	83	45
Somewhat comfortable	49	26
Very comfortable	18	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	28	15
Somewhat uncomfortable	70	38
Somewhat comfortable	65	35
Very comfortable	24	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	69	37
Somewhat uncomfortable	71	38
Somewhat comfortable	29	16
Very comfortable	16	9

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	21	11
Rarely	66	35
Occasionally, once or twice a month	55	29
Fairly often, a couple times a week	33	18
Very often, nearly every day	11	6

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	8	5
Rarely	64	34
Occasionally, once or twice a month	49	26
Fairly often, a couple times a week	52	28
Very often, nearly every day	13	7

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	18	10
Rarely	70	38
Occasionally, once or twice a month	57	31
Fairly often, a couple times a week	33	18
Very often, nearly every day	8	4

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	11	6
Rarely	61	33
Occasionally, once or twice a month	68	37
Fairly often, a couple times a week	38	20
Very often, nearly every day	7	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	14	7
Sometimes acceptable	69	37
Rarely acceptable	68	37
Never acceptable	35	19

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	10	5
Sometimes acceptable	39	21
Rarely acceptable	73	39
Never acceptable	64	34

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	4	2
Sometimes acceptable	18	10
Rarely acceptable	39	21
Never acceptable	125	67

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	78	42
Probably should not allow this speaker	47	25
Probably should allow this speaker	44	24
Definitely should allow this speaker	17	9

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	48	26
Probably should not allow this speaker	52	28
Probably should allow this speaker	62	33
Definitely should allow this speaker	24	13

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	64	34
Probably should not allow this speaker	59	32
Probably should allow this speaker	47	25
Definitely should allow this speaker	16	9

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	17	9
Probably should not allow this speaker	56	30
Probably should allow this speaker	82	44
Definitely should allow this speaker	30	16

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	25	14
Probably should not allow this speaker	49	26
Probably should allow this speaker	82	44
Definitely should allow this speaker	30	16

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	8	4
Probably should not allow this speaker	42	23
Probably should allow this speaker	97	52
Definitely should allow this speaker	39	21

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	47	25
Probably should not allow this speaker	47	25
Probably should allow this speaker	72	39
Definitely should allow this speaker	20	11

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	15	8
Probably should not allow this speaker	29	16
Probably should allow this speaker	95	51
Definitely should allow this speaker	48	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	107	58
Yes	77	42

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	130	70
Yes	55	30

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	157	85
Yes	27	15

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	163	88
Yes	21	11

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	167	90
Yes	18	9

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	151	81
Yes	34	18

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	142	77
Yes	42	23

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	139	75
Yes	46	25

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	143	77
Yes	42	23

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	136	73
Yes	48	26

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	127	68
Yes	58	31

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	139	75
Yes	46	24

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	56	30
Yes	129	69

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	143	77
Yes	42	22

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	138	74
Yes	47	25

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	124	67
Yes	61	33

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	129	70
Yes	55	30

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	140	75
Yes	45	24

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	153	82
Yes	31	17

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	55
Yes	82	44

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	170	91
Yes	15	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	47	25
Yes	136	73

Black or African American student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	49	26
Yes	135	72

Hispanic/Latino student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	43	23
Yes	140	75

Sororities or fraternities

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	61	33
Yes	123	66

LGBTQ+ student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	45	24
Yes	138	74

Christian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	47	25
Yes	137	74

Jewish student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	46	25
Yes	137	74

Muslim/Islamic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	42	22
Yes	142	76

Hindu student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	50	27
Yes	133	72

Atheist/agnostic/secular student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	52	28
Yes	132	71

Republican student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	55	29
Yes	129	69

Democratic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	44	24
Yes	139	75

Politically conservative student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	57	31
Yes	126	68

Politically liberal student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	50	27
Yes	133	72

Black Lives Matter student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	65	35
Yes	119	64

Pro-Israeli student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	88	48
Yes	95	51

Pro-Palestinian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	68	37
Yes	115	62

Other student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	67	36
Yes	117	63

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	175	94
Yes	8	4

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	53	28
Rarely	61	33
Occasionally	39	21
Fairly often, a couple times a week	18	10
Very often, nearly every day	10	5

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	25	14
No	156	84

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	18	9
About right	88	47
Too harsh	76	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	26	14
Rarely	80	43
Occasionally	55	30
Fairly often, a couple times a week	15	8
Very often, nearly every day	4	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Israelis	24	13
Palestinians	87	47
Both equally	35	19
Neither	9	5
Don't know	27	15

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Israel	52	28
Hamas	64	34
Both equally	23	12
Don't know	44	24

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	46	25
Less than once a year	27	15
Once or twice a year	31	17
Several times a year	20	11
Once a month	10	5
2-3 times a month	10	5
About weekly	12	7
Weekly	20	11
Several times a week	5	3

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	3	2
No	178	96

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	3	1	1
No	178	96	99

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	4	2	10
Less than half the time	14	8	40
About half the time	15	8	41
Most of the time, nearly every day	3	1	7
Always	1	0	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	8	4	22
Less than half the time	15	8	43
About half the time	6	3	17
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	2	13
Always	2	1	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	5	3	14
Less than half the time	4	2	11
About half the time	11	6	32
Most of the time, nearly every day	14	8	41
Always	1	0	3

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	8	4	19
Less than half the time	16	9	38
About half the time	15	8	36
Most of the time, nearly every day	2	1	5
Always	0	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	0	0	1
Less than half the time	10	6	28
About half the time	14	7	37
Most of the time, nearly every day	11	6	29
Always	2	1	5



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

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

rankings.thefire.org



@thefireorg