

2025 College Free Speech Rankings **Cornell University**

215

OVERALL
RANK

BELOW
AVERAGE

SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

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Executive Summary

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

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

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

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

- A ranking of 215 overall, with an overall score of 36.49 and a “Below Average” speech climate.
- Among Ivy League schools, Cornell was toward the front of the pack behind Yale University (155), but ahead of Princeton University (223), Dartmouth College (224), Brown University (229), the University of Pennsylvania (248), Columbia University (250) and Harvard University (251).
- In comparison to other institutions, Cornell performed reasonably well on “Tolerance for Liberal Speakers” (76), “Mean Tolerance” (65), “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers” (88), and “Openness” (67).
- Cornell performed poorly on “Disruptive Conduct” (114), “Tolerance Difference” (137), and near the bottom in “Self-Censorship” (195), “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (236), and “Administrative Support” (210).
- FIRE penalizes Cornell for three controversies, including a heckler’s veto disruption at a speech by Ann Coulter and two situations where commentary on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict drew scrutiny, leading to a faculty member taking a leave of absence and a student facing suspension.
- Cornell continues to maintain speech policies that earn it a “yellow light” rating from FIRE. If Cornell had revised these policies and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 74 overall.

Full Report

IN 2020, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (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.¹ Cornell University (Cornell), with a score of 36.49, has a “Below Average” speech climate and ranks 215 overall. This is similar to their score last year (34.94) when we also considered Cornell’s speech climate “Below Average.”

HOW OFTEN ARE CORNELL STUDENTS SELF-CENSORING ON CAMPUS?

Cornell University ranks 195 overall in the “Self-Censorship” component.

Around three-fourths of Cornell students only occasionally (once or twice a month), rarely, or never self-censor in all the contexts asked about: with other students on campus (74%), with professors (75%), and during classroom discussions (72%). Students are slightly more likely to self-censor with each other (74%) than last year (78%).

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

The short answer is: not very. Cornell ranks 236 overall on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component.

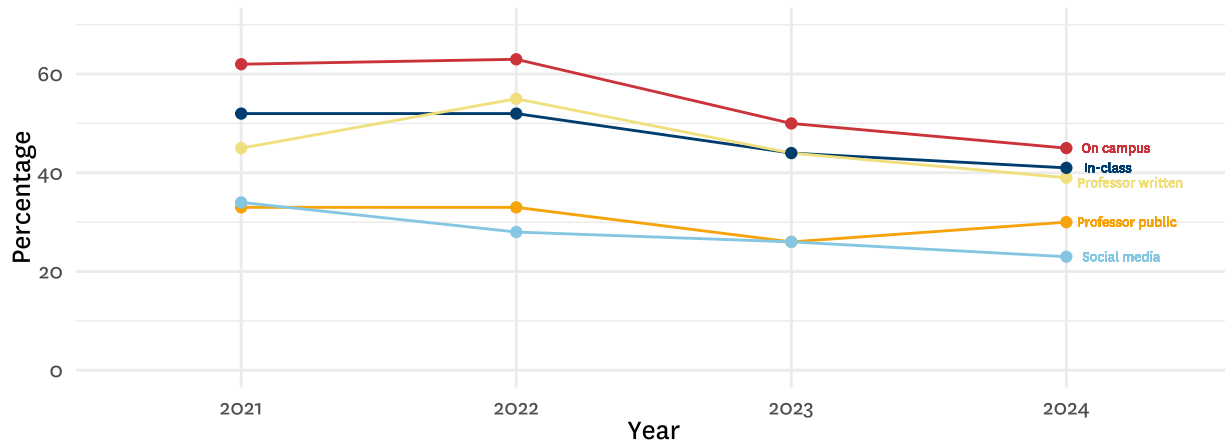
Students who feel “somewhat” or “very” comfortable in the various settings asked about declined since 2021, with the exception of publicly disagreeing with a professor, which remains fairly constant (varied between 30% and 33% over the past four years) with the exception of a dip last year (26%).

- 45% of students feel “somewhat” or “very” comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic to other students during a discussion in a common campus space compared to 62% in 2021.
- 42% of Cornell students feel “somewhat” or “very” comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion compared to 48% in 2021.

¹ Six of the schools surveyed received a “Warning” rating from FIRE for their speech policies. An overall score was calculated separately for these schools, comparing them only to each other.

- 39% of Cornell students feel “somewhat” or “very” comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic in a written assignment compared to 45% in 2021.
- 23% of Cornell students feel “somewhat” or “very” comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic to students on social media compared to 48% in 2021.

FIGURE 1 Students Who Feel “Very” or “Somewhat” Comfortable Expressing Views by Context (%)



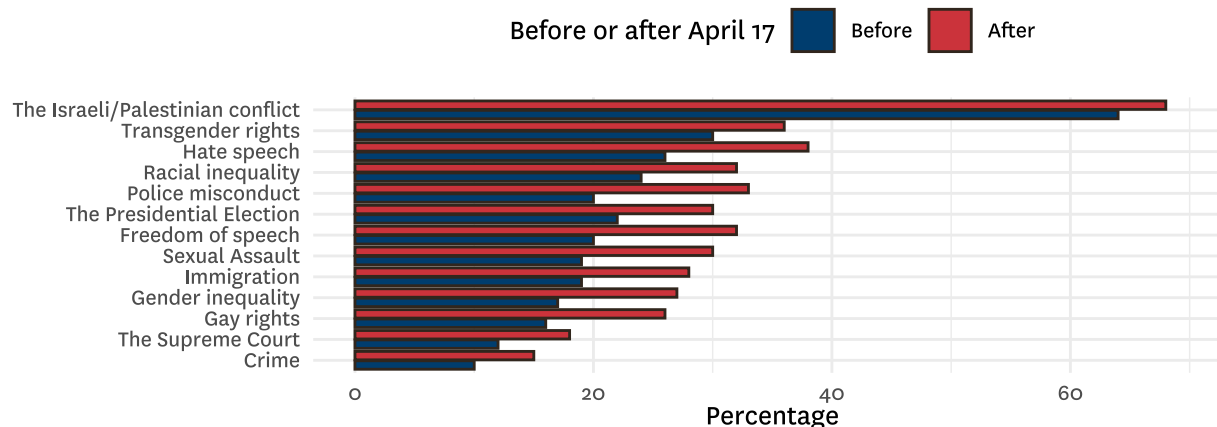
WHAT TOPICS ARE DIFFICULT FOR CORNELL STUDENTS TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT?

Cornell ranks 67 for “Openness.” Across the board, fewer Cornell students express difficulty having an open and honest conversation about most of the topics compared to last year.

Last year, 15% of Cornell students identified none of the topics as difficult to discuss. This year it dropped to just 7%. The big change is that more students choose the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as difficult to discuss — 65% this year compared to 38% last year. More students also find free speech difficult to discuss, rising from 21% last year to 25% this year. Prior to April 17, 2024, the percentage of students who found freedom of speech difficult to have an open and honest conversation about was 20%. After the encampments started, this value jumped to 32%.

Though fewer Cornell students find it difficult to have conversations about most of the 20 topics compared to last year, a shift took place during the encampments. The fraction of students reporting that they find it difficult to have a conversation about several topics rose 10 percentage points or more during the encampments, including police misconduct, hate speech, freedom of speech, sexual assault, and gay rights.

FIGURE 2 Change in the Percentage of Students Identifying a Topic as Difficult to Discuss



WHICH SPEAKERS DO CORNELL STUDENTS CONSIDER CONTROVERSIAL?

Cornell ranks 76 on “Tolerance for Liberal Speakers,” 88 on “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers,” and 65 on “Mean Tolerance.” The students have a heavy bias toward allowing controversial liberal speakers on campus compared to conservative ones, as evidenced by their ranking of 137 on the “Tolerance Difference” component.

Cornell students were asked if eight different controversial speakers should or should not be allowed to speak on campus, and a majority of Cornell students oppose allowing 6 of the 8 speakers on campus. Narrowing in on the controversial liberal speakers, between 49% and 63% of Cornell students say that these speakers should “definitely” or “probably” be allowed on campus:

- 49% say this for a speaker who said, “the police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan.”
- 53% say this for a speaker who said, “the Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.”
- 63% say this for a speaker who said, “children should be able to transition without parental consent.”

Although Cornell was ranked relatively well on “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers” compared to most of the other schools surveyed, conservative speakers were still met with more resistance from Cornell students compared to liberal speakers. Between 32% and 48% of Cornell students say that these controversial conservative speakers should “definitely” or “probably” be allowed on campus:

- 32% say this for a speaker who said, “transgender people have a mental disorder.”
- 36% say this for a speaker who said, “Black Lives Matter is a hate group.”
- 48% say this for a speaker who said, “abortion should be completely illegal.”

This strong favoritism toward allowing controversial liberal speakers on campus compared to conservative ones might be due to the ideological makeup of the student body. Of the Cornell students surveyed, 51% identify as liberal, 21% as conservative, 15% as moderate, and 13% as something else.

Finally, this year we also asked about tolerance toward two controversial speakers on Israeli-Palestinian conflict-related topics:

- 43% say this for a speaker who said, “collateral damage in Gaza is justified for the sake of Israeli security.”
- 67% say this for a speaker who said, “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

WHAT KINDS OF DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT DO CORNELL STUDENTS CONSIDER ACCEPTABLE?

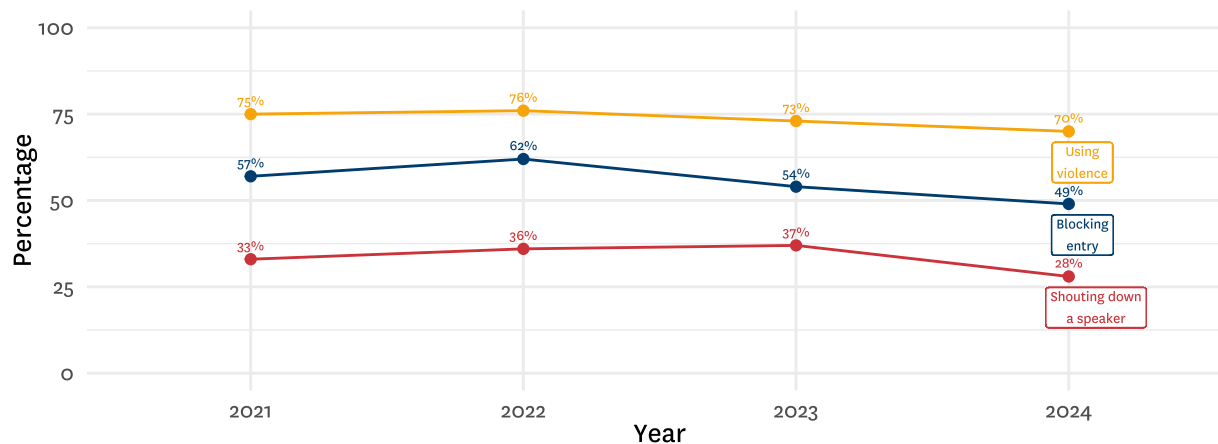
Cornell ranks 114 on “Disruptive Conduct.” Unfortunately, the percentage of Cornell students who indicate illiberal forms of protest are never acceptable continues to slide.

As can be seen in the figure below, last year 37% of Cornell students said shouting down a speaker was “never” acceptable, while only 28% say that this year. Last year 54% of Cornell students said blocking entry to an event was “never” acceptable, this year only 49% say this. Similarly, while last year 73% of Cornell students said violence was “never” acceptable, this year 70% say this.

Digging deeper, 30% of Cornell students indicate they think violence to stop a campus speech could be acceptable. Specifically, 19% say they think using violence is “rarely” (but not never) acceptable, 8% say they think violence is “sometimes acceptable,” and 2% say violence is “always acceptable.”

Compared to students nationally, similar percentages of Cornell students indicate that these forms of disruptive conduct are “never” acceptable. Nationally, 32% of students say “shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus” is never acceptable, 48% say “blocking other students from attending a campus speech” is “never” acceptable, and 68% say “using violence to stop a campus speech” is “never” acceptable.

FIGURE 3 Students Who Say Disruptive Conduct is Never Acceptable (%)



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

Cornell ranks 210 on “Administrative Support.”

Twenty-four percent of Cornell students say that the administration’s protection of free speech on campus is “very” or “extremely” clear compared to 34% of students nationally. Prior to the encampments, 28% of students believed it was “very” or “extremely” clear compared to just 19% after the encampments started.

When it comes to whether the administration will defend a speaker’s rights during a controversy, 19% of Cornell students say this is “very” or “extremely” likely compared to 25% of students nationally. Prior to the start of the encampments, 24% of Cornell students believed it was very or extremely likely the administration would protect a speaker’s rights — this percentage dropped to 12% after April 17, 2024.

Overall, the numbers for Cornell are quite low and reflect Cornell students’ low confidence in their university administration to protect and defend free speech on campus.

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH SEVERAL SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

FIRE awards Cornell’s regulations on student expression a “yellow light” rating, flagging four policies that earn that rating for posing either impermissibly vague or clear but narrow restrictions on protected speech. These include two harassment policies that fail to sufficiently track the legal standard for peer harassment in an educational setting and a bias reporting policy that commits to investigating bias incidents, which are only vaguely defined. Perhaps of greatest concern, however, is a policy on “house rules” which prohibits “offensive” behavior in common areas. While the university may certainly encourage students to hold themselves to a higher standard, most expression subjectively deemed “offensive” is nevertheless protected under First Amendment standards. Cornell must revise each of these policies to reduce the chilling effect they impose on the campus speech climate.

Over the past five years, FIRE has documented seven controversies over free expression at Cornell. In four of these instances, Cornell received no penalty because they did not result in any sanction or deplatforming.

In 2022, a registered student group, the Network of Enlightened Women, invited Ann Coulter to campus. This invitation spawned a disinvitation campaign that included an online petition demanding Coulter be prevented coming to campus. This petition described Coulter as “a known white-supremacist/anti-Semite who is against LGBTQ+ rights.” When protesters began their attempt to shout Coulter down, Cornell’s administration intervened and removed eight of them. However, protesters were successful at shouting down Coulter and the event ended early.

FIRE penalized Cornell for two incidents implicating controversial speech over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Following the October 7, 2023 attacks, Professor Russell Rickford made comments that the attack was “exhilarating” and “energizing.” Rickford’s comments were reported in national media and became the source of widespread controversy and led to a petition with 11,898 signatures demanding his termination for “hate speech.” Cornell condemned Rickford’s comments. Rickford apologized and then took a leave of absence.

In January of 2024, Cornell announced that student Maria Lima Valdez “will be held fully accountable and appropriately sanctioned” for her “heinous” and “hateful” social media post saying “Zionists must die.” Cornell suspended Valdez and banned her from campus on January 16, pending its disciplinary investigation. Following advocacy from FIRE on Valdez’s behalf, Valdez was found not responsible for her disciplinary charges in May of 2024.

HOW CAN CORNELL IMPROVE?

Cornell can improve its rating by revising its yellow light speech code to obtain a “green light” rating. If Cornell had revised these policies and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 74 overall.

However, obtaining a green light rating does not by itself guarantee that a school’s overall score and ranking will improve. In previous evaluations of other schools, we have suggested a public campaign about obtaining green light status because we think it would also result in an improved “Administrative Support” score and an improvement in a school’s overall school and ranking. Cornell faces a more difficult challenge: its own students’ views on freedom of speech and their perceptions of the administration’s stance on it.

As FIRE has said: “Cornell administrators seem to get it, but the student body’s grasp on free speech and academic freedom is more tenuous.”² The students disagree with FIRE’s evaluation. Only 19% think it is “very” or “extremely” likely that their college administration will defend a speaker’s rights during a controversy, and only 24% say that it is “very” or “extremely” clear that the administration protects free speech on campus. With that in mind, it’s no wonder that Cornell ranks near the bottom (210 out of 251) in students’ perceptions of administrative support for free expression. In other words, Cornell students perceive their administration as weak on freedom of speech even though the administration has demonstrated the opposite through its own recent actions.

2 Conza, S. and Willis, J. (April 14, 2023). ‘Building knowledge and inspiring discussion’: Cornell stands up for free speech, announces university-wide free expression initiative. *The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression*. Available online: <https://www.thefire.org/news/building-knowledge-and-inspiring-discussion-cornell-stands-free-speech-announces-university>

As noted above, this contradiction might be because Cornell students think the administration has violated *their* speech rights — potentially because of punishments for students who violated reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions at encampment protests or shouting down Ann Coulter.

Cornell’s university-wide initiative to explore free expression and academic freedom throughout the current academic year will, we hope, help change this confusion about freedom of speech and academic freedom. If it does, we should see an improvement in Cornell’s standing in the College Free Speech Rankings. If Cornell had revised these policies and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 74 overall.

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 15.³
- **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

³ 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.⁴

⁴ 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.⁵
- Supporting students and student groups, as recorded in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings behavioral metrics documentation that is available online.⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸

5 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/i15h8y1M4GFv5FQzyx6LLZqHj1oOa1YQJOYvozCqAzE8/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>.

6 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/i15h8y1M4GFv5FQzyx6LLZqHj1oOa1YQJOYvozCqAzE8/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.

7 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.

8 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.⁹

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:

9 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	42	8
Not very clear	160	31
Somewhat clear	190	37
Very clear	97	19
Extremely clear	29	6

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	33	6
Not very likely	152	29
Somewhat likely	237	46
Very likely	66	13
Extremely likely	30	6

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	186	36
Somewhat uncomfortable	177	34
Somewhat comfortable	124	24
Very comfortable	31	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	119	23
Somewhat uncomfortable	196	38
Somewhat comfortable	152	29
Very comfortable	51	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	114	22
Somewhat uncomfortable	189	36
Somewhat comfortable	173	33
Very comfortable	42	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	121	23
Somewhat uncomfortable	167	32
Somewhat comfortable	154	30
Very comfortable	76	15

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	238	46
Somewhat uncomfortable	160	31
Somewhat comfortable	90	17
Very comfortable	29	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	74	14
Rarely	190	37
Occasionally, once or twice a month	143	28
Fairly often, a couple times a week	80	15
Very often, nearly every day	30	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	49	9
Rarely	150	29
Occasionally, once or twice a month	187	36
Fairly often, a couple times a week	87	17
Very often, nearly every day	45	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	45	9
Rarely	170	33
Occasionally, once or twice a month	176	34
Fairly often, a couple times a week	82	16
Very often, nearly every day	46	9

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	34	7
Rarely	180	35
Occasionally, once or twice a month	156	30
Fairly often, a couple times a week	106	20
Very often, nearly every day	42	8

How acceptable would you say it is for students to engage in the following action to protest a campus speaker?
[Presented in randomized order]

Shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	22	4
Sometimes acceptable	180	35
Rarely acceptable	173	33
Never acceptable	143	28

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	22	4
Sometimes acceptable	100	19
Rarely acceptable	142	27
Never acceptable	253	49

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	11	2
Sometimes acceptable	42	8
Rarely acceptable	100	19
Never acceptable	365	70

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	168	32
Probably should not allow this speaker	184	36
Probably should allow this speaker	107	21
Definitely should allow this speaker	58	11

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	125	24
Probably should not allow this speaker	145	28
Probably should allow this speaker	165	32
Definitely should allow this speaker	82	16

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	167	32
Probably should not allow this speaker	163	32
Probably should allow this speaker	117	23
Definitely should allow this speaker	70	14

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	78	15
Probably should not allow this speaker	165	32
Probably should allow this speaker	164	32
Definitely should allow this speaker	110	21

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	96	18
Probably should not allow this speaker	166	32
Probably should allow this speaker	157	30
Definitely should allow this speaker	98	19

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	54	10
Probably should not allow this speaker	136	26
Probably should allow this speaker	226	44
Definitely should allow this speaker	99	19

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	115	22
Probably should not allow this speaker	178	34
Probably should allow this speaker	139	27
Definitely should allow this speaker	82	16

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	60	12
Probably should not allow this speaker	108	21
Probably should allow this speaker	198	38
Definitely should allow this speaker	152	29

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	323	62
Yes	186	36

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	338	65
Yes	170	33

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	428	83
Yes	81	16

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	445	86
Yes	64	12

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	447	86
Yes	61	12

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	393	76
Yes	116	22

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	381	74
Yes	128	25

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	407	79
Yes	102	20

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	399	77
Yes	110	21

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	395	76
Yes	113	22

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	352	68
Yes	157	30

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	391	76
Yes	118	23

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	173	33
Yes	336	65

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	380	73
Yes	129	25

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	378	73
Yes	131	25

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	369	71
Yes	139	27

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	380	73
Yes	129	25

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	387	75
Yes	122	23

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	436	84
Yes	73	14

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	343	66
Yes	166	32

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	473	91
Yes	36	7

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	171	33
Yes	334	65

Black or African American student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	176	34
Yes	330	64

Hispanic/Latino student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	169	33
Yes	337	65

Sororities or fraternities

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	220	43
Yes	285	55

LGBTQ+ student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	172	33
Yes	334	64

Christian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	185	36
Yes	320	62

Jewish student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	177	34
Yes	329	63

Muslim/Islamic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	192	37
Yes	313	60

Hindu student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	185	36
Yes	321	62

Atheist/agnostic/secular student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	211	41
Yes	295	57

Republican student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	216	42
Yes	290	56

Democratic student groups.

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	195	38
Yes	311	60

Politically conservative student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	214	41
Yes	292	56

Politically liberal student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	212	41
Yes	293	57

Black Lives Matter student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	214	41
Yes	291	56

Pro-Israeli student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	267	51
Yes	239	46

Pro-Palestinian student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	224	43
Yes	282	54

Other student groups

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	246	48
Yes	260	50

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	456	88
Yes	49	10

How often, if at all, do you hide your political beliefs from your professors in an attempt to get a better grade?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	150	29
Rarely	151	29
Occasionally	106	20
Fairly often, a couple times a week	59	11
Very often, nearly every day	31	6

Have you ever been involved in publicly calling out, punishing, or “canceling” someone or a group for inappropriate statements or actions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	53	10
No	442	85

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	71	14
About right	230	44
Too harsh	195	38

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	102	20
Rarely	199	38
Occasionally	130	25
Fairly often, a couple times a week	52	10
Very often, nearly every day	12	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	81	16
Palestinians	192	37
Both equally	94	18
Neither	27	5
Don't know	105	20

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	107	21
Hamas	138	27
Both equally	94	18
Don't know	160	31

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	192	37
Less than once a year	59	11
Once or twice a year	60	12
Several times a year	68	13
Once a month	23	4
2-3 times a month	22	4
About weekly	25	5
Weekly	18	4
Several times a week	20	4

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	28	5
No	458	88

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	22	4	5
No	464	90	95

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	5	1	4
Less than half the time	46	9	38
About half the time	38	7	31
Most of the time, nearly every day	21	4	18
Always	11	2	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	22	4	24
Less than half the time	43	8	46
About half the time	20	4	22
Most of the time, nearly every day	7	1	8
Always	0	0	0

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	2	10
Less than half the time	13	2	12
About half the time	42	8	38
Most of the time, nearly every day	33	6	30
Always	12	2	11

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	27	5	33
Less than half the time	35	7	42
About half the time	11	2	13
Most of the time, nearly every day	7	1	8
Always	3	1	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	1	7
Less than half the time	17	3	18
About half the time	33	6	36
Most of the time, nearly every day	26	5	27
Always	11	2	12



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