

What Went Wrong?

Columbia's Year-in-Review

2025 College Free Speech Rankings

250

OVERALL
RANK

ABYSMAL

SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

What Went Wrong?

Columbia's Year in Review

2025 College Free Speech Rankings

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Executive Summary

AFTER THE OCTOBER 7, 2023, ATTACK ON ISRAEL, Columbia University faced demands from multiple powerful constituencies with vehement and irreconcilable positions. It was unprepared to administer its own policies on a principled, viewpoint-neutral basis, and unable to credibly profess institutional neutrality. Instead, Columbia’s leaders made ever-changing, politically calculated decisions that further eroded trust in the institution and ultimately led to President Minouche Shafik’s resignation after only a year in office.

FIRE surveys highlight the extent to which Columbia University has long failed to protect student and faculty speech on campus, suggesting the university’s failed response to Oct. 7 protests was all but inevitable.

Since 2020, Columbia has sanctioned expression in at least 14 instances, including eight involving faculty and three involving students. These counts exclude any incidents that occurred during the Spring 2024 encampment protests and counter-protests.

The findings in this report are based on a combination of results of multiple surveys of students and faculty, an assessment of Columbia’s written speech policies, and the outcomes of campus speech controversies. Key findings include:

- Student confidence in Columbia’s administration to defend free speech on campus has collapsed in response to the school’s reaction to the encampment protests.
- Ranking 250 out of 251 colleges and universities in FIRE’s 2025 College Free Speech Rankings, Columbia is the only school other than Harvard with a *negative* raw score.
- A third of students, up from 18% in 2021, say they “very” or “fairly” often feel they cannot express themselves because of how fellow students, a professor, or the administration would respond.
- Despite being on a campus racked by protest, 35% of Columbia students say they are “not at all” or “not very” aware of written policies on campus protests, while 30% say they are just “somewhat” aware.
- 78% of Columbia students identified the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as difficult to discuss — up from 40% last year. Additionally, 89% of Columbia faculty report difficulty discussing the conflict on campus.
- Roughly 1 in 5 Columbia faculty report self-censoring, and over half express little confidence in the administration to defend free speech on campus.
- Columbia speech policies have earned a “yellow light” rating from FIRE, meaning they can too easily be abused to censor controversial speech.

How Events Unfolded

HAMAS' ATTACK ON ISRAEL on Oct. 7, 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza sent shock waves through American college and university campuses. Record numbers of deplatforming attempts [took place](#). Protesters tried to disrupt events — and succeeded — with [increasing frequency](#). [Students](#), [student groups](#), and [faculty](#) who expressed pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian sentiment were targeted for sanction by their peers, administrators, and [elected officials](#). University presidents testified in front of the House of Representatives on matters related to speech and protest on campus, and some subsequently [resigned](#).

Two days after the attack, Columbia's then-President Minouche Shafik issued a "[Message of Concern](#)" urging the school to "reject forces that seek to pull us apart" and show "respect for all." Days later, protests spread, and Columbia started restricting access to its Morningside Heights campus. Israel supporters were [accused](#) of "doxing" pro-Palestinian students. Pro-Palestinian student groups [chanted](#) slogans such as "Minouche Shafik, you can't hide, you're supporting genocide."

On Oct. 18, Shafik issued a statement titled "[Upholding Our Values](#)." Shafik condemned doxing but was generally supportive of free expression, saying debate and protest are "essential ways for students to address and process political and social turmoil."

Heading into the fall 2023 semester, Columbia had not pledged to maintain [institutional neutrality](#) on controversial political issues as recommended long ago by the University of Chicago's "[Kalven Report](#)." Columbia's leaders instead reserved the right to use their positions to weigh in on hot-button political issues. This left the door open for activists on both sides to demand that Shafik and Columbia choose *their* side and bring the university's influence to bear in service of *their* cause. "Upholding Our Values" nevertheless invoked the principle of neutrality to explain Shafik's refusal to take a side, writing:

Unlike a political organization or advocacy group, Columbia's role is to create space for our scholars and students to fill with their own moral and intellectual conversations, an essential function in a world in which that space is narrowing.

It was already too late for this plea to be effective. Moreover, Columbia was further from establishing a space for free discussion than most institutions. In FIRE's Campus Free Speech Rankings for the previous year, Columbia ranked 214 out of 248. The students' lack of comfort discussing 20 different difficult topics landed Columbia a ranking of 164 on the "Openness" component. Columbia students' discomfort discussing controversial topics in a variety of contexts resulted in a mediocre 140 ranking on the "Comfort Expressing Ideas" component. Student skepticism that the administration would support free speech on campus landed Columbia a ranking of 163 on that component. And for 2023, Columbia [ranked](#) dead last in the overall rankings.

Political pressure to stop the protests at Columbia and elsewhere continued to grow, and on Oct. 27, Columbia started to buckle. In an announcement to the community entitled "[Standing in Solidarity](#)," Shafik wrote, "Just as we defend the right to free speech, we are duty-bound to be vigilant when we see discourse devolve into hate speech which can be a prelude to harassment or violence." She promised punishment "when hate speech or incidents violate university rules," though not for simply uttering expressions deemed hateful.

On Nov. 1, Columbia **announced** the formation of a Task Force on Antisemitism. Shafik, along with the presidents of the related Barnard College and Teachers College, said of recent anti-Semitic incidents on campus, “[W]e will not tolerate such actions and are moving forcefully against antisemitic threats, images, and other violations as they are reported.” This announcement made no mention of protecting free speech. While true threats are not protected under the First Amendment or Columbia’s policies, most of the expression (such as “images”) on campus that could be deemed anti-Semitic or anti-Palestinian would be protected under both.

On Nov. 9, hundreds of students **participated** in a “Shut It Down for Palestine” walkout and “die-in” organized by Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace. The next day, Columbia **shut both groups down** for the rest of the semester, saying they had “repeatedly violated university policies related to holding campus events.” While technically true, there was more to the story. Within a week, the *Columbia Spectator* student newspaper **published a feature** explaining how university policies had mysteriously changed shortly after Oct. 7.

The changes made planning demonstrations more onerous by labeling them “special events” and imposing requirements such as a 10-day advance notice. “Special events” now included any “event in outdoor university space,” a new and startlingly broad criterion. The policy added an extensive section detailing sanctions for violations. The next day, Gerald Rosberg, Columbia’s senior executive vice president, admitted at a contentious university senate meeting that the administration had **made the changes unilaterally** and that Shafik had been involved in the decision to suspend the groups.

Jettisoning free speech principles and cracking down on demonstrations failed to solve the problem. As campus protests continued across the nation, the U.S. House of Representatives summoned the presidents of three of Columbia’s peer institutions — Claudine Gay of Harvard, Liz Magill of the University of Pennsylvania, and Sally Kornbluth of MIT — to testify about their handling of campus protests. Their disastrous testimony became a national sensation. These presidents of elite universities indicated an unwillingness to commit to silencing anti-Semitic speech while, at the same time, providing no satisfying explanation for their **histories** of **punishing** or **silencing speech** aimed at other groups. Under intense pressure, Magill resigned just four days later. Gay initially resisted the pressure, but ultimately stepped down on Jan. 2 after critics credibly **accused** her of plagiarism in her academic work.

In December, after the Congressional hearing, Columbia declared that calls for genocide were unprotected by university policy, saying speech “that promotes or supports violence in any manner” was prohibited. **Not only was this claim untrue**, but if consistently applied it would chill speech on topics ranging from the American Revolution to abortion.

Demonstrations and incidents continued. In January 2024, Columbia’s law school student government **denied recognition** to a proposed “Law Students Against Antisemitism” group because of a dispute over the meaning of “anti-Semitism.” (FIRE wrote to the student government, and the group was recognized in February.) Also in January, two individuals **sprayed a noxious “skunk” chemical** on pro-Palestinian protesters, after which university administration **banned them from campus**. After a “**Resistance 101**” event in March involving an outside speaker alleged to be part of a Palestinian terrorist group, Columbia even **hired private investigators** to track down, identify, and question student participants.

While Shafik had not attended the first Congressional hearing, she and other Columbia administrators were summoned to testify at a second hearing before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce on April 17. During the hearing, Shafik agreed with committee members that on at least three occasions, a faculty member’s speech had crossed a line. She **confirmed** that some of these professors were being investigated and that at least one “will never teach at Columbia again.” In her **prepared remarks**, Shafik claimed Columbia

had been caught unprepared by the protests and “the unprecedented scale of the challenges,” adding that she was “personally frustrated” that Columbia’s policies were at times “unable to meet the moment.”

This admission would prove to be prophetic. In the early hours of that very morning, hundreds of Columbia students had **established** the Gaza Solidarity Encampment on South Lawn to protest Israel’s military campaign in Gaza, demanding divestment from Israel and other concessions — a tactic that pro-Palestinian demonstrators would soon replicate on campuses nationwide.

Columbia has been a center of student protest for more than half a century and is home to one of the most famous student protests in American history. For a week in April 1968, Columbia students protesting racism and the Vietnam War occupied five buildings, seized the president’s office, **held Dean Henry Coleman captive** for a day in his own office in Hamilton Hall, and more. The situation ended only after an **April 30 “bust”** involving approximately 1,000 NYPD officers that resulted in more than 700 arrests and nearly 150 injuries.

Columbia has been prone to protest ever since. In 2014, a female student **carried a mattress around campus for months** to protest Columbia’s exoneration of the male student she said sexually assaulted her, making national news and leading to similar protests by **hundreds** of other Columbia students. In 2016, the student group Columbia Divest for Climate Justice **occupied Low Library** for eight days, demanding that Columbia stop investing in fossil fuel companies. Graduate students **picketed Columbia** in 2018 over its refusal to recognize their union, resulting in canceled classes. (They **walked out again** in 2021, with the provost calling the situation “one of the most trying and disruptive periods in Columbia’s long history.”) Also in 2018, students **occupied Lerner Hall** for days, demanding Columbia establish a 24/7 rape crisis center on campus. And in February 2022, hundreds of students **demonstrated on the Low Library steps** to show support for Ukraine after Russia’s invasion.

With its rich history of demonstrations, Columbia should have been not just prepared but expertly prepared. As Shafik admitted to Congress, however, it proved unequal to the task. Having allowed dozens of tents to be pitched that morning in obvious violation of policy, Columbia then **gave protesters** until 9 p.m. that night to clear out without punishment. Many refused, and so on April 18, Shafik authorized the New York City Police Department to clear the encampment and arrest protesters. Police arrested 113 protesters, including Isra Hirsi, the daughter of U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar.

Shafik’s willingness to bring in the NYPD and suspend demonstrators outraged many and left few satisfied. Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine **called** for an “academic boycott of all events” and the organization said it would support a no-confidence vote in Shafik. The Columbia College Student Council executive board **demande**d that the NYPD be barred from campus. Meanwhile, the Columbia Jewish Alumni Association **urged** Shafik to do more to protect Jewish students.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators had continued to sleep on tarps on South Lawn after the sweep on April 18. On April 21, they **again began to put up tents**. This led Jewish campus leaders to advise Jewish students to leave campus for safety reasons. U.S. Representative Elise Stefanik **called** for Shafik’s resignation. On April 22, Shafik announced classes would be held virtually, saying the campus needed “a reset.”

Instead, matters escalated. That morning, Shai Davidai, a pro-Israel professor of management in Columbia’s business school who had announced his intention to visit the encampment, **found his ID card deactivated and was denied access** to that part of campus. Later that day, hundreds of Columbia faculty members **held a mass walkout** to protest the recent arrests of students. Columbia College students

passed referendums demanding divestment from Israel and the closure of a university center and dual degree program in Tel Aviv.

As the encampment continued, Shafik announced on April 23 that **Columbia was setting a midnight deadline** to dismantle the encampment. When midnight came and went, Columbia announced a 48-hour extension. On April 24, both Republicans and Democrats from Congress visited campus, with the GOP representatives calling for Shafik's resignation. Fear of another NYPD sweep led Shafik and other leaders to declare **in a campus-wide email** that while Columbia had called in the NYPD once, they believed that doing so again "would be counterproductive."

Negotiations continued over the weekend, but on Monday, April 29, Shafik **announced** talks had failed and that Columbia would not divest from Israel. Columbia added that students **had until 2 p.m. to leave the encampment** or be suspended. Students did not leave, but instead **picketed**. Around midnight, demonstrators **took over** Hamilton Hall, blocking entrances with wooden tables, zip-tying doors shut, and smashing a window. Columbia announced that **access to campus would be "indefinitely" restricted** to essential personnel and resident students.

The Hamilton Hall takeover lasted throughout Tuesday, April 30. Shafik and Columbia had said just four days prior that bringing in the NYPD would be counterproductive, but at around 9:30 p.m., **the NYPD returned to campus**. The police stormed Hamilton Hall through a second-story window and arrested 109 demonstrators, making national news and **drawing comment** from both U.S. presidential candidates. The sweep came 56 years to the day after the NYPD had cleared Hamilton Hall in 1968. History had repeated itself.

Even this disaster was not the end of the Columbia administration's nightmare. On May 31, during reunion weekend, Jewish leaders from Columbia **held a panel discussion** called "Jewish Life on Campus: Past, Present, Future." While the event could have been an opportunity to mend fences, high-level administrators sent it careening off the rails. Susan Chang-Kim, the vice dean of Columbia College, attended the event and chose to text about it with three colleagues — Josef Sorett (the dean of Columbia College), Cristen Kromm (dean of undergraduate student life), and Matthew Patashnick (associate dean for student and family support). On June 12, the Washington Examiner revealed that an audience member sitting behind Chang-Kim **took photos** of some of the exchanges, in which the administrators **mocked the head of Hillel** and accused Jewish campus community members of taking advantage of Oct. 7 for fundraising (including using a vomit emoji).

This would have been bad enough, but Kromm and Patashnick were on the front lines of Columbia's efforts towards "inclusivity." They were two of only four permanent members of **Columbia's Bias Response Team**, to whom Columbia community members are urged to submit any incidents of "bias." Both, along with Sorett, also **served** on Columbia's Inclusive Public Safety Working Group.

Within days, Kromm, Patashnick, and Chang-Kim had been placed on leave, while Sorett sent a public apology to the Board of Visitors. On July 8, Shafik and Provost Angela Olinto **notified the campus community** that all but Sorett had been "permanently removed from their positions."

To see three high-level administrators at an Ivy League university forced out over this kind of exchange is practically unprecedented, illustrating the depth and intensity of the power struggle on Columbia's campus. One more huge surprise was yet in the offing: less than a week later, on Aug. 14, 2024, Shafik had finally had enough. Barely a year into the coveted Ivy League presidency, she resigned, leaving Columbia and the U.S. itself for what *The New York Times* **called** a "part-time role in London" that was "unpaid, temporary and only advisory."

Evaluating Columbia in Spring 2024

FIRE WAS UNIQUELY POSITIONED to evaluate the effects of Columbia’s failure to protect free speech during the tumultuous school year.

First, we were fielding our [2025 College Free Speech Rankings survey](#) when the April 2024 encampment protests began. We surveyed 389 Columbia students during the semester — 117 before the encampment was established and 272 afterwards until June 17 — leaving us uniquely positioned to assess how Columbia’s response to the protests influenced student attitudes, including student confidence in the administration’s commitment to protecting free speech.

Second, in response to the encampments — the first of which was at Columbia — FIRE and College Pulse ran a [second survey](#) of 30 colleges and universities from May 17 through June 25 and included the results in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings.¹ Columbia was one of the 30 schools, with 118 Columbia students involved in this second survey.

Third, this past spring, FIRE administered a faculty survey on free speech attitudes at 55 colleges and universities.² Again, Columbia was included, with FIRE sampling 130 Columbia faculty members.³ Of these, 90 responded to the survey before the April 17 encampment and 40 responded after.⁴

The results of the student surveys will be discussed together; the faculty survey will be treated separately.

1 The encampment survey sampled 3,803 undergraduate students at 30 four-year colleges and universities in the United States. While we randomly selected 29 of these schools from the larger survey, we specifically selected Columbia as the final school because the encampment protests began there. That survey was fielded between May 17 and June 25 via the College Pulse mobile app and web portal.

2 In spring of 2024, FIRE launched a first-of-its-kind large-scale survey of faculty, assessing topics related to free speech attitudes and related dynamics. The survey was completed by 6,269 faculty at 55 colleges and universities. The 55 colleges and universities targeted for recruitment were the colleges and universities sampled for the first CFSR survey. The faculty survey was fielded from March 4 through May 13. All active faculty listed on department webpages or rosters with an active email address were sent an invitation to participate.

3 At Columbia University, 2,641 faculty were emailed an invitation to participate. In total, 130 Columbia faculty participated, for a response rate of about 5%, consistent with other studies of university faculty.

4 Honeycutt, N., Stevens, S.T., & Freberg, L. (forthcoming). Academic Freedom and Free Expression Among University Faculty. *Working title, report forthcoming.*

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF COLUMBIA'S FREE SPEECH CULTURE

Columbia performed abysmally on this year's College Free Speech Rankings,⁵ ranking ahead of only Harvard University, with an overall score of **zero**. Both Columbia and Harvard actually obtained *negative* scores, but Columbia was spared from receiving the title of this year's worst college for free speech because Harvard's score was even worse.⁶

How Is Columbia's Administrative Stance on Freedom of Speech Perceived?

The admin only protects a specific opinion on the ongoing war and is willing to endanger students to make sure they don't express an opposing view. Our campus still looks like a military base despite the fact that the protesters were never violent and never threatened anyone on campus.⁷

Students lack faith that administrators support free speech, as evidenced by Columbia's ranking close to last — 247 out of 251 — on the “Administrative Support” component. Student perceptions of Columbia's administration only worsened after the encampment protest started and President Shafik first called the NYPD to campus.

Indeed, in the encampments survey, roughly two-thirds (69%) of Columbia students said they find it “not at all” or “not very” clear that their administration protects free speech on campus. Similarly, in the Campus Free Speech Survey, 57% of students said it is “not at all” or “not very” clear, sharply up from only a quarter of students last year. The percentage of Columbia students who say their administration's stance is “extremely” or “very” clear has also declined. In 2021, a third of Columbia students said this. During this year's Campus Free Speech Survey, 20% did, and in the encampment survey, just 10% did.

In terms of students' expectations that the administration would protect a speaker's rights during a controversy over offensive speech, most Columbia students surveyed for the encampments survey (57%) believe that it is “not at all” or “not very” likely that they would. This percentage is greater than that found in the Campus Free Speech Survey as a whole (43%). It is also greater than findings over the past three years (24% to 28%) and before the encampments (46%). Correspondingly, the percentage of Columbia students who say it is “extremely” or “very” likely that Columbia's administration would defend a speaker's rights during a controversy over offensive speech plummeted to 8%, from 15% during this year's Campus Free Speech Survey and between 31% to 35% in previous years' surveys.

Furthermore, in the encampments survey, more than two-thirds (70%) of Columbia students say that their college administration is “not at all” or “not very” supportive of student protests on campus, while just 15% say the administration is “extremely” or “very” supportive.

5 The College Free Speech Rankings are based on a composite score of 14 components. Seven assess student perceptions of the speech climate on their campus, while seven others assess behavior by administrators, faculty, and students. Nationally, this year's survey included 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 Jan. 25 through June 17.

6 Harvard's actual score was -21.58, Columbia's was -0.58. Both scores were rounded up to 0.00.

7 All unattributed quotes in the student perceptions sections are from students at Columbia.

A number of Columbia students specifically told FIRE that the response of their administration to protests on campus since Oct. 7 has chilled their speech and that this has become particularly acute since the encampment protest began. For instance, one student told us:

During the protests on campus I was scared to protest because I did not know how the administration would react. With the mass arrests that happened on campus it created an environment where I felt like if I was protesting or speaking out against the administration I would get suspended or they would note my name down and this could affect my academic prospects. I have never felt like I could not express my opinion in the company of my fellow students and faculty, however I did not feel comfortable expressing them around administrative personnel.

Many students also mentioned how intimidated they have felt by the administration calling the NYPD on the encampment protesters. One student said:

I have felt very threatened to express my opinions on the administrations [sic] complicity involving Israel's war on Gaza. Students sharing my political views have been harassed verbally and physically and have even been attacked with Israeli made chemicals by fellow students with little to no action. The administration has not acknowledged the concerted efforts by students and other Columbia affiliated individuals [sic] to make an incredibly hostile anti-Palestinian environment on campus because they themselves are complicit. The NYPD has been brought into campus to intimidate student protesters into silence.

Another told us:

Columbia University deployed the NYPD on its students for standing up for [sic] a genocide. Free speech is not protected on our campus, and the administration will do anything (including evicting, arresting, and starving out students) to make that clear.

And a third said:

The administration sent the NYPD and threatened to bring in the National Guard over student speech, this has without a doubt stopped me from expressing my opinions.

Finally, in the encampments survey:

- 3 in 5 Columbia students said that the police response to the encampment protests across the country makes them feel “very” or “somewhat” unsafe.
- 3 in 5 Columbia students also said that the right to freedom of speech is “not at all” or “not very” secure on their campus.
- 1 in 5 Columbia students said that they currently feel “very” or “somewhat” unsafe on campus.

These findings leave little room to doubt that Columbia students now profoundly lack trust in their administration to protect free speech on campus.

How Often Are Columbia Students Self-Censoring on Campus?

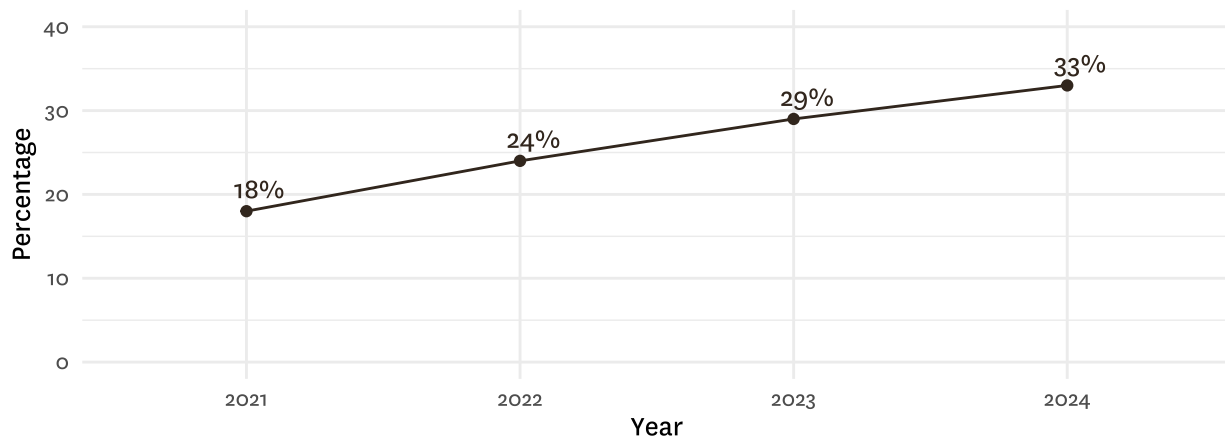
I wouldn't say it was one moment, rather pervasive moments related to campus culture and the on-going war. It has become very much one side v. the other with very little room to openly suggest a middle ground.

The moments have been as ongoing as the protests have been at my school in regards to the Israel/Palestine conflict.

A third of Columbia students are self-censoring “very” or “fairly” often. Self-censorship rates among Columbia students have risen steadily since 2021, when 18% of Columbia students said that they “very” or “fairly” often felt that they could not express their opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond.

- Specifically, one-third of Columbia students also report self-censoring “very” or “fairly” often in conversations with other students, up slightly from 29% last year.
- About a quarter (26%) say they self-censor “very” or “fairly” often in conversations with their professors, up slightly from 22% last year.
- And 29% say they self-censor “very” or “fairly” often during classroom discussions, about the same as last year (30%).

FIGURE 1 Columbia Students Who Say They “Very” or “Fairly” Often Feel They Cannot Express an Opinion Because of How a Member of Campus Would Respond (%)



Self-censorship rates among Jewish students at Columbia are particularly high this year:

- 54% say they often feel they cannot express their opinion because of how students, professors, or the administration might respond.
- 55% also say they self-censor often during classroom discussions.
- 48% say they self-censor often in conversations with peers or professors.

Unfortunately, the number of self-identified Muslim students sampled at Columbia was too small for rigorous analysis.

How Comfortable Are Columbia Students Expressing Their Views on Controversial Topics?

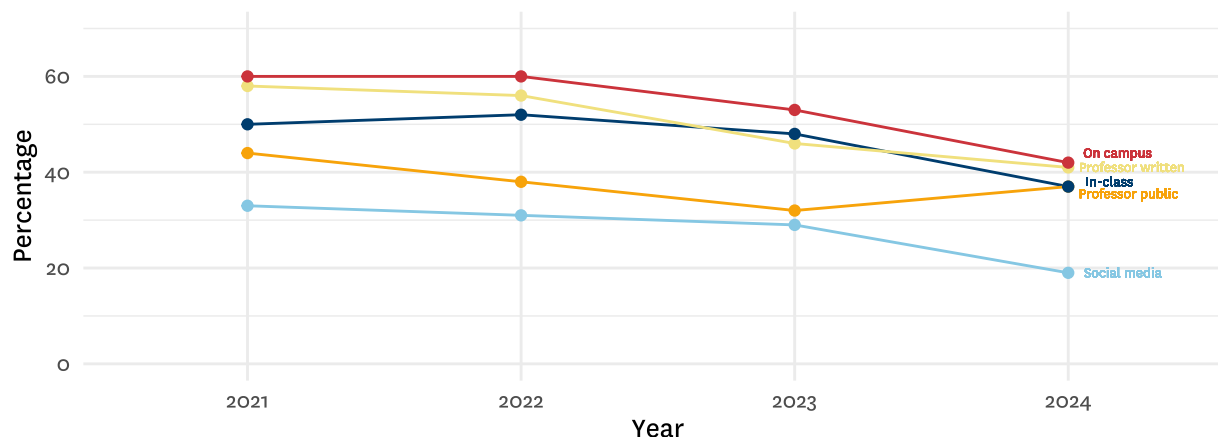
During a discussion involving a reading that mentioned the Israeli Occupation, I did not feel comfortable naming Israel as an apartheid state or calling the current genocide a genocide because I knew there were Zionists in the class and the administration would not protect me if they were to dox me.

I never felt comfortable in expressing my opinion that I believe that both the IDF and Hamas are bad. I also don't feel comfortable expressing the fact that Hamas and the IDF have committed war crimes because if I do so, I will be socially ostracized by those who are pro-Palestine and those who are pro-Israel.

Each year for the past three years, fewer and fewer Columbia students have reported feeling comfortable discussing their views on a controversial political topic in almost every setting which FIRE asked (see Figure 2). This year's drop landed Columbia a rank of 234 on the "Comfort Expressing Ideas" component.

- Only around two-fifths of Columbia students say they feel "very" or "somewhat" comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic in a common campus space such as the dining hall (42%) or disagreeing with a professor in a written assignment (41%).
- Only 37% say they feel "very" or "somewhat" comfortable disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic either publicly or in a classroom setting.
- These comfort levels have all dropped by at least 10 percentage points since 2021, except for publicly disagreeing with a professor, where comfort has declined by only 7 percentage points.

FIGURE 2 Columbia Students Who Are Comfortable Expressing Their Views on a Controversial Political Topic by Setting (%)



FIRE also asked students how comfortable they felt expressing their views on several specific issues. Less than two-fifths (37%) of Columbia students say they feel “very” or “somewhat” comfortable expressing their views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This includes 41% of liberal students and 28% of conservative students. In contrast, roughly two-thirds say they feel “very” or “somewhat” comfortable expressing their views on abortion or police misconduct.

What Topics Are Difficult for Columbia Students to Have Conversations About?

With the situation re: Israel/Palestine protests, I tend to take a nuanced view: primarily pro-Palestinian but with some qualms about their demands/particular messaging. However, I generally felt unable to express this dissent because of the tense, toxic nature of political discourse on campus.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a difficult topic to discuss on Columbia’s campus since FIRE launched the College Free Speech Rankings five years ago. This year, however, a record 78% of Columbia students identified the conflict as difficult to discuss — up from 40% last year. This is compared to 38% who say they find it difficult to discuss affirmative action, 34% for hate speech, 33% for police misconduct, 32% for religion, and 31% for free speech.

Which Speakers Do Columbia Students Consider Controversial?

Every year, FIRE asks students about their tolerance for allowing different speakers on campus. This past year, we asked students whether they would allow or not allow a speaker on campus who previously said “Collateral damage in Gaza is justified for the sake of Israeli security,” and one who previously said “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” At Columbia, just over half of students said they would allow the pro-Israel speaker on campus, while three quarters would allow the pro-Palestinian speaker.

What Kinds of Disruptive Conduct Do Columbia Students Consider Acceptable?

Roughly one-third (35%) of students say they are “not at all” or “not very” aware of their college campus’ written policies on campus protests.

Worse, a staggering number of Columbia students are “not sure” about what basic forms of expression are allowed on campus. For instance:

- 14% say they are “not sure” they can create a petition.
- 17% are “not sure” they are allowed to hold a sign.
- Almost half (45%) are “not sure” they are allowed to engage in a hunger strike.

Columbia permits all three. That Columbia was unable to make these basic facts universally understood after a year of campus protest is a shocking educational failure.

Furthermore, none of the following expressive actions are protected by Columbia policy, but a non-trivial number of students still don’t know it:

- A quarter of Columbia students say that establishing encampments on campus is either “allowed” (7%) or that they are “not sure” if they are (18%).
- 17% say that defacing school property is either “allowed” (3%) or that they are “not sure” (14%).
- 15% say that occupying buildings is either “allowed” (4%) or that they are “not sure” (11%).

TABLE 1 Columbia Students Who Say That Each Protest Tactic is “Allowed,” “Not Allowed,” or That They Are “Not Sure.”

TACTIC	ALLOWED ON CAMPUS	NOT ALLOWED ON CAMPUS	NOT SURE
Hold a sign	78%	5%	17%
Create a petition	77%	9%	14%
Hand out flyers	65%	5%	30%
March for long distances	41%	22%	37%
Distribute or post materials anonymously	39%	20%	40%
Engage in a hunger strike	35%	21%	45%
Use amplified sound	28%	37%	36%
Burn an American flag	8%	44%	48%
Establish encampments	7%	74%	18%
Occupy buildings	4%	85%	11%
Deface school property	3%	82%	14%

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to weighting and rounding error.

In addition, three-quarters of Columbia students say it's at least "rarely" acceptable for college students to shout down a speaker on campus. About half (52%) say it's at least "rarely" acceptable for students to block other students from entering a campus event. Finally, one-third say it is at least "rarely" acceptable for college students to use violence to stop a campus speech. Last year these percentages were 60%, 41%, and 27% respectively.

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF COLUMBIA'S FREE SPEECH CULTURE

Since Oct. 7, many universities have **adopted** official positions of institutional neutrality on social and political issues. While Columbia has not yet done so, on Sept. 17, 2024, Interim President Katrina Armstrong **announced the formation of an advisory committee** to consider it. Support for institutional neutrality among faculty appears to be high. Specifically, 79% of Columbia faculty surveyed endorsed the position that "Colleges/universities should not take positions on political and social issues," while only 21% endorsed the position that "Colleges/universities should be free to take positions on political and social issues, even if some students and faculty disagree."

Similarly, 73% of Columbia faculty endorsed the position that "Official faculty units (e.g. departments) should not take positions on political and social issues," while only 27% endorsed the position that "Official faculty units (e.g. departments) should be free to take positions on political and social issues, even if some in the unit disagree."

How Is Columbia's Administrative Stance on Freedom of Speech Perceived?

- | *...The administration has taken specific steps to limit faculty freedom of speech.*
- | *I have confidence in the faculty at universities/colleges including mine. I do not have confidence in many in the administration.*
- | *At my university, the biggest threat to freedom of speech comes from the administration, which has consistently taken punitive measures toward student protesters; not toward professors, who are relatively free to speak their minds.*

Nearly half (48%) of Columbia faculty think that academic freedom on their campus is "not at all" or "not very" secure. Similarly, over half (54%) of Columbia faculty say it is "not at all" or "not very" clear that their college administration protects free speech on campus. Even before the encampment started on April 17, 52% of faculty (n=90) said it was "not at all" or "not very" clear that the Columbia administration protects free speech on campus. Among those who responded after the encampment started (n=40), this value rose to 58%.

Similarly, nearly half (49%) of Columbia faculty say that if a controversy over offensive speech were to occur on campus, the Columbia administration is "not at all" or "not very" likely to defend the speaker's right to express their views. Additionally, 45% of Columbia faculty who responded before the encampment started said that if a controversy over offensive speech were to occur on campus, the Columbia administration is "not at all" or "not very" likely to defend the speaker's right to express their views. This jumped to 58% among those who responded after the encampment started.

How Often Are Columbia Faculty Self-Censoring on Campus?

I feel as though I am unable to freely express my opinions, even about our work at Columbia University, resembling a situation in which freedom of expression is limited, akin to what one might experience in China.

While self-censorship among Columbia faculty is not as prevalent as it is among Columbia students, the rates are still concerning. About 21% of faculty report that at least “a couple times a week” they are unable to express their opinion on a subject because of how other faculty, students, or the administration would respond. Another 42% of Columbia faculty say they “occasionally” feel this way.

Asked about in a variety of specific contexts, percentages of Columbia faculty that reported self-censoring at least “a couple times a week” included:

- 22% during conversations with other faculty
- 26% during conversations with administrators
- 21% during conversations with their students
- 21% during classroom discussions

Roughly 1 in 3 (32%) Columbia faculty reported feeling “a good deal” or “a great deal” of pressure to avoid discussing controversial topics in their classes. And 23% report having toned down something they recently wrote because they worried it might cause too much controversy.

Thankfully, most Columbia faculty report not self-censoring their academic research or writing. Of those who say they are “very” or “extremely” likely to self-censor:

- 6% say so regarding research topics investigated.
- 10% say so regarding academic publications.
- 16% say so regarding publications, talks, interviews, or lectures directed to a general audience.

What Topics Are Difficult for Columbia Faculty to Have Conversations About?

I avoid any discussions related to race, Trump, the Republican Party, or Israel--the costs of diverging from orthodoxy are potentially very high.

Nearly 9 in 10 (89%) Columbia faculty identified the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a topic difficult to have an open and honest conversation about on their campus — even higher than among students. Notable but smaller proportions of Columbia faculty also say affirmative action (42%), racial inequality (38%), and hate speech (35%) are difficult to discuss. No other topic was identified as difficult by one-third or more of Columbia faculty.

What Kinds of Disruptive Conduct Do Columbia Faculty Consider Acceptable?

Most faculty agree that it is never acceptable to shout down a speaker to prevent them from speaking, block others from entering a campus speech, or use violence to stop a campus speech. But strikingly, 37% of Columbia faculty think it is at least “rarely” acceptable for students to shout down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus.

TABLE 2 Faculty Indicating it is “Never” Acceptable for Students or Faculty to Engage in the Following Forms of Illiberal Protest

	FOR STUDENTS	FOR FACULTY
Shout down	63%	78%
Block entry	83%	91%
Violence	96%	97%

A ‘Yellow Light’ School

FIRE AWARDS COLUMBIA’S REGULATIONS on student expression a “yellow light” rating, flagging seven policies that earn that rating for posing either impermissibly vague or clear but narrow restrictions on protected speech. These include three harassment policies that fail to sufficiently track the legal standard for peer harassment in an educational setting, two demonstrations policies that require advance approval from administrators prior to any event on campus — essentially prohibiting all spontaneous expressive activity — and an internet usage policy prohibiting any use of university email to send “nuisance email,” “chain letters,” or “obscene or harassing messages,” a vague list of items ripe for abuse by administrators.

Perhaps of greatest concern, however, is a bias reporting policy that invites students to report incidents “when language or behavior conveys prejudice” and is motivated “by a negative judgment” about a person’s “perceived identity.” Columbia then determines whether to punish the violator or “assist in implementing remedying solutions, such as a facilitated dialogue and/or educational opportunities.”

Bias reporting schemes like this often have a chilling effect on students and the broader campus community because students fear being reported by their classmates for saying anything that might run afoul of this broad, subjective standard. Columbia must revise each of these policies to reduce the chilling effect they impose on the campus speech climate.

Still, even if Columbia modified its speech policies to obtain a “green light” rating, it would rank 248 in this year’s College Free Speech Rankings with an overall score of 14.42, ahead of only Harvard, New York University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Barnard College.

A Recent History of Controversy

AS A PRACTICAL MATTER, FIRE chose not to penalize schools in the 2025 College Free Speech Rankings for how they handled the encampment protests over the last academic year. The exclusion of these particular events is *not* an endorsement of how schools handled the spring 2024 semester. Indeed, we highlighted several problems earlier.

However, Columbia’s ranking was still negatively impacted by the outcomes of 14 speech controversies since 2020 unrelated to the encampments.

In 2021, graduate and undergraduate student protesters interrupted then-President Lee Bollinger’s undergraduate political science class, “Freedom of Speech and Press,” to express their support for the Student Workers of Columbia, who were threatening to strike if their contract demands were not met. Bollinger dismissed his class early and exited through a side door to avoid the protesters outside.

That same year, students filed a complaint with the university’s Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action after law professor Dinah PoKempner **said “nigger” 11 times** while relating how a lawyer for the Southern Poverty Law Center once faked an accent and used the racial slur in a effort to get a member of the Ku Klux Klan to open up during deposition. Students also wrote a letter to the Institute for the Study of Human Rights, where PoKempner was employed. After being placed under investigation and subsequently suspended by Columbia, PoKempner was terminated.

In 2022, Jeffrey Lieberman tweeted “whether a work of art or freak of nature she’s a beautiful sight to behold” about Nyakim Gatwech, a dark-skinned model. Following this tweet, Columbia removed Lieberman from his position as psychiatrist-in-chief and suspended him from his position as the psychiatry department chair.

The remaining 11 controversial incidents have all occurred since Oct. 7, 2023.

On Oct. 23, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke on a panel with Michelle Bachelet and Maria Ressa, marking the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. During the discussion, a heckler **began shouting over Clinton**, demanding that she denounce President Joe Biden’s “warmongering” speech from the previous week in which he called for \$100 billion more in funding to help defend Israel, Taiwan, and Ukraine. After yelling over Clinton for several minutes, the heckler left. The panel resumed and was completed successfully.

The same week, board members of LionLez, a student organization “for queer women and nonbinary people run by students of color” at Columbia, **postponed a film screening** because the group’s president and founder, Lizzy George-Griffin, defended a controversial flier promoting the event in an email. The flier said, “It’s FREE PALESTINE over here. Zionists aren’t invited.” In her email, George-Griffin wrote, “white Jewish people are today and always have been the oppressors of all brown people,” that “Israelites are the Nazis,” and that “WHEN I SAY THE HOLOCAUST WASN’T SPECIAL, I MEAN THAT.”

Two other LionLez board members released an anonymous statement distancing the organization from George-Griffin, who sent her email without consulting other board members. University administrators then demanded that LionLez leadership take down its post about the event being rescheduled because

“the event has not been rescheduled” and “Columbia has policies and a process through which students can be disciplined for their behavior.”

In December, Columbia Social Workers 4 Palestine organized a teach-in and discussion about “the significance of the October 7 Palestinian counteroffensive” and placed promotional posters across campus. A faculty member shared a photo of these posters on social media and called for people to complain to administrators. The administration revoked their approval of the event because the promotional materials were not approved by the school, but the students held the event anyway.

In February 2024, hecklers once again **attempted to disrupt** an event featuring former Secretary of State Clinton. The university’s School of International and Public Affairs invited Clinton to speak at an event titled “Preventing and Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,” along with Linda Thomas-Greenfield. As Clinton was speaking, a heckler began calling her a “war criminal.” The school’s dean had the heckler escorted out by security. At least two additional hecklers stood up and shouted over Clinton during her remarks.

Clinton paused her speech and noted, “People are free to protest, but they are not free to disrupt the events or classes.” As Thomas-Greenfield was speaking, protesters began shouting over her too, calling for attendees to walk out. Some attendees stood up, chanted “Free, free Palestine” and blocked the entrance before leaving. Thomas-Greenfield subsequently finished her remarks.

Columbia has also sanctioned a number of scholars since the beginning of 2024. This includes not renewing Abdul Kayum Ahmed’s contract after a Wall Street Journal article discussed lecture recordings in which Ahmed, a professor of public health, called Israel a colonial settler state and encouraged students to engage in activism. It also includes the termination of Mohamed Abdou, a professor of Modern Arab Studies — a termination confirmed by then-President Shafik during her congressional testimony.

Three faculty members were placed under investigation by Columbia since the start of the year. Shai Davidai was investigated for a series of posts on X admonishing pro-Palestinian student groups and protesters. Tonika Boston, a professor of social work was investigated after social work students complained about her in-class comments about media reports of sexual violence against Israeli women on Oct. 7. Finally, psychology professor Carl Hart has claimed he was the victim of targeted harassment by campus security officers after the school intensified safety protocols in response to the ongoing pro-Palestinian encampment.

Multiple student groups at Columbia have also claimed they have been sanctioned this year.

Columbia University Apartheid Divest said that administrators forced them to change an event’s location and then cancel an event featuring pro-Palestinian speakers Charlotte Kates, Khaled Barakat, and Nerdeen Kiswani following a complaint from a Ph.D. student.

Some members of Columbia University Apartheid Divest ultimately held the event, virtually, from a dorm room. Columbia administrators considered this event “unsanctioned” and, after an investigation, suspended six students and evicted them from campus housing. The administrators would later reverse the sanctions for two of those students.

Finally, the Columbia Law School Student Senate denied recognition to Law Students Against Antisemitism, apparently on the grounds that by adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of anti-Semitism, the group would be improperly “conflat[ing] antisemitism with anti-Zionism.” Ultimately a re-vote was held, and the group was approved.

How Can Columbia Improve?

COLUMBIA CAN IMPROVE by adopting the following five practices: 1) Have policies in place before protests erupt, 2) work with stakeholders on policy, 3) enforce rules quickly, fairly, and consistently, 4) commit to honesty and transparency, and 5) adopt the [Chicago Statement](#) and [institutional neutrality](#).

By taking appropriate measures regarding speech on campus, the school can create a more open learning environment for its faculty and students, which would result in a green light rating rather than the yellow light status it now has.

When the protests hit, Columbia wasn't ready, and that's inexcusable. As a result, it was forced to change its policies, or its enforcement of those policies, in reaction to fast-moving events. Whether or not they actually *are* politically motivated — and in Columbia's case, they certainly were — such changes will always *appear* to be politically motivated, undercutting confidence in both the decision-makers and the policies.

Universities including Columbia should also work with stakeholders in making policies. Columbia set a bad precedent early on by unilaterally changing the rules for special events and subsequently punishing groups for violating them. For instance, does a college or university really need a blanket ban on encampments? Why? What if a less restrictive regime would better serve all parties? Stakeholder involvement makes it far more likely that such inquiries will be made. In addition, when stakeholders are involved in shaping policy and required to defend their positions, they are more likely to adhere to the rules. On the other hand, if they have no say in the process, they're more likely to justify breaking the rules.

Once it establishes reasonable and just policies, Columbia must enforce the rules quickly, fairly, and consistently. While Columbia may have been taken by surprise when the first tents appeared on April 18, it surely was not surprised when, on April 21, students who had been sleeping on tarps began to put the tents up again. Why did Columbia not stop them at the time? If enforcing its no-camping policy seemed unreasonable, that should have been taken as a sign that the rule itself might be a bad idea. Allowing rule breaking, with repeated negotiation over punishment for rule-breakers, sends the message that the institution does not have confidence in its own policies. If it does not, why should its students or faculty have any respect for those rules?

University leaders must set an unimpeachable standard of honesty, sincerity, and transparency. It should go without saying (though it evidently did not) that half the members of the “bias response team” should not be sending fellow administrators snarky texts making fun of Jewish figures. It's not enough for administrators to assure themselves or others that they can be fair. Such assurances will be seen as empty unless they also appear fair to reasonable observers. Additionally, they should make difficult decisions both decisively and with accountability. For example, enforcing decisions in a passive-aggressive manner by deactivating an ID card, as was done with Prof. Davidai, is not the right approach. Similarly, if there is no real chance that a demand will be met — such as the demand for Columbia to divest from Israel — it is deceptive to negotiate such demands with students and therefore tempt them to risk punishment for what they see as a larger moral good.

Finally, Columbia should adopt and bind itself to both the [Chicago Statement](#), which commits the institution to free speech, and to [institutional neutrality](#), and then stick to those commitments. The University of Chicago’s [Kalven Report](#), the forerunner of modern statements of institutional neutrality, dates to 1967. Yet despite its obvious advantages in helping universities avoid unwinnable involvement in social conflicts, it is only in the wake of the Oct. 7 attack on Israel that other universities have [begun to rush](#) to embrace institutional neutrality. While the popularity of institutional neutrality is a welcome development, Columbia and other universities have had many decades during which they could have, and should have, seriously considered making such a commitment.

While Columbia and President Shafik repeatedly attempted to avoid taking a side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after Oct. 7, Columbia has long taken sides on other controversial issues. As recently as 2021, Columbia announced that it would [divest from oil and gas companies](#), with then-president Lee Bollinger saying, “[t]here is an undeniable obligation binding upon Columbia and other universities to confront the climate crisis across every dimension of our institutions.” Columbia’s leadership therefore lacked any credibility in their attempt to avoid choosing one side or the other of the immediate and deadly conflict in the Middle East — and partisans on both sides knew it.

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