

FIRE's Religious Liberty on Campus Surveys

Summary of Results

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Background

Since its founding in 1999, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) has defended the religious liberty of dozens of students and student groups on college and university campuses across the country. It quickly became clear that there exists a profound misunderstanding—or willful ignorance—of the essential freedoms guaranteed to every citizen by the First Amendment. FIRE has found itself involved in case after case where those in charge of educational institutions sought to prevent religious students from practicing their faith. Students at institutions where the free exercise of religion was under assault too often did not or could not defend themselves. Though many students were either the targets of such oppression or appalled witnesses to it, few had a clear understanding of their rights under the law and of the fundamental respect that should be afforded private conscience and belief.

Now, FIRE has turned anecdotal evidence of the pervasive ignorance surrounding vital issues of American liberty into rigorous data. FIRE commissioned two national surveys that measured, respectively, administrators' and students' knowledge of the First Amendment and how it applies on college and university campuses.

The shocking results demonstrate a profound and dangerous failure to comprehend the moral and legal basis for religious liberty. FIRE is releasing the results of the surveys at a time of year often given to reflection on the value of religious freedom. We hope that the results of our poll will encourage the nation and its academic leaders to turn their attention to this vitally important issue. For more information, please visit www.thefire.org/religiousliberty.

Method

FIRE's Religious Liberty on Campus surveys were conducted between **December 2002** and **April 2003** by the **Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut (CSRA)**.

Number of students surveyed: **1037**

Number of colleges and universities represented in the student survey: **339**

Number of administrators surveyed: **306**

Number of colleges and universities represented in the administrator survey: **306**

Key Findings

Knowledge of the First Amendment:

Students and administrators were asked to name **any** of the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment.

- Only **21%** of administrators and **30%** of students named freedom of religion. (For full results, see Survey Q1.)

Students and administrators were asked which freedom the First Amendment mentions **first**.

- Only **6%** of administrators and **2%** of students correctly named freedom of religion. (Q2)

Importance of Religious Freedom:

Students and administrators were asked about **the importance of the right of students to practice the religion of their choice**.

- **74%** of students and **87%** of administrators stated that it is “essential” that students on their campuses have this right. (Q5)

Climate for Freedom of Expression on Campus:

Students and administrators were asked to choose a description that most closely describes **their view of religious individuals’ activities on campus**.

- **41%** of administrators and **32%** of students believe that religious individuals should spread their religious beliefs by whatever legal means they choose.
- **41%** of administrators say that their administration takes the view that religious people should be careful not to offend people while spreading their beliefs.
- Students echoed administrators’ attitudes, with **55%** stating that religious individuals should avoid giving offense while spreading their religious beliefs. (Q16)

Given the extremely broad notion of “offense” that prevails on most campuses, it is alarming that both students and administrators value not “offending” others as much or more than they value the freedom to spread one’s religious beliefs.

Awareness of Threats to Religious Freedom:

Despite the threats to religious liberty that prevail on our nation's campuses,

- 90% of students and 95% of administrators agreed that students on their respective campuses have about the right amount of religious freedom. (Q10)

The Promotion of Religious Versus Non-Religious Viewpoints:

Students and administrators were asked if their respective college or university has the **legal right to prohibit non-religious groups from actively recruiting** members.

- Only 12% of administrators and 12% of students stated that their respective college or university has the legal right to prohibit non-religious student groups from actively recruiting members. (Q38)

They were also asked if their respective college or university has the **legal right to prohibit a religious group from actively trying to convert students** to a particular religion.

- In this case, 24% of administrators and 19% of students stated that their respective college or university does have the legal right to prohibit a student religious group from actively trying to convert students to its religion. (Q37)

The unfair treatment of religious student groups on campus is made possible by the fact that too many students and administrators believe that restrictions on recruiting members should apply unequally to religious and non-religious groups.

The Promotion of Controversial Viewpoints:

Students and administrators were presented with several scenarios involving the existence of a **student group with controversial views**:

1. Allowing religious groups, including those that hold traditional and restrictive views about gender and sexuality, to advance their particular viewpoints on campus: (Q13)

Percent that **support this strongly**:

Group	Overall	Public	Private
Administrators	43%	56%	36%
Students	23%	22%	23%

2. Allowing students to form a club on your campus that argues that homosexual behavior is sinful and can be altered by prayer: (Q23)

Percent that **agree with this strongly**:

Group	Overall	Public	Private
Administrators	32%	48%	23%
Students	20%	21%	20%

3. Allowing students to form a club on your campus that encourages women to be submissive to men in the home and society, even though administrators actively oppose its formation to ensure a supportive and nurturing campus environment: (Q24)

Percent that **agree with this strongly**:

Group	Overall	Public	Private
Administrators	29%	44%	21%
Students	15%	13%	16%

4. Allowing a student Christian group on your campus that wants to use its funds, provided through a system of student fees, to buy newspaper advertisements and to engage speakers that condemn pro-choice students on campus: (Q30)

Percent that **agree with this strongly**:

Group	Overall	Public	Private
Administrators	25%	31%	22%
Students	46%	40%	50%

These results indicate that both students and administrators fail to understand the vital importance—indeed, the core American value—of permitting expression even when it may be offensive to others. Such a rejection of free expression poses grave dangers to the entire spectrum of American belief and to the recognition of the rights of free peoples.

Voluntary Association on the Basis of Religious Views:

Students and administrators were asked about **voluntary association rights**, on and off campus:

1. Under current U.S. law is a religious group that believes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender behavior or lifestyle is sinful allowed to exclude gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals from joining their organization? (Q11a)

Percent that said, “**Yes**”:

Group	Overall	Public	Private
Administrators	16%	19%	14%
Students	40%	36%	41%

2. If a student Christian group on your campus believes that homosexuality is in opposition to scripture, and wants to exclude individuals who are homosexual and who believe that their homosexuality is not immoral, from leadership of the group, would you agree or disagree that this group should be allowed to exclude such individuals from leadership in the group? (Q31)

Percent that agree with this strongly:

Group	Overall	Public	Private
Administrators	9%	14%	7%
Students	31%	33%	29%

*As a consequence of the 2000 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*, a public university simply may not use anti-discrimination policies to dictate the leadership or membership of religious groups. The fact that less than one fifth of public institution administrators understand this reveals a failure to grasp the principle of voluntary association that may underlie the denial of religious liberty to student religious groups (to read about a number of FIRE’s religious liberty cases, please visit www.thefire.org/religiousliberty). Freedom of association for religious and other expressive purposes is inseparable from freedom of expression, and voluntary association lies at the very heart of religious and political liberty.*

Inconsistent Views on Freedom:

Students were asked if their college or university has the right to tell all incoming students that they **must** attend an orientation that includes diversity training or sensitivity training, **the goal of which is to lead them to value all sexual preferences and to recognize the relativity of these values compared to the values of their upbringings.**

- **33%** of students from public and **46%** of students from private colleges or universities stated that their college or university does have this right.
- **49%** of administrators from private and **34%** of administrators from public colleges or universities stated that this type of mandatory exercise is required of students. (Q11c)

Results previously discussed revealed that a significant number of students believed that their college or university has the right to prevent religious student groups from actively converting other students to a particular religion, yet an even greater number also believe that their college or university has the legal right to enforce mandatory and intrusive “thought reform” on behalf of an ideological agenda.

The margin of error in the student survey is ± 2.8 percent. The margin of error in the administrator survey is ± 5.6 percent.

More: www.thefire.org/religiousliberty