

5 Tips for Choosing a College that Respects Free Speech

1. IS IT A PUBLIC OR A PRIVATE INSTITUTION?

Not all colleges treat free speech rights equally. Public colleges, as state agents, are legally bound to respect the constitutional rights of their students. Private colleges and universities are not directly bound by the First Amendment, which limits only government action. Although you can generally expect greater recognition of the free speech rights of students at public schools, even public institutions sometimes fail to live up to their constitutional obligations.

2. IF IT IS A PRIVATE INSTITUTION, DOES IT ADVERTISE ITSELF AS A PLACE WHERE FREE SPEECH IS ESTEEMED AND PROTECTED?

Despite not being directly bound by the constitution, the vast majority of private universities have traditionally viewed themselves—and sold themselves—as bastions of free thought and expression.

If a private college advertises itself as a place where free speech is esteemed and protected—as most of them do—then it should be held to the same standard as a public institution. (You can typically find these statements in their published or online materials. Try searching terms like “free speech,” “speech code,” or “academic freedom” on the school’s website.) Private colleges and universities should be held to the standard that they themselves establish; they are contractually bound to respect the promises they make to students.

Some institutions promise freedom of expression in university promotional materials and student conduct policies, but then deliver selective censorship once the first tuition check is cashed. They may not be bound by the First Amendment, but private institutions are still legally obligated to provide what they promise. Private institutions may not engage in fraud or breach of contract.

You will also want to conduct a brief internet search to see if the school has been the site of any recent attempts to shut down invited speeches or other intimidation tactics to silence protected free speech. If so, how did the administration respond? If you’re not comfortable with the school’s response, this is definitely something to consider and discuss before enrolling.

3. CHECK THE SCHOOL’S FIRE RATING IN OUR [SPOTLIGHT DATABASE](#).

You can also search the school in our Search Engine to see activity or has implemented policies that infringe upon students’ freedom of speech rights. FIRE awards Red, Yellow, or Green Light ratings to indicate whether the school clearly and substantially restricts free expression (Red), restrict some expression or have vague policies (Yellow), or maintains policies that do not undermine free speech (Green.)

Be sure to review our annual list of the [10 Worst Schools for Free Speech](#) to find some of the worst offenders quickly. But, better still, use the database to identify schools that have earned FIRE’s [Green Light rating](#).



4. **DOUBLE-CHECK WITH HETERODOX ACADEMY'S GUIDE TO COLLEGES**

There are other metrics you can use to assess a school's respect for free speech and liberty. One indicator FIRE recommends is whether or not the school has endorsed the University of Chicago's exemplary statement on Academic Freedom (which we encourage all colleges to do. You can find a copy of this statement [here.](#))

Heterodox Academy has conveniently compiled several of these indicators into a useful format that you can use to assess different colleges' commitments to viewpoint diversity and tolerating free expression. Heterodox Academy ratings combine FIRE's free speech ratings with US News & World Report rankings, Chicago Statement endorsement status, and ratings from the [Intercollegiate Studies Institute](#).

5. **VISIT THE SCHOOL AND ASK STUDENTS AND OFFICIAL REPRESENTATIVES ABOUT THE CAMPUS RULES AND CLIMATE FOR FREE SPEECH AND OPEN INQUIRY.**

Armed with this background research, you'll be well-prepared for personal school visits. While you're there, don't just listen to the marketing spiel from the admissions representatives: be sure to speak up and ask questions about the issues that will matter to you most in college!

If the school has a Yellow or Red free speech rating, you could ask the school representatives about that. If there seems to be an ideological bias on campus, you could ask how students in the ideological minority are treated on campus by professors, administrators, and peers. Another good question to ask is whether all topics are open to discussion on campus, or if certain topics are considered "closed" or "off limits."

Be sure to talk to students, too, and ask them if they feel the campus climate is biased against certain groups and if there is tolerance or suppression of certain points of view. Are professors welcoming of viewpoints that differ from their own? What do the current students think?

The more colleges hear that potential applicants take free speech rights seriously, the better. And remember: you can help make any college safer for free speech. At FIRE, we depend on students like you to report incidents of free speech infringement, so know your rights and [get involved!](#) Together, we can improve the climate for free speech on campuses across the country.

SPOTLIGHT RATINGS



Red Light

Adams State University
Alabama A&M University
Barnard College
Bates College
Boise State University
Boston College
Boston University
California State University - Dominguez Hills
California State University - Fresno
California State University - Monterey Bay
Carleton College
Case Western Reserve University
Cheyney University of Pennsylvania
Chicago State University
Clark University
Clemson University
Coastal Carolina University
Colby College
Colgate University
College of Charleston
College of the Holy Cross
Connecticut College
Dakota State University
Dartmouth College
Davidson College
Delaware State University
DePauw University
Dickinson College
Drexel University
Eastern Illinois University
Emory University
Evergreen State College
Florida State University
Fordham University
Fort Lewis College
Framingham State University
Furman University
Georgetown University
Georgia Southern University
Governors State University
Grinnell College
Harvard University
Howard University
Idaho State University
Johns Hopkins University
Kean University
Lafayette College
Lake Superior State University
Lehigh University
Lewis-Clark State College
Lincoln University
Louisiana State University - Baton Rouge
Macalester College
Marquette University
Middlebury College
Morehead State University
Mount Holyoke College
Murray State University
New Jersey Institute of Technology
Northeastern University
Northern Illinois University
Northern Vermont University
Oklahoma State University - Stillwater
Portland State University
Princeton University
Reed College
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Southeastern Louisiana University
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
Southern Oregon University
Southern Utah University
St. Olaf College
State University of New York - Fredonia
State University of New York - New Paltz
State University of New York - Albany
Stevens Institute of Technology
Syracuse University
Tennessee State University
The College of New Jersey
Troy University

Tufts University
Tulane University
Union College
University of Alabama at Birmingham
University of Alaska Anchorage
University of Alaska Fairbanks
University of Central Missouri
University of Central Oklahoma
University of Houston
University of Illinois at Chicago
University of Louisiana Lafayette
University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth
University of Massachusetts at Lowell
University of Miami
University of Montana
University of New Orleans
University of North Texas
University of Notre Dame
University of South Carolina Columbia
University of Southern California
University of Texas at Austin
University of Texas at Dallas
University of Tulsa
University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh
University of Wyoming
Utah State University
Villanova University
Virginia State University
Western Illinois University
Whitman College
Wichita State University
William Paterson University
Worcester Polytechnic Institute



Yellow Light

Alabama State University
American University
Amherst College
Angelo State University
Arkansas State University
Athens State University
Auburn University Montgomery
Ball State University
Bard College
Bemidji State University
Black Hills State University
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania
Bowdoin College
Bowling Green State University
Brandeis University
Bridgewater State University
Brooklyn College, City University of New York
Brown University
Bryn Mawr College
Bucknell University
California Institute of Technology
California Maritime Academy
California Polytechnic State University
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
California State University - Bakersfield
California State University - Channel Islands
California State University - Chico
California State University - East Bay
California State University - Fullerton
California State University - Long Beach
California State University - Los Angeles
California State University - Northridge
California State University - Sacramento
California State University - San Bernardino
California State University - San Marcos
California State University - Stanislaus
California University of Pennsylvania
Cameron University
Carnegie Mellon University
Central Connecticut State University
Central Michigan University
Central Washington University

Centre College
 Christopher Newport University
 Clarion University of Pennsylvania
 Colorado College
 Colorado Mesa University
 Colorado School of Mines
 Colorado State University
 Colorado State University Pueblo
 Columbia University
 Cornell University
 East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania
 East Tennessee State University
 Eastern Michigan University
 Eastern New Mexico University
 Eastern Washington University
 Elizabeth City State University
 Fayetteville State University
 Ferris State University
 Fitchburg State University
 Florida A&M University
 Florida Atlantic University
 Florida Gulf Coast University
 Florida International University
 Fort Hays State University
 Franklin & Marshall College
 Frostburg State University
 George Washington University
 Georgia Institute of Technology
 Georgia State University
 Gettysburg College
 Grambling State University
 Grand Valley State University
 Hamilton College
 Harvey Mudd College
 Haverford College
 Henderson State University
 Humboldt State University
 Hunter College, City University of New York
 Illinois State University
 Indiana State University
 Indiana University - Bloomington
 Indiana University - Kokomo
 Indiana University - Purdue University Columbus
 Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis
 Indiana University of Pennsylvania
 Indiana University South Bend
 Indiana University, East
 Indiana University, Northwest
 Indiana University, Southeast
 Iowa State University
 Jackson State University
 Jacksonville State University
 James Madison University
 Kennesaw State University
 Kent State University
 Kentucky State University
 Kenyon College
 Kutztown University of Pennsylvania
 Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania
 Longwood University
 Louisiana Tech University
 Mansfield University of Pennsylvania
 Marshall University
 Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
 Massachusetts Institute of Technology
 Metropolitan State University
 Metropolitan State University of Denver
 Miami University of Ohio
 Michigan State University
 Middle Georgia State University
 Middle Tennessee State University
 Millersville University of Pennsylvania
 Missouri State University
 Missouri University of Science & Technology
 Montana State University
 Montana Tech of the University of Montana
 Montclair State University
 New College of Florida
 New Mexico State University
 New York University
 Nicholls State University
 Norfolk State University
 North Carolina A&T State University
 North Dakota State University
 Northeastern Illinois University
 Northern Kentucky University
 Northern Michigan University
 Northwestern Oklahoma State University



Northwestern State University
Northwestern University
Oakland University
Oberlin College
Occidental College
Ohio University
Old Dominion University
Pennsylvania State University - University Park
Pittsburg State University
Pitzer College
Pomona College
Radford University
Rhode Island College
Rice University
Rogers State University
Rowan University
Rutgers University - New Brunswick
Saginaw Valley State University
Saint Cloud State University
Salem State University
Sam Houston State University
San Diego State University
San Francisco State University
San Jose State University
Scripps College
Sewanee, The University of the South
Shawnee State University
Skidmore College
Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania
Smith College
Sonoma State University
South Dakota State University
Southeast Missouri State University
Southern Connecticut State University
Southern Methodist University
Southwest Minnesota State University
Stanford University
State University of New York - Binghamton
State University of New York - Oswego
State University of New York - University at Buffalo
State University of New York College of
Environmental Science and Forestry
Stockton University
Stony Brook University
Swarthmore College
Tarleton State University
Temple University
Tennessee Technological University
Texas Southern University
Texas State University - San Marcos
Texas Tech University
Texas Woman's University
The City College of New York
The Ohio State University
The University of Virginia's College at Wise
Towson University
Trinity College
University of Akron
University of Alabama
University of Alabama in Huntsville
University of Alaska Southeast
University of Arkansas - Fayetteville
University of California Berkeley
University of California Davis
University of California Irvine
University of California Merced
University of California Riverside
University of California San Diego
University of California Santa Barbara
University of California Santa Cruz
University of Central Arkansas
University of Central Florida
University of Cincinnati
University of Colorado at Boulder
University of Connecticut
University of Delaware
University of Denver
University of Georgia
University of Hawaii at Manoa
University of Hawaii Hilo
University of Idaho
University of Illinois at Springfield
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
University of Iowa
University of Kansas
University of Kentucky

University of Maine
University of Maine at Fort Kent
University of Maine Presque Isle
University of Mary Washington
University of Massachusetts - Amherst
University of Massachusetts - Boston
University of Memphis
University of Michigan - Ann Arbor
University of Michigan - Dearborn
University of Michigan - Flint
University of Minnesota - Morris
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
University of Missouri - Columbia
University of Missouri at St. Louis
University of Missouri-Kansas City
University of Montana Western
University of Montevallo
University of Nebraska - Lincoln
University of Nebraska Omaha
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
University of Nevada, Reno
University of New Mexico
University of North Alabama
University of North Carolina at Asheville
University of North Carolina School of the Arts
University of North Georgia
University of Northern Colorado
University of Northern Iowa
University of Oklahoma
University of Oregon
University of Pennsylvania
University of Pittsburgh
University of Rhode Island
University of Richmond
University of Rochester
University of South Alabama
University of South Dakota
University of South Florida
University of South Florida at Saint Petersburg
University of Southern Indiana
University of Southern Maine
University of Texas at Arlington
University of Texas at El Paso
University of Texas at San Antonio
University of Texas at Tyler
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
University of Toledo
University of Utah
University of Vermont
University of Washington
University of West Alabama
University of West Florida
University of West Georgia
University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire
University of Wisconsin - Green Bay
University of Wisconsin - La Crosse
University of Wisconsin - Madison
University of Wisconsin - Stout
University of Wisconsin Milwaukee
Utah Valley University
Valdosta State University
Vanderbilt University
Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Wake Forest University
Washington & Lee University
Washington State University
Washington University in St. Louis
Wayne State University
Weber State University
Wellesley College
Wesleyan University
West Chester University of Pennsylvania
West Virginia University
Western Kentucky University
Western Michigan University
Western Oregon University
Western Washington University
Westfield State University
Williams College
Winona State University
Winston Salem State University
Worcester State University
Wright State University
Yale University
Youngstown State University



Green Light

Alcorn State University
Appalachian State University
Arizona State University
Auburn University
Claremont McKenna College
Cleveland State University
Delta State University
Duke University
East Carolina University
Eastern Kentucky University
Edinboro University of Pennsylvania
George Mason University
Kansas State University
Keene State College
McNeese State University
Michigan Technological University
Mississippi State University
North Carolina Central University
North Carolina State University
Northern Arizona University
Oregon State University
Plymouth State University
Purdue University
Purdue University Fort Wayne
Purdue University Northwest
Shippensburg University
State University of New York - Brockport
State University of New York - Plattsburgh
Texas A&M University
The College of William & Mary
University of Arizona
University of California Los Angeles
University of Chicago
University of Florida
University of Louisville
University of Maryland - College Park
University of Mississippi
University of New Hampshire
University of North Carolina - Pembroke
University of North Carolina Chapel Hill
University of North Carolina Charlotte
University of North Carolina Greensboro

University of North Carolina Wilmington
University of North Dakota
University of North Florida
University of Southern Mississippi
University of Tennessee Knoxville
University of Virginia
Western Carolina University
Western Colorado University



Warning Schools*

Baylor University
Brigham Young University
Pepperdine University
Saint Louis University
Vassar College
Yeshiva University

*These schools make clear that they put other values above freedom of expression. Students should not expect free speech protections.