There are a lot of words you could use to describe FIRE. In the last year, many of those characteristics came to the forefront, as we confronted unprecedented demand, unique challenges, and unanticipated obstacles. Agile. Aggressive. Supportive. Creative.

But the word we are most proud of? Principled.

At a time when far too many are willing to abandon principle in favor of partisanship, FIRE continues to be a proudly nonpartisan organization. The events of the past year made that clearer than ever before. With threats to expression coming from all sides, FIRE remained firmly planted on the side of free speech. And thanks to the generous support of our donors, we were able to translate that principle into action.
When student and faculty rights are in jeopardy, it is critical to act quickly—and effectively. Over the past year, FIRE’s Individual Rights Defense Program once again demonstrated its ability to do so.

Just consider Stanford University student Nicholas Wallace’s experience. After Wallace sent a satirical email mocking the university’s Federalist Society chapter to the student listserv, the university initiated an investigation into Wallace and put a hold on his diploma two weeks before his law school graduation.

FIRE quickly sprang into action. Our defense team gathered all the facts, contacted the university, and issued a national press release. Thanks to our efforts, the story quickly went viral, leading a U.S. Senator to chime in and call on the university to change course. And just one day later, they did. The investigation was suspended, and Wallace graduated on time with his peers.

Not every case goes viral, and not every issue is resolved so quickly, but FIRE’s defense program remains an agile—and steadfast—advocate for every voice. In the last year, we firmly stood on the side of students and faculty, no matter their viewpoint, and continued to secure justice on behalf of those targeted by campus abuse.

Our Individual Rights Defense Program successfully advocated on behalf of:

- Rutgers University Law School student groups, which faced a student government requirement to host events through the “lens” of critical race theory or diversity in order to be eligible for student fee funding.
- A University of San Diego professor who faced an investigation over a blog post questioning whether COVID-19 originated in a laboratory in China.
- The University of Pennsylvania’s Hunting, Archery, and Shooting student club, which was denied recognition due to the “nature of the group’s mission and potential group activities.”
- A Sam Houston State University graduate student who was expelled after tweeting her disagreements with the school administration.

I am immensely grateful to FIRE for their support over the past few days, and their ongoing advocacy for students’ free speech rights. Nicholas Wallace, Stanford University student
Some administrators just don’t get it. FIRE’s Litigation Project exists to make sure they learn fast and respect the law. This year, it took litigation to ensure Haskell Indian Nations University would face the facts.

In the fall of 2020, student journalist Jared Nally earned the ire of Haskell President Ronald Graham. After Nally’s critical reporting, Graham issued a “Directive” forbidding Nally from engaging in standard newspapering activities and threatening him with discipline if he engaged in these and other constitutionally protected activities or failed to show members of the Haskell community the “highest respect.” Haskell also imposed financial and administrative hurdles on The Indian Leader, the award-winning student newspaper where Nally is editor-in-chief.

That egregious behavior earned Haskell a lawsuit. Filed in March, FIRE’s suit challenges Graham’s retaliation against Nally and the Indian Leader as well as the university’s policies on student expressive rights.

That suit is just one of the many aggressive steps our Litigation Project took this year to defend student and faculty rights on campus.

**Case highlights:**

- **In February,** FIRE filed a lawsuit on behalf of Kimberly Diei, a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center College of Pharmacy. Diei was twice investigated by her program’s Professional Conduct Committee because of allegations that her personal social media activity was too “crude.” FIRE’s suit challenges the college’s vague professionalism policies as well as the university’s disciplinary actions against Diei for her constitutionally-protected expression.

- **After FIRE worked with student Michael Brown to file suit against Jones County Junior College for their repeated abuses,** we finalized a settlement with the college in November. As part of the settlement, Jones agreed to implement a policy allowing students to express themselves without permission, which includes language from the “Chicago Statement.” The college also agreed to pay $44,000 for attorneys’ fees and damages.

- **FIRE’s legal team secured a settlement on behalf of Central Michigan University Professor Timothy Boudreau. Boudreau was terminated for directly quoting slurs from First Amendment legal cases and records in his media law class.**

- **The Supreme Court ruled favorably in three cases in which FIRE filed amicus curiae briefs.**
  - Alongside the National Coalition Against Censorship and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, FIRE filed an amicus curiae brief in favor of high school student Brandi Levy, who was suspended for a Snapchat post. In June, the Court ruled in Levy’s favor. The Mahoning Area School District v. B.L. ruling means that the rights of students at institutions across the country, from K-12 schools to graduate schools, are more secure.
  - In March, the Court issued an 8-1 ruling in Uzuegbunam v. Preczewski, holding that former Georgia Gwinnett College student Chike Uzuegbunam’s First Amendment lawsuit against his alma mater was not rendered moot after the institution changed its free speech zone policy. FIRE had filed a brief, in partnership with the Cato Institute, urging that result.
  - We also celebrated the Court’s ruling in Americans for Prosperity Foundation v. Bonta, which we briefed alongside a wide range of other groups, in defense of the right to private, anonymous association.

This year, FIRE launched a new Faculty Legal Defense Fund that provides free legal representation to public college faculty members who need it. The fund also features a 24/7 telephone hotline for faculty in need of immediate assistance. With almost one-third of FIRE’s cases involving faculty speech, the fund will be a vital resource to professors fighting for their careers. In its first few months, it had already assisted professors at schools including the University of Illinois at Chicago and SUNY Buffalo State College.

I knew FIRE had my back, so to speak, that they were going to defend me right to the bitter end . . . . They are a great ally to have, a tremendous ally.

Timothy Boudreau, Former Central Michigan University professor and FIRE plaintiff

FIRE is the single greatest legal institution for the preservation of free speech on college campuses in these United States.

Michael Brown, Jones County Junior College student and FIRE plaintiff

THANK GOD for FIRE! . . . FIRE gave me the comfort of public support and solidarity; the Faculty Legal Defense Fund (FLDF) gave me the silver bullet of real legal action.

Jason Kilborn, University of Illinois at Chicago professor and FIRE FLDF client
Engaged

This year, we once again saw how free speech and due process can be threatened by figures on both sides of the aisle. That’s why it is so critical to be engaged at every level as a nonpartisan advocate. FIRE’s Legislative and Policy Project played that role this year, successfully navigating the challenges presented by partisanship.

For example, when it was first introduced, a Nevada campus sexual misconduct bill contained numerous provisions that would have gutted due process. FIRE immediately engaged—testifying in both chambers, calling and writing legislators, and publishing an op-ed in the Las Vegas Review Journal. Thanks to that work, FIRE successfully convinced the Democrat-led legislature to cut a host of those highly problematic provisions from the bill.

By working on the federal and state level, our legislative team was able to secure many other advancements this year—and provide a critical nonpartisan voice for free expression.

Title IX

In August 2020, FIRE celebrated when the new Title IX regulations went into effect on campuses nationwide. After nearly a decade of FIRE’s advocacy, the regulations guarantee critical due process protections that Americans recognize as essential to securing justice, but that have for too long been denied to students accused of sexual misconduct on college campuses. The regulations also include important protections for student free speech rights. That includes a presumption of innocence, impartial investigators, and the right to an advisor. Since August, FIRE has continued to fight for the regulations through lobbying, public outreach, and legal action.

Through individual words and actions . . . you and your administration have a tremendous opportunity to strengthen our national commitment to protecting core civil liberties on campuses nationwide.

FIRE’s open letter to President Joe Biden
When students, faculty, administrators, policy makers, and the general public need expert information and advice, they turn to FIRE’s policy reform team.

Last year, University of Connecticut students Mike Hernández, Isadore Johnson, John “Jay” Mosely, and John Ross sought that expertise as part of their effort to get a version of the Chicago Statement adopted on their campus. That support turned out to be critical, as their campaign was labeled “racist” and “misogynist,” with fellow students calling the petition to support free speech a means to protect hate and enable bigotry. When facing that sort of opposition, hard facts, in-depth research, and legal analysis can make a big difference. FIRE has all of those tools in hand, making our collaboration with students like these all the more powerful.

FIRE’s Policy Reform Project won 35 policy change victories affecting nearly 600,000 students. In just the last two years, FIRE has secured revisions to over 100 individual policies. Eight institutions revised their restrictive policies after being named as our “Speech Code of the Month.”

FIRE welcomed Colorado Mesa University and the University of Colorado Boulder to our “green light” list of institutions without speech codes.

Our speech code reporting has noted a growing number of green light schools in recent years. The percentage of “red light” colleges and universities that maintain policies that substantially restrict students’ and faculty members’ right to freedom of expression dropped to 21.3 percent.

FIRE is one of the most effective organizations in higher education.
Heidi Ganahl, University of Colorado Board of Regents Member

“Even with campuses shut down and administrators tackling the challenges presented by the pandemic, FIRE’s policy team continued to serve as an expert resource to administrators and campus contacts around the country.”

Isadore Johnson, University of Connecticut student activist

“If we can find ways of encouraging the administration to see stakeholders for free speech as important members of the community, then I think we can make some serious changes.”

Isadore Johnson, University of Connecticut student activist

“FIRE’s policy reform efforts pay dividends long after a school works with us to revise their speech codes:

• After the release of our annual speech code report in December, the University of North Florida, the University of Virginia, Arizona State University, and Jackson State University all released press releases announcing their green light ratings.

• In September, Texas A&M University released a new website focused on the school’s commitment to free expression, highlighting the school’s green light rating and linking to FIRE’s online First Amendment Scholar Quiz and First Amendment Library.

• As a green light institution, the University of Virginia offers students a way to immediately report “an incident of disruption of constitutionally protected speech.”

• Green light institutions routinely refer other colleges and universities to FIRE. This year, positive feedback from an administrative contact at the University of North Dakota helped convince administrators at North Dakota State University to work with FIRE to review a proposed “hate speech” policy and other policies.

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FIRE’s Policy Reform Project won 35 policy change victories affecting nearly 600,000 students.
In a truly unique academic year, the FIRE Student Network worked hard to stay connected to student activists around the country. After all, these students need support to stand up to the campus culture. Consider Robert Fensom, a University of North Carolina Wilmington student. As UNCW Student Government Association President, Robert faces a lot of pressure to give in to the illiberal drive to silence unpopular speech. Fortunately, as a FIRE Student Network member and FIRE intern, Robert understands the value of free expression. So when a controversy erupted on campus this year over a Facebook post by a UNCW professor, Robert didn’t shy away from defending the expression, explaining to local media why the post was protected speech and calling any attempts to punish the professor chilling. Individuals like Robert are prime examples of what our FIRE Student Network can enable on campus. By staying connected with students through resources and training, we are empowering numerous on-the-ground advocates fighting for free expression and individual rights.

Thanks to FIRE’s outreach:
- Sam Recheck is organizing the First Amendment Forum at the University of South Florida, an organization encouraging constructive dialogue and recognition for the First Amendment on campus, which also produces a podcast called “Campus Talk: The 1AF Podcast.”
- Audrey Unverferth started a new campus publication at the University of Chicago, called The Chicago Thinker, aimed at featuring diverse voices and supporting the First Amendment.
- Cecelia Vieira served as an undergraduate representative for the University of Pennsylvania’s Committee on Open Expression.

“I am so grateful to FIRE and its wonderful staff for this unforgettable and unparalleled program.”

“During a summer where many of my fellow classmates’ summer opportunities were cancelled, I am very grateful to have had this opportunity and even more so to have immersed in the powerful case law of the First Amendment.”

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“During a summer where many of my fellow classmates’ summer opportunities were cancelled, I am very grateful to have had this opportunity and even more so to have immersed in the powerful case law of the First Amendment.”

“FIRE provided me with the unparalleled opportunity to rigorously study, and defend, the First Amendment.”

-FIRE’s 2020 Interns

This year, professors around the country faced unprecedented challenges. Virtual learning. Overzealous administrators. External pressure from legislators. In the face of that, professors needed a community of support. FIRE’s Faculty Network provided just that. University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Professor and FIRE Faculty Network member April Bleske-Rechek explained just how much that can mean as part of an interview she did with FIRE this spring, saying “There is strength in numbers . . . [and] I know that I can seek help if my voice is not given fair and just treatment.”

As threats to faculty speech grow, last year, the Faculty Network brought together thousands of faculty members from around the country to share resources, collect data, and build a coalition. FIRE’s Faculty Network has over 1,300 members—nearly double last year’s figure. FIRE hosted seven Faculty Network webinars this year. According to our 2021 member survey, more than 40 percent of respondents reported they “fairly often” or “very often” hold back certain opinions for worry about how students, other faculty, or administrators may react.

75 percent of surveyed members said they felt there were significant topics that aren’t openly debated because of fear of social or professional sanctions.

The work that FIRE does is essential, and it is a light of hope in an oppressive environment on campus. Thank you for all you and your colleagues do to preserve free speech and freedom of conscience on campus.

Thank you so much for keeping us faculty in the loop, and for giving us knowledge that can help us engage in productive conversation about student rights.

-FIRE Faculty Network members

“Supportive
**Inspiring**

The last year provided plenty of reasons for pessimism. That was true off campus as well, particularly when one considers the K-12 landscape. Parents struggled to navigate virtual learning, concerns over civic knowledge continued, and heated debates broke out over “thought reform” and “critical race theory.”

FIRE's 2020 high school essay contest attracted almost 3,000 entries and gave out $20,000 in college scholarships to the winning entrants.

**FIRE's High School Network has over 1,700 subscribers.**

FIRE's High School Network webpage attracted almost 40,000 unique page views in December 2020 alone.

FIRE's curriculum package offers 15 different modules.

The essay contest made the First Amendment feel more personal to me. As I wrote it, I had to actually think about how life or college would look if free speech were barred and consider how restrictions could affect me and not just ‘people’ in the abstract.

– Former high school essay contest winner

**Comprehensive**

FIRE isn’t afraid to break into new spheres and be comprehensive in our approach. Our Targeted Advocacy Project proved our ability to effectively do so throughout the past year. Whether through the launch of our “Free Speech Out Loud” podcast, our inclusion in a UN Special Rapporteur report about global academic freedom presented to the General Assembly, the continued expansion of our First Amendment Library, or our work promoting our Free Speech Orientation Program, FIRE once again provided comprehensive resources and commentary that helped advance our mission on a broad scale.

FIRE published two special reports this year, on the impact of COVID on campus speech and on online censorship.

12 colleges and universities engaged with FIRE following our letter encouraging them to adopt the recommendations for academic freedom in a 2020 UN Special Rapporteur report.

FIRE's First Amendment Library attracted over 125,000 unique page views.

12 colleges and universities are currently using modules from FIRE's Free Speech Orientation Program.

When pressured to censor speech at their home campuses or to turn a blind eye to troubling realities at their expansions abroad, universities must transparently reject these efforts and reaffirm their commitments to free expression.

FIRE's Sarah McLaughlin on foreign threats to American college and university students in Newsweek

I think it’s vital that discussion of the principles of free speech and academic freedom become a prominent part of orientation. That, of course, is a conversation that ought to be deepened and renewed over four years of undergraduate education. FIRE has provided a great way to start.

Professor Daniel Cullen, on his experience using FIRE's orientation modules in his classroom

But our High School Outreach Project showed how commitment to principle can inspire. Over the past year, through resources and network-building, it inspired parents around the country to speak out, media to learn more, and students to take action. For example, after he won second prize in FIRE’s 2020-21 high school essay contest, Sami Al-Asady went on to attend our 2021 FIRE Student Network conference. Now, as an incoming freshman at Arizona State University, Sami is already committed to working with FIRE to start a new chapter of our campus civil discourse society, Let’s Talk.

By reaching students like Sami and helping key audiences like parents and educators, FIRE’s High School Network is inspiring national free speech activists.

The Network was mentioned in leading outlets such as The New York Times, New York Daily News, and The Chicago Tribune.

**3,000**

FIRE’s 2020 high school essay contest attracted almost 3,000 entries and gave out $20,000 in college scholarships to the winning entrants.

**1,700**

The FIRE High School Network has over 1,700 subscribers.

**40,000**

FIRE’s High School Network webpage attracted almost 40,000 unique page views in December 2020 alone.

**15**

FIRE’s curriculum package offers 15 different modules.

Our materials have reached 49 states.

When pressured to censor speech at their home campuses or to turn a blind eye to troubling realities at their expansions abroad, universities must transparently reject these efforts and reaffirm their commitments to free expression.

FIRE's Sarah McLaughlin on foreign threats to American college and university students in Newsweek

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Professor Daniel Cullen, on his experience using FIRE's orientation modules in his classroom
Creative

Entrenched problems require creative solutions. For over twenty years, FIRE has sought to be innovative in how we approach challenges on campus. As those challenges have grown deeper and deeper, we have invested even further in original projects and groundbreaking research.

Last year, our team took that work to the next level with the release of a FIRE documentary titled “Mighty Ira.” The film explores the life and career of former American Civil Liberties Union Executive Director and FIRE Advisory Council Member Ira Glasser, with a particular focus on his defense of free speech and First Amendment values. At a time when principled figures like Ira are far and few between, the documentary provides viewers with a reminder of what it means to be a champion for free speech.

That multimedia work was matched by research as well, with the release of FIRE's College Free Speech Rankings, a first-of-its-kind survey of campus specific student attitudes towards free expression.

Thanks to these creative efforts, FIRE helped increase awareness and enlist support.

In September, FIRE released our College Free Speech Rankings, which revealed campus-specific student attitudes towards free speech at 55 colleges and universities nationwide. This first-of-its-kind report surveyed almost 20,000 students and ranked institutions based on that data. Among its findings:

- 8 of the top 10 colleges and universities for free speech are rated as green light by FIRE.
- 8 of the bottom 10 colleges and universities earn a “red light” for their restrictive speech codes.
- 60 percent of students reported feeling that they could not express an opinion because of how students, a professor, or their administration would respond.
- 21 percent of students at Ivy League schools expressed some level of acceptance for using violence to stop a campus speech.

The film was reviewed in 16 leading outlets including The Hollywood Reporter and The New York Times.

Mighty Ira was screened at five film festivals and earned the grand prize for a feature documentary at the Anthem Film Festival.

“Glasser’s life and career serve merely as an appropriate vehicle for a larger exploration of the importance of free speech in a free society.”

“‘Mighty Ira’ is a long-overdue tribute to a civil-liberties hero, a man who didn’t just make the case for free speech in the abstract, but lived it. Watch it and be inspired.”

“Soaring ode to Free Speech and American Values”

-Praise for Mighty Ira
Recognized

Ever since our founding, FIRE has leveraged the power of public awareness to make progress. After all, bringing the stories of individuals affected by campus abuse to the public goes a long way towards personalizing our work and enlisting support.

Consider our work on behalf of FIRE Litigation Project plaintiff Kimberly Diei this year. When Kimberly worked with FIRE to file suit this spring, FIRE’s communications team secured an exclusive story on her experiences in The New York Times. Other stories from a range of outlets, including African-American outlets, student media, international outlets, and local and national TV stations expanded on FIRE’s core media base to appeal to readers who may be new to our work and to share Kimberly’s experience. All of that coverage meant a legal challenge turned into a personal story for millions of Americans.

Coverage like that exemplifies why FIRE has become increasingly recognized as the advocate for campus rights. In the last year, our Public Awareness Project has grown FIRE’s footprint by a remarkable extent—helping to generate even more support for our work.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>37</th>
<th>podcast episodes</th>
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<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>radio broadcasts</td>
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FIRE was mentioned in 2,723 articles.

3.3M pageviews, a 65% percent increase over last year.

70,000 pageviews in June alone—the highest since we began tracking this metric in spring 2019.

41 videos and attracted over 780,000 views.

29 podcast episodes attracted almost 150,000 listens.

400% increase in Facebook page and a 140 percent increase in Twitter engagements.

Photo Credit: VIA Productions and Breezy Lucia for FIRE
Energized

This spring, FIRE landed on the front page of The New York Times in a feature that acknowledged that campus is “where so many consequential battles are fought” regarding free speech and highlighted the importance of FIRE’s work as an honest broker in those battles. Consequential seems almost an understatement to us—FIRE truly believes that the battles we are fighting for free expression today are absolutely vital to the future.

That’s why, even though the challenges before us might seem dire, lead some to pessimism, or induce some to just give up, FIRE is more energized than ever before. This is the time to take a stand. With our principles to ground us and our supporters behind us, FIRE is ready to build on all of the strengths that characterized our work over the last year and continue the fight for individual rights for all.

8.7M
FIRE has won over 900 victories affecting more than 8.7 million students around the country.

5M
We have secured nearly 450 policy changes affecting over 5 million students—and millions more yet to arrive on campus.

By almost any measure, FIRE’s scope has dramatically increased in recent years. Here are just a few:

3x
Our social media following has tripled since 2016.

10,000
FIRE has added 10,000 email subscribers in the last two years.

2x
The number of FIRE projects has doubled since the 2015-16 fiscal year.

In the last year alone, we welcomed 23 employees.
Key Financials from FIRE's 20–21 Fiscal Year

- Revenue
  - Contributions $15,761,288
  - Investment $2,474,767
  - Other $74,886
  - TOTAL $18,310,941

- Expenses
  - Programs: $8,089,189
    - Individual Rights Defense Program $852,789
    - Policy Reform Project $489,048
    - Litigation Project $1,324,206
    - Legislative and Policy Project $508,180
    - FIRE Student Network $738,337
    - High School Outreach Project $432,669
    - Faculty Outreach Project $230,883
    - Public Awareness Project $2,610,630
    - Targeted Advocacy Project $310,608
    - Research and Special Projects $591,839
  - Administrative $849,858
  - Development $1,506,934
  - TOTAL $10,445,981

- Assets and Liabilities
  - Cash and Equivalents $4,526,772
  - Investments $24,747,559
  - Pledges and Receivables $300,228
  - Fixed Assets $1,067,310
  - Other Assets $111,220
  - Liabilities ($1,602,912)
  - NET ASSETS $29,150,118

Total number of donations

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We raised $15.7 million, 69 percent from individual donors and 31 percent from foundation grants.

1,456 individuals or organizations donated to FIRE for the first time this fiscal year.
FIRE's mission is to defend and sustain the individual rights of students and faculty members at America's colleges and universities. These rights include freedom of speech, freedom of association, due process, legal equality, religious liberty, and sanctity of conscience—the essential qualities of liberty. FIRE educates students, faculty, alumni, trustees, and the public about the threats to these rights on our campuses, and provides the means to preserve them.