

2026 College Free Speech Rankings

Barnard College

257

OVERALL
RANK

F

SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

Executive Summary

THE COLLEGE FREE SPEECH RANKINGS are the most comprehensive comparison of free speech climates at U.S. colleges and universities. Developed by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, the rankings combine student survey data, written speech policies, and school responses to recent speech-related controversies to evaluate how well institutions uphold free expression. Schools earn higher scores when they protect open debate and viewpoint diversity and lose points when they restrict it.

To understand the student experience of free speech on campus, our survey partner, College Pulse, surveyed 68,510 student respondents from 257 colleges and universities from Jan. 3 through June 5, 2025. The College Free Speech Rankings are available online (rankings.thefire.org) for easy comparison between institutions.

We surveyed 154 Barnard College undergraduate students. Key findings include:

- Barnard ranks last of 257 schools, receiving a speech climate grade of F. It also ranks in the bottom 10 on the components of “Self-Censorship,” “Comfort Expressing Ideas,” and “Administrative Support.”
- Barnard students don’t believe the administration will protect free speech. Its “Administrative Support” score was the lowest ever recorded in the history of the College Free Speech Rankings and was more than four standard deviations below the national average.
- Self-censorship is rampant, and Barnard students are not comfortable expressing their views.
- Barnard students support illiberal protest and do not believe controversial conservative speakers should be allowed on campus — Barnard ranks poorly on “Disruptive Conduct” and “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers.”
- More students also said that it is acceptable for their peers to shut down a speaker, block entry to a campus event, or use violence to stop a campus speech than last year.
- Barnard received a “yellow light” rating for maintaining 12 speech restrictive policies. If Barnard earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 177.
- Barnard was penalized for five incidents since 2023, two involving student journalists and three involving speaker deplatformings.

Barnard College ranks last out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The college earned a score of 40.74, an F speech climate grade.¹ The following report highlights Barnard’s poor performance across the student survey. In addition, it discusses Barnard’s speech policies and statements, its speech controversies, and what Barnard can do to improve its free speech climate.

BARNARD STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students do not trust their administration

Last year, Barnard College ranked last out of 251 schools on the “Administrative Support” component. This year, things have gotten worse.

Barnard students again rank their administration last — 257 — on support for free speech. Its “Administrative Support” score was just 6.53 — more than four standard deviations below the national average of 11.32 and the lowest in the history of the College Free Speech Rankings.

FIGURE 1: “Administrative Support” scores for Barnard, Columbia, and nationally

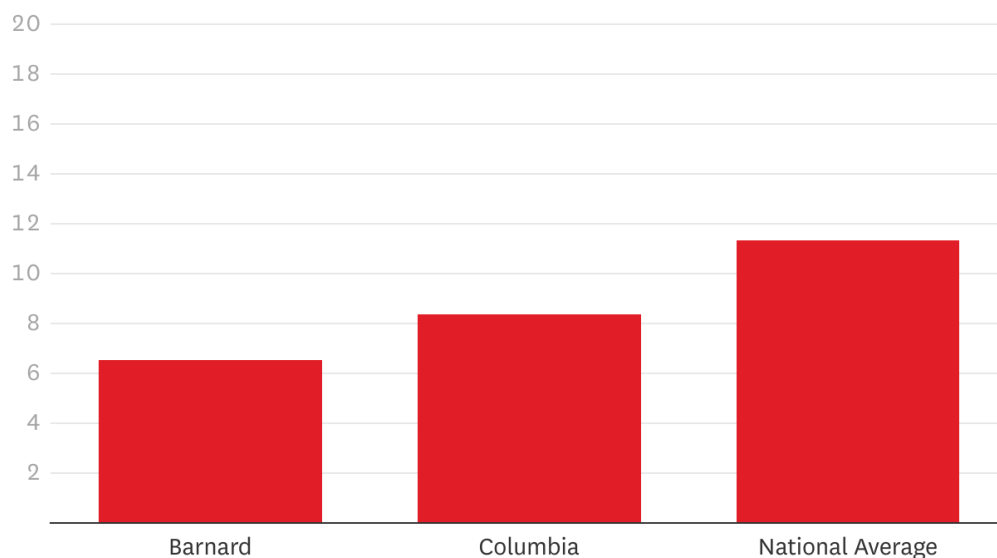


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

¹ The detailed methodology can be found at rankings.thefire.org/methodology.

Put another way:

- Just 3% of Barnard students said it was “very” or “extremely” clear that their administration protects free speech on campus, while 73% said it was “not very” or “not at all clear.”
- Similarly, just 6% said it was “very” or “extremely” likely that their administration will defend a speaker’s rights during a controversy, while 69% said it was “not very” or “not at all” likely.”

These feelings were stated clearly by a number of Barnard students when they were asked to describe a time they self-censored on campus:

I feel as though for a lot of opinions I have to censor it or else there might be administrative backlash or discipline because our administration tends to be very harsh if you hold an opinion different to theirs.

Protests are relatively common on my campus, but there is a fear of being identified and expelled/reprimanded by administration for expressing opinions on specifically the Israel/Palestine conflict, due to high security and police presence on campus.

Constant and recurrent threats and follow through of admin bringing in NYPD and SWAT teams, assaulting students walking in front of the school during times of heightened police presence, allowing ICE on campus and to detain students without probable cause, constant and deliberate discrimination toward pro-palestine movement/events/sentiments and ignorance of racism, religious discrimination, xenophobia.

The situation is bleak. Barnard’s administration has lost the trust of a majority of the student body when it comes to freedom of expression on campus.

Self-censorship is rampant, students not comfortable expressing their views

Barnard also ranks last on “Comfort Expressing Ideas,” with a score almost two standard deviations below the national average, and it ranks 249 on “Self-Censorship.”

These rankings indicate that students are uncomfortable expressing their opinions on political topics in a variety of campus settings such as the classroom, common areas, and in conversations with faculty.

- 15% of students were “very” or “somewhat” comfortable publicly disagreeing with their professor on a controversial political topic; 24% were comfortable doing so in a written assignment.
- 21% were “very” or “somewhat” comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic in a class discussion; 42% were comfortable doing so in a common campus area such as a dining hall or lounge.
- 9% were “very” or “somewhat” comfortable expressing their views to other students on a social media account linked to their name.

The findings are similar when it comes to frequency of self-censorship. Over a third (38%) of Barnard students said they self-censored “a couple times a week” or “nearly every day” during classroom

discussions. About a third (34%) said this about conversations with other students, and around a quarter (28%) reported this about conversations with professors.

These findings, when considered along with those regarding “Administrative Support,” indicate that Barnard is a campus where free expression is neither protected nor prioritized.

Tolerance for controversial liberal speakers, but not conservative ones

In contrast to the poor performance documented above, Barnard students demonstrated a high amount of tolerance when it came to allowing controversial liberal speakers on campus, and the school ranks 15 overall on this sub-component. However, students did not extend this tolerance to controversial conservative speakers — on which Barnard ranks 223. This is likely because of the ideological breakdown of Barnard’s students, where for every conservative student there are roughly 14 liberal ones.

FIGURE 2: Controversial speakers Barnard students would probably or definitely allow on campus

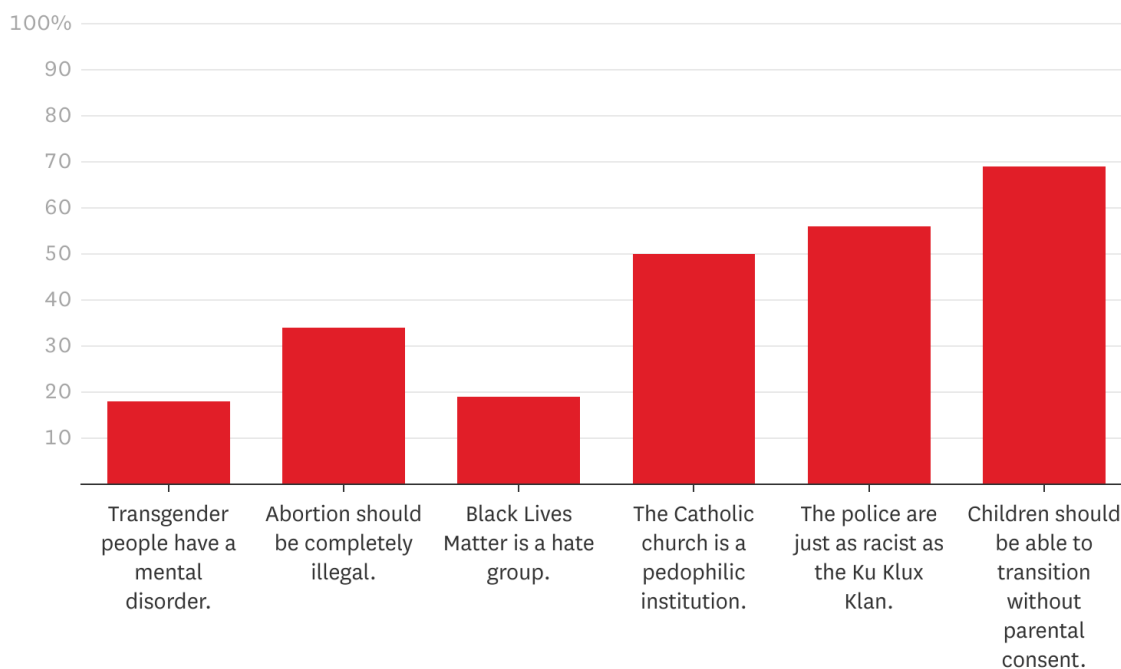


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

The ideological breakdown of Barnard’s students makes the results discussed above even more concerning. One would expect an ideologically homogenous student body to report more comfort discussing political topics and self-censoring less. Yet, Barnard’s almost entirely liberal campus is full of rampant self-censorship, and a considerable portion of its students report being uncomfortable discussing their political views, publicly and privately.

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH NO COMMITMENTS

Barnard College earns an overall “yellow light” rating for its written policies governing student expression. The college maintains twelve yellow light policies and two “green light” policies. All of the university’s harassment policies fail to meet the legal standard for peer hostile environment harassment in an educational setting, putting protected speech at risk. The internet usage policies ban students from using college resources to conduct “political activity,” “cyberbully,” or send “abusive messages.” These undefined, broad categories subject a wide range of protected speech to punishment. Barnard requires 28 days’ notice for “events” and 36 hours’ notice for “demonstrations,” but the definitions of “event” and “demonstration” overlap in ways that make it unclear which rules students must follow. This complexity, along with the outright ban on impromptu protests, impermissibly burdens expressive rights.

The university also bans student organizations from participating in “Partisan Political Activity” unless off campus and prohibits posting of related materials unless in private office spaces or dormitories. This broad content regulation subjects potentially unpopular but protected expression to punishment. Similarly, Barnard makes “dishonesty” and “verbal abuse” punishable offenses and prohibits exposing someone’s identifiable information with the intent to “humiliate” or “bully.” While honesty is a laudable goal for students to aspire to, mandates on honesty—or administrators’ perception of it—can all too easily be applied to punish disfavored but protected speech. Furthermore, any expression the university wishes to prohibit under the regulation of “verbal abuse” and “bullying” would best be governed under revised hostile environment harassment policies. Lastly, Barnard requires students to have regard for the “rights and sensitivities of others.” While grounded in a legitimate interest, broad mandates on civility risk punishing protected expression.

BARNARD’S SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

Barnard College was penalized for five speech controversies, each of which have occurred since 2023.

In the spring of 2025, Georgia Dillane and Celeste Gamble, who worked for the student-run WKCR radio station, received a “fact-finding” email from Barnard’s Community Accountability, Response, and Emergency Services (CARES) about a March protest that Dillane did not even attend. The email requested a meeting “to provide any information you would like to share, including information that refutes any suggestion that you were involved, are a witness, or have information about this incident,” and noted that they would not be allowed to bring anyone else to the meeting and that failure to engage could be viewed as a violation of Barnard’s student code of conduct.

The protest in question was attended by Gamble, who wore a press badge and left the scene when administrators announced a bomb threat. Dillane, meanwhile, was not present — she was anchoring a broadcast at the campus radio station. She later expressed concern that the investigation threatened her journalistic ethics. The station’s legal team responded to Barnard, and the matter initially appeared resolved. However, three weeks later, Dillane received a second notice — this time from the director of Student Intervention and Success — accusing her of multiple conduct violations, including disorderly conduct, disruptive behavior, unauthorized entry, and vandalism. Just hours before her scheduled disciplinary meeting on May 5, Barnard informed her that they no longer believed she was present during the “unauthorized protest” and declared the matter closed.

Then, on May 7, Gamble was involved in another episode that raised additional concerns about administrative conduct. After identifying herself as a student journalist to Public Safety, she scanned her

school ID while exiting Columbia University's Butler Library, where a pro-Palestinian protest was taking place. Gamble, along with three other student journalists (Luisa Sukkar and Natalie Lahr from Barnard, Sawyer Huckabee from Columbia), left the building before Columbia's interim president authorized the New York Police Department to "assist in securing the building" — an operation that ultimately led to 78 arrests.

Despite leaving before the police intervention, Gamble and the others were soon notified that they were suspended. Barnard Dean Leslie Grinage reportedly emailed Gamble, Sukkar, and Lahr about their "alleged actions at Butler Library," informing them of the disciplinary action. The suspensions were lifted a few days later.

For these student-related incidents, Barnard was penalized three points in the rankings. Three deplatforming incidents also negatively impacted Barnard's score.

In 2023, shortly after the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel, Barnard administrators canceled a planned event two days before it was scheduled to occur. The event, co-sponsored by the Barnard Center for Research on Women and Columbia University's chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, was to feature Palestinian author and poet Mohammed el-Kurd as well as Mahmood Mamdani, a Columbia professor of government. Administrators cited a policy requiring prior approval five weeks in advance of an event co-sponsored by a non-Barnard entity. However, the co-directors of the center co-hosting the event later suggested that administrators selectively enforced the policy because they had worked with non-Barnard entities on a number of other events in the past without issue.

A second event at the Barnard Center for Research on Women was also canceled by Barnard's administration. In 2024, the center was scheduled to host a panel titled "Resistance 101." At the start of the event, student organizers said they were being forced to relocate the event to Columbia University's Q House, an LGBTQ+ community at Columbia, because of a student complaint to Barnard's administration. The panel discussion occurred successfully at the Q House and was livestreamed over Zoom — but the students who livestreamed the discussion were punished by Columbia.

Finally, after calls by pro-Palestinian student groups — including Columbia University Apartheid Divest, Students for Justice in Palestine, and Jewish Voice for Peace — to boycott incoming president Laura Rosenbury's inaugural speech, a protester attempted to disrupt the event by shouting "shame on you, Laura" as she began her remarks. Over the next several minutes, more protesters stood up one by one and shouted over Rosenbury. In total, ten protesters were escorted out of the event, after which Rosenbury resumed and completed her remarks.

For these incidents, Barnard was penalized another four points in the rankings.

HOW CAN BARNARD IMPROVE?

If Barnard hopes to repair its reputation and regain student trust, it must take immediate and visible steps to reverse course.

This means overhauling its speech codes to earn a "green light" Spotlight rating, as well as adopting the "Chicago Statement" and an official commitment to institutional neutrality to prevent future perceived administrative bias on debates of social or political concern. These changes would considerably improve

Barnard's score — if they had been in place this year, the school would have scored a 56.74 and ranked 151 of 257 schools.

Policy reform is just a start, however, and Barnard has not given its students reasons to be confident that the administration would protect free expression even if “good” policies were in place. The only way to begin to change this perception is to resist the urge to restrict protected expression the next time a controversy arises and to do the same each time after that.

Clearly though, more will need to be done. We encourage Barnard to also incorporate robust First Amendment education into orientation to ensure students understand not just their rights, but also the difference between protected speech and unlawful conduct.

Without bold, systemic change, Barnard risks remaining the worst environment for campus speech in the country.

Barnard's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	BARNARD COLLEGE	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	8.02	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	11.26	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	14.76	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	6.53	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.46	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	4.70	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	0 (No)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Institutional Neutrality	0 (No)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-4	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	-3	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	40.74	58.63		

Topline Results

How clear is it to you that your college administration protects free speech on campus?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	64	42
Not very clear	48	31
Somewhat clear	36	23
Very clear	5	3
Extremely clear	1	0

If a controversy over offensive speech were to occur on your campus, how likely is it that the administration would defend the speaker's right to express their views?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all likely	38	25
Not very likely	67	44
Somewhat likely	38	25
Very likely	9	6
Extremely likely	0	0

How comfortable would you feel doing the following on your campus? [Presented in randomized order]
Publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	55	36
Somewhat uncomfortable	75	49
Somewhat comfortable	18	12
Very comfortable	5	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	50	32
Somewhat uncomfortable	67	44
Somewhat comfortable	24	16
Very comfortable	12	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	49	32
Somewhat uncomfortable	71	46
Somewhat comfortable	28	18
Very comfortable	5	3

Expressing your views on a controversial political topic to other students during a discussion in a common campus space such as a quad, dining hall, or lounge.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	39	25
Somewhat uncomfortable	51	33
Somewhat comfortable	47	31
Very comfortable	17	11

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	90	58
Somewhat uncomfortable	50	32
Somewhat comfortable	13	8
Very comfortable	2	1

This next series of questions asks you about self-censorship in different settings. For the purpose of these questions, self-censorship is defined as follows:

Refraining from sharing certain views because you fear social (e.g., exclusion from social events), professional (e.g., losing job or promotion), legal (e.g., prosecution or fine), or violent (e.g., assault) consequences, whether in person or remotely (e.g., by phone or online), and whether the consequences come from state or non-state sources. [Presented in randomized order]

How often do you self-censor during conversations with other students on campus?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	4	2
Rarely	42	27
Occasionally, once or twice a month	57	37
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	42	28
Very often, nearly every day	9	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	8	5
Rarely	49	32
Occasionally, once or twice a month	54	35
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	28	19
Very often, nearly every day	14	9

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	7	4
Rarely	37	24
Occasionally, once or twice a month	51	33
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	42	27
Very often, nearly every day	17	11

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

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	14	9
Sometimes acceptable	60	39
Rarely acceptable	45	29
Never acceptable	34	22

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	10	6
Sometimes acceptable	25	16
Rarely acceptable	66	43
Never acceptable	53	35

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	2	1
Sometimes acceptable	19	12
Rarely acceptable	30	20
Never acceptable	103	67

Student groups often invite speakers to campus to express their views on a range of topics. Regardless of your own views on the topic, should your school **ALLOW** or **NOT ALLOW** a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea? [Presented in randomized order]

Transgender people have a mental disorder.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	80	52
Probably should not allow this speaker	47	30
Probably should allow this speaker	19	13
Definitely should allow this speaker	7	5

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	49	32
Probably should not allow this speaker	53	34
Probably should allow this speaker	39	25
Definitely should allow this speaker	13	9

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	79	51
Probably should not allow this speaker	46	30
Probably should allow this speaker	21	14
Definitely should allow this speaker	8	5

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	25	16
Probably should not allow this speaker	52	34
Probably should allow this speaker	49	32
Definitely should allow this speaker	28	18

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	15	10
Probably should not allow this speaker	53	35
Probably should allow this speaker	60	39
Definitely should allow this speaker	25	17

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	17	11
Probably should not allow this speaker	30	20
Probably should allow this speaker	60	39
Definitely should allow this speaker	46	30

Some students say it can be difficult to have conversations about certain issues on campus. Which of the following issues, if any, would you say are difficult to have an open and honest conversation about on your campus? [Presented in randomized order with none of the above always listed last]

Abortion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	128	83
Yes	26	17

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	113	74
Yes	40	26

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	130	85
Yes	23	15

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	139	90
Yes	15	10

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	136	88
Yes	18	12

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	117	76
Yes	36	24

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	67
Yes	51	33

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	130	84
Yes	24	16

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	130	85
Yes	24	15

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	130	85
Yes	23	15

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	102	66
Yes	52	34

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	111	72
Yes	42	28

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	15	10
Yes	138	90

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	117	76
Yes	37	24

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	105	69
Yes	48	31

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	108	71
Yes	45	29

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	104	68
Yes	49	32

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	117	76
Yes	37	24

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	132	86
Yes	21	14

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	122	80
Yes	31	20

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	150	98
Yes	3	2

On your campus, how often have you felt that you could not express your opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	19	12
Rarely	40	26
Occasionally, once or twice a month	42	27
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	37	24
Very often, nearly every day	16	11

Have you ever been disciplined by your college's administration for expression on campus?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	4	2
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	17	11
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	132	86

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	54	35
Rarely	72	47
Occasionally, once or twice a month	14	9
Fairly often, a couple times a week	8	5
Very often, nearly every day	6	4

How likely or unlikely is it that a student on campus would be reported to the administration by another student for saying something controversial?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very unlikely	4	2
Unlikely	26	17
Neither likely or unlikely	40	26
Likely	53	35
Very likely	30	20

How likely or unlikely is it that a professor on campus would be reported to the administration by a student for saying something controversial?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very unlikely	3	2
Unlikely	15	10
Neither likely or unlikely	54	35
Likely	56	36
Very likely	26	17

Have you or anyone you know filed a Title IX complaint?

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	10	7
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	3	2
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	28	18
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	112	73

Has a Title IX complaint ever been filed against you or someone you know?

Response	Frequency	Percent
A Title IX complaint was filed against me.	1	1
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	4	3
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	15	10
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	134	87

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	58	38
Less than once a year	25	16
Once or twice a year	16	11
Several times a year	21	14
Once a month	12	8
2-3 times a month	3	2
About weekly	5	3
Weekly	7	5
Several times a week	7	4

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	1	1
No	153	99

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
No	154	100	100

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	0	0	1
Less than half the time	5	3	14
About half the time	18	12	55
Most of the time, nearly every day	7	4	21
Always	3	2	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	7	38
Less than half the time	10	6	35
About half the time	2	1	8
Most of the time, nearly every day	5	3	16
Always	1	1	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Less than half the time	8	5	28
About half the time	14	9	51
Most of the time, nearly every day	3	2	11
Always	3	2	10

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	10	6	29
Less than half the time	6	4	19
About half the time	14	9	43
Most of the time, nearly every day	3	2	8
Always	0	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	0	2
Less than half the time	3	2	10
About half the time	14	9	43
Most of the time, nearly every day	10	6	31
Always	5	3	14



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