

2026 College Free Speech Rankings
Brown University

187

OVERALL
RANK

F

SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT
RATING

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 376 Brown University undergraduates. Key findings:

- Brown ranks 187 with a score of 55.2, earning an F speech climate grade.
- Students are uneasy expressing dissent, especially with professors: 69% were uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor in class; 56% felt the same in writing. Only 49% felt comfortable discussing a controversial topic with peers in a common space and 22% on a named social account.
- Self-censorship is routine. At least monthly, 61% self-censored in class, 56% with professors, and 62% with peers. About 27% hid political views from professors at least monthly in hopes of a better grade.
- Acceptance of disruptive tactics is high. 78% said shouting down a speaker is at least rarely acceptable (nationally 71%), 64% said blocking attendees is at least rarely acceptable (nationally 54%), and 32% said violence could be acceptable (nationally 34%).
- Perceived administrative backing is weak. Only 23% said it is very or extremely clear that Brown protects free speech (nationally 36%), and 16% said the administration would defend a speaker (nationally 24%).
- Brown is a “yellow light” school; if policies were reformed to “green light,” Brown would rank 43.
- Brown was penalized for three speech controversies: two involving attempted disruptions of speeches given by President Christina Paxton, and another involving a student investigated for asking administrators over email what tasks they accomplished that week.

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Brown University ranks 187 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earns a score of 55.2, an F speech climate grade.¹ It was penalized for “yellow light” speech policies and three speech controversies. The following report highlights Brown’s poor performance across the student survey. In addition, it discusses Brown’s speech policies and statements, controversies, and what Brown can do to improve its free speech climate.

BROWN SCORES POORLY ON MOST SURVEY COMPONENTS

Students are uncomfortable sharing ideas

Brown University ranks 238 on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component. The pattern was consistent across contexts:

- 69% of students were uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor about a political topic in class.
- 55% felt uncomfortable registering that disagreement in writing. General in-class discussion is difficult for many (62% uncomfortable).

By contrast, peer-to-peer conversation in informal settings is easier — about 49% felt comfortable talking about controversial topics in common campus spaces. Comfort dropped sharply on social media (22% comfortable), indicating that students perceive reputational risks when expression is publicly tied to their name.

In practice, this fear means sensitive disagreements — especially with faculty — often go unvoiced. Seminars and discussion-heavy courses may be especially vulnerable to conformity pressures, with fewer students willing to test ideas or articulate minority viewpoints. Over time, the absence of candid pushback can skew classroom debate and limit the diversity of arguments students encounter.

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

FIGURE 1: Students Who are Uncomfortable Expressing Ideas At Brown and Nationally

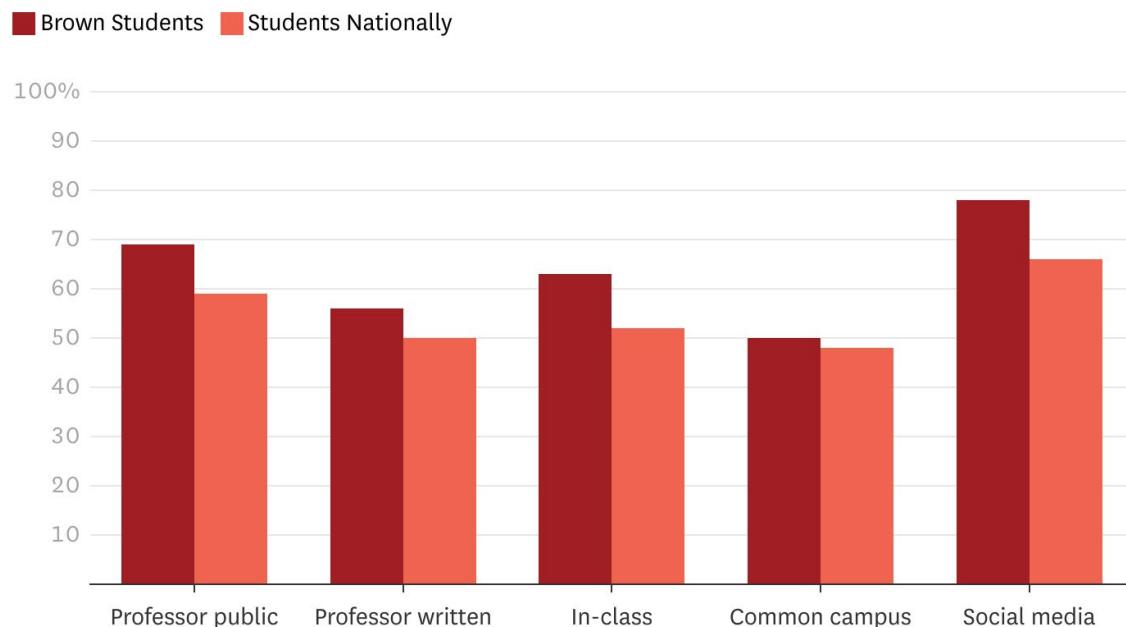


Chart: Emily Nawer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

Students self-censor frequently

Brown ranks 142 on “Self-Censorship.” At least monthly, 61% of students self-censored in class, 57% did so when speaking with professors, and 63% did so with peers. In a related measure, about 27% reported hiding their political beliefs from professors at least monthly in an attempt to get a better grade. Students’ open-ended comments described weighing social costs, grade implications, and the possibility of administrative involvement. These habits, once established, can normalize silence and discourage precisely the kind of exploratory thinking universities hope to cultivate.

FIGURE 2: Students Who Self-Censor at Least Monthly at Brown and Nationally

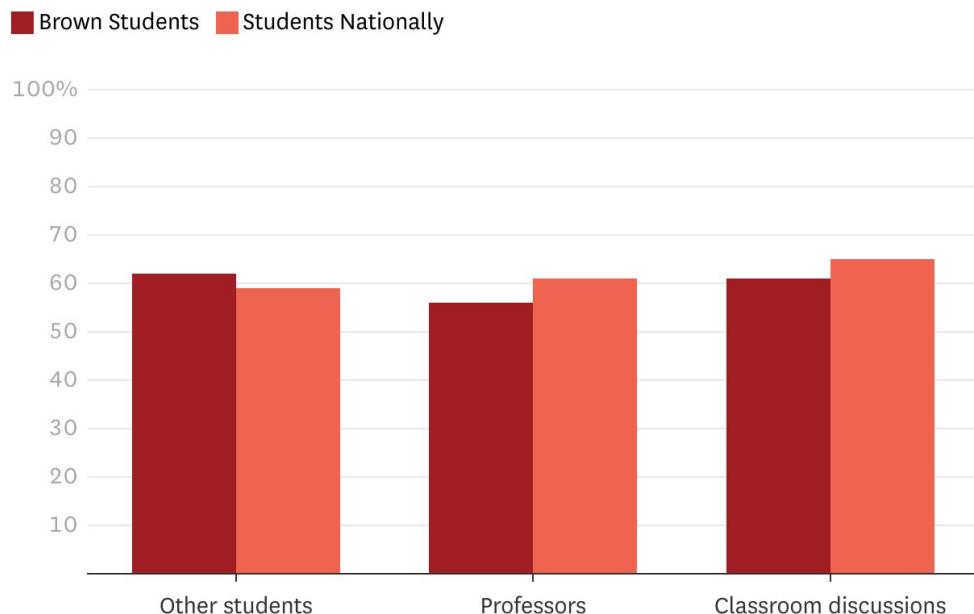


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

Students remain relatively accepting of disruptive conduct

Brown ranks 190 on “Disruptive Conduct,” roughly in line with national norms. Still, attitudes toward disruptive tactics are permissive.

- 78% said shouting down a speaker is at least “rarely” acceptable (nationally 72%).
- 64% said blocking other students from attending is at least “rarely” acceptable (nationally 54%).
- 32% said violence could be acceptable at least “rarely” (nationally 34%).

Because the rankings penalize deplatformings and disruptions, shifting norms away from these tactics would both improve campus climate and reduce behavior penalties.

FIGURE 3: Students Who Believe Violence Can be Acceptable to Stop a Campus Speaker

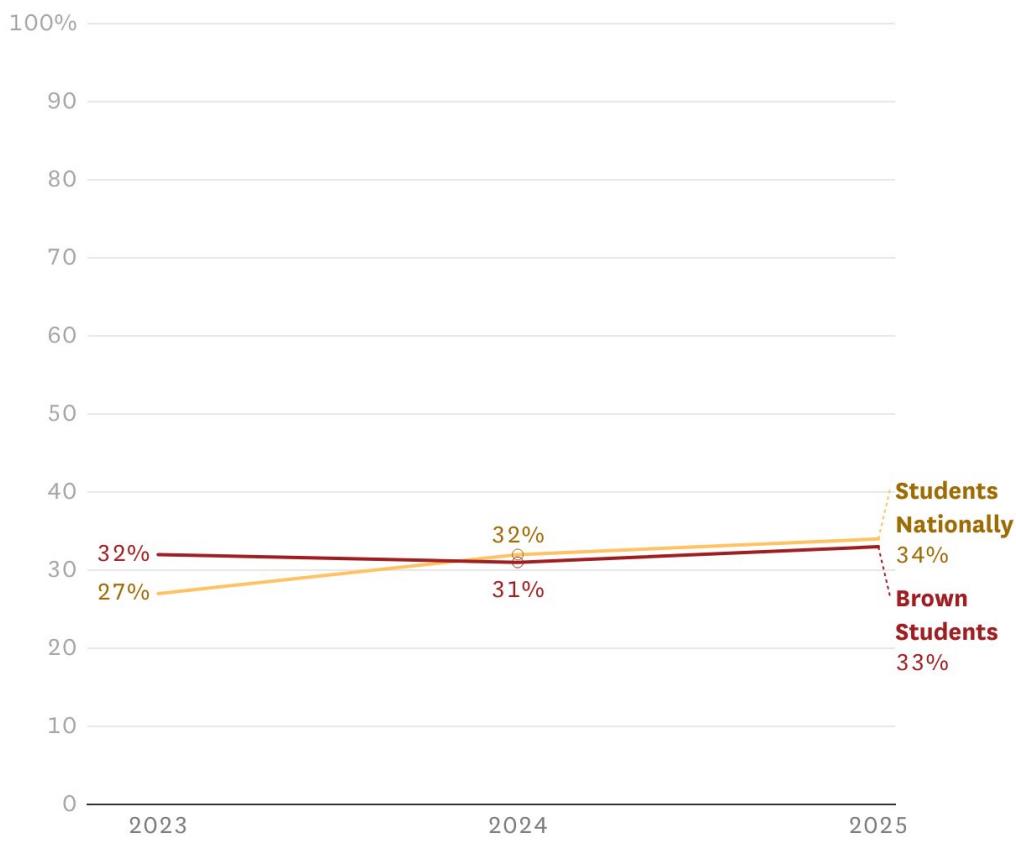


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

Students are more tolerant of liberal than conservative speakers

Brown ranks 47 on overall “Political Tolerance,” with a clear imbalance by ideology, ranking 33 for liberal speakers versus 149 for conservative speakers. Survey items illustrate the split. Majorities said Brown should not allow speakers who said “Transgender people have a mental disorder” (80% not allow vs. 20% allow) or “Black Lives Matter is a hate group” (78% not allow vs. 22% allow). And a narrow majority opposed a speaker who claimed “Abortion should be completely illegal” (55% not allow vs. 45% allow).

By contrast, majorities supported speakers who said “Children should be able to transition without parental consent” (68% allow vs. 32% not allow) and “The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution” (51% allow vs. 49% not allow). Responses were more evenly divided for the statement “The police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan” (48% allow vs. 52% not allow).

Students have difficulty talking about current events

Students report difficulty having open, honest conversations about high-salience issues. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands out — 77% said it is difficult to discuss. Other challenging topics include affirmative action (41%), the presidential election (32%), transgender rights (31%), and immigration (28%). Brown ranks 53 on “Openness,” indicating better-than-average but still mediocre student willingness to engage with these subjects and others.

Students don't trust their administration to protect free speech

Perceived administrative commitment to defending free speech is low. Only 23% said it is very or extremely clear the administration protects free speech (nationally 36%), and only 16% said the administration would defend a speaker during a controversy (nationally 24%). This helps explain Brown’s 207 rank on “Administrative Support.” To change these perceptions, Brown should pair clearer public commitments with consistent actions during flashpoints — defending the right to speak and to listen while enforcing rules against disruption.

FIGURE 4: Students Who Say Their Administration Protects Free Speech

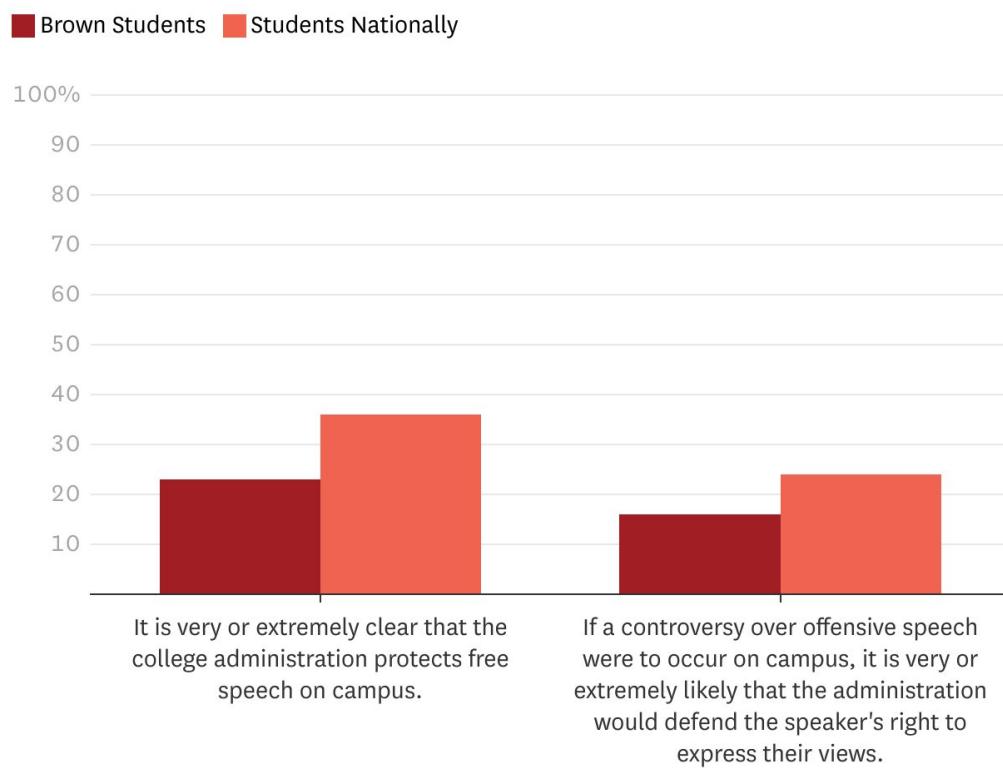


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH INSTITUTIONAL NEUTRALITY

Brown currently earns a “yellow light” Spotlight rating for policy. Ambiguous or overbroad rules — particularly in areas like harassment or “harm” standards — can chill protected expression by granting broad administrative discretion. At the same time, Brown receives credit for institutional neutrality, which — if maintained — reduces pressure on community members to align with official positions and protects room for dissent. If Brown had reformed its remaining yellow light policies to “green light” standards, its overall placement would have been 43. A public adoption of the “Chicago Statement” would further clarify that the university protects lawful speech, even when offensive.

The university maintains two yellow light policies and two green light policies. One of the university’s harassment policies fails to meet the legal standard for peer hostile environment harassment in an educational setting, putting protected speech that does not reach that threshold at risk. Brown also broadly bans “emotional/psychological harm,” which it defines as “abusive, threatening, bullying, intimidating, harassing, or humiliating actions.” This makes largely unpopular but protected expression punishable by the administration. The administration should instead focus its resources on enforcing its discrimination and harassment policies.

BROWN’S SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

Brown University was penalized for three speech controversies.

Most recently, in April 2025, the university investigated students Alex Shieh, Benjamin Marcus, and Gary Bittker. Using the university’s organizational chart, Shieh created a database of campus administrators and used an algorithm to analyze their perceived efficiency. He then, in his capacity as a member of the conservative campus newspaper *The Brown Spectator*, sent an email similar to one that had been sent by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to government employees asking administrators to explain what tasks they had accomplished in the past week. Claiming that Shieh had used “confidential information” in the database’s construction and had “emotionally harmed” employees, administrators demanded he return or destroy the confidential information. Administrators also investigated students Benjamin Marcus, editor-in-chief of *The Brown Spectator*, and Gary Bittker, the paper’s managing editor, and charged them with a trademark violation due to the paper’s name. Ultimately, none of the three students were formally disciplined.

The university was also penalized for two efforts to disrupt speeches by Brown’s President, Christina Paxson. In a 2024 incident, Paxson’s commencement speech was briefly disrupted by students and members of Brown Alumni for Palestine, who claimed responsibility for leading the disruption. The protesters called on Paxson and Brown, to divest from “companies complicit with the genocide in Palestine.” After a few minutes, Paxson resumed her remarks and successfully completed the commencement address.

Similarly, during a 2023 vigil for a Palestinian student seriously injured in a shooting in Vermont, students shouted over Paxson and called for the university to divest its endowment from companies affiliated with Israel.

HOW CAN BROWN IMPROVE?

The easiest steps Brown University could take are to reform remaining “yellow light” policies to meet narrow, speech-protective standards to earn a “green light”. Adopting the Chicago Statement to codify a principled, viewpoint-neutral commitment to free expression alongside institutional neutrality would boost the ranking further. Also, during controversies, they should defend the right to speak and to listen while enforcing rules against disruption.

Policy changes and better responses to controversies alone do not change a campus’s free speech culture. Brown should communicate these policy changes to students in a way that emphasizes the university’s commitment to free expression and affirms that students and faculty won’t be penalized for protected speech. The university should also take active steps to improve campus culture. For example, Brown could embed expressive rights training into first-year orientation so students learn what is protected expression and when expression crosses into unprotected conduct. These changes could improve Brown’s poor rankings on “Administrative Support” (207) and “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (238).

Brown’s 2026 College Free Speech Rankings scores by component

COMPONENT	BROWN UNIVERSITY	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.00	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	12.05	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.15	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	10.62	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.54	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	5.82	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	0 (No)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Institutional Neutrality	3 (Yes)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-2	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	-1	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	55.18	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	5	1
Not very clear	95	25
Somewhat clear	190	51
Very clear	67	18
Extremely clear	18	5

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	15	4
Not very likely	100	27
Somewhat likely	201	53
Very likely	51	14
Extremely likely	9	2

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	123	33
Somewhat uncomfortable	136	36
Somewhat comfortable	83	22
Very comfortable	34	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	74	20
Somewhat uncomfortable	134	36
Somewhat comfortable	130	35
Very comfortable	37	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	67	18
Somewhat uncomfortable	168	45
Somewhat comfortable	110	29
Very comfortable	31	8

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	54	14
Somewhat uncomfortable	136	36
Somewhat comfortable	125	33
Very comfortable	61	16

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	171	45
Somewhat uncomfortable	124	33
Somewhat comfortable	70	19
Very comfortable	11	3

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	12	3
Rarely	128	34
Occasionally, once or twice a month	139	37
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	65	17
Very often, nearly every day	32	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	37	10
Rarely	124	33
Occasionally, once or twice a month	133	35
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	51	13
Very often, nearly every day	32	8

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	31	8
Rarely	115	31
Occasionally, once or twice a month	117	31
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	83	22
Very often, nearly every day	28	8

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	4
Sometimes acceptable	139	37
Rarely acceptable	139	37
Never acceptable	83	22

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	10	3
Sometimes acceptable	72	19
Rarely acceptable	158	42
Never acceptable	136	36

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	2	1
Sometimes acceptable	49	13
Rarely acceptable	68	18
Never acceptable	255	68

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	159	42
Probably should not allow this speaker	142	38
Probably should allow this speaker	60	16
Definitely should allow this speaker	14	4

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	83	22
Probably should not allow this speaker	125	33
Probably should allow this speaker	128	34
Definitely should allow this speaker	39	10

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	157	42
Probably should not allow this speaker	137	36
Probably should allow this speaker	71	19
Definitely should allow this speaker	11	3

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	57	15
Probably should not allow this speaker	127	34
Probably should allow this speaker	152	40
Definitely should allow this speaker	40	11

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	53	14
Probably should not allow this speaker	142	38
Probably should allow this speaker	143	38
Definitely should allow this speaker	37	10

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	28	8
Probably should not allow this speaker	93	25
Probably should allow this speaker	187	50
Definitely should allow this speaker	66	18

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	278	74
Yes	97	26

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	222	59
Yes	154	41

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	327	87
Yes	49	13

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	351	94
Yes	24	6

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	338	90
Yes	37	10

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	279	74
Yes	96	26

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	300	80
Yes	75	20

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	304	81
Yes	71	19

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	312	83
Yes	63	17

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	301	80
Yes	74	20

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	299	80
Yes	76	20

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	272	72
Yes	104	28

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	88	23
Yes	287	77

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	257	68
Yes	119	32

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	296	79
Yes	79	21

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	261	69
Yes	115	31

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	283	75
Yes	93	25

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	294	78
Yes	81	22

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	337	90
Yes	38	10

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	260	69
Yes	115	31

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	351	94
Yes	24	6

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	52	14
Rarely	148	39
Occasionally, once or twice a month	101	27
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	53	14
Very often, nearly every day	22	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	11	3
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	32	9
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	333	89

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	169	45
Rarely	105	28
Occasionally, once or twice a month	59	16
Fairly often, a couple times a week	24	6
Very often, nearly every day	18	5

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	31	8
Unlikely	97	26
Neither likely or unlikely	135	36
Likely	90	24
Very likely	22	6

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	21	6
Unlikely	80	21
Neither likely or unlikely	124	33
Likely	117	31
Very likely	34	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	16	4
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	7	2
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	100	27
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	252	67

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	0
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	6	2
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	72	19
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	297	79

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	128	34
Less than once a year	41	11
Once or twice a year	74	20
Several times a year	35	9
Once a month	18	5
2-3 times a month	29	8
About weekly	18	5
Weekly	27	7
Several times a week	6	2

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	6	2
No	369	98

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	2	1	1
No	373	99	99

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	3	1	5
Less than half the time	24	6	34
About half the time	14	4	20
Most of the time, nearly every day	26	7	37
Always	3	1	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	22	6	28
Less than half the time	34	9	43
About half the time	15	4	19
Most of the time, nearly every day	7	2	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	5	1	8
Less than half the time	18	5	30
About half the time	20	5	34
Most of the time, nearly every day	16	4	26
Always	2	0	3

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	22	6	22
Less than half the time	44	12	45
About half the time	22	6	23
Always	10	3	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	0	1
Less than half the time	30	8	44
About half the time	22	6	33
Most of the time, nearly every day	11	3	16
Always	4	1	6



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