

## 2026 College Free Speech Rankings

# Harvard University

245

OVERALL  
RANK

F

SPEECH  
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT  
RATING



**FIRE**

Foundation for Individual  
Rights and Expression

# Executive Summary for Harvard University

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**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](https://rankings.thefire.org)) for easy comparison between institutions.

We surveyed 411 Harvard University undergraduates. Key findings include:

- Harvard ranks 245 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 49.74, an F speech climate grade.
- Harvard students have higher political tolerance for speakers compared to students nationally.
- 4 out of 5 Harvard students find shoutdowns acceptable.
- Students doubt Harvard's commitment to free expression and many students feel uneasy voicing opinions.
- Harvard earns a "yellow light" Spotlight rating for maintaining 10 speech restrictive policies. If Harvard earned a "green light" rating it would have ranked 84.
- Harvard was penalized for 11 speech controversies since 2023. One controversy involved Harvard's president Alan Garber. At the start of Garber's speech on Harvard Alumni Day, a protester approached the podium and poured gold glitter over Garber in protest of the "baby monkey labs."
- The school received a "high honors" bonus after President Alan Garber responded with a strong free speech statement to federal demands to derecognize several student groups.

**HARVARD RANKS 245** out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 49.74, an F speech climate grade.<sup>1</sup> The following report highlights one area where Harvard performs comparatively well and several areas where it performs relatively poorly. In addition, it discusses Harvard speech policies and statements, its speech controversies, and what Harvard can do to improve its free speech climate.

## HARVARD STUDENTS HAVE HIGHER POLITICAL TOLERANCE FOR SPEAKERS

We asked students whether controversial speakers — on both the left and right — should be allowed on campus, regardless of whether the students agreed with the speakers' views. Harvard ranks 24 on “Tolerance of Liberal Speakers” and 33 on “Tolerance of Conservative Speakers.”

Harvard ranks 64 on “Political Tolerance” overall.

Harvard students were more willing to allow liberal and conservative speakers on campus than students nationally.

- 50% would allow a speaker who said “the police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan,” compared to 38% nationally.
- 52% would allow a speaker on campus who said “the Catholic church is a pedophilic institution,” compared to 38% nationally.
- 73% would allow a speaker on campus who said “children should be able to transition without parental consent,” compared to 49% nationally.
- 31% would allow a speaker who said “transgender people have a mental disorder,” compared to 25% nationally.
- 33% would allow someone who said “Black Lives Matter is a hate group,” compared to 24% nationally.
- 55% would allow someone who said “abortion should be completely illegal,” compared to 40% nationally.

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<sup>1</sup> The detailed methodology can be found at [rankings.thefire.org/methodology](https://rankings.thefire.org/methodology).

**FIGURE 1:** Harvard Students Who Would Allow Each Conservative Speaker and Liberal Speaker on Campus (%)

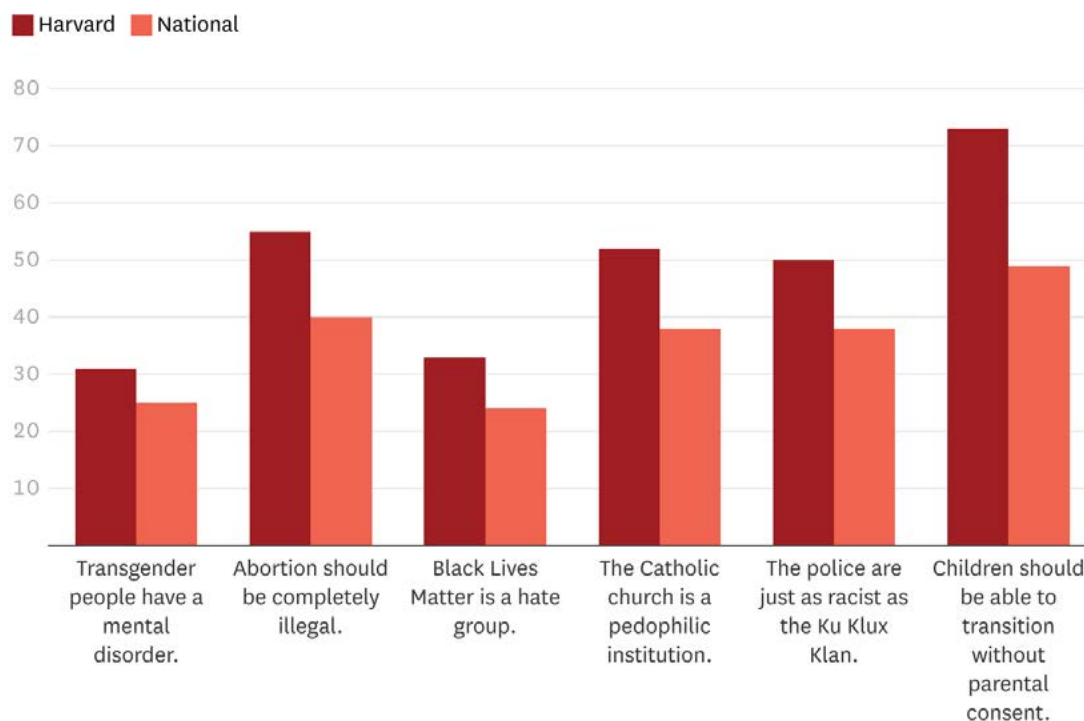


Chart: Emily Nayer - Source: College Pulse/FIRE

## 4 OUT OF 5 HARVARD STUDENTS FOUND SHOUTDOWNS ACCEPTABLE

We asked students how acceptable it is to engage in three different methods of disruptive protest against a campus speaker. Harvard University ranks 161 on the “Disruptive Conduct” component.

When compared to students nationally, Harvard students were more likely to say that students using disruptive conduct to stop a campus speech is at least “rarely” acceptable. Specifically, 79% of Harvard students found shouting down a speaker acceptable compared to 71% nationally and 58% of Harvard students deemed blocking other students from attending a campus speech to be acceptable compared to 54% of students nationally. However, 32% of Harvard students viewed violence to stop a speech as acceptable compared to 34% of students nationally.

## STUDENTS DOUBT HARVARD'S COMMITMENT TO FREE EXPRESSION

Harvard ranks 247 on both the “Administrative Support” and “Comfort Expressing Ideas” components, 10 places from the bottom. Only 20% of Harvard students said the administration is either “very” or “extremely” clear in protecting freedom of speech, another 40% said it is “somewhat” clear. In terms of the administration’s willingness to defend a speaker’s rights during controversies, a dismal 8% of Harvard students believed this is either “very” or “extremely” likely, while 52% saw it as “somewhat” likely.

**FIGURE 2:** Harvard Student Perceptions of the Administration

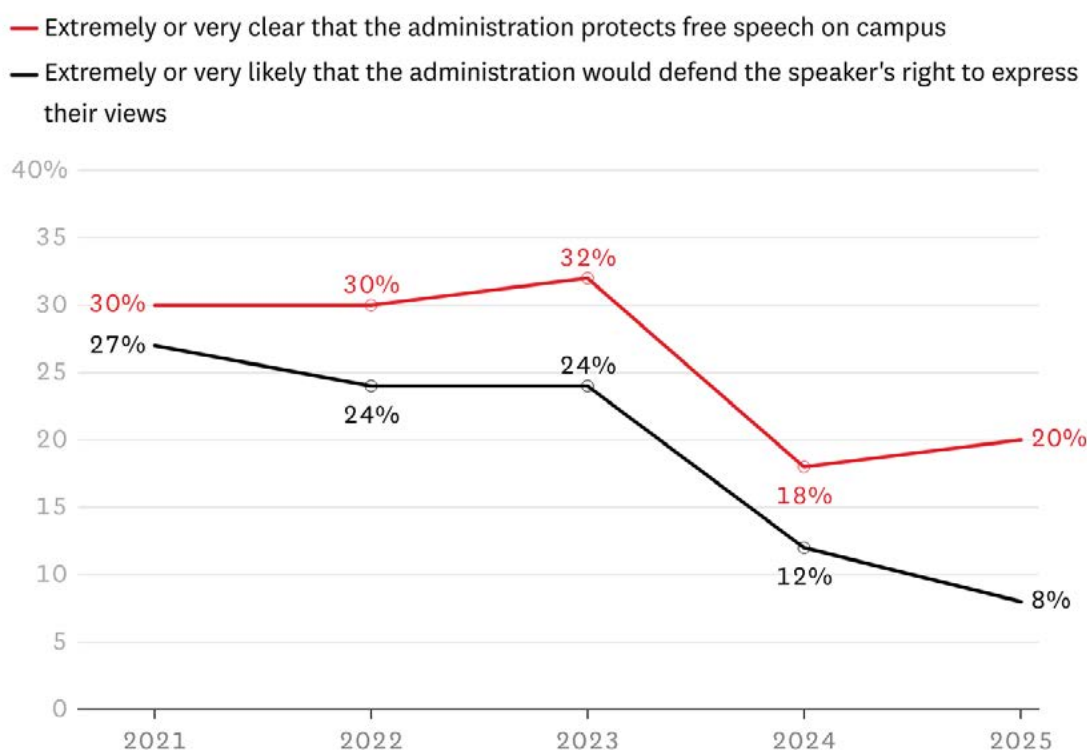


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: College Pulse/FIRE

Compared to other scenarios, more students at Harvard felt comfortable expressing their 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 (49%).

By comparison, fewer students felt comfortable expressing disagreement with one of their professors about a controversial political topic in a written assignment (42%); expressing their views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion (39%); publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic (31%); and expressing an unpopular political opinion to their fellow students on a social media account tied to their name (16%).

**FIGURE 3: Students Who Felt At Least Somewhat Comfortable by Context (%)**

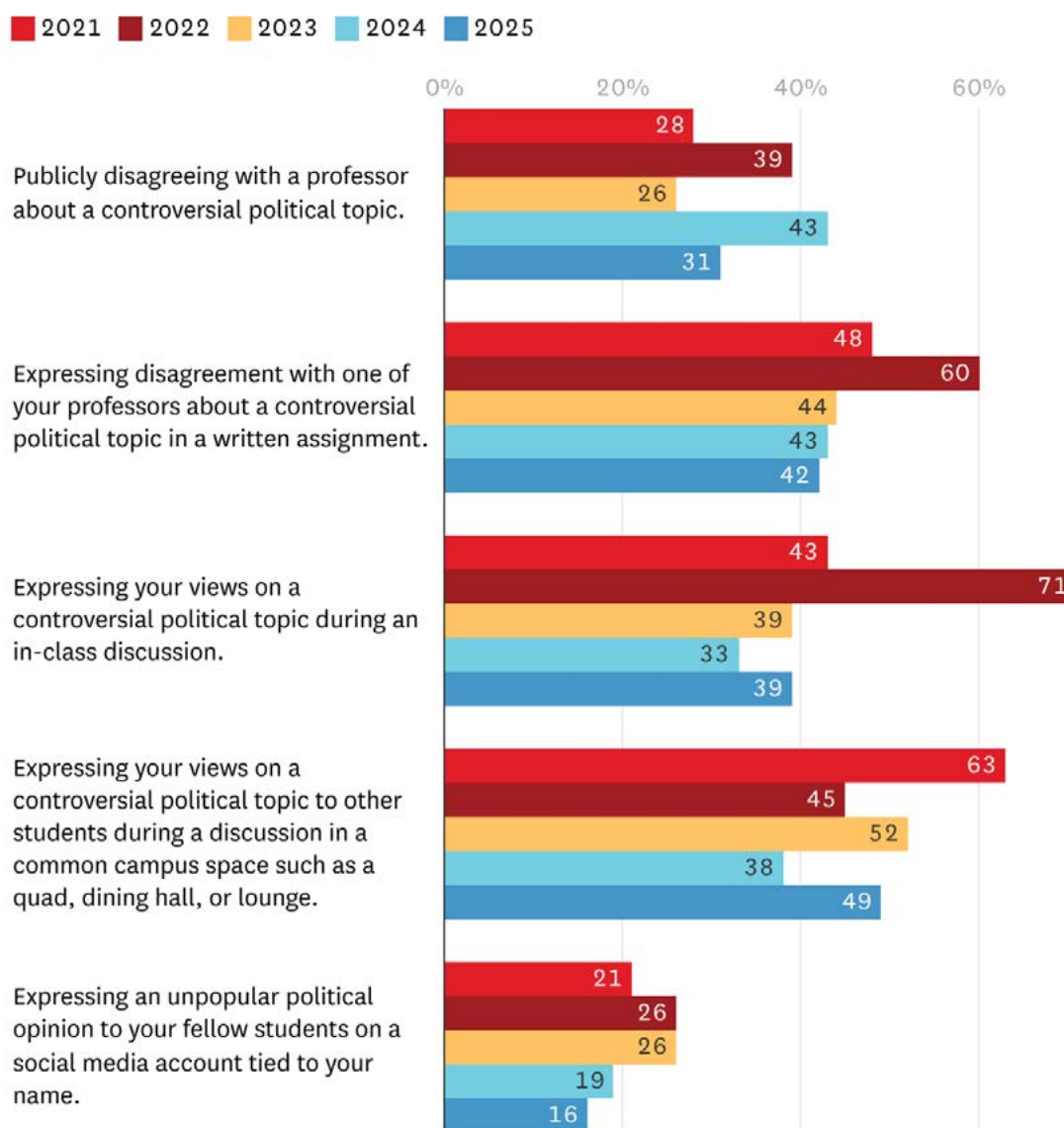


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: College Pulse/ FIRE

## A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH INSTITUTIONAL NEUTRALITY

Harvard earns an overall “yellow light” rating for its written policies governing student expression. The university maintains 10 yellow light policies. None of the university’s five harassment policies meet the legal standard for peer hostile environment harassment in an educational setting, putting protected speech that does not reach that threshold at risk. The university also broadly defines bullying, opening up a wider range of protected speech to punishment. Any expression the university wishes to prohibit under the “bullying” banner would best be categorized as hostile environment harassment and governed under those policies.

The university also restricts expressive activities on campus by forcing all students to register with the administration before handing out any materials on campus or planning an event outdoors, no matter how small or unlikely the event is to cause a disruption to campus operations.

Harvard further stifles student expression by mandating civility when using university computers and networks. Civility may indeed be a laudable goal for students to aspire to, but mandates on civility can all too easily be applied by administrators to punish disfavored speech.

Finally, Harvard encourages students to report “bias” to the administration via their Anonymous Reporting Hotline. The administration should focus its resources on reports of discrimination and harassment and refrain from soliciting reports of subjective bias.

Last year Harvard made an official commitment to institutional neutrality. This commitment signals that the university will refrain from taking official positions on social and political issues unless the issue directly threatens the institution’s core mission.

## HARVARD’S SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

Harvard had 13 speech controversies since 2023. Two of these were substantial event disruptions and three were attempted disruptions.

For example, in 2023, a professor organized a panel discussion titled “50 Years Since the 1973 Oil Embargo: Reflections and Perspectives” featuring multiple panelists. It was moderated by Mohammed Alyahya. During the event, a group of protesters entered the room objecting to two of the speakers (Edward Luttwak and Meghan O’Sullivan) because of their ties to the fossil fuel industry. The demonstrators made it difficult for the audience to see or hear the speakers. Administrators in attendance said they could not interfere with the protesters’ rights to free expression.

In another example from 2024, at the start of Harvard President Alan Garber’s speech on Harvard Alumni Day, a protester approached the podium and poured gold glitter over Garber while shouting “For the baby monkeys, for the animals in the labs, Harvard, shut down the baby monkey labs now.” University police detained and escorted the protester out of the event. Garber resumed his remarks and repeatedly referred to the glitter attack during his speech, which he finished successfully.

While Harvard performed similarly to other schools in most components, it had stark differences in the “Disruptive Conduct” (161) component. Students at Harvard found shouting down speakers and blocking other students from attending a speaker’s event as more acceptable compared to students nationally. It is not entirely clear why Harvard students see shoutdowns and blockages as acceptable forms of behaviors.

But it is not always the students. In 2025, after Maia Evans had reserved a room for an event with the African and African American Resistance Organization — an unrecognized student group — she received an email from an administrator reminding her that university policy prohibits unrecognized groups from conducting “any activity at Harvard.” However, according to the campus newspaper, several other unrecognized groups have used campus buildings for events, including the Harvard Vote Socialist 2024 campaign and Harvard for Harris. Evans was instructed to notify attendees the event was canceled and threatened with disciplinary referral and suspension from the school’s room reservation system should there be “any attempt to go forward” with the event.

Though Harvard was penalized for the above incidents, it received bonus points for an incident in 2025. In a letter to Harvard's president, the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the General Services Administration accused the university of failing "to live up to both the intellectual and civil rights conditions that justify federal investment." They further issued a series of demands including the derecognition of five student groups for having "engaged in anti-Semitic activity since October 7th, 2023." In response to the broader demands, Harvard's lawyers accused these agencies of being "in contravention of the First Amendment, invad[ing] university freedoms long recognized by the Supreme Court," and announced that "the university will not surrender its independence or relinquish its constitutional rights." In retaliation, the federal government froze \$2.2 billion in funds.

## HOW CAN HARVARD IMPROVE?

Harvard can improve its ranking by reforming its "yellow light" speech policies to earn a "green light" rating. If Harvard earned a green light rating this year it would rank 84 instead of 245. In addition to improved speech policies, we encourage Harvard to adopt the Chicago Statement to reaffirm its commitment to open inquiry.

But policy changes alone will not rebuild trust. The university should take active steps to improve campus culture by publicly defending student and faculty expression in moments of controversy and clearly communicating the value of free speech in a university setting. By doing so Harvard can demonstrate to students that it cares about free speech. These changes would not only improve their policy and controversy scores but could also improve the university's poor "Administrative Support" (247) ranking.

In addition to improving its policies and how it responds to speech controversies, Harvard could embed expressive rights training into first-year orientation so students learn when expression crosses into unprotected conduct. This training might reduce the penalties for disruption-based speech controversies. It could also improve Harvard's middling rank on "Disruptive Conduct" (161) along with scores on other components.

Harvard's reputation gives it outsized influence in higher education — but to lead credibly, it must not only have strong policies on paper, but also show students that it's willing to stand by them in practice.



## Harvard's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	HARVARD UNIVERSITY	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	8.92	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	12.29	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.32	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	9.53	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.49	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	7.19	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	0 (No)	-	0	3
Institutional Neutrality	3 (Yes)	-	0	3
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-5	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	-2	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	-2	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
<b>Overall score</b>	<b>49.74</b>	<b>58.67</b>		

# Topline Results

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	40	10
Not very clear	127	31
Somewhat clear	162	40
Very clear	70	17
Extremely clear	12	3

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	36	9
Not very likely	126	31
Somewhat likely	212	52
Very likely	31	7
Extremely likely	6	1

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	118	29
Somewhat uncomfortable	165	40
Somewhat comfortable	97	24
Very comfortable	30	7

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	74	18
Somewhat uncomfortable	162	39
Somewhat comfortable	129	31
Very comfortable	46	11

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	97	24
Somewhat uncomfortable	154	38
Somewhat comfortable	131	32
Very comfortable	28	7

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	55	13
Somewhat uncomfortable	154	38
Somewhat comfortable	147	36
Very comfortable	54	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	201	49
Somewhat uncomfortable	142	35
Somewhat comfortable	49	12
Very comfortable	18	4

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	28	7
Rarely	133	32
Occasionally, once or twice a month	163	40
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	72	18
Very often, nearly every day	13	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	24	6
Rarely	156	38
Occasionally, once or twice a month	130	32
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	78	19
Very often, nearly every day	23	5

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	23	6
Rarely	131	32
Occasionally, once or twice a month	156	38
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	78	19
Very often, nearly every day	21	5

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	13	3
Sometimes acceptable	153	37
Rarely acceptable	160	39
Never acceptable	85	21

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	8	2
Sometimes acceptable	90	22
Rarely acceptable	139	34
Never acceptable	174	42

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	6	1
Sometimes acceptable	27	7
Rarely acceptable	99	24
Never acceptable	279	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	125	30
Probably should not allow this speaker	162	39
Probably should allow this speaker	97	24
Definitely should allow this speaker	28	7

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	49	12
Probably should not allow this speaker	135	33
Probably should allow this speaker	166	40
Definitely should allow this speaker	61	15

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	121	29
Probably should not allow this speaker	156	38
Probably should allow this speaker	109	27
Definitely should allow this speaker	25	6

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	35	9
Probably should not allow this speaker	161	39
Probably should allow this speaker	161	39
Definitely should allow this speaker	54	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	43	11
Probably should not allow this speaker	161	39
Probably should allow this speaker	167	41
Definitely should allow this speaker	39	9

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	22	5
Probably should not allow this speaker	90	22
Probably should allow this speaker	217	53
Definitely should allow this speaker	82	20

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	274	67
Yes	136	33

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	251	61
Yes	160	39

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	353	86
Yes	57	14

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	364	89
Yes	47	11

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	358	87
Yes	53	13

## Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	316	77
Yes	94	23

## Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	338	82
Yes	73	18

## Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	327	80
Yes	84	20

## Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	351	86
Yes	59	14

## Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	333	81
Yes	78	19

## Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	321	78
Yes	89	22

## Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	303	74
Yes	107	26

## The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	112	27
Yes	298	73

## The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	279	68
Yes	131	32

## Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	317	77
Yes	94	23

## Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	299	73
Yes	112	27

## Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	330	80
Yes	80	20



## Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	290	71
Yes	121	29

## The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	357	87
Yes	53	13

## Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	279	68
Yes	131	32

## None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	360	88
Yes	50	12

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	53	13
Rarely	165	40
Occasionally, once or twice a month	120	29
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	52	13
Very often, nearly every day	20	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	3	1
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	50	12
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	358	87

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	156	38
Rarely	124	30
Occasionally, once or twice a month	84	20
Fairly often, a couple times a week	37	9
Very often, nearly every day	10	2

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	47	11
Unlikely	105	26
Neither likely or unlikely	159	39
Likely	67	16
Very likely	33	8

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	29	7
Unlikely	87	21
Neither likely or unlikely	155	38
Likely	105	26
Very likely	34	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	5	1
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.	137	33
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	262	64

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.	0	0
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	2	0
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	98	24
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	310	76

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	166	41
Less than once a year	24	6
Once or twice a year	62	15
Several times a year	57	14
Once a month	33	8
2-3 times a month	17	4
About weekly	19	5
Weekly	25	6
Several times a week	8	2

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	6	1
No	405	99

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	6	1	1
No	404	99	99

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	12	3	11
Less than half the time	52	13	50
About half the time	27	7	26
Most of the time, nearly every day	9	2	9
Always	3	1	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	10	2	15
Less than half the time	38	9	56
About half the time	17	4	25
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	0	1
Always	2	0	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	3	15
Less than half the time	23	6	32
About half the time	13	3	18
Most of the time, nearly every day	17	4	23
Always	10	2	13

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	23	6	29
Less than half the time	39	9	50
About half the time	11	3	14
Most of the time, nearly every day	5	1	7
Always	0	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	9	2	10
Less than half the time	26	6	29
About half the time	43	10	48
Most of the time, nearly every day	9	2	10
Always	3	1	4



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