

2026 College Free Speech Rankings

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

82
OVERALL
RANK

D-

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 194 Massachusetts Institute of Technology undergraduates. Key findings include:

- MIT ranks 82 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned an overall score of 59.78, a D- speech climate grade.
- MIT students voiced above-average support for allowing controversial speakers on campus but a higher willingness to endorse disruptive conduct than students nationally.
- Many MIT students are uncomfortable expressing political views in academic settings. Nearly 7 in 10 (69%) reported feeling uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor on a controversial topic, and 50% felt uncomfortable voicing controversial opinions during in-class discussions.
- Despite this discomfort, MIT students reported self-censoring less frequently than students at most other schools. About 46% of MIT students said they occasionally or often hold back their views in class (once or twice a month or more), well below the national average of 65%.
- MIT earns a “yellow light” Spotlight rating for seven campus speech codes. If MIT had earned a “green light” rating it would have ranked 27 in this year’s rankings. The University has adopted a free expression statement in line with the “Chicago Statement,” but has not adopted an institutional neutrality policy on social and political issues.

MIT ranks 82 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 59.78, a D- speech climate grade.¹ The following report discusses MIT student perceptions, speech policies and statements, and what MIT can do to improve its free speech climate.

MIT STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students support controversial speakers but tolerate disruptive tactics

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology performs well on measures of openness to campus speakers but poorly on opposition to disruptive protest. Student survey responses give MIT a top-10 ranking on tolerance for controversial liberal speakers (5), a decent ranking on tolerance for controversial conservative speakers (38), and a low ranking (173) on “Disruptive Conduct.” In other words, MIT students were more willing than students at most schools to welcome controversial guest speakers but also more inclined to accept actions that shut down speech.

The ideological tolerance gap among MIT students is striking. Like peers at many institutions, they were far more receptive to left-leaning speakers than to right-leaning speakers. For example, 76% of MIT students said a speaker advocating that “children should be able to transition without parental consent” probably or definitely should be allowed on campus, compared to only 26% who said the same about a speaker asserting that “transgender people have a mental disorder.” This 50-point gap among MIT students is roughly double the gap among students nationally (49% vs. 26%).

Similarly, 64% of MIT students would allow a speaker arguing that “the police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan,” compared to only 30% who would allow a speaker suggesting that “Black Lives Matter is a hate group.” This 34-point gap among MIT students is more than double the gap among students nationally (38% vs. 24%).

These disparities underscore that while MIT students are, on the whole, more willing than average to permit controversial speech on campus, they extend that courtesy rather unevenly across ideological lines.

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

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

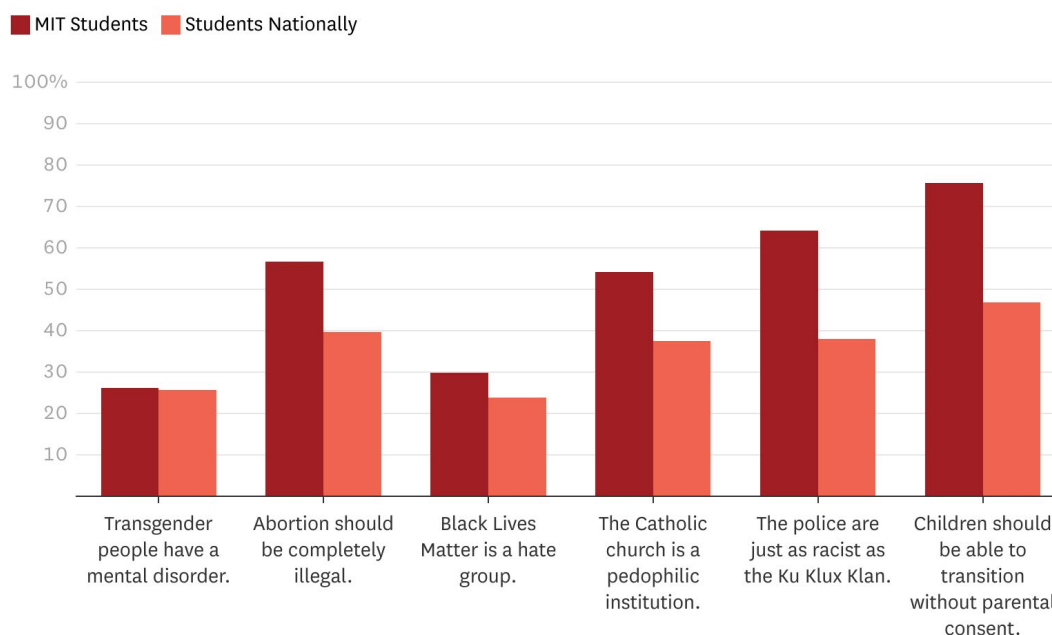


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

MIT students' attitudes toward protest reflect a similar ambivalence. A large majority (about 83%) said shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking is acceptable at least on rare occasions — a higher share than the 72% of students nationally who said the same. About 61% of MIT students said it could be acceptable to block other students from attending a campus speech, versus 54% nationally. When it comes to using violence to stop a speech, MIT students are roughly in line with the national average — 32% at MIT said violence is at least rarely acceptable, compared to 34% of students nationwide. In short, MIT students condone milder forms of disruptive protest (shouting down, blocking entry) at higher rates than their peers.

FIGURE 2: Students Who Believe Violence Can be Acceptable to Stop a Speaker (%)

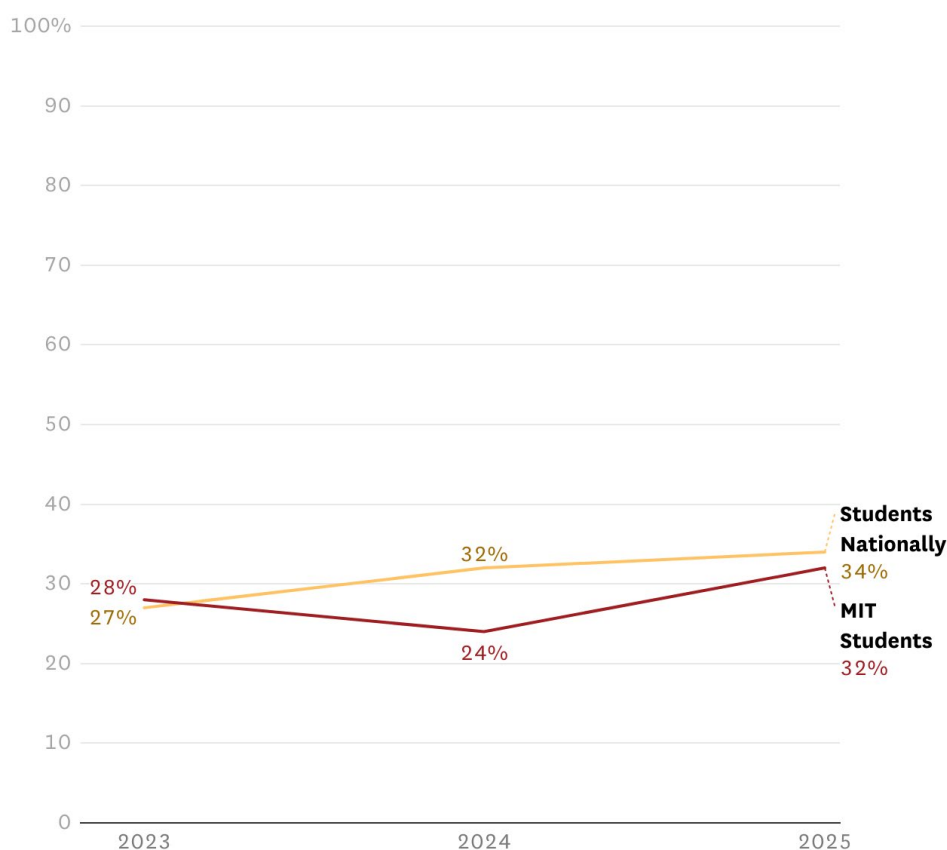


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

MIT students are uncomfortable expressing controversial ideas — yet self-censor less often than their peers

Massachusetts Institute of Technology received a bottom-50 ranking for “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (212 out of 257) but a top-25 ranking for low “Self-Censorship” (14). The survey data suggests a campus environment where many students feel uneasy voicing dissent, especially in the classroom, but relatively fewer end up silencing themselves on a regular basis.

Academic settings proved particularly intimidating for MIT students, as 69% reported being uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic. Additionally, half of students said they were uncomfortable expressing such an opinion in a written class assignment or during in-class discussions.

Outside the classroom, however, MIT students reported somewhat greater ease engaging in debate. A smaller group (44%) said they feel uncomfortable discussing controversial politics in informal campus settings like quads, dining halls, or lounges (nationally, 48% felt uncomfortable in those common spaces). This suggests that while the classroom climate at MIT can inhibit open expression, students are more willing to voice opinions among friends or in casual venues on campus.

FIGURE 3: Students Who Felt Uncomfortable Discussing Controversial Topics by Setting

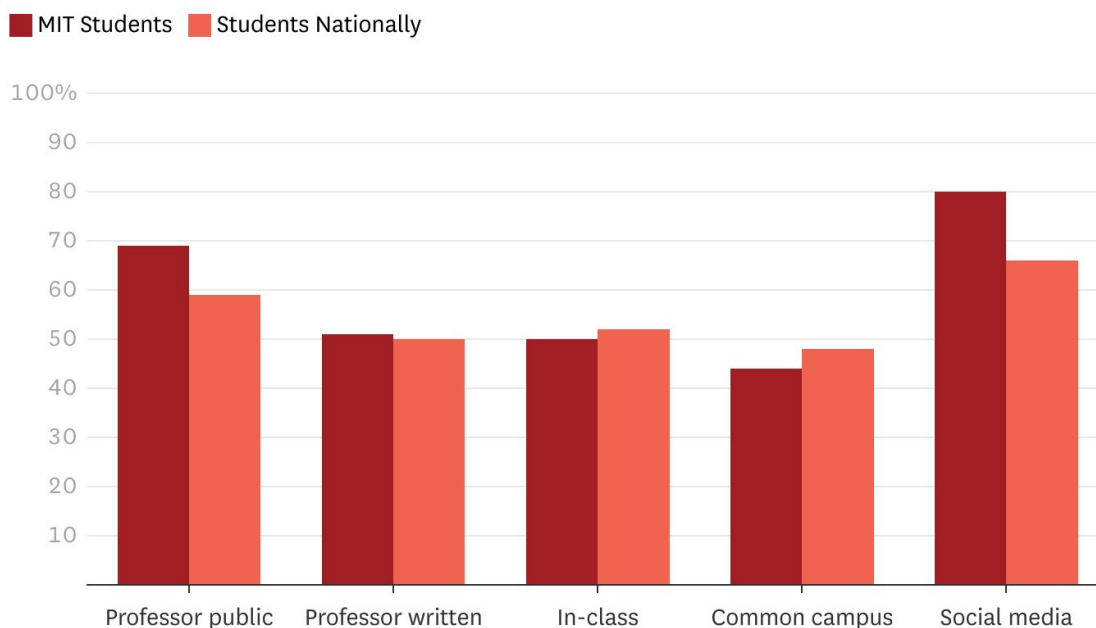


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

MIT students also indicated a lower frequency of self-censorship than students elsewhere. About 46% of MIT students said they self-censor once or twice a month or more during classroom discussions; by comparison, 65% of students nationwide report self-censoring that often in class. MIT’s high ranking (14) on the “Self-Censorship” metric reflects this relatively infrequent suppression of speech. In other contexts, MIT students also appear less prone to bite their tongues. For instance, 19% of MIT students said they refrain from sharing their views with professors either “fairly” or “very” often — a non-trivial share, but lower than the 27% of students nationwide who said the same. Taken together, these findings paint a nuanced picture: MIT students feel considerable pressure and discomfort around controversial speech, yet many push through that discomfort more than their peers do, resulting in comparatively less self-silencing.

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH A FREE EXPRESSION COMMITMENT BUT NO NEUTRALITY POLICY

In December 2022, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology officially adopted a statement on free speech like the Chicago Statement, for which the university earned bonus points in this year’s College Free Speech Rankings. However, this bonus was not enough to offset the penalties the university incurred as a result of its policies and its failure to adopt institutional neutrality.

MIT earns an overall “yellow light” rating for its written policies governing student expression. The university maintains seven yellow light policies and four green light policies. Two of the university’s three harassment policies fail 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. The final harassment policy tracks the proper legal standard and earns a green light rating. The university maintains a restrictive demonstrations policy which only allows certain community groups access and generally requires “at least three business days” notice, effectively banning impromptu gatherings. MIT’s posting policy bans anonymous authorship and allows a “rapid response team” to remove posters “based solely on content/viewpoint.” Although the policy states this would occur in “rare” circumstances, this policy grants the administration broad discretion over campus speech. MIT also encourages students to report “discrimination, discriminatory harassment, and bias,” thus conflating these terms and making largely unpopular but protected expression potentially punishable by the administration. The administration should refrain from soliciting reports of subjective bias and instead focus its resources on reports of discrimination and harassment.

MIT’s internet usage policy prohibits any use of the network that “might contribute to the creation of a hostile academic or work environment,” creating a vague framework that allows the administration to punish expressions that “may” contribute to a hostile environment without further evidence. Lastly, the university states that “freedom from unreasonable and disruptive offense” is part of its mission and asks people who have offended another to “consider immediately stopping the offense and apologizing.” While attempts to encourage civility are noble in pursuit, this policy empowers administrators to punish disfavored speech.

HOW CAN MIT IMPROVE?

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology can improve its free speech climate — and its ranking — through both policy reform and cultural change. The most straightforward step would be to reform MIT’s written speech policies to earn a green light rating from FIRE. By revising or removing any remaining yellow light policies (such as tightening ambiguous harassment definitions and revisiting speech-related regulations that may be overly broad), MIT would eliminate the policy penalties currently dragging down its score. If MIT achieved a green light Spotlight rating, it would have gained an additional 10 points in this year’s rankings — enough to vault the school from 82 to 26.

In addition, MIT should adopt a formal commitment to institutional neutrality. Embracing a neutrality statement would signal to students and faculty that MIT, as an institution, will not officially side in political or ideological disputes but will instead encourage a marketplace of ideas. This step, worth three points in the rankings, could by itself bump MIT’s score into the low 60s. Had MIT paired a green light rating with a neutrality policy this year, it would rank 10. More importantly, these policy actions would strengthen the framework protecting free expression on campus.

Policy changes, however, must be accompanied by cultural leadership. MIT's survey results indicate that many students lack confidence in the administration's support for free speech (MIT ranks 239 on "Administrative Support"). To address this, MIT's leaders should communicate clearly and often about the university's free speech commitments. When controversies arise, administrators should respond in a speech-protective manner, defending the rights of speakers and protesters alike as long as they remain within legal and policy bounds. Visible support for free expression — for example, public statements from the MIT President affirming an unpopular speaker's right to be heard — can reassure students and faculty that the university means what it says in its free expression pledge. Over time, backing up words with actions will help earn student trust and improve the campus's "Administrative Support" perception.

MIT can also work to close the gap between student discomfort and action. The data shows that while many MIT students feel uncomfortable voicing unpopular opinions, a smaller segment routinely self-censors. This suggests an opportunity: MIT could implement workshops or orientations on civil discourse, giving students tools to respectfully debate and disagree. By normalizing viewpoint diversity and teaching skills for constructive argument, MIT might reduce the fear and hesitation that lead to discomfort. Likewise, the university should educate students on the appropriate ways to protest. Given the high approval of disruptive tactics in the survey, MIT should make clear in student conduct training that shouting down or blocking speakers violates the spirit of free inquiry (and MIT policy), even as peaceful protest is welcome. Ensuring that students understand what forms of protest are acceptable — and that serious consequences will follow acts of suppression or violence — could deter the kind of illiberal disruptions that erode a free speech culture.

In summary, MIT has already taken a significant step by affirming free expression in principle. To build on this foundation, the university should bring its policies fully in line with free-speech ideals, adopt a stance of official neutrality, actively champion expressive rights in practice, and engage in outreach to foster a culture of open debate. These measures would not only boost MIT's ranking but, more importantly, enrich the educational environment by allowing all members of the MIT community to speak, argue, and learn without fear.

MIT's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.18	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	12.96	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.27	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	9.79	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.78	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	6.81	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	3 (Yes)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Institutional Neutrality	0 (No)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	59.78	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	14	7
Not very clear	63	33
Somewhat clear	81	42
Very clear	31	16
Extremely clear	5	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	12	6
Not very likely	61	31
Somewhat likely	94	49
Very likely	24	12
Extremely likely	3	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	68	35
Somewhat uncomfortable	66	34
Somewhat comfortable	51	26
Very comfortable	8	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	34	17
Somewhat uncomfortable	65	34
Somewhat comfortable	75	39
Very comfortable	20	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	33	17
Somewhat uncomfortable	64	33
Somewhat comfortable	76	39
Very comfortable	21	11

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	22	11
Somewhat uncomfortable	65	33
Somewhat comfortable	78	40
Very comfortable	29	15

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	88	46
Somewhat uncomfortable	66	34
Somewhat comfortable	28	14
Very comfortable	12	6

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	24	12
Rarely	48	25
Occasionally, once or twice a month	76	39
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	36	19
Very often, nearly every day	9	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	21	11
Rarely	86	44
Occasionally, once or twice a month	50	26
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	29	15
Very often, nearly every day	8	4

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	19	10
Rarely	86	44
Occasionally, once or twice a month	48	25
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	35	18
Very often, nearly every day	6	3

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	7
Sometimes acceptable	63	32
Rarely acceptable	84	43
Never acceptable	34	17

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	6	3
Sometimes acceptable	26	14
Rarely acceptable	86	44
Never acceptable	76	39

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	2	1
Sometimes acceptable	13	7
Rarely acceptable	47	24
Never acceptable	132	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	71	37
Probably should not allow this speaker	72	37
Probably should allow this speaker	33	17
Definitely should allow this speaker	18	9

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	36	19
Probably should not allow this speaker	47	24
Probably should allow this speaker	76	39
Definitely should allow this speaker	34	18

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	56	29
Probably should not allow this speaker	80	41
Probably should allow this speaker	37	19
Definitely should allow this speaker	21	11

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	26	13
Probably should not allow this speaker	63	32
Probably should allow this speaker	68	35
Definitely should allow this speaker	37	19

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	22	11
Probably should not allow this speaker	48	25
Probably should allow this speaker	87	45
Definitely should allow this speaker	38	19

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	13	7
Probably should not allow this speaker	34	18
Probably should allow this speaker	95	49
Definitely should allow this speaker	52	27

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	156	80
Yes	38	20

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	137	71
Yes	57	29

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	157	81
Yes	37	19

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	180	93
Yes	14	7

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	181	93
Yes	13	7

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	161	83
Yes	33	17

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	140	72
Yes	54	28

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	166	86
Yes	28	14

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	161	83
Yes	33	17

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	166	86
Yes	28	14

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	151	78
Yes	43	22

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	154	79
Yes	40	21

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	40	21
Yes	154	79

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	147	76
Yes	47	24

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	148	76
Yes	46	24

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	148	76
Yes	46	24

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	152	79
Yes	42	21

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	159	82
Yes	35	18

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	176	91
Yes	18	9

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	139	72
Yes	55	28

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	175	90
Yes	19	10

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	21	11
Rarely	88	45
Occasionally, once or twice a month	50	26
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	27	14
Very often, nearly every day	8	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	3	2
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	11	6
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	179	92

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	106	55
Rarely	53	28
Occasionally, once or twice a month	27	14
Fairly often, a couple times a week	6	3
Very often, nearly every day	1	1

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	15	8
Unlikely	50	26
Neither likely or unlikely	68	35
Likely	52	27
Very likely	9	5

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	11	6
Unlikely	36	19
Neither likely or unlikely	62	32
Likely	67	35
Very likely	18	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	2	1
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	1	1
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	31	16
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	159	82

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.	3	2
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	1	0
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	23	12
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	166	86

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	97	50
Less than once a year	15	7
Once or twice a year	27	14
Several times a year	19	10
Once a month	5	3
2-3 times a month	11	6
About weekly	3	2
Weekly	9	5
Several times a week	7	3

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	2	1
No	191	99

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	1	0	0
No	193	99	100

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	2	1	4
Less than half the time	16	8	42
About half the time	12	6	33
Most of the time, nearly every day	8	4	20

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	6	27
Less than half the time	22	11	55
About half the time	7	4	18

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	4	2	10
Less than half the time	8	4	20
About half the time	12	6	30
Most of the time, nearly every day	15	8	37
Always	1	0	2

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	8	4	20
Less than half the time	17	9	45
About half the time	4	2	12
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	2	12
Always	4	2	11

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	0	3
Less than half the time	10	5	25
About half the time	17	9	43
Most of the time, nearly every day	10	5	26
Always	1	1	3



FIRE

Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

510 Walnut Street
Suite 900
Philadelphia, PA 19106
T: 215.717.3473
www.thefire.org

DOWNLOAD THE 2025 COLLEGE
FREE SPEECH RANKINGS REPORT

rankings.thefire.org



@thefireorg