

2026 College Free Speech Rankings

Northwestern University

120

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 379 Northwestern University undergraduates. Key findings include:

- Northwestern University ranks 120 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned an overall score of 58.0, an F speech climate grade.
- Students are uncomfortable sharing controversial ideas.
- Students lack confidence that administrators will defend speech during controversy.
- About half of students self-censored at least monthly in classroom discussions; many also did so with professors and with other students on campus.
- A large share of students reported that disruptive tactics such as shouting down a speaker or blocking entry to a talk are acceptable.
- Students showed a large tolerance gap by ideology: they were more likely to believe controversial liberal speakers should be allowed on campus than conservative speakers.
- 7 in 10 students have difficulty talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Northwestern has a “yellow light” Spotlight rating and has adopted both the “Chicago Statement” and the “Kalven Report” on institutional neutrality. Had Northwestern removed its speech-restricting policies and earned a “green light,” it would have ranked 32.
- Northwestern was penalized for two speech controversies this year: a student theater group canceling a play under pressure and administrators pressuring Jewish Voice for Peace to amend its constitution.

2026 College Free Speech Rankings
Northwestern University

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Northwestern University ranks 120 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned an overall score of 58.0, an F speech climate grade.¹ While still poor, this is far better than its rank last year (238). Over the last year, the university upgraded its Spotlight rating from red light to yellow light. While “Administrative Support” and “Openness” decreased since last year, Northwestern improved in most other categories. Northwestern had two speech controversies that impacted its ranking this year.

The following report highlights Northwestern’s poor performance across the student survey. In addition, it discusses Northwestern’s speech policies and commitments, and what the university can do to improve its free speech climate.

NORTHWESTERN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students are uncomfortable sharing ideas

Northwestern University students reported high levels of discomfort expressing controversial political ideas across settings. These rates were higher than national averages, indicating a campus climate where open disagreement often feels socially risky.

Specifically, 68% of Northwestern students said they were uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic compared to 60% of students nationally. A majority were also uncomfortable expressing disagreement with a professor in a written assignment (53% Northwestern vs. 50% nationally) and speaking up during an in-class discussion (59% vs. 52%). Half felt uncomfortable sharing views in a common campus space (50% vs. 48%), and about three quarters were uncomfortable posting an unpopular political opinion on social media tied to their name (76% vs. 66% nationally).

FIGURE 1: Students Who Are Uncomfortable Sharing Ideas by Setting

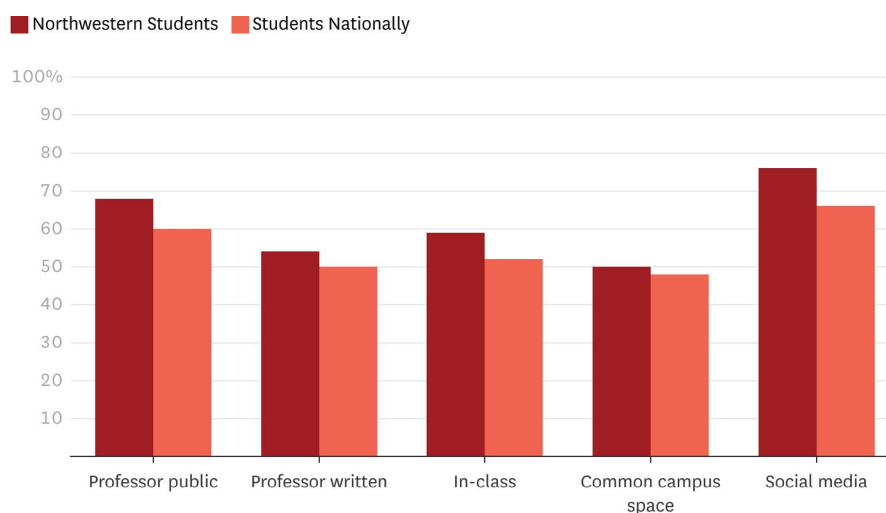


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

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

Students don't trust administrators to defend speech

Very few Northwestern students believed the administration would defend a speaker's rights during a controversy, and only a small minority said it is clear that the administration protects free speech. Both measures lagged behind national averages, indicating low student confidence in official support for expression. Only 16% said it is “very” or “extremely” clear that the administration protects free speech on campus (vs. 36% nationally). Similarly, just 15% said it is “very” or “extremely” likely the administration would defend a speaker's rights during a controversy (vs. 24% nationally).

FIGURE 2: Students Who Trust that Administrators Protect Free Speech

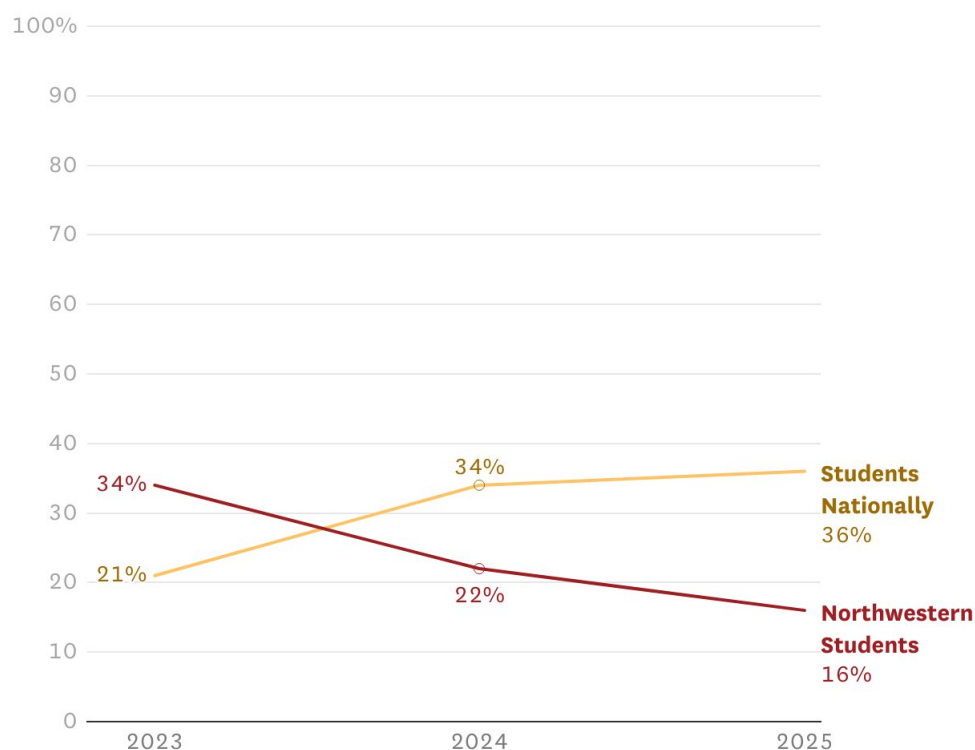


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

Students are self-censoring less than nationally, but many still hold back

About half of Northwestern students said they self-censored at least once or twice a month in classroom discussions, with similar shares reporting self-censorship with professors and other students. These rates were somewhat lower than the national averages, though discomfort is still high. In classroom discussions, 58% of Northwestern students reported self-censoring at least once or twice a month. Roughly half of students self-censor at least monthly with professors (52%) and other students (50%).

Many students believe disruptive conduct can be acceptable

A large majority of students (72% at Northwestern and nationally) said shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking is at least “rarely” acceptable, and over half (54% at Northwestern and nationally) said blocking entry to a campus speech is at least “rarely” acceptable. Nearly a third (31% vs. 34% nationally) said it is at least “rarely” acceptable to use violence to stop a speech.

FIGURE 3: Students Who Support Using Violence to Stop a Campus Speaker

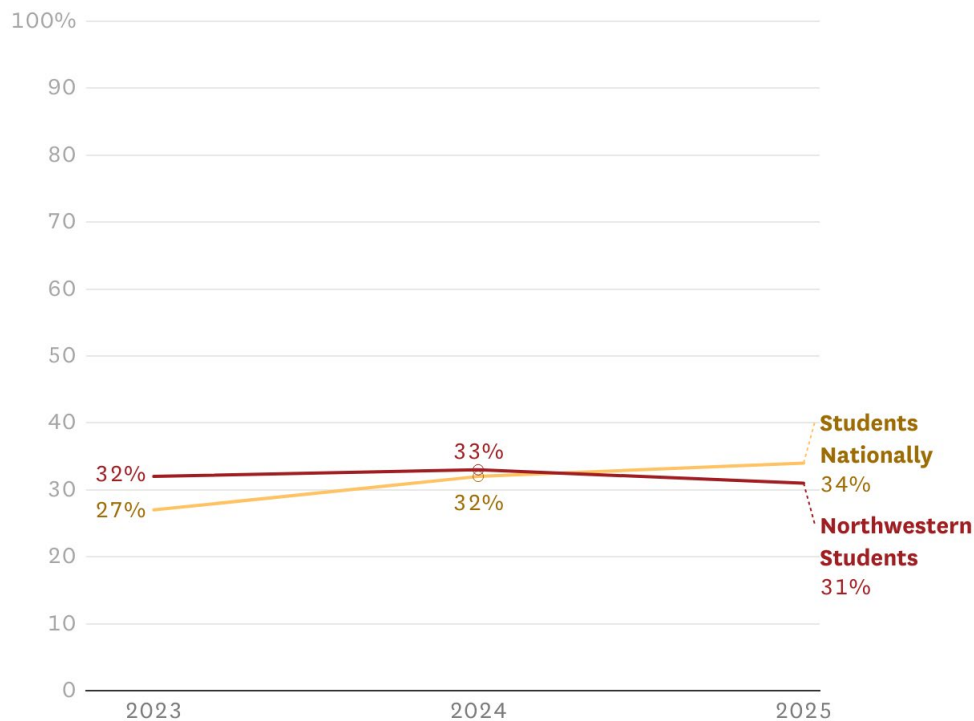


Chart: Emily Nayer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

Students are more tolerant of controversial liberal speakers than conservative speakers

When asked about hosting controversial guest speakers, Northwestern students were far more likely to support allowing speakers with liberal views than speakers with conservative views.

For controversial liberal speakers, 62% said Northwestern should allow a speaker who argues that “children should be able to transition without parental consent” (vs. 49% nationally), 50% would allow a speaker who says that “the police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan” (vs. 38% nationally), and 43% would allow a speaker who claims that “the Catholic church is a pedophilic institution” (vs. 38% nationally). For conservative speakers, 42% would allow a speaker who says “abortion should be completely illegal” (vs. 40% nationally), 24% would allow a speaker who says “transgender people have a mental disorder” (vs. 25% nationally), and only 20% would allow a speaker who says “Black Lives Matter is a hate group” (vs. 24% nationally). The wide gap for the two kinds of speakers contributes to Northwestern’s low score on “Political Tolerance.”

7 in 10 students have difficulty talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Across many issues, relatively few Northwestern students said it is difficult to have an open and honest conversation. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however, was an outlier: 73% said it is difficult to have an open and honest conversation on this topic (vs. 53% nationally). By contrast, these percentages were lower for other issues such as abortion (27% at Northwestern vs. 46% nationally), the 2024 presidential election (39% vs. 42%), and transgender rights (29% vs. 41%).

FIGURE 4: Students Who are Comfortable Discussing Various Topics

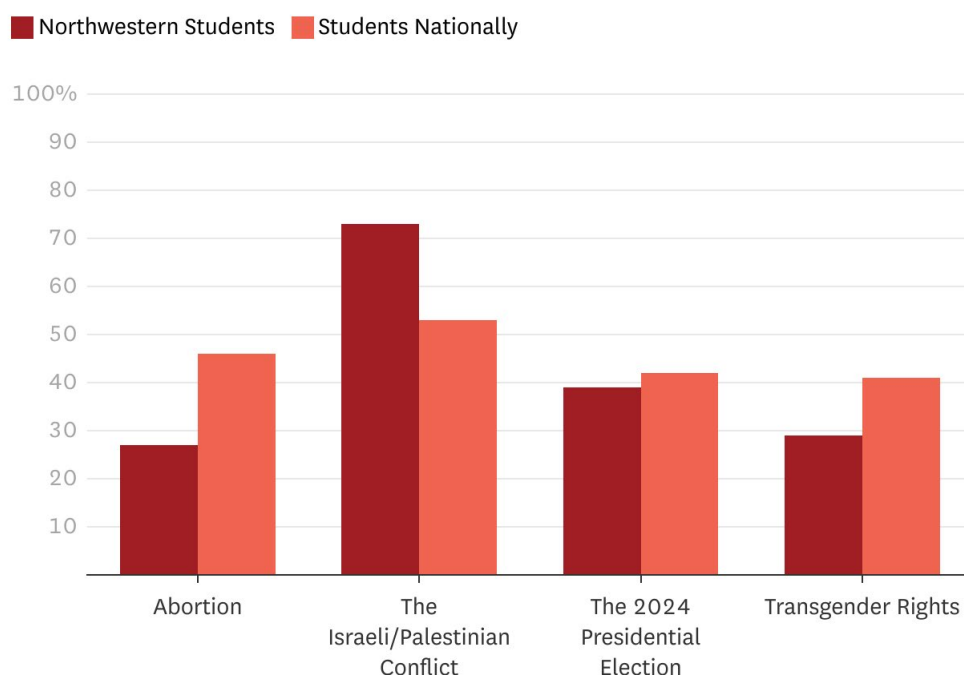


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH A CHICAGO STATEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL NEUTRALITY

FIRE awards Northwestern University a “yellow light” Spotlight rating for its speech codes. Northwestern has adopted both the Chicago Statement on free expression and a commitment to institutional neutrality. These commitments set a positive tone but have not yet translated into strong student confidence or comfort.

Northwestern earns an overall yellow light rating for its written policies governing student expression. The university maintains four yellow light policies and five “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, placing protected speech at risk. Expressive activities are also curtailed by Northwestern’s restrictive posting policy, which mandates the inclusion of identifiable information on materials, effectively forbidding anonymous authorship and chilling expression on campus.

The university mandates civility in its student handbook, further stifling protected speech. 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. Lastly, Northwestern’s internet usage policy prohibits “phishing; circulating spam; etc.” without defining the terms or specifying that such activity must disrupt others’ use of the system. This provision could subject a wide range of protected expression to punishment.

NORTHWESTERN’S SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

Northwestern University received penalties for two incidents, both this year.

First, administrators pressured Jewish Voice for Peace, a Jewish anti-Zionist student group, to amend its constitution, citing the school’s new anti-discrimination policy. The group’s constitution initially read that “members are expected to be anti-Zionist and identify with Judaism.” Administrators claimed that this would violate the school’s new policy incorporating the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of antisemitism, according to which “denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of the State of Israel is a racist endeavor” is an example of antisemitism.

In the other incident, a university student theater group, Lovers & Madmen, canceled the final two performances of Stephen Sondheim’s musical “Assassins” following backlash over the inclusion of a racial slur in the script. The controversy centered on the character John Wilkes Booth’s use of “Nigger” in the song “The Ballad of Booth,” which some students felt was harmful and insensitive. Prior to the show’s opening, the production team issued a content warning on social media, acknowledging the presence of the slur and providing resources to contextualize its use. Despite these efforts, many students expressed dissatisfaction, arguing that the inclusion of the word perpetuated a culture dismissive of black students’ concerns. Some called for the removal of the word from the script, while others demanded the cancellation of the remaining shows. The decision to cancel the performances was announced just before a scheduled show, leaving audience members with unusable tickets. In an official statement, Lovers & Madmen apologized for not engaging in meaningful conversations with the black community and acknowledged the harm caused by its actions.

HOW CAN NORTHWESTERN IMPROVE?

Northwestern University can improve its rating by revising its four remaining “yellow light” policies (e.g., ambiguous harassment/civility rules) to achieve a “green light” Spotlight rating. Had it done so, it would have ranked 32 instead of 120.

Policy changes alone are not sufficient to change a campus’ free speech culture. Northwestern 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. Such actions could improve Northwestern poor rank on “Administrative Support” (228).

Additionally, taking steps to protect events during controversy by affirming that invited speakers and performances will proceed and by enforcing rules against shout-downs and disruptions would help, as would increasing viewpoint diversity in programming and curriculum to expose students to a wider range of perspectives.

Northwestern’s 2026 College Free Speech Rankings scores by component

COMPONENT	NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.09	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	12.76	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.49	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	10.10	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.64	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	5.86	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	3 (Yes)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Institutional Neutrality	3 (Yes)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-3	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	-1	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	57.95	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	24	6
Not very clear	97	26
Somewhat clear	197	52
Very clear	47	12
Extremely clear	14	4

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	10	3
Not very likely	126	33
Somewhat likely	185	49
Very likely	49	13
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	110	29
Somewhat uncomfortable	146	39
Somewhat comfortable	94	25
Very comfortable	28	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	74	19
Somewhat uncomfortable	131	34
Somewhat comfortable	131	34
Very comfortable	44	12

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	82	22
Somewhat uncomfortable	144	38
Somewhat comfortable	121	32
Very comfortable	33	9

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	57	15
Somewhat uncomfortable	131	35
Somewhat comfortable	142	37
Very comfortable	49	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	146	38
Somewhat uncomfortable	143	38
Somewhat comfortable	75	20
Very comfortable	15	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	26	7
Rarely	162	43
Occasionally, once or twice a month	110	29
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	61	16
Very often, nearly every day	20	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	46	12
Rarely	137	36
Occasionally, once or twice a month	122	32
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	48	13
Very often, nearly every day	26	7

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	32	9
Rarely	125	33
Occasionally, once or twice a month	145	38
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	58	15
Very often, nearly every day	19	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	24	6
Sometimes acceptable	117	31
Rarely acceptable	132	35
Never acceptable	105	28

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	12	3
Sometimes acceptable	71	19
Rarely acceptable	121	32
Never acceptable	175	46

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	8	2
Sometimes acceptable	34	9
Rarely acceptable	74	19
Never acceptable	263	69

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	170	45
Probably should not allow this speaker	119	31
Probably should allow this speaker	55	15
Definitely should allow this speaker	35	9

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	107	28
Probably should not allow this speaker	113	30
Probably should allow this speaker	109	29
Definitely should allow this speaker	50	13

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	174	46
Probably should not allow this speaker	130	34
Probably should allow this speaker	47	13
Definitely should allow this speaker	27	7

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	70	18
Probably should not allow this speaker	145	38
Probably should allow this speaker	103	27
Definitely should allow this speaker	61	16

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	73	19
Probably should not allow this speaker	118	31
Probably should allow this speaker	123	33
Definitely should allow this speaker	65	17

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	34	9
Probably should not allow this speaker	108	29
Probably should allow this speaker	174	46
Definitely should allow this speaker	63	17

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	73
Yes	101	27

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	267	70
Yes	112	30

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	331	87
Yes	48	13

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	344	91
Yes	35	9

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	334	88
Yes	45	12

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	295	78
Yes	84	22

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	299	79
Yes	80	21

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	307	81
Yes	72	19

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	315	83
Yes	64	17

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	316	83
Yes	63	17

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	302	80
Yes	77	20

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	277	73
Yes	102	27

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	101	27
Yes	278	73

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	230	61
Yes	149	39

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	296	78
Yes	83	22

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	287	76
Yes	92	24

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	292	77
Yes	87	23

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	315	83
Yes	63	17

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	336	89
Yes	43	11

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	267	71
Yes	112	29

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	339	90
Yes	40	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	63	17
Rarely	162	43
Occasionally, once or twice a month	106	28
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	36	10
Very often, nearly every day	12	3

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.	48	13
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	328	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	160	42
Rarely	108	29
Occasionally, once or twice a month	67	18
Fairly often, a couple times a week	26	7
Very often, nearly every day	17	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	29	8
Unlikely	127	33
Neither likely or unlikely	109	29
Likely	87	23
Very likely	27	7

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	28	7
Unlikely	82	22
Neither likely or unlikely	103	27
Likely	127	34
Very likely	39	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	6	2
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	11	3
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	82	22
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	280	74

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.	4	1
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	3	1
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	59	16
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	313	83

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	140	37
Less than once a year	24	6
Once or twice a year	73	19
Several times a year	49	13
Once a month	19	5
2-3 times a month	26	7
About weekly	18	5
Weekly	26	7
Several times a week	4	1

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	7	2
No	372	98

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	3	1	1
No	376	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	17	5	26
About half the time	21	6	33
Most of the time, nearly every day	16	4	25
Always	7	2	11

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	17	4	26
Less than half the time	40	11	62
About half the time	6	2	9
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	0	1
Always	1	0	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	6	1	6
Less than half the time	31	8	34
About half the time	32	8	35
Most of the time, nearly every day	10	3	11
Always	13	4	14

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	25	7	30
Less than half the time	40	11	48
About half the time	17	5	20
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	0	1
Always	0	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	3	1	4
Less than half the time	32	8	43
About half the time	20	5	27
Most of the time, nearly every day	13	3	17
Always	6	2	8



FIRE

Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

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

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