

2026 College Free Speech Rankings
Pennsylvania State University

109

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 379 Pennsylvania State University undergraduates. Key findings include:

- Penn State ranks 109 out of 257 in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 58.29, an F speech climate grade.
- Penn State students are more trusting of their administration and more tolerant of controversial speakers than students nationally.
- Penn State improved on “Self-Censorship” (176 compared to 229 last year) and “Openness” (169 compared to 205 last year) meaning that fewer students self-censor and students find fewer topics difficult to discuss.
- Student perceptions have worsened in other areas: Fewer students are comfortable expressing ideas and more are accepting of disruptive conduct.
- Penn State was penalized for a 2023 speech controversy in which the university rejected Turning Point USA’s efforts to bring Riley Gaines to campus.
- The university was further penalized for its maintenance of two speech policies that earned it a “yellow light” rating from FIRE. If Penn State revised these policies and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 31 overall.

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Pennsylvania State University ranks 109 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 58.29, an F speech climate grade.¹ The university jumped 119 places and gained 3.29 points since last year, thanks in part to decaying penalties from prior speech controversies.

The following report highlights two survey areas where Penn State ranks among the best in the nation, two areas where it improved to middling, and two areas where it worsened. In addition, it discusses Penn State's speech policies and statements, its speech controversies, and what Penn State can do to improve its free speech climate.

PENN STATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Penn State students are more trusting of their administration and more tolerant of controversial speakers than students nationally

Pennsylvania State University ranks 46 on "Administrative Support."

Compared to only 36% of students nationally, 43% of Penn State students said it was either "very" or "extremely" clear that the administration protects free speech on campus. Additionally, 33% of Penn State students said that it was either "very" or "extremely" likely that the administration would defend a controversial speaker's expressive rights, compared to 24% of students nationally.

Penn State students expressed greater tolerance for controversial speakers, evidenced by the university's ranking 8 on "Political Tolerance."

Students were asked whether six speakers (three liberal, three conservative) who had previously expressed controversial opinions should be allowed to give a campus speech. The "Political Tolerance" component was influenced by four subcomponents. Impressively, Penn State ranked in the top 75 for each: "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers" (75), "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers" (10), "Mean Tolerance" (19), and "Tolerance Difference" (31).

For controversial liberal speakers, the percentage of students who said such speakers "probably" or "definitely" should be allowed was similar at Penn State (ranging from 43-54%) to students nationally (ranging from 38%-49%). Support for controversial conservative speakers, meanwhile, was much higher among Penn State students (ranging from 40% to 54%) than students nationally (ranging from 24% to 40%).

Not only did greater percentages of Penn State students support each speaker, but they also were more firm in their support. Compared to students nationally, the percentage of Penn State students who said a speaker "definitely should" be allowed was greater for both the liberal (+6 points on average) and conservative (+10 points on average) speakers.

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

FIGURE 1: Students Who Said Their School “Probably” or “Definitely” Should Allow Controversial Speakers (%)

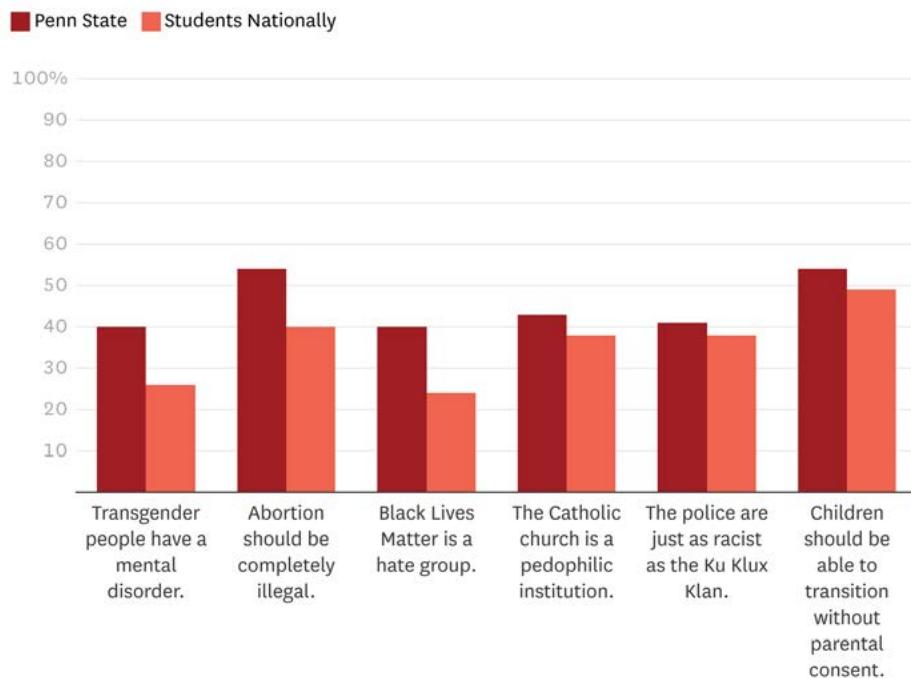


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

Students self-censor less and find fewer topics difficult to discuss

Penn State ranks 176 on “Self-Censorship” after finishing 229 last year.

Students were presented the following definition of self-censorship:

“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.”

They were then asked about the frequency with which they self-censor in three campus contexts. For each of the three, the percentage of Penn State students who reported self-censoring at least “a couple of times a week” was in line with students nationally. And since last year, percentages have gone down in two of the three contexts.

- 23% said they self-censored during conversations with other students on campus (30% last year).
- 28% said they self-censored during conversations with their professors (29% last year).
- 26% said they self-censored during classroom discussions (32% last year).

Penn State also experienced a rise in rank on the “Openness” component from 205 last year to 169 this year.

Students were presented with a list of 20 topics and asked which, if any, were difficult to have an open and honest conversation about. Since last year, percentages fell for 16 of the 20 topics by a modest average of 4 percentage points.

FIGURE 2: Topics Identified as Difficult to Have an Open and Honest Conversation About (%)

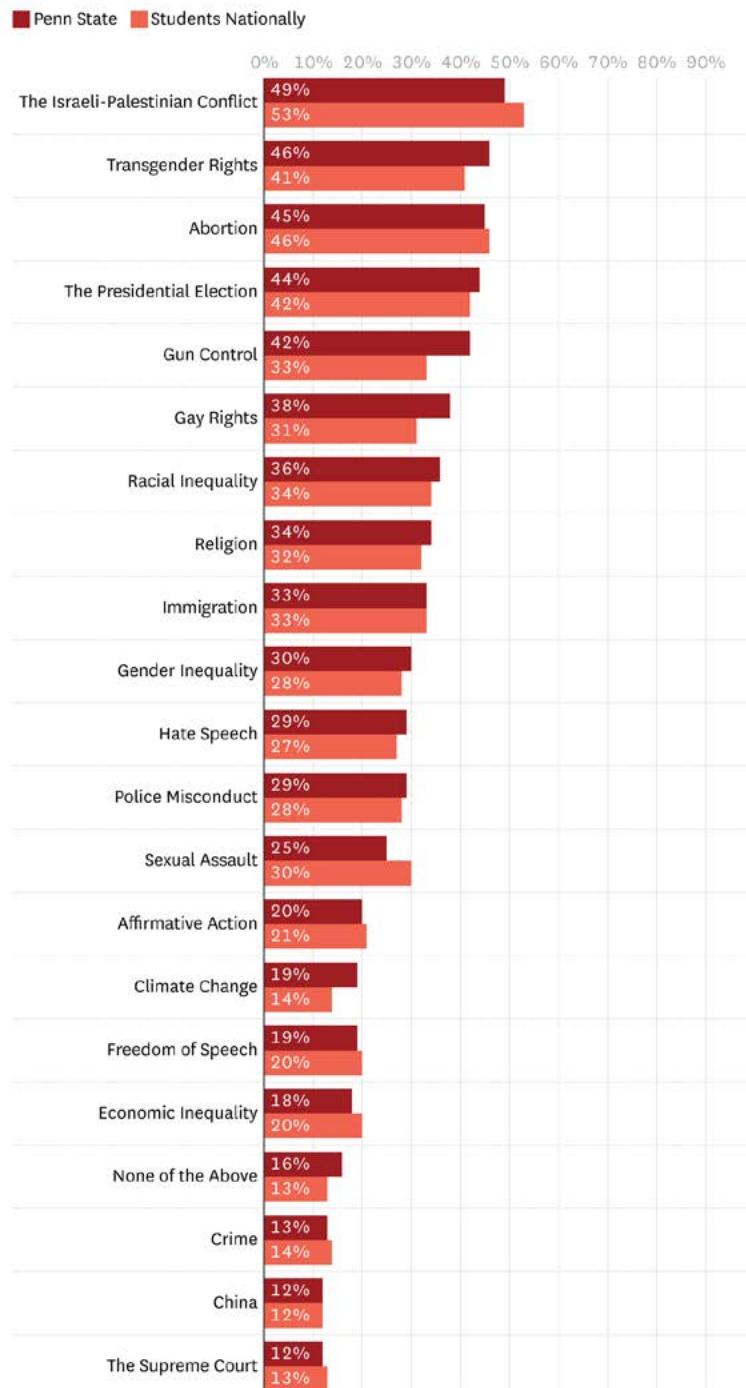


Chart: Emily Nayer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

FEWER STUDENTS ARE COMFORTABLE EXPRESSING IDEAS AND MORE ARE ACCEPTING OF DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT

Penn State ranks 159 on “Comfort Expressing Ideas” after finishing 102 last year.

Students were asked how comfortable they would be expressing themselves in five contexts. For each context, 50% or fewer students felt either “somewhat” or “very” comfortable.

- 50% were comfortable expressing disagreement with a professor in a written assignment.
- 49% were comfortable expressing 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.
- 46% were comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion.
- 41% were comfortable publicly disagreeing with professors about a controversial political topic.
- 37% were comfortable expressing an unpopular political opinion to fellow students on a social media account tied to their name.

Students’ discomfort levels were consistent with responses to three questions that did not factor into Penn State’s ranking.

Nineteen percent of Penn State students reported hiding their political beliefs from their professors “at least a couple of times a week” to get a better grade. But their concern didn’t come just from professors. Indeed, 24% said it was either “likely” or “very likely” that a student would report another student to the administration for saying something controversial. What’s more, 32% said it was “likely” or “very likely” that a professor would be reported by a student for the same reason.

Penn State also dropped in its rank on the “Disruptive Conduct” component, from 92 last year to 124 this year.

Compared to last year, a greater percentage of Penn State students this year said it was at least “rarely” acceptable to shout down a speaker or block other students from attending a campus speech (+5 percentage points each). Meanwhile, the percentage saying the same about using violence to stop a campus speech was similar to last year. Compared to five years ago, however, acceptance has increased for all three behaviors, particularly the use of violence, which has doubled since then.

FIGURE 3: Students Who Said Disruptive Conduct Was at Least “Rarely” Acceptable (%)

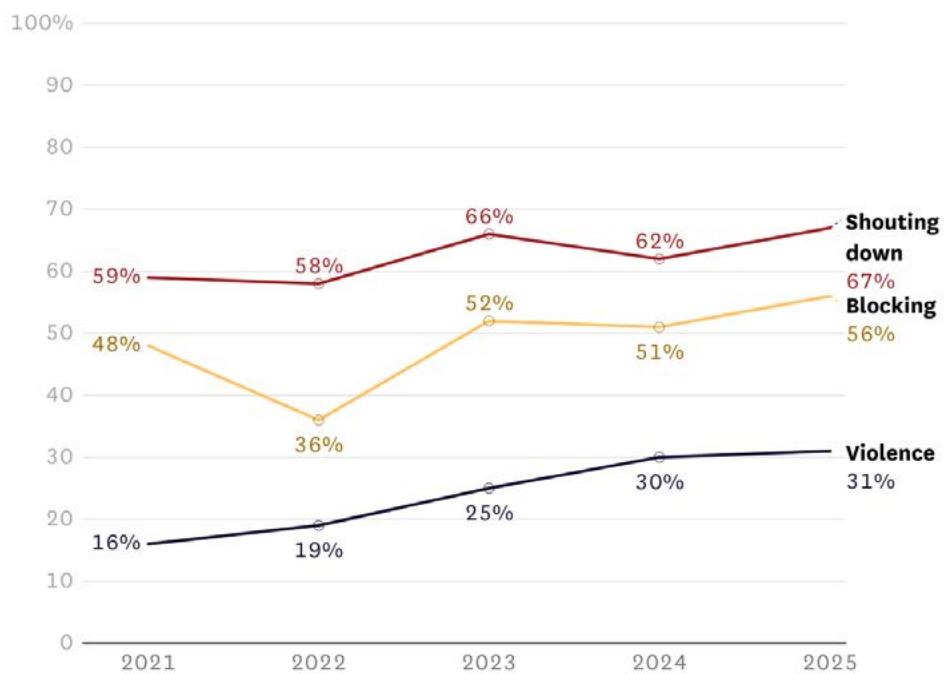


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH NO COMMITMENTS

Pennsylvania State University earns an overall “yellow light” rating for its written policies governing student expression. The university maintains two 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. Penn State also has yet to adopt the “Chicago Statement” and commit to institutional neutrality.

PENN STATE’S SPEECH CONTROVERSY

Pennsylvania State University was penalized for one speech controversy from 2023. The campus chapter of Turning Point USA tried to schedule a speaking event featuring Riley Gaines, but university administrators said the event was not booked properly, a claim Gaines and the sponsoring group disputed. Gaines spoke at a different event on the common green.

HOW CAN PENN STATE IMPROVE?

Pennsylvania State University can improve its ranking by reforming its “yellow light” speech policies to earn a “green light” rating. If it had earned a green light rating this year, Penn State would have ranked 31 instead of 109. In addition to urging Penn State to improve its speech policies, we encourage the university to adopt the Chicago Statement and make an official commitment to institutional neutrality. Paired with green light policies, these commitments would have placed Penn State 6 in this year’s College Free Speech Rankings.

But policy changes alone do not change a campus’ free speech culture. With 1 in 4 students saying it is “likely” or “very likely” that a student would report another student to administrators for saying something controversial, and 1 in 3 saying violence is at least “rarely” acceptable to stop a campus speech, Penn State might consider embedding rights training into first-year orientation. This training could help freshmen learn the value of free speech in a university setting and better understand when protected speech crosses into unprotected and disruptive conduct. These measures may help improve the university’s rankings on “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (159) and “Disruptive Conduct” (124).

Penn State’s 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.42	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	11.87	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.51	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	12.10	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.02	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	8.37	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	0 (No)	1.16	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Institutional Neutrality	0 (No)	0.53	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-4.07	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-1	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	58.29	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	11	3
Not very clear	51	13
Somewhat clear	154	41
Very clear	117	31
Extremely clear	46	12

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	19	5
Not very likely	62	16
Somewhat likely	179	47
Very likely	92	24
Extremely likely	27	7

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	104	27
Somewhat uncomfortable	121	32
Somewhat comfortable	116	31
Very comfortable	38	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	62	16
Somewhat uncomfortable	127	33
Somewhat comfortable	140	37
Very comfortable	50	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	69	18
Somewhat uncomfortable	135	36
Somewhat comfortable	137	36
Very comfortable	38	10

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	60	16
Somewhat uncomfortable	133	35
Somewhat comfortable	143	38
Very comfortable	42	11

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	123	33
Somewhat uncomfortable	115	30
Somewhat comfortable	113	30
Very comfortable	27	7

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	31	8
Rarely	108	28
Occasionally, once or twice a month	154	41
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	72	19
Very often, nearly every day	14	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	29	8
Rarely	108	28
Occasionally, once or twice a month	136	36
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	73	19
Very often, nearly every day	33	9

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	19	5
Rarely	95	25
Occasionally, once or twice a month	165	44
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	74	19
Very often, nearly every day	27	7

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	22	6
Sometimes acceptable	111	29
Rarely acceptable	123	32
Never acceptable	123	33

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	13	3
Sometimes acceptable	69	18
Rarely acceptable	132	35
Never acceptable	165	44

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	9	2
Sometimes acceptable	43	11
Rarely acceptable	69	18
Never acceptable	257	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	112	30
Probably should not allow this speaker	116	31
Probably should allow this speaker	84	22
Definitely should allow this speaker	67	18

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	79	21
Probably should not allow this speaker	94	25
Probably should allow this speaker	129	34
Definitely should allow this speaker	76	20

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	110	29
Probably should not allow this speaker	117	31
Probably should allow this speaker	84	22
Definitely should allow this speaker	68	18

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	79	21
Probably should not allow this speaker	138	36
Probably should allow this speaker	99	26
Definitely should allow this speaker	63	17

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	87	23
Probably should not allow this speaker	135	36
Probably should allow this speaker	93	24
Definitely should allow this speaker	64	17

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	73	19
Probably should not allow this speaker	102	27
Probably should allow this speaker	136	36
Definitely should allow this speaker	69	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	207	55
Yes	172	45

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	304	80
Yes	75	20

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	332	88
Yes	47	12

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	305	81
Yes	74	19

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	329	87
Yes	50	13

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	310	82
Yes	69	18

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	305	81
Yes	73	19

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	236	62
Yes	143	38

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	267	70
Yes	112	30

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	221	58
Yes	158	42

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	269	71
Yes	110	29

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	254	67
Yes	125	33

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	192	51
Yes	187	49

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	212	56
Yes	167	44

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	268	71
Yes	111	29

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	241	64
Yes	138	36

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	249	66
Yes	129	34

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	283	75
Yes	96	25

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	333	88
Yes	46	12

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	204	54
Yes	175	46

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	317	84
Yes	61	16

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	72	19
Rarely	141	37
Occasionally, once or twice a month	116	31
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	44	12
Very often, nearly every day	5	1

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.	50	13
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	318	84

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	122	32
Rarely	101	27
Occasionally, once or twice a month	82	22
Fairly often, a couple times a week	43	11
Very often, nearly every day	30	8

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	35	9
Unlikely	105	28
Neither likely or unlikely	150	40
Likely	72	19
Very likely	17	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	32	9
Unlikely	82	22
Neither likely or unlikely	144	38
Likely	104	27
Very likely	17	4

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.	10	3
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	76	20
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	288	76

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.	14	4
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	45	12
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	319	84

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	126	33
Less than once a year	45	12
Once or twice a year	64	17
Several times a year	68	18
Once a month	20	5
2-3 times a month	16	4
About weekly	19	5
Weekly	16	4
Several times a week	5	1

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	6	2
No	373	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	10	3	12
Less than half the time	30	8	35
About half the time	20	5	24
Most of the time, nearly every day	20	5	24
Always	5	1	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	30	8	32
Less than half the time	42	11	44
About half the time	19	5	20
Most of the time, nearly every day	2	1	3
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	5	1	8
Less than half the time	24	6	39
About half the time	26	7	42
Most of the time, nearly every day	5	1	9
Always	2	0	3

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	18	5	31
Less than half the time	27	7	46
About half the time	12	3	20
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	0	2
Always	1	0	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	10	3	14
Less than half the time	25	7	33
About half the time	25	7	33
Most of the time, nearly every day	12	3	16
Always	3	1	4



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