

2026 College Free Speech Rankings
Stanford University

75
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 263 Stanford University undergraduate students. Key findings include:

- Stanford ranks 75 with an overall score of 60.66, a D- speech climate grade.
- Stanford students remained open to discussing controversial topics and were less accepting of disruptive conduct to stop speakers than they were last year.
- Fewer students believed the administration would protect free speech and fewer felt comfortable expressing views on controversial issues compared to last year.
- Stanford received a “yellow light” rating for maintaining six policies that limit protected expression. If Stanford earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 19.
- Stanford had three event disruptions since 2023. Following the two more substantial disruptions, university administrators made statements in defense of the right to listen and free speech, earning a couple of bonus points that mitigate the penalties slightly.

Stanford University ranks 75 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 60.66, a D- speech climate grade.¹ The following report highlights where Stanford performs comparatively well and is improving as well as a couple areas that are waning. In addition, it discusses Stanford's speech policies and statements, its speech controversies, and what Stanford can do to improve its free speech climate.

Stanford students remain open and are less accepting of disruptive conduct

Stanford University ranked 19 on "Openness" this year, similar to last year (13) on having open and honest conversations about difficult topics on campus.

Compared to the average student in the U.S., Stanford students found it easier to have an open and honest conversation about most topics. One topic that most Stanford students found difficult to discuss was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (62%).

Stanford ranked 175 on "Disruptive Conduct." Despite the fact that this is an improvement from last year's ranking of 227, it shows that many Stanford students still support illiberal responses to speech.

Most Stanford students found it at least rarely acceptable for students to shout down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus (72%) and to block other students from attending a campus speech (54%). Troublingly, about a third of them found it acceptable to use violence to stop a campus speech (34%).

FIGURE 1: Students Who Said Disruptive Conduct Would Be Acceptable (%)

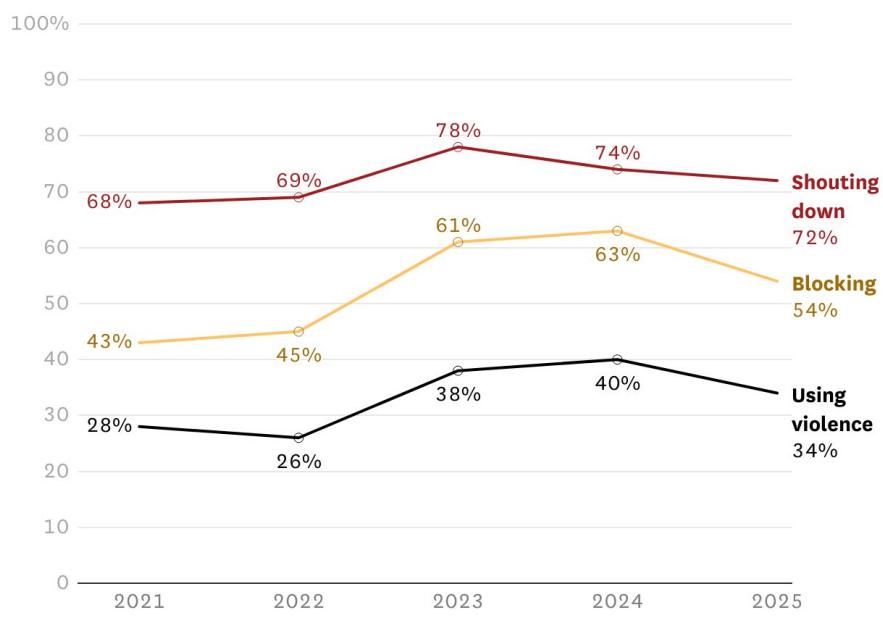


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

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

Trust in the administration wanes while comfort dips

Fewer students believed the administration would protect free speech and fewer felt comfortable expressing views on controversial issues compared to last year, which led to a drop in rank for “Administrative Support” (177 compared to last year’s 99) and “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (136 compared to last year’s 78).

Over 3 in 4 (76%) Stanford students said it was at least somewhat clear that the administration protected free speech on campus, and 2 in 3 (66%) thought the administration would defend a speaker’s right to express their views if a controversy occurred. Students’ trust in the administration declined (compared to last year’s 73% and 80%, respectively), likely as a result of a substantial event disruption that occurred this year.

FIGURE 2: Student Perceptions of the Administration

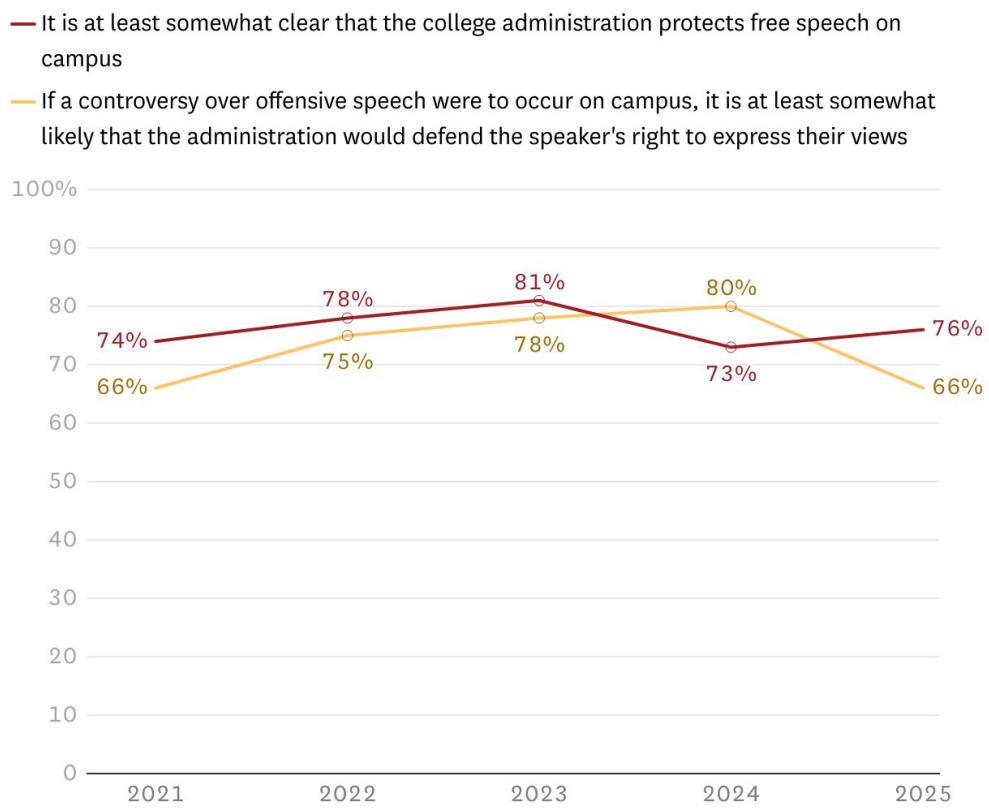


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

About half of Stanford students reported feeling comfortable disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic in a written assignment (50%), expressing their views on a controversial political topic during a discussion in the classroom (50%), and in a common campus space, such as a quad, dining hall, or a lounge (52%).

However, only 1 in 3 Stanford students reported feeling comfortable expressing an unpopular opinion to their fellow students on social media (33%) and publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic (33%). Students' comfort in the latter setting significantly dropped: Last year, about half of Stanford students reported feeling comfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor (47%).

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

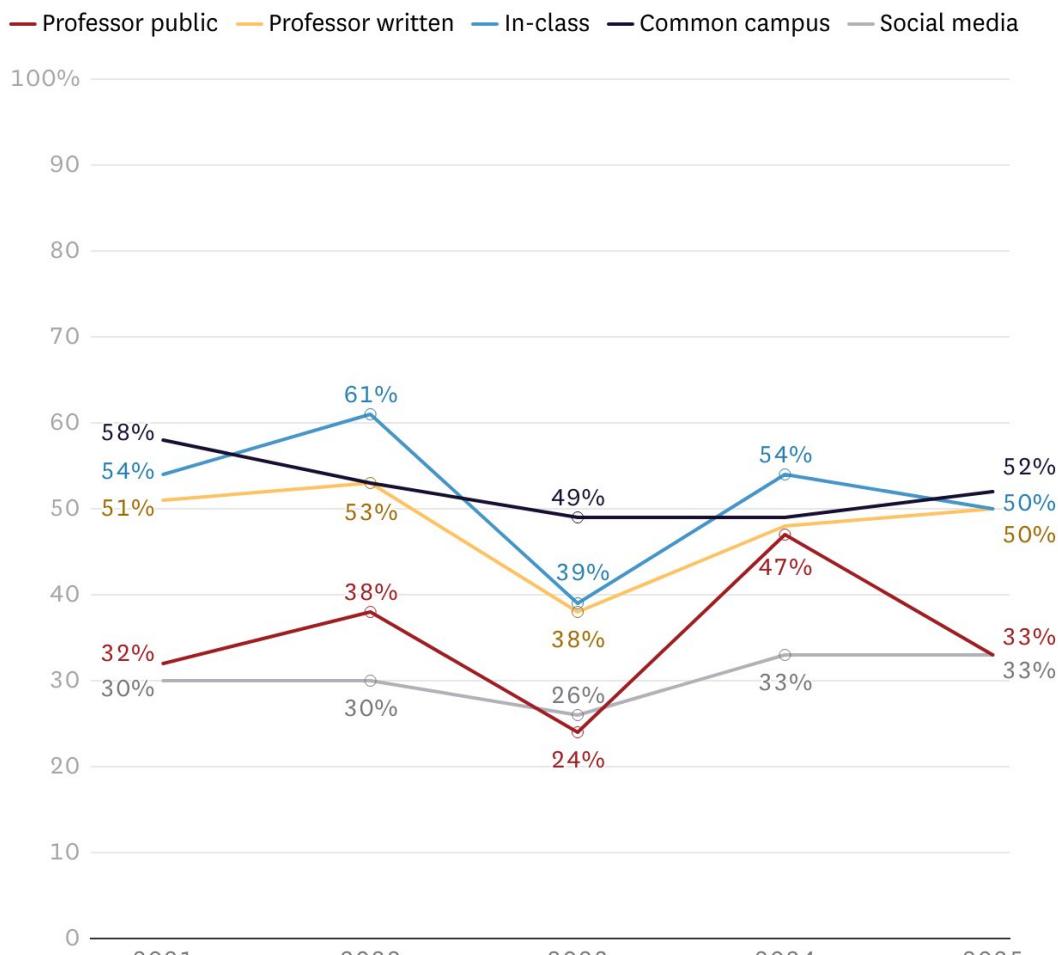


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH FREE SPEECH COMMITMENTS

FIRE awards Stanford University a “yellow light” rating for its expression-related policies, flagging six policies that could too easily be used to punish protected speech. On the positive side, Stanford received bonus points for affirming the “Chicago Statement” and adopting a statement on institutional neutrality.

Stanford University earns an overall yellow light rating for its written policies governing student expression. The university maintains six yellow light policies and four “green light” policies. Two of the university’s 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. One harassment policy goes so far as to establish a broad list of “Danger Zones” that makes speech punishable based solely on the listener’s subjective perception, suppressing protected expression. The university’s demonstration policy burdens speech rights by seemingly confining protests to designated parts of campus and banning impromptu gatherings. Lastly, Stanford stifles student expression by mandating civility in its Fundamental Standard policy. 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.

STANFORD’S SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

Stanford University has had three event disruptions since 2023. Following the two more substantial disruptions, university administrators made statements in defense of the right to listen and free speech, earning a couple of bonus points that mitigate the penalties slightly.

The most recent one was the disruption of an event involving economists Emmanuel Saez and Larry Summers. Saez appeared at the “Democracy and Disagreement” lecture series to debate Summers on the merits of a wealth tax. During the event, members of the activist group Climate Defiance stormed the stage, unfurled banners reading “Larry Summers your time is up,” “toxic mess,” and “tax the rich,” and accused Summers of being a “climate criminal.” They also threw fake money into the audience with messages criticizing Summers’ alleged support for climate-destructive policies. The audience responded with boos and chants of “let him speak,” expressing frustration over the interruption. Summers invited the protesters to return to their seats to facilitate a constructive discussion, but they declined, prolonging the disruption for over ten minutes. Summers ultimately resumed speaking and finished his remarks.

While Stanford received a penalty for the event disruption, it also received a bonus point for its administration’s response. The university’s president and provost said:

“[while the] expression of divergent views is welcome, disruption in the classroom setting is a fundamental disruption of the university’s operations and of the enrolled students’ opportunity to learn.”

The dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences also said: “There is a time and place for protest, and it is not in a classroom, and it is not disrupting the experience of almost 500 people who came to listen.”

Stanford also received a reduced penalty for a disruption attempt from 2024. Richard Saller, the university’s interim president at the time, held a fireside chat with Jenny Martinez, the university’s

provost; Michal Cotler-Wunsh, Israel's special envoy for combating antisemitism; Kevin Feiglis, a physics Ph.D. student; and Jafi Lipson, an associate professor in the school of medicine. The chat was moderated by Larry Diamond. Prior to the event, a student group, Jewish Voice for Peace, condemned Saller and Martinez for sharing the stage with Cotler-Wunsh, and during the Q&A submitted about 30 questions, none of which the panelists were asked. A member of Jewish Voice for Peace interrupted Cotler-Wunsh's response to the last question and asked why none of their questions had been asked. Another student repeatedly chanted "Ceasefire now!" Both protesters were escorted out of the event by campus security.

Stanford witnessed another event disruption in 2023 involving Judge Kyle Duncan. Law students interrupted Duncan's prepared remarks at a Federalist Society event with almost nonstop shouting and heckling. During the Q&A session, an administrator who came to the podium ostensibly to restore order defended Duncan's right to speak but also seemed to side with the protesters, questioning whether Duncan's remarks were worth student distress.

Stanford would still have been penalized for the Judge Duncan incident this year if not for the response from then-president Marc Tessier-Lavigne and then-dean of the law school Jenny Martinez which underscored Stanford's commitment to free speech and its anti-disruption policy. In their apology to Judge Duncan, Tessier-Lavigne and Martinez wrote:

"We are very clear with our students that, given our commitment to free expression, if there are speakers they disagree with, they are welcome to exercise their right to protest but not to disrupt the proceedings. Our disruption policy states that students are not allowed to 'prevent the effective carrying out' of a 'public event' whether by heckling or other forms of interruption. In addition, staff members who should have enforced university policies failed to do so, and instead intervened in inappropriate ways that are not aligned with the university's commitment to free speech."

Stanford earned a bonus point for the response, which offset the penalty that it would have received for the disruption this year.

HOW CAN STANFORD IMPROVE?

One thing Stanford University can do to improve its ranking is to reform its speech policies to earn a "green light" rating. If Stanford had earned a green light rating this year, it would have pushed its ranking from 75 to 19.

By improving the university's speech policies and publicizing those improvements, Stanford can show students that it cares about free speech, which can raise its mediocre "Administrative Support" (177) ranking. Stanford can also pair the policies with free speech training to teach students about which types of protests are protected and which types are unprotected, which can improve its middling ranking on "Disruptive Conduct" (175). Finally, fostering a culture of free expression can improve Stanford's ranking on "Comfort Expressing Ideas" (136).

Overall, by promoting the university's commitment to free speech through training and improved policies and continuing to defend free speech during speech controversies, Stanford could improve its speech climate grade in future years by creating a strong culture for free speech on campus.

Stanford 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	STANFORD UNIVERSITY	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.49	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	12.50	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.24	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	10.99	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.86	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	6.58	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	3 (Yes)	-	0	3
Institutional Neutrality	3 (Yes)	-	0	3
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-3	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire		-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire		-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	60.66	58.67		

Topline Results

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	25	9
Not very clear	38	14
Somewhat clear	113	43
Very clear	67	25
Extremely clear	20	8

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	23	9
Not very likely	66	25
Somewhat likely	99	38
Very likely	56	21
Extremely likely	18	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	65	25
Somewhat uncomfortable	111	42
Somewhat comfortable	61	23
Very comfortable	25	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	45	17
Somewhat uncomfortable	86	33
Somewhat comfortable	90	34
Very comfortable	41	16

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	38	14
Somewhat uncomfortable	91	35
Somewhat comfortable	93	35
Very comfortable	40	15

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	44	17
Somewhat uncomfortable	82	31
Somewhat comfortable	92	35
Very comfortable	44	17

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	98	37
Somewhat uncomfortable	78	30
Somewhat comfortable	68	26
Very comfortable	19	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	20	8
Rarely	92	35
Occasionally, once or twice a month	98	37
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	43	16
Very often, nearly every day	10	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	29	11
Rarely	74	28
Occasionally, once or twice a month	91	35
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	49	19
Very often, nearly every day	19	7

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	25	10
Rarely	76	29
Occasionally, once or twice a month	115	44
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	34	13
Very often, nearly every day	11	4

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	18	7
Sometimes acceptable	79	30
Rarely acceptable	92	35
Never acceptable	74	28

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	6	2
Sometimes acceptable	53	20
Rarely acceptable	85	32
Never acceptable	119	45

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	10	4
Sometimes acceptable	42	16
Rarely acceptable	36	14
Never acceptable	174	66

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	98	37
Probably should not allow this speaker	88	33
Probably should allow this speaker	52	20
Definitely should allow this speaker	25	10

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	51	19
Probably should not allow this speaker	82	31
Probably should allow this speaker	93	35
Definitely should allow this speaker	37	14

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	99	38
Probably should not allow this speaker	99	38
Probably should allow this speaker	43	16
Definitely should allow this speaker	22	8

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	24	9
Probably should not allow this speaker	98	37
Probably should allow this speaker	105	40
Definitely should allow this speaker	35	13

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	32	12
Probably should not allow this speaker	102	39
Probably should allow this speaker	83	32
Definitely should allow this speaker	45	17

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	38	14
Probably should not allow this speaker	43	17
Probably should allow this speaker	130	50
Definitely should allow this speaker	51	19

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	191	73
Yes	70	27

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	186	71
Yes	75	29

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	235	90
Yes	27	10

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	234	89
Yes	28	11

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	238	91
Yes	24	9

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	220	84
Yes	41	16

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	216	82
Yes	46	17

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	214	82
Yes	47	18

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	216	82
Yes	46	17

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	223	85
Yes	38	15

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	197	75
Yes	65	25

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	198	75
Yes	64	24

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	98	37
Yes	164	62

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	194	74
Yes	68	26

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	224	86
Yes	37	14

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	194	74
Yes	68	26

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	213	81
Yes	49	19

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	194	74
Yes	68	26

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	239	91
Yes	23	9

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	189	72
Yes	73	28

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	225	86
Yes	37	14

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	49	19
Rarely	97	37
Occasionally, once or twice a month	91	35
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	18	7
Very often, nearly every day	7	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	5	2
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	42	16
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	215	82

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	97	37
Rarely	91	35
Occasionally, once or twice a month	41	15
Fairly often, a couple times a week	19	7
Very often, nearly every day	14	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	44	17
Unlikely	81	31
Neither likely or unlikely	76	29
Likely	50	19
Very likely	11	4

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	33	13
Unlikely	65	25
Neither likely or unlikely	76	29
Likely	58	22
Very likely	29	11

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.	13	5
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	79	30
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	168	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.	5	2
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	58	22
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	198	76

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	97	37
Less than once a year	19	7
Once or twice a year	27	10
Several times a year	66	25
Once a month	28	11
2-3 times a month	7	3
About weekly	6	2
Weekly	5	2
Several times a week	7	3

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	7	3
No	254	97

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	7	3	3
No	254	97	97

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	3	15
Less than half the time	24	9	48
About half the time	12	5	25
Most of the time, nearly every day	5	2	10
Always	1	1	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	10	4	23
Less than half the time	23	9	51
About half the time	6	2	14
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	1	3
Always	4	1	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	9	3	12
Less than half the time	22	8	29
About half the time	13	5	17
Most of the time, nearly every day	23	9	31
Always	9	3	12

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	9	4	19
Less than half the time	31	12	61
About half the time	7	3	15
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	0	2
Always	2	1	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	3	1	8
Less than half the time	18	7	43
About half the time	15	6	35
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	2	10
Always	2	1	4



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