

2026 College Free Speech Rankings
University of Delaware

156
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 472 University of Delaware undergraduates. Key findings include:

- UD ranks 156, with an overall score of 56.40, an F speech climate grade.
- UD did not rank in the top 50 on any of the survey components, leaving the university without an area of clear strength.
- UD plummeted on both the “Self-Censorship” (210, compared to 19 last year) and “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (246, compared to 79 last year) components, indicating a campus climate where many students keep opinions to themselves.
- UD continues to maintain speech policies that earn it a “yellow light” rating from FIRE. If the university revised its one yellow light policy and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 18 overall.

The University of Delaware ranks 156 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 56.40, an F speech climate grade.¹ The university fell 84 spots and lost 1.31 points since last year.

The following report highlights two survey areas where UD is middling and two areas where it sits among the worst in the nation. In addition, it discusses the university's speech policies and what the school can do to improve its free speech climate.

UD STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students perceive the administration as being more supportive of free speech

The University of Delaware ranks 97 on the "Administrative Support" component after ranking 122 last year.

Thirty-nine percent of UD students said it was either "very" or "extremely" clear that the administration protects free speech on campus, compared to 36% of students nationally. An additional 49% said it was "somewhat" clear.

Additionally, 26% of UD students said that it was either "very" or "extremely" likely that the administration would defend the expressive rights of an invited speaker in the face of controversy, in line with students nationally. A further 51% said it is "somewhat" likely.

Students are equally intolerant of liberal and conservative speakers

The University of Delaware ranks 153 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.

Last year, a greater percentage of UD students said the administration "probably" or "definitely" should not allow the conservative speakers (ranging from 61% to 77%) than the liberal speakers (ranging from 44% to 57%). Reflecting a national trend, opposition among UD students increased toward each of the six speakers. Unlike students nationally, however, this increase was not proportional. Opposition toward conservative speakers increased by an average of 7 percentage points both among students nationally and at UD. Opposition toward liberal speakers, on the other hand, increased only 9 percentage points on average among students nationally and a whopping 23 percentage points on average at UD.

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

FIGURE 1: UD Students Who Opposed Controversial Speakers (%)

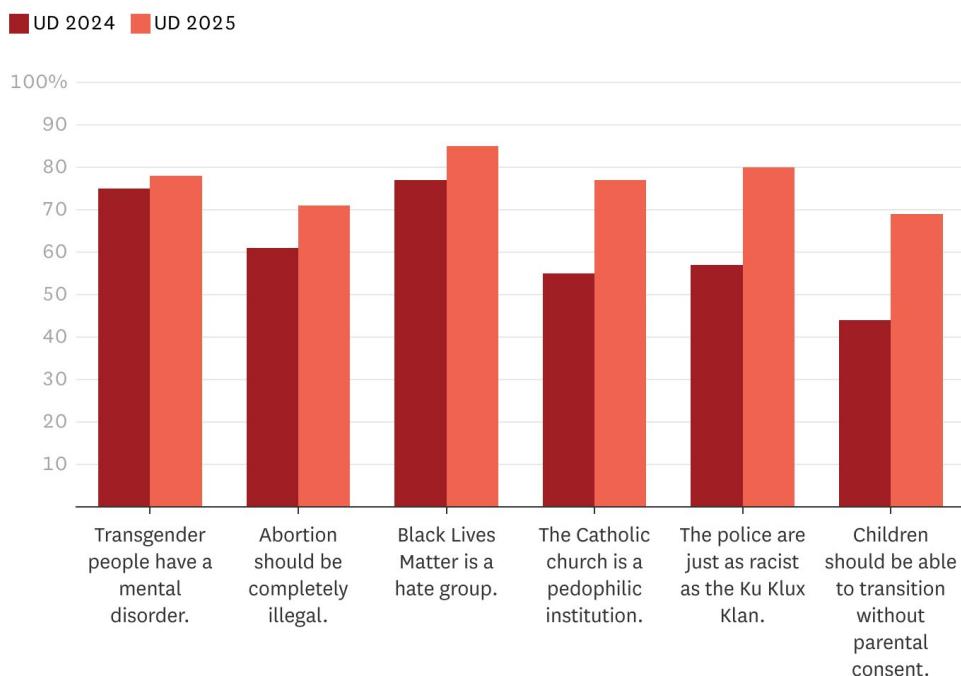


Chart: Emily Nayer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

Students are less comfortable and self-censor more

I felt scared to express my political opinions

The University of Delaware ranks 210 on the “Self-Censorship” component after finishing 19 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. Results show that not only are more students self-censoring, but they are also self-censoring more frequently. Since last year, the percentage of UD students who said they “never” self-censored dropped by 7 percentage points for each context. Meanwhile, the percentage who said they self-censored at least “a couple of times a week” increased for each context by an average of 10 percentage points.

FIGURE 2: Students Who Self-Censor at Least a Couple of Times a Week (%)

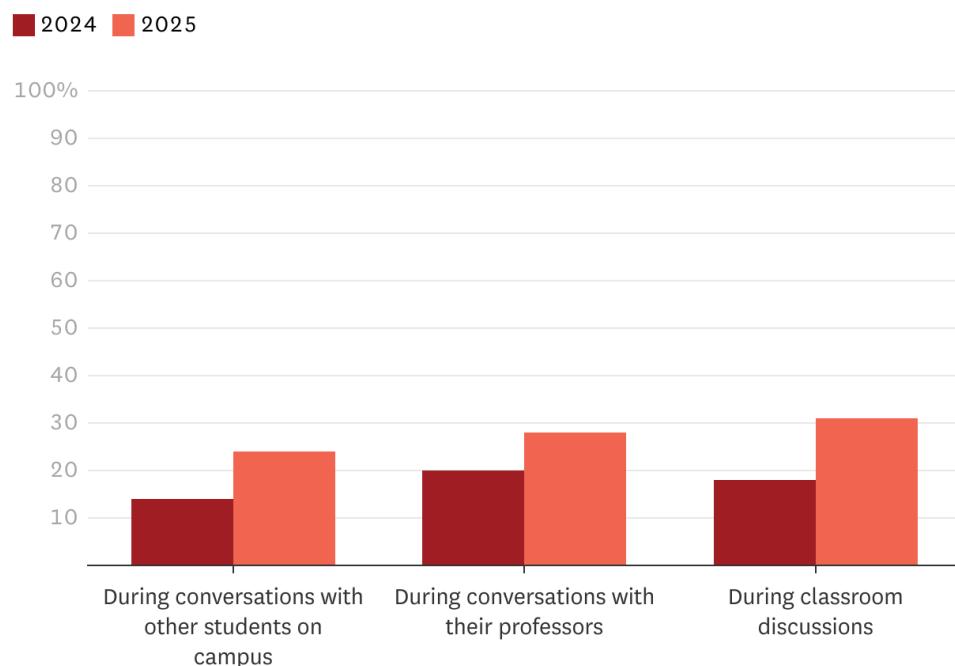


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

Given the spike in self-censorship on campus, it's unsurprising then that UD plummeted 167 spots on "Comfort Expressing Ideas," ranking 246 this year after finishing 79 last year. Its current position is a far cry from its top 20 finish in 2021.

Back then, between 45% and 65% of students expressed feeling either "somewhat" or "very" comfortable in each of five campus settings. Today, these percentages ranged from 30% to 41%. What's more, over this period the percentage who said they felt "very uncomfortable" increased for all five contexts by an average of 10 percentage points.

After reaching a nadir in each context in 2023, UD recovered substantially the following year. However, comfort levels have once again plummeted for each setting, by an average of 9 percentage points.

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

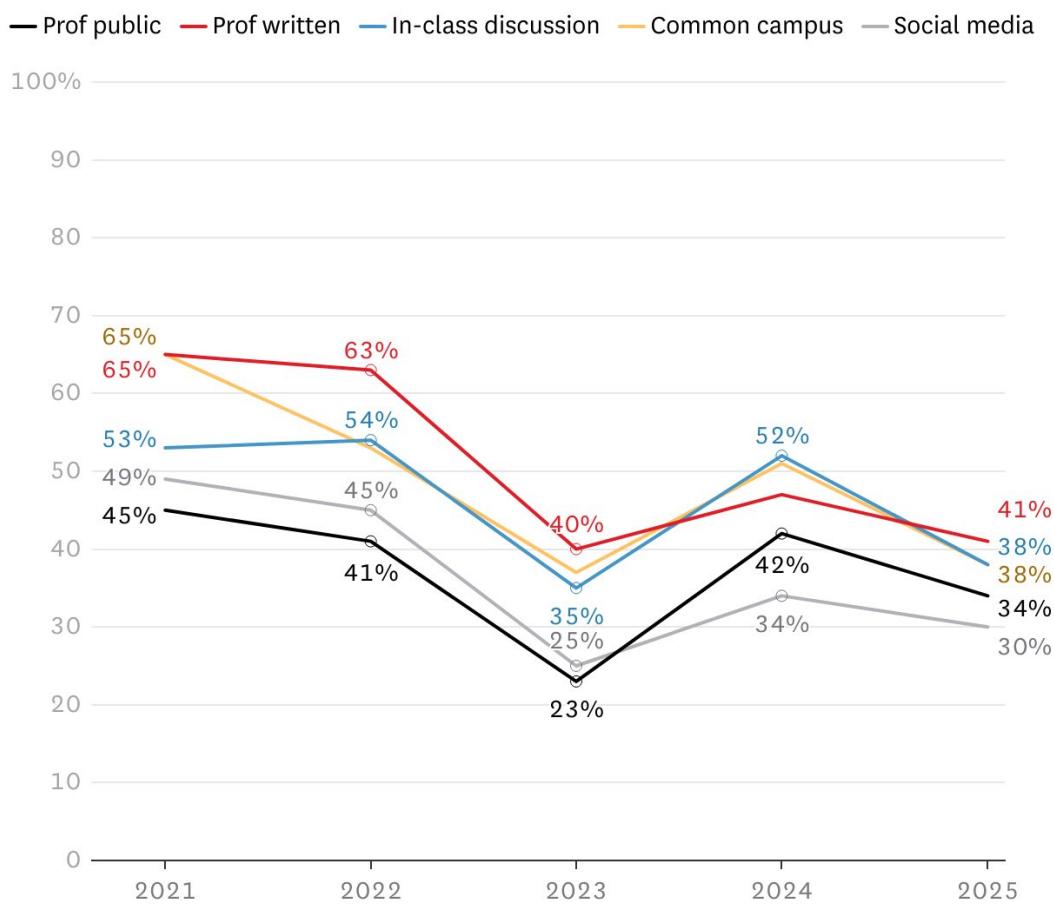


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH NO COMMITMENTS

University of Delaware earns an overall “yellow light” rating for its written policies governing student expression. The university maintains one yellow light policy and two “green light” policies. The university’s harassment policy fails 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. UD also has yet to adopt institutional neutrality or a statement of commitment to free expression such as the “Chicago Statement.”

HOW CAN UD IMPROVE?

The University of Delaware can improve its ranking by reforming its one “yellow light” speech policy to earn a “green light” rating. If the university earned a green light rating this year, it would have ranked 18 instead of 156. In addition to urging UD to improve its speech policies, we encourage UD to adopt statements committing to free speech and institutional neutrality similar to those of the Chicago Statement and “Kalven Report.” These changes, in combination with a green light rating, would have placed UD 2 in this year’s College Free Speech Rankings.

But policy changes and formal commitments alone will not improve UD’s free speech climate. Students reported staggering levels of self-censorship, discomfort expressing themselves across various campus settings, and intolerance toward both controversial liberal and conservative speakers. The university could pair its policy changes and formal commitments to free speech and institutional neutrality with free speech training for its student body. By helping students better understand the principles around free speech and their relationship to open inquiry, UD could help raise its ranking on the “Self-Censorship” (210), “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (246), and “Political Tolerance” (153) components.

UD’s 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

| COMPONENT | UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE | NATIONAL AVERAGE | MINIMUM VALUE | MAXIMUM VALUE |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Comfort Expressing Ideas | 8.92 | 9.53 | 5 | 15 |
| Self-Censorship | 11.66 | 12.12 | 3 | 20 |
| Disruptive Conduct | 15.64 | 15.50 | 3 | 20 |
| Administrative Support | 11.68 | 11.32 | 2 | 20 |
| Openness | 7.14 | 7.19 | 0 | 10 |
| Political Tolerance | 6.32 | 6.44 | 3 | 15 |
| Chicago Statement | 0 | - | 0 | 3 |
| Institutional Neutrality | 0 | - | 0 | 3 |
| 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 | 56.40 | 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 | 9 | 2 |
| Not very clear | 48 | 10 |
| Somewhat clear | 230 | 49 |
| Very clear | 167 | 36 |
| Extremely clear | 16 | 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 | 2 |
| Not very likely | 96 | 20 |
| Somewhat likely | 242 | 51 |
| Very likely | 111 | 24 |
| Extremely likely | 10 | 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 | 145 | 31 |
| Somewhat uncomfortable | 165 | 35 |
| Somewhat comfortable | 116 | 25 |
| Very comfortable | 44 | 9 |

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

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Very uncomfortable | 96 | 20 |
| Somewhat uncomfortable | 183 | 39 |
| Somewhat comfortable | 148 | 32 |
| Very comfortable | 43 | 9 |

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

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Very uncomfortable | 96 | 20 |
| Somewhat uncomfortable | 198 | 42 |
| Somewhat comfortable | 141 | 30 |
| Very comfortable | 36 | 8 |

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 | 101 | 21 |
| Somewhat uncomfortable | 190 | 40 |
| Somewhat comfortable | 152 | 32 |
| Very comfortable | 27 | 6 |

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

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Very uncomfortable | 168 | 36 |
| Somewhat uncomfortable | 163 | 35 |
| Somewhat comfortable | 111 | 24 |
| Very comfortable | 27 | 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 | 37 | 8 |
| Rarely | 111 | 24 |
| Occasionally, once or twice a month | 205 | 44 |
| Fairly often, a couple of times a week | 91 | 19 |
| Very often, nearly every day | 26 | 5 |

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

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Never | 44 | 9 |
| Rarely | 106 | 22 |
| Occasionally, once or twice a month | 191 | 41 |
| Fairly often, a couple of times a week | 78 | 17 |
| Very often, nearly every day | 51 | 11 |

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Never | 32 | 7 |
| Rarely | 111 | 24 |
| Occasionally, once or twice a month | 186 | 40 |
| Fairly often, a couple of times a week | 106 | 23 |
| Very often, nearly every day | 36 | 8 |

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 | 4 | 1 |
| Sometimes acceptable | 128 | 27 |
| Rarely acceptable | 177 | 38 |
| Never acceptable | 161 | 34 |

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------|-----------|---------|
| Always acceptable | 12 | 2 |
| Sometimes acceptable | 93 | 20 |
| Rarely acceptable | 157 | 33 |
| Never acceptable | 208 | 44 |

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------|-----------|---------|
| Always acceptable | 4 | 1 |
| Sometimes acceptable | 94 | 20 |
| Rarely acceptable | 60 | 13 |
| Never acceptable | 312 | 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 | 191 | 41 |
| Probably should not allow this speaker | 173 | 37 |
| Probably should allow this speaker | 73 | 16 |
| Definitely should allow this speaker | 33 | 7 |

Abortion should be completely illegal.

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Definitely should not allow this speaker | 152 | 32 |
| Probably should not allow this speaker | 184 | 39 |
| Probably should allow this speaker | 116 | 25 |
| Definitely should allow this speaker | 17 | 4 |

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Definitely should not allow this speaker | 216 | 46 |
| Probably should not allow this speaker | 185 | 39 |
| Probably should allow this speaker | 50 | 11 |
| Definitely should allow this speaker | 18 | 4 |

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Definitely should not allow this speaker | 156 | 33 |
| Probably should not allow this speaker | 208 | 44 |
| Probably should allow this speaker | 92 | 20 |
| Definitely should allow this speaker | 14 | 3 |

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

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Definitely should not allow this speaker | 196 | 42 |
| Probably should not allow this speaker | 180 | 38 |
| Probably should allow this speaker | 74 | 16 |
| Definitely should allow this speaker | 20 | 4 |

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Definitely should not allow this speaker | 122 | 26 |
| Probably should not allow this speaker | 203 | 43 |
| Probably should allow this speaker | 123 | 26 |
| Definitely should allow this speaker | 22 | 5 |

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 | 255 | 54 |
| Yes | 214 | 46 |

Affirmative action

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 400 | 85 |
| Yes | 70 | 15 |

China

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 410 | 87 |
| Yes | 60 | 13 |

Climate change

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 397 | 84 |
| Yes | 73 | 16 |

Crime

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 416 | 88 |
| Yes | 54 | 12 |

Economic inequality

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 388 | 83 |
| Yes | 82 | 17 |

Freedom of speech

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 372 | 79 |
| Yes | 98 | 21 |

Gay rights

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 316 | 67 |
| Yes | 154 | 33 |

Gender inequality

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 329 | 70 |
| Yes | 141 | 30 |

Gun control

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 315 | 67 |
| Yes | 155 | 33 |

Hate speech

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 340 | 72 |
| Yes | 130 | 28 |

Immigration

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 296 | 63 |
| Yes | 174 | 37 |

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 247 | 52 |
| Yes | 223 | 48 |

The Presidential Election

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 239 | 51 |
| Yes | 231 | 49 |

Police misconduct

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 342 | 73 |
| Yes | 128 | 27 |

Racial inequality

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 297 | 63 |
| Yes | 173 | 37 |

Religion

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 344 | 73 |
| Yes | 126 | 27 |

Sexual assault

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 340 | 72 |
| Yes | 130 | 28 |

The Supreme Court

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 406 | 86 |
| Yes | 64 | 14 |

Transgender rights

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 272 | 58 |
| Yes | 198 | 42 |

None of the above

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| No | 391 | 83 |
| Yes | 79 | 17 |

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 | 84 | 18 |
| Rarely | 154 | 33 |
| Occasionally, once or twice a month | 152 | 32 |
| Fairly often, a couple of times a week | 47 | 10 |
| Very often, nearly every day | 32 | 7 |

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

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|---|-----------|---------|
| Yes, I have been disciplined. | 30 | 6 |
| No, but I have been threatened with discipline. | 62 | 13 |
| I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline. | 378 | 80 |

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 | 34 |
| Rarely | 109 | 23 |
| Occasionally, once or twice a month | 132 | 28 |
| Fairly often, a couple times a week | 32 | 7 |
| Very often, nearly every day | 37 | 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 | 32 | 7 |
| Unlikely | 116 | 25 |
| Neither likely or unlikely | 188 | 40 |
| Likely | 114 | 24 |
| Very likely | 20 | 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 | 31 | 7 |
| Unlikely | 135 | 29 |
| Neither likely or unlikely | 168 | 36 |
| Likely | 112 | 24 |
| Very likely | 24 | 5 |

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. | 13 | 3 |
| I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint. | 86 | 18 |
| I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”) | 366 | 78 |

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. | 11 | 2 |
| A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me. | 58 | 12 |
| A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”) | 400 | 85 |

How often do you attend church or religious services?

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------|-----------|---------|
| Never | 122 | 26 |
| Less than once a year | 62 | 13 |
| Once or twice a year | 98 | 21 |
| Several times a year | 73 | 15 |
| Once a month | 41 | 9 |
| 2-3 times a month | 31 | 7 |
| About weekly | 26 | 6 |
| Weekly | 10 | 2 |
| Several times a week | 8 | 2 |

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| Yes | 8 | 2 |
| No | 462 | 98 |

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

| Response | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Yes | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| No | 468 | 100 | 100 |

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

| Response | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Never | 8 | 2 | 7 |
| Less than half the time | 41 | 9 | 37 |
| About half the time | 29 | 6 | 26 |
| Most of the time, nearly every day | 30 | 6 | 27 |
| Always | 3 | 1 | 3 |

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

| Response | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Never | 22 | 5 | 29 |
| Less than half the time | 41 | 9 | 54 |
| About half the time | 10 | 2 | 14 |
| Most of the time, nearly every day | 2 | 0 | 3 |

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

| Response | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Never | 7 | 2 | 8 |
| Less than half the time | 33 | 7 | 38 |
| About half the time | 34 | 7 | 39 |
| Most of the time, nearly every day | 12 | 3 | 14 |
| Always | 0 | 0 | 1 |

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

| Response | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Never | 33 | 7 | 31 |
| Less than half the time | 54 | 12 | 52 |
| About half the time | 13 | 3 | 13 |
| Most of the time, nearly every day | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| Always | 0 | 0 | 0 |

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

| Response | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Never | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| Less than half the time | 25 | 5 | 27 |
| About half the time | 30 | 6 | 32 |
| Most of the time, nearly every day | 17 | 4 | 18 |
| Always | 17 | 4 | 18 |



FIRE

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