

2026 College Free Speech Rankings
University of Iowa

63
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 334 University of Iowa undergraduates. Key findings include:

- The University of Iowa ranks 63 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 61.55, a D- speech climate grade.
- Students at the University of Iowa had low tolerance for controversial speakers on either side of the political spectrum.
- Despite their low tolerance for controversial speakers, students at the University of Iowa were generally opposed to disruptive conduct and more so than students nationally. There is, however, a trend toward more acceptance of such behavior compared to previous years.
- The University of Iowa scored relatively well in “Openness,” with students generally feeling comfortable discussing every issue except for abortion.
- Although students felt slightly more comfortable in discussions with peers than with professors, “Self-Censorship” was high regardless of audience.
- University of Iowa students were less concerned about administrative restrictions on speech than students nationally.
- The University of Iowa earns a “yellow light” Spotlight rating for maintaining one speech restrictive policy. Had Iowa earned a “green light” rating, it would rank 17. The University of Iowa does not have a policy on institutional neutrality but has affirmed the “Chicago Statement.”

The University of Iowa ranks 63 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 61.55, a D- speech climate grade.¹ The following report highlights where the University of Iowa performs comparatively well and a couple of areas where the university performs relatively poorly. In addition, it discusses the University of Iowa's speech policies and statements, and what the university can do to improve its free speech climate.

IOWA STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students had low tolerance for all controversial speakers

The University of Iowa ranks 73 on the "Political Tolerance" component. Students generally indicated that a controversial speaker should not be allowed on campus regardless of the speaker's political alignment.

Iowa students were generally opposed to controversial speakers on campus, more so than students nationally. A majority of students were opposed to each of the hypothetical speakers. The only speaker that more Iowa students (28%) were in favor of allowing than students nationally (25%) was the conservative speaker who said "transgender people have a mental disorder." Iowa students were most willing to allow a liberal speaker who said "children should be able to transition without parental consent" (44%) and the least willing to allow the conservative speaker who said "Black Lives Matter is a hate group" (19%).

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

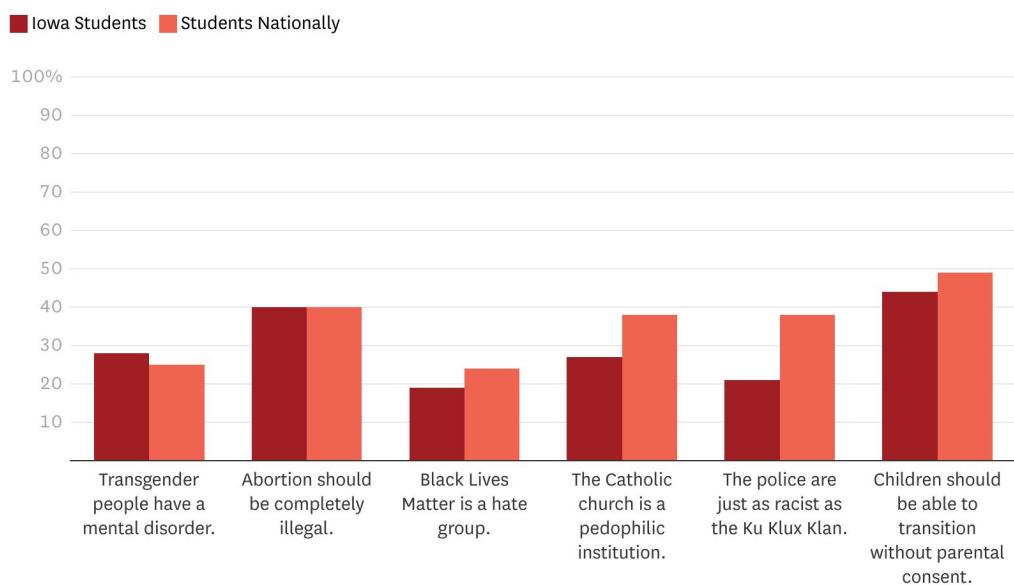


Chart: Emily Nayer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

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

STUDENTS GENERALLY OPPOSE DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT

The University of Iowa ranks 82 on “Disruptive Conduct” and had no incidents of attempted disruption.

Iowa students typically did not support disruptive conduct, but there has been a trend over the last several years toward more acceptance. This change could reflect a national trend toward greater acceptance of disruptive conduct. Nationally, this year saw an increase from last year, with record high percentages of students saying that it is acceptable to shout down a speaker, block entry to a campus speech, or use violence to stop a campus speech.

FIGURE 2: Students Who Said The Following Disruptive Conduct To Be At Least Rarely Acceptable

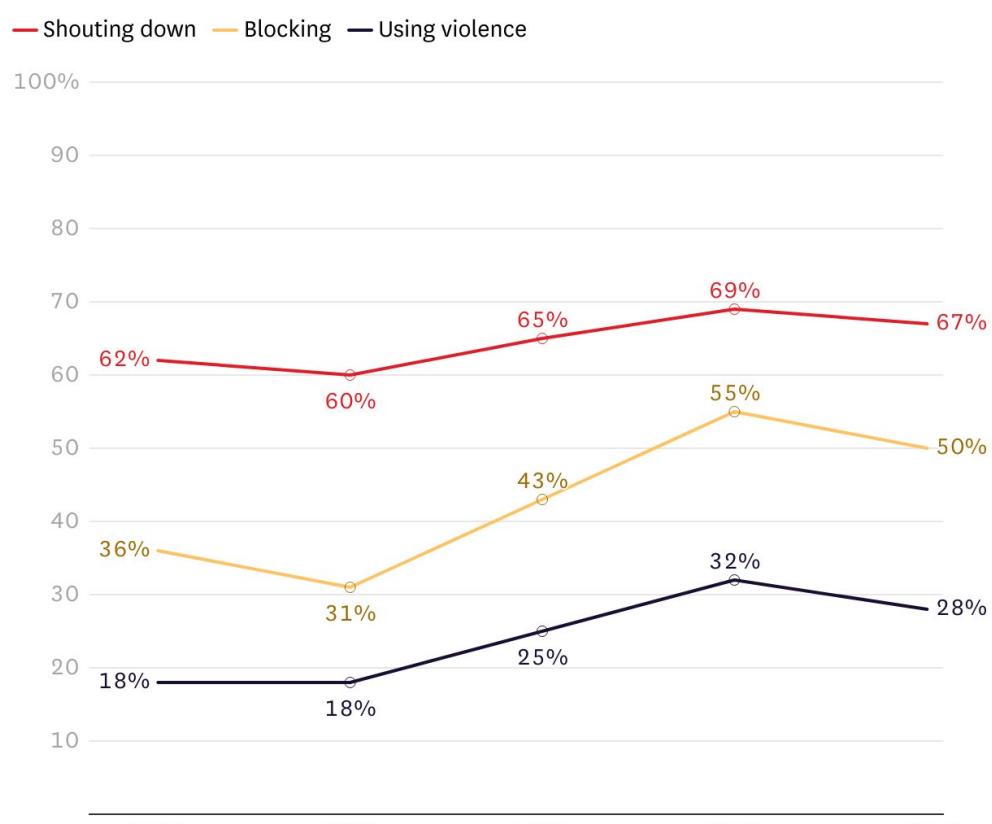


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

While the percentages of Iowa students who said disruptive conduct was “always” or “sometimes” acceptable were relatively similar to the national average, a larger percentage of Iowa students indicated that disruptive conduct was “never” acceptable. This indicates that while Iowa students may be disinclined toward disruptive conduct in similar numbers to other schools, their opposition is more vehement.

FIGURE 3: Students Who Said The Following Disruptive Conduct To Be at Least Rarely Acceptable Compared To Students Nationally

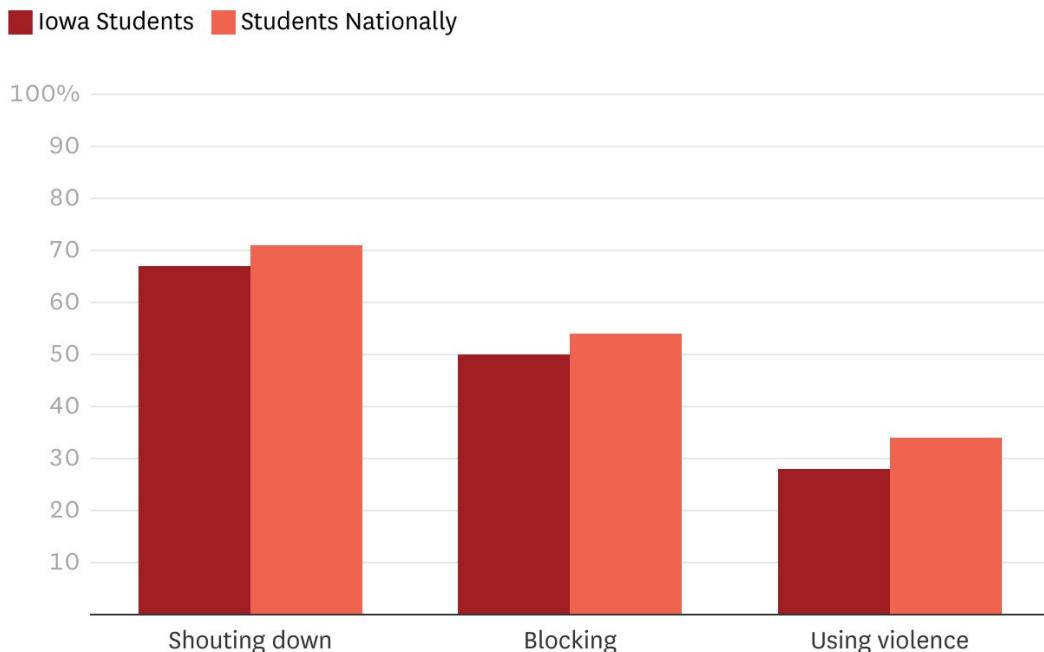


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

Iowa students were especially opposed to violence. A majority of students, 72%, said that violence was “never” acceptable, more than the 66% of students nationally.

Iowa scored relatively well on “Openness” with the exception of abortion

The University of Iowa ranks 105 on the “Openness” component. Students generally felt comfortable having open and honest conversations about the controversial topics presented in the survey.

Abortion was the only topic identified by a majority (52%) of Iowa students as being difficult to have an open and honest conversation about on campus, followed closely by the presidential election and transgender rights (48% apiece). No other topic broke 40%.

FIGURE 4: Topics Identified as Difficult to Have an Open and Honest Conversation About

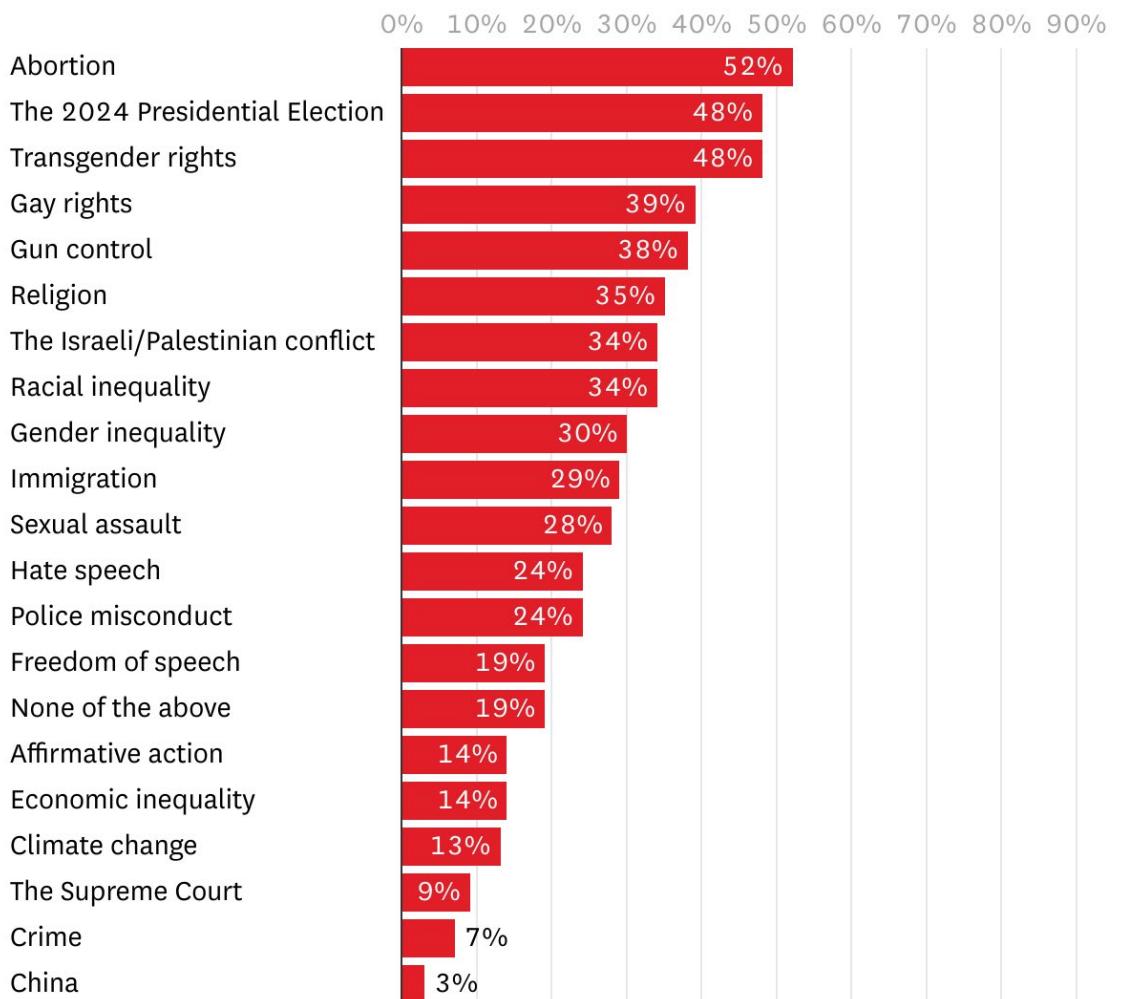


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

Self-censorship was high regardless of audience

The University of Iowa ranks 151 on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component and 227 on the “Self-Censorship”. Although Iowa students were more comfortable talking about controversial issues with their peers than with professors, the rate of self-censorship was high regardless of audience.

Excepting conversations with professors, Iowa students generally expressed similar levels of comfort discussing controversial political topics as students nationally.

- 48% of Iowa students were at least “somewhat” comfortable expressing their views on a political topic with other students in common campus spaces versus 52% of students nationally.
- 39% of Iowa students were at least “somewhat” comfortable expressing their unpopular views on a political topic to other students via social media, versus 34% of students nationally.
- 47% of Iowa students said they would feel at least “somewhat” comfortable expressing views during an in-class discussion, versus 49% of students nationally.
- 41% of Iowa students said they would feel at least “somewhat” comfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor, versus 50% of students nationally.

Compared to students nationally, Iowa students were more likely to have engaged in some level of self-censorship.

- 36% of Iowa students said they “never” or “rarely” self-censored in conversations with other students, versus 41% of students nationally.
- 31% of Iowa students said they had “never” or “rarely” self-censored in class discussions, versus 35% of students nationally.
- 37% of Iowa students said they “never” or “rarely” self-censored in conversations with professors, versus 39% of students nationally.

Iowa students were also somewhat less comfortable than students nationally in expressing their political beliefs to professors when it related to an assignment or grade.

- 40% of Iowa students said they hide political beliefs from professors in an attempt to get a better grade either “occasionally,” “fairly often,” or “very often,” versus 34% of students nationally.
- 55% of Iowa students said they would feel “somewhat” or “very” uncomfortable disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic in a written assignment, versus 50% of students nationally.

FIGURE 5: Students Who Felt Never Or Rarely Engaged in Self-Censorship In Different Settings

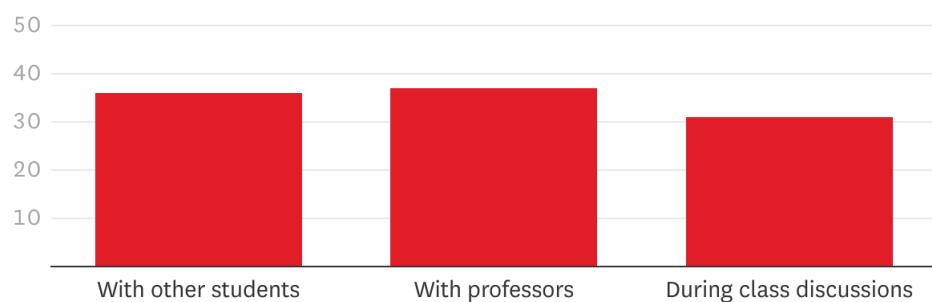


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

FIGURE 6: Students Who Felt Somewhat Or Very Comfortable Discussing Controversial Topics By Setting

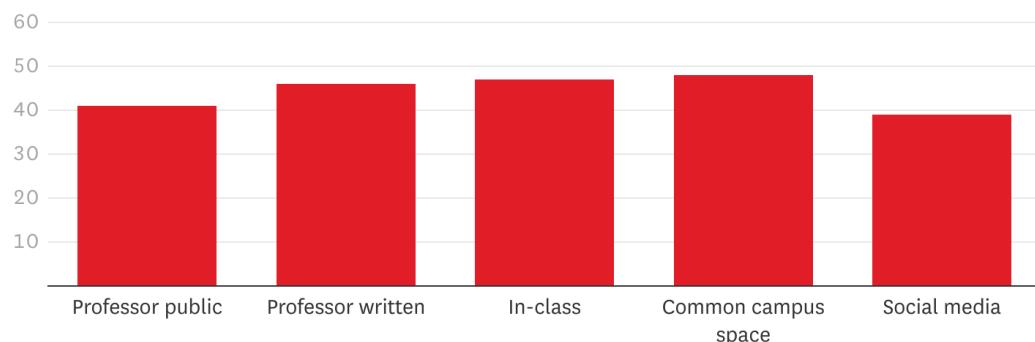


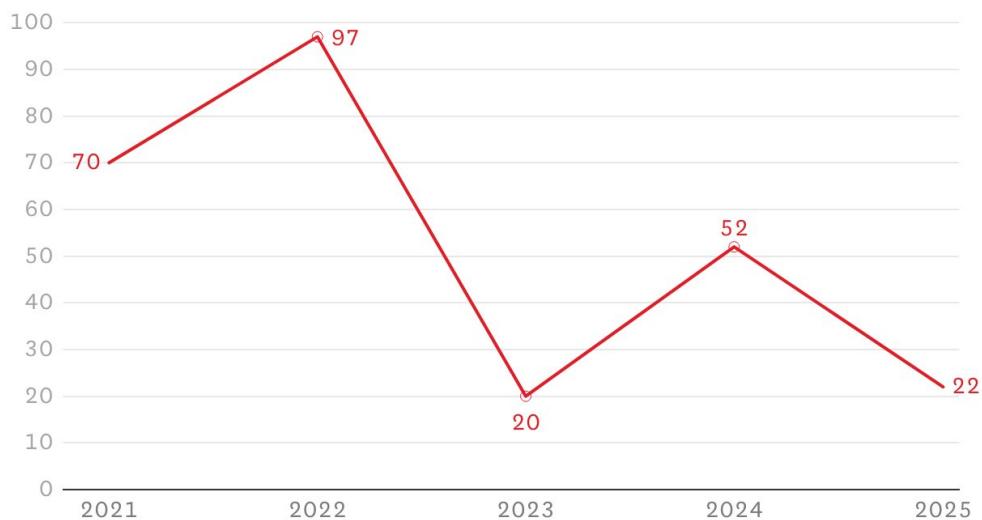
Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

Despite reporting concerns about the impacts of their views on assignments and grades, Iowa students did not self-censor more with professors than with other students.

Iowa students trust their administration supports free speech more than students nationally

The University of Iowa scored well on “Administrative Support,” ranking 22. This is an improvement from the previous year and part of an upward trend for the school.

FIGURE 7: Administrative Support Ranking Over Time



The lower the administrative grade, the better the ranking.

Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

Students at the University of Iowa generally thought that their administration supports and would defend free speech. More Iowa students were confident in their administration than students nationally.

- 90% of Iowa students said that it was at least “somewhat” clear that their administration protects free speech on campus. In contrast, only 79% of students nationally said the same.
- 80% of Iowa students said it was at least “somewhat” likely that their administration would defend a speaker’s right to expression. In contrast, only 72% of students nationally said the same.

Fewer students at Iowa believed that a student or professor would be reported for something they said compared to students nationally.

- Only 11% of Iowa students said it was “likely” or “very likely” that a student would be reported to the administration by another student for controversial speech. Nationally, 25% of students said the same.
- 19% of Iowa students responded said it was “likely” or “very likely” that a professor would be reported for controversial speech. Nationally, 32% of students said the same.

Iowa students were unlikely to have been threatened with discipline or actually disciplined for their expression. Only five students of the 334 surveyed reported having been disciplined, and 88% had neither been disciplined nor threatened with it. Students nationally were slightly more likely to have experienced disciplinary action.

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH A CHICAGO STATEMENT

The University of Iowa earns an overall “yellow light” rating for its written policies governing student expression. The university maintains one yellow light policy and three “green light” policies. One of the university’s three harassment policies 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.

While the University of Iowa was penalized five points for its yellow light rating, it was awarded three points for a statement of commitment to freedom of expression similar to that of the “Chicago Statement.”

HOW CAN THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA IMPROVE?

The University of Iowa can improve its ranking by reforming its “yellow light” speech policies to earn a “green light” rating. If Iowa earned a green light rating this year it would rank 17 instead of 63.

In addition to improved speech policies, we encourage the University of Iowa to adopt a policy on institutional neutrality. The introduction and promotion of such a policy may help improve student comfort and trust in expressing ideas. Iowa should focus on promoting the university’s commitment to

free speech through training and improvement of existing policies in order to continue the positive trend in administrative support on campus. Currently, the University of Iowa ranks well, at 22.

However, while Iowa's administration has improved trust, students still reported high levels of self-censorship and discomfort, especially with professors and in assignments, as well as intolerance toward both controversial liberal and conservative speakers. To improve this campus culture, the university could engage in free speech training for its student body and faculty.

By helping students better understand the principles around free speech and their relationship to open inquiry, Iowa could help raise its ranking on the "Self-Censorship" (227) and "Comfort Expressing Ideas" (151) components. Including faculty in these trainings may help students feel more comfortable expressing ideas in class assignments and to professors, something about which Iowa students indicated particular concern. Training could also include specific lessons on how to engage in discussions on controversial topics and how to disagree. Iowa students already express more disapproval for disruptive conduct (82) than students nationally, and such training could help reinforce those beliefs while encouraging greater tolerance for controversial speakers.

The University of Iowa's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	UNIVERSITY OF IOWA	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.44	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	11.56	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.76	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	12.45	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.28	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	7.05	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	3 (Yes)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Institutional Neutrality	0 (No)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	61.55	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	3	1
Not very clear	26	8
Somewhat clear	119	36
Very clear	144	44
Extremely clear	34	10

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	3	1
Not very likely	63	19
Somewhat likely	172	53
Very likely	76	23
Extremely likely	12	4

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	83	26
Somewhat uncomfortable	111	34
Somewhat comfortable	104	32
Very comfortable	28	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	45	14
Somewhat uncomfortable	132	41
Somewhat comfortable	117	36
Very comfortable	33	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	56	17
Somewhat uncomfortable	116	35
Somewhat comfortable	135	41
Very comfortable	19	6

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	49	15
Somewhat uncomfortable	119	36
Somewhat comfortable	112	34
Very comfortable	46	14

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	92	28
Somewhat uncomfortable	109	33
Somewhat comfortable	103	32
Very comfortable	23	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	19	6
Rarely	97	30
Occasionally, once or twice a month	131	40
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	67	20
Very often, nearly every day	13	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	19	6
Rarely	100	31
Occasionally, once or twice a month	104	32
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	63	19
Very often, nearly every day	40	12

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	11	3
Rarely	93	28
Occasionally, once or twice a month	114	35
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	79	24
Very often, nearly every day	29	9

How acceptable would you say it is for students to engage in the following action to protest a campus speaker?
[Presented in randomized order]

Shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	13	4
Sometimes acceptable	85	26
Rarely acceptable	122	37
Never acceptable	107	33

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	12	4
Sometimes acceptable	58	18
Rarely acceptable	91	28
Never acceptable	165	51

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	8	2
Sometimes acceptable	51	16
Rarely acceptable	33	10
Never acceptable	234	72

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	116	36
Probably should not allow this speaker	119	36
Probably should allow this speaker	79	24
Definitely should allow this speaker	12	4

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	66	20
Probably should not allow this speaker	132	41
Probably should allow this speaker	94	29
Definitely should allow this speaker	34	11

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	123	38
Probably should not allow this speaker	141	43
Probably should allow this speaker	58	18
Definitely should allow this speaker	5	1

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	94	29
Probably should not allow this speaker	145	45
Probably should allow this speaker	70	22
Definitely should allow this speaker	17	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	135	41
Probably should not allow this speaker	122	37
Probably should allow this speaker	56	17
Definitely should allow this speaker	14	4

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	66	20
Probably should not allow this speaker	115	35
Probably should allow this speaker	122	37
Definitely should allow this speaker	23	7

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	157	48
Yes	170	52

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	281	86
Yes	46	14

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	316	97
Yes	11	3

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	284	87
Yes	42	13

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	303	93
Yes	23	7

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	281	86
Yes	45	14

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	263	81
Yes	63	19

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	198	61
Yes	129	39

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	228	70
Yes	98	30

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	204	62
Yes	123	38

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	248	76
Yes	78	24

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	232	71
Yes	95	29

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	215	66
Yes	112	34

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	169	52
Yes	158	48

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	248	76
Yes	78	24

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	216	66
Yes	111	34

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	211	65
Yes	116	35

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	234	72
Yes	93	28

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	296	91
Yes	31	9

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	170	52
Yes	157	48

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	266	81
Yes	61	19

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	74	23
Rarely	109	33
Occasionally, once or twice a month	96	29
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	36	11
Very often, nearly every day	11	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.	33	10
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	287	88

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	112	34
Rarely	80	24
Occasionally, once or twice a month	80	24
Fairly often, a couple times a week	44	13
Very often, nearly every day	10	3

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	49	15
Unlikely	104	32
Neither likely or unlikely	137	42
Likely	27	8
Very likely	8	3

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	36	11
Unlikely	98	30
Neither likely or unlikely	127	39
Likely	60	18
Very likely	5	1

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.	10	3
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	32	10
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	278	85

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.	2	1
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	10	3
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	28	9
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	286	88

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	101	31
Less than once a year	29	9
Once or twice a year	54	17
Several times a year	65	20
Once a month	17	5
2-3 times a month	20	6
About weekly	6	2
Weekly	18	6
Several times a week	11	3

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	5	2
No	316	97

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	5	2	2
No	316	97	98

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	6	2	7
Less than half the time	31	10	38
About half the time	14	4	17
Most of the time, nearly every day	23	7	28
Always	8	2	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	15	5	26
Less than half the time	33	10	58
About half the time	4	1	7
Most of the time, nearly every day	5	2	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	9	3	14
Less than half the time	15	5	24
About half the time	24	7	38
Most of the time, nearly every day	14	4	22
Always	2	1	4

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	18	6	31
Less than half the time	36	11	61
About half the time	3	1	5
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	0	2
Always	0	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	6	2	10
Less than half the time	9	3	14
About half the time	32	10	52
Most of the time, nearly every day	9	3	15
Always	5	2	9



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