

2026 College Free Speech Rankings

University of Pennsylvania

231

OVERALL
RANK

F

SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

Executive Summary

THE COLLEGE FREE SPEECH RANKINGS are the most comprehensive comparison of free speech climates at U.S. colleges and universities. Developed by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, the rankings combine student survey data, written speech policies, and school responses to recent speech-related controversies to evaluate how well institutions uphold free expression. Schools earn higher scores when they protect open debate and viewpoint diversity and lose points when they restrict it.

To understand the student experience of free speech on campus, our survey partner, College Pulse, surveyed 68,510 student respondents from 257 colleges and universities from Jan. 3 through June 5, 2025. The College Free Speech Rankings are available online (rankings.thefire.org) for easy comparison between institutions.

We surveyed 341 UPenn undergraduates. Key findings include:

- A ranking of 231, with an overall score of 51.51 and an F speech climate.
- Among the other Ivy League schools, UPenn ranked below Dartmouth (35), Yale (58), Princeton (160), Brown (187), and Cornell (227), but above Harvard (245) and Columbia (256).
- No survey component placed in the top 50, leaving the university without a clear area of strength. On the bright side, UPenn did leap 137 spots on “Disruptive Conduct” (89).
- After dropping 71 spots, UPenn now ranks in the bottom 50 for “Self-Censorship” (223). Worse, it ranks in the bottom 20 for perceived “Administrative Support” for free expression (238) and second to last in “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (256).
- UPenn was penalized six points for four speech controversies from 2023 and 2024.
- UPenn continues to maintain speech policies that earn it a “yellow light” rating from FIRE. If UPenn revised these policies and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 64 overall.

The University of Pennsylvania ranks 231 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 51.51, an F speech climate grade.¹ The university moved up 17 spots and gained 6.46 points since last year, thanks in part to adopting a statement of institutional neutrality.

The following report highlights one survey area where UPenn improved, and three areas where it sits among the worst in the nation. In addition, it discusses UPenn's speech policies and statements, its speech controversies, and what the school can do to improve its free speech climate.

UPENN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students are less accepting of disruptive conduct

After placing 226 on the “Disruptive Conduct” component last year, the University of Pennsylvania leapt 137 spots to rank 89 this year. Since last year, students were less accepting of each of the three disruptive tactics by an average of 10 percentage points.

Compared to students nationally, UPenn students expressed similar levels of acceptance when it comes to shouting down a speaker (73%) and blocking other students from attending a campus speech (54%). But when it comes to using violence to stop a campus speech, UPenn students are 8 percentage points less accepting (26%) than students nationally.

FIGURE 1: UPenn Students Who Said Disruptive Conduct Was At Least “Rarely” Acceptable (%)

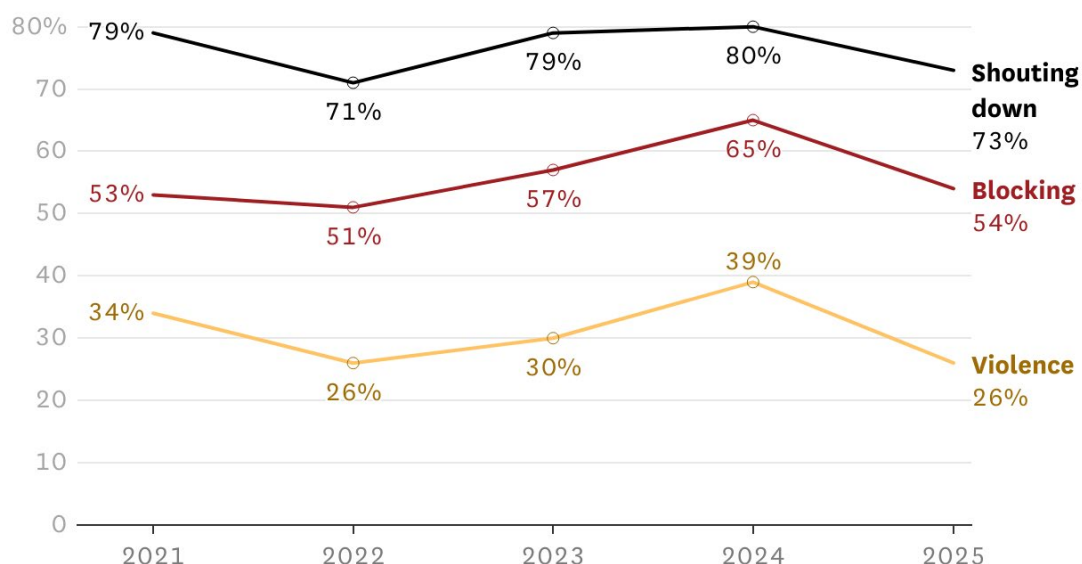


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

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

STUDENTS ARE MORE UNCOMFORTABLE SHARING IDEAS AND LESS SURE IF THE ADMINISTRATION SUPPORTS FREE SPEECH

[O]pen dialogue and constructive debates are uncommon at university, so students can be quick to anger or become easily upset when hearing opposing opinions. In classrooms, it is difficult at times to express full opinions without causing someone to become upset.

UPenn ranks 223 on the “Self-Censorship” component, dropping 71 spots from its 152 finish last year.

1 in 4 students said they self-censored at least a couple times a week either during conversations with professors or during conversations with other students. While these levels are consistent with last year’s and with those of students nationally, self-censorship rose during classroom discussions, with 1 in 3 students having said they do so at least a couple of times a week.

It is unsurprising, then, that UPenn also ranks second to last (256) on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component, with a majority of students having said they would be uncomfortable expressing a controversial political topic within each of the five contexts about which they were asked. Compared to students nationally, discomfort among UPenn students was an average of 15 percentage points higher for each.

FIGURE 2: Students Who Feel At Least “Somewhat” Uncomfortable By Context (%)

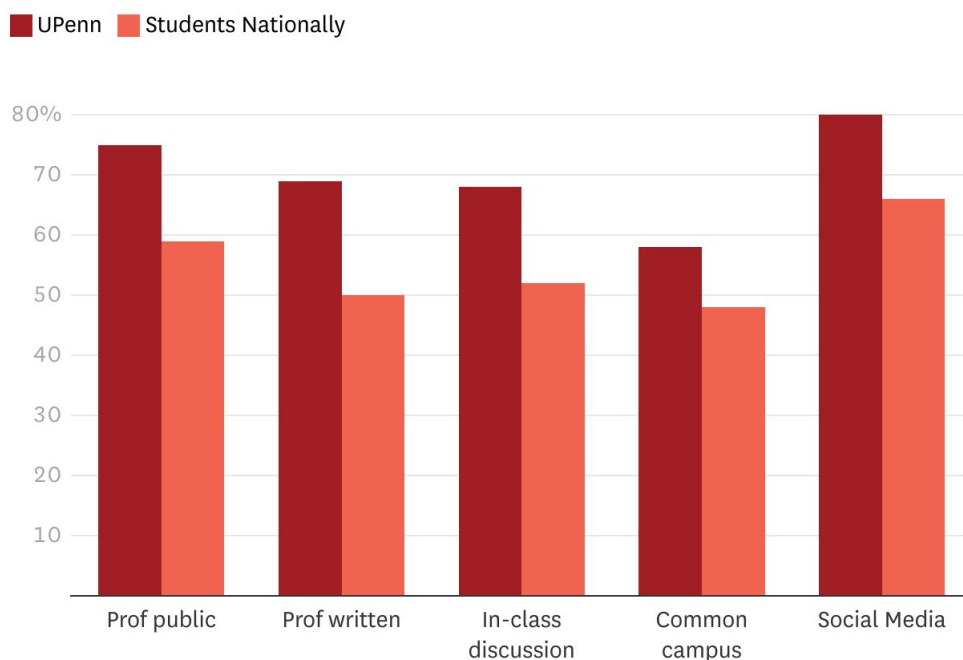


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

These alarming sentiments are perhaps influenced by UPenn’s handling of recent speech controversies. In fact, the university was penalized at least five points in each of the past three years for how it responded to such controversies, and in each of these years it has placed below 200 on the “Administrative Support” survey component. This year, UPenn ranks 238.

When asked how clear it is that the administration protects free speech on campus, twice as many students said it was “not very” or “not at all” clear (33%) than those who said it was “very” or “extremely” clear (16%). Even worse, nearly three times as many students said it was “not very” or “not at all” likely that the administration would defend a speaker’s expressive rights (42%) than those who said it was “very” or “extremely” likely (15%).

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH INSTITUTIONAL NEUTRALITY

On September 10, 2024, the University of Pennsylvania officially adopted a statement on institutional neutrality, which earned the school three bonus points in this year’s College Free Speech Rankings. However, the school’s continued maintenance of a “yellow light” Spotlight rating all but neutralized this bonus.

UPenn earns an overall yellow light rating for its written policies governing student expression and maintains four yellow light policies and six “green light” policies. Its harassment policy does not meet the legal standard for peer hostile environment harassment in an educational setting, putting protected speech that does not reach that threshold at risk. The university’s demonstration policy outright bans overnight expression and mandates protest participants be “respectful,” granting administrators broad discretion over campus speech and expression.

Expressive activities are further curtailed by UPenn’s restrictive posting policy, which mandates the inclusion of identifiable information on materials, effectively forbidding anonymous authorship and chilling expression on campus.

Lastly, UPenn encourages students to use its “Bias Incident Reporting form” to report instances of bias—which may include protected speech—to the administration. Concerns related to bias are already addressed by harassment and discrimination protocols; therefore, the administration should focus its resources on these established systems and avoid soliciting reports of subjective bias.

UPENN’S SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

The University of Pennsylvania was penalized six points as a result of its handling of four campus controversies involving expression about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In 2024, UPenn launched an investigation into Penn Students Against the Occupation of Palestine after a faculty member allegedly accused the student group of discriminatory social media content. According to the group, administrators compelled it to change the name of its Instagram account and suspended it from organizing events in campus spaces until the conclusion of the investigation. Ultimately, administrators revoked the group’s status as a registered student group.

Also that year, the West Craft Fest experienced a substantial event disruption. An anonymous person emailed the venue and accused it, and the university, of hosting vendors who supported violence against Jewish people, and also took issue with the inclusion of pro-Palestinian artists and artwork in the festival. In response, the university asked the organizers to exclude any “items that depict, glorify, or incite violence of any kind whatsoever AND/OR are politically sensitive.” The organizers moved the event to a smaller location that could not accommodate all of the original vendors set to attend the event.

The year prior, on- and off-campus groups, a member of Congress, and students petitioned the university to either cancel or relocate the Palestinian Literature Festival, which was designed to celebrate Palestinian culture. Though the event took place, two speakers, Refaat Alareer and Pink Floyd’s Roger Waters, were disinvited, with Waters being told he could join by Zoom instead.

Finally, after being pressured by students and others—including Congress—to combat anti-Israel speech on campus, the university asked a progressive Jewish student group to postpone a screening of the film, *Israelism*, citing safety reasons. The university feared unrest because the film is critical of Israeli policy. The student group showed the film anyway, and the university threatened the group with disciplinary action for doing so.

HOW CAN UPENN IMPROVE?

The University of Pennsylvania can improve its ranking by reforming its “yellow light” speech policies to earn a “green light” rating. If UPenn earned a green light rating this year, it would rank 64 instead of 231. In addition to advising improved speech policies, we encourage UPenn to adopt the “Chicago Statement” or a similar statement committing to the principles of free speech. This, in combination with a green light rating, would have positioned UPenn among the top 50 schools in this year’s College Free Speech Rankings.

But policy changes alone will not improve UPenn’s free speech climate. To feel comfortable expressing themselves on campus, students need to trust that neither they nor anyone else on campus will be punished for their speech. That’s why administrators should not only communicate these policy changes directly to the student body, but also publicly defend community members’ expressive rights whenever controversy arises. These actions could help rescue the school’s “Self-Censorship” (223), “Administrative Support” (238), and “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (256) scores.

UPenn's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	8.46	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	11.57	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.70	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	9.83	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.27	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	6.65	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	0	-	0	3
Institutional Neutrality	3	-	0	3
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-4	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	-2	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	51.51	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	26	8
Not very clear	87	25
Somewhat clear	174	51
Very clear	44	13
Extremely clear	10	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	20	6
Not very likely	123	36
Somewhat likely	146	43
Very likely	41	12
Extremely likely	10	3

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	132	39
Somewhat uncomfortable	121	36
Somewhat comfortable	67	20
Very comfortable	20	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	104	31
Somewhat uncomfortable	128	38
Somewhat comfortable	74	22
Very comfortable	34	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	96	28
Somewhat uncomfortable	135	40
Somewhat comfortable	84	25
Very comfortable	26	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	69	20
Somewhat uncomfortable	131	38
Somewhat comfortable	101	30
Very comfortable	40	12

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	179	53
Somewhat uncomfortable	93	27
Somewhat comfortable	55	16
Very comfortable	13	4

This next series of questions asks you about self-censorship in different settings. For the purpose of these questions, self-censorship is defined as follows:

Refraining from sharing certain views because you fear social (e.g., exclusion from social events), professional (e.g., losing job or promotion), legal (e.g., prosecution or fine), or violent (e.g., assault) consequences, whether in person or remotely (e.g., by phone or online), and whether the consequences come from state or non-state sources. [Presented in randomized order]

How often do you self-censor during conversations with other students on campus?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	5	2
Rarely	102	30
Occasionally, once or twice a month	149	44
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	61	18
Very often, nearly every day	23	7

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	11	3
Rarely	117	34
Occasionally, once or twice a month	127	37
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	60	18
Very often, nearly every day	25	7

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	9	3
Rarely	105	31
Occasionally, once or twice a month	118	35
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	79	23
Very often, nearly every day	30	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	12	4
Sometimes acceptable	106	31
Rarely acceptable	128	38
Never acceptable	94	28

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	3	1
Sometimes acceptable	73	22
Rarely acceptable	107	31
Never acceptable	157	46

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	1	0
Sometimes acceptable	40	12
Rarely acceptable	49	14
Never acceptable	250	73

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	158	46
Probably should not allow this speaker	96	28
Probably should allow this speaker	52	15
Definitely should allow this speaker	34	10

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	88	26
Probably should not allow this speaker	98	29
Probably should allow this speaker	95	28
Definitely should allow this speaker	59	17

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	142	42
Probably should not allow this speaker	93	27
Probably should allow this speaker	61	18
Definitely should allow this speaker	44	13

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	68	20
Probably should not allow this speaker	116	34
Probably should allow this speaker	121	36
Definitely should allow this speaker	35	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	92	27
Probably should not allow this speaker	100	29
Probably should allow this speaker	100	29
Definitely should allow this speaker	48	14

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	54	16
Probably should not allow this speaker	74	22
Probably should allow this speaker	138	40
Definitely should allow this speaker	75	22

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	219	65
Yes	121	35

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	218	64
Yes	123	36

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	302	89
Yes	38	11

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	305	90
Yes	35	10

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	298	88
Yes	42	12

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	260	77
Yes	80	23

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	260	76
Yes	80	24

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	270	79
Yes	71	21

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	270	79
Yes	70	21

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	268	79
Yes	72	21

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	250	73
Yes	91	27

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	236	69
Yes	104	31

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	86	25
Yes	254	75

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	191	56
Yes	150	44

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	253	74
Yes	88	26

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	238	70
Yes	102	30

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	251	74
Yes	89	26

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	255	75
Yes	85	25

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	292	86
Yes	48	14

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	225	66
Yes	115	34

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	292	86
Yes	48	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	41	12
Rarely	122	36
Occasionally, once or twice a month	125	37
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	34	10
Very often, nearly every day	18	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	1	0
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	28	8
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	311	91

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	126	37
Rarely	118	35
Occasionally, once or twice a month	60	18
Fairly often, a couple times a week	20	6
Very often, nearly every day	16	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	34	10
Unlikely	90	26
Neither likely or unlikely	129	38
Likely	73	21
Very likely	14	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	25	7
Unlikely	71	21
Neither likely or unlikely	114	34
Likely	102	30
Very likely	28	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	2	1
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	33	10
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	305	90

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 and someone I know.	5	1
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	25	7
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	310	91

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	118	35
Less than once a year	38	11
Once or twice a year	64	19
Several times a year	57	17
Once a month	15	4
2-3 times a month	15	4
About weekly	15	4
Weekly	15	5
Several times a week	4	1

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	2	1
No	338	99

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	1	0	0
No	339	100	100

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	3	19
Less than half the time	21	6	36
About half the time	18	5	31
Most of the time, nearly every day	6	2	11
Always	2	1	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	19	6	25
Less than half the time	34	10	45
About half the time	14	4	19
Most of the time, nearly every day	7	2	9
Always	1	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	2	11
Less than half the time	17	5	27
About half the time	20	6	30
Most of the time, nearly every day	18	5	28
Always	3	1	5

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	21	6	26
Less than half the time	30	9	38
About half the time	20	6	25
Most of the time, nearly every day	7	2	8
Always	1	0	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	10	3	16
Less than half the time	15	5	24
About half the time	22	7	35
Most of the time, nearly every day	12	4	19
Always	4	1	6



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