

# 2026 College Free Speech Rankings

## University of Virginia

21  
OVERALL  
RANK

C-

SPEECH  
CLIMATE

GREEN

SPOTLIGHT  
RATING

# Executive Summary

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**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](https://rankings.thefire.org)) for easy comparison between institutions.

We surveyed 315 students at the University of Virginia. Key findings include:

- UVA ranks 21 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 70.33, a C- speech climate grade.
- Student perceptions dipped across nearly all areas surveyed compared to last year.
- 8 in 10 UVA students find shoutdowns acceptable.
- 7 in 10 UVA students are uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor and self-censor during classroom discussions.
- The number of UVA students who trust that their administration protects free speech has shrunk in half since 2023.
- UVA students don't want controversial speakers on campus.
- 6 in 10 UVA students find it difficult to talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- UVA was penalized for a 2025 incident in which an administrator threatened a student with a no-trespass order and possible disenrollment unless he left the spot where he was quietly protesting on university grounds.
- UVA earns a "green light" rating for maintaining minimally restrictive speech policies.

Executive Summary	1
Student perceptions dipped across nearly all metrics	3
8 in 10 students find shoutdowns acceptable	3
7 in 10 students are uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor and self-censor during classroom discussions	3
Students don't trust their administration to protect free speech	5
Students don't want controversial speakers on campus	5
6 in 10 students find it difficult to talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict	6
A 'green light' school with institutional commitments	7
UVA's speech controversies	8
How can UVA improve?	8
Topline Results	10

The University of Virginia ranks 21 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 70.33, a C- speech climate grade.<sup>1</sup> The following report highlights UVA's middling to poor performance across the student survey. In addition, it discusses UVA's speech policies and statements, its speech controversies, and what UVA can do to improve its free speech climate.

## STUDENT PERCEPTIONS DIPPED ACROSS NEARLY ALL METRICS

### 8 in 10 students find shoutdowns acceptable

The University of Virginia ranks 165 on the “Disruptive Conduct” component, rising from 200 last year.

However, compared to students nationally, UVA students were still more likely to say that students using disruptive conduct to stop campus speech is acceptable to some degree except when it comes to the use of violence.

- 77% of UVA students found shouting down a speaker at least “rarely” acceptable, compared to 71% of students nationally.
- 56% of students deemed blocking other students from attending a campus speech to be at least “rarely” acceptable, compared to 54% of students nationally.
- 33% viewed violence to stop a speech as at least “rarely” acceptable, compared to 34% of students nationally.

### 7 in 10 students are uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor and self-censor during classroom discussions

More University of Virginia students were uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic (72%) than their peers nationally (59%). And likewise more UVA students self-censored at least once or twice a month during classroom discussions (71%) than nationally (65%).

This year, UVA ranks 211 on “Comfort Expressing Ideas” compared to 107 last year. In addition, UVA ranks 183 on “Self-Censorship” compared to 112 last year.

At UVA, minorities of students felt comfortable expressing disagreement with a professor about a controversial political topic in a written assignment (46%), expressing their views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion (45%), expressing an unpopular political opinion to their fellow students on a social media account tied to their name (30%), and publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic (28%).

The only area where a majority of students felt comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic was to other students during a discussion in a common campus space such as a quad, dining hall, or lounge (55%).

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<sup>1</sup> The detailed methodology can be found at [rankings.thefire.org/methodology](https://rankings.thefire.org/methodology).

**FIGURE 1: Students Who Feel at Least Somewhat Comfortable by Context (%)**

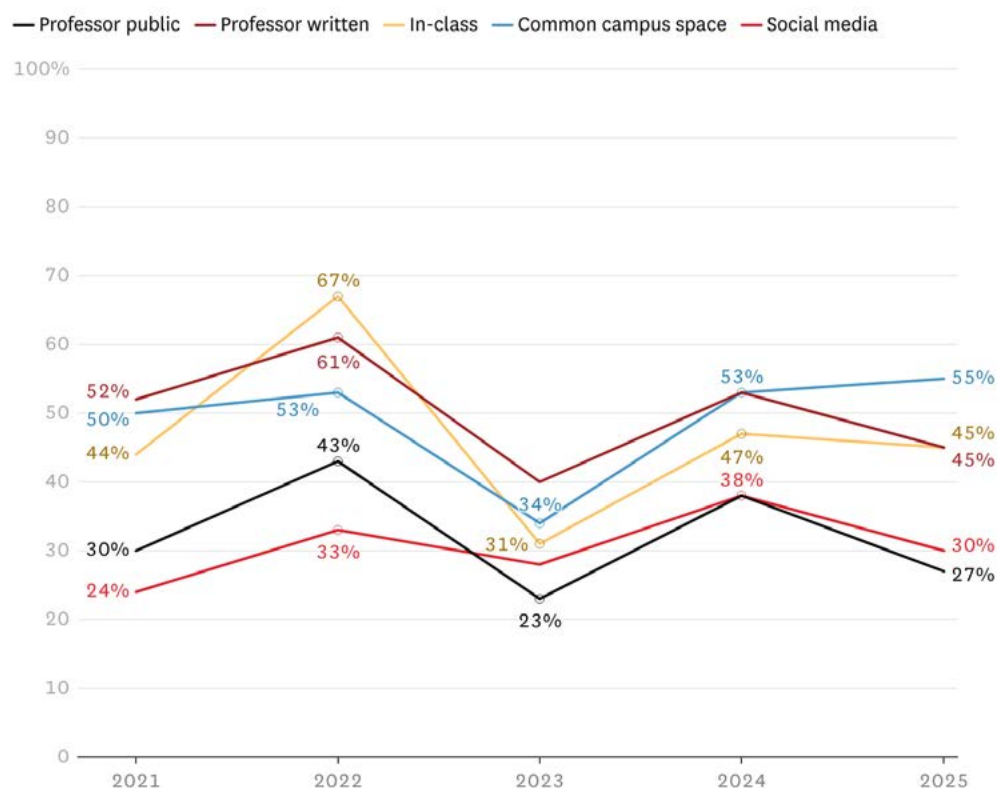


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

We gave students 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.”***

We then asked about the frequency with which they self-censor in three campus contexts.

- 59% reported self-censoring at least “once or twice a month” during conversations with other students on campus, up from 54% last year.
- 64% reported self-censoring at least “once or twice a month” during conversations with professors, up from 55% last year.
- 71% reported self-censoring at least “once or twice a month” during classroom discussions, up from 60% last year.

## Students don't trust their administration to protect free speech

The University of Virginia ranks 210 on “Administrative Support.” Only 24% of UVA students found the administration either “very” or “extremely” clear in protecting freedom of speech, with an additional 46% who considered it “somewhat” clear. In terms of the administration’s willingness to defend a speaker’s rights during controversies, 22% of UVA students believed this was either “very” or “extremely” likely, while 51% saw it as “somewhat” likely.

Notably, perceptions that the administration protects free speech and the rights of speakers have dropped considerably since 2023 as seen in Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2: Student Perceptions of the Administration**

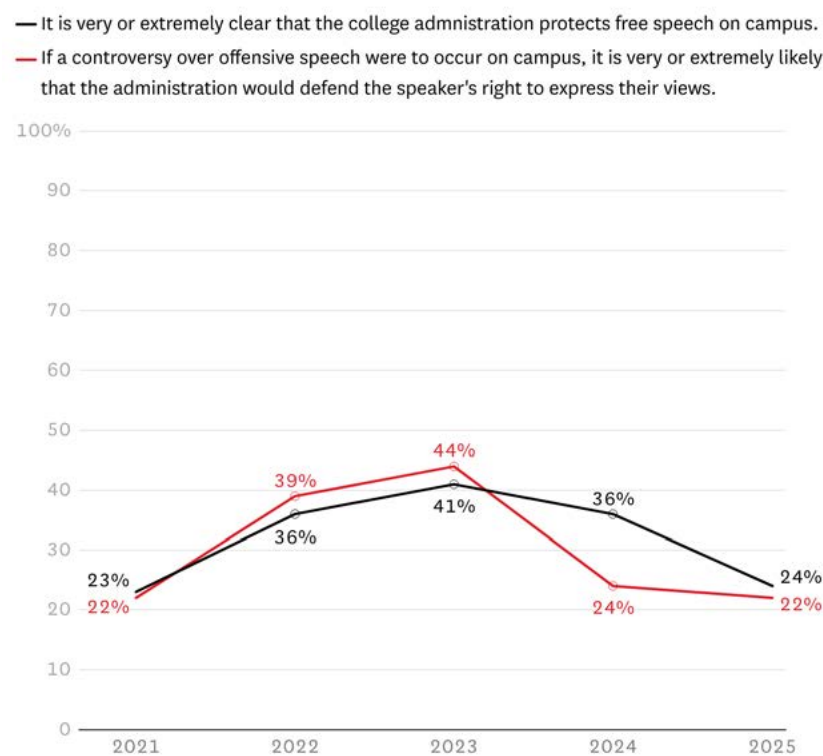


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

## Students don't want controversial speakers on campus

The University of Virginia ranks 163 on “Political Tolerance.” Students were asked whether six speakers (three liberal and three conservative) who had previously expressed controversial opinions should be allowed to give a campus speech. Minorities of students believed that five of the six speakers asked about should not be allowed on campus.

Students were most supportive of allowing a speaker who said that “children should be able to transition without parental consent” (62%), followed by the other liberal speakers.

- 45% would allow a speaker on campus who said that “the Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.”
- 44% would allow a speaker on campus who said that “the police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan.”

Conservative speakers, on the other hand, were less tolerated by UVA students. While 43% of students would allow a speaker on campus who said that “abortion should be completely illegal,” only 23% of students would allow a speaker on campus who said that “transgender people have a mental disorder.” An equal percentage said the same for a speaker who said “Black Lives Matter is a hate group.”

**FIGURE 3: Students Who Would Allow Each Conservative Speaker on Campus (%)**

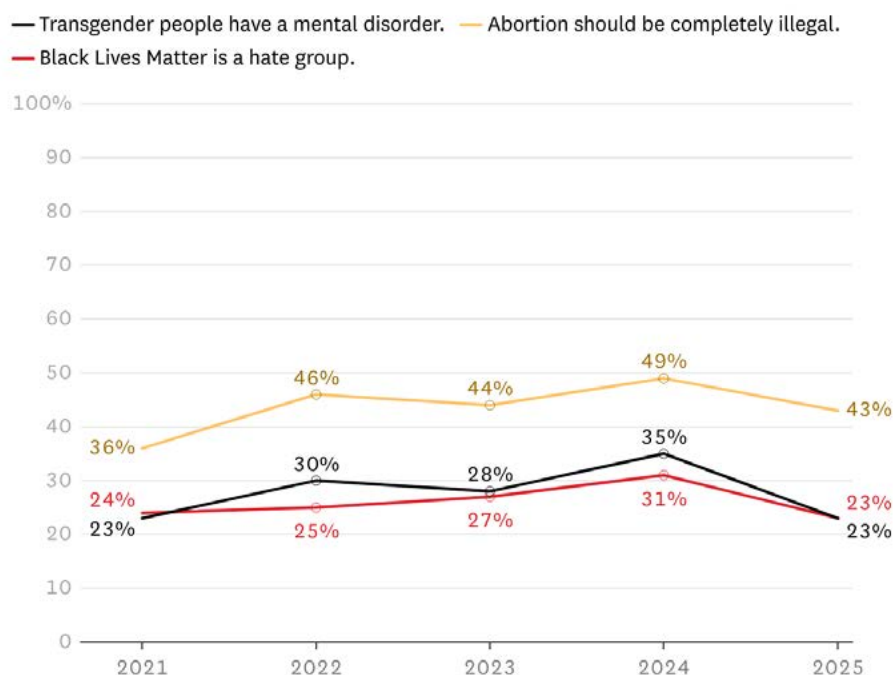


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

## 6 in 10 students find it difficult to talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The University of Virginia ranks 114 on the “Openness” component.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was identified most frequently as a topic that is difficult for students to have an open and honest conversation about on UVA’s campus (61%). In 2021 and 2022, around 30% of UVA students reported the same.

The second most frequently identified topic this year was the presidential election (40%), followed closely by transgender rights (39%).

**FIGURE 4:** Students Who Have Difficulty Talking About Each Topic (%)

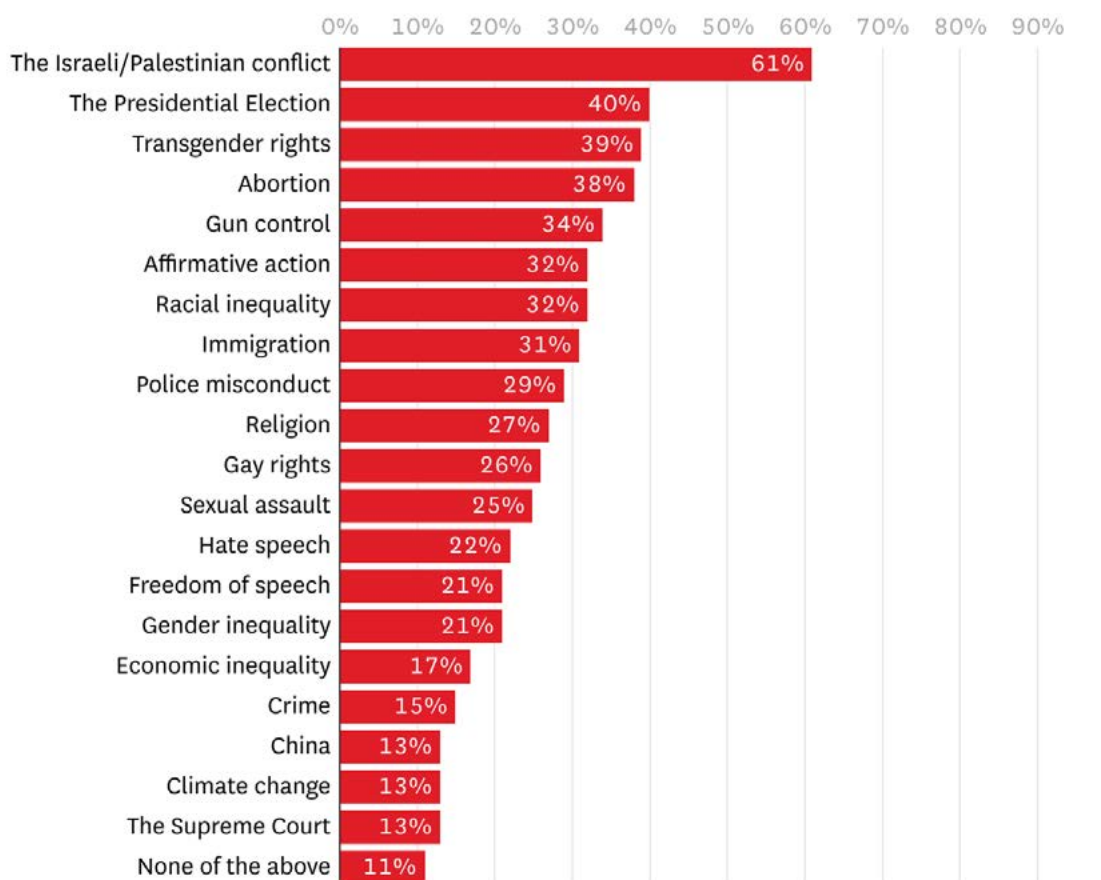


Chart: Emily Nayer • Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

## A ‘GREEN LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENTS

The University of Virginia earns an overall “green light” rating for its written policies governing student expression. The institution maintains harassment and conduct policies that do not imperil free speech of students on campus and openly advertises their commitment to the First Amendment.

However, the university is governed by two harassment policies that earn “yellow light” ratings; these policies do not implicate UVA’s overall green light rating. This limited exception to the Spotlight rating system allows a school to earn an overall green light rating if it maintains harassment policies that comply with the current Title IX regulations but deviate from FIRE’s recommended harassment standard as articulated in the 1999 *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* Supreme Court decision.

In addition, UVA has endorsed a statement of the committee on free expression and free inquiry akin to the “Chicago Statement.” And in the last year, UVA made a commitment to institutional neutrality.



## UVA'S SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

UVA was penalized for a 2025 incident in which an administrator accompanied by a campus police officer threatened to discipline a student who was quietly studying beside protest signs. Though the student was ultimately not sanctioned and reportedly received an apology from another administrator, the university was penalized for the initial encounter.

Outside the Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School grounds (but still on university grounds), student Kirk Wolff engaged in expressive activity when he placed two signs decrying President Trump beside a folding chair on which he quietly studied. Shortly thereafter, a campus police vehicle pulled up and an officer accompanied by an administrator approached Wolff.

The administrator told Wolff that he was violating university policy and instructed him to leave or else "be issued a no-trespass order barring you from university property for up to four years." Wolff then called one of his law professors and, minutes later, the administrator reversed course and said the student was not breaking any rules. Three days later, Wolff met with the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs who told him that body camera footage showed that the administrator who confronted Wolff had not followed correct procedures and that the university would change its policies to no longer deploy campus police to speech-related incidents.

A university spokesperson stated that, "the content of the expressive activity in question was irrelevant to this encounter... No University policies were violated by University officials or the individual in question... It is accurate that a student affairs representative approached [Wolff] to gather information about their expressive activities on Grounds. Once it was determined that [Wolff] was affiliated with the University, his expressive activity continued that day, as well as the following Monday."

## HOW CAN UVA IMPROVE?

While the University of Virginia is among the top 25 schools in this year's College Free Speech Rankings, it is struggling with how students perceive the free speech environment on campus.

UVA has a strong foundation with a "green light" Spotlight rating, adoption of the Chicago Statement, and a commitment to institutional neutrality. To close the gap between policy and perception, students must see their rights defended in both words and actions.

UVA leadership should more clearly and proactively articulate the value of expressive rights, particularly during moments of controversy, by publicly defending student and faculty expression and clearly communicating the value of free speech in a university setting. By doing so, UVA can demonstrate to students that it cares about free speech. These changes would improve not only their policy and controversy scores but also, possibly, the university's poor "Administrative Support" (210) ranking.

In addition, UVA should incorporate robust First Amendment education into first-year orientation to help students understand not only their rights, but also where lawful expression ends and unprotected conduct begins. This training might reduce the penalties for disruption-based speech controversies. It could also improve UVA's middling rank on "Disruptive Conduct" (165) along with scores on other components.

By promoting a commitment to free speech through training, improved policies, and public support, UVA could maintain its already good standing in the overall rankings and improve its standing among its students.

#### UVA's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	UVA	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.18	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	11.83	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.30	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	10.59	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.26	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	6.17	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	3 (Yes)	-	0	3
Institutional Neutrality	3 (Yes)	-	0	3
Spotlight Rating	5 (Green)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	-1	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
<b>Overall score</b>	<b>70.33</b>	<b>58.67</b>		

# Topline Results

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	16	5
Not very clear	80	25
Somewhat clear	144	46
Very clear	63	20
Extremely clear	11	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	18	6
Not very likely	68	22
Somewhat likely	160	51
Very likely	64	20
Extremely likely	4	1

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	91	29
Somewhat uncomfortable	136	43
Somewhat comfortable	74	23
Very comfortable	13	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	55	17
Somewhat uncomfortable	116	37
Somewhat comfortable	120	38
Very comfortable	23	7

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very comfortable	18	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	48	15
Somewhat uncomfortable	94	30
Somewhat comfortable	129	41
Very comfortable	43	14

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	103	33
Somewhat uncomfortable	117	37
Somewhat comfortable	78	25
Very comfortable	15	5

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	21	7
Rarely	107	34
Occasionally, once or twice a month	110	35
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	63	20
Very often, nearly every day	12	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	24	8
Rarely	90	29
Occasionally, once or twice a month	94	30
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	81	26
Very often, nearly every day	25	8

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	22	7
Rarely	70	22
Occasionally, once or twice a month	133	43
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	67	21
Very often, nearly every day	21	7

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

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	13	4
Sometimes acceptable	106	34
Rarely acceptable	124	39
Never acceptable	71	23

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	7	2
Sometimes acceptable	64	20
Rarely acceptable	105	34
Never acceptable	137	44

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	6	2
Sometimes acceptable	35	11
Rarely acceptable	63	20
Never acceptable	210	67

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	115	37
Probably should not allow this speaker	128	41
Probably should allow this speaker	59	19
Definitely should allow this speaker	12	4

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	81	26
Probably should not allow this speaker	97	31
Probably should allow this speaker	102	33
Definitely should allow this speaker	33	11

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	113	36
Probably should not allow this speaker	128	41
Probably should allow this speaker	57	18
Definitely should allow this speaker	16	5

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	37	12
Probably should not allow this speaker	135	43
Probably should allow this speaker	108	35
Definitely should allow this speaker	33	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	45	14
Probably should not allow this speaker	130	41
Probably should allow this speaker	100	32
Definitely should allow this speaker	38	12

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	32	10
Probably should not allow this speaker	89	28
Probably should allow this speaker	141	45
Definitely should allow this speaker	52	17

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	196	62
Yes	118	38

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	213	68
Yes	100	32

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	273	87
Yes	40	13

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	274	87
Yes	39	13

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	268	85
Yes	46	15



## Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	260	83
Yes	54	17

## Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	247	79
Yes	67	21

## Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	232	74
Yes	82	26

## Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	249	79
Yes	65	21

## Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	207	66
Yes	106	34

## Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	244	78
Yes	70	22

## Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	217	69
Yes	97	31

## The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	122	39
Yes	192	61

## The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	188	60
Yes	126	40

## Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	221	71
Yes	92	29

## Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	214	68
Yes	100	32

## Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	228	73
Yes	86	27

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	237	75
Yes	77	25

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	272	87
Yes	41	13

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	191	61
Yes	123	39

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	279	89
Yes	35	11

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	61	19
Rarely	140	45
Occasionally, once or twice a month	76	24
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	28	9
Very often, nearly every day	6	2

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.	38	12
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	268	86

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	124	40
Rarely	95	30
Occasionally, once or twice a month	48	15
Fairly often, a couple times a week	28	9
Very often, nearly every day	15	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	39	12
Unlikely	108	34
Neither likely or unlikely	92	29
Likely	61	19
Very likely	12	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	29	9
Unlikely	71	23
Neither likely or unlikely	122	39
Likely	69	22
Very likely	19	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	4	1
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	12	4
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	66	21
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	228	73

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.	3	1
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	4	1
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	31	10
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	272	87

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	102	33
Less than once a year	16	5
Once or twice a year	66	21
Several times a year	44	14
Once a month	9	3
2-3 times a month	31	10
About weekly	18	6
Weekly	19	6
Several times a week	6	2

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	5	2
No	305	97

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	4	1	1
No	306	98	99

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	2	1	3
Less than half the time	30	10	41
About half the time	27	8	36
Most of the time, nearly every day	13	4	18
Always	2	1	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	21	7	37
Less than half the time	12	4	20
About half the time	15	5	26
Most of the time, nearly every day	9	3	15
Always	1	0	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	2	13
Less than half the time	13	4	25
About half the time	19	6	37
Most of the time, nearly every day	11	4	22
Always	1	0	2

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	29	9	42
Less than half the time	27	9	39
About half the time	8	2	11
Most of the time, nearly every day	6	2	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	12	4	21
Less than half the time	16	5	27
About half the time	20	6	34
Most of the time, nearly every day	6	2	10
Always	5	2	8



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