

2026 College Free Speech Rankings
Williams College

166
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 154 students at Williams College. Key findings include:

- Williams ranks 166, with an overall score of 56.05 and an F speech climate.
- Among the other schools in the New England Small College Athletic Conference, Williams ranks below Amherst (70), Colby (125), Wesleyan (127), and Hamilton (157), but ahead of Trinity (181), Bowdoin (184), Connecticut College (222), Bates (226), Tufts (239), and Middlebury (249).
- Williams students are less accepting of disruptive conduct compared to other NESCAC schools. The college is a top 25 school on the “Disruptive Conduct” component (21), a rise from its rank of 149 last year when the college experienced a substantial event disruption of a round-table discussion with several invited speakers.
- Williams students find more topics difficult to talk about this year, resulting in the college’s “Openness” rank plummeting from 16 last year to 146.
- Williams student perceptions remain unimpressive elsewhere, with slight improvement on “Administrative Support” (157, 188 last year), “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (181, 217 last year), “Tolerance for Conservative Speakers” (89, 109 last year), “Tolerance Difference” (154, 227 last year), and the “Mean Tolerance” (89, 109 last year). The “Tolerance for Liberal Speakers” component worsened (91, 33 last year)
- Around 2 in 5 students say it is either “likely” or “very likely” that students would report a professor or fellow student to administrators for saying something controversial.
- Williams continues to maintain speech policies that earn it a “yellow light” rating from FIRE. If Williams revised these policies and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 19 overall.
- Williams continues to be penalized for a 2024 incident involving the disruption of a round-table discussion by pro-Palestinian student protesters.

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Williams College has a score of 56.05, an F speech climate, and ranks 166 overall in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings.¹

The following report highlights Williams' notable improvement on "Disruptive Conduct," its drop on "Openness," and its continued subpar performance on the other perceptions components. In addition, it discusses Williams's speech policies, its speech controversies, and what Williams can do to improve its free speech climate.

WILLIAMS STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students are less accepting of disruptive conduct

Williams College leapt into the top 25 (21) on the "Disruptive Conduct" component after finishing 149 last year. Compared to last year, fewer Williams said it is acceptable to shout down a speaker, block other students from attending a campus speech, or use violence to stop a campus speech.

FIGURE 1: Students Who Said Disruptive Protest Is At Least "Rarely" Acceptable (%)

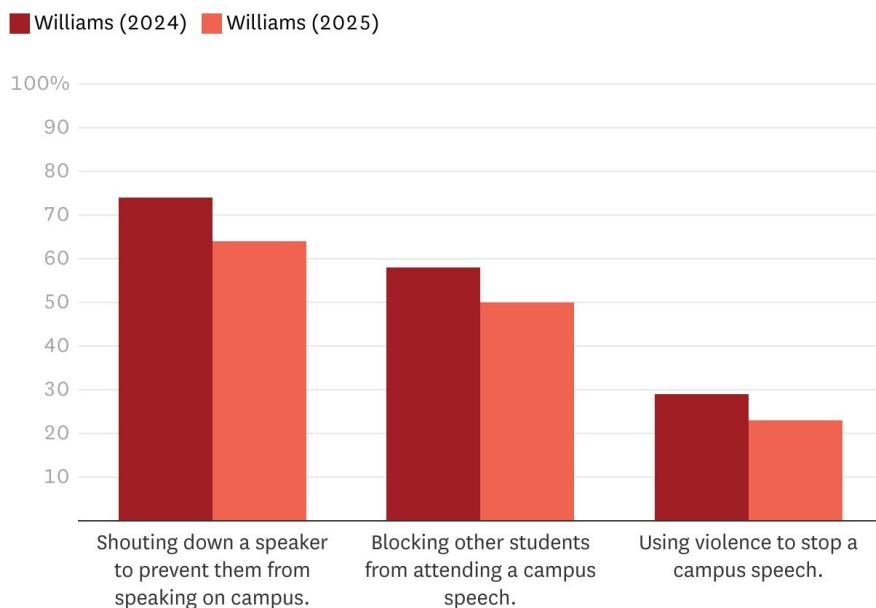


Chart: Emily Nayer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

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

Students find more topics difficult to talk about

After ranking 16 on “Openness” last year, Williams College plummeted to 146 this year.

Students were presented a list of 20 topics and asked which, if any, were difficult to have an open and honest conversation about. Percentages increased for 17 topics since last year at Williams, demonstrating a narrowing of campus discourse. This constriction was particularly notable for 8 topics, which had percentages increase by 10 or more points. Most notably, 8 in 10 Williams students identified the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as being difficult to discuss, compared to 6 in 10 last year and 5 in 10 students nationally.

FIGURE 2: Topics Identified as Difficult to Have an Open and Honest Conversation About (%)

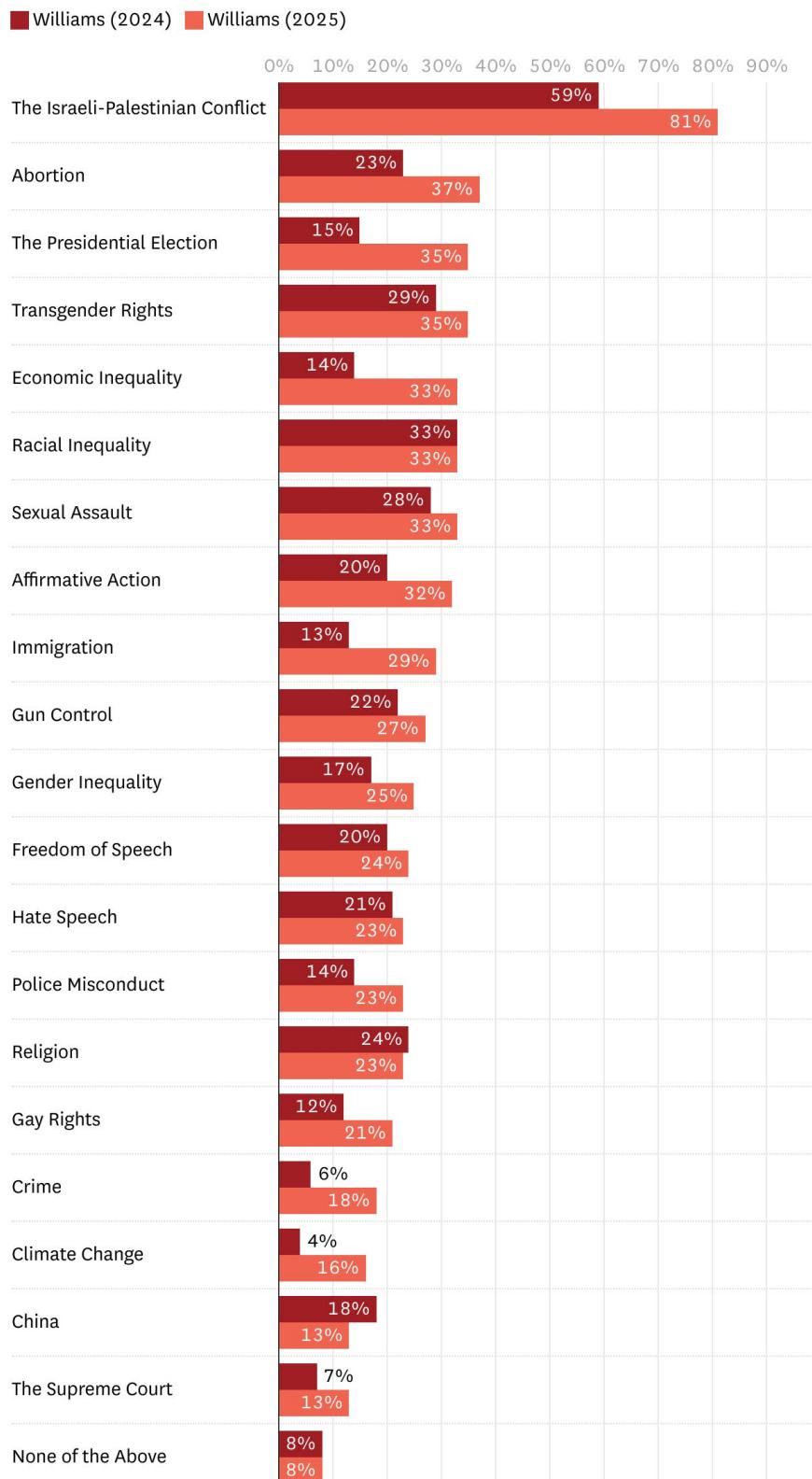


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

STUDENTS THINK CONTROVERSIAL SPEECH IS LIKELY TO BE REPORTED

Though not factored into Williams College's ranking, this year's survey asked how likely or unlikely it would be that a student on campus would report a peer or professor to the administration for saying something controversial.

Nearly half (45%) of Williams students said it is either "likely" or "very likely" that a student would report one of their peers to the administration for controversial speech. By comparison, 26% of students nationally said the same.

What's more, 41% said it is either "likely" or "very likely" that a student would report a professor to the administration for controversial speech. By comparison, 32% of students nationally said the same.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS REMAIN UNIMPRESSIVE ELSEWHERE

Though its ranks are still middling, Williams College improved slightly on the "Administrative Support," "Political Tolerance," and "Comfort Expressing Ideas" components. And though Williams students are self-censoring more than last year, the "Self-Censorship" rank improved slightly because students nationally are self-censoring more.

4 in 10 students said the administration protects free speech

Williams College ranks 157 on "Administrative Support" after finishing 188 last year.

Thirty-nine percent of Williams students said it was either "very" or "extremely" clear that the administration protects free speech on campus (+3 points compared to students nationally and +13 points compared to last year). An additional 42% said it was "somewhat" clear.

Meanwhile, 23% said it was either "very" or "extremely" likely that the administration would defend a speaker's rights during a controversy (in line with students nationally but +6 points compared to last year). An additional 39% said it was "somewhat" clear.

Students are more tolerant of conservative speakers but less tolerant of liberal speakers than last year

Williams College ranks 134 on "Political Tolerance," and for the subcomponents ranks:

- 108 on "Tolerance for Conservative Speakers" (193 last year).
- 91 on "Tolerance for Liberal Speakers" (33 last year).
- 154 on "Tolerance Difference" (227 last year).
- 89 on "Mean Tolerance" (109 last year).

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.

When it comes to controversial conservative speakers, the percentage of Williams students who said each “probably” or “definitely should” be allowed is in line with students nationally and has risen since last year for two of the three.

Meanwhile, support among Williams students for controversial liberal speakers fell since last year, reflecting a national trend. Of note is that for each speaker, the percentage of Williams students who said they “definitely should” be allowed has decreased since last year (by -12 points on average) while the percentage who said they “definitely should not” be allowed has increased (by +9 on average). A positive, however, is that Williams students were more supportive than students nationally of two of the three speakers by more than 10 points each.

FIGURE 3: Students Who Said Their School Should “Probably” or “Definitely Should” Allow Each Controversial Speaker (%)

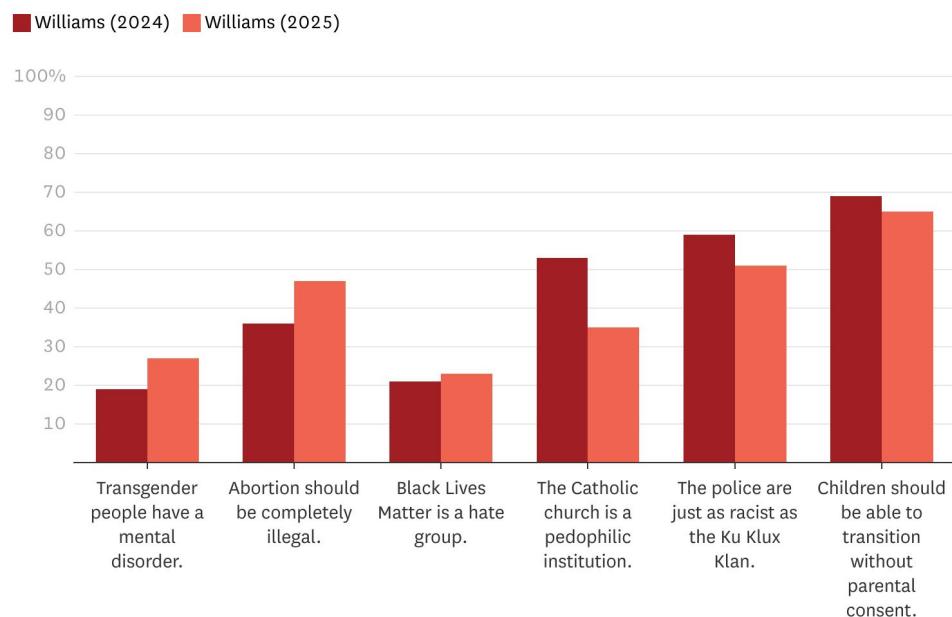


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

3 in 10 students are comfortable expressing a controversial view in class

Just every day discussions about political topics make me uncomfortable on a regular basis; fear of losing friends or getting judged in personal settings or getting bad grades in academic settings.

Williams College ranks 181 on the “Comfort Expressing Ideas” component, after finishing 217 last year.

Students were asked how comfortable they'd be expressing themselves in five contexts. Despite Williams' modest improvement on this component since last year, majorities of Williams students said they were either "somewhat" or "very" uncomfortable in each of the five contexts.

- 64% said they were uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic (+4 points compared to students nationally).
- 51% said they were uncomfortable disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic in a written assignment (+2 points compared to students nationally).
- 69% said they were uncomfortable expressing views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion (+17 points compared to students nationally).
- 54% said they were uncomfortable expressing views on a controversial political topic to other students in a common campus space such as a quad, dining hall, or lounge (+6 points compared to students nationally).
- 79% said they were uncomfortable expressing an unpopular political opinion to fellow students on a social media account tied to their name (+13 points compared to students nationally).

On the bright side, for each context the percentage of Williams students saying they felt "very uncomfortable" fell since last year by an average of 9 points.

3 in 10 students self-censor during classroom discussions

Williams College ranks 74 on the "Self-Censorship" component after ranking 79 last year.

Students were presented with 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.

- 27% reported self-censoring at least "a couple of times a week" during conversations with other students on campus.
- 25% reported self-censoring at least "a couple of times a week" during conversations with professors.
- 29% reported self-censoring at least "a couple of times a week" during classroom discussions.

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL

FIRE awards Williams College’s regulations on student expression a “yellow light” rating, flagging seven policies that earn that rating for posing either impermissibly vague or clear but narrow restrictions on protected speech.

Williams earns an overall yellow light rating for its written policies governing student expression. The university maintains seven yellow light policies and two green light policies. Williams’ harassment policy fails to meet the legal standard for peer hostile environment harassment, risking suppressing protected speech. The college also bars registered student organizations from using their funds on activities “offensive” to the community. This provision allows the student government to engage in viewpoint-discrimination, conflicting with Williams’ free speech promises.

Williams further restricts speech rights by requiring outdoor events to receive administrative approval, putting an unnecessary burden on the expressive rights of the community. Further, the institution’s posting policy curtails the right to anonymous expression by requiring the author’s email be included on all materials. The college’s internet usage policy prohibits all “chain letters” and “spam” without defining the terms or specifying such email must disrupt others’ use of the system. This provision could potentially subject a wide range of protected expression to punishment.

Finally, Williams encourages students to report “bias incidents” to the administration. Concerns related to bias are already addressed by existing harassment and discrimination protocols. The administration, therefore, should focus its resources on these established systems and avoid soliciting reports of subjective bias.

WILLIAMS’ SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

Williams College was penalized for one speech controversy. In 2024, student protesters affiliated with Students for Justice in Palestine disrupted a round-table discussion between Aaron David Miller and Stephen Walt, moderated by Galen Jackson. During the event, protesters loudly chanted slogans over the panelists, such as “resistance is justified when people are occupied,” “long live Palestine,” and “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” After several minutes, the protesters left. Later, however, during the question and answer portion, another chant occurred while the panelists tried to respond to a question. President Maud Mandel walked to the stage and approached Jackson, who then announced the event was ending early. This substantial event disruption negatively impacted Williams’ overall score last year and continues to do so this year, though to a lesser degree.

Fortunately, no repeat event occurred in 2025 that impacted Williams’ overall score.

HOW CAN WILLIAMS IMPROVE?

The easiest thing Williams College can do to improve its ranking in next year's College Free Speech Rankings is revise its "yellow light" speech policies. If Williams had revised them to "green light" policies this year, it would rank 19 overall. Ideally, Williams would pair these reforms with official statements committing to free expression and institutional neutrality similar to those seen in the "Chicago Statement" and "Kalven Report," which would raise its score even further.

Though Williams has improved in a number of survey components since last year (most notably "Disruptive Conduct"), it has worsened in others. In particular, Williams has dropped from 16 to 146 on the "Openness" component, with students identifying 17 of 20 topics more frequently than last year. It is especially concerning that 81% say the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is difficult to have an open and honest conversation about (+22 points since last year and +28 points compared to students nationally).

Additionally, high percentages of Williams students say it is either "likely" or "very likely" that students would report a professor (41% vs. 32% students nationally) or fellow students (45% vs. 26% students nationally) to administrators for saying something controversial. While these findings didn't factor into Williams' overall ranking, they further highlight the challenges students face in talking with one another about important and sensitive topics.

For these reasons, Williams should not only change its policies, but also communicate these changes to students in a way that emphasizes the college's commitment to free expression and affirms that students and faculty won't be penalized for protected speech. Such actions could further improve Williams' middling ranks for "Administrative Support" (157) and "Comfort Expressing Ideas" (181) and return it to a top 20 school on "Openness".

Williams' 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	WILLIAMS COLLEGE	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.35	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	12.36	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	16.42	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	11.22	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.12	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	6.55	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	0	-	0	3
Institutional Neutrality	0	-	0	3
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-2	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	56.05	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	5	3
Not very clear	25	16
Somewhat clear	64	42
Very clear	45	30
Extremely clear	14	9

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	8	5
Not very likely	52	34
Somewhat likely	59	39
Very likely	27	18
Extremely likely	8	5

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	28	18
Somewhat uncomfortable	70	45
Somewhat comfortable	37	24
Very comfortable	19	12

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	24	16
Somewhat uncomfortable	55	36
Somewhat comfortable	48	31
Very comfortable	27	17

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	21	13
Somewhat uncomfortable	85	56
Somewhat comfortable	29	19
Very comfortable	19	12

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	26	17
Somewhat uncomfortable	57	37
Somewhat comfortable	42	27
Very comfortable	29	19

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	51	33
Somewhat uncomfortable	70	46
Somewhat comfortable	22	14
Very comfortable	10	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	18	12
Rarely	40	26
Occasionally, once or twice a month	55	36
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	37	24
Very often, nearly every day	5	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	19	12
Rarely	64	42
Occasionally, once or twice a month	32	21
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	28	18
Very often, nearly every day	10	7

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	13	9
Rarely	41	26
Occasionally, once or twice a month	55	36
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	33	21
Very often, nearly every day	12	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	3	2
Sometimes acceptable	33	21
Rarely acceptable	63	41
Never acceptable	55	36

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	8	5
Sometimes acceptable	17	11
Rarely acceptable	52	34
Never acceptable	76	50

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	2	1
Sometimes acceptable	4	3
Rarely acceptable	29	19
Never acceptable	119	77

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	55	36
Probably should not allow this speaker	58	37
Probably should allow this speaker	30	20
Definitely should allow this speaker	11	7

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	30	20
Probably should not allow this speaker	51	33
Probably should allow this speaker	60	39
Definitely should allow this speaker	13	8

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	68	44
Probably should not allow this speaker	51	33
Probably should allow this speaker	27	17
Definitely should allow this speaker	8	5

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	31	20
Probably should not allow this speaker	70	45
Probably should allow this speaker	43	28
Definitely should allow this speaker	10	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	34	22
Probably should not allow this speaker	41	27
Probably should allow this speaker	62	40
Definitely should allow this speaker	16	11

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	24	16
Probably should not allow this speaker	29	19
Probably should allow this speaker	88	57
Definitely should allow this speaker	12	8

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	96	63
Yes	57	37

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	105	68
Yes	48	32

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	134	87
Yes	19	13

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	129	84
Yes	25	16

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	125	82
Yes	28	18

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	104	67
Yes	50	33

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	117	76
Yes	37	24

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	122	79
Yes	32	21

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	115	75
Yes	39	25

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	112	73
Yes	42	27

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	119	77
Yes	35	23

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	109	71
Yes	44	29

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	29	19
Yes	125	81

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	100	65
Yes	54	35

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	118	77
Yes	36	23

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	67
Yes	51	33

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	119	77
Yes	35	23

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	67
Yes	51	33

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	134	87
Yes	19	13

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	100	65
Yes	54	35

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	141	92
Yes	12	8

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	27	18
Rarely	52	34
Occasionally, once or twice a month	42	27
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	26	17
Very often, nearly every day	7	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	8	5
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	145	95

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	61	40
Rarely	54	35
Occasionally, once or twice a month	29	19
Fairly often, a couple times a week	5	3
Very often, nearly every day	4	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	13	9
Unlikely	37	24
Neither likely or unlikely	35	22
Likely	52	34
Very likely	17	11

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	16	11
Unlikely	36	23
Neither likely or unlikely	38	25
Likely	55	36
Very likely	8	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	2	1
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	4	3
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	52	34
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	95	62

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.	0	0
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	55	36
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	98	64

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	33	22
Less than once a year	19	13
Once or twice a year	25	16
Several times a year	21	14
Once a month	8	5
2-3 times a month	5	4
About weekly	14	9
Weekly	19	12
Several times a week	9	6

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	0	0
No	153	100

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
No	154	100	100

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	2	1	8
Less than half the time	12	7	44
About half the time	8	5	30
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	2	13
Always	1	1	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	5	16
Less than half the time	25	16	56
About half the time	12	8	26
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	1	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	2	1	8
Less than half the time	7	4	23
About half the time	8	5	28
Most of the time, nearly every day	11	7	41

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	8	5	27
Less than half the time	9	6	30
About half the time	11	7	37
Most of the time, nearly every day	2	1	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Less than half the time	11	7	46
About half the time	9	6	37
Most of the time, nearly every day	2	1	10
Always	1	1	6



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Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

510 Walnut Street
Suite 900
Philadelphia, PA 19106
T: 215.717.3473
www.thefire.org

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