



FIRE QUARTERLY

FALL 2025



FIRE'S BIGGEST YEAR YET

WINNING HEARTS, MINDS, AND HEADLINES AMID
NEW CHALLENGES TO FREE SPEECH

CAMARADERIE, CREATIVITY, AND PRINCIPLE

**A message from FIRE Chief
Development Officer Bridget Glackin**

This fall marks my 15th year at FIRE. For those of you I've had the privilege of connecting with, you'll know that I love to tell the story of those 15 years because it reveals so much of what I love about the organization — tenacity, camaraderie, creativity, and most of all, principle. I encountered all those values when sitting in the FIRE lunchroom with all 15 of our staffers back in 2010, and I still see them represented now in the FIRE office of more than 130 people.

You'll also see them in this final quarterly of the year, where we celebrate a “green light” milestone made possible by our tenacious policy reform efforts, examine cases that show the continued growth of our principled litigation work, announce our celebration of America's 250th birthday, and highlight how our president and CEO brought down the house with his presentation at TED2025.

It's hard to fit all those highlights into one magazine, and I often find myself doing a double take at just how much FIRE has going on. In fact, as we close out 2025, I can confidently say we've never been busier. This quarter is just one small slice of a year that pushed limits and exceeded expectations. And we're not letting up. For example, our litigation staff ended August filing six *amicus* briefs over the course of just eight days. That's quite the feat!

That energetic work is paying dividends. Consider this metric: As of this writing, our communications team has racked up 15,000 media mentions in outlets across the country, including a recent front-page profile in *The New York Times*. When I started in 2010, we had 109 media mentions for the entire year.

Of course, FIRE's rising profile wouldn't be possible without the generous support of our donors — so thank you. But our incredible growth is also a result of our unshakeable commitment to free speech. As one donor recently told me: You guys really mean it.

We really do. That's why we didn't shy away when 2025 presented us with big challenges. We took on tough cases, explored new methods of outreach, and worked to pull every lever possible to motivate reform.

Looking back on our biggest year ever, I continue to be filled with pride knowing that our staff truly gives it our all in the fight for free speech. I hope that fills you with pride too, since every one of our accomplishments is equally shared with those who support us.

Whether this is your first year or your 15th as a donor, thanks for making this one our biggest yet!



SPARKS OF HOPE ON CAMPUS

After nearly two decades, FIRE’s Policy Reform team has achieved a significant milestone for campus policies.

In July, FIRE released the 19th edition of our Spotlight on Speech Codes Report. This annual report details the trends from our Spotlight database, which rates regulations on student expression at nearly 500 colleges and universities based on how well they align with First Amendment standards.

We give:



“Red light” ratings to the most clearly and substantially restrictive policies.



“Yellow light” ratings to more vague or narrow restrictions.



“Green light” ratings to policies that do not seriously imperil free speech.

These ratings then factor into a school’s score in FIRE’s College Free Speech Rankings report, putting special pressure on the 257 colleges included to revise restrictive speech policies.

This year, for the first time ever, the number of colleges earning an overall green light rating surpassed the number of colleges earning a red light rating. To put this in perspective: In the first edition of this report, released in 2006, there were 229 red light colleges and *only eight* green light colleges.

This is the culmination of decades of work from FIRE.

For example, “free speech zones” — small, out of the way areas designated by colleges as the sole areas for expressive activities — are largely a thing of the past because of our efforts. For decades, FIRE attorneys advocated to ban them at the state level and took colleges to court over unconstitutional rules. And FIRE’s Policy Reform team has worked collaboratively with dozens of colleges to craft policies that comply with state laws and legal precedent.

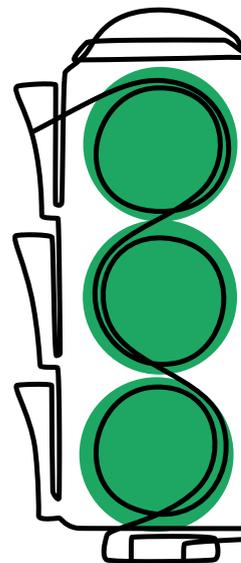
In a recent push, FIRE worked with administrators at the University of Missouri system to secure changes to several systemwide policies, including harassment policies and a policy on computer use. These changes resulted in the University of Missouri-Columbia, the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and Missouri University of Science and Technology all joining our list of green light schools this year.

Still, our work isn’t done. As long as any colleges continue to maintain restrictions that impermissibly limit campus speech, FIRE will fight to change these policies, whether in statehouses, courtrooms, or in behind-the-scenes meetings with campus administrators.

Based on our track-record, we’re optimistic about success.

“More and more, colleges are turning to FIRE for advice. We show them that addressing misconduct while upholding free speech is not only possible. It’s essential to a better campus environment.”

- LAURA BELTZ,
FIRE DIRECTOR OF POLICY REFORM



SHINING LIGHT ON CITY COUNCIL CENSORS

Enter: public servants who squash public discourse

You may recall the case of Mary Hall Rayford, a Michigan resident shushed by her own mayor during a public comment period of a city council meeting. Or Rebekah Massie, an Arizona mom arrested in front of her 10-year-old daughter for questioning a city attorney’s pay at a council meeting. How about Joel Bassoff, a New Jersey man banned from — you guessed it — a town council meeting for waving a small American flag?

It happened again, this time in Kyle, Texas. During a public comment period, while discussing a proposed amendment to the city’s ethics rules, Yvonne Flores-Cale suggested city officials were trying to conceal unethical conduct. As she tried to speak, the mayor repeatedly cut her off. The last thing she said before police escorted her away from the mic: “Our community’s integrity begins with the leaders.”

FIRE defended Mary, Rebekah, and Joel, and we’ve been vocal about this case too, objecting to the mayor’s censorship and a public comment rule that restricts “personal attacks” and discussion of “personnel matters.” We told the city that, barring narrow exceptions, the First Amendment protects speech by members of the public at government meetings. Officials cannot pick and choose which opinions can be aired.



Police escort Yvonne Flores-Cale away from the mic

BEATING THE BOOK BAN BLUES

Utah schools move beyond the library, into student backpacks

You’ve heard of schools removing books from curriculums or school libraries, but the Utah State Board of Education went one step further. In January, the board banned public school students from bringing personal copies of blacklisted books to school — *even if their parents approve of them reading the book*. The list of books banned for “sensitive content” includes works by Margaret Atwood, Judy Blume, and Rupi Kaur.

But students don’t lose the right to read just because they walk into a school building. Education officials may have latitude to decide what’s included in the curriculum, but they can’t restrict personal reading material unless it meets the legal definition of “obscene as to minors.” We wrote the state board of education and initiated a take-action campaign, asking concerned citizens to voice their objections to the policy.

Thanks to your advocacy, we won. Utah revised its policy, which now specifies that while certain books still can’t be used for class assignments, students can read them freely at school. That’s a victory worth bookmarking!



CENSORSHIP'S BIGGER IN TEXAS

A sweeping state law bans all expressive activity on college campuses between 10 at night and 8 in the morning. But these student groups know the First Amendment never sleeps.

In 2025, the Texas legislature passed a law that heralds a literal dark age for campus free speech.

One provision of the law, which took effect in September, requires public universities in Texas to ban all “expressive activities” on campus between the hours of 10 p.m. and 8 a.m., which the law defines as “any speech or expressive conduct protected by the First Amendment.”

This shocking prohibition of protected speech means public universities now have the power to discipline students at nighttime for all sorts of things: wearing a hat with a political message, playing music, writing an op-ed, attending candlelight vigils . . . The list goes on.

The law also mandates that universities ban student groups from a host of protected expression during the last two weeks of any semester or term, including inviting guest speakers, using amplified sound, or playing a drum. The Fellowship of Christian University Students at UT-Dallas, for example, would be unable to invite an off-campus minister to lead a prayer during finals.

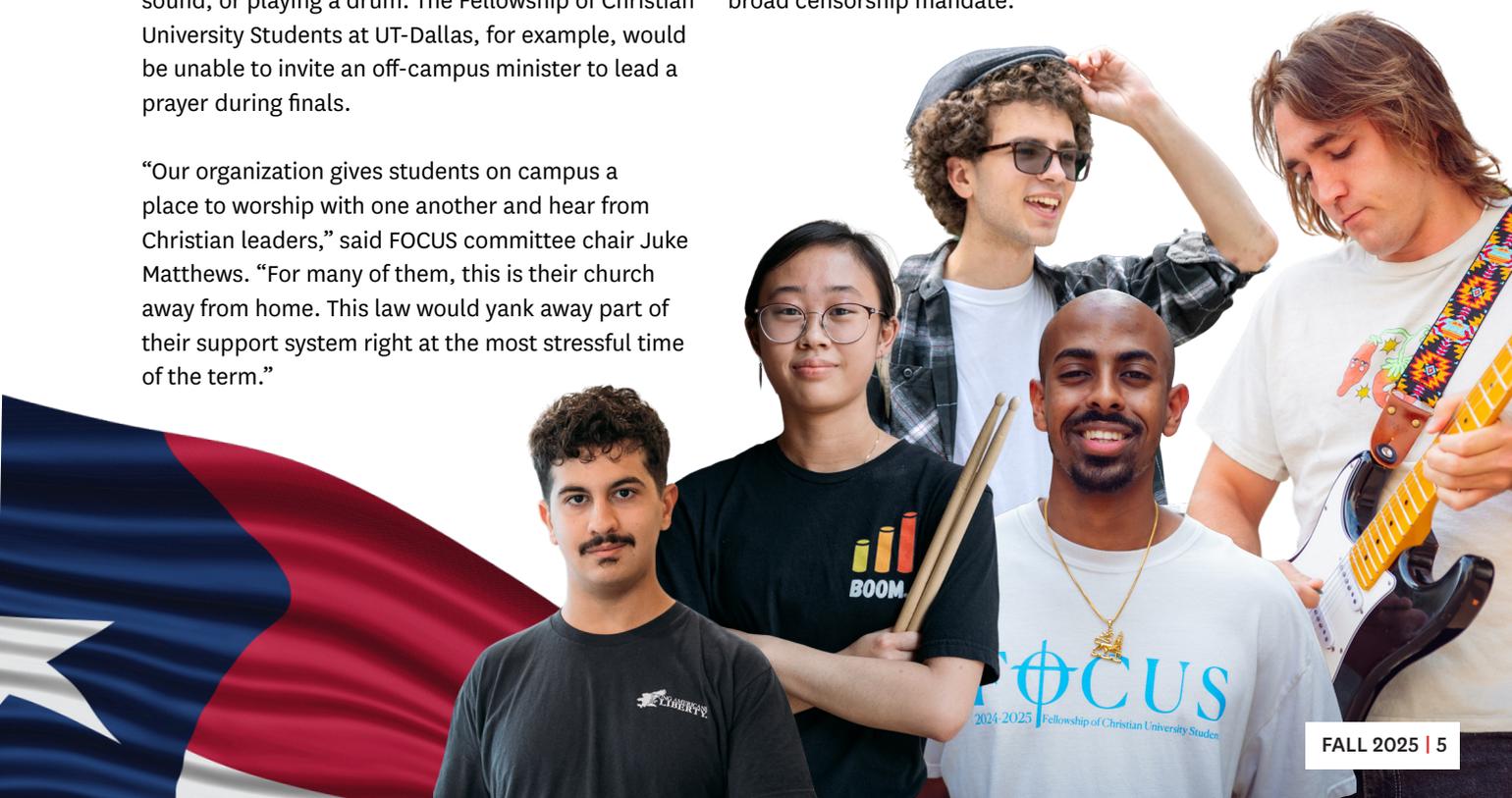
“Our organization gives students on campus a place to worship with one another and hear from Christian leaders,” said FOCUS committee chair Juke Matthews. “For many of them, this is their church away from home. This law would yank away part of their support system right at the most stressful time of the term.”

The potential consequences of this law are so wide-ranging that student musicians, journalists, political organizers, and religious students spanning the ideological spectrum are rallying together to challenge it.

Teaming up with FIRE in a lawsuit against the University of Texas system are:

- **Young Americans for Liberty:** An Austin-based national grassroots organization. Many of their student members engage in protests, petitions, and “Free Speech Balls” that traditionally take place during evening hours.
- **Texas Society of Unconventional Drummers:** A registered student organization at UT-Austin that puts on performances throughout the term, including at the end of each semester.
- **Strings Attached:** A student music group that holds public performances on UT-Dallas’s campus, including in the final two weeks of terms.
- **The Retrograde:** An independent student newspaper that serves the UT-Dallas community. Much of its staff’s newsgathering and reporting necessarily happens after Texas’ 10 p.m. free speech cutoff.

“This law gives campus administrators a blank check to punish speech,” said FIRE attorney Adam Steinbaugh. “Administrators have plenty of ways to prevent disruptive conduct that do not involve such a broad censorship mandate.”





FIRE'S 2026 COLLEGE FREE SPEECH RANKINGS

ON FREE SPEECH FRIENDLINESS, MOST U.S. COLLEGES DON'T MAKE THE GRADE

If America's colleges could earn report cards for free speech on campus, most would deserve an "F."

The sixth annual College Free Speech Rankings show a continued lack of support for free speech among a majority of students on campus, including a deep unwillingness among students of every political persuasion to encounter controversial ideas.

The survey, which is the most comprehensive look at campus expression in the country, ranked 257 schools based on 68,510 student responses to a wide array of free speech-related questions, an analysis of university policies, and how schools handled speech controversies.

"Rather than hearing out and then responding to an ideological opponent, both liberal and conservative college students are retreating from the encounter," said FIRE President and CEO Greg Lukianoff. "This will only harm students' ability to think critically and create rifts between them."

The report comes at a critical moment. Beyond clashes over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a vigorous culture of student activism, and the Trump administration's persistent scrutiny of higher ed, the report was released just one day after the horrific assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk.

The best colleges for free speech:

1. Claremont McKenna College
2. Purdue University
3. University of Chicago
4. Michigan Technological University
5. University of Colorado, Boulder

The worst colleges for free speech:

257. Barnard College
256. Columbia University
255. Indiana University
254. University of Washington
253. Northeastern University

What do the best colleges have in common?

Speech controversies at the highest ranked schools are rare, their administrations are more likely to support free speech, and their policies rarely infringe on expression. For these reasons, Claremont McKenna topped our list for the second time. Meanwhile, the lowest ranked schools are home to restrictive speech policies and some of last year's most shocking anti-free speech moments. At Indiana University, for instance, police in riot gear descended on the campus during a peaceful protest, and snipers were stationed on top of buildings. Talk about a chilling effect!

MORE STUDENTS THAN EVER ACCEPT VIOLENCE IN RESPONSE TO SPEECH

Sigmund Freud once said civilization started the day man first cast a word instead of a stone. He was right. Words are not violence. Words are what we use instead of violence to resolve our differences. But in September, the unthinkable happened: Conservative commentator Charlie Kirk was assassinated in broad daylight at Utah Valley University while speaking before an audience of thousands.

Over the years, students and student groups have invited Kirk to speak at hundreds of campuses. At these events, he would share his opinions and invite others to do the same. When not marred by deplatforming attempts or disruptions, these exchanges reflected the best of what colleges and universities have to offer: A space to talk across lines of difference and develop a deeper and fuller understanding of the world. This only works, of course, when people feel safe to share their ideas in the public square.

Unfortunately, since 2021, students increasingly have reason to feel ill at ease. **In this year's rankings report, we found that 1 in 3 students express some support for the use of violence to stop a campus speech.** That's a record high — up from 20% only three years ago. What's more, 71% of students now believe shoutdowns are acceptable in some circumstances, and 48% say the same about blocking access to a campus speech.

These trends reflect a broader cancer infecting our body politic: a deep intolerance for the norms of open dialogue and debate. And they must be addressed without sacrificing those norms.

According to our Deplatforming Database, Kirk was the subject of at least 14 attempts to stop him from speaking on campuses since 2021. Over the years, FIRE has repeatedly written to colleges that sought to silence Kirk's organization and supporters. Tragically, he was silenced by the assassin's veto.

Following the assassination, calls erupted for people to lose their jobs for their speech. The legality of firing someone for their expression depends on the speech and the job: Like many questions of free speech, nuance and context matter.

While calls to fire people for their expression may feel righteous in the heat of the moment, they're not indicative of a healthy speech environment. Additionally, the calls aren't just affecting people "celebrating" Charlie's murder. People's jobs and college careers are being threatened for even liking a post or quoting Charlie. And there have been cases of mistaken identity in these trials by Twitter.

FIRE's campus team has been working overtime, writing in defense of more than 80 students and professors facing discipline for speech protected by the First Amendment.

In America, we cannot let the censors have the last word. We cannot let violence prevail. We can and must come together to reject illiberalism and embrace the only constructive path forward: No tolerance for violence and free speech for *all*.

"More students than ever think violence and chaos are acceptable alternatives to peaceful protest. This finding cuts across partisan lines. It is not a liberal or conservative problem — it's an American problem."

- SEAN T. STEVENS,
FIRE CHIEF RESEARCH ADVISOR



DEPORTATION FOR OPINIONS?

In a lawsuit against Secretary of State Marco Rubio, FIRE challenges unconstitutional provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act.

Imagine if writing an op-ed meant risking deportation. Would you still speak your mind? You might think it couldn't happen here, but this is the everyday reality faced by noncitizens lawfully present in the United States.

Wielding two provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act, Secretary of State Marco Rubio is targeting lawfully present noncitizens for their opinions and casting a pall of fear across the country.

- The first provision allows the secretary of state to initiate deportation proceedings against any noncitizen for protected speech if the secretary “personally determines” the speech “compromise[s] a compelling United States foreign policy interest.”
- The second enables the secretary of state to revoke the visa of any noncitizen “at any time” for any reason.

The Trump administration claims that the First Amendment poses no barrier to deporting noncitizens for their political opinions. That's wrong. America's founding principle is that liberty comes not from the government, but is an inherent right of every individual. Every person — whether they're a U.S. citizen, visiting for the week, or here on a student visa — has free speech rights in this country. Courts have affirmed this.

FIRE's lawsuit against Rubio seeks to strike down the unconstitutional provisions as applied to protected speech and restore the rights of a wide range of groups and individuals.

Our plaintiffs are *The Stanford Daily*, the independent, student-run newspaper at Stanford University, where writers with student visas are declining assignments, worried that reporting on

the conflict in the Middle East will endanger their immigration status; and Jane Doe and John Doe, two legal noncitizens with no criminal record who fear deportation and visa revocation for engaging in pro-Palestinian speech.

“There's real fear on campus and it reaches into the newsroom,” said Greta Reich, editor-in-chief of *The Stanford Daily*. “I've had reporters turn down assignments, request the removal of some of their articles, and even quit the paper.”

Aiming to restore those voices to the conversation as soon as possible, we moved to stop the government from abusing the visa provision while the case is ongoing. No administration, whether Democrat or Republican, should be allowed to wield such power.



Conor Fitzpatrick speaks with CNN's Kate Bolduan about the case

“In the United States, you shouldn't have to show your passport to voice an opinion.”

- CONOR FITZPATRICK
FIRE SUPERVISING SENIOR ATTORNEY

The New York Times

The New York Times situated this case within FIRE's long history of First Amendment advocacy, chronicling our rise from small campus rights advocacy group to 100+ person organization in an in-depth profile. “In today's intense debates about free speech and higher education, FIRE can seem ubiquitous,” it said, noting FIRE's defense of both conservatives and liberals, even in the face of criticism.



4 TRUTHS ABOUT FREE SPEECH THAT EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW

Greg Lukianoff gets real about free speech in stirring TED Talk

FIRE President and CEO Greg Lukianoff brought a timeless message to new audiences with a 12-minute talk delivered live at the TED2025 conference in Vancouver. Greg systematically debunked four pervasive pro-censorship myths and introduced viewers to four truths “that can help get us back to understanding and appreciating free speech.”

Here are those truths, excerpted from the full talk:

It makes people safer.

You are not safer for knowing less about what people really think . . . Lizard people who live under the Denver airport do not, in fact, control the world. But knowing that your future husband thinks they do — or your congressman thinks they do, or every single one of your neighbors thinks they do — is pretty important information to have. To understand the world, you must know what people really think.

It cures violence.

About half of Americans — by some estimates more — believe that words can be violence . . . Now, I’ve experienced real violence. I was once punched out, I was randomly assaulted, I got a concussion, and I couldn’t see out of this eye for a month. Worse, one

of my friends was stabbed in the chest . . . That’s violence, and we insult the victims of actual violence by equating words with bloody violence. Free speech is not violence. It’s the best alternative to violence ever invented.

It protects the powerless.

People were showing up on my radar who seemed to have been taught that free speech is a cynical tool of the 3 B’s: The Bully, The Bigot, and The Robber Baron. This is just bad history. You only need a special protection for free speech like the First Amendment for people who are either unpopular with power or unpopular with the majority . . . Civil rights leaders understood that free speech is not the weapon of the powerful, it is the best check on power ever invented.

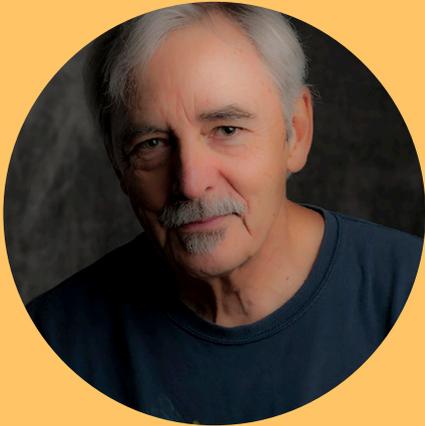
Even bad people can have good ideas.

So much time is wasted in social media debates trying to establish that your opponent is a bad person, as if that’s the same thing as saying that they’re wrong. Hopefully by now we understand that good people aren’t always right and bad people aren’t always wrong . . . Labeling someone “woke” or “fascist” or “libtard” or “grifter” doesn’t have anything to do with whether or not they are right. The way we figure out truth is a process of checking and rechecking, and it doesn’t work if you just talk to people you already agree with.

Catch Greg’s full talk on TED’s YouTube channel:



DONOR SPOTLIGHT:
KEN WELLS



“Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” – John Milton, *Areopagitica*

I came of age in the ‘60s at a small illiberal liberal-arts college in the South, where the right-wing administration not only imposed speech restrictions but dress codes. I joined a tiny minority of students who rebelled against these strictures, and we were branded “radicals” because we had the temerity to engage the American Civil Liberties Union in our ultimately successful effort to restore our constitutional guarantees of free expression. I went on to an adventurous five-decade career in journalism.

It never occurred to me to shut down the other side. Settling disputes in the marketplace of ideas — making a better, more persuasive argument — was surely the only way to accommodate the rough-and-tumble of public discourse and preserve the social and political fabric of a heterogeneous society. Then a strange thing occurred.

In all too many places, and particularly at left-leaning universities, speech codes came galloping back, propelled largely by champions of Manichaean identity politics who have sought to ban speech critical of their chosen protected classes or ideas they find offensive. Appalled, I looked around and realized the old champions of free speech had gone AWOL, and were no longer reliable defenders of the First Amendment.

Thankfully, I found FIRE. Founded by nonpartisan free thinkers, FIRE has robustly stepped into the breach, using the power of persuasion and — when necessary — lawsuits to stanch this radical and abusive assault on our most fundamental right, no matter which side of the political spectrum this threat comes from. Of all the checks I write for my pet causes, this is the one cause I care most about.

Ken Wells is a Louisiana native who spent 24 years as an editor and writer for The Wall Street Journal and six more at Bloomberg Businessweek before slipping into semi-retirement to write books. He is the author of six novels and three works of narrative nonfiction and divides his time between Chicago and a tidy log cabin in the wilds of Maine. Ken is a proud member of FIRE’s Ember Club.

There are many ways to support FIRE’s work, including stock donations, IRA charitable rollovers, direct wire transfers, cryptocurrency, legacy gifts, and more.

To learn more about all the ways to support us, visit: thefire.org/donate/more-ways-to-donate.

And, if you’re not already a member of the Ember Club, consider joining today and enjoy exclusive benefits.

Questions? Contact us at: support@thefire.org or 215-717-3473.

To renew your support or join the Ember Club, scan the QR code:



FIRE'S 2024-2025 YEAR IN REVIEW

Every year, FIRE reviews our successes in our Annual Report, which details what your support made possible during the past fiscal year. One thing is clear: From campuses to courtrooms, free speech advocacy is making an impact. We're proud to report these highlights:

TAKING COURTROOMS BY STORM

FIRE's litigation team:

- Launched 12 cases
- Secured 15 victories
- Maintained a docket of 30+ cases
- Filed 37 *amicus* briefs in courts nationwide



One of FIRE's biggest wins this year was a \$250,000 settlement for Dr. Kimberly Diei, a former pharmacy student who was nearly expelled for posting lyrics by Cardi B and Beyoncé on her personal social media.

DEFENDING RIGHTS BEYOND THE COURTS

Outside the courtroom, FIRE's Campus Rights and Public Advocacy teams:

- Fielded 1,200+ case submissions
- Secured 99 victories
- Wrote 230 letters to call out censorship
- Launched 19 take-action campaigns, like petitions and email-writing initiatives



FIRE successfully defended Joel Bassoff, who was banned from a New Jersey town council meeting for waving a small American flag.

IMPROVING LAW AND POLICY

Our legislative and policy departments:

- Secured 20 legislative wins in 11 states
- Reformed 43 policies on 29 campuses, impacting more than 630,000 students
- Welcomed four new schools to our roster of "green light" campuses that maintain no policies that seriously imperil free expression



Priscilla Villarreal was arrested by police in Laredo, Texas, for asking officers to verify facts as part of her everyday news reporting. With FIRE, she's taking her case all the way to the Supreme Court.

EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION

FIRE's Student Development programs hosted:

- 30 interns
- 13 legal fellows and clerks
- More than 100 undergraduates at our summer conference in Philadelphia
- 200 high schoolers at our week-long Free Speech Forum in Washington, D.C.

Check out thefire.org/annual-report to read more about all the accomplishments you helped make possible!





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SAVE THE DATE!

CELEBRATE AMERICA'S 250TH, FIRE STYLE

Soapbox 2026 is FIRE's bold new conference, taking place November 4-6, 2026, in Philadelphia to celebrate America's 250th anniversary. We will bring together thought leaders, faculty, advocates, artists, celebrities, and supporters who believe in the power of free expression and want to shout it from their own soapbox.

This dynamic, multi-day event will feature high-impact keynotes, timely panels, and unforgettable entertainment. It will all culminate in a showstopping gala. Soapbox will be a high-energy celebration of free speech culture both on and off campus, offering speakers and partners a unique platform to shape national dialogue and reach new audiences regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum.

This is just the beginning. We're building something big with Soapbox, and we'd love for you to be part of our inaugural year.

**CONTACT SOAPBOX@THEFIRE.ORG
TO LEARN HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED!**



Still **SOAPBOX 26**
Revolutionary