

2026 College Free Speech Rankings **Cornell University**

227

OVERALL
RANK

F

SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE
Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

Executive Summary

THE 2026 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 (FIRE), the rankings combine student survey data, written speech policies, and school responses to recent speech-related controversies. Schools earn higher scores when they protect open debate 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 students at 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.

At Cornell University, we surveyed 304 undergraduates. Key findings include:

- Cornell ranks 227 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings with a score of 51.7, earning an F speech climate grade.
- Cornell students showed greater tolerance for controversial speakers than students nationally.
- 4 in 5 Cornell students found shoutdowns acceptable.
- Many Cornell students were uncomfortable expressing controversial views, particularly around professors and on social media.
- Cornell had a “yellow light” Spotlight rating and has not adopted institutional neutrality. Had Cornell earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 63.
- Cornell was penalized for three recent speech controversies, including the disinvitation of a performer, discipline of a student for political speech, and a disrupted panel event.

Cornell University ranks 227 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earns a score of 51.7, an F speech climate grade.¹ It also earned a “yellow light” rating for policies that could be used to restrict speech. Cornell had three speech controversies that impacted its ranking this year.

The following report highlights Cornell’s poor performance across most of the student survey. In addition, it discusses Cornell’s speech policies and statements, speech controversies on campus, and what Cornell can do to improve its free speech climate.

CORNELL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students showed greater tolerance for controversial speakers

Cornell University students demonstrated a relatively high willingness to allow controversial speakers on campus, ranking in the top tier nationally for “Political Tolerance.” Cornell ranks in the top 20 nationally on tolerance of both liberal and conservative speakers.

- 72% would allow a speaker saying “children should be able to transition without parental consent” (vs. 49% nationally).
- 56% would allow a speaker calling “the Catholic church is a pedophilic institution” (vs. 38% nationally).
- 50% would allow a speaker claiming “the police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan” (vs. 38% nationally).
- 41% would allow a speaker arguing “transgender people have a mental disorder” (vs. 25% nationally).
- 54% would allow a speaker saying “abortion should be completely illegal” (vs. 40% nationally).
- 35% would allow a speaker claiming that “Black Lives Matter is a hate group” (vs. 24% nationally).

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

FIGURE 1: Students Who Tolerate Speakers

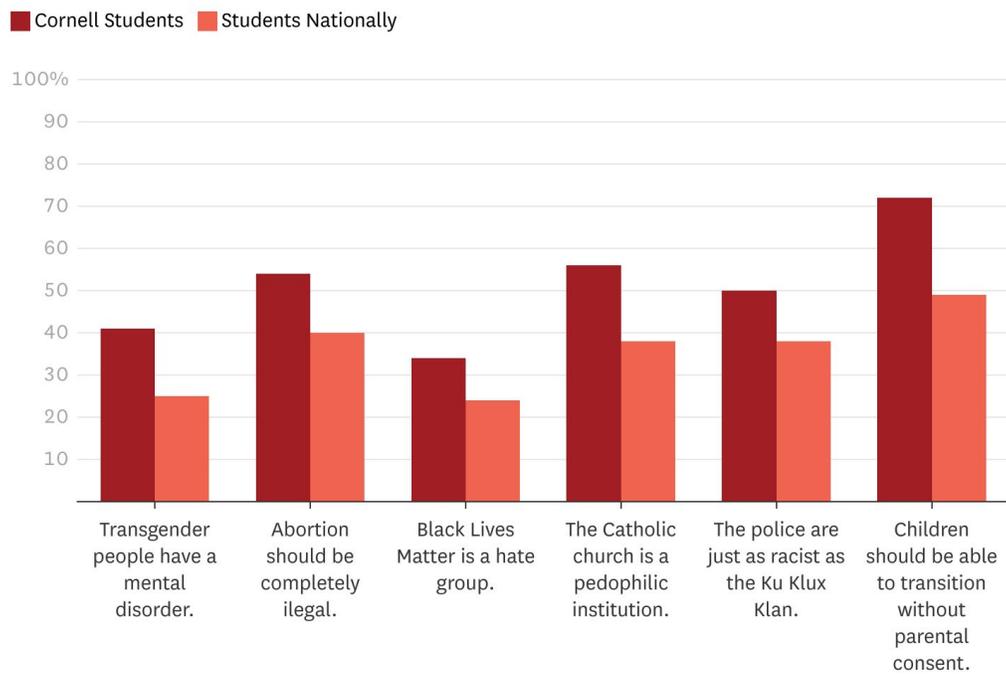


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

4 in 5 Cornell students found shoutdowns acceptable

Despite high tolerance for speakers, Cornell students were more accepting than their peers nationally of disruptive protest tactics.

- 80% said shouting down a speaker is at least rarely acceptable (vs. 72% nationally).
- 61% said blocking entry to a campus speech is at least rarely acceptable (vs. 54% nationally).
- 36% said violence to stop a speech is at least rarely acceptable (vs. 34% nationally).

Cornell ranks 156 on “Disruptive Conduct.”

FIGURE 2: Students Who Believed Shouting Down a Speaker Can be Acceptable

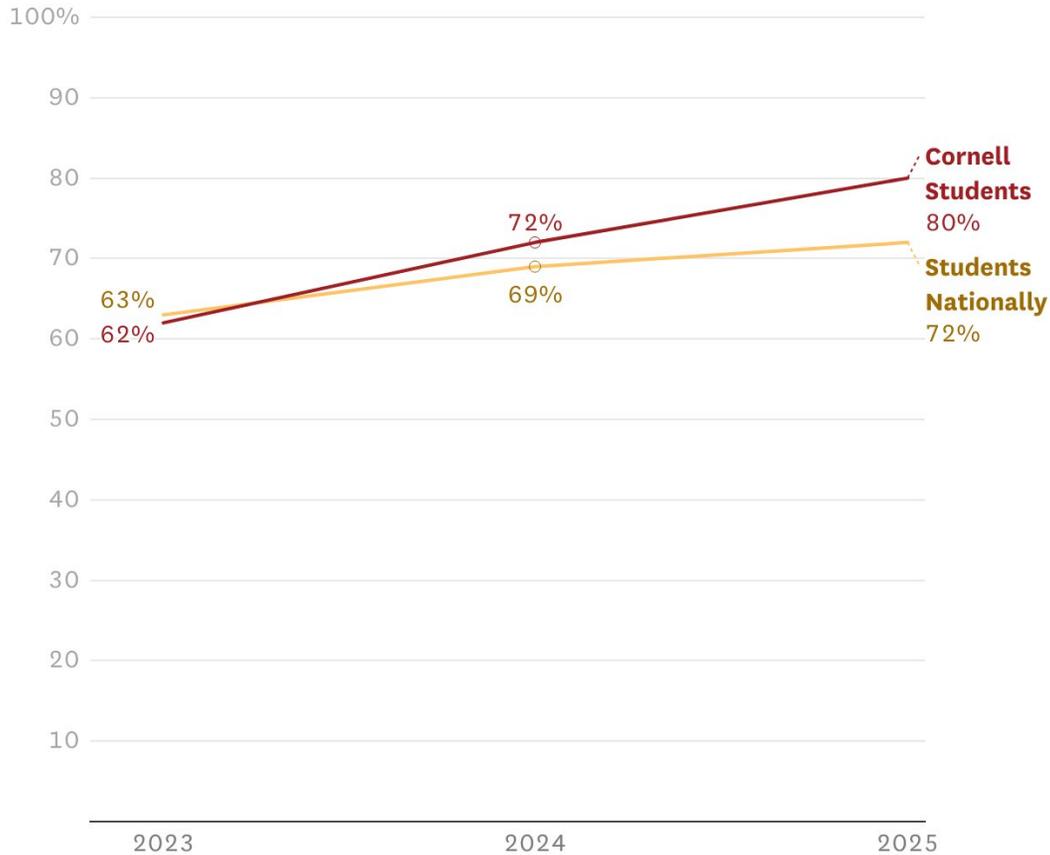


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: Fire/ College Pulse

Students were uncomfortable expressing controversial views

Cornell students often felt uncomfortable sharing their views in academic and social settings.

- Only 26% felt comfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor in class.
- 46% felt comfortable expressing disagreement in a written assignment.
- 41% felt comfortable speaking up during in-class discussions.
- 54% felt comfortable sharing views with peers in informal campus spaces.
- Just 20% feel comfortable posting an unpopular opinion on social media under their own name.

Nearly 70% of Cornell students reported self-censoring at least occasionally around friends, and one-quarter reported censoring themselves weekly or more.

FIGURE 3: Students Who Felt Comfortable Expressing Controversial Ideas by Context

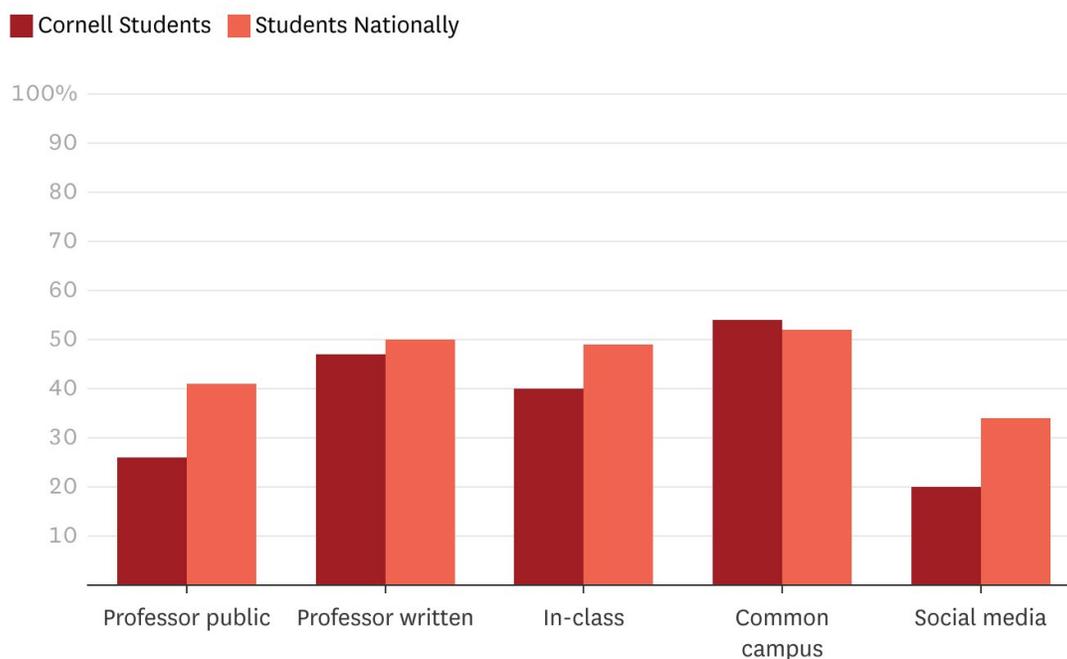


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

A “YELLOW LIGHT” SCHOOL

Cornell University has a “yellow light” rating for its written speech policies, meaning it maintains ambiguous or restrictive policies that could be used to suppress protected speech. Cornell has not adopted the “Chicago Statement” or a formal policy of institutional neutrality.

The university maintains four yellow light policies and two “green light” policies. One of the university’s harassment policies fails to meet the legal standard for peer hostile environment harassment in an educational setting, putting protected speech that does not reach that threshold at risk. The university also encourages students to report “bias activities” and “bias-related incidents,” conflating these terms with harassment and discrimination. These policies make largely unpopular but protected expression punishable by the administration. The administration should instead focus its resources on reports of discrimination and harassment and refrain from soliciting reports of subjective bias.

Lastly, Cornell broadly bans “loud, offensive, or lewd behavior” in common areas of the residence halls. The first amendment permits viewpoint-neutral limits on noise in the residence halls. However, it does not allow limiting expression on the basis it is found to be “offensive”.

CORNELL'S SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

Cornell University was penalized for three speech controversies.

The first controversy, occurring earlier in 2025, involved Grammy-nominated R&B artist Kehlani, who had been scheduled to headline the university's annual Slope Day event. Shortly after the announcement, backlash mounted over Kehlani's history of anti-Israel statements, including a widely publicized chant of "Fuck Israel" and "Fuck Zionism" at a pro-Palestinian protest earlier in the year. Critics, including students, alumni, and members of Congress, argued that her rhetoric was inflammatory and inappropriate for a university-sponsored event. A petition urged the university to cancel the performance, citing her political statements as incompatible with Cornell's values. U.S. Sen. Rick Scott and Reps. Lisa McClain and Mike Lawler publicly called for Kehlani to be disinvited, amplifying pressure on the administration. In response, the university rescinded Kehlani's invitation.

Another incident this year involved a March panel discussion titled "Pathways to Peace" that aimed to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and explore avenues for peace. The panel was moderated by former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait, and Lebanon, Ryan Crocker, and included former Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, former vice prime minister and former foreign minister of Israel, Tzipi Livni, and former U.S. ambassador to Israel, Daniel Shapiro. The discussion was disrupted by pro-Palestinian protesters, leading to the arrest of at least 17 individuals by the Cornell University Police. The protest was organized by the campus chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), which criticized the university for hosting Livni, labeling her a "war criminal" due to her involvement in Israeli military actions. Protesters interrupted the event with chants and accusations, including shouting "500 children in 2014 and you killed them. You are a butcher." After the protesters were removed, the panel discussion resumed.

In response to the disruptions, the interim university president condemned the actions, emphasizing the importance of free expression and dialogue in the educational process. He announced that nine students involved would be referred to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards for disciplinary action, including potential suspension, and that SJP could face suspension as a registered campus organization.

Finally, in 2024 administrators suspended student Maria Valdez for her "heinous" and "hateful" social media post saying "Zionists must die." The university suspended Valdez, banning her from campus pending a disciplinary investigation. Four months later, Cornell found Valdez not responsible for all disciplinary charges.

HOW CAN CORNELL IMPROVE?

Cornell University can improve its ranking by reforming its policies to achieve a "green light" rating. If Cornell reformed its policies to earn a green light rating, its overall ranking would have been 63 instead of 227. Adopting the Chicago Statement on free expression and adopting institutional neutrality would have further boosted its ranking to 34.

Policy changes alone do not change a campus' free speech culture. Cornell should communicate these policy changes to students in a way that emphasizes the university's commitment to free expression and affirms that students and faculty won't be penalized for protected speech. Such actions could improve Cornell's poor rank (204) on "Administrative Support."

The university should also take active steps to improve campus culture. For example, Cornell could embed expressive rights training into first-year orientation so students learn what is protected expression and when expression crosses into unprotected conduct. By taking these steps, Cornell can better align its policies and campus culture with its students' broad support for hearing diverse speakers and create an environment where students themselves feel freer to speak openly.

Cornell's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings scores by component

COMPONENT	CORNELL UNIVERSITY	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.11	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	11.50	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.33	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	10.70	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.51	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	7.51	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	0 (No)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Institutional Neutrality	0 (No)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-4	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	-1	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	51.66	58.63		

Topline Results

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	15	5
Not very clear	84	28
Somewhat clear	135	45
Very clear	62	20
Extremely clear	7	2

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	3
Not very likely	78	26
Somewhat likely	138	45
Very likely	66	22
Extremely likely	13	4

How comfortable would you feel doing the following on your campus? [Presented in randomized order]
Publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	81	27
Somewhat uncomfortable	146	48
Somewhat comfortable	66	22
Very comfortable	11	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	46	15
Somewhat uncomfortable	117	39
Somewhat comfortable	111	37
Very comfortable	29	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	49	16
Somewhat uncomfortable	132	43
Somewhat comfortable	101	33
Very comfortable	22	7

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	34	11
Somewhat uncomfortable	105	35
Somewhat comfortable	128	42
Very comfortable	37	12

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	109	36
Somewhat uncomfortable	133	44
Somewhat comfortable	52	17
Very comfortable	9	3

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	14	4
Rarely	79	26
Occasionally, once or twice a month	135	44
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	58	19
Very often, nearly every day	19	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	18	6
Rarely	98	32
Occasionally, once or twice a month	88	29
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	69	23
Very often, nearly every day	30	10

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	9	3
Rarely	75	25
Occasionally, once or twice a month	140	46
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	52	17
Very often, nearly every day	28	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	5	2
Sometimes acceptable	117	39
Rarely acceptable	120	40
Never acceptable	61	20

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	1	0
Sometimes acceptable	53	18
Rarely acceptable	132	43
Never acceptable	118	39

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	5	2
Sometimes acceptable	20	7
Rarely acceptable	82	27
Never acceptable	196	64

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	80	26
Probably should not allow this speaker	100	33
Probably should allow this speaker	90	30
Definitely should allow this speaker	34	11

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	61	20
Probably should not allow this speaker	81	27
Probably should allow this speaker	103	34
Definitely should allow this speaker	59	20

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	95	31
Probably should not allow this speaker	104	34
Probably should allow this speaker	74	24
Definitely should allow this speaker	31	10

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	47	15
Probably should not allow this speaker	88	29
Probably should allow this speaker	115	38
Definitely should allow this speaker	54	18

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	51	17
Probably should not allow this speaker	101	33
Probably should allow this speaker	88	29
Definitely should allow this speaker	64	21

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	28	9
Probably should not allow this speaker	59	19
Probably should allow this speaker	137	45
Definitely should allow this speaker	81	27

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	218	72
Yes	86	28

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	197	65
Yes	107	35

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	260	85
Yes	44	15

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	283	93
Yes	20	7

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	258	85
Yes	46	15

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	232	76
Yes	72	24

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	244	80
Yes	60	20

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	247	81
Yes	57	19

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	246	81
Yes	58	19

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	234	77
Yes	70	23

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	235	77
Yes	69	23

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	240	79
Yes	64	21

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	86	28
Yes	218	72

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	203	67
Yes	101	33

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	228	75
Yes	76	25

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	217	71
Yes	87	29

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	240	79
Yes	64	21

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	224	74
Yes	80	26

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	271	89
Yes	33	11

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	200	66
Yes	104	34

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	275	90
Yes	29	10

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	32	10
Rarely	135	44
Occasionally, once or twice a month	94	31
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	33	11
Very often, nearly every day	10	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	5	2
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	32	11
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	267	88

How often, if at all, do you hide your political beliefs from your professors in an attempt to get a better grade?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	96	32
Rarely	120	40
Occasionally, once or twice a month	44	15
Fairly often, a couple times a week	23	7
Very often, nearly every day	20	7

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	17	5
Unlikely	91	30
Neither likely or unlikely	108	35
Likely	66	22
Very likely	22	7

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	12	4
Unlikely	57	19
Neither likely or unlikely	89	29
Likely	110	36
Very likely	36	12

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.	8	3
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	89	29
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	203	67

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.	2	1
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	46	15
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	256	84

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	144	47
Less than once a year	22	7
Once or twice a year	41	14
Several times a year	43	14
Once a month	13	4
2-3 times a month	16	5
About weekly	6	2
Weekly	17	6
Several times a week	1	0

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	3	1
No	301	99

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	0	0	0
No	303	100	100

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	5	2	9
Less than half the time	19	6	32
About half the time	16	5	29
Most of the time, nearly every day	13	4	23
Always	4	1	7

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	12	4	22
Less than half the time	30	10	58
About half the time	6	2	11
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	1	8
Always	0	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	4	1	5
Less than half the time	18	6	23
About half the time	22	7	28
Most of the time, nearly every day	20	7	25
Always	15	5	19

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	27	9	39
Less than half the time	17	5	24
About half the time	16	5	23
Most of the time, nearly every day	9	3	12
Always	1	0	1

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	0	2
Less than half the time	17	6	36
About half the time	17	6	37
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	1	9
Always	7	2	15



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