

2026 College Free Speech Rankings

Davidson College

78
OVERALL
RANK

D-

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 135 Davidson College undergraduates. Key findings include:

- Davidson ranks 78, with an overall score of 60.37 and a D- speech climate.
- Students are more trusting of the administration, more open when discussing difficult topics, and less accepting of disruptions than last year, allowing Davidson to perform well on the “Administrative Support” (49), “Openness” (51), and “Disruptive Conduct” (76).
- However, the college is middling on “Self-Censorship” (107) and “Political Tolerance” (138), and is in the bottom quartile on “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (198).
- The college continues to maintain speech policies that earn it a “yellow light” rating from FIRE. If Davidson had earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 21 overall.
- Davidson was penalized for a 2025 speech controversy involving the student group, Young Americans for Freedom.

Davidson College ranks 78 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The college earned a score of 60.37, a D- speech climate grade.¹ The college moved up 49 spots and gained 1.57 points since last year, thanks in part to stark improvements on the “Administrative Support” (+52 spots), “Openness” (+70 spots), and “Disruptive Conduct” (+134 spots) components.

The following report highlights three survey areas where Davidson performed well and three areas where it is middling or performed poorly. In addition, it discusses Davidson’s speech policies and statements, its speech controversy, and what the school can do to improve its free speech climate.

DAVIDSON STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students are more trusting of the administration, more open when discussing difficult topics, and less accepting of disruptions than last year

Davidson College ranks 49 on “Administrative Support” after ranking 101 last year.

Forty-two percent of Davidson students said it was either “very” or “extremely” clear that the administration protects free speech on campus, compared to 33% last year and 36% of students nationally. Additionally, 31% said it was either “very” or “extremely” likely that the administration would defend a speaker’s expressive rights in the face of controversy. Though unchanged since last year, this is more than students nationally (24%).

The college also improved its ranking on the “Openness” component, rising from 121 last year to 51 this year.

Students were presented with a list of 20 topics and asked which, if any, were difficult to have an open and honest conversation about. Impressively, 14 of 20 topics were identified less frequently this year than last year, and 16 of 20 were identified less frequently than by students nationally.

While percentages shifted only slightly for most topics, for others the shifts were dramatic. The topics that experienced the biggest shifts in percentages since last year were crime (-11 percentage points), police misconduct (-13 percentage points), freedom of speech (-15 percentage points), gun control (-19 percentage points), and the presidential election (+17 percentage points).

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

FIGURE 1: Topics Identified as Difficult to Have an Open and Honest Conversation About (%)

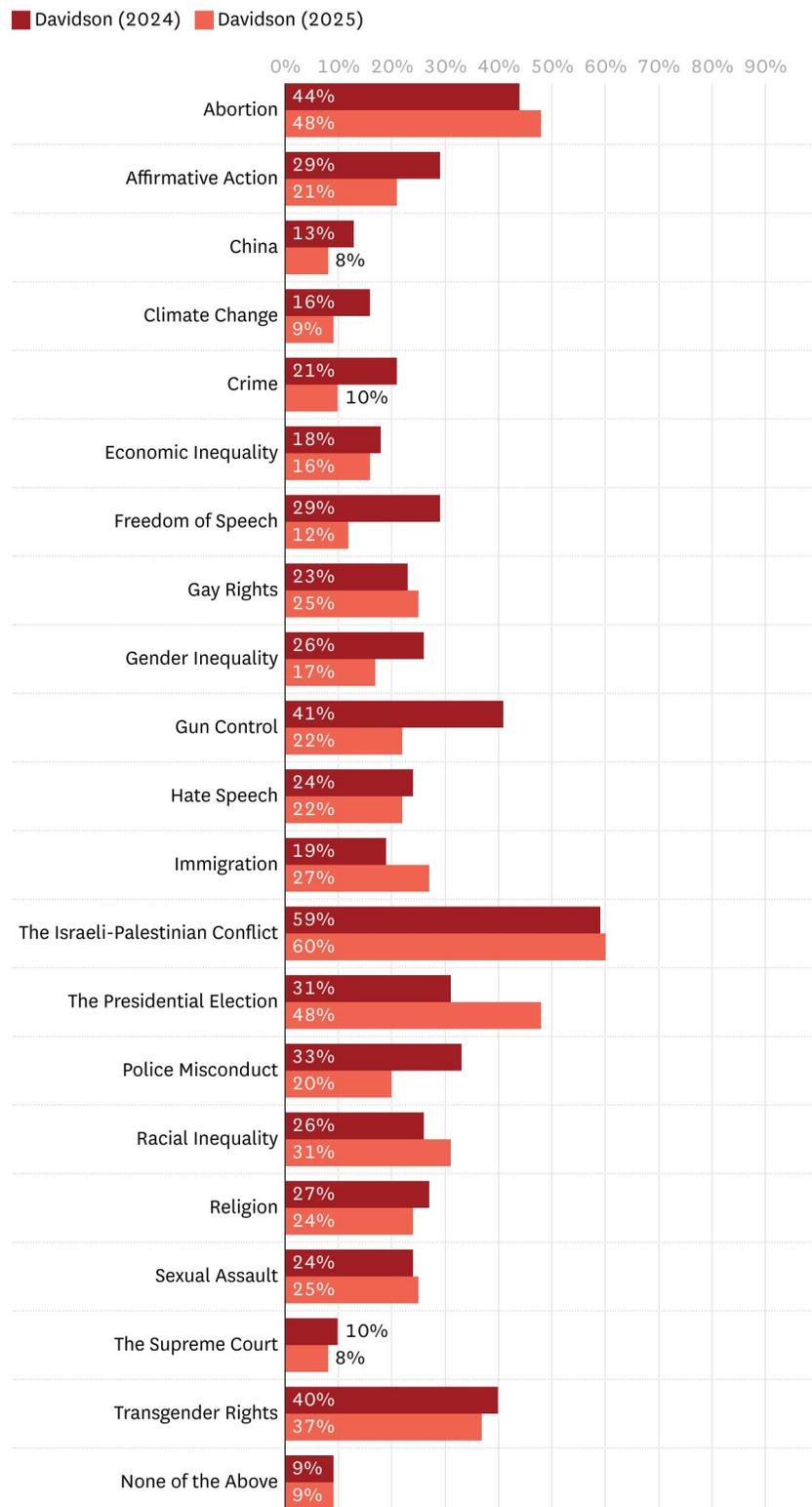


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

However, the biggest shift came in Davidson’s ranking on the “Disruptive Conduct” component. After ranking 210 last year, Davidson leapt 134 spots to rank 76 this year. Since then, fewer students said each of the three disruptive tactics was acceptable:

- 65% said shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus was at least “rarely” acceptable (69% last year).
- 48% said blocking other students from attending a campus speech was at least “rarely” acceptable (59% last year).
- 26% said using violence to stop a campus speech was at least “rarely” acceptable (33% last year).

Student perceptions are middling elsewhere

Davidson College ranks 138 on “Political Tolerance.”

Students were asked whether six speakers (three liberal, three conservative) who had previously expressed controversial opinions should be allowed to give a campus speech. When it came to controversial liberal speakers, the percentages of students who said a speaker “probably” or “definitely should” be allowed ranged from 36% to 59%. Support for controversial conservative speakers, meanwhile, ranged from only 22% to 48%.

FIGURE 2: Students Who Support Allowing Controversial Speakers (%)

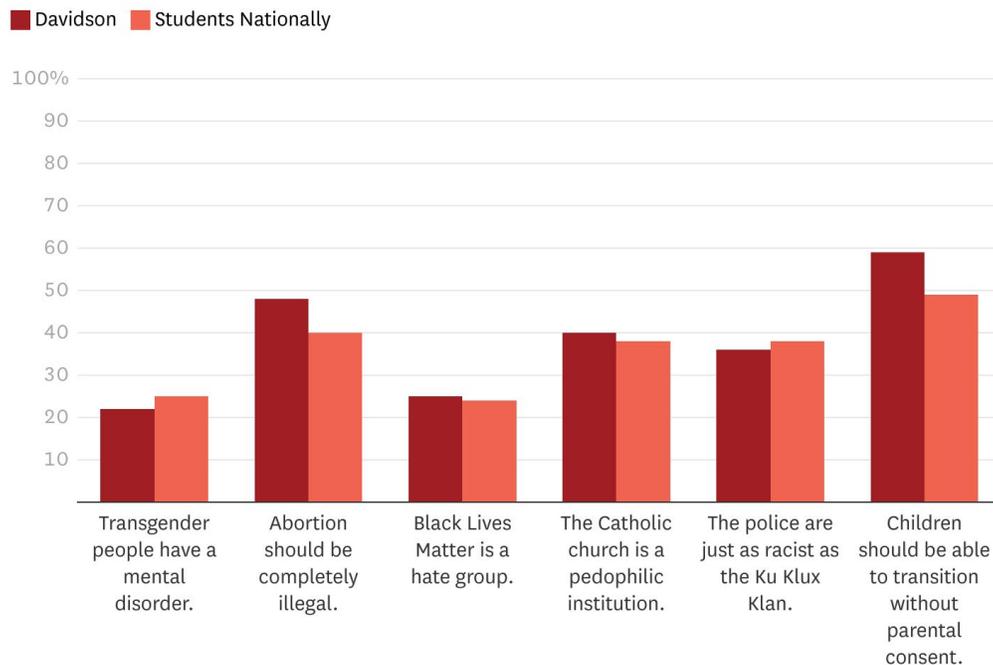


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

Davidson ranks 107 on “Self-Censorship.”

Students were presented 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.”

Subsequently, students were asked about the frequency with which they self-censored in three campus contexts. For each context, between 20% and 25% of students reported self-censoring at least “a couple of times a week.” Specifically:

- 20% said they self-censored during conversations with other students on campus.
- 25% said they self-censored during conversations with professors.
- 22% said they self-censored during classroom discussions.

Davidson ranks 198 on “Comfort Expressing Ideas.” Though this is its lowest-ranking component, Davidson improved on its 225 ranking from last year.

On a positive note, fewer students than last year said they were either “somewhat” or “very” uncomfortable for three of five contexts, and especially when publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic. However, a majority said they were uncomfortable doing this.

In fact, majorities of Davidson students were uncomfortable in three of five contexts. Most notably, 70% said they were uncomfortable when expressing an unpopular political opinion to fellow students on a social media account tied to their name.

FIGURE 3: Students Who Feel At Least “Somewhat” Uncomfortable By Context (%)

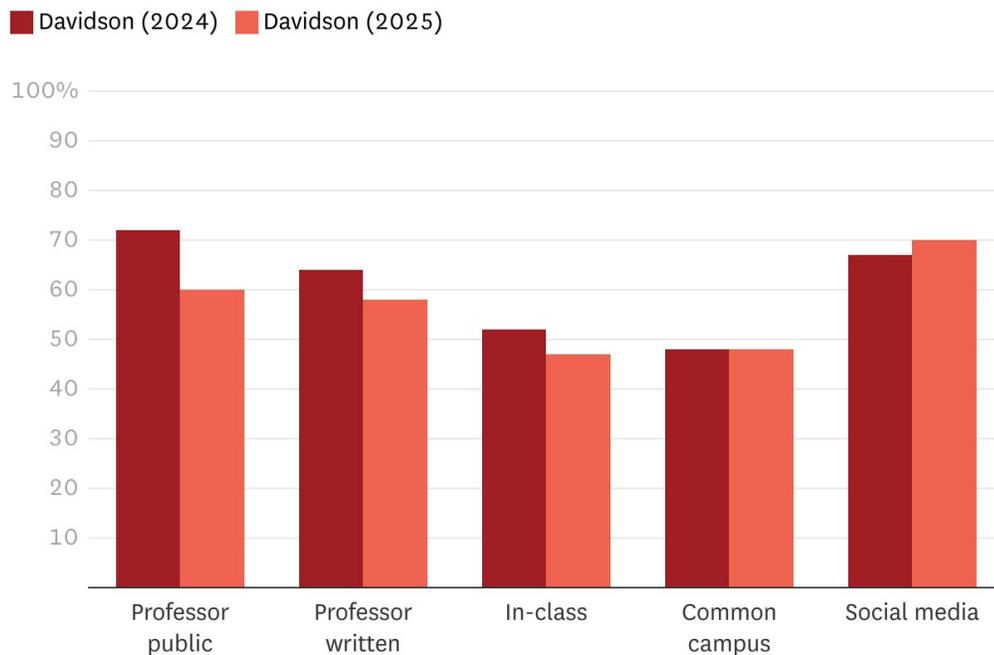


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH FREE SPEECH COMMITMENTS

Davidson College earns an overall “yellow light” rating for its written policies governing student expression. The college maintains four yellow light policies and five “green light” policies. One of the college’s harassment policies fails to meet the legal standard for peer hostile environment harassment, risking suppressing protected speech. Davidson also mandates “respect” and “social responsibility”—laudable values for students to strive toward, but subjective standards that administrators can all too easily misuse to punish protected yet disfavored speech.

By banning material on flyers that conflicts with the “Davidson College statement of purpose,” the college’s posting policy grants administrators broad discretion over campus speech. Lastly, Davidson’s internet usage policy prohibits all “chain letters,” “spam,” and “false emails” 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.

While Davidson was penalized five points for its yellow light rating, it was awarded three points for having a statement of commitment to freedom of expression similar to that of the “Chicago Statement.”

DAVIDSON'S SPEECH CONTROVERSY

Davidson College was penalized one point for its handling of a campus controversy involving the Young Americans for Freedom student group.

The Dean of Students Office contacted Young Americans for Freedom after receiving complaints that the group had distributed a pamphlet containing “misinformation that promotes islamophobia.” The complaints also alleged that the group shared an Instagram post “speculating [about] the sex/gender identity of Imane Khelif, an Algerian boxer, which allegedly includes information that promotes transphobia.” In its letter to YAF, the Dean of Students Office stated that the group could either accept responsibility for the alleged Code of Responsibilities violations and unspecified sanctions or agree to a council hearing.

HOW CAN DAVIDSON IMPROVE?

Davidson College can improve its ranking by reforming its “yellow light” speech policies to earn a “green light” rating. If Davidson earned a green light rating this year it would have ranked 21 instead of 78. In addition to improving its speech policies, Davidson should adopt a formal commitment to institutional neutrality similar to the “Kalven Report.” This, in combination with a green light rating, would have positioned Davidson among the top 10 schools in this year’s College Free Speech Rankings.

But policy changes alone will not improve Davidson’s free speech climate. To feel comfortable expressing themselves on campus, students need to trust that neither they nor anyone else on campus will be punished for their speech. That’s why administrators should not only communicate these policy changes directly to the student body, but also publicly defend community members’ expressive rights whenever controversy arises, regardless of their political leanings. These actions could help improve the school’s “Self-Censorship” (107), “Political Tolerance” (138), and “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (198) scores.

Davidson’s 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	DAVIDSON COLLEGE	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.25	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	12.22	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.80	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	12.08	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.55	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	6.47	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	3 (Yes)	1.16	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Institutional Neutrality	0 (No)	0.53	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-4.07	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	-1	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	60.37	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	2	2
Not very clear	20	15
Somewhat clear	55	41
Very clear	40	29
Extremely clear	18	13

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	4	3
Not very likely	27	20
Somewhat likely	62	46
Very likely	36	27
Extremely likely	6	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	41	31
Somewhat uncomfortable	39	29
Somewhat comfortable	49	37
Very comfortable	6	4

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	25	19
Somewhat uncomfortable	53	39
Somewhat comfortable	49	36
Very comfortable	8	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	22	16
Somewhat uncomfortable	42	31
Somewhat comfortable	60	44
Very comfortable	11	8

Expressing your views on a controversial political topic to other students during a discussion in a common campus space such as a quad, dining hall, or lounge.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	14	10
Somewhat uncomfortable	52	38
Somewhat comfortable	51	38
Very comfortable	19	14

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	57	42
Somewhat uncomfortable	37	28
Somewhat comfortable	33	25
Very comfortable	8	6

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	8	6
Rarely	43	32
Occasionally, once or twice a month	57	43
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	15	11
Very often, nearly every day	11	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	18	13
Rarely	39	29
Occasionally, once or twice a month	45	33
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	20	15
Very often, nearly every day	14	10

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	7	6
Rarely	45	34
Occasionally, once or twice a month	52	39
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	19	14
Very often, nearly every day	11	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	8	6
Sometimes acceptable	42	31
Rarely acceptable	38	28
Never acceptable	47	35

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	3	2
Sometimes acceptable	23	17
Rarely acceptable	39	29
Never acceptable	70	52

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	5	4
Sometimes acceptable	15	11
Rarely acceptable	15	11
Never acceptable	100	74

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	67	49
Probably should not allow this speaker	38	28
Probably should allow this speaker	25	18
Definitely should allow this speaker	6	4

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	19	14
Probably should not allow this speaker	51	37
Probably should allow this speaker	47	35
Definitely should allow this speaker	18	13

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	60	44
Probably should not allow this speaker	43	32
Probably should allow this speaker	28	21
Definitely should allow this speaker	5	4

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	30	22
Probably should not allow this speaker	52	38
Probably should allow this speaker	46	34
Definitely should allow this speaker	8	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	29	21
Probably should not allow this speaker	57	42
Probably should allow this speaker	40	29
Definitely should allow this speaker	9	7

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	22	16
Probably should not allow this speaker	34	25
Probably should allow this speaker	55	41
Definitely should allow this speaker	24	18

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	71	52
Yes	64	48

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	106	79
Yes	29	21

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	124	92
Yes	11	8

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	123	91
Yes	12	9

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	121	90
Yes	14	10

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	113	84
Yes	22	16

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	119	88
Yes	16	12

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	102	75
Yes	33	25

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	111	83
Yes	24	17

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	105	78
Yes	30	22

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	106	78
Yes	29	22

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	99	73
Yes	36	27

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	54	40
Yes	81	60

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	71	52
Yes	64	48

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	109	80
Yes	26	20

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	93	69
Yes	42	31

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	103	76
Yes	32	24

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	101	75
Yes	34	25

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	124	92
Yes	11	8

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	84	63
Yes	51	37

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	123	91
Yes	12	9

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	20
Rarely	43	32
Occasionally, once or twice a month	39	29
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	12	9
Very often, nearly every day	14	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	3	2
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	11	8
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	121	89

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	47	35
Rarely	30	22
Occasionally, once or twice a month	27	20
Fairly often, a couple times a week	14	11
Very often, nearly every day	16	12

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	11	9
Unlikely	42	31
Neither likely or unlikely	35	26
Likely	34	25
Very likely	12	9

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	9	7
Unlikely	41	30
Neither likely or unlikely	34	25
Likely	39	29
Very likely	12	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	6	4
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	2	1
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	42	31
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	86	63

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.	0	0
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	1	1
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	47	35
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	86	63

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	42	31
Less than once a year	16	12
Once or twice a year	24	18
Several times a year	23	17
Once a month	4	3
2-3 times a month	12	9
About weekly	5	4
Weekly	6	5
Several times a week	1	1

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	1	0
No	134	100

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	1	0	0
No	134	100	100

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	1	1	6
Less than half the time	5	4	21
About half the time	6	5	27
Most of the time, nearly every day	9	7	37
Always	2	1	8

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	5	4	21
Less than half the time	9	7	39
About half the time	7	5	29
Most of the time, nearly every day	2	2	10

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	8	27
Less than half the time	8	6	18
About half the time	16	12	37
Most of the time, nearly every day	7	5	16
Always	0	0	1

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	13	10	46
Less than half the time	12	9	42
About half the time	3	2	11
Most of the time, nearly every day	0	0	2

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	0	0	3
Less than half the time	1	1	8
About half the time	12	9	71
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	1	8
Always	2	1	11



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

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