

# 2020 College Free Speech Rankings

## About College Pulse

College Pulse is a survey research and analytics company dedicated to understanding the attitudes, preferences, and behaviors of today's college students. College Pulse delivers custom data-driven marketing and research solutions, utilizing its unique American College Student Panel™ that includes over 400,000 undergraduate college student respondents from more than 1,000 two- and four-year colleges and universities in all 50 states.

For more information, visit [collegepulse.com](https://collegepulse.com).

## About FIRE

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education ([FIRE](https://thefire.org)) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to defending and sustaining the individual rights of students and faculty members at America's colleges and universities. These rights include freedom of speech, freedom of association, due process, legal equality, religious liberty, and sanctity of conscience—the essential qualities of liberty.

For more information, visit [thefire.org](https://thefire.org).

## About RealClearEducation

RealClearEducation is dedicated to providing readers with better, more insightful analysis of the most important news and education policy issues of the day. RealClearEducation is part of the RealClear Media Group, which includes RealClearPolitics and more than a dozen other news websites. RealClear's daily editorial curation, public opinion analysis, and original reporting present balanced, non-partisan news coverage that empowers readers to stay informed.

For more information, visit [RealClearEducation.com](https://RealClearEducation.com).

# Research

Each year, college students and professors gather in classrooms across America (and increasingly online) to examine the most pressing issues facing society, such as the state of race relations, or the freedoms of religion and association. Yet free and open discussion of these issues is not always possible and information on what the experience of being a student on a particular campus, and what it is like to engage (or not) on that campus in the free exchange of ideas, is scant.

The College Free Speech Rankings project provides the first-ever way to comprehensively assess and compare the culture of freedom of speech on college campuses in America. These rankings are available online, along with more information to compare colleges on an interactive dashboard ([speech.collegepulse.com](https://speech.collegepulse.com)), for prospective students and their parents to better understand the campus climate at colleges they are considering. Professors, administrators, staff, and current students can also use these rankings to better understand the student experience on their campus by exploring which topics are most uncomfortable for students to discuss openly, as well as which groups feel most ready to do so.

## Methodology

The College Free Speech Survey was developed by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, RealClearEducation, and College Pulse. The administration of the survey was conducted by College Pulse. No donors to the project took part in the design or conduct of the survey. The survey was fielded from April 1 to May 28, 2020. These data come from a sample of 19,969 undergraduates who were currently enrolled full-time in four-year degree programs in the United States. Fifty-five colleges and universities are represented in this sample. The margin of error for the U.S. undergraduate population is +/- 1 percentage point, and the margin of error for college student sub-demographics ranges from 2 to 5 percentage points.

The initial sample was drawn from *College Pulse's American College Student Panel™*, which includes more than 400,000 verified undergraduate students at more than 1,000 different two- and four-year colleges and universities in all 50 states. Panel members are recruited by a

number of methods to help ensure student diversity in the panel population, including web advertising, permission-based email campaigns, and partnerships with university-affiliated organizations. To ensure the panel reflects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the American college population, College Pulse recruits panelists from a wide variety of institutions. The panel includes students attending large public universities, small private colleges, online universities, historically Black colleges such as Howard University, and religiously-affiliated colleges such as Brigham Young University.

College Pulse uses a two-stage validation process to ensure that all its surveys include only students currently enrolled in two-year or four-year colleges or universities. Students are required to provide an .edu email address to join the panel and, for this survey, had to acknowledge that they were currently enrolled full-time in a four-year degree program. All invitations to complete surveys are sent using the student's .edu email address or through notification in the College Pulse app that is available on iOS and Android platforms.

College Pulse applies a post-stratification adjustment based on demographic distributions from multiple data sources, including the 2017 Current Population Survey (CPS), the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), and the 2017–18 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The post-stratification weight rebalances the sample based on a number of important benchmark attributes, such as race, gender, class year, voter registration status, and financial aid status. The sample weighting is accomplished using an iterative proportional fitting (IPF) process that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables. Weights are trimmed to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the final results.

The use of these weights in statistical analysis ensures that the demographic characteristics of the sample closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the target populations. Even with these adjustments, surveys may be subject to error or bias due to question wording, context, and order effects.

For further information on the survey methodology, please visit <https://collegepulse.com/methodology>.

# Free Speech Rankings

The overall college rankings are based on a composite score of five sub-components described in detail below: Openness, Tolerance, Administrative Support, Self-Expression, and FIRE's Speech Code Rating. To create an overall score for each college, called the Overall Score, the five sub-component scores were rescaled and added for a maximum possible score of 100 points. Higher scores indicate stronger environments on campus for free speech and expression. A college's Overall Score is the average score of the students surveyed at that college. Two additional overall scores for each college were computed: an overall average score among students who identify as Liberal, and one among students who identify as Conservative.

## Openness

To capture how willing students are to have difficult conversations on campus, the College Free Speech Survey asked, *"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?"* Options included Abortion, Affirmative action, Feminism, Gun control, Immigration, The Israeli/Palestinian conflict, Race, and Transgender issues. Student responses received one point for each topic the student *did not* consider difficult to have an open and honest conversation about on campus, so the maximum openness score was 8. This score was then rescaled to a maximum of 40 points of a college's overall score.

## Tolerance

The tolerance score is the sum of points for the responses to six questions:

"Would you support or oppose your school ALLOWING a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea:"<sup>1</sup>

- "Abortion should be completely illegal?"

---

<sup>1</sup> While eight questions were asked about whether a student would support or oppose different speakers on campus, only six items were included in this analysis. The six items included in the analysis reached an Eigenvalue greater than 1, suggesting that only six out of the eight survey questions contributed to a meaningful tolerance dimension. Tolerance items were included based on both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis.

- “Black Lives Matter is a hate group?”
- “Censoring the news media is necessary?”
- “Some racial groups are less intelligent than others?”
- “The U.S. should support Israeli military policy?”
- “Transgender people have a mental disorder?”

Response options were coded on a four-point scale: *Strongly support* = 4 points, *somewhat support* = 3 points, *somewhat oppose* = 2 points, and *strongly oppose* = 1 point. Each question was weighed equally, for a maximum tolerance score of 24. This score was then rescaled to a maximum of 40 points in a college’s overall score.

## Self-Expression

Students were asked whether they “*Personally ever felt you could not express your opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond?*” Student responses of “no” received three points, while “yes” received no points. This sub-component is 12 points of the overall score.

## Administrative Support for Free Speech

Student perceptions of their college administration’s attitudes toward free speech were determined via two questions. First, “*Does your college administration make it clear to students that free speech is protected on your campus?*” Second, “*If a controversy over offensive speech were to occur on your campus, would the administration be more likely to...*” Answer options for the second question included: *Punish the speaker for making the statement* or *Defend the speaker’s right to express their views*. A response indicating that the administration clearly supports free speech, or that it would more likely defend a speaker’s right to free speech during a controversy, received two points. The maximum for this sub-component was four points in the overall score.

## FIRE Speech Code Rating

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), an organization dedicated to promoting free and open inquiry on college campuses, rates the written policies governing

student speech at over 470 higher-education institutions in the United States. Four ratings are possible: Warning, Red, Yellow, or Green (actually “red light,” “yellow light,” and “green light”). A Warning rating is assigned to a private college or university when its policies clearly and consistently state that it prioritizes other values over a commitment to freedom of speech. Colleges with this rating received a score of -1. A rating of Red indicates that the institution has at least one policy that both clearly and substantially restricts freedom of speech. These colleges also received a score of -1. Colleges with Yellow ratings have policies that restrict a more limited amount of protected expression or, by virtue of their vague wording, could too easily be used to restrict protected expression. This rating received a score of 0. Finally, the policies of an institution with a Green rating do not seriously threaten speech, although this rating does not indicate that a college actively supports free expression. This rating received a score of 1. With a maximum of 1, this sub-component was then multiplied by 4 to constitute +/- 4 points in the overall score.

## Overall Score

To create an overall score for each college, called the Overall Score, the five components were added, for a maximum possible score of 100. The Overall Score for each college is the average score of the entire student body surveyed at that college, including the College Pulse weighting described above.<sup>2</sup> The average Overall Score score was 52.72, and the standard deviation was 3.17.

## Liberal and Conservative Scores

This report provides two additional scores for each college: a score for Liberal students (Liberal Score) and a score for Conservative students (Conservative Score).<sup>3</sup> A higher Liberal Score indicates that students who identify as Liberal at that college report a better climate for free speech and expression, while a higher Conservative Score conveys the same information

---

<sup>2</sup> Two sources of school-specific weights were applied. The first weights were calculated for each college, with respondents considered within the sample of only their school. That is, weighting targets were developed for each college individually. The second set of weights considered respondents within the overall sample. Weighting targets for the overall sample were calculated from a weighted average of the individual school targets, based on school enrollment.

<sup>3</sup> These scores were computed from unweighted data because of a dearth of generalizable data on the political ideology of undergraduate students. Self-identification used a seven point scale that ranged from “Extremely liberal” to “Extremely conservative” and on which students could choose “4” to identify as “Moderate.” A “Something else” option was also available.

about students who identify as Conservative at that college. The average Liberal Score was 49.79 with a standard deviation of 4.98, while the average Conservative Score was 53.14 with a standard deviation of 4.00.

## Variables

Variable name	Variable label	Value labels
school	School	1 = Dartmouth College 5 = Harvard University 6 = Yale University 7 = Brown University 8 = Princeton University 9 = Cornell University 10 = University of Pennsylvania 11 = Columbia University 15 = University of Chicago 18 = Duke University 20 = Northwestern University 25 = Stanford University 31 = University of Michigan 35 = Louisiana State University 36 = University of California, Berkeley 38 = Georgetown University

		<p>41 = Clemson University</p> <p>46 = University of South Carolina</p> <p>47 = University of California, Los Angeles</p> <p>49 = Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University</p> <p>54 = University of Oregon</p> <p>57 = Syracuse University</p> <p>60 = Wake Forest University</p> <p>68 = University of Georgia</p> <p>78 = University of North Carolina</p> <p>79 = University of Virginia</p> <p>91 = University of Texas at Austin</p> <p>92 = University of Colorado</p> <p>97 = Texas A&amp;M University</p> <p>104 = Ohio State University</p> <p>119 = University of Alabama</p> <p>124 = University of Arizona</p> <p>125 = University of California, Davis</p> <p>143 = Rutgers, the</p>
--	--	---



		<p>State University of New Jersey</p> <p>155 = Kansas State University</p> <p>162 = University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign</p> <p>171 = University of Oklahoma</p> <p>189 = University of Missouri</p> <p>215 = University of Utah</p> <p>216 = Indiana University</p> <p>220 = Brigham Young University</p> <p>234 = University of Texas at Dallas</p> <p>254 = University of Arkansas</p> <p>301 = Oklahoma State University</p> <p>391 = University of Illinois, Chicago</p> <p>397 = Arizona State University</p> <p>409 = University of Iowa</p> <p>414 = Washington State University</p> <p>419 = University of Wisconsin</p> <p>430 = Pennsylvania State University</p> <p>431 = University of Minnesota</p>
--	--	---

		501 = University of Tennessee 1336 = University of Nebraska 2192 = DePauw University 8715 = University of Washington
speechcode	FIRE rating	-1 = Warning/Red 0 = Yellow 1 = Green
weight	Weight for analysis of national data	N/A
schoolweight	Weight for school comparison	N/A
undergraduateenrollment	Undergraduate enrollment at college	N/A
state	State college is located in	N/A
publicorprivate	Public or private college	2 = Public 3 = Private, not-for-profit
gender	Gender	1 = Man 2 = Woman 3 = Something else <sup>4</sup>
race	Race	1 = Hispanic/Latino 2 = Black or African American 3 = American Indian 4 = Asian

---

<sup>4</sup> For the gender variable, “Something else” includes the following options: Transgender male, Transgender female, Genderqueer, and Other (write in).

		5 = Native Hawaiian 6 = Two or more races 7 = White 8 = Something else
year	Anticipated graduation year	5 = 2020 6 = 2021 7 = 2022 10 = Other 11 = 2023
orientation	Sexual orientation	1 = Gay/lesbian 2 = Heterosexual/ straight 3 = Bisexual 4 = Pansexual 5 = Queer 6 = Questioning 7 = Something else
politicalparty	Political party	1 = Strong Democrat 2 = Weak Democrat 3 = Independent, lean Democrat 4 = Independent 5 = Independent, lean Republican 6 = Weak Republican 7 = Strong Republican 8 = Something else
censusregion	Census region	1 = Northeast 2 = Midwest 3 = South 4 = West
ivyleague	Ivy League?	0 = No 1 = Yes

highschool	Type of high school	1 = Public 2 = Private 3 = Parochial 4 = Homeschool 5 = Something else
religion	Religion	1 = Protestant 2 = Catholic 3 = Mormon 4 = Orthodox Christian 5 = Jewish 6 = Muslim 7 = Buddhist 8 = Hindu 9 = Atheist 10 = Agnostic 11 = Nothing 12 = Christian 13 = Something else
socioeconomicstatus	Socioeconomic status	1 = Upper class 2 = Upper-middle class 3 = Middle class 4 = Working class 5 = Lower class
openness_abortion	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?: Abortion	0 = No 1 = Yes
openness_affirmativeaction	Some students say it can be	0 = No

	<p>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?: Affirmative action</p>	1 = Yes
openness_feminism	<p>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?: Feminism</p>	<p>0 = No 1 = Yes</p>
openness_guncontrol	<p>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?: Gun control</p>	<p>0 = No 1 = Yes</p>
openness_immigration	<p>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?: Immigration</p>	<p>0 = No 1 = Yes</p>

openness_israelpalestine	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?: The Israeli/Palestinian conflict	0 = No 1 = Yes
openness_race	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?: Race	0 = No 1 = Yes
openness_transgender	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?: Transgender issues	0 = No 1 = Yes
studentcomfort_professor	How comfortable would you feel doing the following on your campus: Publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial topic?	1 = Very comfortable 2 = Somewhat comfortable 3 = Somewhat uncomfortable 4 = Very uncomfortable

		5 = Write in
studentcomfort_socialmedia	How comfortable would you feel doing the following on your campus: Expressing an unpopular opinion on a social media account tied to your name?	1 = Very comfortable 2 = Somewhat comfortable 3 = Somewhat uncomfortable 4 = Very uncomfortable 5 = Write in
studentcomfort_classmates	How comfortable would you feel doing the following on your campus: Discussing a controversial political topic with your classmates?	1 = Very comfortable 2 = Somewhat comfortable 3 = Somewhat uncomfortable 4 = Very uncomfortable 5 = Write in
studentcomfort_oped	How comfortable would you feel doing the following on your campus: Writing an article or letter in the student newspaper that is critical of the college administration?	1 = Very comfortable 2 = Somewhat comfortable 3 = Somewhat uncomfortable 4 = Very uncomfortable 5 = Write in
studenttolerance_transgender	Would you support or oppose your school ALLOWING a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea: Transgender people have a mental disorder?	1 = Strongly support 2 = Somewhat support 3 = Somewhat oppose 4 = Strongly oppose 5 = Write in
studenttolerance_abortion	Would you support or oppose your school	1 = Strongly support 2 = Somewhat support

	ALLOWING a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea: Abortion should be completely illegal?	3 = Somewhat oppose 4 = Strongly oppose 5 = Write in
studenttolerance_israel	Would you support or oppose your school ALLOWING a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea: The U.S. should support Israeli military policy?	1 = Strongly support 2 = Somewhat support 3 = Somewhat oppose 4 = Strongly oppose 5 = Write in
studenttolerance_racialintelligence	Would you support or oppose your school ALLOWING a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea: Some racial groups are less intelligent than others?	1 = Strongly support 2 = Somewhat support 3 = Somewhat oppose 4 = Strongly oppose 5 = Write in
studenttolerance_christianity	Would you support or oppose your school ALLOWING a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea: Christianity has a negative influence on society?	1 = Strongly support 2 = Somewhat support 3 = Somewhat oppose 4 = Strongly oppose 5 = Write in
studenttolerance_censornews	Would you support or oppose your school ALLOWING a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea: Censoring the news media is necessary?	1 = Strongly support 2 = Somewhat support 3 = Somewhat oppose 4 = Strongly oppose 5 = Write in
studenttolerance_blm	Would you support or oppose your school ALLOWING a speaker on	1 = Strongly support 2 = Somewhat support 3 = Somewhat oppose



	campus who promotes the following idea: Black Lives Matter is a hate group?	4 = Strongly oppose 5 = Write in
studenttolerance_whitesracist	Would you support or oppose your school ALLOWING a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea: All white people are racist?	1 = Strongly support 2 = Somewhat support 3 = Somewhat oppose 4 = Strongly oppose 5 = Write in
studentprotest_removeflyers	How acceptable would you say it is for students to engage in the following action to protest a campus speaker: Removing flyers or other advertisements for an upcoming speaker or event on campus?	1 = Always acceptable 2 = Sometimes acceptable 3 = Rarely acceptable 4 = Never acceptable
studentprotest_blockentrance	How acceptable would you say it is for students to engage in the following action to protest a campus speaker: Blocking other students from entering a campus event?	1 = Always acceptable 2 = Sometimes acceptable 3 = Rarely acceptable 4 = Never acceptable
studentprotest_shoutdown	How acceptable would you say it is for students to engage in the following action to protest a campus speaker: Shouting down a speaker or trying to prevent them from speaking on campus?	1 = Always acceptable 2 = Sometimes acceptable 3 = Rarely acceptable 4 = Never acceptable
studentprotest_violence	How acceptable would you say it is for students to	1 = Always acceptable 2 = Sometimes

	engage in the following action to protest a campus speaker: Using violence to stop a speech or event on campus?	acceptable 3 = Rarely acceptable 4 = Never acceptable
studenttolerance_trump	Regardless of whether you agree with them, do you feel any of the following figures should be allowed on campus to share their views?: Donald Trump	0 = No 1 = Yes
studenttolerance_sanders	Regardless of whether you agree with them, do you feel any of the following figures should be allowed on campus to share their views?: Bernie Sanders	0 = No 1 = Yes
studenttolerance_biden	Regardless of whether you agree with them, do you feel any of the following figures should be allowed on campus to share their views?: Joe Biden	0 = No 1 = Yes
studenttolerance_limbaugh	Regardless of whether you agree with them, do you feel any of the following figures should be allowed on campus to share their views?: Talk radio host Rush Limbaugh	0 = No 1 = Yes
admin_protect	Does your college administration make it clear to students that free speech is protected on your	1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Write in

	campus?	
admin_offensivespeech	If a controversy over offensive speech were to occur on your campus, would the administration be more likely to...	1 = Defend the speaker's right to express their views 2 = Punish the speaker for making the statement 3 = Write in
politicalideology	Using a seven-point scale from extremely liberal–point 1–to extremely conservative–point 7–where would you place yourself on this scale?	1 = Extremely liberal 2 = Liberal 3 = Slightly liberal 4 = Moderate 5 = Slightly conservative 6 = Conservative 7 = Extremely conservative 8 = Something else (write in)
trumpapproval	Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as president?	1 = Approve 2 = Disapprove 3 = Write in
date_trumpsupporter	Even if you are not currently single or dating, how difficult would it be for you to date someone who supports Donald Trump?	1 = Impossible 2 = Very difficult 3 = Somewhat difficult 4 = Not too difficult 5 = Not at all difficult 6 = Write in
date_trumpopponent	Even if you are not currently single or dating, how difficult would it be for you to date someone who opposes Donald Trump?	1 = Impossible 2 = Very difficult 3 = Somewhat difficult 4 = Not too difficult 5 = Not at all difficult

		6 = Write in
selfexpression	Have you personally ever felt you could not express your opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond?	1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Write in