

More Than Half of College Students Self-Censor When Race and Other Tough Topics Come Up, Survey Finds

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John W. Tomac for The Chronicle

Race, abortion, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are among the most uncomfortable topics for college students to discuss, according to a report on a survey of nearly 20,000 full-time undergraduate students at 55 four-year colleges and universities. The [report](#), “2020 College Free Speech Rankings: What’s the Climate for Free Speech on America’s College Campuses?,” released on Tuesday, says that about six out of 10 students said they had censored themselves on these and other thorny issues out of fear of how others would react.

The survey was administered between April 1 and May 28 by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, College Pulse, and RealClearEducation. FIRE described the report, which was underwritten by the Charles Koch Institute, as the largest-ever free-speech survey of college students and the first ranking of free-speech climates at dozens of leading colleges.

The report highlighted how students of different political affiliations, genders, races, and religions viewed freedom of speech on their campuses. Among the findings:

- More than 80 percent of students say that violence is never acceptable to stop a speaker. Of the nearly one in five who say it can be acceptable in certain, usually extreme cases, liberal students, and those who attend Ivy League institutions, were more likely to hold that view.
- The free-speech climate is better, especially for conservative students, at large public universities. Ivy League institutions score worse.
- Nearly a third of students think President Trump should not be allowed to speak on campus, and one in five say the same for former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.
- Seventy percent of students agree that college administrators make it clear to students that free speech will be protected.

Based on the results of the survey, FIRE ranked colleges on a scale from 0 to 100 for their overall speech climates, as well as the experiences of conservative and liberal students.

The University of Chicago came out as the best place for free speech, but its score was only 63 out of 100. “Even the best college in this study receives a grade that wouldn’t pass a university course without a curve,” the report’s authors noted.

About 60 percent of students kept an opinion to themselves because they were afraid of how students, a professor, or an administrator would respond. For those who identified as “strong Republicans” the percentage was highest — at 75 percent — and for “strong Democrats,” it was 52 percent. Black students were most likely to report a time when they kept views to themselves.

Last year President Trump signed an executive order threatening to yank federal money from colleges that don’t protect free speech.

Conservative lawmakers in more than a dozen states have also helped pass laws intended to protect free speech on campuses. Critics argue that the First Amendment already protects speech and that, for the most part, students can express their views freely. They’ve described such government intervention as a cure in search of a problem.

The authors of the report insist the problems of speakers’ being shouted down and others’ being relegated to small “free-speech zones” are real. They say students and their parents need more guidance in picking colleges where they’ll feel comfortable. Professors, too, can learn which topics are most likely to cause students to clam up, the authors say.

“When it comes to free speech, you don’t always get what you pay for,” FIRE’s executive director, Robert Shibley, said in a news release accompanying the report. “Students and parents need to know whether their tuition dollars buy them an education or censorship, and administrators need to know how their policies affect student expression.”

ADVERTISEMENT

Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, student success, and job training, as well as free speech and other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter [@KatherineMangan](#), or email her at katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.

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