

Free Speech and Inclusion:

How College Students Are Navigating Shifting Speech Norms



Recent controversies and protests against conservative speakers have fueled a growing perception that college campuses suppress conservative views while favoring liberal ones. The result is a declining public trust in higher education, especially among Republicans. In response, a wave of proposed state legislation targets diversity efforts and programs that are associated with progressive culture. This contentious climate seems to pit free speech against inclusion. This report, stemming from a survey of 2,618 college students across the U.S., explores questions arising from this issue, including whether campus discourse norms skew liberal, how students across the political spectrum experience campus speech culture, and what values drive speech conflicts. The findings reveal that neither free expression nor inclusion is thriving, and the fight over which to prioritize is hindering both.

Students, particularly conservatives, are afraid to speak up out of fear of offending their peers

45%

of students, including 64% of very conservative students, are "somewhat" or "very often" "afraid to share their views out of fear of offending their peers" in the classroom. Statistics are nearly identical for sharing views on social media (49% overall).

Yet, many students are still regularly offended on campus

25%

of all college students, including 40% of liberal students, report being "somewhat" or "very often" offended by the perspectives shared by their peers. Liberal ideology, not race/gender, best predicts feeling offended. However, 29% of Black students report often feeling offended, the most of any major demographic group.



College classes are a place for students to feel uncomfortable and grapple with difficult concepts in the world. Students need the opportunity to correct one another and have hard and sometimes offensive conversations with one another.

—Natalie, a conservative and a senior at a private school on the West Coast

A couple of days ago we had a person come to campus to speak about how transgender is a terrible thing and those people should be erased from this world and I was completely heartbroken from this.

—Jenna, a moderate and junior at a small public university in the South



Students across the political spectrum endorse traditional academic values, providing a shared foundation for more open discourse and improved culture

94%

of students agree that “we should listen to others with an open mind, including those with whom we disagree.”

90%

of students believe that “no matter how different we are, we can understand each other’s experiences by listening and empathizing.”

Students show less agreement on social justice values

64%

of students agree that “students who are privileged should listen more than they speak.”

57%

of students believe that “people from marginalized groups understand American society better than people who are not from marginalized groups do.”

Students agreeing with the statements above are much more likely to feel offended, to engage in calling out or “canceling,” and to see “canceling” as appropriate accountability for causing harm.

Students were split on whether a speaker’s intentions are more important than the impact of their words

54%

of students answered in the slightly agree to slightly disagree range that “a speaker’s intentions are more important than the effect their words have on others.” Conservative students tend to emphasize the intent of the speaker, whereas liberals emphasize the impact of speech.

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[Cancel culture] is just a shift in general culture. Ideas that were once deemed as normal are simply now being confronted and questioned.

— Eduardo, a liberal and freshman at a public community college on the West Coast

I believe that our differences make the world a better place and learning new cultures in college has made me even more curious about the world.

—Paige, a moderate and junior at a small public university in the Northeast

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