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BEYOND THE HEADLINES

The Reality of Free Speech on College Campuses



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Table of Contents

2	Executive Summary
4	Detailed Findings
14	Implications
15	Methodology



Executive Summary

Issues related to free speech and expression have long been a source of tension on college campuses. National debates often break through into the dialogue on college campuses in some form. These include strikes for racial justice at San Francisco State University in the 1960s; Vietnam War protests at Kent State University that ended with four students being killed by Ohio National Guard troops; campus sit-ins during the Occupy Wall Street movement; walk-outs in response to school shootings; and more recently, clashes between pro-Israel and pro-Palestine factions in the wake of the Israel-Hamas war.

In recent years, college campus protests and questions of free speech have received increased public and legislative attention. Between 2021 and 2024, 34 state legislators introduced laws aimed at limiting or banning the teaching or discussion of so-called “divisive concepts” — particularly those related to race or gender — on college campuses.¹ Eleven states passed at least one such law. In response to campus protests tied to the Israel-Hamas war, members of the House of Representatives subpoenaed college presidents to testify about the state of free speech on their campuses, leading to high-profile resignations² from the presidents of Harvard University, Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania. The House also passed legislation restricting colleges’ ability to limit demonstrations on campuses.³ Across the broader American public, a [June 2024 survey](#) conducted by Lumina Foundation and Gallup found that among the roughly one in three U.S. adults who expressed “very little” or “no” confidence in higher education, the most-cited reason for their lack of confidence was a belief that campuses push political agendas.

Despite the intense focus on these incidents, they do not reflect the typical U.S. college student experience regarding free expression. The latest Lumina Foundation-Gallup survey interviewed more than 2,000 currently enrolled bachelor’s degree students and found that most say their campus does a good job of promoting free speech. They also feel free to express their opinions on campus, including views related to race, religion and politics. These feelings are consistent across political affiliations, as well as by race, gender or religiosity.

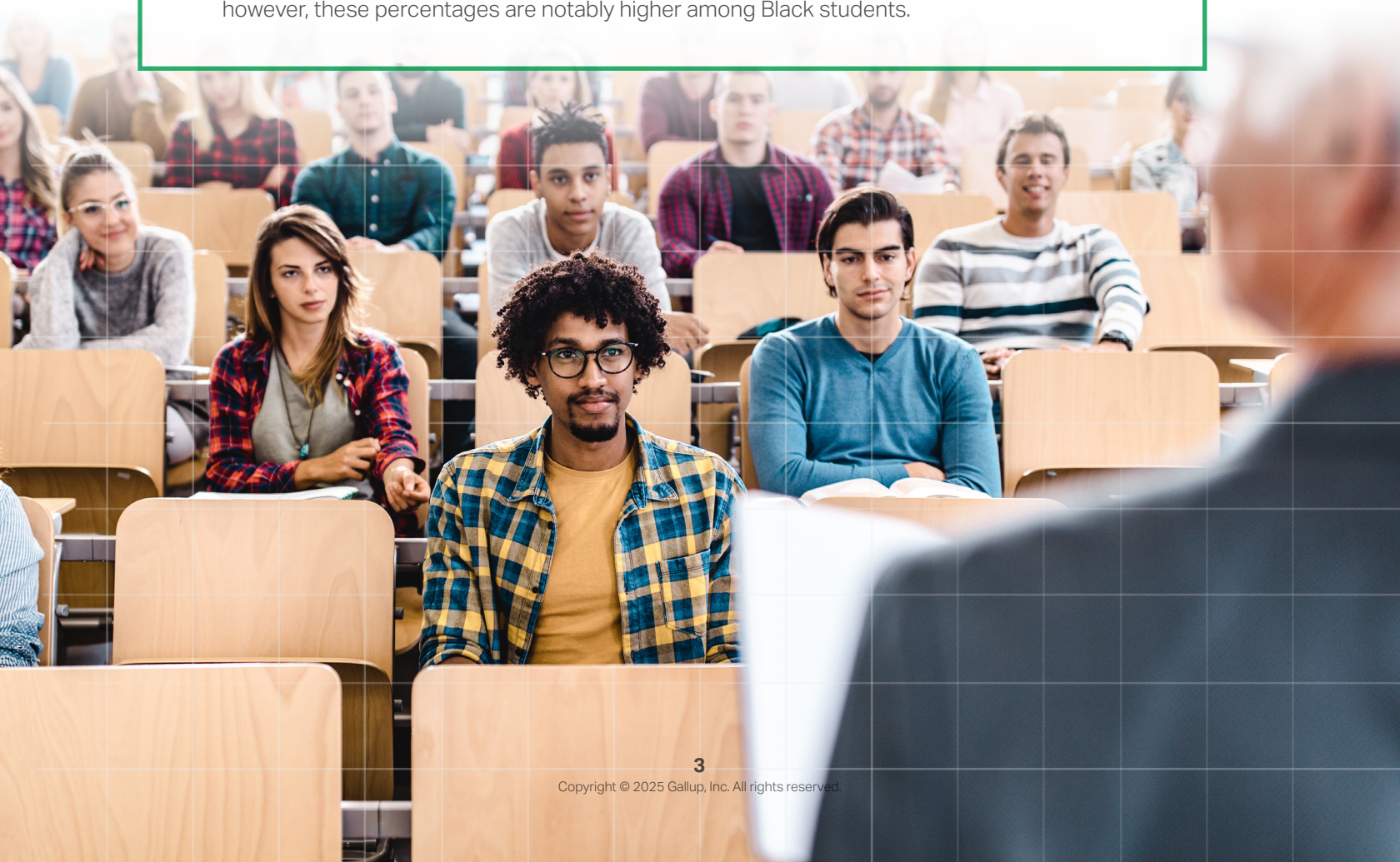
1 *Pen America Index of educational gag orders*. (n.d.). Airtable. Retrieved March 12, 2025, from <https://airtable.com/appg59iDuPhILPPFP/shrtwubfBUo2tuHyO/tblZ40w5HLBuTK9vs/viw5IFPxKHGkamF0k?blocks=hide>

2 A look at college presidents who have resigned under pressure over their handling of Gaza protests. (2024, August 15). *The Associated Press*. <https://apnews.com/article/college-president-resign-shafik-magill-gay-59fe4e1ea31c92f6f180a33a02b336e3>

3 Knott, K. (2024, September 20). *Colleges say GOP bill to protect free speech would do the opposite*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/politics-elections/2024/09/20/bill-end-woke-higher-education-clears-house>

Key takeaways from the survey of currently enrolled bachelor's degree students include:

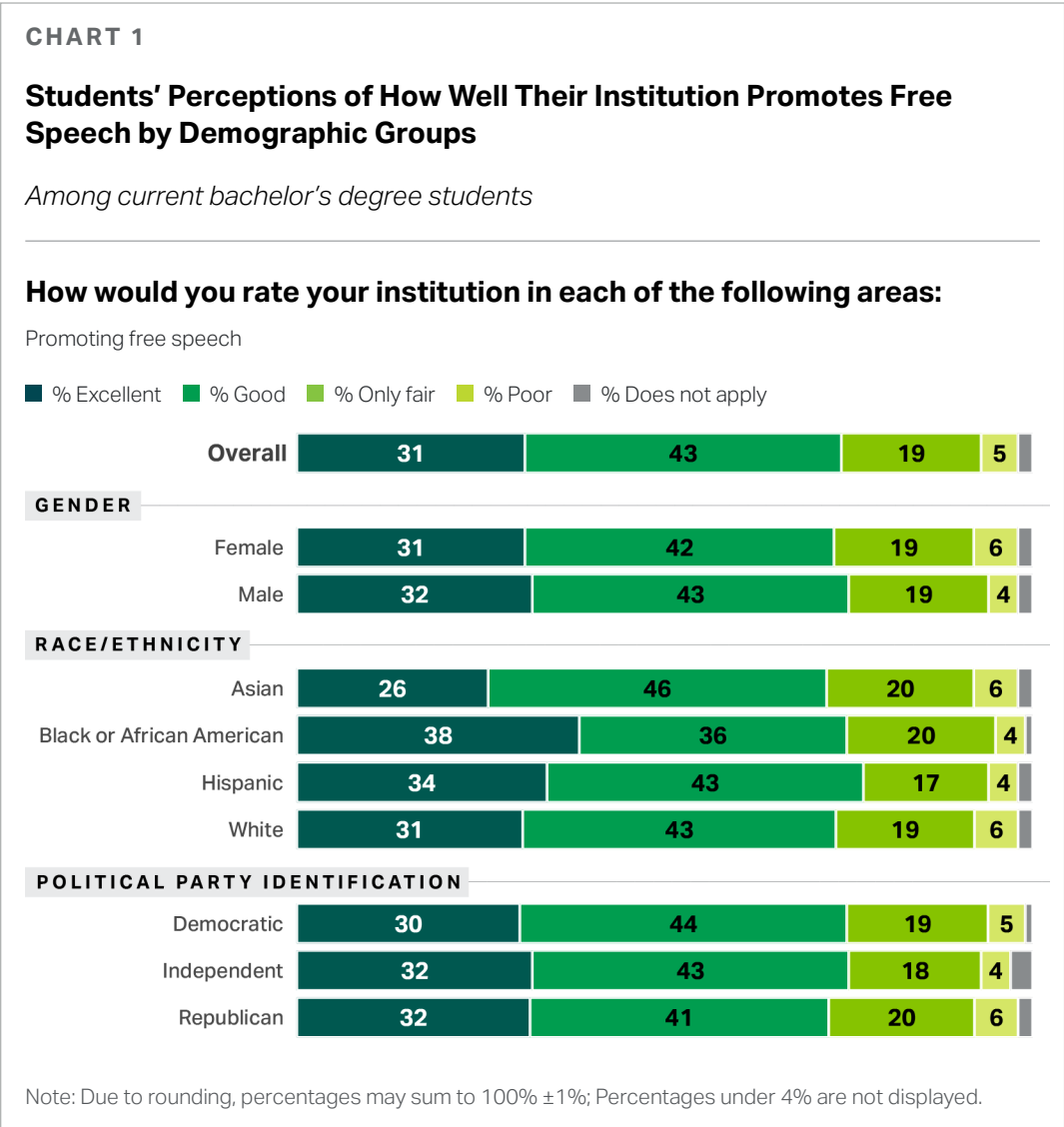
- 1 Three-quarters of students**, including 73% of Republicans and 75% of Democrats and independents, say their college does an “excellent” (31%) or “good” job (43%) of promoting free speech on campus. Five percent say their institution does a “poor” job.
- 2 At least six in 10** agree that students at their school can freely discuss issues related to race (66%), gender and sexual orientation (67%), and religion (62%) on campus. Fewer students believe opinions sympathetic to Israelis (50%) or Palestinians (57%) are welcome in discussions related to the conflict in Gaza.
- 3 Students are more likely to agree** that their school is a place where students can freely share liberal views (67%) than to believe the same of conservative views (53%); however, large majorities of Democratic (78%), independent (73%) and Republican students (69%) personally agree they can freely express themselves on campus.
- 4 More than two-thirds of students** of all genders, races and major political parties feel like they belong on campus, and at least three-quarters also agree that they are respected by faculty members.
- 5 Fewer than one in five students** say they occasionally or frequently feel disrespected on campus, and about one in 10 have been harassed or discriminated against at least occasionally; however, these percentages are notably higher among Black students.



Detailed Findings

Three-quarters of bachelor’s degree students say their school does a good job promoting free speech but are less satisfied with their institutions’ responses to protests on campus.

About three out of four currently enrolled bachelor’s degree students say their college or university does an “excellent” (31%) or “good” job (43%) of promoting free speech on campus. Just 5% of students rate their school as “poor” at promoting free speech, with most of the rest saying it is “only fair” (19%).



The percentage of students who say their school does an excellent or good job of promoting free speech is nearly identical across Republican (73%), Democratic (75%) and independent students (75%). This sentiment also does not vary significantly based on students' race or gender.

Students are more negative about their university's responses to protests and other disruptions on campus. Just over half of students say their university has done an excellent (18%) or good job (36%) responding to protests. Female students (49%) give their school particularly low marks in this area, while Black students (64%) rate their schools more positively than their peers. Democratic (51%) and Republican students (54%) rate their institutions' responses slightly more negatively than their independent peers (59%).

CHART 2

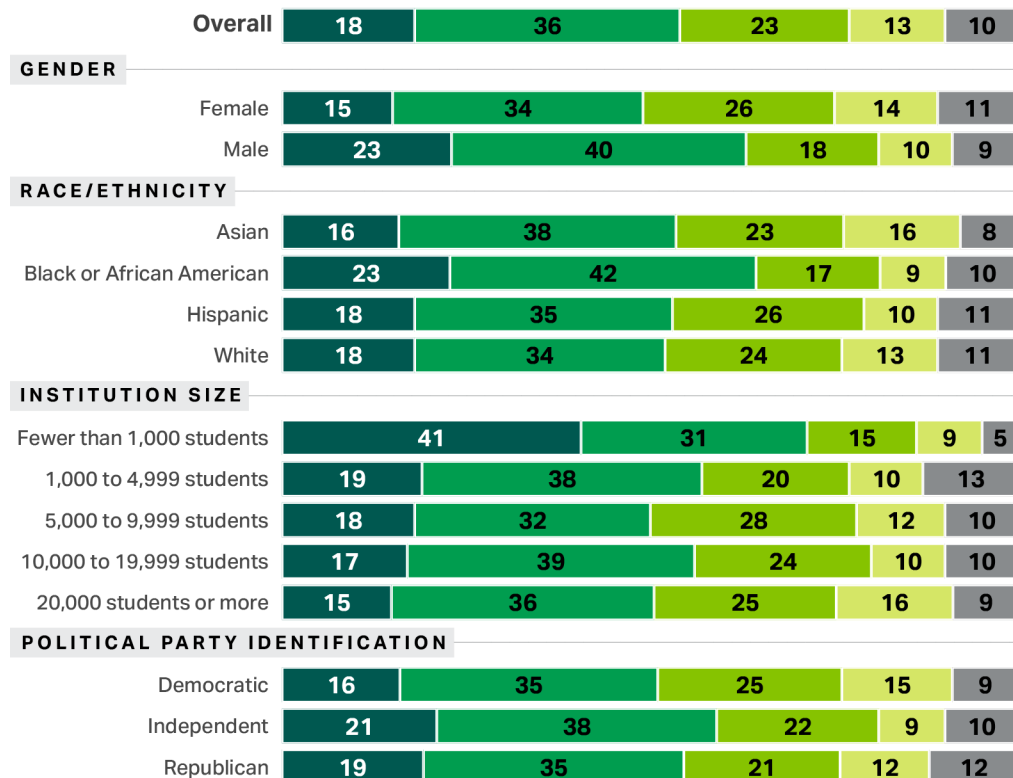
Students' Ratings of How Well Their Institution Responds to Campus Protests and Disruptions by Demographic Groups and Size of Institution

Among current bachelor's degree students

How would you rate your institution in each of the following areas:

Responding to protests and other disruptions on campus

■ % Excellent ■ % Good ■ % Only fair ■ % Poor ■ % Does not apply



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to 100% ±1%.

The students most satisfied with their school's response to disruptions on campus are those enrolled at the smallest universities, where enrollment is fewer than 1,000 students (71%).

Bachelor's degree students' views on which topics they can discuss vary little by gender, race or political party.

While students broadly believe their college facilitates free expression on campus, some topics and opinions evoke more hesitation than others. More than six in 10 students agree that their school is a place where they can express all opinions related to issues of race (66%), sexual orientation and gender identity (67%), and religion (62%). Regarding generic partisan opinions, students are somewhat more likely to believe their peers can freely share liberal viewpoints (67%) than conservative ones (53%), though most students think their campus is a place where opinions from both ends of the political spectrum are welcome.

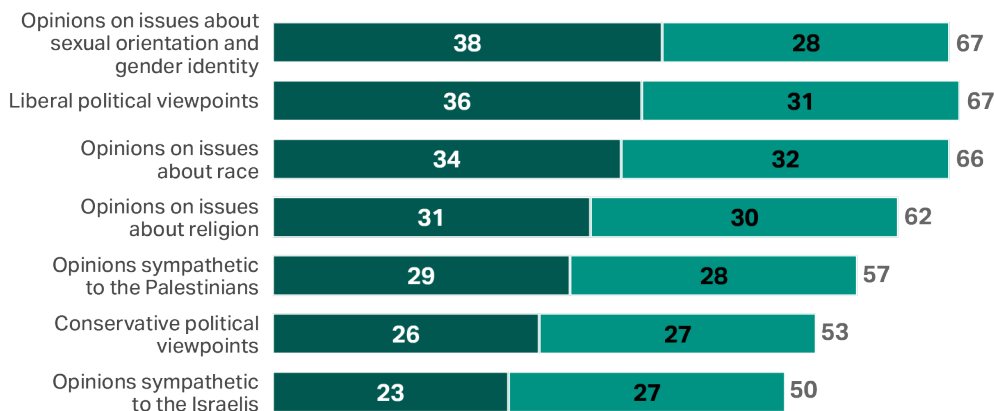
CHART 3

Students' Views About Free Expression on Their Campus by Topic

Among current bachelor's degree students

[Institution] is a place where students can freely express:

■ % Strongly agree ■ % Agree



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ± 1 percentage point.

Opinions related to the Israel-Hamas war are among the least tolerated topics on campuses. By a narrow margin, students are more likely to agree that their peers can express viewpoints that are sympathetic to Palestinians than those sympathetic to Israelis (57% to 50%), though both sets of opinions are viewed as less palatable on campus than general debates about race and religion. This may partly be the result of students' proximity to demonstrations regarding the conflict in Gaza that recently disrupted many college campuses. Due to sample size constraints, no conclusions can be drawn as to whether Jewish and Muslim students report meaningfully different perceptions of these issues on campus compared to their peers.

While some may expect students to feel their own views are more restricted than their peers', the data do not support that theory. Regardless of their race, religiosity or political affiliation, students are generally aligned regarding which views or topics they can discuss on campus. In several cases, students who may identify most strongly with a particular topic — such as religious students' experiences discussing religion on campus or Democratic and Republican students' views on liberal and conservative opinions — are the most likely to believe those topics can be discussed freely on campus.

Republican students are about as likely as Democrats to say conservative views are welcome on campus (53% to 51%), while Democratic students are slightly more likely than Republicans to believe liberal views are welcome (70% to 64%). That is to say, students who identify with a political party are just as, if not more, likely than their peers to believe their own views are accepted on campus. The data also show that Republican students report a smaller gap in how freely conservative and liberal viewpoints can be discussed compared to Democrats, who believe there is a larger discrepancy. Still, to varying extents, students of all party affiliations believe liberal viewpoints are more welcome on campus than conservative ones.

CHART 4

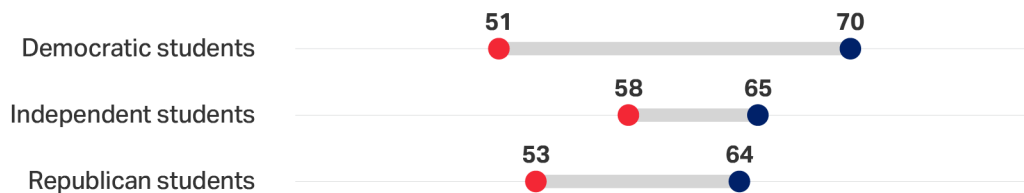
Opinions About the Ability to Freely Express Political Viewpoints on Campus by Political Party Identification

Among current bachelor's degree students

[Institution] is a place where students can freely express:

% Strongly agree + Agree

● Conservative political viewpoints ● Liberal political viewpoints



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ± 1 percentage point.

The students most likely to believe religious issues can be discussed freely on campus are religiously affiliated and regularly attend services (66%). Additionally, perceptions of race-related debates are similar across students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds: Asian (68%) and White students (67%) are only marginally more likely than Black (64%) and Hispanic students (62%) to feel like their school is a place where students can freely discuss issues about race.

CHART 5

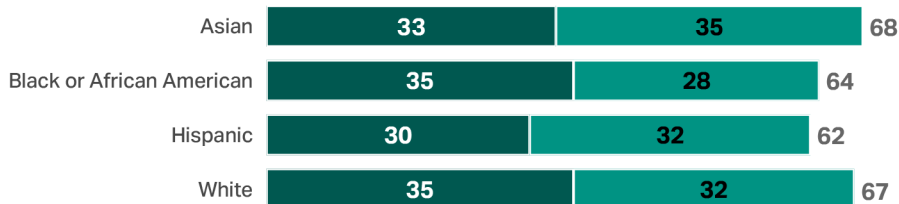
Students' Views About Free Expression on Their Campus by Race, Religiosity and Political Party Identification

Among current bachelor's degree students

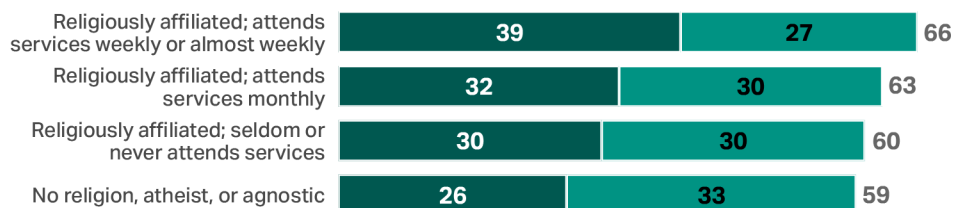
[Institution] is a place where students can freely express:

■ % Strongly agree ■ % Agree

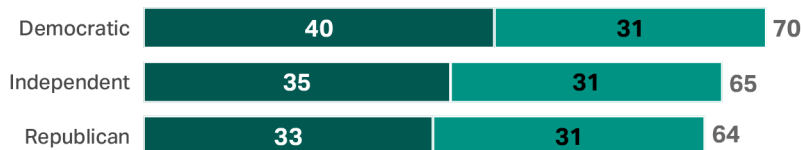
OPINIONS ON ISSUES ABOUT RACE



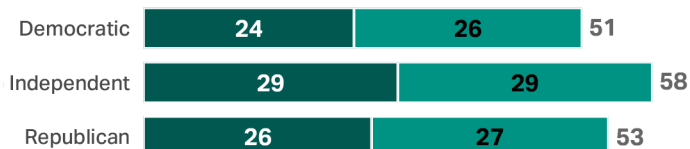
OPINIONS ON ISSUES ABOUT RELIGION



LIBERAL POLITICAL VIEWPOINTS



CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL VIEWPOINTS



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ± 1 percentage point.

Regardless of race, gender or political affiliation, more than two-thirds of bachelor's degree students agree they can freely express themselves on campus.

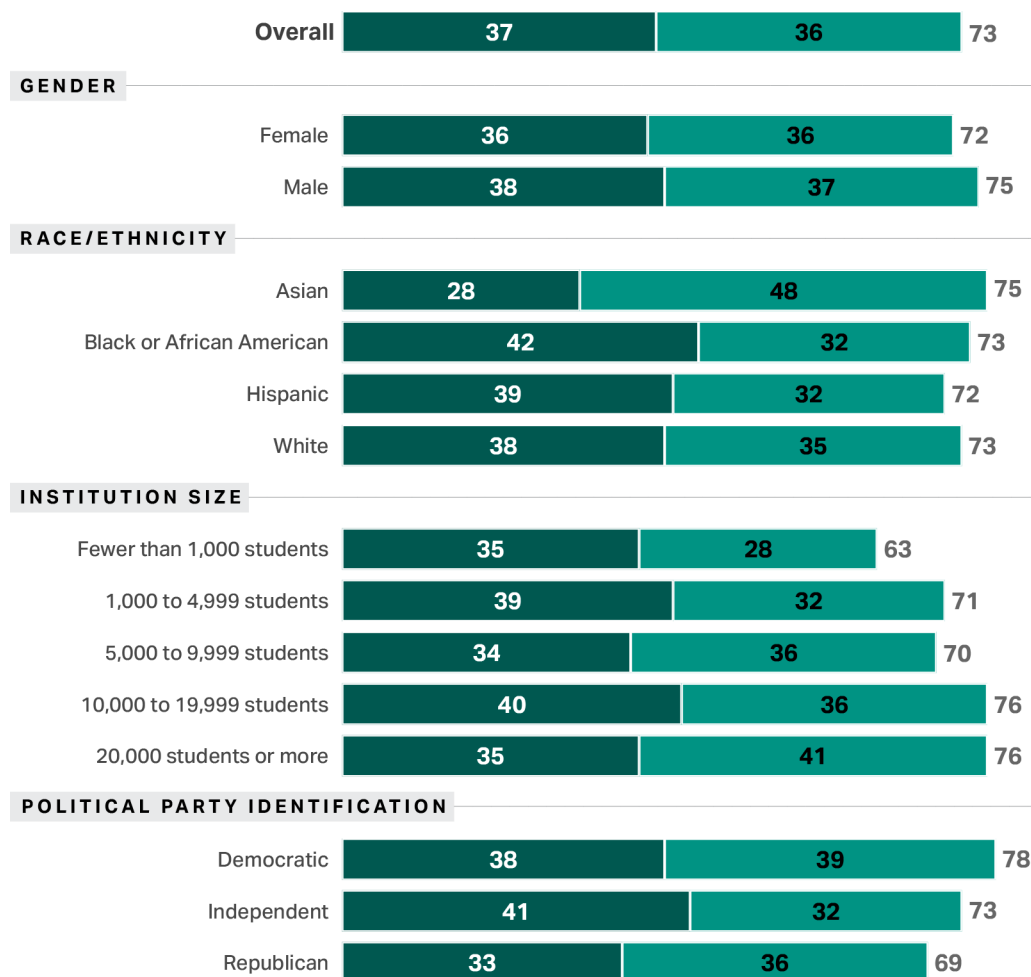
Despite reservations about whether specific topics can be discussed, between 69% and 78% of students of all races, genders and political parties say they can freely express their opinions on campus. Moreover, the belief that the speech of certain groups — especially those who hold conservative views — is being suppressed is more prevalent than those students' actual negative experiences with free speech.

For example, about half of all bachelor's degree students (53%) agree that conservative views can be freely discussed on their campus. Yet, a notably higher percentage of Republican students (69%) say they personally feel free to express their opinions. Similarly, while 67% of all students believe liberal views can be freely expressed on campus, a slightly higher 78% of Democratic students agree they can share their opinions freely.



CHART 6**Opinions About Freedom of Expression on Campus by Demographic Groups and Size of Institution***Among current bachelor's degree students***At [Institution], I can express my opinions freely.**

■ % Strongly agree ■ % Agree

Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ± 1 percentage point.

That said, Republican students are still somewhat less likely than Democrats and independent students to agree that they can express their views freely on campus.

Students at larger schools are more likely to report that they can express their views freely. More than three-quarters of students (76%) at schools with an enrollment of 10,000 or more agree they can express themselves freely on campus; meanwhile, 63% of students at schools that enroll fewer than 1,000 students say the same. Students across gender and racial subgroups are about equally likely to feel free to express themselves on campus.

More than two-thirds of bachelor's degree students across gender, race and major political parties feel they belong and are respected on campus.

Three-quarters of students agree they are treated with respect by their fellow students, and an even higher percentage (82%) agree they feel respected by their faculty members.

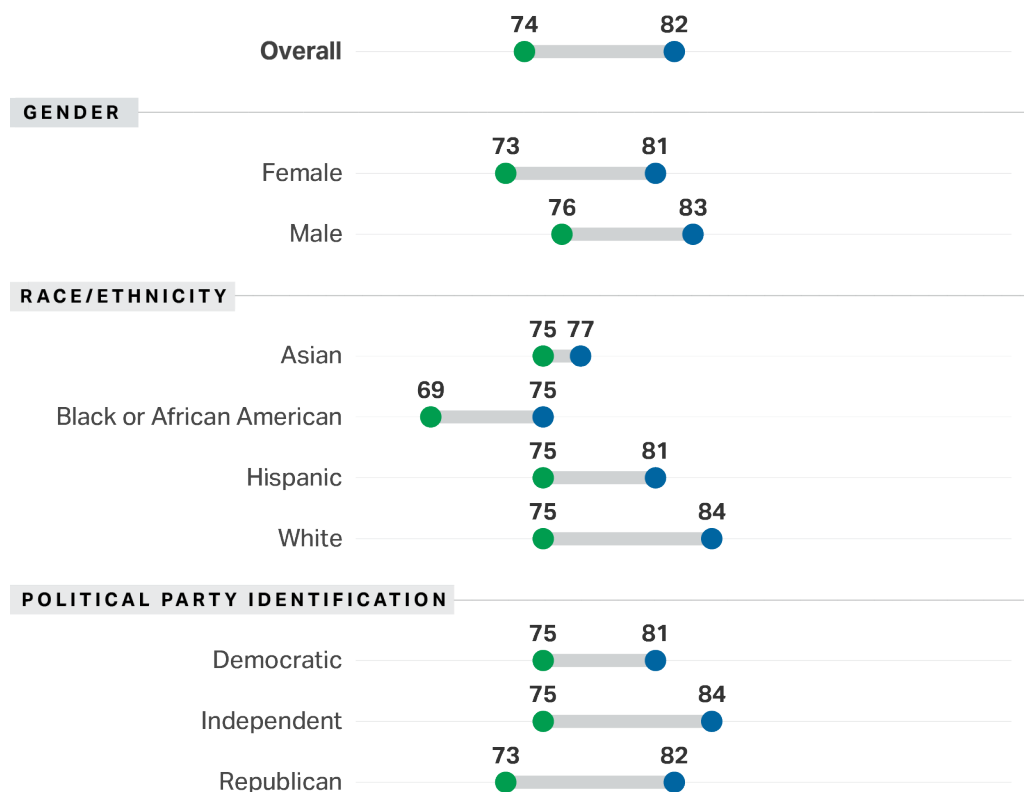
CHART 7

Students' Feelings of Respect on Campus by Demographic Groups

Among current bachelor's degree students

% Strongly agree + Agree

- You are treated with respect **by other students** at [Institution].
- You are treated with respect **by faculty members** at [Institution].



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ±1 percentage point.

As with free speech, the degree to which students feel respected does not vary greatly by demographics: At least 69% of students of all genders, races and political parties feel respected by other students, and at least 75% feel respected by their faculty. Black students are somewhat less likely than their peers to feel respected by other students (69%) and faculty members (75%), while Asian students are also less likely than average to feel respected by faculty (77%).

Relatedly, seven in 10 students not only feel respected but also feel like they belong in their campus community. However, as with respect, there are a few notable gaps in the extent to which students express this sense of belonging. Female students are slightly less likely than males to feel like they belong (67%, compared to 73%), and politically independent students (75%) are at least six points more likely to agree than Democratic (68%) or Republican students (69%).

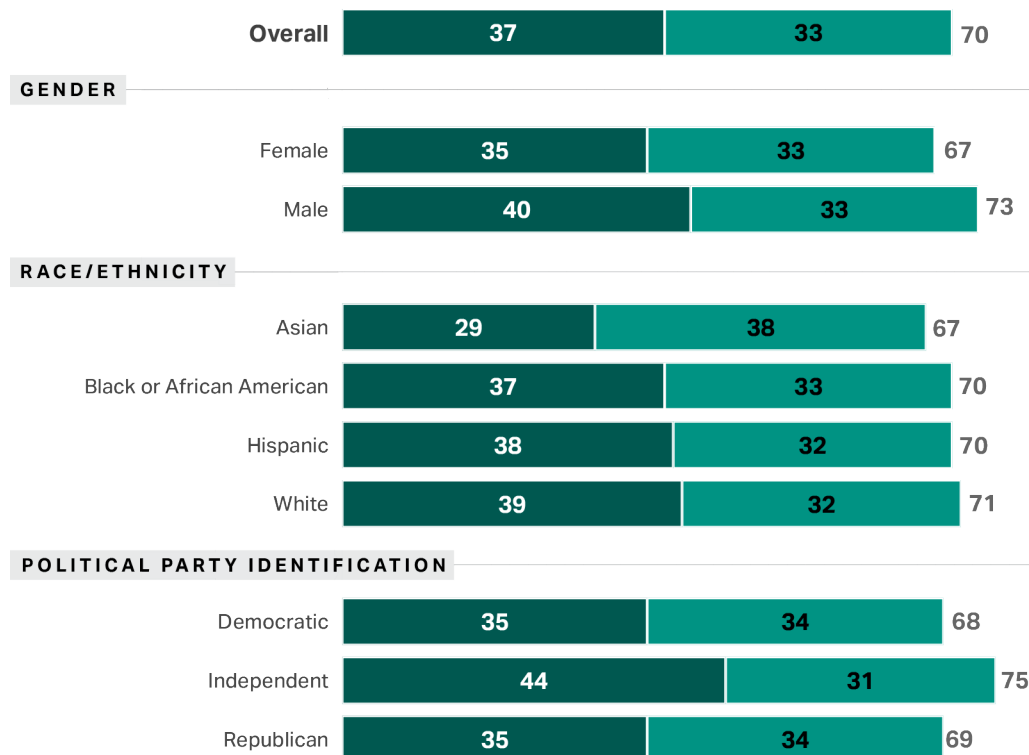
CHART 8

Students' Feelings of Belonging at their Institution by Demographic Groups

Among current bachelor's degree students

You feel like you belong at [Institution].

■ % Strongly agree ■ % Agree



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ± 1 percentage point.

Still, this general feeling of respect and belonging is occasionally pierced by negative incidents. Just under one in five students (17%) say they have “occasionally” or “frequently” experienced disrespect on campus, and about one in 10 say they have at least occasionally experienced harassment (10%) or discrimination (12%). While there are few differences in the frequency of these experiences based on gender or political party affiliation, Black students are especially likely to say they have occasionally or frequently been harassed (18%) or discriminated against (24%).

CHART 9

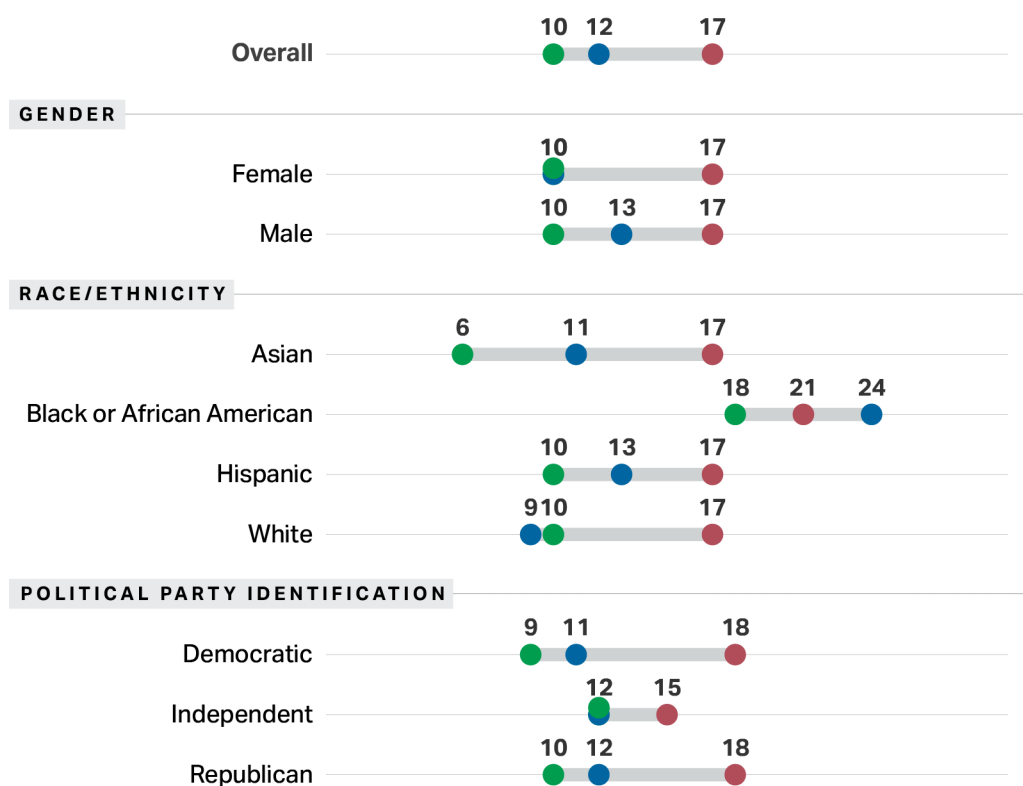
Reports of Feeling Disrespected, Harassed or Discriminated Against on Campus by Demographic Groups

Among current bachelor's degree students

How often, if ever, do you feel any of the following at [Institution].

% Frequently + % Occasionally

● Harassed ● Discriminated against ● Disrespected



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ±1 percentage point.

Implications

Current bachelor's degree students generally say they can express their opinions freely at college, even as the news media and political leaders have drawn attention to incidents that call schools' commitment to free expression into question. While notable segments of students express some reservations about whether certain topics can be discussed openly on campus, just 5% of students rate their school poorly in promoting an environment of free expression, and fewer than one in 10 students of any political party say they cannot express themselves freely on campus, are not treated with respect or are made to feel like they do not belong at their university.

Of particular note is the juxtaposition of responses to items focused on individual students and responses to more generalized, speculative items about the overall student population. While 53% of students believe their school is a place where conservative views can be shared, 69% of Republican students themselves say that they are free to share their views on campus — a percentage not starkly different from their Democratic and independent peers. This finding may suggest that national perceptions and isolated incidents influence students' perceptions of their own campuses' speech environments in ways that do not reflect the actual experience of even a significant minority of students.

While these data should not diminish or discount the negative experiences some students have endured after expressing a minority or unorthodox opinion, it may indicate that these real incidents have had an outsized influence on national perceptions of free speech on college campuses. Moreover, while some students are not comfortable sharing their views on potentially controversial topics, this may not be a function of whether their school adequately promotes dialogue on campus. Even if a university could create a perfect free speech environment, there would likely still be students who would not feel comfortable talking about politics, religion or similar topics with relative strangers — particularly in a political environment that has caused **more than half of Americans to avoid sharing their political views** for fear of being harassed or mistreated.

Universities should certainly remain cognizant of campus-specific and national factors that may dissuade students from sharing their opinions on campus. However, direct feedback from students suggests that no particular group is disproportionately likely to feel that way.

Methodology

Results for the Lumina-Gallup Study are based on web surveys conducted from Oct. 2-31, 2024, with samples of 6,000 students who are currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program (certificate, associate or bachelor's degree), 4,931 adults who were previously enrolled in a postsecondary education program but had not completed an associate or bachelor's degree, and 3,002 adults who had never enrolled in a postsecondary education program. This includes 2,327 adults who say they are currently pursuing a bachelor's degree, which serves as the base for all results included in this report.

All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 59 and had a high school diploma or equivalent but not an associate or bachelor's degree. Respondents were interviewed via Dynata's non-probability web-based panel.

The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region for the population of U.S. adults aged 18 to 59 with a high school diploma but without a college degree. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent American Community Survey figures.



GALLUP®

World Headquarters

The Gallup Building
901 F Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

t +1.877.242.5587

f +1.888.500.8282

www.gallup.com