

Despite Public Debate, Seven in 10 Students Say They Feel Free to Speak Their Minds on Campus

Lumina Foundation-Gallup study finds most bachelor's students rate their school positively on promoting free speech

WASHINGTON, D.C. — April 8, 2025 — Seventy-three percent of currently enrolled bachelor's degree students say they can freely express their opinions on campus, with most also agreeing they can freely discuss issues related to race (66%), gender and sexual orientation (67%), and religion (62%), according to new research from Lumina Foundation and Gallup. The majority of these students also say their college or university does an “excellent” (31%) or “good” job (43%) of promoting free speech on campus.

Most Bachelor's Degree Students Say Free Speech Is Promoted and Accepted on Campus

Only 5% of current bachelor's degree students rate their school as “poor” at promoting free speech, and ratings are consistent across race, gender and political affiliation. Seventy-three percent of Republican students and 75% of both Democratic and independent students rate their institution positively in this area.

When asked to consider political viewpoints, Republican students are about as likely as Democrats to say conservative views are welcome on their campus (53% to 51%), while Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe liberal views are welcome (70% to 64%). However, when asked if they can freely express their own opinions on campus, large majorities of Democratic (78%), independent (73%) and Republican students (69%) all agree that they can.

“At a time when public discourse often questions whether free speech is still alive on college campuses, students are telling us a more hopeful story. Most say they feel free to speak up, share their views and engage in respectful conversations — even on complex and controversial topics,” said Courtney Brown, Lumina's vice president of impact and planning. “It's a powerful reminder that, despite the national narrative of polarization, many campuses are doing what higher education is meant to do: foster open dialogue, encourage learning and create a sense of belonging.”

Discussion of Controversial Topics, Handling of Protests Perceived Less Favorably

Views on the Israel-Hamas war are seen as less welcome on campus than general discussions about race and religion. Half (50%) of current bachelor's degree students say pro-Israel perspectives can be freely expressed, while 57% say the same about pro-Palestinian viewpoints.

Students are less positive when evaluating their school's response to protests or other disruptions, with just over half of bachelor's degree students reporting their university has done an “excellent” (18%) or “good” job (36%) responding to protests.

Belonging and Respect Remain Strong Across Groups

The majority of students pursuing their bachelor's degree (70%) say they feel they belong at their institution, and 82% say faculty members respect them. Students' perceptions of respect and belonging do not vary greatly by demographics, though Black students are slightly less likely than their peers to say they feel respected by other students (69%) and faculty members (75%), and female students are slightly less likely than males to feel like they belong (67% vs. 73%). Black students are more likely to say they have occasionally or frequently been harassed (18%) or discriminated against (24%) at their institution.

"Students continue to see their colleges as places where they can express themselves and feel respected," said Stephanie Marken, senior partner for U.S. research at Gallup. "While public debate around free speech on campus often focuses on moments of conflict, the student perspective adds important nuance — and underscores the value of hearing directly from those living the student experience every day."

Methodology

The *Beyond the Headlines: The Reality of Free Speech on College Campuses* report is based on web surveys conducted from October 2-31, 2024. The sample includes **6,000 currently enrolled students, 4,931 previously enrolled adults and 3,002 never-enrolled adults. 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.** Respondents were aged 18-59, held a high school diploma and had not completed an associate or bachelor's degree. The data were weighted to match U.S. demographics.

About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision higher learning that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's talent needs through a broad range of credentials. We work toward a system that prepares people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy.

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students, and citizens than any other organization in the world.