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More in Common

Free Speech and Inclusion:

How College Students Are Navigating Shifting Speech Norms

Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI)

Founded in 2017, CDI is a non-profit organization dedicated to equipping the next generation of Americans with the mindset and skill set to engage in dialogue across differences. At CDI, we seek to help teachers, faculty, and administrators build learning environments that enable students to feel comfortable engaging with challenging topics so that real learning can occur. To accomplish this goal, we translate the latest behavioral science research into educational resources and teaching strategies that are evidence-based, practical, and scalable.

More in Common (MIC)

More in Common is an international initiative aimed at building societies and communities that are stronger, more united and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media and government in order to connect people across lines of division.

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Foreword

On March 9th, 2023, Stuart Kyle Duncan, a federal judge with a record of opposing expansion of LGBTQ+ rights, spoke to a roomful of Stanford Law students at the invitation of the student chapter of the Federalist Society.

The small lecture hall where he was speaking was standing room only, as protesters lined the walls and heckled from the doorway. Duncan tried to make himself heard over the commotion but was unsuccessful. He then appealed to an administrator to take control of the situation. To a quieted room, the administrator read from prepared remarks, starting by addressing Duncan directly: "This event is tearing at the fabric of this community that I care about... For many people here, your work has caused harm."

A video recording of the entire episode went viral, amassing millions of views and bringing the story into the news headlines.

Events such as these are used as evidence of the "rise of an intolerant and radical left"[1] on college campuses. A *Newsweek* op-ed asserted that free speech on college campuses is in a "death spiral."[2] Similarly, a *New York Times* piece described professors "teaching on tenterhooks" in a "volatile climate."[3]

Surveys of the American public suggest that these controversies have spurred declines in public trust in higher education over the past decade. The most recent Gallup poll conducted in 2023 found Americans' confidence in higher education at 36%, a dramatic decline from 57% eight years prior.[4]

This shift in perception is characterized by a widening ideological gap. Democrats and Republicans once shared positive views of higher education, regarding colleges as key providers of opportunity and essential components of democracy. According to recent Pew Research Center polling, however, 64% of Republicans now believe that colleges have a negative impact on the country, while 76% of Democrats believe they have a positive impact.[5] Among the top reasons for the negative perception among Republicans is the predominant belief that colleges and universities are politicized and favor liberal views.[6,7]

Historically, colleges were regarded as institutions of truth, avenues of opportunity, and catalysts for progress. **Yet, to effectively play these roles in society, higher education must not only be unbiased but also be perceived as such by the general public.** Most universities were founded on the principle of open inquiry, where testing ideas and engaging in diverse views lead to societal knowledge and progress. If some questions, methods, or conclusions are deemed "off limits" due to ideological constraints, the very process of knowledge production is compromised.

Similarly, higher education aims to prepare future citizens and leaders who actively engage with diverse communities living in an ever-changing knowledge landscape. If students fear being ostracized for expressing unpopular opinions, they cannot fully participate in this collective endeavor. Such gaps in mutual understanding will yield graduates who struggle to interact with the diverse perspectives in their wider communities. This will, in turn, hinder social cohesion and weaken the dialogue that is foundational to democracy.

In recent years, state legislatures have increasingly tried to address higher education's lack of ideological diversity with policy interventions, but these may create *different* problems. As of this writing, 40 bills in 22 states have been proposed to restrict diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts at state colleges and universities. Such bills ban the use of diversity statements and defund DEI offices.[8] A recent poll by Gallup found that the majority of students (74%) say the presence of DEI bans would deter them from enrolling—or re-enrolling—at impacted colleges.[9] This finding is even more alarming in light of the anticipated "enrollment cliff" between 2025 and 2030 that will result from a shrinking population of 18 to 24-year-olds.[10]

Restoring public faith in higher education has thus become an urgent task. This report brings data to inform the public conversation about free expression on college campuses. With a nationally representative sample of 2,618 college students, we aim to assess whether norms of discourse are skewed toward liberal values. We explore how students across the political spectrum experience the dialogue culture on their campus. Finally, we identify the core values that drive conflict surrounding speech.

The findings in this report indicate that many students do feel afraid to share their opinions because they worry about judgment from their peers. Conservative students, in particular, feel they must tread lightly. Yet, the findings also show that liberal students grapple with a different challenge, one of feeling hurt, offended, and marginalized. **The picture that emerges is one where neither freedom of expression nor inclusion is thriving on college campuses, and the fight over which to prioritize is paradoxically hindering both.**

But the picture is also hopeful. Regardless of their political affiliation, students value dialogue and reject moralistic ideas about power and privilege. To be sure, there are true disagreements—about the centrality of marginalized identity and the role of marginalized groups in social change. College students are not the only ones conflicted about these issues: this is one of the most divisive topics of our time. But therein lies the opportunity. Higher education can lead the way, as it often has, in shaping a national conversation that is open, self-critical, and constructive. The responsibility and the power to inform our societal direction at this pivotal moment belongs to every member of the academic community—higher education leaders, faculty, and most critically, our students.
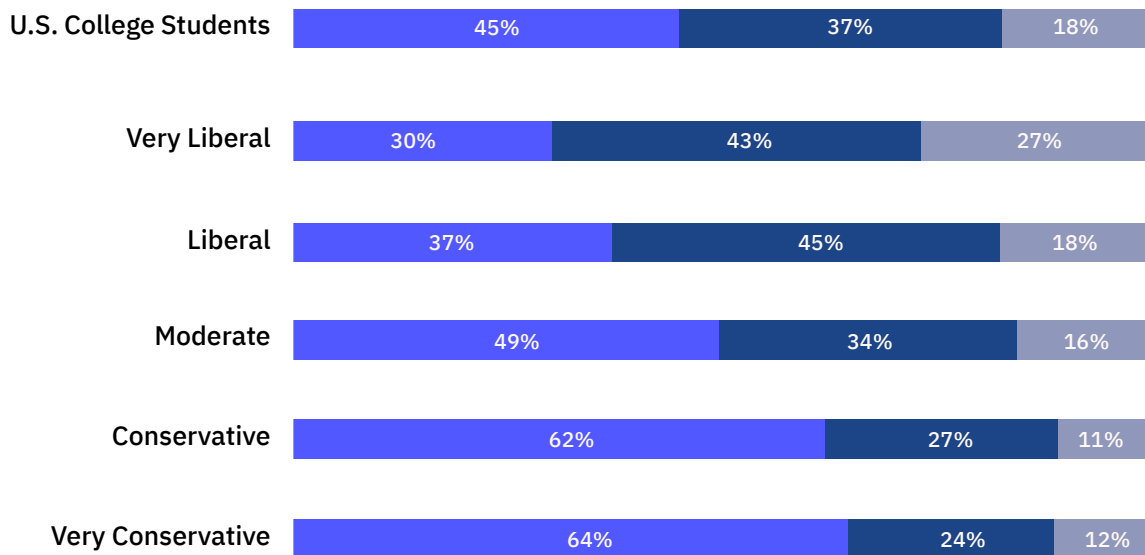
Executive
Summary

In this survey of 2,618 college students recruited from across the United States, we evaluate the common assertion that freedom of expression has eroded on college campuses and assess the evidence supporting popular explanations for this erosion. Here, we summarize our findings.

1 **Almost half of college students are afraid to share their opinions in the classroom out of fear of offending their peers.**

The chilling effect is felt particularly by conservative students: 64% of very conservative students say that concerns about offending peers make them hold back their opinions, compared to 30% of very liberal students.

Very conservative students are twice as likely as very liberal students to be afraid of expressing their opinion in the classroom

■ Somewhat or Very Often
■ Not Very Often
■ Never

	Somewhat or Very Often	Not Very Often	Never
U.S. College Students	45%	37%	18%
Very Liberal	30%	43%	27%
Liberal	37%	45%	18%
Moderate	49%	34%	16%
Conservative	62%	27%	11%
Very Conservative	64%	24%	12%

Question: How often, if ever, have you been afraid to share your opinion for fear of offending peers or classmates when in the classroom?

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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2 **More than one in five students (22%) say they have called out, punished, or "canceled" someone or a group for inappropriate behavior.**

Additionally, 38% were aware of at least one such incident occurring, which suggests that students' reluctance to speak up is a response to genuine social risks.

Students are split on whether "cancel culture" is intimidation or accountability, and strong views were expressed across the political spectrum. Still, the majority of college students support this type of public censure. Among those aware of an incident where someone was called out, 59% felt that the censure was justified (36%) or even too lenient (23%).

45%
of college students are afraid to express their opinions, out of fear of offending their peers

22%
of college students have actively called out, punished, or "canceled" someone or a group

25%
of college students are regularly offended by the perspectives shared by classmates

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

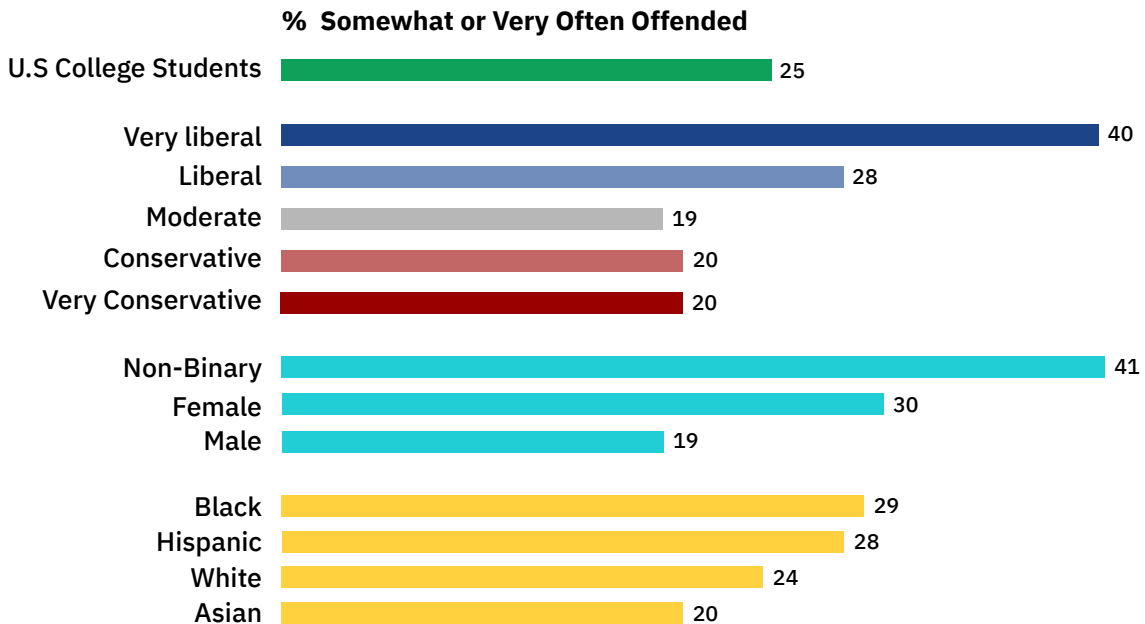Constructive Dialogue Institute

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3 **Despite efforts to eliminate harmful speech, students often feel offended by the perspectives of their peers.**

A quarter (25%) of college students are "somewhat" or "very often" offended by the perspectives shared by their peers or classmates, even in monitored settings such as the classroom. This includes:

- 40% of very liberal students,
- 41% of non-binary students, and
- 29% of Black students.

The subgroups most frequently offended are also inclined to call out, punish, or "cancel" someone and are most likely to consider such censure justified. Thus, when students feel hurt, offended, and marginalized, they leverage social pressure to regulate their peers' speech.

Students who are offended are disproportionately liberal, non-binary, and Black

% Somewhat or Very Often Offended

Group	%
U.S College Students	25
Very liberal	40
Liberal	28
Moderate	19
Conservative	20
Very Conservative	20
Non-Binary	41
Female	30
Male	19
Black	29
Hispanic	28
White	24
Asian	20

Question: How often, if ever, have you personally been offended by perspectives shared by peers or classmates when in the classroom?

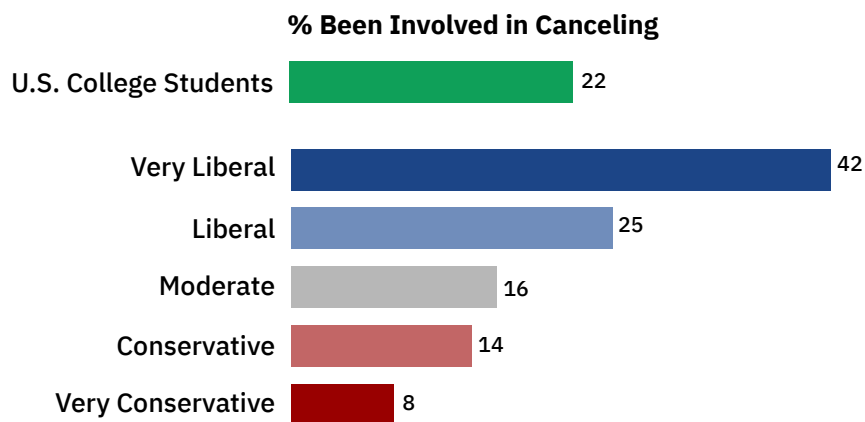Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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4 Liberal students are much more likely to use social pressure to regulate speech.

Compared to their conservative counterparts, liberal students are much more likely to engage in and approve of calling out, punishing, or "canceling" someone or a group for inappropriate statements and actions. For example, very liberal students (42%) are more than five times as likely as very conservative students (8%) to report that they have engaged in this type of public censure.
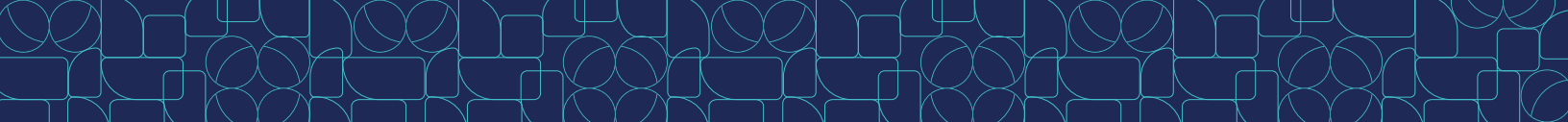
Very liberal students are more than five times as likely as very conservative students to have engaged in "calling out, punishing, or 'canceling'"

% Been Involved in Canceling

U.S. College Students	22
Very Liberal	42
Liberal	25
Moderate	16
Conservative	14
Very Conservative	8

Question: Have you ever been involved in publicly calling out, punishing, or "canceling" someone or a group for inappropriate statements or actions?

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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Liberal students are also much more likely to perceive public censure as warranted. When prompted to reflect on a recent experience where someone or a group was "called out, punished, or 'canceled,'" 87% of very liberal students believe that the social censure was justified, compared to only 16% of conservative students. Put differently, very liberal students are more than five times more likely than their very conservative peers to endorse social censure.
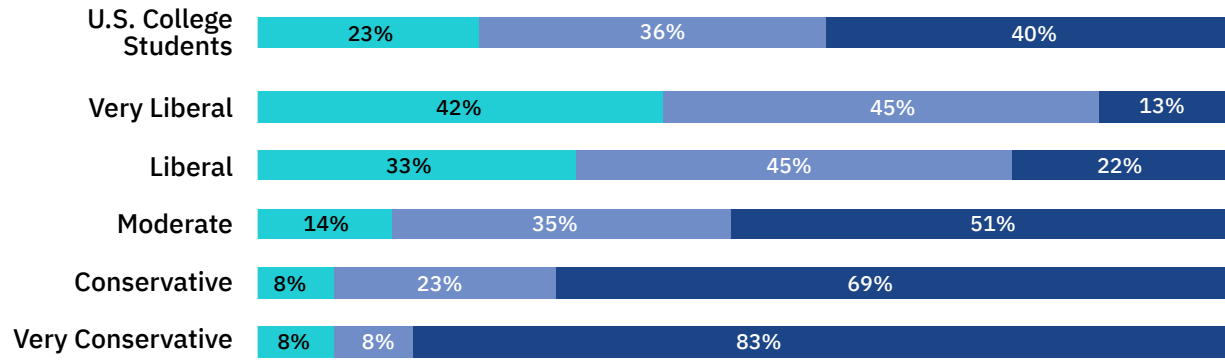
Very liberal students are more than five times more likely than their very conservative peers to endorse social censure as a consequence

- Too Lenient
- About Right
- Too Harsh

	Too Lenient	About Right	Too Harsh
U.S. College Students	23%	36%	40%
Very Liberal	42%	45%	13%
Liberal	33%	45%	22%
Moderate	14%	35%	51%
Conservative	8%	23%	69%
Very Conservative	8%	8%	83%

Question: Thinking of the last incident where someone was publicly called out, punished, or "canceled" for their statements or actions, would you say the consequence or impact on the person was...

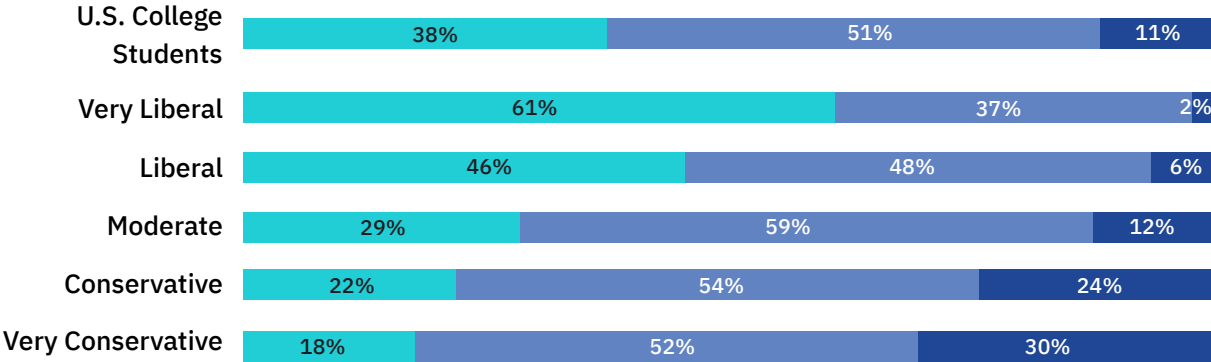Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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Conservative students, on the other hand, tend to believe that offensive speech is punished much too harshly. For instance, very conservative students are fifteen times more likely than very liberal students to say that their college administration's handling of offensive speech is "somewhat" or "far too harsh" (30% vs. 2%, respectively).

Very conservative students are fifteen times more likely than very liberal students to say that their school's administration is too harsh on offensive speech

Legend:
- ■ Too Lenient
- ■ About Right
- ■ Too Harsh

Category	Too Lenient	About Right	Too Harsh
U.S. College Students	38%	51%	11%
Very Liberal	61%	37%	2%
Liberal	46%	48%	6%
Moderate	29%	59%	12%
Conservative	22%	54%	24%
Very Conservative	18%	52%	30%

Question: How well do you think your college administrators handle instances of offensive speech? Are they...?

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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5 **Political ideology is a more powerful influence on speech attitudes than students' identification with a marginalized group.**

Students with strong ideological views have more pronounced views on free speech than those from marginalized groups. For instance, very liberal students (42%) are more likely than either non-binary (35%) or Black students (26%) to engage in calling out, punishing, or canceling someone for their statements and actions.
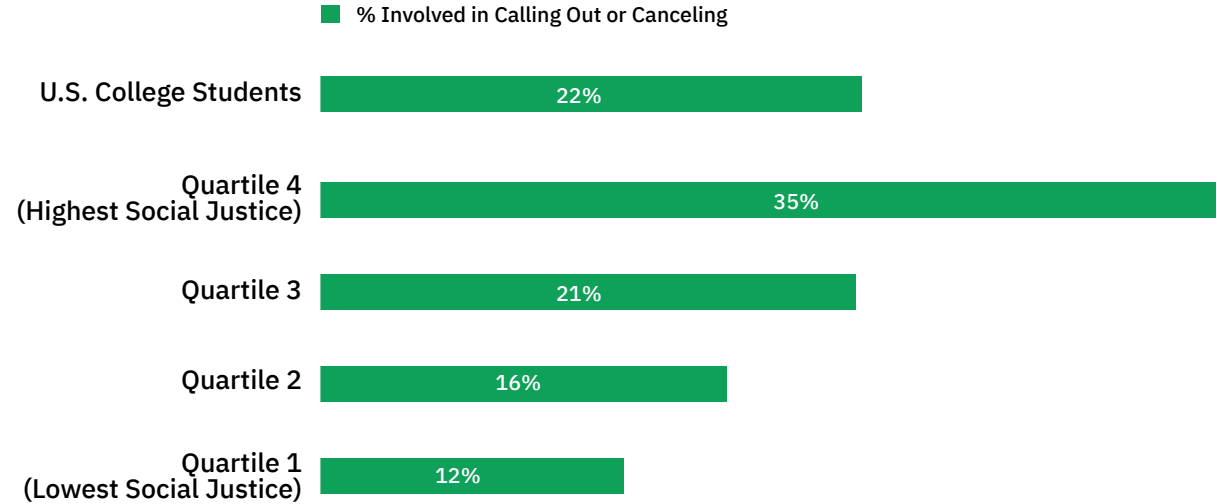
Ideological differences among college students primarily emanate from disagreement about ideas related to social justice. For example, we asked students how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- "People from privileged groups can never truly understand what it is like to be marginalized."

- "Students who are privileged should listen more than they speak."

- "Today's social and political movements should be led by people from marginalized communities."

- "People from marginalized groups understand American society better than people who are not from marginalized groups do."

Students in the top 25% of agreement on these items are almost three times more likely to have engaged in some form of social censure than those in the bottom 25% of agreement.

Students with stronger social justice orientations are more likely to have been involved in canceling

■ % Involved in Calling Out or Canceling

U.S. College Students	22%
Quartile 4 (Highest Social Justice)	35%
Quartile 3	21%
Quartile 2	16%
Quartile 1 (Lowest Social Justice)	12%

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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6 Yet, while social justice values are contentious, traditional academic principles resonate with college students across the political spectrum.

As expected, liberals tend to endorse social justice beliefs at a much higher rate than conservatives. For instance, 84% of students identifying as "very liberal" believe that "people from marginalized groups understand American society better than people who are not from marginalized groups." In contrast, just 24% of very conservative college students concur with this statement.
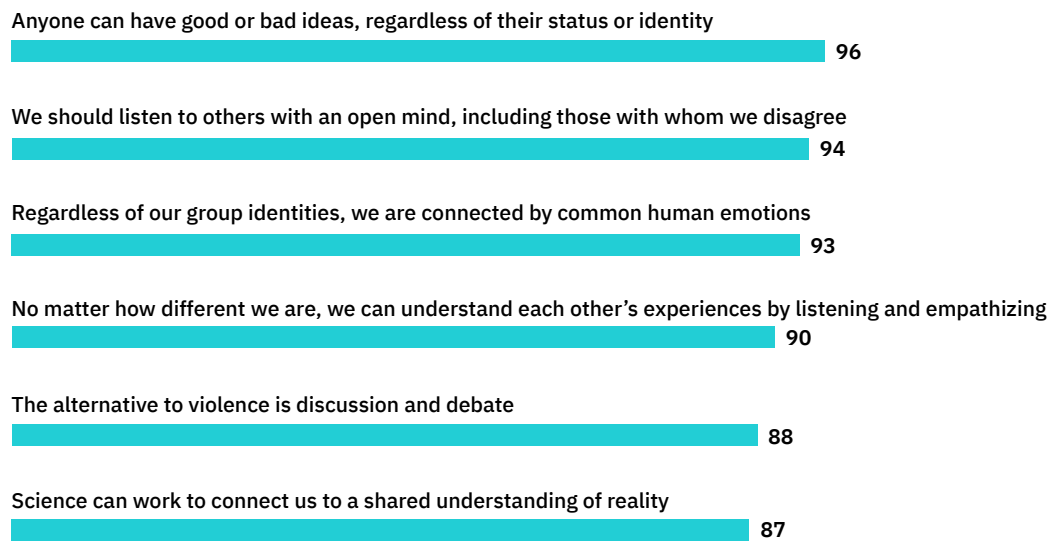
On the other hand, liberals, moderates, and conservatives overwhelmingly endorse the traditional academic principles that underlie a university education:

- 94% agree that "we should listen to others with an open mind, including those with whom we disagree," and

- 90% agree that "no matter how different we are, we can understand each other's experiences by listening and empathizing."
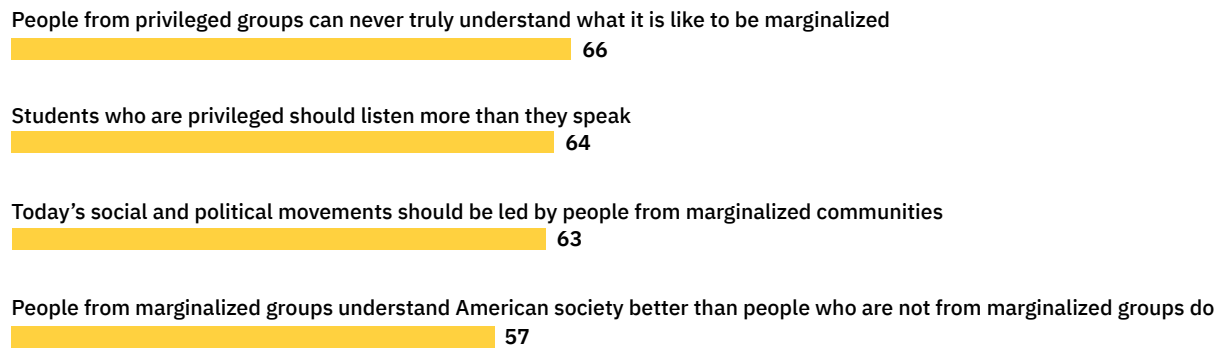
Students across the political spectrum endorse traditional academic values but show less agreement on social justice values

Traditional Academic Values	% Agreement

Anyone can have good or bad ideas, regardless of their status or identity
96

We should listen to others with an open mind, including those with whom we disagree
94

Regardless of our group identities, we are connected by common human emotions
93

No matter how different we are, we can understand each other's experiences by listening and empathizing
90

The alternative to violence is discussion and debate
88

Science can work to connect us to a shared understanding of reality
87

Social Justice Values

People from privileged groups can never truly understand what it is like to be marginalized
66

Students who are privileged should listen more than they speak
64

Today's social and political movements should be led by people from marginalized communities
63

People from marginalized groups understand American society better than people who are not from marginalized groups do
57

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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The current research suggests that colleges and universities struggle to uphold freedom of expression, but not because support for free speech as a principle has waned. Rather, students are weighing a competing value: the extent to which campus discourse should be influenced by its potential impact on historically marginalized groups.

Cancel culture appears to be one manifestation of the drive to protect already marginalized individuals from further hurt and offense. This report suggests, however, that hurt and offense occur with alarming frequency. In other words, higher education struggles to foster inclusion while simultaneously upholding freedom of expression.

Both freedom of expression and inclusion are critical to an effective learning environment. We suggest, therefore, that the public discourse shift away from pitting these as competing ideals. In our Recommendations (p. 68), we outline how colleges and universities can play a critical role in integrating divergent perspectives and mitigating the toxic conflict that stems from these competing worldviews.

Methodology

Procedures

Constructive Dialogue Institute and More in Common partnered with Qualtrics, a research firm known for its best-of-class survey platform and research panels, to conduct this study. The survey was conducted with *N* = 2,618 U.S. college students from March 27 to May 18, 2023. The margin of error is +/- 2% for the overall U.S. college students sample and higher for subgroups. Demographic quotas were set to ensure adequate representation of participants by gender, race, institution type (public vs. private), and region of the country. As a result, the sample's demographics closely resembled the population of college students in the U.S.

Measures

Participants answered questions about a range of higher education issues, including participation in and attitudes about cancel culture, views on how administrators handle campus issues, moral values around free speech and social justice, general demographics, and open-ended questions regarding their own experience of speech culture on campus.

Ideology

We assessed political ideology with the item: "In general, how would you describe your own political viewpoint?" The response scale included a five-point ideological spectrum "very liberal," "liberal," "moderate," "conservative," and "very conservative"—with an additional "not sure" option to capture uncertainty or non-identification. This classification allows for an assessment of broad ideological tendencies while acknowledging potential ambivalence in political self-identification.

Does higher education have a free speech problem?

"If you feel you're being silenced on a generally liberal college campus, it's probably because you're disagreeing with human rights.

—GLORIA, a liberal freshman at small private college in the Northeast

"If you're a Republican on a college campus, you're made to feel as though you're a leper.

—NOAH, a conservative and senior at a public university in the Midwest

A major driver of public distrust in higher education is the perception that universities are hostile to conservative, religious, or moderate political perspectives.[11] This skepticism is partly fueled by the belief that professors bring their political and social views into the classroom and that schools are overly concerned with protecting students from views they might find offensive.[12] Politicians and college students alike have voiced objections about the prevalence of contempt and so-called "cancel culture." [13,14] These prominent accusations of intolerance and bias in higher education are not merely bad publicity; they undermine colleges' ability to fulfill their core mission in society.

Prior research has borne out some of these criticisms, finding that campuses indeed feel hostile to conservative views. In a recent survey by Heterodox Academy, for example, 63% of college students agreed that "the climate on [their] campus prevents people from saying things that [they] believe."[15] In particular, conservative students report greater reluctance to discuss contentious topics like race and gender, more self-censorship of their views, feeling discriminated against due to their politics, and an overall lack of belonging on campus.[16,17]
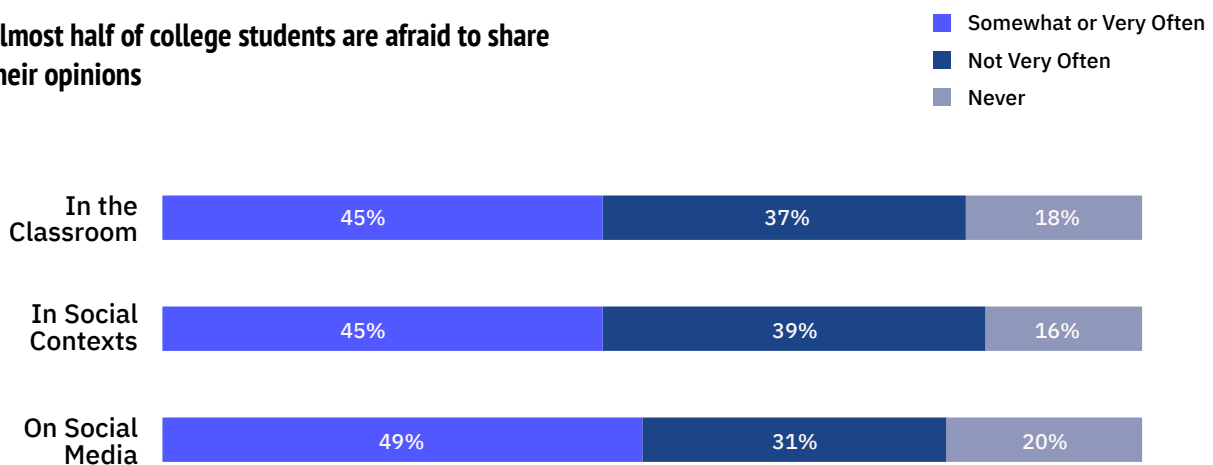
Contrary to public perception, however, prior research suggests that much of this bias occurs in peer-to-peer interactions, not as a result of professors' or administration's actions.[18,19] For example, one prominent longitudinal study of college students tracked their political identities, social networks, and socialization during college and found that changes in students' political identity transitions were driven mainly by the impact of social experiences and the political views of their peer networks and family.[20]

We sought to assess the extent to which college campuses are suppressing free expression. If students are indeed anxious to speak up, what drives these fears? How often are students actually taking offense and publicly calling out others? Finally, we sought to understand the intergroup dynamics on campus: who feels stifled, and who feels offended?

Almost half of college students are reluctant to speak up

We find that many college students are anxious to share their opinions with their peers. For example, almost half (45%) are "somewhat" or "very often" "afraid to share their views out of fear of offending their peers" in the classroom. This figure is almost identical for sharing views on social media (49%) and in social contexts (45%). Further, 37% disagree that they "feel comfortable expressing [their] thoughts and opinions on [their] college campus without fear of offending others." These findings lend validity to public concerns about students' willingness to discuss difficult topics on campus.

Almost half of college students are afraid to share their opinions

- ■ Somewhat or Very Often
- ■ Not Very Often
- ■ Never

	Somewhat or Very Often	Not Very Often	Never
In the Classroom	45%	37%	18%
In Social Contexts	45%	39%	16%
On Social Media	49%	31%	20%

Question: How often, if ever, have you been afraid to share your opinion for fear of offending peers or classmates when...

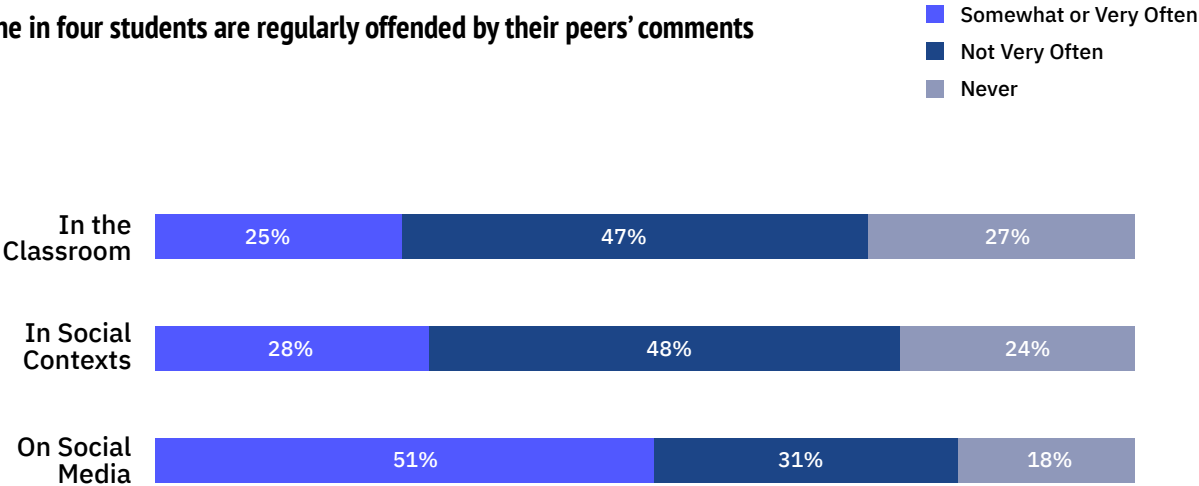Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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A small but significant portion of students are regularly offended

One in four students (25%) say they are "somewhat" or "very often" personally offended "by perspectives shared by peers or classmates" when in the classroom or social settings such as at lunch or a party. This increases to one in two (49%) on social media.

Across all settings, most students experience offense at least occasionally. For example, only 27% say they are "never" offended in the classroom.

The numbers reveal a disconcerting pattern of hurtful incidents occurring with surprising frequency, even in environments where psychological safety should be a top priority, such as classrooms. Moreover, it prompts reflection on the effectiveness of efforts to foster an inclusive learning environment.

One in four students are regularly offended by their peers' comments

Legend:
- Somewhat or Very Often
- Not Very Often
- Never

	Somewhat or Very Often	Not Very Often	Never
In the Classroom	25%	47%	27%
In Social Contexts	28%	48%	24%
On Social Media	51%	31%	18%

Question: How often, if ever, have you personally been offended by perspectives shared by peers or classmates when in the...

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023

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One in five college students has engaged in calling out, punishing, or canceling

The fact that many students feel reluctant to share their views raises the question of whether students are at risk of being punished for unpopular views. We examined the proportion of students who have called out, punished, or "canceled" others for expressing disagreeable views. The results show that one of every five students (22%) has personally engaged in this behavior. Most do so online: 17% of students reported calling out or canceling someone online. But some in-person confrontations also occur, with one in ten students (9%) reporting they have called out or canceled someone in person. Given the predominance of cancel culture in the national debate, this estimate seems comparatively low. However, for college students living and learning in campus environments, these numbers indicate that the possibility of being publicly censured or ostracized is nevertheless quite real.

Moreover, many students are aware of these trends: 38% say they know of at least one incident "during [their] time at college or university where someone was publicly called out, punished, or 'canceled' for inappropriate statements or actions." An equal proportion said no, and 24% were unsure.

Public confrontations, therefore, appear to be a relatively common occurrence among college students. A considerable number have actively taken part in such confrontations, and an even larger group is aware of them. Considering that public censure can be deeply aversive, these confrontations may well have a chilling effect on college students' willingness to express viewpoints that may be perceived as unpopular.

17%
of college students have publicly called out, punished, or "canceled" someone **online**

9%
of college students have publicly called out, punished, or "canceled" someone **in person**

78%
of college students have **not** publicly called punished, or "canceled" someone

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.
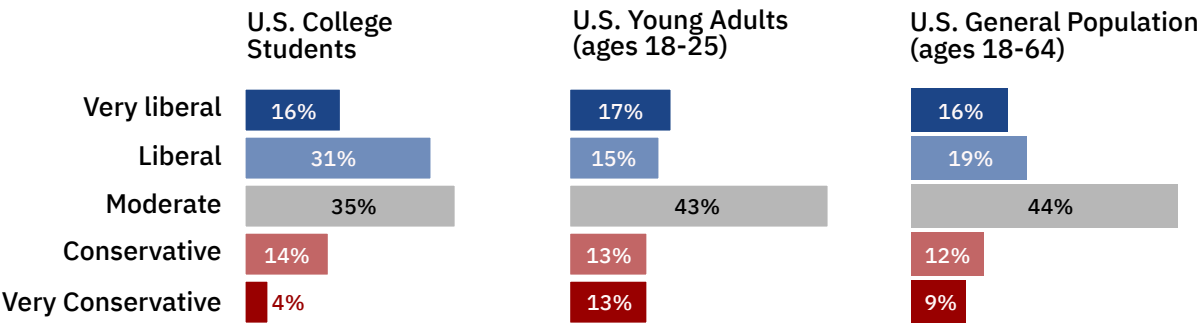
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The political makeup of today's college student population

Below, we delve into the question of whether rates of offense, on the one hand, and the sense of self-censorship, on the other hand, are correlated with factors such as political ideology, race, and gender. By examining these phenomena by subgroup, we can better understand the complex interplay between student demographics and the dynamics of free expression within the college environment.

To provide context for the subgroup analyses to follow, we examine the ideological distribution among college students and compare it to a nationally representative sample of 4,014 adults aged 18 to 64 who took part in the Spring 2021 National Wellbeing Survey.[21] Given that young people tend to be more liberal, we also address the influence of age by comparing our college sample to a subset of the comparison sample, those aged 18 to 25 (*n* = 724).

College students are more liberal than the general U.S. population, even after accounting for age

	U.S. College Students	U.S. Young Adults (ages 18-25)	U.S. General Population (ages 18-64)
Very liberal	16%	17%	16%
Liberal	31%	15%	19%
Moderate	35%	43%	44%
Conservative	14%	13%	12%
Very Conservative	4%	13%	9%

Question: In general, how would you describe your own political viewpoint?

Source: Source: College student sample comes from survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023. Comparison data for U.S. Young Adults and U.S. General Population comes from The National Wellbeing Survey in Spring 2021.

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Compared to the general U.S. population as well as the subset of young adults, the college student sample shows a greater prevalence of left-of-center views. For instance, 31% of college students identified as liberal, compared to 15% of young adults and 19% of the general population. Similarly, the percentage of college students identifying as "very conservative" is only 4%, compared to 13% of young adults and 9% of the general population. Overall, the college student political distribution is characterized by a higher proportion of liberals and a near-absence of the far right.
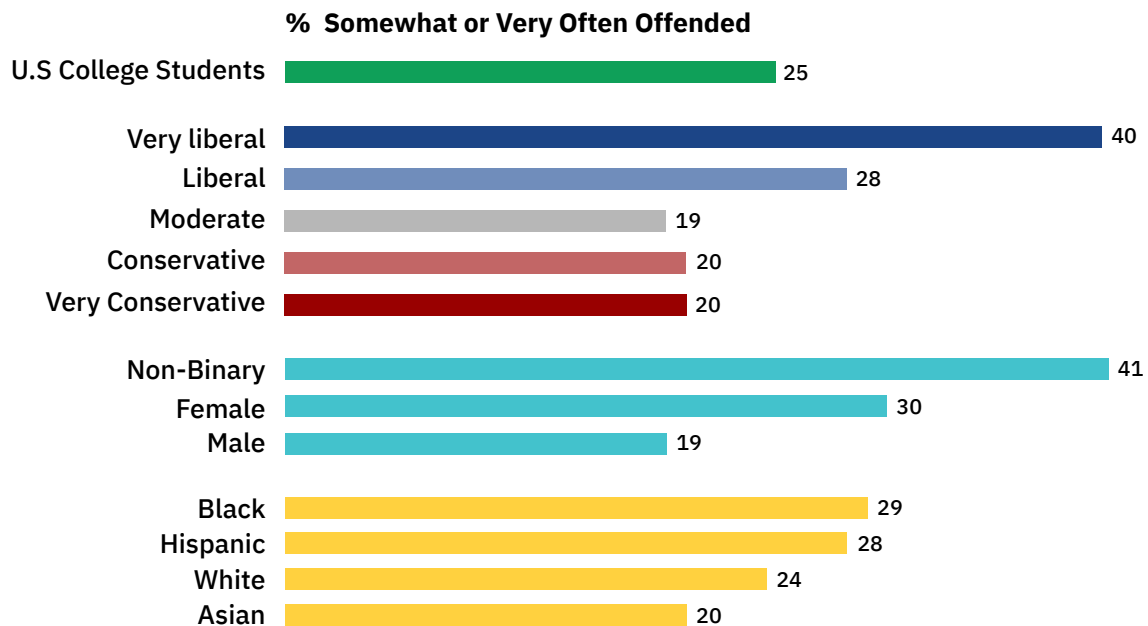
In the following sections, we examine how different features of student identity, including ideology, gender, and race, are associated with rates of being offended and self-censorship.

Students who are offended are disproportionately liberal

There are marked differences in how often students feel offended and hurt by the opinions their peers express in the classroom and these differences correspond to students' political ideology and gender; race plays less of a role. Of all student subgroups, non-binary students report feeling offended most frequently, with 41% saying they are offended "somewhat" or "very often" in the classroom. This is almost twice the rate for the average college student (25%), and more than twice the rate for male students (19%). Ideology also plays a role, with 40% of very liberal students being regularly hurt and offended by classmates. Very conservative students, by contrast, are half as likely to be regularly offended (20%).

Students who are offended are disproportionately liberal, non-binary, and Black

% Somewhat or Very Often Offended

U.S College Students	25
Very liberal	40
Liberal	28
Moderate	19
Conservative	20
Very Conservative	20
Non-Binary	41
Female	30
Male	19
Black	29
Hispanic	28
White	24
Asian	20

Question: How often, if ever, have you personally been offended by perspectives shared by peers or classmates when in the classroom?

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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There are also distinctions based on race. Black students report the highest levels of hurt and offense (29%). Following closely are Hispanic students (28%). As a point of comparison, Asian students reported the lowest rates, at 20%. Thus, while racial differences exist, they are smaller than ideological and gender differences.
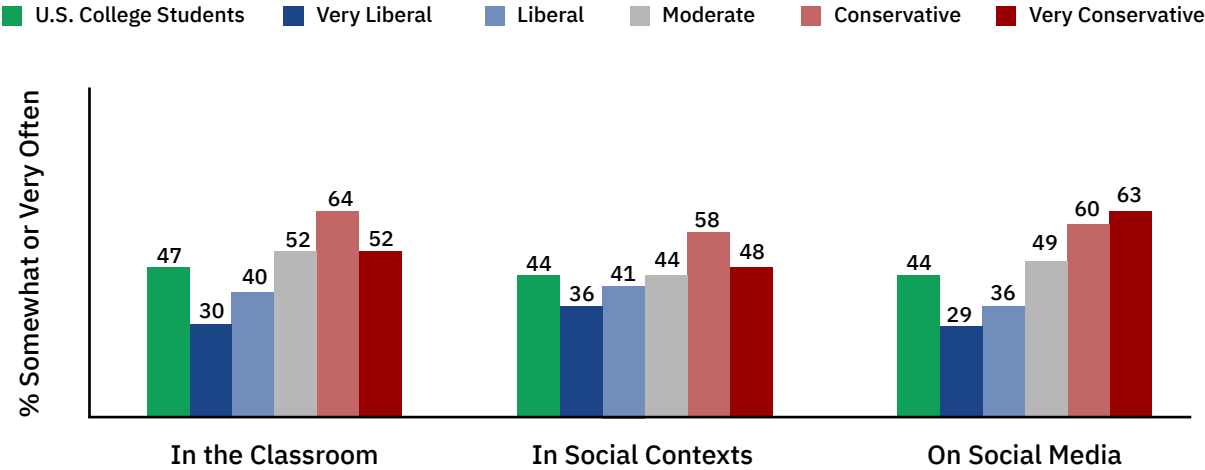
These findings highlight substantial variation in the frequency of hurt and offense encountered by college students. Those reporting the highest offense rates include members of marginalized social identities and those with liberal political views. The particularly high rate of being offended among non-binary students (41%) might reflect the evolving nature of gender-related discourse. Black students also experience high levels of offense. Interestingly, the difference between liberal and conservative students (20 percentage points) is much larger than between Black and white students (5 percentage points). Overall, the subgroup differences suggest that being offended results from two factors: direct experiences of discrimination and ideological differences in views of what constitutes acceptable speech.

Self-censorship varies across ideological lines; Conservative students feel most stifled on campus

Self-censorship is a shared concern among college students regardless of their ideology, with a significant proportion expressing fear of offending their peers (29% to 63%, depending on ideological lean). However, conservative students are most anxious to express their views. For instance, very conservative students (63%) are more than twice as likely as liberals (29%) to say they are afraid to share their opinions out of fear of offending their peers in the classroom. However, the gap narrows in social contexts such as lunch or parties (58% for conservative and 36% for very liberal students).

Liberal students are least likely to be afraid of sharing their opinion for fear of offending peers

Legend: ■ U.S. College Students ■ Very Liberal ■ Liberal ■ Moderate ■ Conservative ■ Very Conservative

Y-axis: % Somewhat or Very Often

In the Classroom: 47, 30, 40, 52, 64, 52
In Social Contexts: 44, 36, 41, 44, 58, 48
On Social Media: 44, 29, 36, 49, 60, 63

Question: How often, if ever, have you been afraid to share your opinion for fear of offending peers or classmates when...?
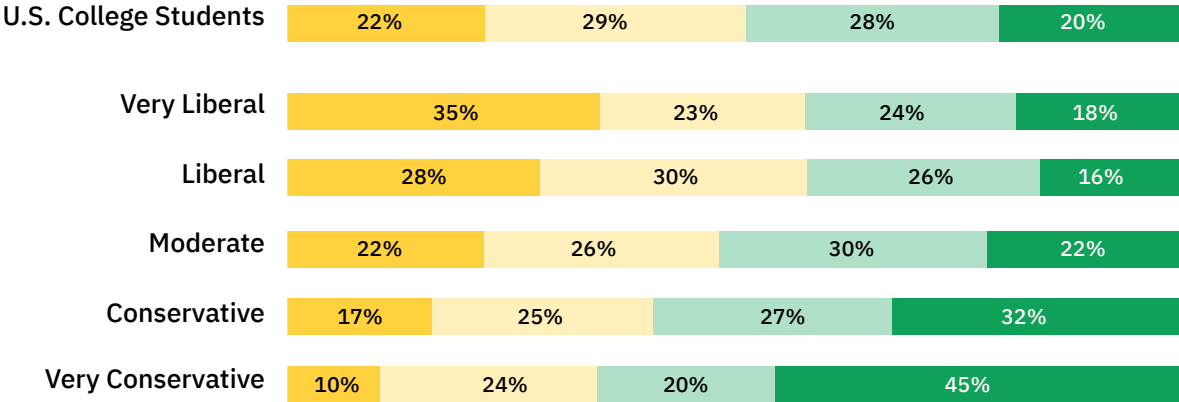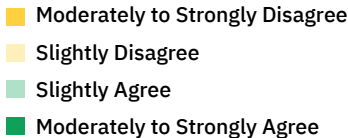
Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

Constructive Dialogue Institute   More in Common

Most students take some responsibility for their own psychological comfort and consider the speaker's intent

To further understand how students experience speech on campus, we examined two questions that have received much attention in national discourse. First, if students are psychologically uncomfortable on campus, who is responsible—the students themselves or the university? Second, which matters more—the speaker's intent, or the impact their words have on others?

Conservatives emphasize student responsibility and liberals emphasize university responsibility for managing student discomfort

Legend:
- Moderately to Strongly Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Moderately to Strongly Agree

	Moderately to Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately to Strongly Agree
U.S. College Students	22%	29%	28%	20%
Very Liberal	35%	23%	24%	18%
Liberal	28%	30%	26%	16%
Moderate	22%	26%	30%	22%
Conservative	17%	25%	27%	32%
Very Conservative	10%	24%	20%	45%

Question: Students, not the university, are responsible for managing any discomfort they themselves may feel while engaging in learning and classroom discussions.

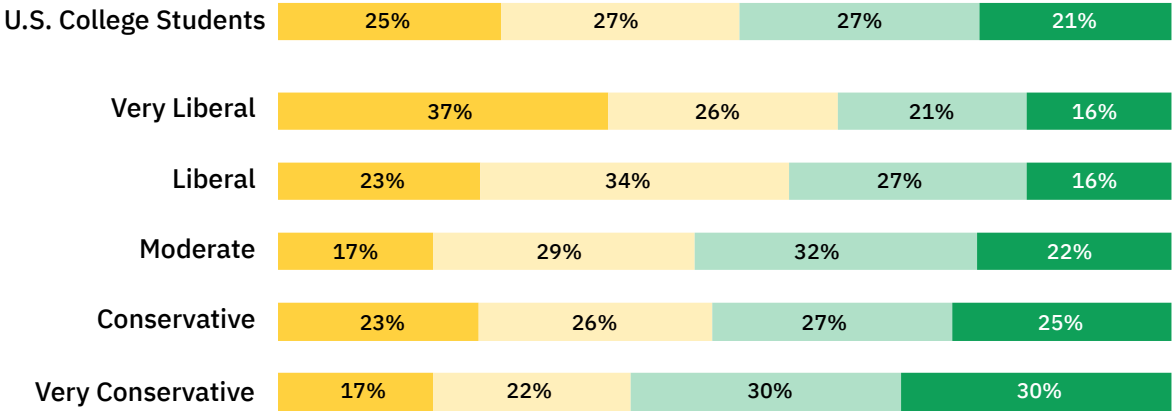Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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More in Common

For both questions, there is a near 50/50 split in student opinion. Those on the left tend to emphasize the university's responsibility for ensuring student comfort, whereas students on the right tend to emphasize students' personal responsibility. For example, very conservative students are twice as likely as very liberal students to agree that "students, not the university, are responsible for managing any discomfort they themselves may feel while engaging in learning and classroom discussions" (45% vs. 18%, respectively.) Moreover, the majority of students (57%) responded in the slightly agree to slightly disagree range, which may indicate that these students believe that both students and the university share responsibility for the student's comfort in the learning environment.

Students were also divided in opinion about whether "a speaker's intentions are more important than the effect their words have on others." Liberal students tend to place more weight on the impact of speech, whereas conservative students place more weight on the intention. Again, the majority of students (54%) answered in the slightly agree to slightly disagree range for this item, suggesting that they weigh both intentions and impact in evaluating speech.

Conservatives emphasize the intent of the speaker, whereas liberals emphasize the impact of speech

■ Moderately to Strongly Disagree
■ Slightly Disagree
■ Slightly Agree
■ Moderately to Strongly Agree

	Moderately to Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately to Strongly Agree
U.S. College Students	25%	27%	27%	21%
Very Liberal	37%	26%	21%	16%
Liberal	23%	34%	27%	16%
Moderate	17%	29%	32%	22%
Conservative	23%	26%	27%	25%
Very Conservative	17%	22%	30%	30%

Question: A speaker's intentions are more important than the effect their words have on others.

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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More in Common

Summary

The data presented in this chapter suggests that freedom of expression faces significant threats within college campuses. By replicating previous surveys, we confirm that a troubling number of college students, nearly half, are apprehensive about sharing their opinions, especially due to concerns about offending their peers. Furthermore, we establish that public censure is common and conspicuous, creating a tangible risk for individuals who might inadvertently say something deemed inappropriate or controversial.

The differences between subgroups reveal a set of complex social dynamics. On one hand, liberal, non-binary, and Black students regularly encounter hurtful comments from their peers, suggesting an environment lacking in inclusion. On the other hand, students across the spectrum, but particularly conservative students, fear offending, suggesting an issue with free expression. Thus, higher education faces dual challenges in building a campus community where students can express their opinions *and* feel connected to their peers.
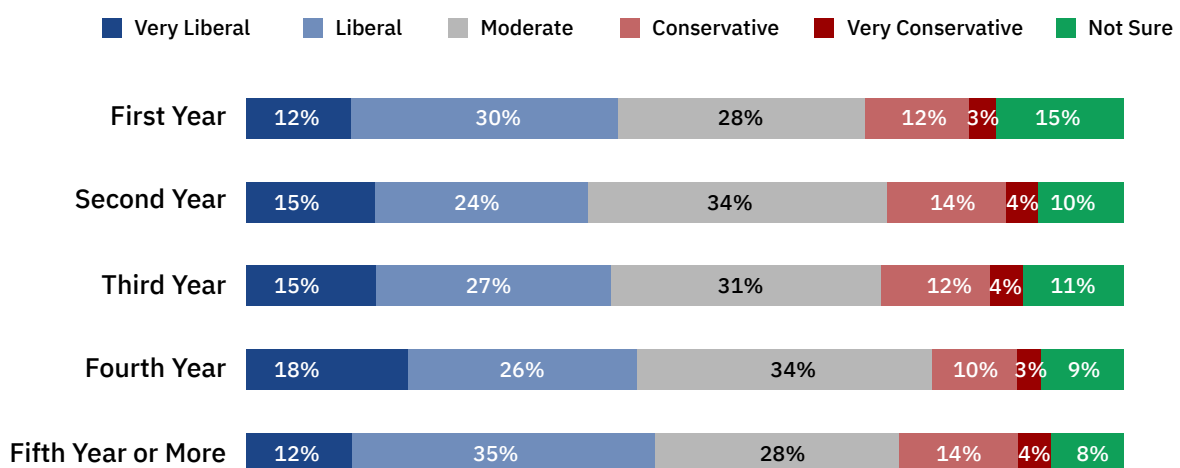
Are colleges liberalizing students?

Some conservatives have expressed concerns that colleges are liberal indoctrination centers.[22] This assertion has sparked political debate[23] as well as legislative efforts to correct the bias (for instance, by banning concepts such as critical race theory from being taught in schools).[24]

We addressed this question by analyzing political ideology by year in school. Although the percentage of students describing themselves as "very liberal" increased from the first year (12%) to the fourth year (18%), this difference was not statistically significant. In fact, there are no significant differences in ideology by year in school.

Other large-scale studies of college students have shown that the experience of college has a small liberalizing effect on students,[25, 26] and that the shift is driven mainly by peer interactions, not by the influence of curriculum or professors.[27, 28, 29]

	Very Liberal	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Very Conservative	Not Sure
First Year	12%	30%	28%	12%	3%	15%
Second Year	15%	24%	34%	14%	4%	10%
Third Year	15%	27%	31%	12%	4%	11%
Fourth Year	18%	26%	34%	10%	3%	9%
Fifth Year or More	12%	35%	28%	14%	4%	8%

Question: In general, how would you describe your own political viewpoint?

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

Constructive Dialogue Institute

More in Common

Cancel Culture or Accountability for Harm?

> "I am a strong conservative on an extremely liberal campus. Many people are nice, but I am worried if I say anything they disagree with, they will destroy me. I am also scared to say things because people are so easily offended. One time I wondered if I messed up because I said I liked shopping in the "men's" section.

—LAURA, a white conservative and senior at a small private school in the Northeast

> **"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

Research shows that college students are especially motivated to fit in with their peers.[30,31] For many, the campus is where they learn and live. They are also in a developmental stage where their social network and their standing within it are key to their sense of self.[32] Along with meaningful learning experiences, students' connectedness to their peers is one of the most important predictors of their mental health, academic performance, engagement, and persistence in college.[33,34,35]

The possibility of being called out or "canceled" by their peers, therefore, could strongly motivate self-censorship. Put differently, the need to belong may lead students to withhold any potentially controversial opinions that might jeopardize their status in the campus community.

This chapter delves into the phenomenon of "cancel culture," which remains a subject of vigorous debate with limited scholarly examination. Emerging research defines it as "using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds."[36]

Politicians and commentators have labeled cancel culture as an intolerant leftist phenomenon, used to silence alternative perspectives, ostracize contrarians, and inhibit intellectual debate. College campuses are often portrayed as the vanguard of cancel culture. These claims—and indeed, the very concept of "cancel culture"—have been dismissed by some as a fabricated narrative aimed at undermining legitimate concerns—particularly those voiced by marginalized communities. Others have denounced cries of cancel culture as a cynical effort to stoke conservative outrage for political gain.

Further complicating this analysis, in today's politically charged climate, the term "cancel" is often conflated with any act of accountability, diluting its specific meaning and obscuring different types of public censure. This broad treatment can be wielded as a tool for division, suggesting that all acts of calling out others are equal and unjustified. In addition, the term "canceling" can carry connotations of callousness or malicious intent. The broadest treatment of the term obscures instances where public censure might be a legitimate response to real and harmful transgressions.

To encompass a range of forms of social censure, including those motivated by a genuine desire for accountability, we asked students if they have "called out, punished, or 'canceled'" others. Keeping the range of possible motivations in mind, this chapter explores college students' involvement with canceling, delves into their perspectives, and sheds light on the factors that drive students to endorse it.

Students are split on whether cancel culture is intimidation or accountability

Contrary to prevailing narratives, college students do not universally endorse canceling.

We found a range of strong opinions across the ideological spectrum. The endorsements and resentments students articulated mirror the broad array of perspectives found in national discourse. Indeed, many students expressed nuanced or conflicting opinions about cancel culture that considered both the benefits and drawbacks.

Some students assert that cancel culture stifles free expression, represents a form of bullying, and creates a toxic culture:

- The people going around "canceling" others are just being overly sensitive to having feelings hurt *or* have nothing better to do than complain about people with different views. We should stop pitifully trying to shame people into oblivion just because a small percentage of the population disagree with their views.
  —EMMA, a conservative and freshman at a large private university in the South

- No matter the intentions, [canceling] sets the impression that bullying works in getting what you want.
  —BAILEY, a liberal at a small public university on the West Coast

- I personally feel now that I have to watch everything I say, do, or post on social media because the GEN Z'ers will find the smallest evidence of "hate speech" and ruin your life immediately by publicizing your name in a negative way.
  —DANIELA, a moderate and junior at a small public university in the South

- I don't think students should be in charge of the discipline of other students.
  —BETSY, a conservative and sophomore at a small public university in the South

Meanwhile, other students contend that calling out individuals for inappropriate behavior serves as a means of holding them accountable, especially when those in positions of power fail to do so. These students frequently reject the label of "cancel culture" and instead interpret public accountability as a sign of societal progress, where individuals are now held responsible for words and deeds that were once deemed acceptable:

- If your opinion or message is racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, or promoting the marginalization and mistreatment of a group or individual, then you deserve to be "canceled".
  —TRINITY, a liberal student at a mid-sized public university in the South

- If we report what a person has said to the campus officials, nothing much is done. Therefore, it is taken into the hands of the students.
  —ALEXIS, a liberal and sophomore at a small private university in the South

- [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

- Cancel culture is a nonsense concept created by people afraid of accountability for their actions. Infringed speech claims from the demographic that whines about cancel culture is simply a protest to anyone acknowledging the harmfulness in their words or actions.
  —CHLOE, a liberal and freshman at a small public university in the Midwest

To quantify students' attitudes toward cancel culture, we prompted them to reflect on an experience where they observed someone or a group being "called out, punished, or 'canceled'" and to judge whether the resulting "consequence or impact on the person or persons involved" was either "too harsh" or "too lenient." Among the 38% of students aware of such an incident, a full one-third (36%) felt that the public censure was warranted, and an additional 23% found it to be "too lenient." The minority (40%) viewed the consequence as "too harsh." Thus, there is a prevailing majority in favor of public censure, yet there is also notable disagreement among students.

Students who favor public censure are disproportionately liberal

Which students are most likely to support canceling? To answer this question, we examined how students' attitudes about canceling varied by subgroup, including political ideology, gender, and race.
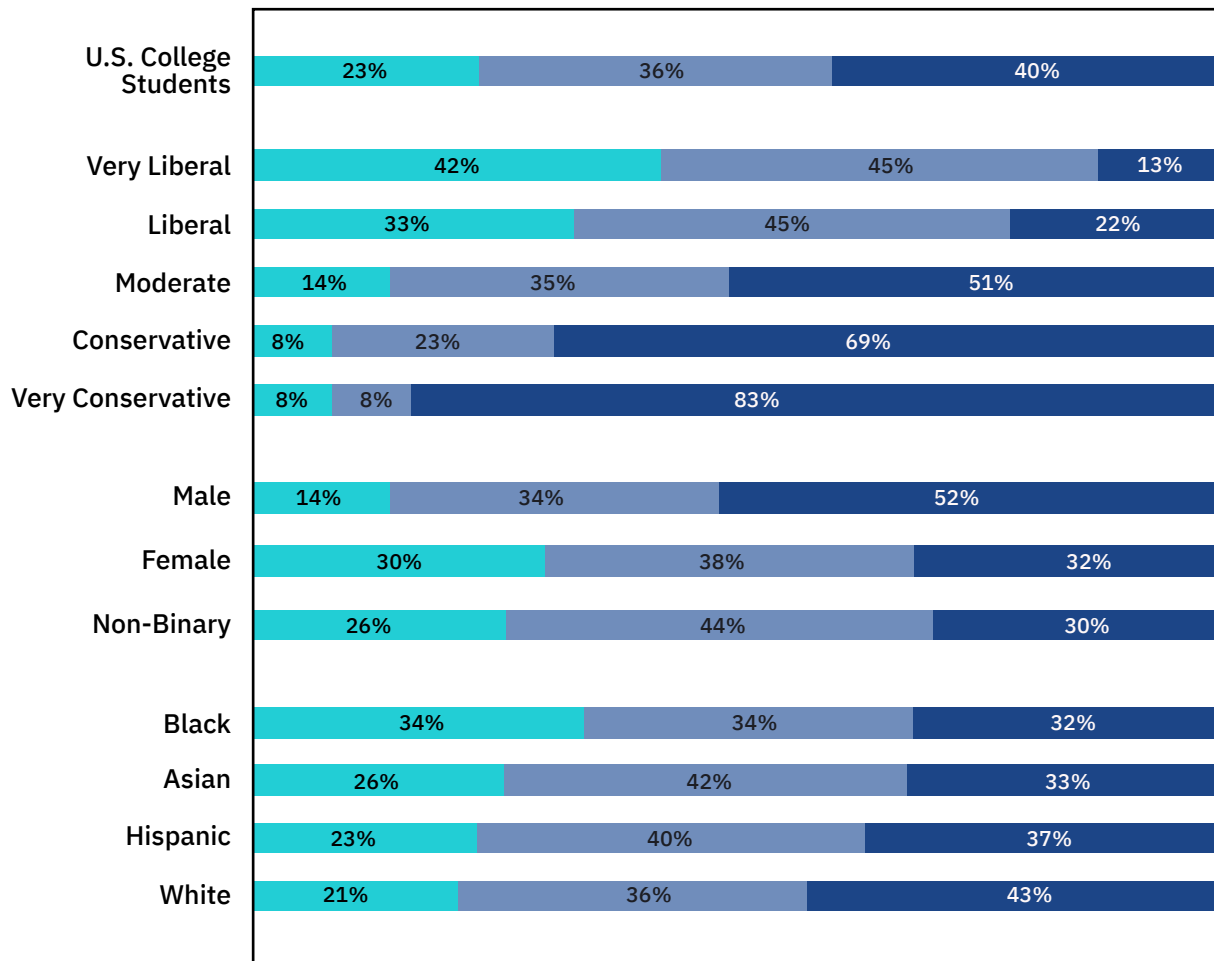
We found that students' endorsement of social censure correlated significantly with their political ideology and gender and, to a lesser extent, with their race.

Among very liberal students, an overwhelming majority (87%) believe that the public censure they observed was justified or too lenient of a consequence, compared to only 16% of conservative students. Conversely, only 13% of liberals felt the punishment was too harsh, compared to 83% of conservative students. Put differently, very liberal students are more than five times more likely than their very conservative peers to endorse social censure as a consequence for inappropriate behavior. These data support the lay belief that very liberal students are much more inclined to approve of canceling.

Gender differences are less pronounced but still notable, with male students being the only major demographic group with majority opposition to canceling. A majority of non-binary (70%) and female students (68%) perceive censure to be "just right" or too lenient. In contrast, the majority of male students (52%) said it was too harsh.

Attitudes about social censure differ markedly by ideology, less so by gender and race

Legend:
- ■ Too Lenient (teal)
- ■ About Right (medium blue)
- ■ Too Harsh (dark blue)

Group	Too Lenient	About Right	Too Harsh
U.S. College Students	23%	36%	40%
Very Liberal	42%	45%	13%
Liberal	33%	45%	22%
Moderate	14%	35%	51%
Conservative	8%	23%	69%
Very Conservative	8%	8%	83%
Male	14%	34%	52%
Female	30%	38%	32%
Non-Binary	26%	44%	30%
Black	34%	34%	32%
Asian	26%	42%	33%
Hispanic	23%	40%	37%
White	21%	36%	43%

Question: Thinking of the last incident where someone was publicly called out, punished, or "canceled" for their statements or actions, would you say the consequence or impact on the person was...

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

Constructive Dialogue Institute   More in Common

CANCEL CULTURE OR ACCOUNTABILITY FOR HARM?

45

This pattern of gender differences suggests a connection between identifying with a marginalized group and endorsing canceling. Non-binary students are likely to encounter more offensive speech due to the evolving nature of gender-related discourse and ongoing political debates over LGBTQ+ rights. Similarly, female students may be motivated by their own encounters with offensive speech and the marginalization of women's rights. They also may be motivated by heightened empathy and a desire to prevent harm.[37,38]

Compared to ideological and gender differences, racial group differences in cancel culture attitudes were relatively modest, with an 11-point gap between white students (43%), who often viewed social censure as "too harsh," and Black students (32%), who were less inclined to share this perspective. Again, these group differences align with disparities in societal marginalization, suggesting that such experiences are a potential driver of students' support for canceling.

In addition to attitudes, we measured students' actual behavior by asking them whether they have ever been actively involved in "calling out, punishing, or 'canceling' someone." Not surprisingly, we see the same pattern of subgroup differences, with large differences by ideology and gender and modest differences by race. For example,   very liberal students are five times more likely than very conservative students to self-report this behavior (42% vs. 8%, respectively). Similarly, nonbinary students are almost twice as likely to have engaged in social censure as male students (35% vs. 19%, respectively). Among racial groups, white students (31%) are more likely than any racial minority group to have engaged in calling out.

Participation in calling out, punishing, or "canceling" differs markedly by ideology and gender, less so by race
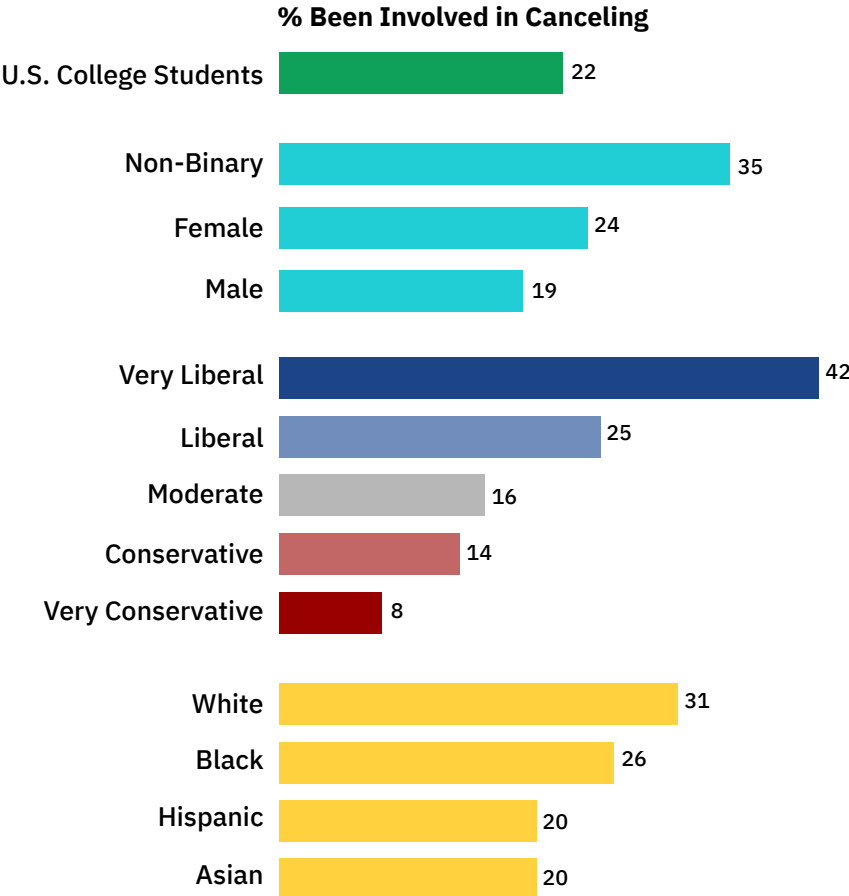
% Been Involved in Canceling

Group	%
U.S. College Students	22
Non-Binary	35
Female	24
Male	19
Very Liberal	42
Liberal	25
Moderate	16
Conservative	14
Very Conservative	8
White	31
Black	26
Hispanic	20
Asian	20

Question: Have you ever been involved in publicly calling out, punishing, or "canceling" someone or a group for inappropriate statements or actions?

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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More in Common

When we examine engagement in canceling alongside students' experience of being offended on campus, we see the two variables closely track each other. That is, student identities that report a higher frequency of encountering offense also report the highest incidence of participation in canceling. The exception is conservative students, who are disproportionately less likely to engage in canceling, even after accounting for their level of offense.

Students who are most often offended are most involved in calling out, punishing, or "canceling"
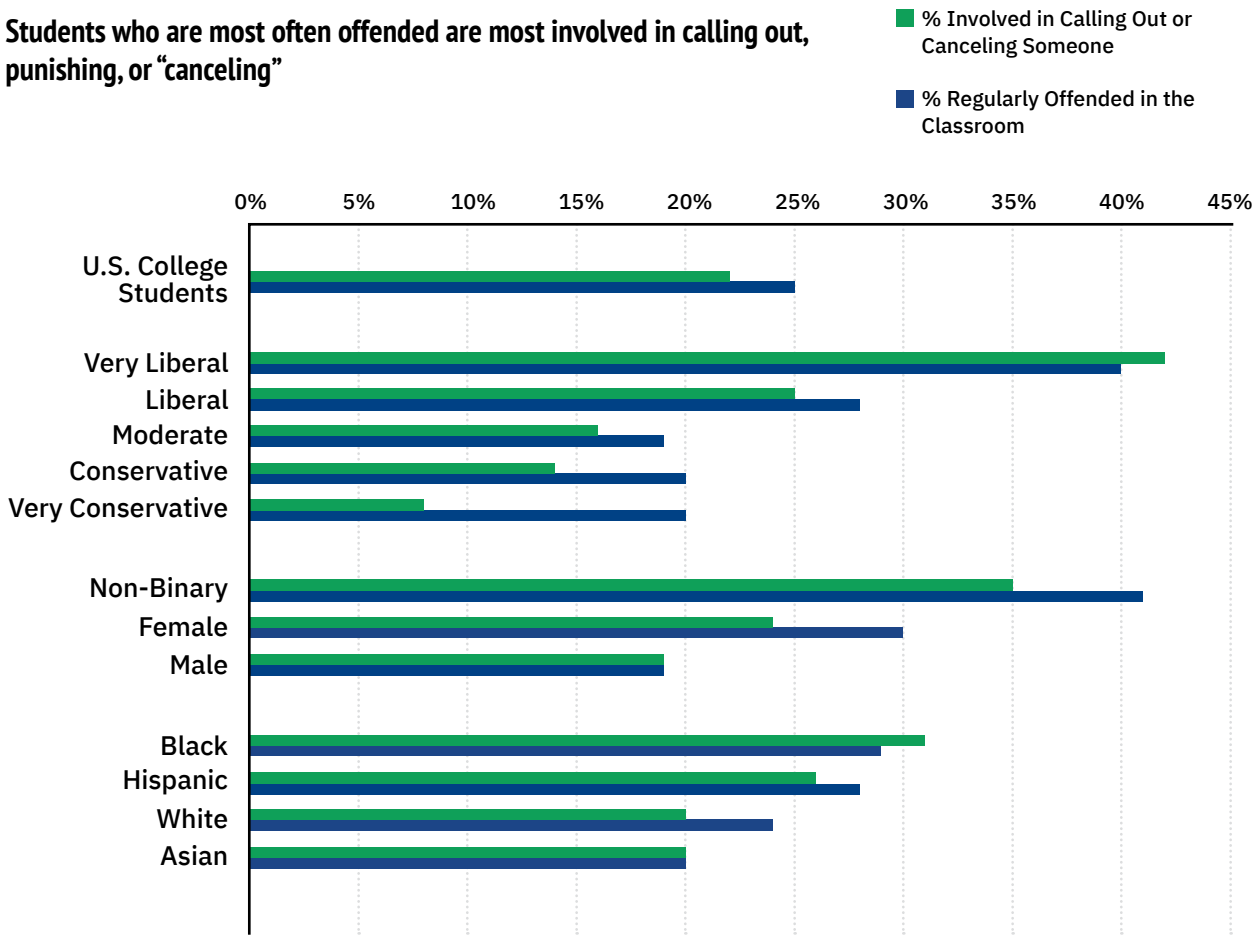
■ % Involved in Calling Out or Canceling Someone

■ % Regularly Offended in the Classroom

Question: How often, if ever, have you personally been offended by perspectives shared by peers or classmates when in the classroom?

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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More in Common

The observed pattern and magnitude of group differences point to two potential contributors to students' attitudes towards and involvement in calling out, punishing, or "canceling" someone or a group.

First, the use of canceling correlates with membership in marginalized groups and their direct experience of being hurt and offended by peers. For these students, calling out may be a way to ensure accountability for wrongdoing where formal systems fall short. Nevertheless, experiences with marginalization do not entirely explain the pattern of group differences: ideological differences in attitudes and behavior far outsize race differences. This suggests that a moral reasoning component is at play in canceling. For instance, politically liberal individuals tend to prioritize equality and prevention of harm,[39] and these differences may partially explain the variation in group attitudes towards canceling.

Liberal students evaluate offenses against groups especially harshly

In students' opinion, which behaviors warrant the harshest punishment? To gauge how students reason about misconduct, we asked them how their campus administration responded to various transgressions. Our interest, specifically, was in understanding how they might evaluate offenses against historically marginalized groups, including "allegations of racism, sexism, and homophobia," "discrimination," "offensive speech," and "allegations of sexual harassment."

As a point of comparison, we assessed students' views of the school's response to "hazing and bullying." Like the other four offenses, "hazing and bullying" is an act of aggression. Yet, unlike the other four scenarios, the aggression in "hazing and bullying" is targeted at an individual, not against persons of color, women, LGBTQ+ communities, or other protected classes.

First, we examine students' attitudes toward hazing and bullying. Here, we find negligible differences across the ideological spectrum: 40% of very liberal and 30% of very conservative students believe that their administration's response to hazing and bullying was too lenient. This difference of ten percentage points is minor, compared to the difference between liberal and conservative students on offenses directed toward protected classes.

We observe a consistent pattern where liberal students are much more likely to call for stricter punishment than their conservative counterparts across all four offenses against protected classes: "allegations of racism, sexism, and homophobia," "discrimination," "offensive speech," and "allegations of sexual harassment." To illustrate, very liberal students tend to believe that administrators under-react to offensive speech: 47% think the administrative response is too lenient, compared to only 12% of conservatives. Conversely, 30% of very conservative students think their school's administration is too harsh on offensive speech, compared to only 2% of very liberal students. In other words, very conservative students are fifteen times more likely than very liberal students to believe that their college administration's handling of offensive speech is "somewhat" or "far too harsh."

Liberal students want stricter punishment for offenses against protected classes

Legend:
- U.S. College Students
- Very Liberal
- Liberal
- Moderate
- Conservative
- Very Conservative

Y-axis: % Somewhat or Too Lenient

Hazing or Bullying: 37, 40, 41, 35, 32, 30
Allegations of Sexual Harassment: 40, 55, 50, 34, 27, 24
Allegations of Racism, Sexism or Homophobia: 33, 54, 45, 29, 25, 10
Discrimination: 33, 52, 41, 28, 23, 7
Offensive Speech: 27, 47, 34, 21, 16, 12
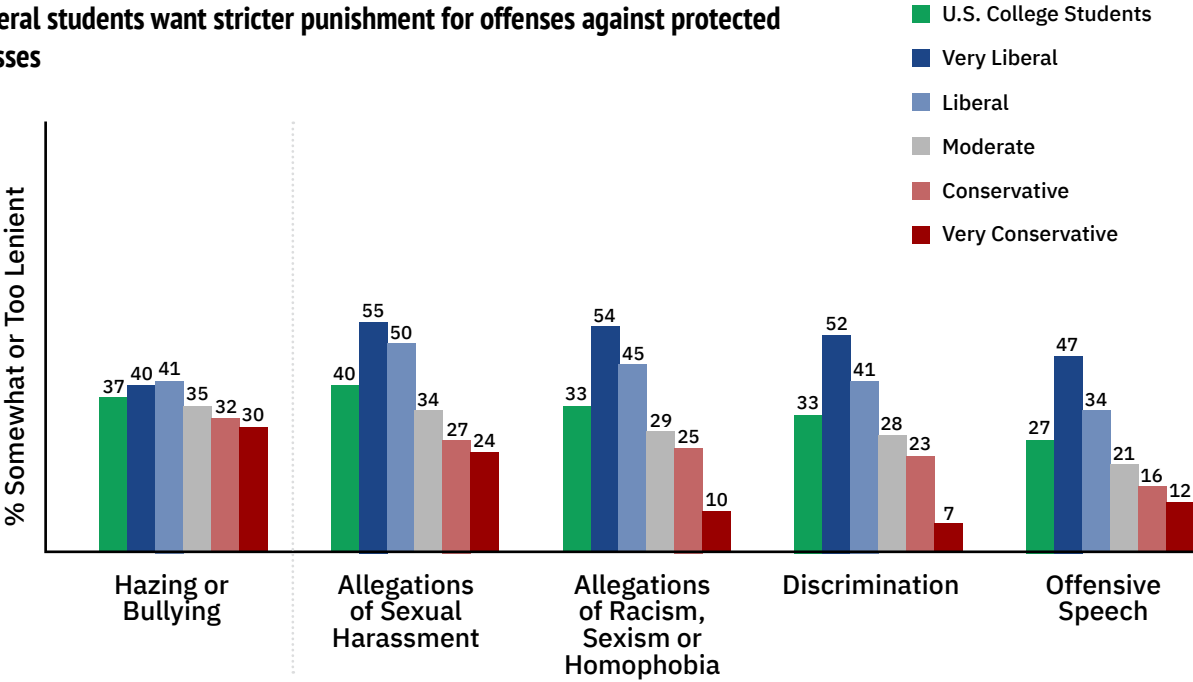
Question: How well do you think your college administrators handle instances of...? Are they...?

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

Constructive Dialogue Institute

More in Common

The same pattern of ideological differences is found for discrimination, allegations of sexism, racism, and homophobia, and allegations of sexual harassment.

The ideological differences in how students judge aggressive acts towards historically marginalized groups are stark and stand in contrast to the *absence of* ideological differences in how they evaluate aggression towards individuals. This suggests that aggression is, in and of itself, not a divisive topic; instead, the divisiveness surrounds the centrality of marginalized group status. More specifically, these findings indicate that the difference between liberal and conservative students is not driven by a sweeping desire to prevent harm. If that were the case, we would see ideological differences across all types of aggressive behavior. Instead, the difference between liberal and conservative students appears to be rooted in a social justice motivation among liberal students, who convey frustration at a perceived lack of institutional attention to systemic injustice.

The distinction between aggression towards groups and aggression towards individuals also appears between gender subgroups. Opinions about hazing and bullying are similar across groups, but there are marked differences in how students judge offenses against protected classes. When asked about offensive speech, for instance, 67% of non-binary college students believe their administration is "too lenient." This is nearly four times the rate for male students (17%). Again, we see a pattern where students with marginalized social identities want their schools to take a stronger stance against systemic injustices.

Regarding race, Black students are most likely to believe that the administration's response to group-based offenses is too lenient. Still, the differences across racial groups are relatively modest, with an average difference of 7 points between the lowest and highest scores. Thus, race is a much less significant driver of attitudes towards identity-based aggression than ideology. This finding is surprising given that race is a dominant factor behind discrimination in broader society. For example, the majority of hate crimes are targeted towards racial and ethnic minorities.[40] This suggests that political ideology is a more powerful influence on attitudes on this topic than one's identification with groups that have been subject to identity-based aggression.

Summary

This research illuminates the factors driving student participation in cancel culture. Student groups most frequently offended—liberal, non-binary, and Black students—are more inclined to support and participate in public censure.

Non-binary and Black students face the greatest societal discrimination, which might extend to their experiences on campus. They may be frustrated with insufficient attention to correcting systematic injustices, which could lead them to perceive public callouts and canceling as ways to enforce accountability for harm.

Liberal students often ally themselves with historically marginalized groups. Among very liberal students, we often find more extreme attitudes than among members of the marginalized groups themselves. On average, very liberal students are more likely than either non-binary or Black students to engage in calling out, punishing, or canceling someone for their statements and actions. This suggests that ideology, more so than gender or race, is predominant in explaining attitudes towards cancel culture.

Further, students' judgments of group-based offenses show subgroup differences while their judgments of non-identity-based forms of aggression do not. This indicates that ideological differences among college students primarily emanate from disagreement about systemic injustices, rather than being solely concerned with the broader concept of preventing harm.

Finally, there were strong parallels in the pattern and the size of subgroup differences, regardless of whether we asked about group-based offenses or public censure. These parallels suggest a shared ideological underpinning between these two distinct phenomena and further indicate that student attitudes about speech are deeply rooted in their sense of systemic fairness and collective accountability.

Incompatible Sacred Values?

"Open debate, civilized and respectful discussions about controversial topics should be encouraged and opposing viewpoints are important. I am absolutely willing to sit down and have a discussion with someone on the ethics of abortion, I'm even willing to play devil's advocate. I am not willing to allow a religious zealot to come on campus with offensive signs, a megaphone, yelling at passersby that they'll go to hell if they don't agree with them.

—ANGELA, a freshman at a small private college in the South

This chapter delves into the drive toward social justice among college students. Much like the concept of "cancel culture," social justice carries its own controversy. On one side, proponents argue for the need to address historical and ongoing injustices and create a more equitable society by uplifting marginalized groups. On the other side, critics question the methods and extent of these efforts, voicing concerns about potential overreach and perceived attacks on free speech.[41,42] Some argue that focusing on identity-based factors could inadvertently perpetuate division rather than unity.[43]

With regard to college students, two concerns have been raised about their orientation toward social justice. One, some have expressed worry that social justice has eclipsed the pursuit of truth as the central mission of higher education.[44] Second, as books such as Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* spark both praise and outrage over its treatment of race relations,[45] some have noted the tendency of liberal young people to adopt an extreme form of ideological purity that paradoxically undermines the very social progress they seek.[46,47]

This chapter examines student attitudes around these issues. Are students on the left and the right orienting towards different and incompatible values in their education? Have liberal students abandoned the pursuit of truth, in favor of social justice? Are students' definitions of social justice so extreme that they believe an individual's social identity is not only influential but deterministic? We examine these questions below by assessing students' endorsement of traditional academic principles and social justice beliefs.

Traditional academic principles resonate with college students across the ideological spectrum

Since the inception of higher education, colleges have been recognized as strongholds of critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, objectivity, and shared humanity. We first sought to assess students' agreement with the beliefs that underlie these values.

Overall, we find near consensus levels of agreement with the academic principles that form the foundation of a university education. Across items, an average of nine in ten college students agree with principles such as the importance of discourse, science as the foundation of a shared reality, and the power of listening and empathy. For instance, almost all students (94%) agree that "we should listen to others with an open mind, including those with whom we disagree." Fully 90% believe that "no matter how different we are, we can understand each other's experiences by listening and empathizing." The idea that "science can work to connect us to a shared understanding of reality" garners agreement from 87%, with just 1% "strongly disagreeing." Crucially, this level of endorsement spans the ideological spectrum, with liberals, moderates, and conservatives overwhelmingly affirming these foundational principles.

The animating values of higher education thus do not appear to be in contention. Yet, at the same time, many students refuse to engage with offensive views and express support for public censure. Perhaps their behavior is motivated by a different value or objective. We consider this possibility in the next section.

The majority of college students support social justice, but there is significant contention

Here we explore students' agreement with social justice beliefs, which center group identity in efforts to redress systemic injustices. We were interested in the overall agreement among college students, compared to their endorsement of traditional academic principles above.
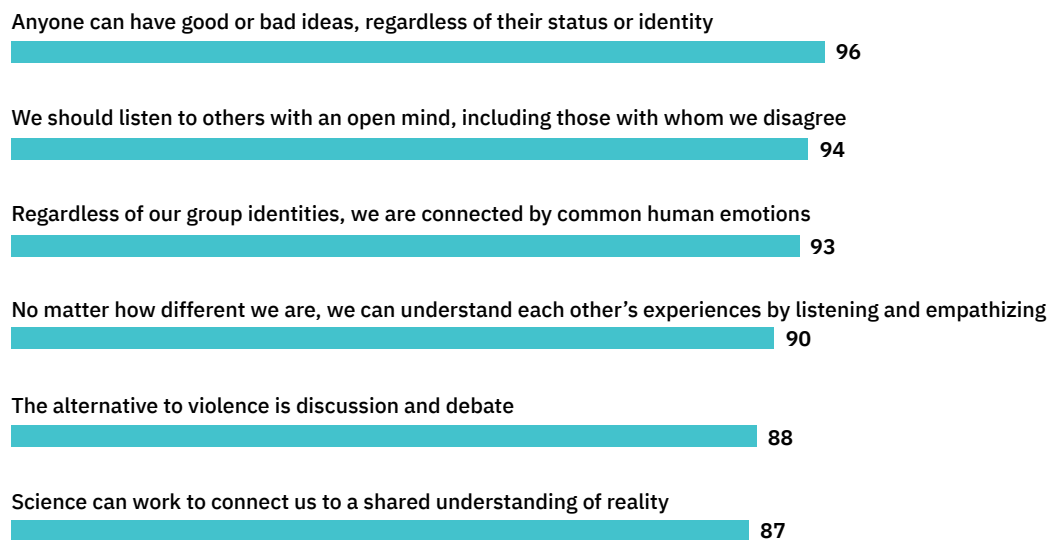
Compared to traditional academic principles, we found that a smaller majority of college students endorse concepts associated with social justice movements. For instance, most students (66%) believe that "privileged groups can never truly understand what it is like to be marginalized." Majorities agree that individuals from marginalized communities "understand American society better" than those from the majority group (57%) and, perhaps consequently, that "students who are privileged should listen more than they speak" (64%). Finally, a majority believes that "today's social and political movements should be led by people from marginalized communities" (63%). In sum, a majority of today's college students support social justice principles. However, the level of agreement is much lower than what we found for traditional academic principles.
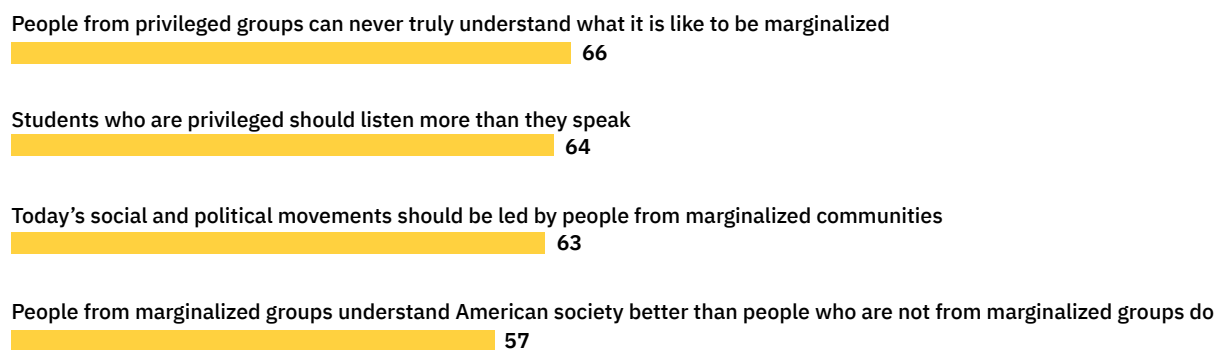
Students across the political spectrum endorse traditional academic values but show less agreement on social justice values

Traditional Academic Values	% Agreement

Anyone can have good or bad ideas, regardless of their status or identity
96

We should listen to others with an open mind, including those with whom we disagree
94

Regardless of our group identities, we are connected by common human emotions
93

No matter how different we are, we can understand each other's experiences by listening and empathizing
90

The alternative to violence is discussion and debate
88

Science can work to connect us to a shared understanding of reality
87

Social Justice Values

People from privileged groups can never truly understand what it is like to be marginalized
66

Students who are privileged should listen more than they speak
64

Today's social and political movements should be led by people from marginalized communities
63

People from marginalized groups understand American society better than people who are not from marginalized groups do
57

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Students across the spectrum reject binary, moralistic thinking about power and privilege

We also measure students' agreement with more extreme beliefs that have been attributed to social justice advocates. These include categorical and deterministic beliefs about power and privilege that assign different standards of morality across groups. We found that such categorical views are overwhelmingly rejected across groups and are endorsed by fewer than 1 in 5 college students. For example, only 14% of students agree that "only people who have privilege or power can be considered racist" and only 17% agree that "criticism should only be directed towards people who have more power." This suggests that, while most students embrace efforts to protect marginalized groups, they also reject totalizing claims about the impunity of those groups.

Social justice beliefs are most prevalent among liberal students

We now examine the distribution of social justice beliefs across subgroups, including ideology, gender, and race. As expected, liberals tend to endorse these items at a much higher rate than conservatives. For instance, 84% of students identifying as "very liberal" believe that "people from marginalized groups understand American society better than people who are not from marginalized groups." In contrast, just 24% of "very conservative" college students concur with this statement.

Social justice orientation varies by ideology and gender, less so by race

Legend:
- Average Social Justice Orientation (green)
- Average Traditional Academic Orientation (dark blue)

Categories (top to bottom): U.S. College Students, Very Liberal, Liberal, Moderate, Conservative, Very Conservative, Male, Female, Non-Binary, Black, Hispanic, Asian, White

Scale: 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0, 5.0, 6.0
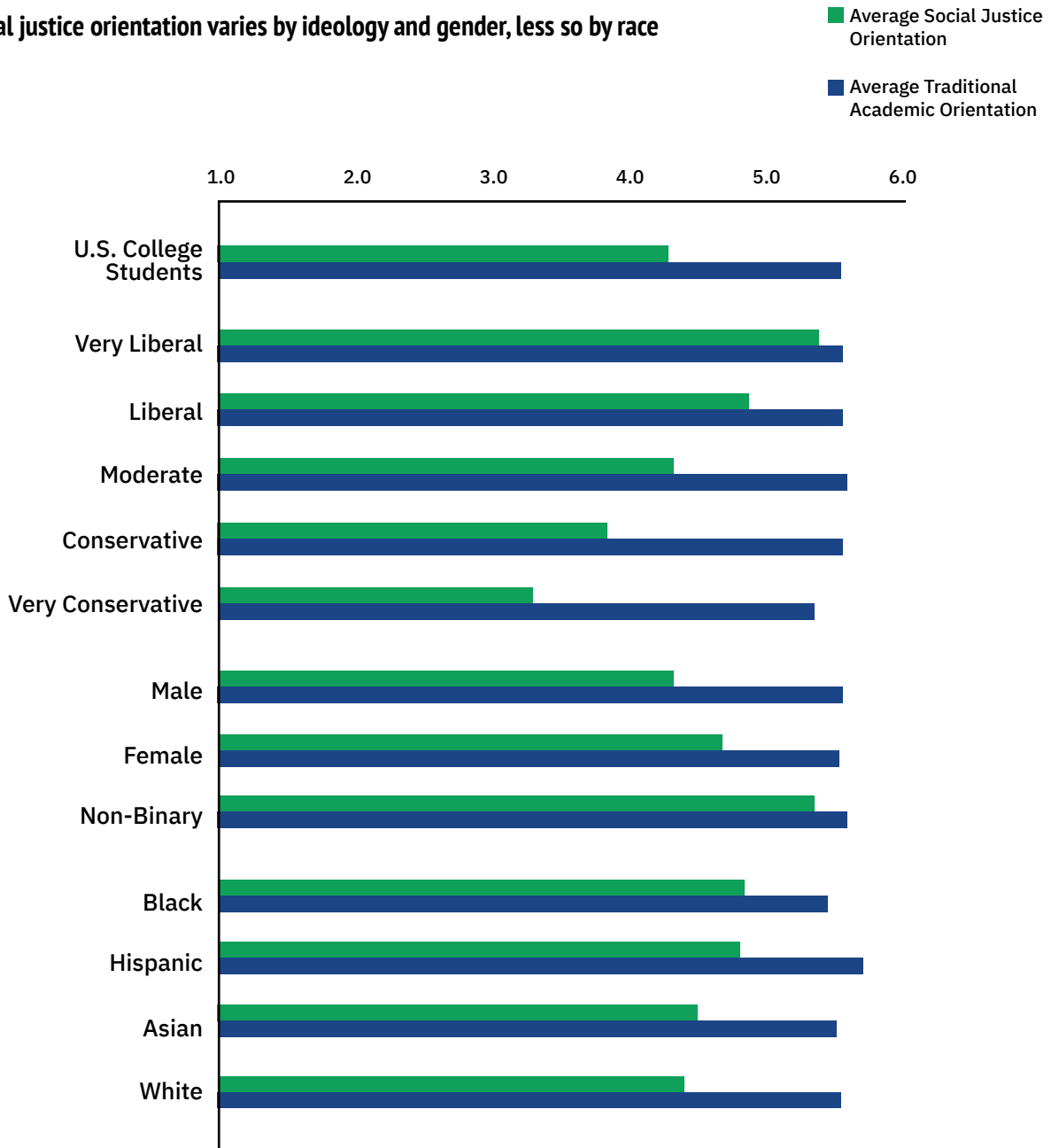
Questions are rated from a scale of strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). See text for wording.

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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Gender differences are less pronounced but still notable. Non-binary students are most likely to endorse social justice beliefs. For instance, 88% of non-binary students agree that "today's social and political movements should be led by people from marginalized communities." In contrast, 55% of male students endorse this statement.

As we found elsewhere in this report, variations among racial groups are comparatively modest. Black students are the most likely (74%) to agree that "people from privileged groups can never truly understand what it is like to be marginalized." White students were the least likely to concur with this statement, yet a majority still endorse it (62%).

The distribution and size of the subgroup differences in social justice beliefs are familiar: they mirror those we describe above with regard to speech and cancel culture. That is, ideological differences between groups are most pronounced, followed by gender differences. Race differences are present, but modest in comparison. This suggests that social justice beliefs partly stem from direct experience with harm but that they more strongly reflect a difference in worldview. In other words, it is personal values, rather than identity, that best predict students' views about issues relating to social justice.

Social justice beliefs and a distinct worldview underlie liberal students' perspectives on campus speech

We found ideological differences across all the speech phenomena examined in this report. Compared to conservative students, liberal students are more likely to be offended by their peers, engage in public censure, and support canceling as a form of accountability. We also found, unsurprisingly, that liberal students are more likely to endorse social justice beliefs. To what extent are attitudes toward social justice and attitudes towards speech correlated? And are they associated with fundamental differences in how students see the world?

To address these questions, we constructed two composite measures. We calculated the mean scores for the six items representing traditional academic values:

- "Anyone can have good or bad ideas, regardless of their status or identity."

- "We should listen to others with an open mind, including those with whom we disagree."

- "Regardless of our group identities, we are connected by common human emotions."

- "No matter how different we are, we can understand each other's experiences by listening and empathizing."

- "The alternative to violence is discussion and debate."

- "Science can work to connect us to a shared understanding of reality."

We also calculated a mean score for the four items evaluating social justice values:

- "People from privileged groups can never truly understand what it is like to be marginalized."

- "Students who are privileged should listen more than they speak."

- "Today's social and political movements should be led by people from marginalized communities."

- "People from marginalized groups understand American society better than people who are not from marginalized groups do."

We then segmented the score distribution into quartiles and compared the experiences of students across quartiles.

Attitudes towards social justice show associations with attitudes and behaviors related to campus speech. Students with a stronger social justice orientation express lower levels of concern about "a problem of suppression of free speech on college campuses" and feel less fear of offending in classrooms and social contexts and on social media. Simultaneously, they express higher levels of offense-taking in these same contexts and desire harsher penalties from school administrators for instances of offensive speech.

Social justice beliefs are correlated with speech attitudes and behavior
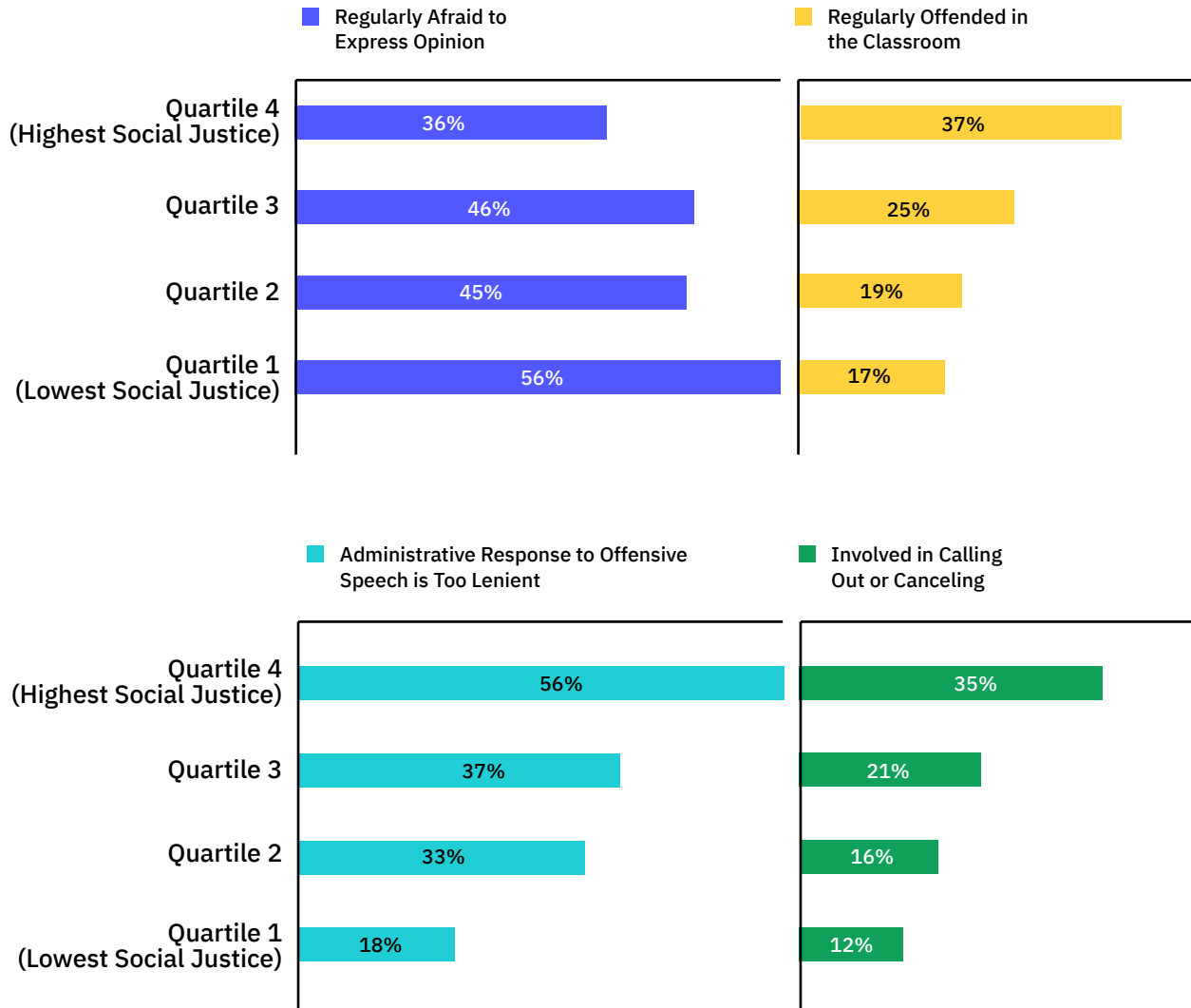
Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

Furthermore, those with the highest scores on the social justice orientation demonstrate the highest propensity towards calling out, punishing, or "canceling" someone or a group for their statements or actions. For example, 35% of students in the top quartile of social justice orientation report that they have engaged in social censure, whereas this is true for only 12% of the students in the bottom quartile of social justice orientation.

These correlations suggest that criticism or judgments of others' conduct are often deemed justified within a left-leaning set of social norms to which many conservatives do not subscribe. Those who embrace the left-leaning norms view calling out others as appropriate accountability, perhaps because they see these as stemming from a sense of empathy for marginalized groups and a more accurate understanding of society.

Social justice beliefs predict views about personal agency

We wanted to understand whether these ideological divisions reflected deeper differences in how individuals see the world. To do this, we reviewed students' choice of which statement they agree with more: "People's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control" or "People are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life."

We found that those with a higher social justice orientation score are also much more likely to believe that "people's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control" as opposed to believing that "people are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life." For example, 79% of those students in the top quartile of social justice orientation agree that life outcomes are largely determined by external factors, compared to only 39% of those in the bottom quartile.

If outcomes in contemporary American life depend on the luck and circumstances of being born into a privileged group, marginalized individuals would have heightened awareness of this fundamental unfairness and a deeper understanding of American society. By contrast, if life outcomes are more linked to individual choices and efforts, the distinction between marginalized and privileged loses significance as they offer limited insights into American life.

Students who are oriented towards social justice also likely to believe life outcomes are largely determined by external factors

■ People's Outcomes in Life are Determined Largely by Forces Outside of Their Control

■ People are Largely Responsible for Their Own Outcomes in Life

% Agree

	Forces Outside Control	Responsible for Own Outcomes
U.S. College Students	43%	57%
Quartile 4 (Highest Social Justice)	61%	39%
Quartile 3	48%	53%
Quartile 2	35%	65%
Quartile 1 (Lowest Social Justice)	21%	79%
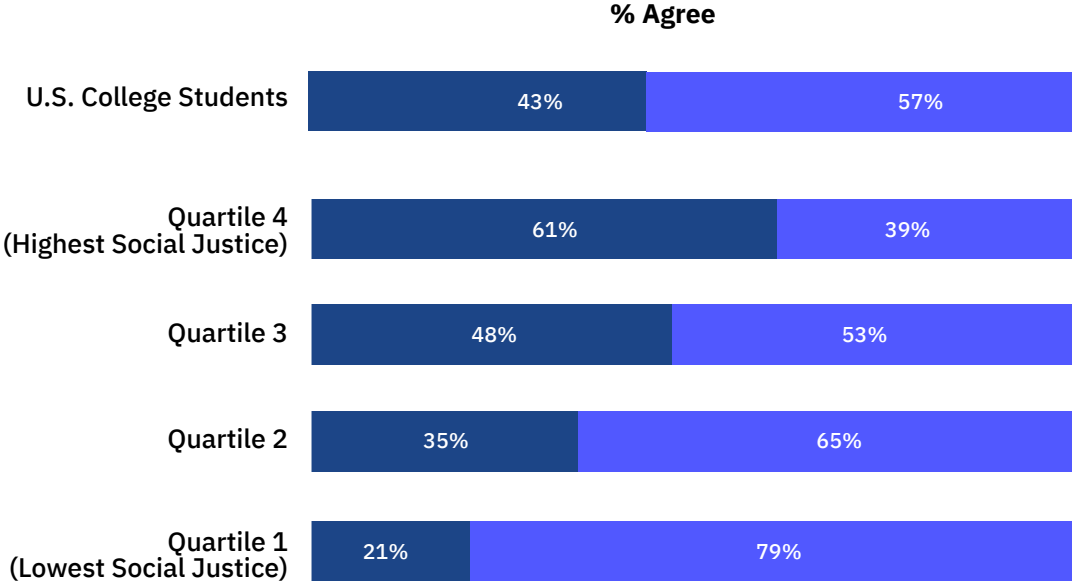
Question: Which statement do you agree with more?

Source: Survey of 2,618 college students in Spring 2023.

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Summary

This chapter delved into the roots of divergent views on campus speech. The findings suggest that students who refuse to engage with views they find to be offensive are not doing so because they have abandoned traditional academic values of shared humanity, the pursuit of truth, or intellectual inquiry. Rather, their motivation lies in a commitment to social justice. For these students, the desire to rectify systemic inequities exists alongside– not in competition with–their commitment to traditional academic principles.

We found, however, that there is disagreement among conservatives and liberals on social justice values, much in the same way that there are ideological differences in their attitudes about campus speech. Moreover, both social justice values and speech attitudes stem from a fundamental difference in how they make sense of the world. Liberals tend to attribute life outcomes to luck and circumstance, while conservatives emphasize hard work and determination as pathways to success.

Rather than framing the free speech debate as a conflict between students of different racial or gender backgrounds, it is more accurate to view the dispute as a clash of worldviews. Because of their disposition, their experience, or both, students have arrived at a set of explanations for how one's group identity and one's individual character interact, and the bearing that each has on shaping one's future. Variations in students' perspectives on cancel culture, free speech, and social justice, then, are simply expressions of these deeper worldviews.

Recommendations

"The biggest takeaway from college comes from being in uncomfortable situations where you question your childhood beliefs and become your own person. When I first arrived at college, I kept my mouth shut [but then] I started to listen to new perspectives and I began talking to people about my views and they usually listen and try to understand.

—MAKAYLA, a moderate and a freshman at a large public university in the South

"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

This report sheds light on the ideological root of free speech conflicts on campus. Liberal students, motivated by a desire to elevate marginalized groups, use social pressure to censure speech that they believe causes harm. Those who do not share this motivation to the same degree, often conservatives, fear their opinions might lead to public censure and ostracism. Despite a culture of self-censorship across the political spectrum, and an ever-present threat of public censure, offensive speech is still prevalent: an alarming number of students from marginalized groups regularly hear offensive remarks even in classroom settings.

By understanding the reasons for public censure, colleges can play a key role in bridging the ideological divide that hampers open discourse on campuses and undermines public trust in higher education. Recognizing and addressing the distinct values and fears held by students of different ideologies is key to creating more inclusive and productive exchanges. Below, we provide concrete recommendations for higher education faculty, staff, and administrators to successfully facilitate constructive dialogue on campus.

1 **Resist the false binary between free speech and inclusion, and challenge students to do the same.**

The prevailing assumption in the national discourse is that universities, administrators, and students must choose their side: they either are "for" free speech or they are "for" inclusion. We contend that this false binary contributes to the high rates of self-censorship and, simultaneously, to the high rates of hurt and offense documented in this study. Most scholars in the area of campus speech agree that free speech and inclusion are not mutually exclusive.[48,49] Indeed, both are equally essential to a healthy academic environment.

It would be naive to claim that free speech and inclusion are never in tension, but when we approach issues with a mindset that honors both, we open the possibility of discovering solutions that do not require us to compromise on core values. This mindset, however, is more than just a thought exercise—it reflects a more expansive view of the interplay between free speech and inclusion. Historical restrictions on free speech, for example, have almost always targeted religious, political, racial, and gender minorities. During the civil rights movement, many southern states passed laws prohibiting boycotts and protests in public spaces, as a strategy for impeding the work of Black activists. Similarly, efforts to diversify the student body can enhance the quality of discourse by bringing in new perspectives. Research conducted in business settings shows that diversity, when coupled with inclusion, leads to greater innovation and higher economic returns.[50,51,52,53]

It will require a cultural shift for all of higher education to embrace and practice this integrative mindset. This work will not be easy. Humans are naturally inclined to simplify the world by imposing binaries where none exist. Holding two seemingly opposed ideas at once requires a level of mental and emotional effort that makes most of us uncomfortable. To resist defaulting to binary thinking will require a holistic culture change effort that encompasses establishing clear norms, modeling by senior leadership, staff, and faculty, skill building with students, and plenty of opportunities to practice dialogue skills across the entire institution.

2 Create campus environments where a broad range of ideas are debated regularly within well-defined norms of respectful dialogue.

Close to half (44%) of U.S. college students we surveyed feel afraid to share their opinions for fear of offending their peers or classmates. This includes 63% of strong conservatives.

Coordinated efforts across multiple university departments will be needed to combat this tendency towards self-censorship and enable students to fully take advantage of the opportunities to engage with diverse ideas. This can begin at orientation and be reinforced in classrooms, residence life, and student-led organizations. For example, new student orientation is a time for senior leadership to communicate the institution's values surrounding free expression and inclusion. Colleges and universities are increasingly adopting curricula in their general education requirements to support students in developing the skills to engage in difficult conversations. Residence Life and other Student Affairs staff, including those working directly with student organizations, should be trained in facilitation and leading educational activities that enhance students' communication and conflict resolution skills.

Frequent practice opportunities across a variety of settings enable students to deeply develop skills of listening and expressing their ideas and opinions and to apply these skills even when the topics are controversial and the conversations are heated. Ideally, by the time students graduate, these skills will have become second nature and they can be leaders in working across lines of difference in their professional roles and their communities.

3 Support faculty and staff in facilitating student dialogue.

One in four students (25%) reported being regularly offended in the classroom, including 41% of non-binary students.

To create inclusive environments that minimize the risk of offense and simultaneously promote a robust exchange of ideas, educators need to take proactive steps, including working with students to create shared norms, skillfully guiding discussions, and promptly addressing any norm violations.

Recent research shows that educators are often reluctant to engage students in dialogue on contentious topics.[54] The recent scrutiny of educators and the diminishing protection for faculty in certain states likely exacerbate this hesitancy. Many may believe that, because they are not deliberately bringing contentious topics into their classroom, they do not need to have an explicit conversation with students about shared norms for engaging in discussion. The data in this report would suggest that we need to revisit such assumptions since an alarming number of students are regularly offended in the classroom setting.

Our previous work suggests that educators intuitively understand the value of affording students the opportunity to engage with the ideas that are being debated in broader society.[55] But most educators will need training, support, and incentives to open up such discussions in their classrooms, given today's political environment.

In terms of training, it is important that training does not become overly focused on reactive strategies such as how to handle offensive comments or hurt feelings. Most of discussion management is proactive. That is, a well-planned discussion with a group of skilled students operating under shared norms will be much less likely to result in offensive comments and hurt feelings. Training, therefore, should focus on helping educators to be well-versed in the process of guiding a group of students to co-create group norms, crafting effective prompts, and selecting structures for discussion. To be clear, instructors should also be prepared to address norm violations, but these incidents are best handled when the group already shares an understanding of what is and is not acceptable in the classroom.

4 Offer students opportunities to engage in discussions regarding the divisive topics and beliefs found in this study.

Our survey revealed several contentious topics among students. These include cancel culture, the centrality of marginalized group status, whether life outcomes are determined by one's own actions or by external forces, how to weigh intentions and impact of speech, and what defines harmful speech. If facilitated thoughtfully, explicit conversations about these topics will be engaging for students and can help to alleviate the unspoken but widely felt tension among students and broaden their understanding of other perspectives.

However, considering the sensitivity of the topic, it is crucial to establish a high level of trust and psychological safety when engaging students in these discussions. Creating an environment where students feel safe to express their thoughts and concerns is paramount. Facilitators should be well-trained to lead difficult conversations, and the group of students engaging with this topic should have already had ample practice with lower-stakes conversations. (As a general rule of thumb, topics that are further removed from students' day-to-day lives, such as hypothetical situations or historical events carry less potential for hurt and offense). In discussions that can get heated, structures such as talking sticks (where only one person speaks at a time) help slow down the pace of exchange and keep the conversation at a manageable level. Still, it will be important to frame these conversations not as debates but as opportunities to consider various perspectives and to clarify one's own thinking. Mistakes and clumsy speech should be normalized. Finally, it is critical to debrief these conversations, either as a group or in written reflections. A structured debrief solidifies learning and allows students to voice lingering feelings of hurt or offense so that relationships can be repaired.

5 **Educate students on how to support marginalized groups while preserving the principles of free expression.**

The results of this report suggest that students who support canceling or deplatforming individuals perceive these actions as necessary due to a perceived lack of other accountability mechanisms.

These findings carry several implications for improving communication between student advocates and those in positions of power on campus, as well as for designing systems that are equitable, transparent, and consistent. Additionally, they underscore the importance of expanding students' skill sets to include less obvious but more effective methods of responding to hateful speech.

For instance, while the typical response of students on most college campuses to a Westboro Baptist Church protest might involve organized counter-protests, a few select groups have chosen a different approach. These students have organized "rainbow dance parties" as a means of demonstrating support for LGBTQ+ communities without engaging in direct confrontation or giving undue attention to the messages espoused by the Westboro Baptist Church.[56]

By expanding their repertoire of approaches, students can effectively advocate for marginalized groups while fostering an environment that encourages dialogue and promotes positive change.

Conclusion

" **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. Although my classmates are different from me, everyone respects each other and lets them have their moment to shine.**

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

Colleges were not always political battlegrounds; historically, they fostered robust debates across differences. As society fractures along partisan lines, so does academia. And the reverse is also true: culture wars on college campuses become national flashpoints. From the Free Speech Movement in the 1960s to recent protests over racial justice, universities incubate movements that have ripple effects in society. Moreover, with a significant number of graduates in media, government, and cultural elites, partisan ideas nurtured on campus often reverberate through public debates. Both the right and the left view shaping campus discourse as a means to win broader ideological battles.

Higher education plays a special role in the functioning of a democratic society, including advancing knowledge, preparing future citizens, and driving intellectual and cultural growth. As intellectual and cultural leaders, academia has a crucial role to play in healing the nation's political divides. By embracing that role, institutions can graduate exemplary scholars and engaged citizens, create a community for learning that simultaneously promotes freedom of speech and inclusion, and restore public trust in higher education.

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