

ON FREE SPEECH, HARVARD FAILS WITH FLYING COLORS

How one of America's top academic institutions completely missed the mark in FIRE's rankings

Harvard is consistently named one of the best undergraduate universities in the United States, but FIRE frequently finds itself giving this all-star academic school failing grades.

Harvard finished below 75% of the schools surveyed in FIRE's College Free Speech Rankings in each of the past four years. And this year, it truly outdid itself, receiving the worst score ever: 0.00 out of a possible 100. This landed it dead last in the rankings — 248 out of 248 schools — with an “Abysmal” speech climate rating.

So why did Harvard do so poorly?

First of all, Harvard has a dismal record of responding to deplatforming attempts on its campus. From 2019 to this year, Harvard penalized four professors for their speech or research, three of whom it terminated or whose contracts it did not renew. It also revoked a student's admission for his years-old social media statements, disinvited a scholar from campus over her viewpoints, and was the site of a substantial event disruption involving protestors who occupied the stage and refused to leave.

Harvard also performed poorly on a number of the survey-based components of the rankings.

- Just over a quarter of Harvard students reported that they are comfortable publicly disagreeing with their professor on a controversial political topic.
- Only roughly a third think that it is “very” or “extremely” clear that the administration protects free speech on campus.
- An alarming 30% think that using violence to stop a campus speech is at least “rarely” acceptable, up from 26% last year.

What's more, the percentage of Harvard students who said they self-censor on campus “fairly often” or “very often” is on the rise, increasing from 16% two years ago to 22% last year and to 24% this year.

Last but not least, Harvard earns FIRE's “yellow light” rating for its speech policies, because it maintains policies that restrict — or could too easily be used to restrict — protected expression.

Harvard prides itself on attracting the brightest students and professors to

seek “Veritas,” or truth, its institutional motto. But truth-seeking depends on the free exchange of ideas. Without a major course-correction, Harvard's educational mission is sure to suffer along with its speech climate.

That's why FIRE is calling on Harvard to turn the ship around. Our Engagement and Mobilization team is leading the way with a take-action campaign through which concerned people can tell Harvard's president to reform ambiguous speech codes and publicly profess support for free expression.



FIRE's Mary Griffin led the way to help DePauw improve in the rankings.

Bringing Harvard from zero to hero may seem like a tall order, but we know it's possible. With help from FIRE's Policy Reform team, 2021's last-place school DePauw University went from a “red light” to a “green light” school and landed at a solid 41 in this year's rankings.

If Harvard follows suit, it may yet make honor roll in the coming years — or at least stay out of detention.

