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8 ways college student views on free speech are evolving

As college campuses across the United States grapple with questions surrounding the power and limits of free expression, a new Gallup-Knight Foundation survey of U.S. college students provides a view into how attitudes about the First Amendment on college campuses are evolving and what that means for our democracy.

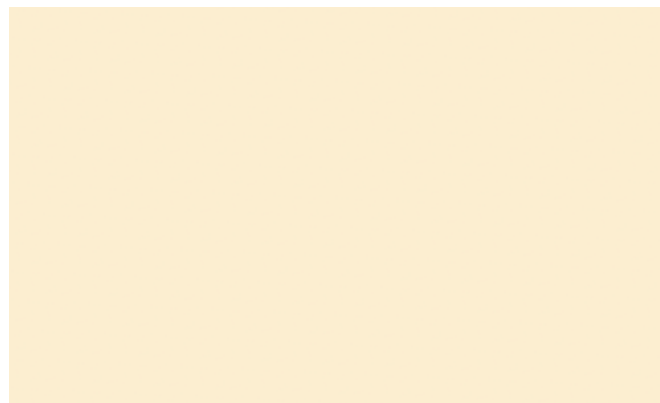
The study, sponsored by Knight Foundation, the American Council on Education, the Charles Koch Foundation, and the Stanton Foundation surveyed 3,014 U.S. college students, including an oversample of 216 students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). It builds on a 2016 study by Gallup, Knight Foundation and the Newseum.

While U.S. college students show strong support for the First Amendment, many also approve of limits on speech to foster an environment where diverse perspectives are respected. These competing views and habits can have an effect on the freedoms that the First Amendment guarantees. Understanding them will help to preserve our most fundamental rights into the future.

Here are 8 findings that stood out to us:

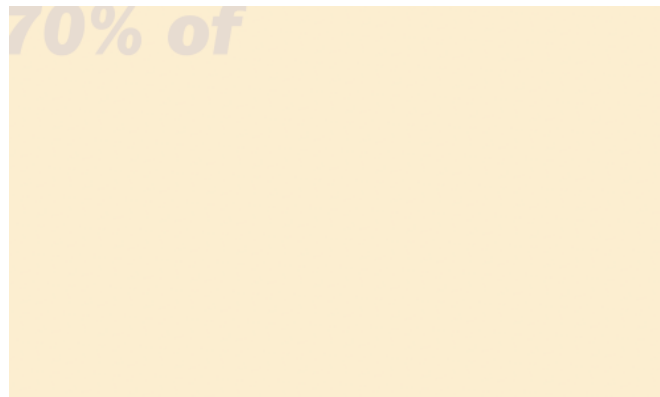
1. Free expression is important, but so is diversity

The majority of college students say protecting free speech rights (56 percent) and promoting a diverse and inclusive society (52 percent) are both extremely important to democracy. But when asked which was more important, students chose, by narrow margin, diversity and inclusion over free speech, 53 percent to 46 percent. Women, blacks and Democrats are more likely than their counterparts to choose inclusion over free speech.



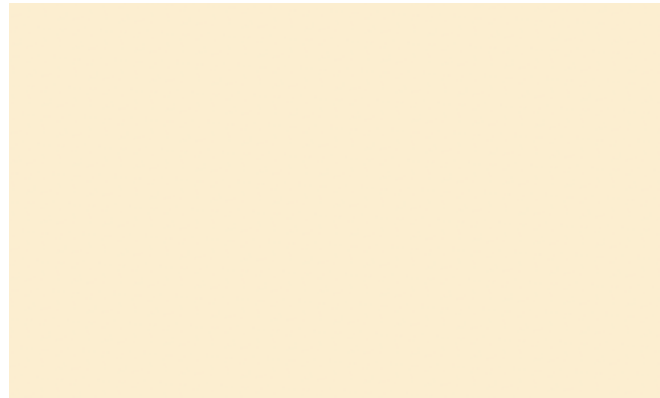
2. Students support free speech, but increasingly favor limits

Students (70 percent) still favor an open learning environment that allows all types of speech over one that puts limits on offensive speech, however not as widely as they did in 2016 (78 percent). Democrats, blacks and women are among the groups that are less supportive of an open environment than they were in 2016; Republicans still overwhelmingly favor an open environment (86 percent).



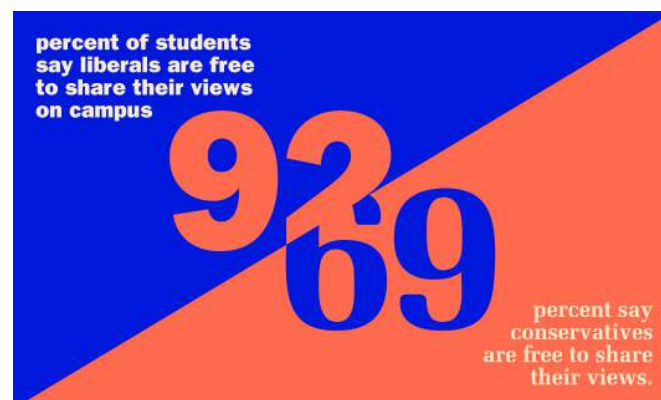
3. Confidence in the security of First Amendment rights is dropping

While the majority of college students continue to view First Amendment rights as secure rather than threatened, this number has dropped since 2016. Sixty-four percent of college students say freedom of speech is secure, down from 73 percent in 2016; 60 percent, down from 81 percent, say freedom of the press is secure.



4. Political conservatives are seen as less able to express their views

Students (54 percent) are more likely to think the climate on their campus prevents people from speaking their mind because others might take offense. While a majority of college students, 69 percent, believe political conservatives are able to freely express their views on campus, many more believe political liberals (92 percent) and other campus groups are able to share their opinions freely.



5. Some students say shouting down speakers and using violence is sometimes acceptable

Many colleges struggle when inviting controversial figures to speak on campus. Ninety percent of college students say it is never acceptable to use violence to prevent someone from speaking, but 10 percent say is sometimes acceptable. A majority (62 percent) also say shouting down speakers is never acceptable, although 37 percent believe it is sometimes acceptable.

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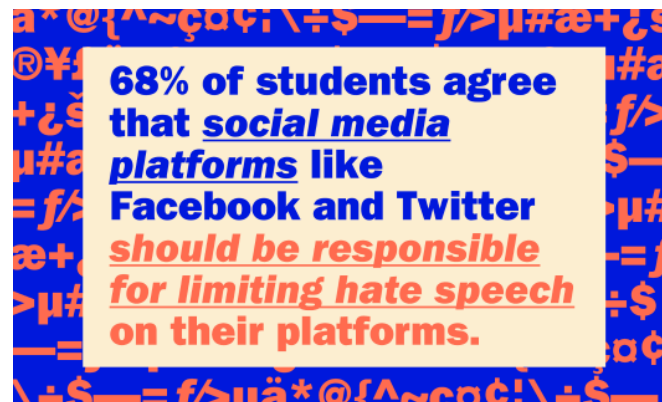
6. Social media can stifle free expression

Students say discussion of social and political issues mostly takes place on social media (57 percent), rather than in public areas of campus (43 percent). They increasingly agree that social media can stifle free expression because people can block those whose views they disagree (60 percent) or because people are afraid of being attacked (59 percent).

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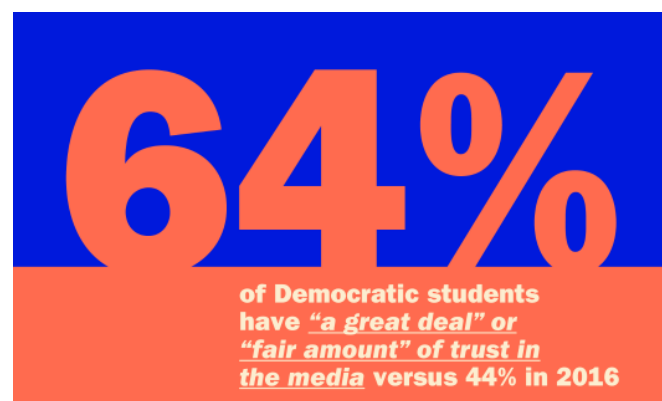
7. Students believe social media companies should be responsible for limiting hate speech

Eight in 10 students agree that the internet has been responsible for an increase in hate speech. Sixty-eight percent of students strongly or somewhat agree that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter should be responsible for limiting hate speech on their platforms. While 79 percent of Democrats hold this belief, 52 percent of Republicans do. Black students are also more likely than their white students to think social media companies should to limit hate speech.



8. Trust in the media varies depending on political affiliation

Democratic students express significantly more trust in the news media now; 64 say they have “a great deal” or “fair amount” of trust in the media to report the news accurately and fairly versus (44 percent) in 2016. Republicans’ trust remains low with 64 percent expressing “not much” or no trust in the media.





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