



COLLEGE PULSE

FREE EXPRESSION ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

MAY 2019

A COLLEGE PULSE STUDY
COMMISSIONED BY
KNIGHT FOUNDATION



Study Overview

Over the past few years, on college campuses around the country, student protests against controversial speakers have spiraled into moments of intense drama. These incidents — which have prevented controversial speakers from engaging on campuses like the University of California, Berkeley¹ and Middlebury² — are high-stakes examples of a debate that is increasingly common on college campuses, about the extent to which potentially offensive speech should be considered against the goal of promoting a more diverse and inclusive learning environment.

Knight Foundation commissioned College Pulse to undertake a national study of college student attitudes on freedom of expression and diversity inclusion, including core questions used in past Knight surveys by other firms.³ The survey was fielded December 22, 2018 to December 25, 2018, via the College Pulse mobile app and web portal. Findings represent a sample of 4,407 full-time students currently enrolled in four-year degree programs. The initial sample was drawn from College Pulse's Undergraduate Student Panel, then comprised of over 215,000 verified students in all 50 states and subsequently weighted according to demographic distributions from the 2017 Current Population Survey (CPS).

This report details the findings from the survey.

[1] Peters, J. W. (2017, April 26). In Ann Coulter's Speech Battle, Signs That Conservatives Are Emboldened. Retrieved January 7, 2019, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/us/politics/ann-coulter-university-of-california-berkeley.html?module=inline>

[2] Saul, S. (2017, May 24). Dozens of Middlebury Students Are Disciplined for Charles Murray Protest. Retrieved January 7, 2019, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/24/us/middlebury-college-charles-murray-bell-curve.html>

[3] Knight Foundation/Gallup First Amendment Study, December 2017

About

About COLLEGE PULSE

College Pulse is an online survey and analytics company dedicated to understanding the attitudes, preferences and behaviors of today's college students. College Pulse offers custom data-driven marketing and research solutions, utilizing its unique Undergraduate Student Panel that currently includes 240,000 undergraduate college student respondents from more than 200 four-year colleges and universities in all 50 states.

For more information, visit <https://collegepulse.com/>

About KNIGHT FOUNDATION

Knight Foundation is a national foundation with strong local roots. We invest in journalism, in the arts, and in the success of cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. Our goal is to foster informed and engaged communities, which we believe are essential for a healthy democracy.

For more information, visit <http://www.knightfoundation.org>.

Executive Summary

Findings show that despite widespread news coverage of campus protests, young people are generally supportive of free speech protections and skeptical about actions taken to disrupt speakers from engaging the campus community. However, there are significant divisions by gender and race that help explain why these issues remain lightning rods on college campuses today.

Students are divided over whether it's more important to promote an inclusive society that welcomes diverse groups or to protect the extremes of free speech, even if those protections come at the expense of inclusivity. Nearly six in 10 students believe that hate speech ought to be protected under the First Amendment. However, students who belong to historically marginalized groups — African American students, gender nonconforming students, and gay and lesbian students —are far more sensitive to unrestricted free speech, particularly hate speech.

There is general support for the principle of protesting public expression on campus, but few students believe that disruptive actions are ever always justifiable. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of students categorically reject the use of violence as a part of protesting those with whom they disagree.

College students generally believe that people are too sensitive about the use of particular words and language. Students also widely agree that fear over offending their classmates prevents some students from expressing their views honestly.

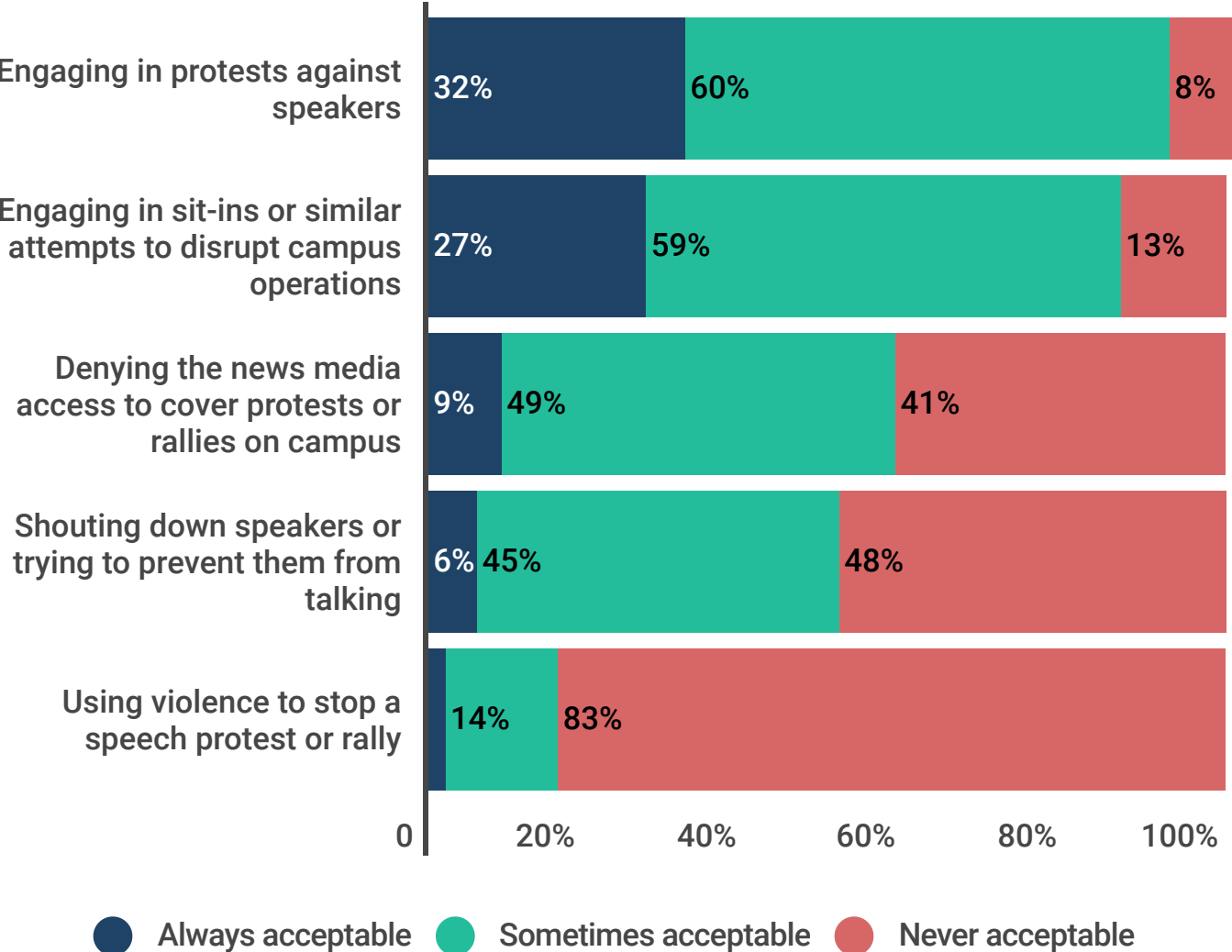
Students today express less confidence in the veracity of the news media than they did the previous year. Less than half of U.S. college students trust the news media to cover current events accurately. But there are stark divisions between partisans with Democratic college students expressing far more confidence than Republicans.

Expressions of Public Protest

There is considerable variability among college students in the type of action they believe is acceptable when it comes to expressions of protest. Roughly one-third (32 percent) of students say that it is always acceptable to engage in protests against speakers who are invited to campus, while six in 10 (60 percent) say this type of activity is sometimes acceptable. Only 8 percent say it is never acceptable. There is little variation in student views by race and ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation or political identity.

College Students Express Doubts About Acceptability of Campus Protests

Percent of college students who say activity is...



A similar number of students say that engaging in sit-ins or similar attempts to disrupt campus operations can be justified. Twenty-seven percent say this type of activity is always acceptable, while 59 percent say it is only sometimes acceptable. Thirteen percent say these disruptions are never acceptable.

College students are generally unlikely to believe that shouting down speakers is acceptable. Only 6 percent of college students report that this type of behavior is always acceptable, while close to half (45 percent) say it is sometimes acceptable. About half (48 percent) of college students say this type of activity is never acceptable.

College students express similar views about whether it's acceptable to deny the news media access to cover a protest or rally. Fewer than one in 10 (9 percent) students believe this type of activity is always acceptable, while nearly half say it can sometimes be acceptable. About four in 10 students say that denying the news media access to cover an event, rally or protest on campus is never acceptable. The perspectives of college students vary substantially by race, ethnicity and gender.

Nearly six in 10 (58 percent) college men say it is never acceptable to shout down speakers or try to prevent them from talking. Substantially fewer college women agree. About four in 10 (41 percent) college women agree that this behavior is never appropriate while a majority say this is sometimes (53 percent) or always (5 percent) acceptable.

White students are far more likely than students of color to oppose actions designed to shut down speakers. More than half (53 percent) of white students say it is never acceptable to try and prevent speakers on campus from expressing their views while fewer Hispanic (41 percent), black (38 percent) and Asian Pacific Islander students (37 percent) agree. Importantly, there is a wide gender gap in the views of white students. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of white male students say shouting down speakers is never acceptable a view shared by fewer than half (45 percent) of white female students.

Substantially fewer college students say it is acceptable to employ violence to stop a speech or rally from taking place. Only 2 percent of students say this is always acceptable, and 14 percent say it is sometimes acceptable. The overwhelming majority (83 percent) say this type of behavior is never acceptable.

There was widespread agreement among students across lines of gender, race and ethnicity and political affiliation. Identical numbers of male and female students (83 percent) believe violence is always unacceptable as a method of protest. Similar numbers of white (85 percent), Hispanic (81 percent) and black students (78 percent) say that using violence is never an acceptable approach. Nearly three-quarters of API students also believe using violent to stop speech is never acceptable. Finally, more than eight in 10 Democratic, independent and Republican students oppose the use of violent actions to stop a speech or rally.

Diversity and Inclusivity vs. Free Speech

College students are divided over whether it's more important to promote an inclusive society that welcomes diverse groups or to protect free speech, even if those protections come at the expense of inclusivity. More than half (53 percent) of students say that protecting free speech rights is the more important value, while nearly as many (46 percent) say that the more important goal is to promote an inclusive and welcoming society. But opinions are sharply divided by gender, race and religion.

Nearly six in 10 college women say that promoting an inclusive society is the more important value, a view shared by only 28 percent of college men. More than seven in 10 (71 percent) college men place a higher emphasis on protecting free speech, while only 41 percent of college women express this view.

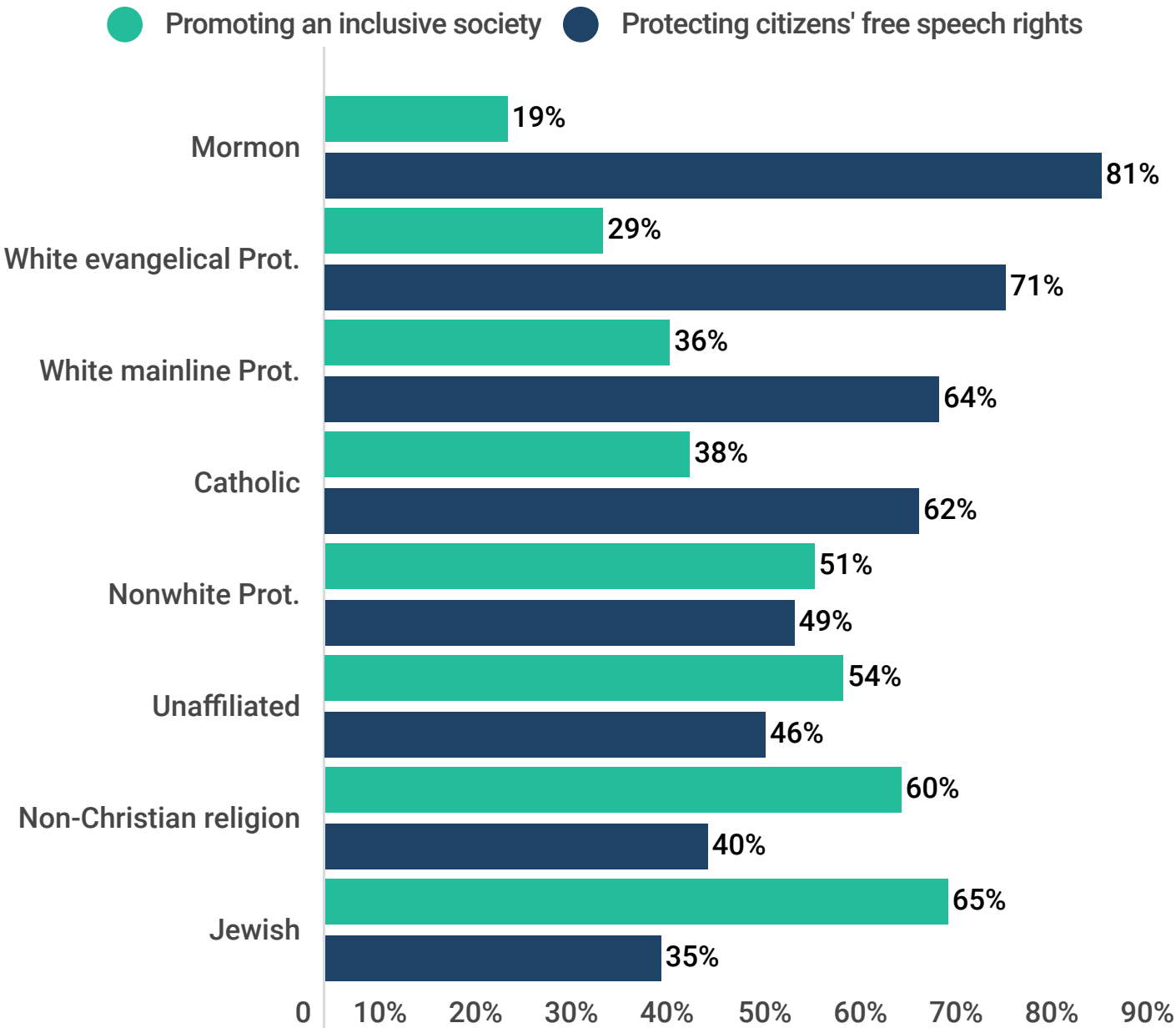
Among racial groups, black college students are likelier than students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds to say that inclusivity is a more important value than free speech. More than six in ten black college students and less than half of Hispanic (49 percent), API (46 percent), and white (42 percent) students agree that promoting an inclusive society that welcomes diverse groups is more important than protecting free speech. A majority of white (58 percent) and API (52 percent) students and half (50 percent) of Hispanic students say that protecting free speech rights should be the higher priority.

There is a stark divide between Christian and non-Christian students. A majority of Mormon (81 percent), white evangelical Protestant (71 percent), white mainline Protestant (64 percent), and Catholic students (62 percent) say that protecting free speech is more important than promoting inclusivity. In contrast, a majority of Jewish

students (65 percent), students who are members of East Asian religions such as Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism (60 percent), and religiously unaffiliated students (54 percent) say that promoting a welcoming, inclusive society is more important. Nonwhite Protestant college students, notably, are about evenly divided: roughly equal numbers believe that inclusivity (51 percent) and free speech (49 percent) should be emphasized.

Religious Divide on Campus over Diversity and Inclusion vs. Free Speech

Percent of college students who say ____ is more important



The religious divide is evident among students regardless of their racial and ethnic background, however it is most pronounced among white students. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of white, non-Hispanic Christians say it is more important to protect free speech rights than promoting an inclusive society. In contrast, fewer than half (49 percent) of white students who do not belong to a Christian denomination say protecting free speech should be the priority.⁴ Nonwhite Christians are somewhat less likely than nonwhite students who do not identify as Christian to prioritize the promotion of an inclusive society over protecting free speech rights (46 percent vs. 57 percent).

Not surprisingly, views among college students vary sharply by political orientation. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of Democratic students say that promoting an inclusive society is the more important priority, while a majority of independent (63 percent) and Republican (84 percent) students disagree, saying that free speech ought to be the higher priority.

Finally, gay and lesbian college students are significantly more likely than heterosexual college students to say inclusivity should be prioritized. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of gay and lesbian college students say that promoting an inclusive and welcoming society is more important than protecting free speech, compared to 38 percent of heterosexual students. Sixty-two percent of heterosexual students say that protecting free speech is more important.

Offensive Language and Hate Speech

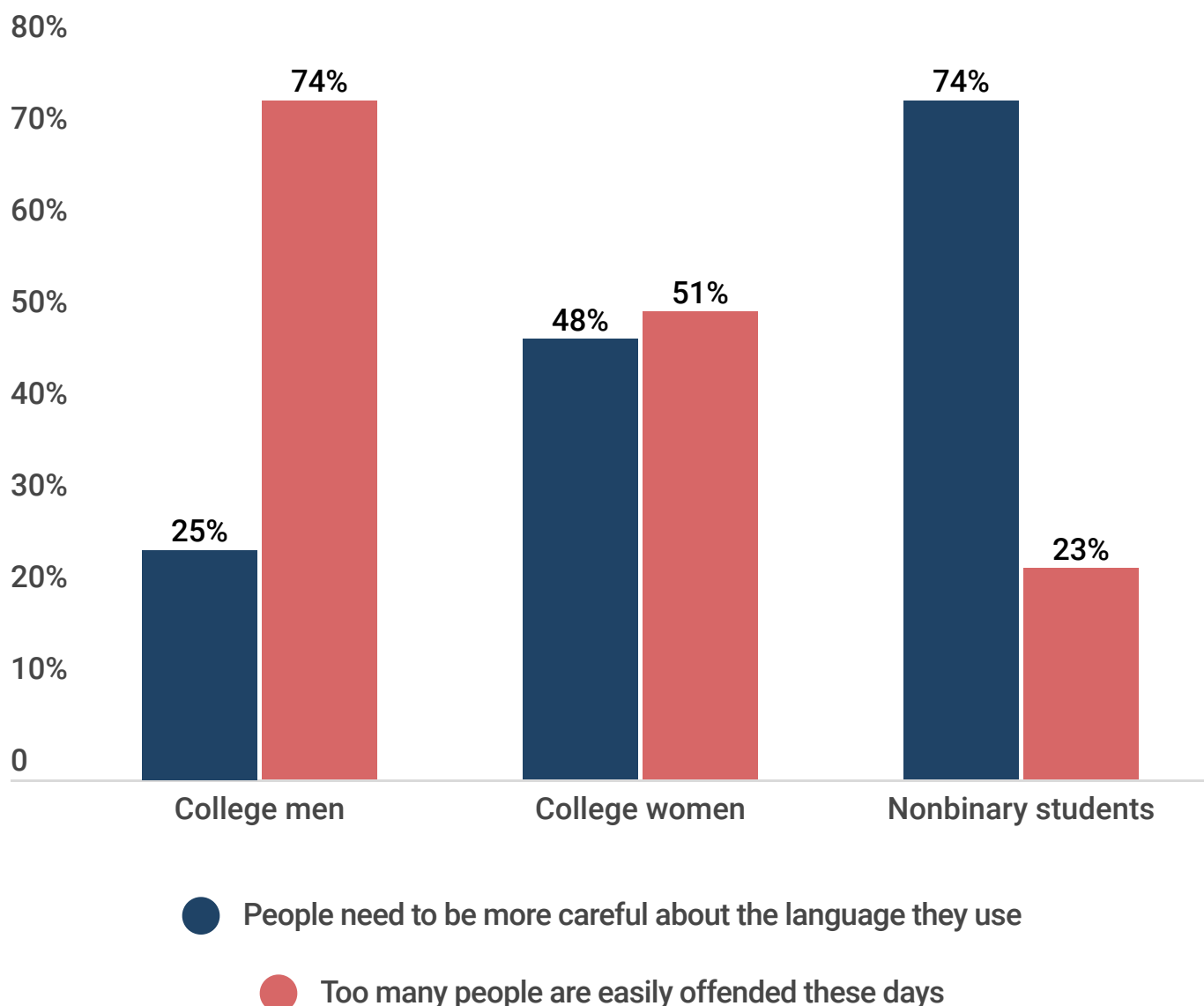
When asked which is the bigger problem — people speaking insensitively in a way that offends others, or people being too sensitive about others' language — most college students agree that people are too sensitive, rather than perceiving a greater overall need for people to exercise care in how they talk.

[4] The results of a multivariate logistic regression model that controlled for various demographic characteristics, such as religious affiliation, gender, race and ethnicity, found that gender more strongly predicted attitudes about free speech and inclusion among students than any other attribute. Religious affiliation and race are both significant predictors of views about the tradeoff between inclusion and free speech among students. Importantly, race alone is not a strong predictor of attitudes, but a separate model that included an interaction of race and gender found a considerably larger effect. This finding suggests that race only has an effect among male students.

Six in 10 college students say that these days too many people are easily offended over the language that others use. Fewer than four in 10 college students say that to avoid offending others of different backgrounds, people should be more careful about the language they use. There are significant divisions by gender, race, and religion.

College women are roughly divided over whether Americans need to be more careful with their language (48 percent) or whether some people are too easily offended (51 percent). In contrast, roughly three-quarters (74 percent) of college men say that too many people are easily offended.

A Campus Gender Divide in Views about Offensive Language



Black college students stand out in their belief that people should choose their words more carefully. A majority (57 percent) of black students say people need to be more careful to avoid offending those with different backgrounds. In contrast, fewer than four in 10 Hispanic (38 percent), API (38 percent), and white students (35 percent) say that people should be more cautious about what they say. Meanwhile, a majority of white (64 percent), Hispanic (61 percent), and API (58 percent) college students say that too many people take offense because of the language that others use.

Notably, Jewish students are unique among religious and nonreligious groups in their concern about the need to avoid offending others. A majority (57 percent) of Jewish college students agree that people need to be more careful about the language they use. A majority of all other religious and nonreligious students disagree.

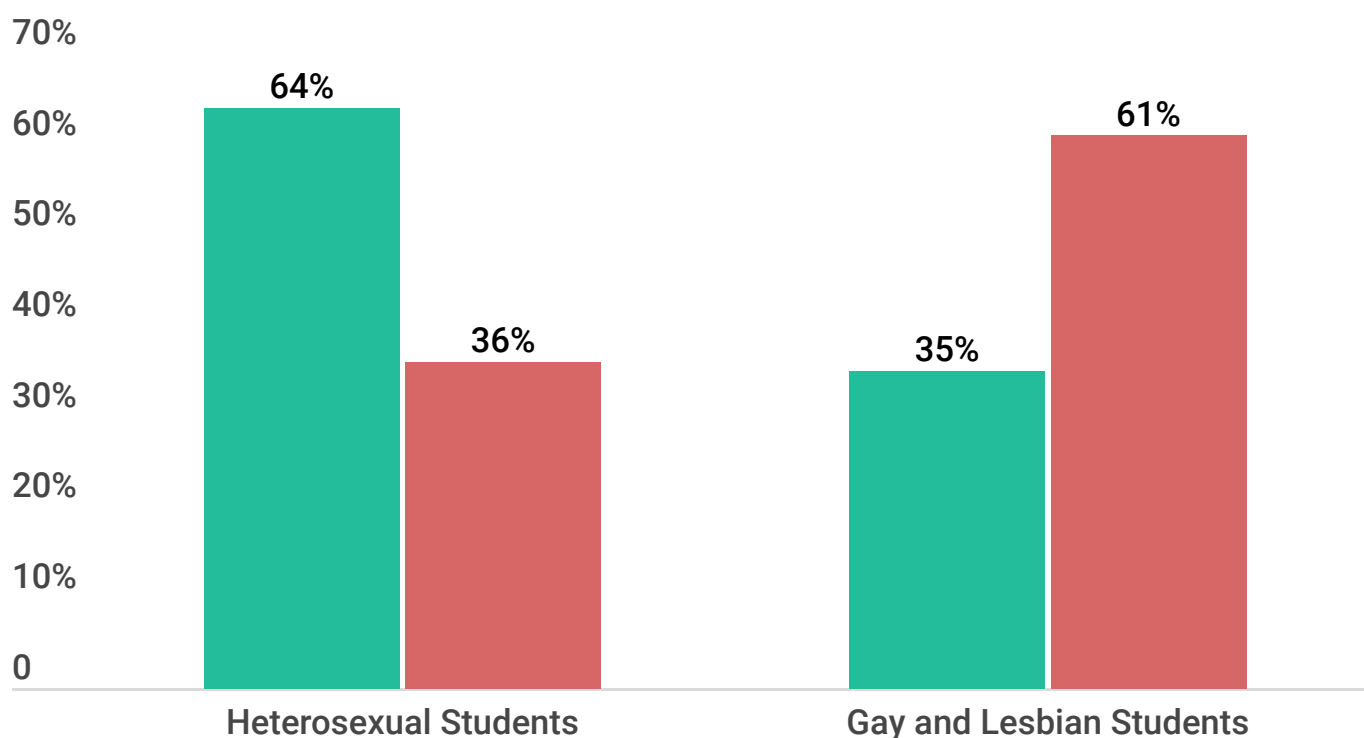
Hate Speech

Most college students agree that hate speech, defined as “attacks [on] people based on their race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation,” ought to be protected by the First Amendment. Nearly six in 10 college students believe such speech should be protected, while 41 percent disagree.

There are substantial divisions by gender on this question. A majority (53 percent) of college women say that hate speech should not be protected by the First Amendment, while 46 percent say it should. In contrast, roughly three-quarters (74 percent) of college men say hate speech should be protected by the First Amendment. Notably, more than two-thirds (69 percent) of college students who identify as gender nonbinary say that hate speech should not be protected by the First Amendment. Twenty-nine percent say that it should be protected.

The views of college students vary significantly by sexual orientation. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of heterosexual students say that hate speech should be protected, while only 35 percent of gay and lesbian college students agree. More than six in 10 gay and lesbian students do not believe that hate speech should be protected.

Gay and Lesbian Students Less Likely to Say Hate Speech Should be Protected by the First Amendment



● Yes, hate speech should be protected ● No, hate speech should NOT be protected

There are also significant divisions by racial and ethnic background. A majority of white (62 percent) and API (56 percent) students agree that hate speech should be protected by the First Amendment. Hispanic and black students are more divided. Less than half (48 percent) of black college students believe that hate speech should be protected, while a slim majority (51 percent) say it should not. Similarly, about half (52 percent) of Hispanic students say hate speech is a form of expression that should be protected under the First Amendment, while nearly as many (47 percent) disagree.

Students who belong to Christian denominations express much greater support for protecting hate speech than students who belong to non-Christian traditions. Less than half of Jewish students (45 percent) and students who belong to eastern religious traditions (46 percent) believe that hate speech is a form of expression that should be protected by the First Amendment. In contrast, large majorities of Mormons (81 percent), white evangelical Protestants (76 percent), white mainline Protestants (68 percent) and Catholics (61 percent) support protecting hate speech.

The Political Climate on College Campuses

College students largely agree that the political and social climate on college campuses prevents some students from saying what they really believe because they're afraid of offending their classmates. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of college students say their campus climate precludes students from expressing their true opinions because their classmates might find them offensive. About one-third (31 percent) disagree. Agreement with this statement has increased modestly over the last 12 months. In 2017, more than six in 10 college students said that a desire to avoid offending their classmates prevented students from expressing their views.⁶

Nearly three-quarters of male college students and close to two-thirds of female college students say the climate at their school prevents some students from expressing their views. However, fewer than half (43 percent) of nonbinary⁷ college students agree.

At least six in 10 API (74 percent), white (69 percent), Hispanic (66 percent), and black (61 percent) students say that concern about offending their classmates prevents some students from expressing their opinions.

Where Do Political Conversations Take Place?

There is broad agreement among college students that discussions of political and social topics are more likely to occur online than face-to-face. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of college students say that political discussions among college students are more likely to occur online, while 35 percent say they are more likely to occur face-to-face on campus or in other public areas. There is general consensus among college students that political topics are likelier to be discussed online, regardless of students' gender, race and ethnicity, and religious or political affiliation.

Notably, college students today are more likely to say these types of discussions are occurring online than they were last year. In 2017, a majority (57 percent) of students said conversations about political and social topics were more likely to take place online, while 43 percent said they more often took place in person.⁸

[6] Knight Foundation/Gallup First Amendment Study, December 2017

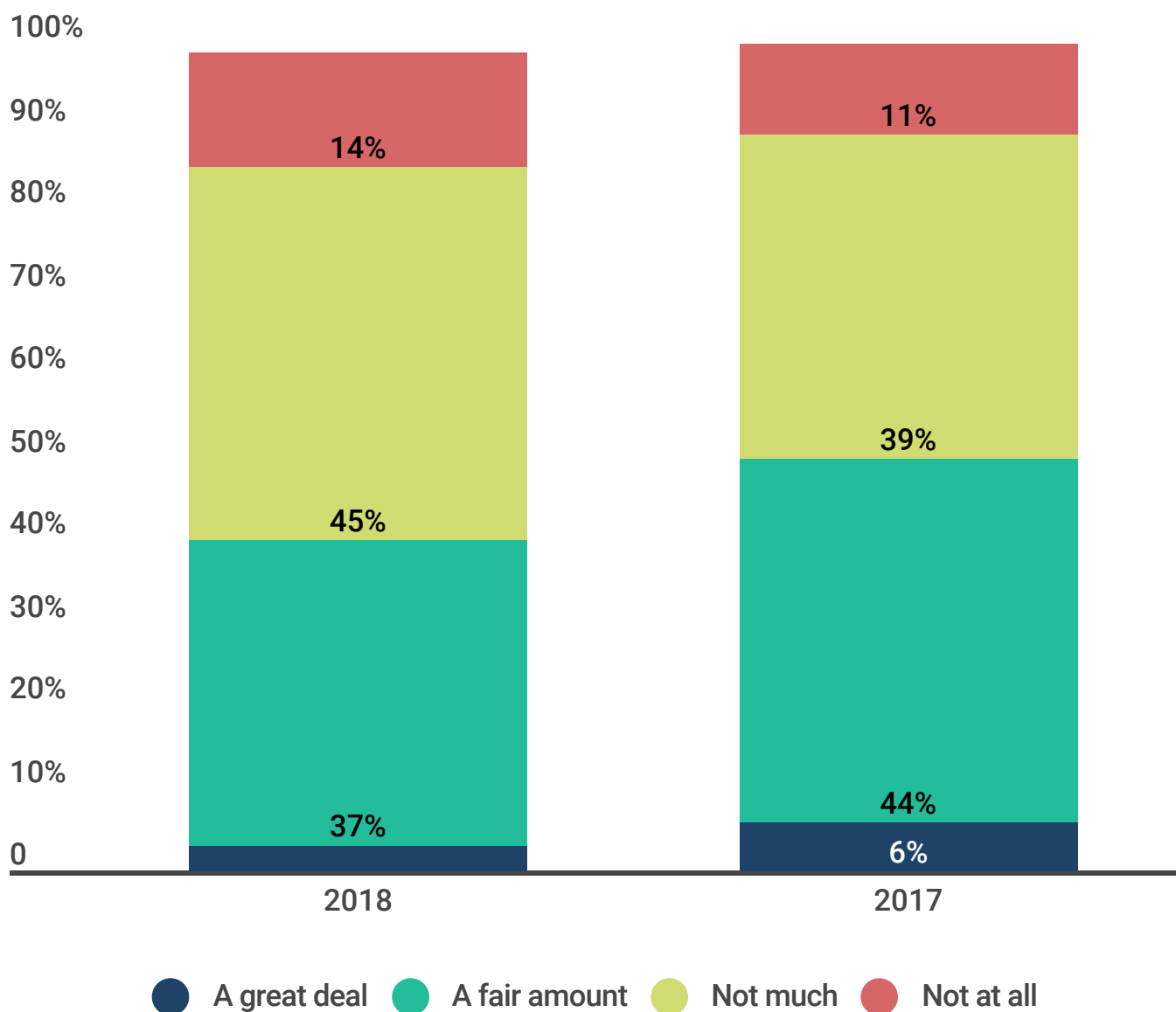
[7] Nonbinary students are those who do not identify as either male or female.

[8] Knight Foundation/Gallup First Amendment Study, December 2017

Declining Trust in the Media

Less than half of U.S. college students trust the news media to cover current events accurately. Four in 10 say they trust the media a great deal (3 percent) or a fair amount (37 percent). Nearly half (45 percent) report not having much confidence in the media to report the news accurately, while 14 percent say they do not trust the media at all. Over the last year, confidence in the media among this group has fallen considerably. In 2017, half (50 percent) of college students said that they trusted the media to report the news accurately and fairly.

Percent of college students who trust the news media to report the news accurately and fairly



There are only modest differences between male and female college students in terms of their levels of trust in the media. Roughly four in 10 college women (42 percent) and college men (39 percent) say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in the news media. Close to half of college women (47 percent) and about four in 10 (4 percent) college men report that they do not have much trust in the media. But college men (18 percent) are more likely than college women (11 percent) to report that they do not trust the media at all.

Among racial and ethnic groups, white college students have the lowest levels of trust in the media. Only 37 percent of white college students express at least a fair amount of confidence in the media's ability to report the news accurately. More than four in 10 black (42 percent) and Hispanic students (45 percent) have similar levels of trust in the media. Notably, a majority (54 percent) of AP students are at least fairly confident that the news media gets the facts right.

Trust in the media is also heavily stratified across political identity. A majority (58 percent) of college students who identify as Democrat say they have a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in the media to be accurate. In contrast, only one-third of college students who identify as politically independent report having at least a fair amount of confidence in the media, while less than one-quarter (24 percent) of college students who identify as Republican say the same. Nearly half of Republican college students say they do not have much confidence in the media's accuracy, while 26 percent report having no confidence at all.

Conclusion

Overall, most college students believe that the political and social climate constrains public expression on campus because students are afraid of offending their fellow classmates. But when it comes to questions about free speech and campus protests, a majority of college students also support broad speech protections, even when these protections may come at the expense of broader inclusivity. They generally agree that hate speech should be protected by the First Amendment, and few believe it's acceptable to shout down campus speakers, disrupt operations or engage in violent protests.

At the same time, there are deep divisions among college students by race, political affiliation, gender and sexual orientation that point to broad and enduring rifts within campus communities on these issues. Although there is general agreement across these groups that the political and social climate on their campus stifles certain types of speech, female college students are likelier than male college students to place a premium on inclusivity, even when it comes at the expense of protecting free speech. There are similar divisions along political lines, with Democratic college students favoring inclusivity over free speech protections, while Republican college students feel the opposite. Black college students stand out from other racial and ethnic groups in their belief that people should choose their words more carefully to avoid offending others. College students of color are also less likely than white college students to believe that hate speech should be protected by the First Amendment.

These divisions highlight the extent to which issues surrounding free speech, hate speech, and the need to promote inclusivity on campus remain controversial and contested among college students today.

Methodology

The survey was designed and conducted by College Pulse and made possible through funding from Knight Foundation. Results of the survey are based on interviews conducted between December 22, 2018 and December 25, 2018. Interviews were conducted in English among a sample of 4,407 students who are currently enrolled full-time in four-year degree programs. The response rate for the survey was 44 percent.

The initial sample was drawn from College Pulse's Undergraduate Student Panel that then included more than 215,000 verified undergraduate students representing more than 200 different four-year colleges and universities in all 50 states. Panel members are recruited by a number of methods to help ensure diversity in the panel population, including web advertising, permission-based email campaigns, and partnerships with university organizations. Panelists can acquire Pulse Points for every survey they take and redeem them for a chance to win prizes like an iPhone, electric bike, or gift cards.

College Pulse uses a two-stage validation process to ensure that all its surveys include only students currently enrolled in four-year colleges or universities. Students are required to provide an .edu email address to join the panel and required to verify that they are currently enrolled either part-time or full-time in a four-year degree program. All invitations to complete surveys are sent using the student's .edu email address.

To reduce the effects of any non-response bias, a post-stratification adjustment was applied based on demographic distributions from the 2017 Current Population Survey (CPS). The post-stratification weight rebalanced the sample based on the following benchmarks: age, race and ethnicity, and gender. The sample weighting was accomplished using an iterative proportional fitting (IPF) process that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables. Weights were trimmed to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the final results.

The use of these weights in statistical analysis ensures that the demographic characteristics of the sample closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the target populations. Even with these adjustments, surveys may be subject to error or bias due to question wording, context and order effects.

[10] Once invited, students are directed to the Pulse App or web portal to complete the survey.

Survey Topline

Knight Foundation/College Pulse First Amendment Survey
December 22, 2018 – December 25, 2018
N=4,407 College Students

Q.1 How much do you trust the news media to report the news accurately and fairly?

College Pulse 12-2018	Gallup 12-2017	
3	6	A great deal
37	44	A fair amount
45	39	Not much
14	11	Not at all
1	*	Refused
100	100	Total

Q.2 Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: the climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive.

College Pulse 12-2018	Gallup 12-2017	
23	20	Strongly agree
45	41	Somewhat agree
25	27	Somewhat disagree
6	11	Strongly disagree
1	*	Refused
100	100	Total

Q.3 Where do you think most expression and discussion of political or social ideas among students at your college takes place these days? **[RANDOMIZE OPTIONS]**

College Pulse 12-2018	Gallup 12-2017	
35	43	Face-to-face on campus in classrooms and public areas
64	57	Online through social media
1	*	Refused
100	100	Total

Q.4 Do you think each of the following actions that could be taken by college students are always acceptable, sometimes acceptable, or never acceptable? **[RANDOMIZE STATEMENTS]**

a. Engaging in protests against speakers

College Pulse <u>12-2018</u>	Gallup <u>12-2017</u>	
32	36	Always acceptable
60	50	Sometimes acceptable
8	14	Never acceptable
<u>1</u>	<u>*</u>	Refused
100	100	Total

b. Shouting down speakers or trying to prevent from talking

College Pulse <u>12-2018</u>	Gallup <u>12-2017</u>	
6	3	Always acceptable
45	34	Sometimes acceptable
48	62	Never acceptable
<u>1</u>	<u>*</u>	Refused
100	100	Total

c. Using violence to stop a speech, protest of rally

College Pulse <u>12-2018</u>	Gallup <u>12-2017</u>	
2	1	Always acceptable
14	9	Sometimes acceptable
83	90	Never acceptable
<u>1</u>	<u>*</u>	Refused
100	100	Total

d. Engaging in sit-ins or similar attempts to disrupt operations in campus buildings

College Pulse <u>12-2018</u>	Gallup <u>12-2017</u>	
27	19	Always acceptable
59	48	Sometimes acceptable
13	33	Never acceptable
<u>1</u>	<u>*</u>	Refused
100	100	Total

e. Denying the news media access to cover a protest or rally on campus

College Pulse 12-2018	Gallup 12-2017	
9	5	Always acceptable
49	34	Sometimes acceptable
41	60	Never acceptable
<u>1</u>	<u>*</u>	Refused
100	100	Total

Q.5 If you had to choose, which do you think is more important... **[RANDOMIZE STATEMENTS]**

College Pulse 12-2018	Gallup 12-2017	
46	53	Promoting an inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups
53	46	Protecting citizens' free speech rights
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	Refused
100	100	Total

Q.6 Which comes closer to your own views—even if neither is exactly right? **[RANDOMIZE STATEMENTS]**

College Pulse 12-2018	
39	People need to be more careful about the language they use to avoid offending people with different backgrounds
60	Too many people are easily offended these days over the language that others use
<u>1</u>	Refused
100	Total

Q.7 The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that hate speech—that attacks people based on their race, religion, gender identify or sexual orientation—is legally protected free speech. Do you think hate speech is a form of expression that should or should not be protected by the First Amendment?

College Pulse 12-2018	
58	Yes, should be protected
41	No, should not be protected
<u>1</u>	Refused
100	Total