

America's Students Say 'Words Are Violence': Free Speech Is Dying on Campus

A recent national survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) reveals that 91% of U.S. college students believe that "words can be violence." Nearly half of respondents said they agree "completely" or "mostly," while just 9% disagreed.

The survey, conducted among over 2,000 undergraduates, also shows that 59% agree at least "somewhat" with the phrase "silence is violence," suggesting a broader interpretation of harm that includes both speech and silence. About 28% agreed with the statement "mostly" or "completely."

These findings reflect changing attitudes on campus, where emotional safety and subjective interpretations of harm are becoming central to how students evaluate speech. FIRE researchers noted that this mindset could influence support for limiting controversial expression, even when no physical threat exists or is intended.

The report also indicates a partisan divide. Moderate and conservative students are more open to hearing from controversial speakers, while liberal students have become more resistant to such events and less tolerant of differing viewpoints.

The data includes responses from students at Utah Valley University, where conservative commentator Charlie Kirk was killed earlier this year. His death appears to have affected

students' comfort levels on campus. Around half said they are now less willing to attend or host events with controversial figures, and about one in five feel less comfortable even participating in regular classroom discussions.

FIRE's analysis suggests that as more students view speech as potentially violent, support for restricting expression may increase, posing new challenges to free speech on college campuses and academic freedom.

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