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CWRU receives failing grade in national free speech ranking



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Case Western Reserve University is among six Ohio institutions that received a failing grade on the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. With a score of 56.16 out of 100, CWRU ranked 163rd out of 257 universities surveyed, based on responses from 326 students. The failing grade places CWRU alongside Kent State University, Oberlin College, Ohio State University, the University of Dayton and the University of Toledo. Wright State University, which ranked 49th, earned the highest grade among Ohio schools, receiving a "D."

Nationwide, Claremont McKenna College in California received the highest ranking with a "B-" grade, while Barnard College in New York City placed last with a score of 40.74 and an "F." In Ohio, FIRE reported declines in political tolerance and administrative support compared to previous years. The survey, conducted by College

Pulse and FIRE, gathered responses from more than 68,000 students nationwide between January and June. It evaluated universities across nine components, including comfort expressing ideas, self-censorship, political tolerance, administrative support, disruptive conduct and whether institutions have adopted the "Chicago Statement" on free expression. Nationwide, 166 of the 257 universities ranked received a failing grade, and Ohio's average grade of "F" matched the national average.

Like many other universities, CWRU has adopted the Chicago Statement, a widely cited framework for affirming campus free speech. It maintains that it supports students' rights to protest and express views. The survey results, however, suggest student perceptions do not always align with formal commitments.

At CWRU, about 49% of surveyed students reported self-censoring at least once or twice a month. Seventy-seven percent said shouting down a speaker was acceptable in rare cases, and 41% said violence could be justified in some

situations to stop speech, data that reflects similar trends in other universities across the nation. Comfort expressing ideas and administrative support for free speech were among the university's lowest component scores.

FIRE's chief research advisor, Sean Stevens, said the results in Ohio reflect a broader national trend. In FIRE's summary of the rankings, Stevens noted that survey data shows a decline in students' willingness to allow controversial speakers on campus, coupled with an increase in acceptance of disruptive protest tactics such as shouting down a speaker, blocking access to events or even using violence.

Recent campus events have also drawn attention to free expression at CWRU. In 2024, the university introduced new protest guidelines requiring pre-approval and limiting demonstration locations. Students for Justice in Palestine described the changes as "entirely authoritarian in nature," while law faculty passed a resolution stating that the policy was "inconsistent with the stated free expression policy."

In May 2024, the university temporarily withheld degrees from students involved in a pro-Palestine encampment. Law student Michael Grimm said the decision was a "clear violation of free speech," and another student said he was barred from commencement activities due to an investigation. In April of this year, a university webmaster reported being asked to remove webpages about DEI scholarships, which she refused. She said the move "was very against Case's values" and inconsistent with the school's mission.

Supporters of FIRE's rankings point to such incidents as evidence that universities can struggle to translate policy commitments into practice. On the other hand, critics of the rankings note that they rely heavily on self-reported student experiences and subjective measures of campus climate, which can vary widely by context.

As higher-education institutions nationwide reflect upon their grades, these rankings prompt discussion about how free expression is defined and can be practiced on campus.