

Survey Insights about Students' Freedom of Expression and Responsibility

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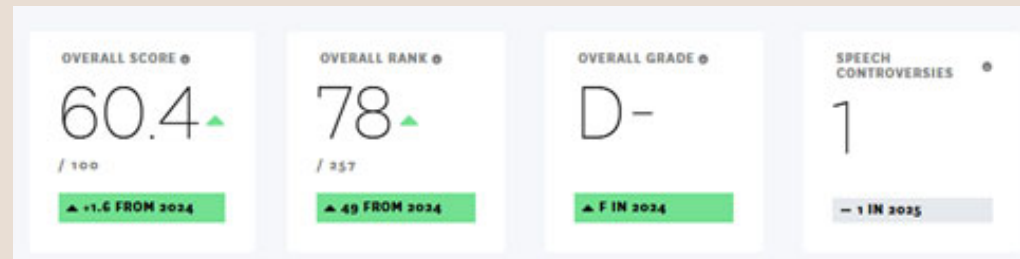
NCAIR 2026



Setting the Stage

DFTD & the FIRE Survey

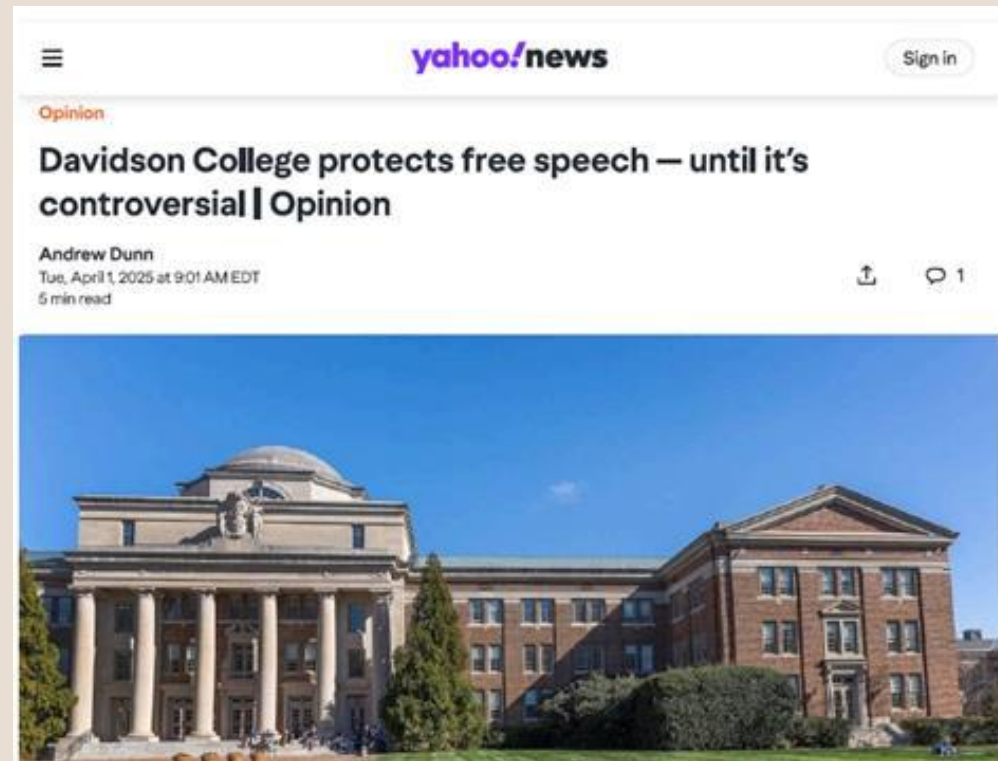
- Davidsonians for Freedom of Thought and Discourse (DFTD)
 - Founded in 2018 to address, “three interconnected distressing trends... **free speech suppression, ideological and political monoculture, [and] declining pedagogical standards**”
 - In Fall 2021 commissioned an independent survey of students and donors about the state of freedom of expression and viewpoint diversity at Davidson College
 - DFTD has since relied on national survey by The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE)



2025 Response: 5% of students (n=106)

In the news...

In April 2025, an opinion article was published retelling how a senior received disciplinary action for distributing a pamphlet titled, "The Five Myths About Israel Perpetrated by the Pro-Hamas Left."



"If Davidson wants to brand itself as a place where students can wrestle with big ideas, then it shouldn't punish them for doing just that"

Davidson's Response

- Written by Faculty Member Issac Bailey
- The college was responding to complaints from other students, some of whom said they felt unsafe.

“Free expression is a right. But it comes with responsibilities, particularly for institutions of higher education whose objective is greater than simply gathering together people to exchange words no matter if truth is cultivated or undermined.”



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Opinion articles provide independent perspectives on key community issues, separate from our newsroom reporting.

OPINION

I know speech is protected at Davidson College. I see it all the time. | Opinion

By Issac Bailey
April 6, 2025 6:00 AM



Davidson College announced Nov. 7, 2023 that it will keep the Chambers name on its central academic building. Maxwell Chambers was a slave owner whose gift in 1855 may have kept the college from closing. The decision came after lengthy examination into how the school could acknowledge its ties to slavery while also preserving a portion of its history. Christopher Record/Davidson College

Survey Instrument & Key Insights

Overview of the Climate Survey 2025

Freedom of Expression Questions

****New for Spring 2025****

Topics (56 Questions total):

- Purpose of Davidson College
- Who can freely speak their minds?
- What should faculty, students, and admin be allowed to do?
- Are students comfortable disagreeing with others?

Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI) Questions

Previously Administered in 2019

Established by Iowa State University and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)

78 Questions Total



Developing Freedom of Expression Questions

- Created a new committee: Campus Assessment Team for Students (CATS)
 - Representation: Chief DEI Officer, VP of Student Life, Institute for Public Good, Faculty Member, and Institutional Effectiveness
- FIRE Survey
- UChicago/AP-NORC Free Expression Poll
- Cognitive Testing with EDU 200 class (17 students)



We heard from 360 students...

Response Rate:
18% of Enrolled Students



38% Male



62% Female



41%

Liberal



48%

Moderate



8%

Conservative

3% identified as "Other"



26% FY

28% SO

24% JR

22% SR



Additional results and graphs have been redacted. Please contact the Presenters if you would like a copy.



Sharing the Results

Digesting the Survey Results

- One-Page Executive Summary
- Presentation Slides
- Survey Item Frequency Report
- Respondent Profile
- Trends for the PSRI Constructs (2025 vs. 2019)
- Demographic Comparisons (Political Ideology, Race/Ethnicity, etc.)

And an infographic...



Climate Survey Results 2025

The following results are based on the PSRI+ (N=360) and NSSE surveys (N=187) that were distributed in Spring 2025



Student Satisfaction



Nearly all students rated their educational experience as "excellent" or "good".



"Several of my professors have gone out of their way to ask about my academic interests and make suggestions about my future plans. I'm immensely grateful for their care and support."

- First-Year Student

Academic Freedom & Honor Code

A majority of students (82%) believe professors should be allowed to teach polarizing ideas in most circumstances.



In 2025, 67% of students agreed that the campus academic honesty policies help stop cheating. This is a decline from 86% in 2022.



"I feel as though I have the utmost freedom to explore new ideas at Davidson."
- Political Science major

"I wish I could play devil's advocate without being deemed cancel-worthy."
- Interdisciplinary major

Over 200 open-ended responses revealed varying student opinions about Freedom of Expression

First-Years

Writing Effectively

81%

Informed Citizen

74%

Developing values

73%

Seniors

Critical Thinking

98%

Working w/ Others

93%

Problem-Solving

78%

Given the positive satisfaction, students report significant personal development



Executive Summary

95% of Seniors have done one HIP and 66% have done two HIPs.

In Summer 2025, 393 students engaged in HIPs funded directly by Davidson College.

95%



66%




High Impact Practices (HIPs)

Created by The Office of Institutional Effectiveness

Meetings

- Senior Leadership Team (SLT) Retreat
- Faculty Chairs
- Student Session
- Campuswide Faculty & Staff Presentation on Great Colleges Results
- DFTD Meeting
- National Society of Honor Councils



Student Voices, Shared Data: Shaping Our Campus Culture

Students! Join us as we share key findings from the recent Campus Climate Survey and discuss what they mean for our campus.

Food will be provided.

Thurs., Oct. 30
11:05 AM - 12 PM

Sprinkle Room
Alvarez Union
4th Floor



DC DAVIDSON COLLEGE
For more information, email publicgood@davidson.edu.



Reflection & Future Plans

Initiatives & Next Steps

- 2026 Climate Survey with a few new questions:
 - Sense of Belonging Scale
 - Physical Harm as a form of protest (in light of the Charlie Kirk tragedy)
- Obtained the rights to PSRI Instrument from AAC&U
 - Awarded the Educating Character Initiative Grant (~\$1M) to administer a multi-institution survey with the PSRI + Freedom of Expression questions.



Martin Institute for Public Good

- Awarded the Educating Character Initiative Grant (~\$1M) to administer multi-institution survey
- Awarded a \$4M FIPSE Grant (for Promoting Civil Discourse) to create a Deliberative Citizenship Network across 100 institutions
- In Feb 2026, Davidson College announced \$47 million donation to establish the Martin Institute for Public Good



MARTIN INSTITUTE *for*
PUBLIC GOOD
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Questions?

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