

**Freedom of Expression at Davidson College:
Is there a Problem? Answers from the Fall 2021
Survey of Davidson College Students**

December 2021



I first noticed cancel culture at Davidson as a new student last year. Of course, there was a high volume of emotional intensity that accompanied the 2020 presidential election, but I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease around the comments I overheard from my peers. Anyone who raised questions about the "correct" belief to have was immediately silenced by backlash from their peers or fear of social exclusion. Though the circumstances are different now, this dynamic is still overwhelmingly present on campus.

. . . it makes me sad to see my peers ostracized just for voicing new ideas, especially when the sense of community at Davidson is a compelling factor that draws new students to campus every year.¹

—Samantha Ewing, Class of 2023

Samantha Ewing, current vice president of the Davidson Student Government Association, articulated concerns about freedom of expression and open, civil discourse on the Davidson campus in her November 10, 2021, perspectives column for the student newspaper, *The Davidsonian*. Her column echoes student complaints at colleges around the country; and they appear to contradict assurances from Davidson College administrators that norms of freedom of expression are strong on campus. Observations such as Ms. Ewing's, that students fear expressing social and political viewpoints that differ from mainstream campus beliefs, should signal to college leaders that there may be a problem. When they are supported (or contradicted) by empirical data from multiple sources, campus leaders have the information they need to act and, on campuses where large numbers of students report a climate that discourages open debate, a responsibility to do so.

The alumni group Davidsonians for Freedom of Thought and Discourse (DFTD) was founded in 2018 to monitor the state of free expression, diversity of viewpoints, and ideological balance at Davidson College. Free and open debate is the lifeblood of any university because it is the precondition of the pursuit of truth. As University of Chicago President Robert M. Hutchins put it almost a century ago, "free inquiry is indispensable to the good life . . . [U]niversities exist for the sake of such inquiry, [and] without it they cease to be universities."² Viewpoint diversity is also essential to a truly liberal education because it is only by testing one's own beliefs against radical alternatives that students refine their own viewpoints, learn the skill of critical analysis, and develop individuality and authentic character.

DFTD was also founded to undertake research to help clarify whether perceived problems in these key areas are real. A Fall 2021 survey of major donors to Davidson College,³ virtually all

of whom are alumni, revealed an urgent problem: Only 20% answered that it is “extremely” or “very clear” to them that the college administration protects free speech on campus, and 94% said that Davidson’s next president should make campus freedom of speech and open, civil discourse a priority.

But do Davidson’s major donors have it right? Is there in reality a problem that needs to be addressed?

To help answer this question, DFTD commissioned College Pulse—an online survey and analytics company dedicated to understanding the attitudes, preferences, and behaviors of today’s college students—to conduct an independent, anonymous survey of Davidson students. The 38-question survey was designed to investigate attitudes on a wide range of issues concerning freedom of speech and ideological balance; 148 Davidson College students completed it between September 15 and November 20, 2021. To help ensure diversity in the panel population, panel members were recruited by a number of methods, including web advertising, permission-based email campaigns, and partnerships with higher education organizations.

College Pulse has established expertise specifically in this research area. The firm conducts student surveys that are the basis for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education’s (FIRE) annual College Free Speech Rankings⁴ and has recently completed a survey for the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) specifically focused on freedom of expression at liberal arts colleges. Davidson students were not included in FIRE’s Spring 2021 surveys of more than 37,000 undergraduates at 159 colleges and universities or in ACTA’s smaller, targeted survey of liberal arts colleges, but this independent Fall 2021 survey of Davidson College students is close enough to the date of the other surveys to make reliable comparisons of findings where the survey questions were identical.

With so much national and campus attention focused on the problem of student self-censorship, Davidson College administrators recently convened a committee to compose a statement expressing the campus’s commitment to academic freedom. The resulting document, “Davidson’s Commitment to Freedom of Expression,” released in draft form on November 29, 2021, is an important first step toward restoring norms of free inquiry. But statements of principle must be accompanied by action in order to bring about the cultural change necessary to build a truly free and open marketplace of ideas. To achieve this, nothing is more important than presidential leadership. As Davidson College undertakes a search for its 17th president, the search committee has an opportunity to choose a leader who has demonstrated a principled commitment to free speech and viewpoint diversity.

The following summary of the Fall 2021 Davidson student survey findings presents the first available empirical data on the extent to which obstacles to freedom of expression are real and pervasive at Davidson. The findings also include insights from students on what they believe the priorities for Davidson’s next president should be. ACTA commends this report to the close attention of Davidson’s Board of Trustees and of the Presidential Search Committee that is now working to identify Davidson’s next president.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student self-censorship is a problem on Davidson's campus

- 71% of respondents said they have felt they could not express their “opinion on a subject” because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond at least “occasionally.”
- Only 16% of respondents said they are “very comfortable” expressing their views on a controversial topic in class (an additional 29% said “somewhat comfortable”).

Students do not perceive a high level of administrative commitment to protecting free speech on campus

- Only 27% of Davidson students answered that it is “extremely” (7%) or “very” (20%) likely “the administration would defend the speaker’s right to express [his/her] views” if a controversy over offensive speech were to occur on campus.

Students strongly support open discourse and viewpoint diversity; they also believe that improving the campus climate for free expression should be a priority of the next president

- 88% of respondents “strongly” (42%) or “somewhat” (46%) agreed that “Davidson’s next president should make freedom of speech and open, civil discourse on campus a high priority.
- 79% said that Davidson’s next president should “make the adoption and implementation of the Chicago Principles [on Freedom of Expression] . . . a high priority.”
- 77% of Davidson College students in the survey “strongly” (38%) or “somewhat” (39%) agreed that the next president should “make achieving ideological and political balance at the college a priority.”

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

The Demographic Composition of Survey Respondents

In building the survey panel of Davidson students, College Pulse sought to mirror the demographic profile of enrolled students with respect to gender, class year, and race/ethnicity. Responses were weighted to reflect the actual campus demographics in the final analysis. The survey firm also obtained from students their self-reported ideological and political party leanings.

- Of the 148 Davidson student respondents, 59% were women and 33% were men, with the balance unidentified.
- 40% were nonwhite and 60% were white.
- 38% of survey respondents self-identified as leaning Democrat, 53% leaned Independent, and 9% leaned Republican.
- 62% of survey respondents self-identified as “extremely liberal,” (16%), liberal (30%), or slightly liberal (16%)—compared to 53% of students in FIRE’s 2021 national survey of over 37,000 students on 159 U.S. campuses. 12% of surveyed Davidson students self-identified as conservative (7%) or slightly conservative (5%)—compared to 20% of students in FIRE’s national survey. (The remaining 26% of Davidson students self-identified as “moderate.”)

Davidson Student Views on the Administration’s Support of Free Speech on Campus

- Only 33% of survey respondents said that it is “extremely clear” or “very clear” that the college administration protects free speech on campus—essentially the same (32%) as in FIRE’s 2021 national survey.

Student Perceptions of Administrative Commitment to Free Expression

"How clear is it to you that [your college] administration protects free speech?"

Extremely clear Very clear Moderately clear Slightly clear Not clear at all

Davidson College



National FIRE Survey



Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Chart: ACTA • Source: 2021 FIRE/College Pulse "Free Speech Rankings" and 2021 DFTD/College Pulse survey of Davidson College Students • Created with Datawrapper

- 39% of surveyed Davidson students say that, if a controversy over offensive speech were to occur at Davidson, it is “not very likely” or “not at all likely” that the administration would defend the speaker’s right to express his or her views.
 - This is much higher than the average student-reported rate in FIRE’s national survey, where the corresponding figure is 28%.

Student Perceptions of Administrative Commitment to Free Expression During Offensive Speech Controversy

"If a controversy over offensive speech were to occur at [your college], how likely is it that the administration would defend the speaker's right to express their views?"

Extremely likely Very likely Somewhat likely Not very likely Not at all likely

Davidson College



National FIRE Survey



Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Chart: ACTA • Source: 2021 FIRE/College Pulse "Free Speech Rankings" and 2021 DFTD/College Pulse survey of Davidson College Students • Created with Datawrapper

- 78% of Davidson students in the survey “strongly” (39%) or “somewhat strongly” (39%) agree that Davidson should adopt the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression, with large majorities across demographic groups expressing support.⁵
 - 91% of male students favor adopting the Chicago Principles, compared to 69% of female students.
 - 82% of white students favor adopting the Chicago Principles, compared to 74% of nonwhite students.
 - 72% of Democrat-leaning students favor adopting the Chicago Principles, compared to 82% of Independent-leaning and 94% of Republican-leaning.⁶

The State of Free Speech and Open Discourse According to Surveyed Davidson Students

- 71% of surveyed Davidson students have felt that they could not express their opinion on a particular subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond—37% reported doing so “occasionally”; 19%, “often”; and 15%, “quite often.”
 - This compares to 53% of students who report self-censoring “quite often,” “often,” or “occasionally” in FIRE’s national survey.
- 71% of surveyed Davidson students feel “very” or “somewhat” uncomfortable expressing an unpopular opinion on a social media account tied to their name—compared to 60% in FIRE’s national survey.
- 54% of surveyed Davidson students feel “very” or “somewhat” uncomfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion—compared to 48% of students in FIRE’s national survey.
- 47% of surveyed Davidson students feel “very” or “somewhat” uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial topic—compared to 61% of students in FIRE’s national survey.
- 44% of surveyed Davidson students feel “very” or “somewhat” uncomfortable expressing disagreement with one of their professors about a controversial topic in a written assignment—compared to 42% in FIRE’s national survey.

Davidson College Student Comfort Expressing Controversial Viewpoints

"At [your college], How comfortable do you feel:"

Very comfortable Somewhat comfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Very uncomfortable

Publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial topic



Expressing an unpopular opinion on a social media account tied to your name



Expressing your views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion



Expressing disagreement... about a controversial topic in a written assignment



Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Chart: ACTA • Source: 2021 FIRE/College Pulse "Free Speech Rankings" and 2021 DFTD/College Pulse survey of Davidson College Students • Created with Datawrapper

- 58% of students in the Davidson College survey said that it is difficult to have an “open and honest” conversation at Davidson about racial inequality issues; 49%, about sexual assault; 46%, about affirmative action; and 45%, about both abortion and transgender issues.
 - A higher proportion, 42%, said it is more difficult to have open and honest conversations about capitalism than about socialism (36%).
- There were marked differences based on students’ reported political affiliation. For example, 61% of those who lean Democrat felt that they could “quite often,” “often,” or “occasionally” not express their opinion on a subject because of how students, professors, or the administration would respond, compared to 95% of those who lean Republican.
 - Other notable demographic disparities include rates of self-censorship among male and female students as well as nonwhite and white students. 78% of male students said that they could not express their opinions “quite often,” “often,” or “occasionally” due to concerns about the responses of other students, professors, or the administration, compared to 65% of female students; the corresponding figure for nonwhite students was 81%, compared to 62% for white students.

Student Views on Acceptable Behavior at Campus Events Featuring External Speakers

- 21% of the Davidson students in the survey say that it is “always” or “sometimes” acceptable to block other students from entering a campus event to protest a speaker—compared to 13% in FIRE’s national survey.
 - 26% of Davidson’s female students said blocking an entryway is acceptable, compared to 16% of male students.
- 19% of Davidson students say it is “always” or “sometimes” acceptable to shout down guest speakers or try to prevent them from speaking on campus—compared to 33% in FIRE’s national survey.

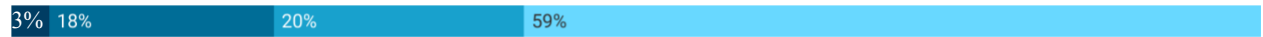
- 26% of female students found shouting down speakers acceptable, compared to 11% of male students.
- Only 1% of respondents say that it is “always” or “sometimes” acceptable to use violence to stop a speech or event on campus—compared to 6% in FIRE’s national survey.

Student Willingness to Disrupt Speakers Expressing Disfavored Viewpoints

"How acceptable would you say it is for students to engage in the following action to protest a campus speaker?"

Always acceptable Sometimes acceptable Rarely acceptable Never acceptable

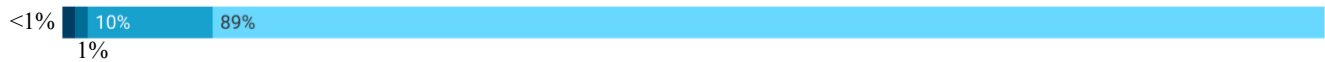
Blocking other students from entering a campus event



Shouting down a speaker or trying to prevent them from speaking on campus



Using violence to stop a speech or event on campus



Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Chart: ACTA • Source: 2021 FIRE/College Pulse "Free Speech Rankings" and 2021 DFTD/College Pulse survey of Davidson College Students • Created with Datawrapper

Student Views on Ideological Balance on Davidson’s Campus

- 72% of Davidson students “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that the New Student Orientation was ideologically balanced—while more than a quarter (28%) said that it was not.
 - The survey found a near universal consensus that the New Student Orientation included sufficient emphasis on Davidson’s honor code (97% “strongly” or “somewhat “agreed).
- A smaller majority of Davidson students, 59%, “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that the New Student Orientation helps promote racial harmony on campus; 41% said that it does not.
 - Differences between white and nonwhite students were marked on this issue: 76% of white students agreed that the New Student Orientation promotes racial harmony, compared to 44% of nonwhite students.

Student Views on How to Improve the Climate for Free Expression, Open Discourse, and Viewpoint Diversity at Davidson

- The survey identified specific actions that Davidson College can take to improve the climate for free expression. Large numbers of students said they would feel freer to discuss controversial subjects at Davidson if:
 - Other students were more open to discussing viewpoints with which they disagree (60%);

- Davidson hosted a broader diversity of guest speakers (50%);
- There was greater viewpoint diversity among faculty members (48%);
- There were more student groups and activities dedicated to fostering wide-ranging debate and discussion (31%);
- Senior administrators (the president, deans, and department chairs) did more to encourage a free speech culture (27%);
- They did not have to worry about other students misrepresenting their comments on social media (25%); and
- Davidson reformed existing policies that discourage free and open discussion (23%).
- When asked to identify the single change that would do the most to improve the climate for open campus dialogue at Davidson College,
 - The largest proportion (39%) indicated that the climate would improve “if other students were more open to discussing viewpoints with which they disagree.”
 - Almost one in five students, 19%, answered that “a greater viewpoint diversity among faculty members” would have the biggest impact.
- 50% of those surveyed “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that the New Student Orientation included sufficient emphasis on free expression and open discourse at Davidson. Almost half (49%) disagreed.

Student Views on the Ongoing Presidential Search:

- When asked to name the two most important priorities for Davidson’s next president, the most frequently selected answers were:
 - Improving the affordability of the college (40%);
 - Increasing the diversity of Davidson’s faculty (32%);
 - Improving race relations on campus (28%); and
 - Improving campus facilities (27%).
- 93% of surveyed students agreed that Davidson’s next president should give close attention to how well the college is preparing graduates for productive work lives.
- 91% of surveyed students agreed that the next president should make “Slowing Down the Rate of Increase in College Costs and Tuition” a priority.
- 88% of surveyed students “strongly” (42%) or “somewhat” (46%) agreed that the next president should make freedom of speech and open, civil discourse on campus a high priority.
- 79% “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that the next president should make adoption and implementation of the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression a high priority.
- 77% “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that the next president should make achieving ideological balance at the college—on the board of trustees, in the administration, and on the faculty—a high priority.
 - There were essentially no gender or race/ethnicity differences on this priority, but while 72% of Democrat-leaning students prioritized achieving ideological balance

on campus, 78% of Independent-leaningers did so and 98% of Republican-leaningers did so.

- The religion of Davidson’s next president was not a prominent concern for most surveyed students: 28% agreed to some degree that the next president should be an individual whose life evidences a strong Christian faith, while 72% disagreed to some degree.

Davidson College Student Views on the Ongoing Presidential Search

"Davidson's next president should..."

■ Strongly agree
 ■ Somewhat agree
 ■ Somewhat disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree

make freedom of speech and open, civil, discourse on campus a high priority



make the adoption and implementation of the Chicago Principles on Free Expression.... a high priority



make achieving ideological and political balance at the College a priority



make slowing down the rate of increase in college costs and tuition a priority



give close attention to how well the college is preparing graduates for productive working lives



Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Chart: ACTA • Source: 2021 FIRE/College Pulse "Free Speech Rankings" and 2021 DFTD/College Pulse survey of Davidson College Students • Created with Datawrapper

ACTA Recommendations and Discussion

This survey of Davidson students confirms that assessments like Samantha Ewing's (class of 2023) are based in fact: Davidson College has a serious problem with respect to freedom of expression, viewpoint diversity, and ideological balance. As comparable FIRE surveys covering 159 colleges and universities reveal, Davidson is far from unique in this regard—but the Davidson survey suggests that, in a number of ways, the problems are more severe at Davidson than on other U.S. campuses.

In a letter to Davidson President Carol Quillen in October 2018, Davidsonians for Freedom of Thought and Discourse proposed that the college take specific steps to improve free expression, ensure academic freedom, and promote viewpoint diversity and ideological balance. The problems that DFTD cited have now been documented by an independent survey firm in clear, empirical, findings, and ACTA echoes the DFTD recommendations:

- The Board of Trustees should establish clear policies governing the circumstances under which it is permissible for the administration to articulate a position on social and political matters. The University of Chicago's Kalven Committee "Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action" is the best guide for administrators when they are speaking on behalf of the institution: "The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic . . . To perform its mission in the society, a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures."⁷
- The administration should develop and implement, with the trustees' approval, a plan for addressing the imbalance that has arisen in the ideological makeup of Davidson's faculty and administration.
- As Davidson finalizes its own version of the 2015 University of Chicago's "Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression," it is time to communicate to campus leaders that the Davidson statement represents a bedrock commitment to restore norms of academic freedom and free expression on campus. The Chicago Statement asserts that institutions of higher education have "a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it" and that "without a vibrant commitment to free and open inquiry, a university ceases to be a university."⁸
- Discussion of the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression or Davidson's own version thereof should be a key part of the college's first-year orientation, and Davidson should take steps to ensure that these principles become an integral part of Davidson's culture.
- Campus staff and administrators, especially student-facing staff in Student Life, should also receive regular professional development designed to raise awareness of norms of academic freedom and the college's commitment to free expression.
- The president and provost's offices should develop and implement a plan to recruit and welcome to campus external speakers who represent a wide diversity of political and ideological viewpoints.

- The board of trustees should commission independent annual surveys of students, faculty, and administrative staff and officers to assess the state of freedom of expression and diversity of thought on campus. The annual report of survey results should be written by the external survey firm so that it can serve as an independent audit of this crucial aspect of college life. The periodic surveys of Davidson alumni that occur should also include questions designed to probe whether students report improvement with respect to ideological balance in the administration, on the faculty, and in the student body from year to year.

Remedying the serious deficiencies documented by the Fall 2021 survey of Davidson College students should be an urgent priority. It is encouraging that a task force appointed by Davidson's president produced "Davidson's Commitment to Free Expression," which was circulated to the campus in draft form on November 29, 2021. Adopting the statement is only the first step, however. As FIRE's national survey reveals, major free speech problems have persisted at some of the universities that have adopted such statements. The challenge now is for the college to work vigorously to incorporate into campus life the principles articulated by the statement, with the aim of correcting the many deficiencies documented by the student survey.

Building a culture of free expression and fostering a lively exchange of diverse viewpoints takes leadership on the part of senior campus administrators and faculty. The ongoing presidential search is an opportunity to do just that. Along with ACTA's report on the Fall 2021 Survey of Davidson Major Donors, this report can help guide the search committee's review of candidates and structure discussions about the new administration's priorities for the coming years. Students, like major donors, expect the next president to work toward strengthening norms of free expression and open discourse on campus; achieving political and ideological diversity within the faculty, administration, and governing board; and reducing costs while ensuring graduates are well-prepared for professional success.

Davidson College is clearly at an inflection point. With clear evidence of the problem on campus, to knowingly permit the existing campus monoculture to persist would be a deliberate choice to abandon the spirit of free inquiry and critical thinking that have so long been hallmarks of Davidson's superb education. Davidson now has the opportunity to chart a course that will set it apart from so many other elite American higher education institutions, where freedom of expression and open inquiry are currently under constant duress. Only by choosing the latter course will Davidson maintain, for the long term, its proud reputation for excellence in liberal education.

Appendix A: About the Fall 2021 Davidson College Student Survey

- The Fall 2021 Davidson Student Survey was conducted by College Pulse, an online survey and analytics company dedicated to understanding the attitudes, preferences, and behaviors of today's college students. In conducting college student surveys, the firm uses a unique Undergraduate Student Panel that includes 400,000 undergraduate college student respondents from more than 1,000 four-year colleges and universities in all 50 states. College Pulse conducts the student surveys for the annual Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) College Free Speech Rankings and recently completed ACTA's targeted survey of liberal arts institutions.
- For this survey, College Pulse used its Undergraduate Student Panel to anonymously survey 148 Davidson College students. To help ensure diversity in the panel population, panel members were recruited by a number of methods, including web advertising, permission-based email campaigns, and partnerships with higher education organizations. To reduce the effects of any non-response bias, post-stratification weights were used to rebalance the sample based on the Davidson student body's age, race and ethnicity, and gender distribution.
- College Pulse reports the margin of error for this survey as being +/-9.2%. It cautions that margins of error are typically calculated on probability-based samples and are not technically correct for non-probability online samples. It supplied them for this survey to provide a general assessment of error ranges that may be associated with the data.

ENDNOTES

¹ Samantha Ewing, “Civil Discourse and Cancel Culture at Davidson,” *The Davidsonian* 120, no. 7 (2021), 4, www.davidsonian.com/civil-discourse-and-cancel-culture-at-davidson/.

² President Robert J. Zimmer and Provost Thomas F. Rosenbaum to Faculty, Staff, and Students, “Freedom of Expression and Protest,” *uchicagonews*, October 20, 2009, news.uchicago.edu/freedom-expression-and-protest.

³ American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), “ACTA/Braun Research, Inc., Survey of Major Donors to Davidson College,” October 2021, 2–3, https://www.goacta.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ACTAReport.Davidson.College-Major.Donor_.Survey10.31.21FINAL.pdf.

⁴ Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), College Pulse, and RealClearEducation, “2021 College Free Speech Rankings,” September 21, 2021, www.thefire.org/research/publications/student-surveys/2021-college-free-speech-rankings/.

⁵ The Chicago Principles state inter alia that “the University has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it.” The Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago, “Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression,” 2015, <https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>.

⁶ Demographic breakdowns are available for all survey questions in the accompanying crosstabs. They are presented here to convey the extent to which large majorities across demographic groups and political affiliations support Davidson College’s adoption of the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression.

⁷ University of Chicago faculty committee, under the chairmanship of Harry Kalven, Jr., “Kalven Committee: Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action,” *The University of Chicago Record* 1, no. 1 (1967), https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_0.pdf.

⁸ The Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago, “Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression.”