

EXPERT INSIGHT | Higher Education Reform Initiative

QUANTIFYING PROGRESSIVE CANCEL CULTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Christopher Schorr, Ph.D.

TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ A culture of hostility toward dissenting thought and expression undermines the value of higher education.
- ★ The evidence is clear: “Cancel culture” on college and university campuses is a form of left-wing political aggression. It is not a “both sides” phenomenon in any meaningful sense.
- ★ Policymakers must force universities to dismantle cancel culture on their campuses and safeguard the First Amendment rights of students, faculty, staff, and visitors.

Introduction

Higher education aims to support the discovery, improvement, and dissemination of knowledge. This mission requires colleges and universities (hereafter, “colleges”) to safeguard and nurture an atmosphere of open inquiry and intellectual exchange—a “marketplace of ideas” ([Kalven Committee, 1967](#)). Unfortunately, this mission is now on life support in the United States due to the virulent spread of cancel culture: “campaigns to get people fired, disinvited, deplatformed, or otherwise punished for speech that is—or would be—protected by First Amendment standards, and the (resulting) climate of fear and conformity” ([Lukianoff, 2024](#)).

The damage wrought by cancel culture to intellectual freedom on American campuses is palpable. As reported by the Knight Foundation and Ipsos, the share of students who describe their free speech rights as “secure” dropped *30 points* from 2016–2024 ([Knight Foundation & Ipsos, 2024](#)). Today, two out of three students report self-censoring, and two-thirds also recognize that self-censorship undermines the value of education.

The situation is no less dire for faculty; indeed, they face a more hostile intellectual climate today than during the McCarthy era. This is the conclusion of a recent report by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) ([Honeycutt, 2024](#)). According to FIRE's survey of four-year college faculty members, one in three faculty (35%) report "toning down" their writing today to avoid controversy, in comparison to nine percent of faculty during the McCarthy era. Additionally, one in four faculty (27%) report being afraid to speak openly, four in 10 (40%) fear reputation costs from colleagues misunderstanding something they have said or done, and one in four (23%) fear losing their jobs for this same reason.

In short, higher education—the "crown jewel" of America's economy and civilization—is failing, and everyone knows it ([Office of the Press Secretary, 2013](#)). But who is to blame?

Surveying the Wreckage

A culture of hostility toward dissenting perspectives can entrench itself anywhere on the political spectrum. This is because partisans and ideologues are quick to accuse their opponents of intolerance but slow to acknowledge their own. However, it does not follow that because both sides *can* act in this fashion, both sides *are* currently acting in this fashion in such a way as to degenerate campus climates to their current (debased) state.

One straightforward way to determine which side is most responsible for creating the current atmosphere of intolerance is to survey students and faculty on their feelings toward free speech rights. Returning to the noted surveys, according to the Knight Foundation-Ipsos:

- Republican students (34%) are less likely than Independent (42%) or Democrat students (51%) to describe their freedom of speech as "secure."
- Republican students are also more likely (49%) to report self-censoring on three or more issues than Democrat students (38%).

If Republican students feel targeted, why might this be the case? Again, the Knight Foundation-Ipsos data paints a clear picture:

- Nearly half of Democrat students (45%) favor "protect(ing) students by prohibiting speech they may find offensive," compared to fewer than one in five Republican students (18%).
- Two out of three Democrat students (65%) believe "hate speech" should not be legally protected, compared to one in three Republican students (33%).
- Eight in 10 Democrat students (82%) say "speech can be as damaging as physical violence," compared to six in 10 Republican students (59%).
- Democrat students (29%) are more likely than Independent (23%) or Republican students (18%) to say the First Amendment "goes too far" in guaranteeing rights.

Turning to faculty members, FIRE finds:



- Half of conservatives (52%) compared to a third of liberals (35%) fear reputation costs from their colleagues misunderstanding something they have said or done.¹
- One in three conservatives (32%) compared to one in five liberals (18%) fear losing their jobs for this reason.

Also, more than half of conservative faculty (55%) say they “occasionally hide their political views in order to keep their jobs.” Less than one in five liberal faculty (17%) say the same. Four in 10 surveyed faculty members (39%) state a hypothetical conservative hire would be a very/somewhat “poor fit” for their department. Only 3 percent say the same about a hypothetical liberal hire.

Unlike the Knight Foundation-Ipsos survey, FIRE does not survey ideological intolerance among faculty members themselves; however, this phenomenon is well documented ([Yancey, 2017](#)). For example, a survey of social and personality psychologists—a field in which self-identified “liberals” outnumber “conservatives” 14-to-one—found widespread willingness to discriminate² against conservatives in cases of:

- Reviewing academic work or inviting faculty to present their work (one in six).
- Reviewing grant applications (one in four).
- Hiring decisions (more than one in three) ([Inbar & Lammers, 2012](#)).

A 2021 report from the Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology found that one in five U.S. academics (20%) would discriminate against a conservative grant applicant, and four in 10 (40%) would oppose hiring a Trump supporter ([Kaufmann, 2021](#)). The report estimates that openly conservative faculty members undergoing review by a randomly selected four-person panel of their peers would face an 80 percent likelihood of being discriminated against for their political views.

The evidence from survey data is clear: Progressive students and faculty exhibit remarkable hostility toward the views of conservative students and faculty. Given that progressives outnumber conservatives by 50 percent to 20 percent among students and 60 percent to 12 percent among faculty, it is easy to see how this would create a hostile intellectual climate for conservatives ([Abrams, 2020](#); [Abrams & Kalid, 2020](#)).

Interrogating Cancellation Data

But perhaps the survey data is misleading. Sentiments are distinct from actions, even if the sentiments in question seem to imply action.³ Still, progressives assure us that they are the side that champions tolerance, inclusivity, and open-mindedness ([The Other Liberal, 2024](#)). Perhaps the survey data is failing to capture progressive tolerance *in practice*.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, “liberal” and “progressive” are synonymous. I used “liberal” in cases where it is used in the referenced material (e.g., in a survey).

² Discrimination in this case refers to a faculty survey respondent’s willingness to penalize his/her colleagues for their conservative views by rejecting grant applications, papers, or job applicants, and by refusing to invite conservative colleagues to a symposium (Inbar & Lammers, 2012, p.11).

³ For example, believing that “hate speech” should not be legally protected suggests support for criminalizing such speech.



Carrying this line of thought further, perhaps survey questions pertaining to perceptions of campus climate (e.g., felt freedom to express opinions) reflect conservatives’ paranoia and emotional fragility rather than an actual climate of hostility ([Underwood, 2024](#); [Higgins-Dailey, 2020](#)). It could be that conservatives—being comparatively *intolerant*, *non-inclusive*, and *narrow-minded*—would love nothing more than to repress all the beautiful openness and diversity of college life, but they are thwarted from doing so by the unpopularity of their views. Frustration with this fact would then cause conservatives to *feel* as though they cannot express themselves despite being no more restrained than anyone else ([Norris, 2023](#)).

One need not concede the premises or sincerity of such arguments to recognize that intolerance of the kind alleged by conservative critics should also be quantifiable in some way. It should be reflected in concrete *actions* taken by progressives to limit expression by conservatives. Fortunately, FIRE’s new campus deplatforming database speaks to this issue ([FIRE, 2024a](#)). FIRE records efforts to restrict public expression on college campuses from 1998–2024. These include:

1. “Disruptions:” interrupting ongoing events (speeches, performances, displays, etc.). FIRE distinguishes “attempted” and “substantial” disruptions based on whether the interruption succeeded in stopping the event (e.g., a speaker forced to vacate the stage) ([FIRE, 2024b](#)).
2. “Cancellations:” successful and unsuccessful efforts to disinvite speakers, cancel events, and remove displays.

With each incident, FIRE provides a description of the controversy. This includes, where appropriate, whether the pressure to deplatform a speaker arose from the political Left or Right. Examining these ideologically motivated cases, the two sides initially look very similar. As described in Table 1, FIRE records 633 deplatforming efforts (“Total Incidents”) from the Left and 626 from the Right.

Table 1. Ideologically Motivated Efforts to Restrict Expression on College Campuses, FIRE Deplatforming Database: 1997–2024

From the:	Total Incidents	Disruptions			Cancellations		
		Substantial	Attempted	All	Successful	Unsuccessful	All
Left	633	108	105	213	195	225	420
Right	626	11	12	23	183	420	603

A closer inspection reveals several important differences.⁴ Progressives (“From the Left” in Table 1) account for a remarkable *90 percent* of ideologically motivated disruptions of campus events (213 vs. 23). These include:

⁴ FIRE records only a subset of campus-based violence and intimidation—those cases associated with deplatforming speakers. FIRE is not chiefly concerned with campus-based violence directed at achieving ideological goals—aka:



- [Shouting down](#) and [assaulting](#) speakers.
- [Vandalism](#) and [destruction of property](#).
- Physical intimidation, such as [seizing stages](#).
- Public [masturbation](#) (yes, seriously).

The progressive-conservative gap narrows substantially in cases where deplatforming efforts less blatantly run afoul of the basic norms of civilized society. For example, progressives lead conservatives only 195 to 183 in successful cancellations: disinviting speakers, canceling or postponing events, removing displays, etc. This narrow gap reflects the comparatively large number of unsuccessful cancellation attempts by conservatives: 420 vs. 225. As shown in Table 2, unsuccessful cancellation attempts are most common at private religious schools. Remarkably, these schools are less censorious on average than private secular and even public schools (more on this later).

Table 2. Successful and Unsuccessful Cancellations by Higher Education Institution Type (Excluding Community Colleges), FIRE Deplatforming Database: 1997–2024

Cancellation	Priv. Religious		Priv. Secular		Public		Total	
	From the: Left.	Right.	Left.	Right.	Left.	Right.	Left.	Right.
Successful	36	101	83	29	71	46	190	176
Unsuccessful	45	359	68	24	11	35	124	418
% Successful	44.4%	22%	55%	57.7%	39%	56.8%	60.5%	29.6%

*Note. Summary estimates from FIRE’s deplatforming database of successful and unsuccessful “cancellation” efforts: canceling or disinviting speakers and performers, removing art displays, canceling film showings, etc. Disruptions of events, such as shout-downs or vandalism, are not included. Cancellation efforts by progressives (“From the Left”) and conservatives (“From the Right”) are reported separately by higher education institution type: private secular, private religious, and public. Community Colleges (19 total observations) are excluded for space.

Another consideration involves the kinds of public expression progressives and conservatives seek to deplatform. Conservative deplatforming efforts are far more likely to center on obscenity. For example, consider *The Vagina Monologues*. This is a play in which:

A character reminisces happily about her own sexual abuse while a troubled 16-year-old. She recalls how a 24-year-old woman plied her with alcohol then had sexual relations with her. But instead of condemning the act, the victim declares the rape her ‘salvation’ that ‘raised her into a kind of heaven’—a claim that glorifies homosexual predation ([The Cardinal Newman Society, 2019](#)).

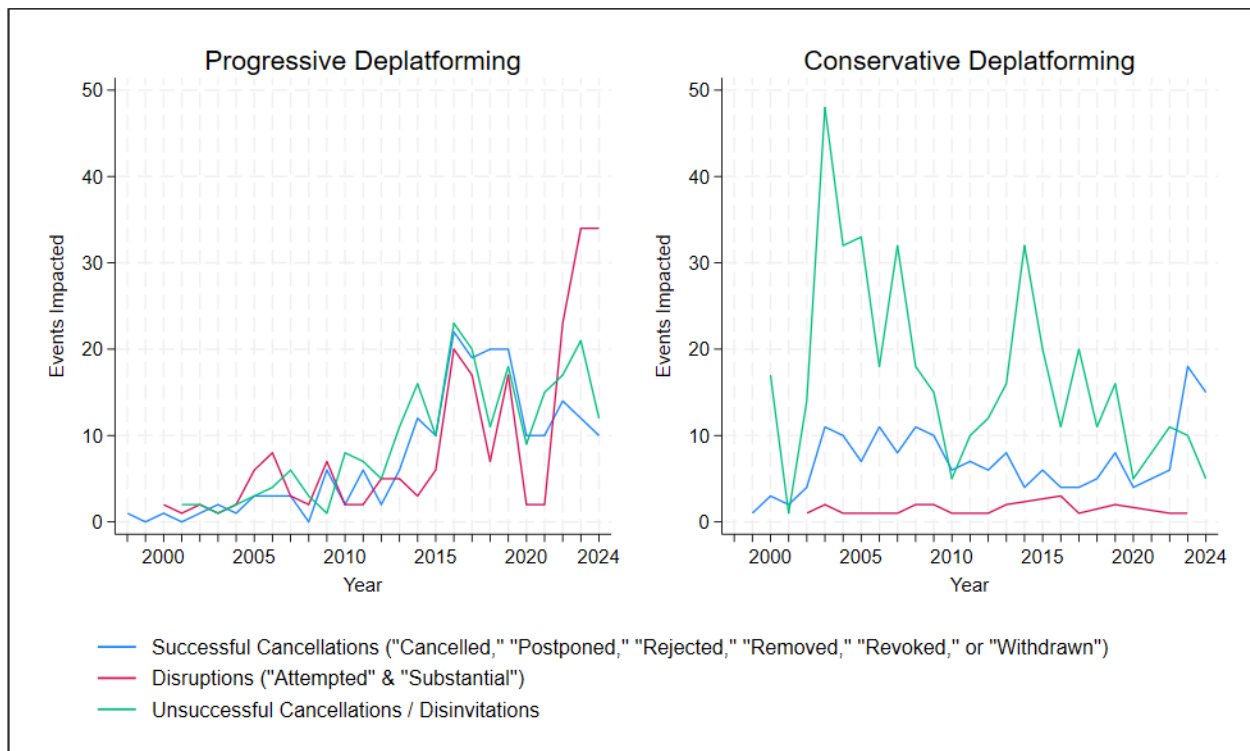
terrorism—nor does it attempt to compose a comprehensive list of attacks on students, faculty, administrators, or property ([Egan et al., 2024](#); [Nathan-Kazis, 2017](#); [Heck et al., 2024](#); [Sparks, 2020](#)).



From 2001 to 2019, FIRE recorded 227 separate *Vagina Monologues* deplatforming events, of which an incredible 219 (96.5%) occurred at private religious colleges. Remarkably, the systematic targeting of conservative Catholic colleges with an obscene and irreligious play did not provoke widespread riots, assaults, or property crimes—a common occurrence when conservative provocateurs speak on left-leaning campuses (Park & Lah, 2017).⁵ Rather, the primary response consisted of a single organization, The Cardinal Neuman Society, issuing a series of annual protest letters. Nearly all of these—84.8 percent—went unheeded until the performances finally ceased in 2019 under pressure from the Left.⁶

A final note on ideological differences: Progressives are not merely more likely but also *increasingly* likely to deplatform speakers on college campuses (see Figure 1). Among progressives, all deplatforming categories have been increasing, and event disruptions have reached record heights. Among conservatives, successful cancellations have increased slightly; however, event disruptions are negligible and attempted cancellations have cratered.

Figure 1. Progressive and Conservative Deplatforming, FIRE Deplatforming Database: 1998–2024



Key Takeaways from FIRE’s Deplatforming Database

⁵ FIRE records that *Vagina Monologue* attendees were sprayed with [holy water](#) at Fordham University in 2005 by a member of the Knights of Columbus.

⁶ The *Vagina Monologues* saga concluded shortly after *progressives* turned against the performance for failing to include transwomen. Each of the three recorded progressive cancellation efforts was successful.



The first takeaway concerns the general character of campus deplatforming efforts. This data confirms findings from surveys of students and faculty regarding the existence and character of campus cancel culture. Cancel culture is very real, and it is driven by intolerance from the political Left. This finding will surprise very few; however, substantiating the leftwing character of this phenomenon is necessary, given denials and equivocations from progressive journalists and academics ([Aleem, 2022](#); [Moynihan, 2017](#)). It is also important to note that deplatforming is only one aspect of cancel culture; for example, campaigns to fire academics and administrators and destroy career opportunities for students are other important aspects of this phenomenon ([Acevedo, 2024](#)).

A second takeaway concerns the implications of deplatforming for different types of institutions of higher education. The First Amendment prohibits the government from “abridging the freedom of speech.” As creatures of the state and as public forums, public colleges have few instances when they may lawfully restrict expression ([Novak, 2020](#)). Moreover, even where speech regulation is permitted—e.g., in nonpublic forums—public colleges may not engage in viewpoint discrimination ([Casemine, 2020](#)).

Private colleges have more leeway, as they are not bound by First Amendment prohibitions on regulating speech ([Manhattan Community Access Corp. et al., v. Halleck et al., 2019](#)). At the same time, state laws and conditions on federal funding provide additional free speech protections for students and faculty ([Pen America, n.d.](#)). Most importantly, private colleges are bound by contract law to adhere to their commitments to students and faculty, including those that protect free expression ([FIRE, 2024c](#)).

Herein lies the rub: *Religious* private colleges and universities assert explicitly religious missions. For example:

- Boston College declares a commitment to “leading its students on a comprehensive journey of discovery—one that integrates their intellectual, personal, ethical, and *religious* formation” (italics added) ([Boston College, 2024](#)).
- The purpose of Augustana College is to “afford an opportunity for a higher education in the liberal arts that provides for the development of all dimensions of human existence, in a manner consistent with the higher education values of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America ([Augustana College, 2024](#)).

Private religious schools often inform prospective students and faculty that attending or working at their institutions entails participating in—or at least not working against—their institutional religious missions. As such, religious colleges can (and do) mandate religious practices, prohibit “immoral” behavior, and, yes, restrict expression in line with their religious values and goals ([French, 2002](#)).

By contrast, *secular* private colleges present themselves as championing free expression and a robust marketplace of ideas. For example, Harvard University’s free speech guidelines state:

Free speech is uniquely important to the University because we are a community committed to reason and rational discourse. Free interchange of ideas is vital for our primary function of discovering and disseminating ideas through research, teaching, and learning. Curtailment of free speech undercuts the intellectual freedom that defines our purpose. It also deprives some



individuals of the right to express unpopular views and others of the right to listen to unpopular views ([Harvard University, 1990](#)).

Columbia University’s Affirmative Statement of the Rules of University Conduct recognizes:

... the right of every member of our community to demonstrate, to rally, to picket, to circulate petitions and distribute ideas, to partake in debates, to invite outsiders to participate, and publicly to retain the freedom to express opinions on any subject whatsoever, even when such expression invites controversy and sharp scrutiny. We expect that members of our community will engage in public discussions that may challenge conventional thinking. Free expression would mean little if it did not include the right to express what others might reject or loathe ([Columbia University, 2024](#)).

In effect, secular colleges claim to provide free and open public forums of the kind the Constitution mandates at public universities. Yet FIRE’s data reveals this to be a farce. As shown in Table 2, cancellation attempts at private secular colleges have a higher success rate (55–57.7%) than attempts at other institutions.⁷ Add to this the widespread toleration of progressive intimidation in the form of disrupted events (see Table 3 below) and, most recently, toleration of antisemitic violence, harassment, property crimes, and encampments ([The Campus Antisemitism Complex at Elite U.S. Universities, 2024](#)). Put simply, many private secular colleges do not appear to be meeting their contractual obligations.

Table 3. Event Disruptions by Higher Education Institution Type, FIRE Deplatforming Database: 1997–2024

	Private Religious	Private Secular	Public
From the Left	11 (59.9%)	82 (91.1%)	117 (91.4%)
From the Right	8 (42.1%)	6 (6.7%)	9 (7%)
Total	19	90	128

Contracts are binding agreements between parties. In the face of pervasive progressive hostility to free expression at private secular colleges, state governments and free speech activists should use every tool at their disposal to force secular private colleges to live by their own rules. This includes penalizing schools with funding reductions or lawsuits for failing to punish students for disrupting events and for enabling the range of lawless activities (riots, harassment, etc.) now commonly associated with progressive campus activism. There should be zero tolerance for unlawful behavior directed at suppressing alternate viewpoints. Without question, public colleges must be held to account in this regard as well.

⁷ Religious colleges cancel the smallest percentage of events (22–44.4%), followed by public colleges (39–56.8%) (see Table 2).



Conclusion

Progressive cancel culture has corrupted higher education in the United States, transforming what had previously been a force for innovation and enlightenment into a rigid ideological monoculture. This conclusion is borne out both by surveys, which measure sentiments, and by the record of recent actions taken to suppress free expression. There is no meaningful sense in which cancel culture can be labeled a “both sides” phenomenon. Conservatives would be wise to regard all such claims as fundamentally disingenuous and to regard colleges and universities as hostile territory.



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