



July 2026

Civil Dialogue in Higher Education: Social Listening Insights

What students, faculty, and parents are saying online about campus free speech and civil dialogue efforts





This research was conducted by More in Common US, a nonpartisan research nonprofit that works to understand the forces driving us apart, find common ground, and bring people together to address shared challenges.

Established in 2017, More in Common US is part of a nonpartisan, international initiative aimed at building societies and communities that are stronger, more united and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division.

More in Common's work is frequently featured in prominent media and used by senior political leaders, governments and leaders in nonprofits, philanthropy, and business.

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Executive Summary

More in Common analyzed two years of online conversation (summer 2024–summer 2026) about campus free speech and civil dialogue. Using Brandwatch, we ran separate queries for key terms “free speech” and “dialogue,” tracking posts or tweets referencing either term across all available data online. The analysis examined general discourse, three key stakeholder groups (students, parents, faculty), and universities at the top and bottom of FIRE's 2026 free speech rankings.

Four findings stand out:

- **The conversation is event-driven and overwhelmingly negative.** Discourse spikes around major moments—Riley Gaines's court win, ICE's detainment of Mahmoud Khalil, Harvard's rejection of the Trump administration's demands, and Charlie Kirk's death—and even during quiet periods, conversations keep circling back to them. Sentiment is heavily negative for free speech, and while dialogue reads as somewhat less negative, it is used much less frequently online than free speech.
- **The two terms, free speech & dialogue, carry different politics.** Free speech is the more common and more polarized term, most often tied to Trump and framed as rights or grievances. Dialogue is softer, less frequent, and most associated with Charlie Kirk.
- **The loudest online voices in this discussion *aren't* students.** Top posters skew older, male, and are more likely to be parents or employed adults than current students. Among stakeholders, faculty discuss free speech most and use academic terminology; parents (who skew female and are often educators) are the most likely to invoke dialogue; students engage least with dialogue and, when they do, it's usually in reference to Kirk.
- **Campuses with poor free speech track records drive the conversation.** FIRE's Bottom 5 schools—Columbia most of all—generate far more free speech and dialogue discourse than the Top 5, with Israel/Palestine-related campus conflict featuring prominently. Still, both groups show similar patterns: discussions of university actions and national politics, partisan framing, and use of the term free speech more than dialogue.

General Methodology

More in Common completed all analysis via Brandwatch's Consumer Research, which is a social listening and consumer intelligence platform for collecting and analyzing public online conversations. It aggregates data from over 100 million sources such as social networks, blogs, forums, news sites, review sites, and video platforms, and has full firehose access to X (Twitter), Reddit, and Tumblr, alongside coverage of Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and TikTok. Mentions are captured using Boolean queries defined by keywords and criteria, then analyzed for volume, sentiment, key topics, and demographics using proprietary machine-learning classifiers and large language models.

This analysis covered two years of data (summer 2024 through summer 2026), using key terms such as "free speech," "constructive dialogue," and "civil discourse," combined with "campus" and "university." The primary focus was X (Twitter). Content was only in English, and only came from users based in the United States.

All figures are exported from Brandwatch; all supporting quotes are from X users.

Outline

- **Part 1:** How do people, in general, use terms such as “free speech” and “dialogue” in online discourse centered around college campuses?
- **Part 2:** How do key groups of interest (college students, parents of college students, faculty/staff at colleges and universities) use these terms/engage in this discourse?
- **Part 3:** How does the discourse differ across college campuses that are known to vary in their relationship to promoting free speech?

Part One: General online discourse surrounding campus dialogue

Part One: Guiding Questions

How do people, in general, use terms such as “free speech” and “dialogue” in online discourse centered around college campuses?

1. What was the online discourse like surrounding campus dialogue and free speech at major moments on campuses in the last two years? How does discourse around major moments differ from “light news” moments when free speech on campuses wasn’t making national headlines?
2. What is the nature of discourse online about **free speech**? Is it mostly positive or negative? What are the key emotions flagged by Brandwatch’s sentiment and emotionality analysis?
3. What is the nature of discourse online about **campus dialogue**? Is it mostly positive or negative? What are the key emotions flagged by Brandwatch’s sentiment and emotionality analysis?
4. In general, what is the typical profile of someone who engages in campus free speech/dialogue discourse online?

Part One: Methodology

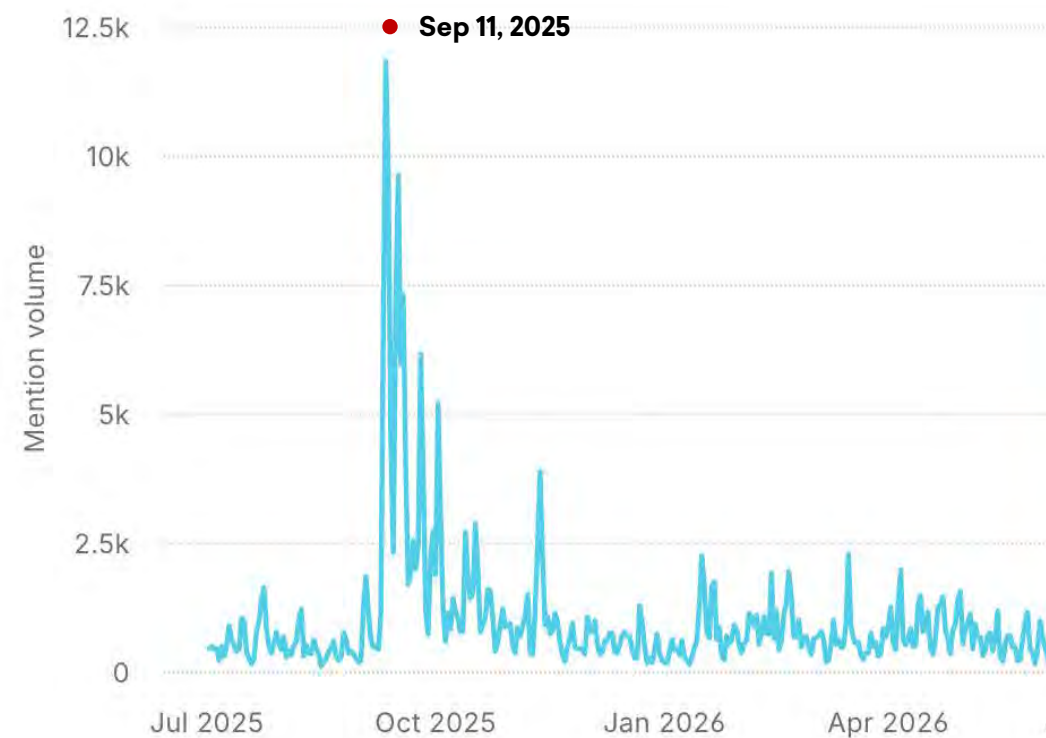
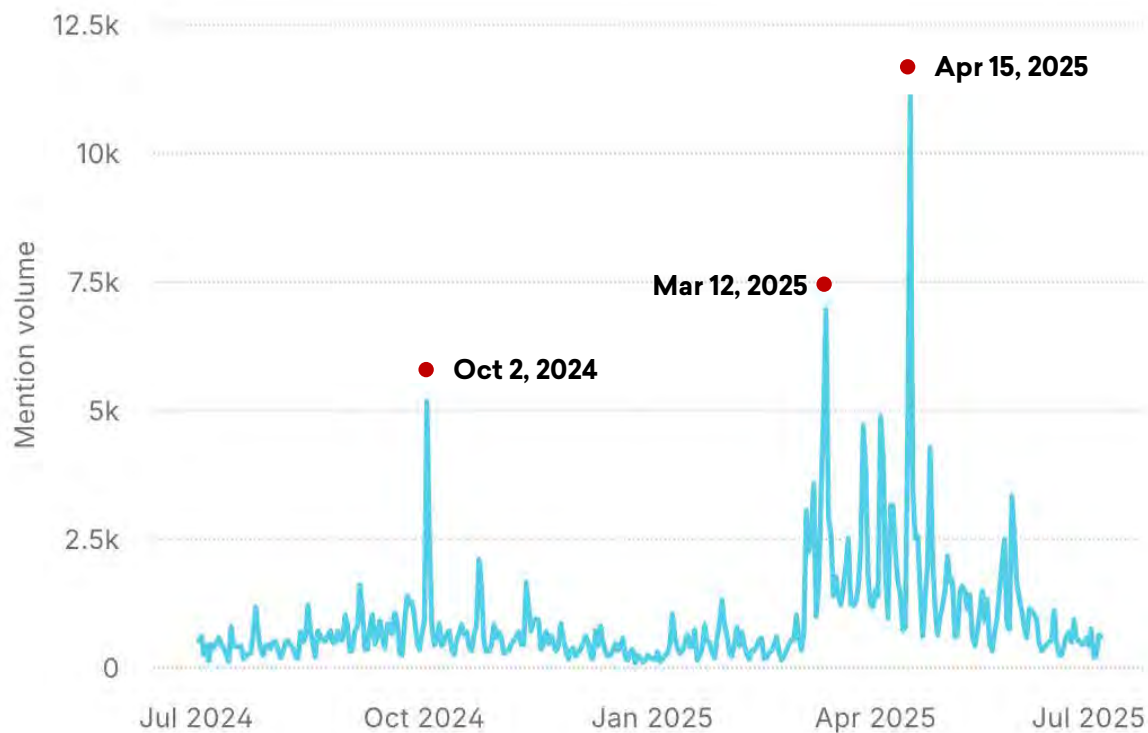
Brandwatch's [“categories” tool](#) allows users to filter their search queries. To compare how discourse varied across the two key terms, this analysis filtered content to show only mentions of “dialogue” versus only mentions of “free speech.”

Part One: Key Findings

1. Online discourse surrounding free speech and dialogue peaked **surrounding four major moments** over the last two years: (1) Riley Gaines wins her court case, (2) ICE agents detain Columbia activist Mahmoud Khalil, (3) Harvard rejects Trump's demands, (4) Charlie Kirk's death. Free speech and dialogue discourse **are similar** across both major moments and light news moments, just differing in volume. During light news periods, free speech and dialogue discourse remains dominated by discussion of major moments.
2. The sentiment around both dialogue and free speech is **overwhelmingly negative**, although dialogue has more positive content than free speech. The main emotion associated with mentions of free speech online is sadness, and for dialogue, it is joy. Figures associated with our key terms: dialogue discourse is often associated with Charlie Kirk, and free speech discourse often involves Trump.
3. Top posters about free speech and dialogue are typically **not students**, but rather are **parents** and/or **employed adults**. Commentary on free speech and dialogue is more often produced by men than women—in line with X's overall demographic makeup.

Finding #1: Four major moments in online discourse

Four major moments stand out in online discourse between July 2024 and today.



Source: More in Common (2026). Analysis via Brandwatch Consumer Research. Visualizing data from July 2, 2024 to July 1, 2025 and July 2, 2025 to June 3, 2026; data pulled on July 2, 2026.

Four major moments stand out in online discourse between July 2024 and today.

- **October 2, 2024 – Conservative activists celebrate Riley Gaines’ win in free speech lawsuit against the University of New Mexico.**
 - o Conservative activist and former NCAA swimmer Riley Gaines won a legal challenge against UNM after a federal judge ruled UNM's policy of charging security fees for conservative speakers was unconstitutional.
 - o Approximately 5k mentions that day
- **March 12, 2025 – Aftermath of Columbia graduate Mahmoud Khalil being detained by ICE.**
 - o Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia graduate and activist, was detained by ICE as part of the Trump administration’s crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests. A U.S. District Court temporarily blocked his deportation while legal challenges proceeded.
 - o Approximately 7k mentions that day
- **April 15, 2025 – Day after Harvard rejects demands from the Trump administration.**
 - o Harvard University publicly rejected a series of demands from the Trump administration, resulting in a \$2.2 billion freeze in federal grants and \$60 million in contracts.
 - o Approximately 11k mentions that day
- **September 11, 2025 – Nationwide reaction to Charlie Kirk’s death.**
 - o Conservative activist and Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk was shot and killed while speaking at Utah Valley University in Orem, Utah.
 - o Approximately 11k mentions that day

Two major moments revolve around school actions and legal wins for free speech.



“Big win for free speech!!!! We **sued University of New Mexico for viewpoint discrimination**, and we've temporarily won. Onward! 🙌”

Posted Oct 2, 2024 on X by Riley Gaines, a political activist and former college athlete



“**Free speech is essential** to defending freedom — especially on college campuses where political discourse and free thought should be protected. Congratulations to @Riley_Gaines_ on her **BIG WIN** for #FreeSpeech. #DefendFreedom”

Posted Oct 2, 2024 on X by Ohio congressman Warren Davidson



“Give me a break. Where was this high-mindedness when **Harvard ranked dead last out of 251 colleges for protecting free speech?**... Certainly it is a place where important research takes place. But that does not give the institution a license to undermine the First Amendment or violate federal civil rights laws, or defy the Supreme Court.”

Posted Apr 15, 2025 on X by California congressman Kevin Kiley

Two major moments involve Trump and free speech violations.



“Across the country, people are standing up to **reject Donald Trump's persecution of Palestinian student activist** Mahmoud Khalil and his administration's war on free speech! In Atlanta, organizers have a message for Trump: ‘You just made us louder, stronger & more powerful!’”

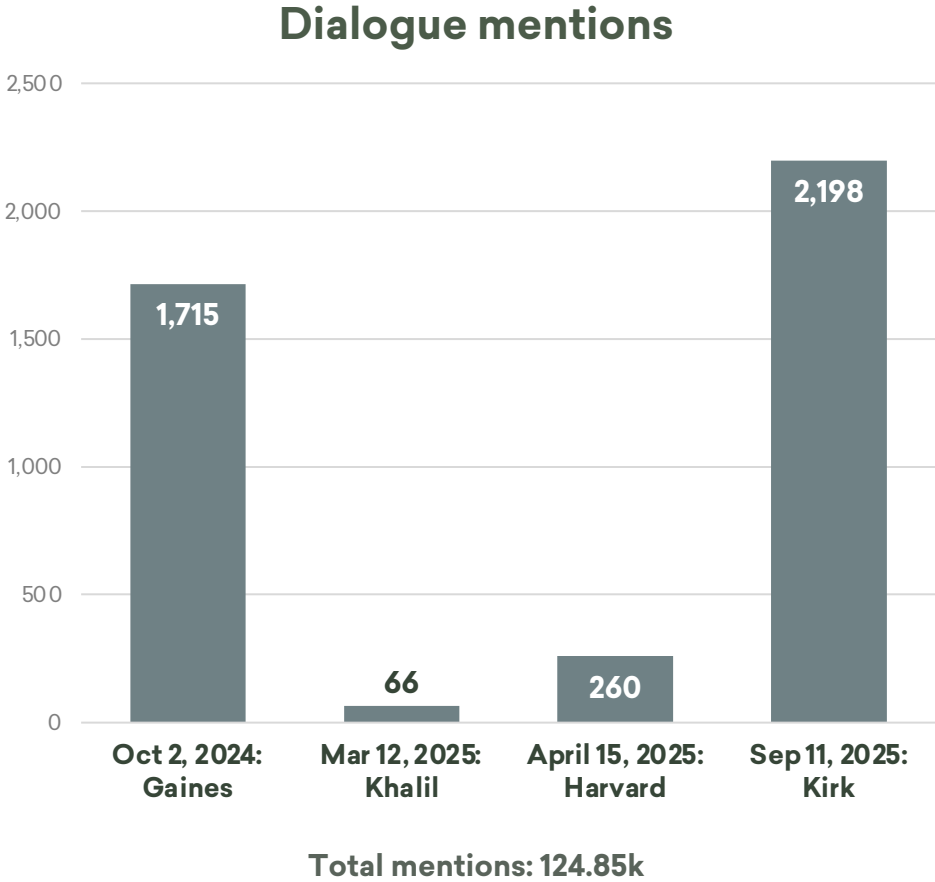
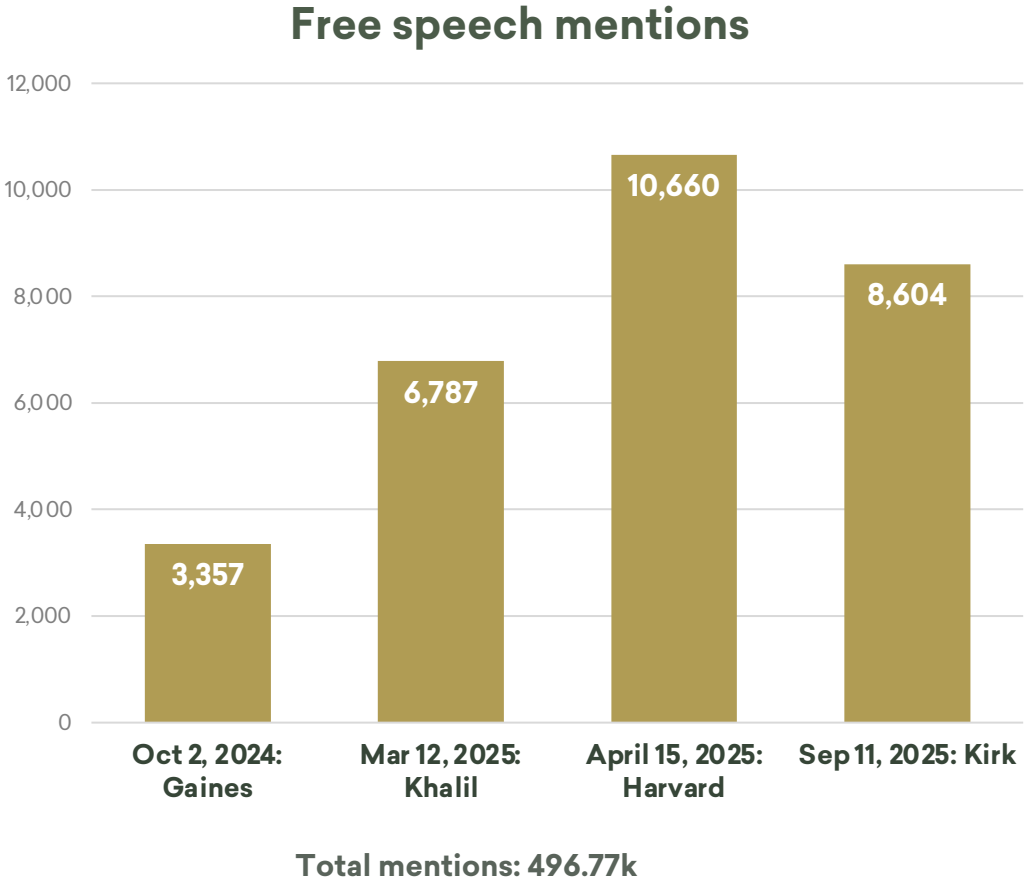
Posted Mar 12, 2025 on X by the Party for Socialism and Liberation



“Harvard University **rejected Trump's unhinged demands** to change school policies related to hiring and admissions. In response, Trump froze \$2.2 billion in funding, but Harvard didn't flinch. They doubled down, with their President speaking out publicly against it. This is exactly how every school should respond to these outrageous and unconstitutional threats by Trump. Fmr. President Barack Obama, who went to Harvard Law School, praised the university for taking a stand, saying: ‘Harvard has set an example for other higher-ed institutions—rejecting an unlawful and ham-handed attempt to stifle academic freedom ... Let's hope others follow suit.’

Posted Apr 15, 2025 on X by Scott Dworkin, a political organizer

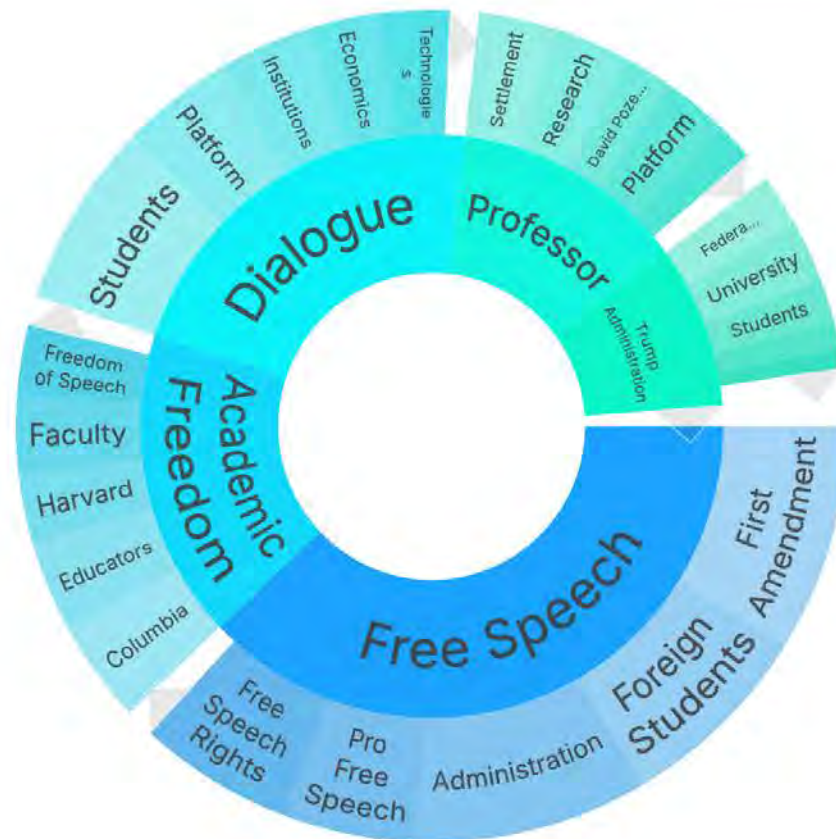
Use of free speech vs. dialogue varies across major moments; dialogue is most often associated with Kirk's assassination.



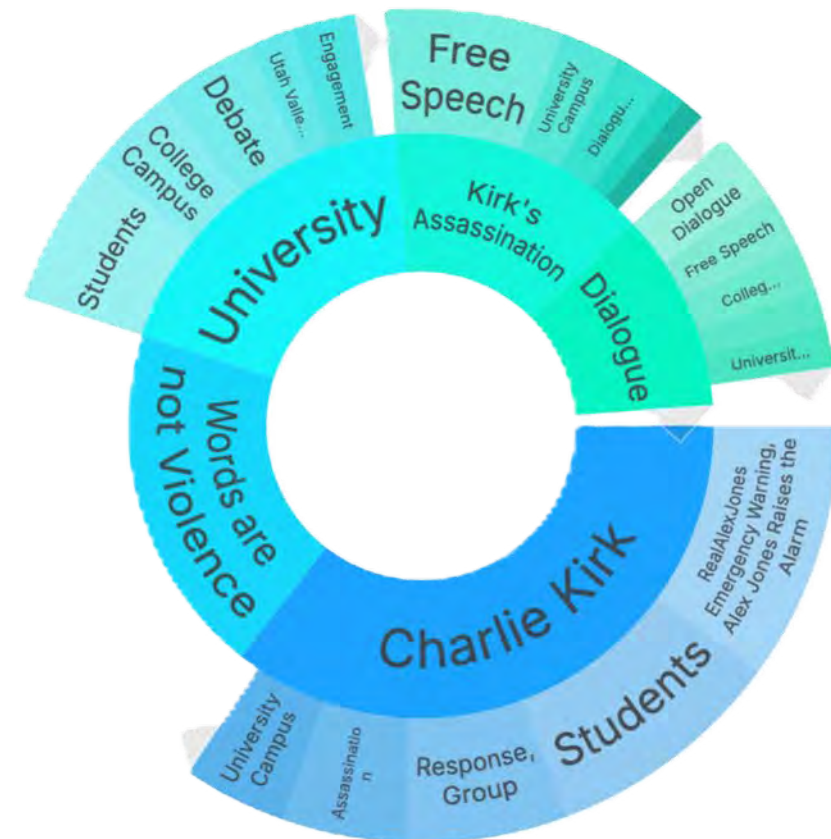
Source: More in Common (2026). Analysis via Brandwatch Consumer Research. Data pulled on July 28, 2026. Query volume totals are subject to slight volume change over time.

On “light news” days, discussion still references major moments, people, and university actions.

“Light news” period: Month of April, 2026



Major moment: Day after Charlie Kirk’s death, September 11, 2025



Major moment vs. “light news” day mentions



“Kids aren’t protesting this war because the Israel Lobby already killed free speech. Over the last two years college students protesting anything tangentially related to Israel faced blacklists from jobs, student group bans, suspensions from school, arrests and deportations.”

Posted Apr 5, 2026 on X by Lee Fang, an independent journalist (**“light news” day**)



“Harvard is asking donors for \$10M to promote ‘viewpoint diversity’ while sitting on \$50B and a faculty that’s ~82% liberal and ~0% conservative. If you need \$10M to hear a different opinion in a \$50B institution, the problem isn’t funding.”

Posted Apr 23, 2026 on X by Stephen Moore, a writer and tv host (**“light news” day**)



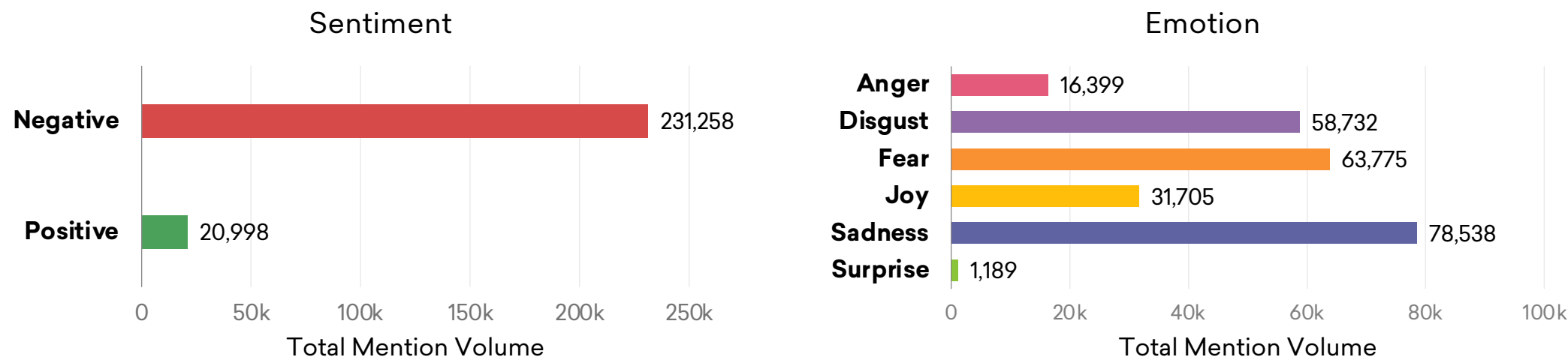
“‘He was one of ours. And he was taken.’ [@MegynKelly](#) reflects on the assassination of Charlie Kirk: ‘I think we are going to see a reaction on college campuses when it comes to free speech by conservatives unlike we’ve ever seen before.’”

Posted Sep 11, 2025 on X by Glenn Beck, a conservative political commentator (**major moment**)

Finding #2: The nature of online discourse is overwhelmingly negative

Sentiment around free speech mentions is overwhelmingly negative. The main emotion flagged is sadness.

Sentiment and Emotions around “Free Speech”

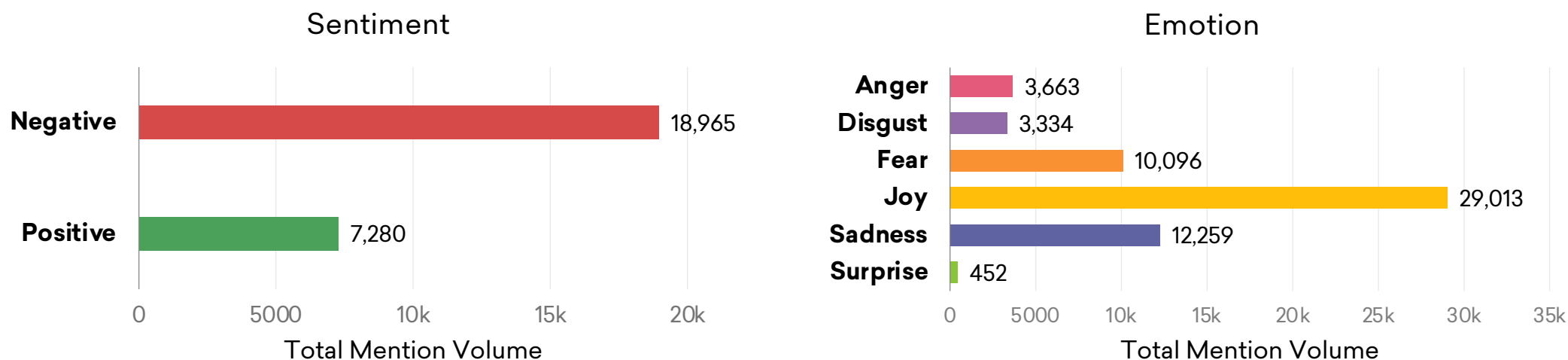


The volume of posts represented in the emotion and sentiment charts does not match the volume of tweets for that given event overall; many posts do not fit into any sentiment or emotion category in Brandwatch's classification model.

Source: More in Common (2026). Analysis via Brandwatch Consumer Research. Visualizing data from July 2, 2024 to July 1, 2026; data pulled on July 7, 2026.

Sentiment around dialogue mentions, while overall negative, is more positive than free speech. In fact, the main emotion flagged is joy.

Sentiment and Emotions around “Dialogue”



The volume of posts represented in the emotion and sentiment charts does not match the volume of tweets for that given event overall; many posts do not fit into any sentiment or emotion category in Brandwatch's classification model.

Source: More in Common (2026). Analysis via Brandwatch Consumer Research. Visualizing data from July 2, 2024 to July 1, 2026; data pulled on July 7, 2026.

Sentiment around dialogue mentions, while overall negative, is more positive than free speech. In fact, the main emotion flagged is joy.



“Charlie Kirk was one of the most influential leaders in the conservative movement. He inspired so many students with open and honest dialogue on college campuses across the country. He was a warrior and a friend. There is no place for political violence in the United States of America. Amanda and I are praying for his wife, children, and the millions of Americans impacted by this horrific assassination.”

Posted Sep 10, 2025 on X by Senator Jim Banks



“Awesome news. [@dartmouth](#) has a [@TPUSA](#) chapter. Our students have choices and opportunities to engage in civil discourse on campus. I was hosted by a former chapter to speak there in 2018. I am thrilled to see it is rebooted. [@charliekirk11](#) would be very pleased!”

Posted Oct 26, 2025 on X by Lily Tang Williams, a political activist

However, free speech as a term is used online almost four times more often than dialogue.

Free Speech

495,870

Mentions

Dialogue

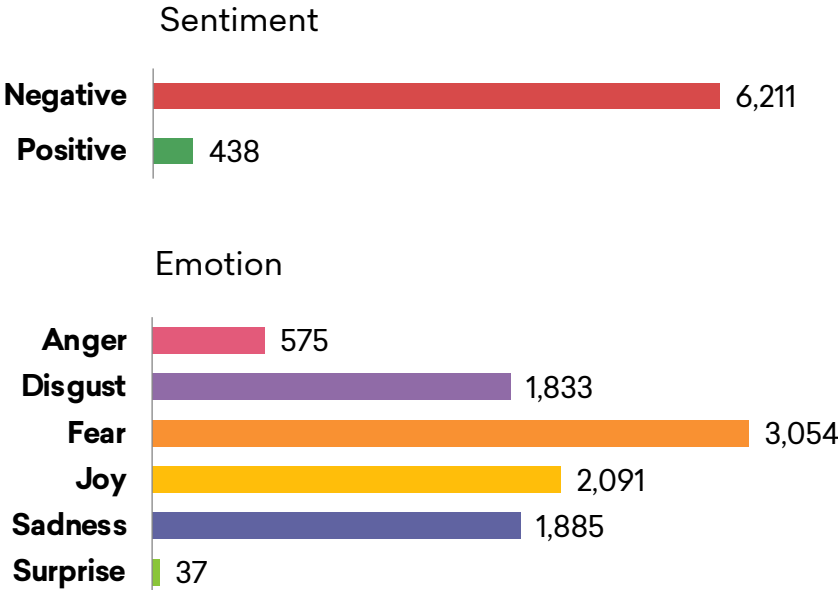
125,080

Mentions

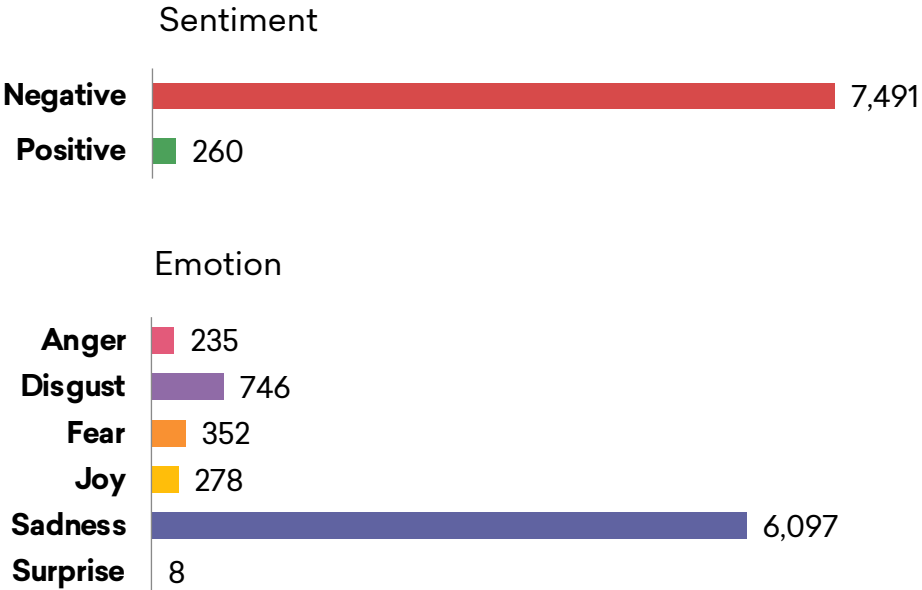
Sentiment and emotion hold similar patterns during both “light news” periods & major moments.



“Light news” period: Month of July, 2025



Major moment: Day after Charlie Kirk’s death, September 11, 2025



The volume of posts represented in the emotion and sentiment charts does not match the volume of tweets for that given event overall; many posts do not fit into any sentiment or emotion category in Brandwatch’s classification model.
Source: More in Common (2026). Analysis via Brandwatch Consumer Research. Data pulled on July 9, 2026.

Charlie Kirk is a key figure in the conversation – both as a contributor and topic of discussion.



“HUGE legal win for [@TPUSA](#), RILEY GAINES, and free speech on college campus! Boom!!”

Posted Oct 2, 2024 on X by Charlie Kirk, a political activist



“What is most chilling about the murder of Charlie Kirk is that it was not in the least surprising. Not anymore. The response to USATP was all too often rage and violence. Liberals and anti-free speech groups like Antifa would trash their tables and threaten students...”

Posted Sep 11, 2025 on X by Jonathan Turley, a law professor



“...Schools can’t censor student speech just because they don’t like its message. ADF is thrilled to get this vindication for Gabby, who courageously lived out her own admonition to “live like Kirk.” I think Charlie would be proud.”

Posted Jun 16, 2026 on X by Kristen Waggoner, president of Alliance Defending Freedom

More in
Common

Source: More in Common (2026). Analysis via Brandwatch Consumer Research. Visualizing data from July 2, 2024 to July 1, 2026; data pulled on July 2, 2026.

A large portion of Trump mentions criticize him on free speech policies.



“Pretty ironic that Trump tells Congress that he has brought free speech back to America, while he calls for pro-Palestine students to be expelled, arrested or deported.”

Posted Mar 5, 2025 on X by Medea Benjamin, a political activist



“Hundreds gather on @UVA Lawn to insist that the Board and interim president not sign onto Trump’s corrupt ‘Contract’ for colleges. Unfettered free speech matters at Jefferson’s University.”

Posted Oct 17, 2025 on X by Larry Sabato, an author and university staff member



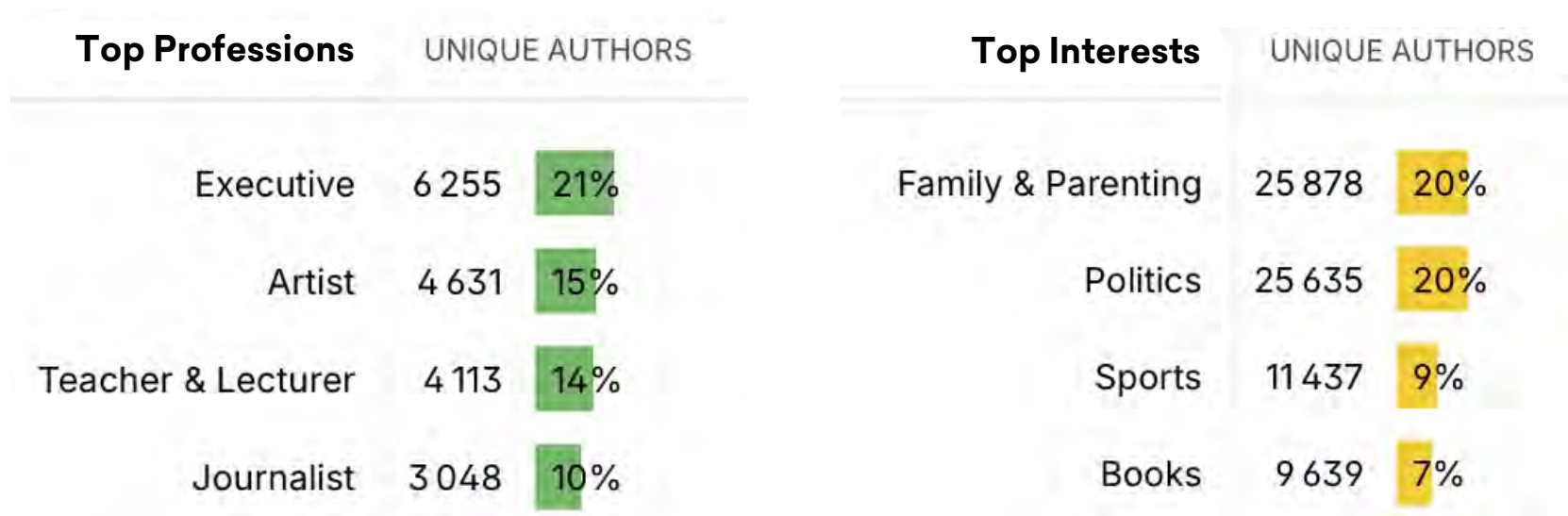
“Funny how Donald Trump is saying the federal government shouldn’t have a role in our public schools when he’s trying to control the curriculum and freedom of speech at private colleges and universities at the very same time. It’s almost as if this isn’t about education at all.”

Posted Mar 21, 2025 on X by Jo, parent

Finding #3: Profile of top posters

The most common profession among posters is not ‘student’; posters skew older and are more likely to be parents.

Top Interests & Professions across the 2-year query



Men post at higher volumes than women across all major moments, consistent with rates on X overall.



	Male Authors	Female Authors
Riley Gaines wins lawsuit (Oct 2, 2024)	71% 1,638 authors	29% 680 authors
Khalil deportation blocked (Mar 12, 2025)	55% 1,622 authors	45% 1,318 authors
Harvard rejects demands (April 15, 2025)	52% 2,462 authors	48% 2,231 authors
Kirk's death (Sept 11, 2025)	61% 2,717 authors	39% 1,755 authors

Part Two: Differences in discourse across key stakeholders

Part Two: Guiding Questions

How do key groups of interest (college students, parents of college students, faculty/staff at colleges and universities) use these terms/engage in this discourse?

1. What's the typical profile of a student who engages in free speech/dialogue discourse online? What do they typically discuss?
2. What's the typical profile of a parent who engages in free speech/dialogue discourse online? What do they typically discuss?
3. What's the typical profile of a faculty member who engages in free speech/dialogue discourse online? What do they typically discuss?

Part Two: Methodology

Brandwatch's "[Social Panels](#)" tool is an audience analysis feature that lets researchers define a specific group of X users (a "panel") and study what those users say online, rather than tracking conversations around a topic or keyword. Panels can be built by combining filters like demographics, interests, or profession; by uploading a list of specific individuals; or by using pre-built panels that Brandwatch curates (e.g., generational or interest-based audiences).

This analysis used a separate social panel for college students, parents, and faculty. Each panel was overlaid onto the main free speech and dialogue query to explore the discourse around each key stakeholder group.

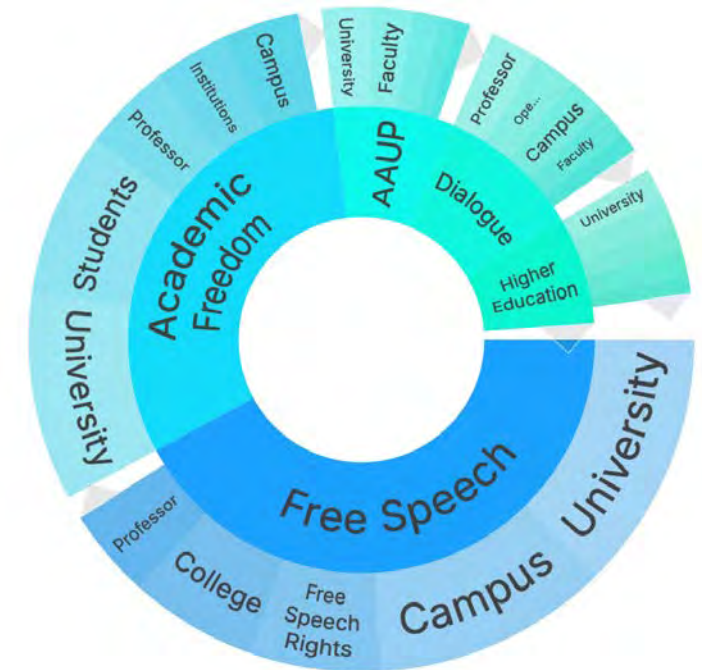
Part Two: Key Findings

1. Among students, **Charlie Kirk is the most common point of discussion** surrounding free speech and dialogue. He is a polarizing figure, even in death.
2. Free speech is more often discussed among faculty than students or parents. Students are less likely to use the word dialogue than parents or faculty.
3. Commentary on free speech and dialogue skews male among faculty and students. However, parent posters skew female. Parent posters are often educators of some kind.



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Faculty



Free speech is most often discussed by faculty.



“...President Linda LeMura, without naming him, wrote that the word caused ‘real hurt’ to Jewish students and implied its use was incompatible with the college’s commitment to inclusion. She then listed her commitments going forward: dialogue sessions, new guidelines for “deeply charged” campus programming, and a declaration that antisemitism has no place at Le Moyne — describing Abu Toha’s testimony, implicitly, as an example of bigotry requiring institutional guardrails...”

Reposted Apr 29, 2026 on X by Rula Jebreal, professor



“87% of university faculty say there's at least one topic they can't discuss honestly on campus. That isn't just a free speech problem. It's a policy problem. Too often, researchers avoid important questions because controversial findings could jeopardize their careers. Without disruptive researchers asking bold questions, the social sciences stagnate. This inevitably produces policy failures...”

Reposted Jun 8, 2026 by Mark McNeilly, professor

Dialogue is most often discussed by parents.



“...I am heartbroken for his family. I am heartbroken that it has come to this in THIS COUNTRY. How can it be that those of us who simply want to have a conversation and dialogue on college campuses are no longer safe to do so?”

Reposted Sep 10, 2025 on X by Dawn Atkinson Jones, mother



“Shows how rude pro-choicers can push people toward the pro-life side. One calm conversation changed this student's mind—proof that life has value and respectful dialogue works.”

Reposted May 14, 2026 on X by a father and veteran



“What Is At The Root Of DEI? Alex Stein engages in a dialogue at the University of Michigan, where he debates a student on DEI practices and whether or not they have a place in society. [@alexstein99](#) [@alexstein69420](#)”

Reposted Apr 15, 2026 on X by Lyn Moss, parent

For students, Charlie Kirk is a common, polarizing topic.



Topics are color-coded by sentiment.

The larger the bubble, the more common that topic and sentiment combination is in student online discourse.

For students, Charlie Kirk is a common, polarizing topic.



“As I travel to Penn State today to engage in an exercise of debate civil discourse on their campus, I’m thinking about Charlie Kirk. The way forward is to keep debating and to defeat violence with free speech.”

Posted Sep 25, 2025 on X by Evan Kujawa, a BU student



“Hasan Piker calls out TPUSA for not respecting Charlie Kirk's defense of free speech in trying to cancel his talk at Yale University ‘They're not carrying the flame’”

Posted Apr 14, 2026 on X by Kevin Ott, an Arizona State student

When students use dialogue, it's often associated with Charlie Kirk.



“In response to the Kirk assassination, I have submitted a formal request to set up a table on my campus. The table will be designated for students who disagree over political issues to sit and talk. We need our shared humanity. "If every college in our country cannot model the civil discourse he tried to embody, then that is an indictment on these institutions and our Republic." I hope other students will do the same on their campus. Your mission will not die with you Charlie, Gideon Askowitz, a student you never met.”

Posted Sep 11, 2025 on X by Gideon Askowitz, a student activist



“Barry University School of Law DENIES a @TPUSA chapter despite strong interest Claim: It doesn't align with 'Catholic values.' Then explain this: why are pro-choice/LGBT groups like OutLaw allowed on campus? Hypocrisy much? A law school should inspire dialogue not STOP it!”

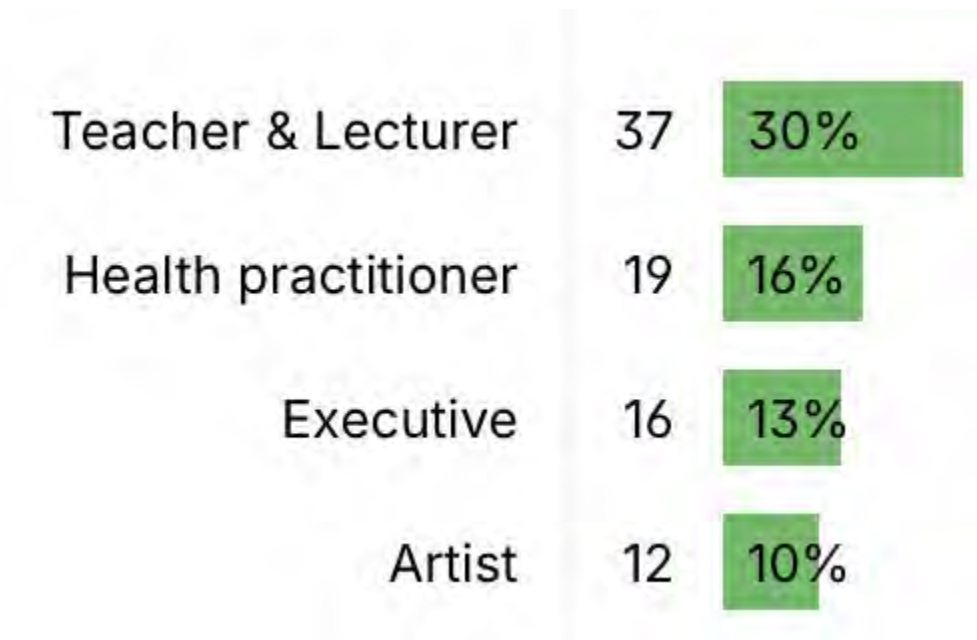
Posted Mar 6, 2026 on X by Kevin J. Lincoln, a Liberty University student

Faculty authors are more likely to be male compared to the average poster; parents are much more likely to be female.



	Male Authors	Female Authors
Overall Authors	62% 50,932 authors	38% 31,226 authors
Faculty Authors	75% 591 authors	25% 196 authors
Parent Authors	32% 56 authors	68% 119 authors
Student Authors	66% 776 authors	34% 401 authors

Parents engaged in free speech and dialogue discourse online are often teachers or professors themselves.



Part Three: Differences in online discourse across college campuses

Part Three: Guiding Questions

How does the discourse differ across college campuses that are known to vary in their relationship to promoting free speech?

How was the discourse around the four major moments identified from the past two years different at the Top 5 vs. the Bottom 5 free speech colleges (according to [FIRE's 2026 rankings](#))?

Part Three: Methodology

This analysis used two social panels filtering for X users whose bios listed a university ranked in either the top 5 or bottom 5 of the [Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression \(FIRE\)'s 2026 college rankings](#). Each panel (Top 5 vs. Bottom 5) was overlaid onto the main free speech and dialogue query to compare how discourse differed between the two groups.

Top 5 Colleges

- Claremont McKenna College (score: 80, grade: B-)
- Purdue University (score: 76, grade: C)
- University of Chicago (score: 76, grade: C)
- Michigan Technological University (score: 76, grade: C)
- University of Colorado Boulder (score: 74, grade: C)

Bottom 5 Colleges

- Barnard College (score: 41, grade: F)
- Columbia University (score: 43, grade: F)
- Indiana University (score: 44, grade: F)
- University of Washington (score: 44, grade: F)
- Northeastern University (score: 47, grade: F)

Part Three: Key Findings

- Bottom 5 schools generate more free speech and dialogue discourse online than Top 5 schools. Columbia generates the most.
- Discourse patterns are similar across the two groups: both center on university actions and national politics, are partisan in tone, and use the term free speech far more than dialogue.
- In both groups, rhetoric around free speech is frequently invoked online by students and faculty to discuss rights on campus.

Bottom 5 colleges contribute to online discussion more than top 5.



Top 5 Schools

299

Mentions

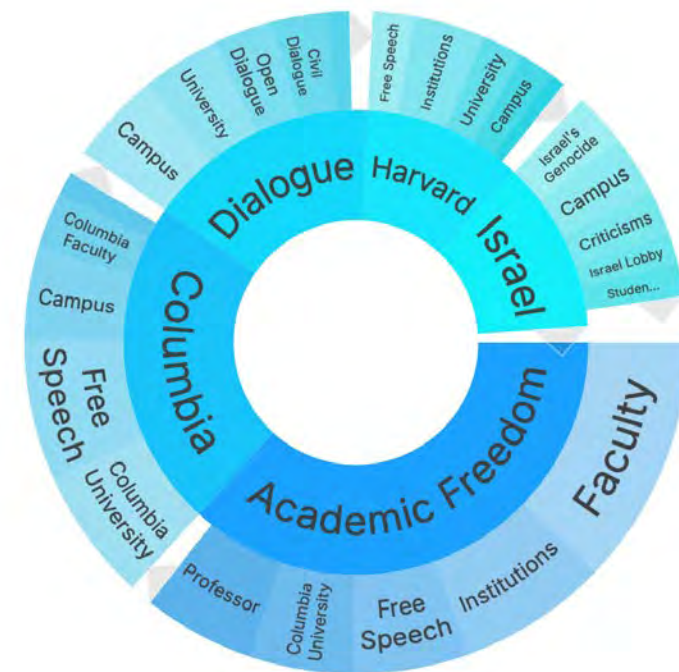
Bottom 5 Schools

1069

Mentions

More in
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Harvard is also highly mentioned as it's a focal university in Trump's university crackdowns on free speech.



Posts on Israel mainly come from Columbia-affiliated posters.



“The refusal to allow any criticism of the government of Israel continues to destroy free speech in the "democratic" nations of the world. Whether it's a college campus in the U.S. or a livestream event in the U.K., this is the price we pay because our leaders support genocide.”

Posted July 4, 2025 on X by Anthony Zenkus, a Columbia professor



“It's shameful how the Trump administration is helping Democrats squash free speech by attacking & even attempting to deport students who express opinions about Israel. The Israeli government is committing a genocide in Gaza, & *everyone* should be free to express dissent.”

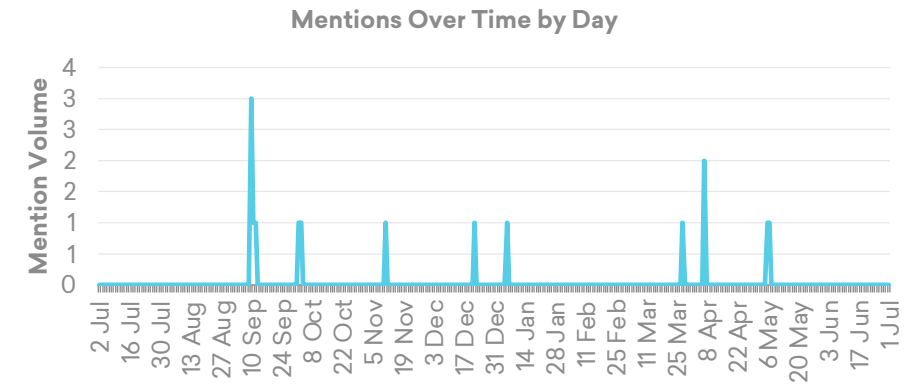
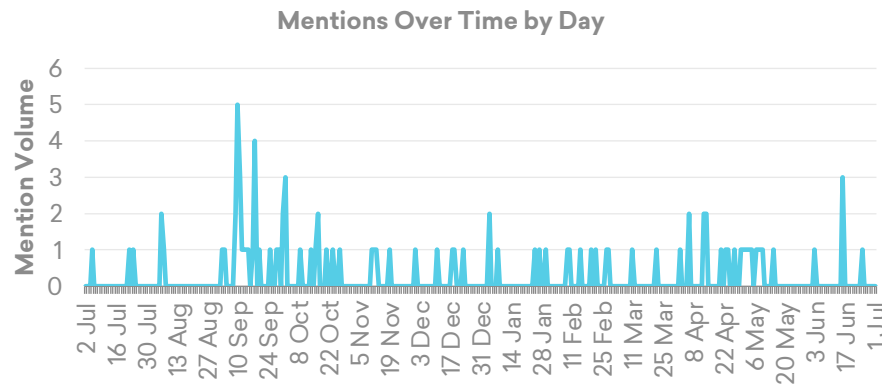
Posted July 30, 2025 on X by Lisa, a Columbia graduate

Both Top 5 and Bottom 5 posters discuss free speech more frequently than dialogue.

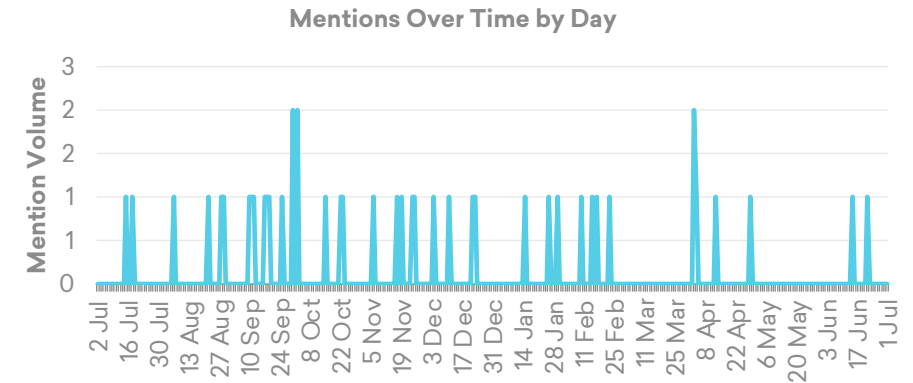
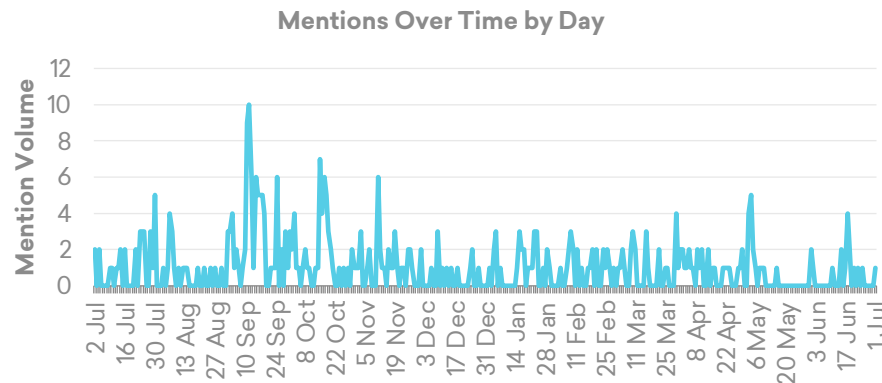
Free speech mentions

Dialogue mentions

Top 5



Bottom 5



Top 5 schools: mentions of free speech



“The University of Chicago is receiving a \$100 million donation to support the principles and practice of free expression, bolstering a shift at US colleges after a wave of campus turmoil spurred by the Israel-Hamas war.”

Posted Sep 26, 2024 on X by The Chicago Forum



“Hey [@purdueexponent](#) [@LifeAtPurdue](#) Purdue Admin!!!! suppressing freedom of speech & expression of Students is not the way to keep [@JohnPurdueClub](#) funds coming. Stop with your woke agenda and protection of a terrible decision.”

Posted Nov 10, 2024 on X by a Purdue graduate



“Hyper partisan organization AAUP takes an institutional position opposed to free speech for conservatives. And equates conservatives to fascists. Helpful background when considering, for example, President Trump's free speech proposals to universities.”

Posted Oct 21, 2025 on X by Eric Wessan, a UChicago alum

Bottom 5 schools: mentions of free speech



“We condemn [@Columbia](#)'s ongoing attacks against academic freedom. Targeting an individual graduate student for posting articles about Palestine is wrong. We are appalled that Columbia University would "apologize to students" because someone mentioned Palestine in a classroom.”

Posted Jan 28, 2025 on X by a Columbia student activist group



“Josh Shapiro:

- supports Israel's genocide of Palestinians
- compared student protesters to the KKK
- supported bills to limit free speech on college campuses

No one who opposes genocide and apartheid will vote for him. Run him and you will lose.”

Posted Nov 11, 2025 on X by Anthony Zenkus, a Columbia professor



“The only reason we have free speech in America is because progressives have fought for it
- [@RepRaskin](#) We can't let Republicans pretend they're champions of free speech while Trump attacks late night hosts and jails college kids.”

Posted Aug 7, 2025 on X by Jack Cocchiarella, a Columbia graduate

Both Top 5 and Bottom 5 students often invoke free speech when discussing campus rights and political issues. Graduate students are especially active in these discussions.



“Ted Cruz received \$1,706,000+ from the pro-‘Israel’ lobby. Through Cruz, the long arm of ‘Israel’ is reaching out to prohibit free speech on American campuses, by describing antigenocide protests as antisemitism. We have a First Amendment in the US.”

Posted Dec 23, 2024 on X by Larry Boorstein, a Columbia PhD student

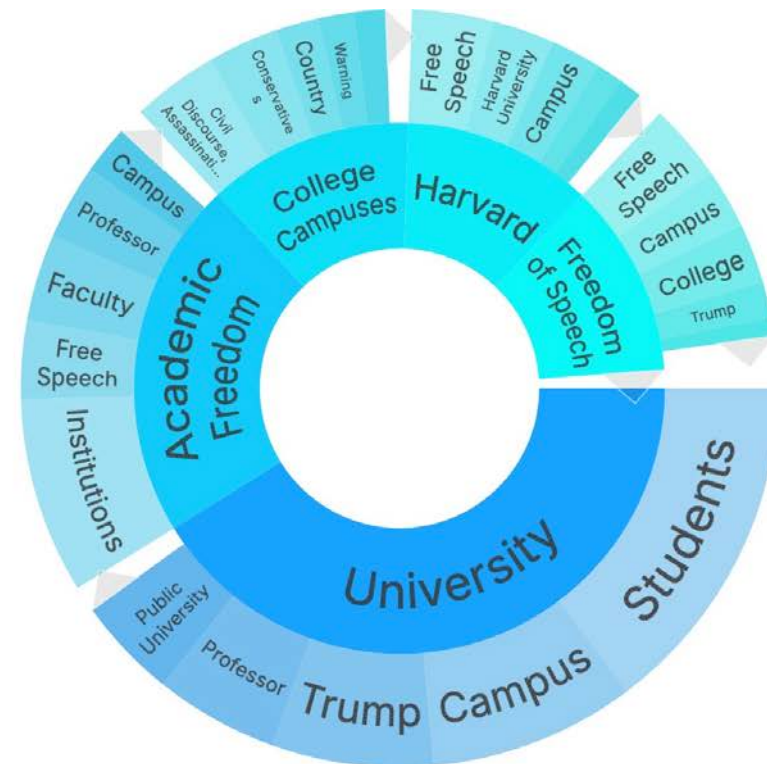


“Our once revered and world class University system has been captured by left wing ideologues who hate freedom of speech. Education needs Reform.”

Reposted Feb 9, 2026 on X by Matthew Tyrmand, a UChicago PhD student

**More in
Common**

Students (Bottom 5)



Faculty strike a softer tone when using the term dialogue, as compared to free speech.



“Students and alumni, chaining themselves to the gates of Columbia University to protest Mahmoud Khalil's detainment and demanding Columbia protect its students and free speech on campus. Heroes.”

Posted Apr 21, 2025 on X by Anthony Zenkus, a Columbia professor



“I do not approve of the trucks or doxxing... but text and images are a lot closer to speech of the "free speech" sort than violence and physical obstruction... and breaking of campus rules... and... etc.”

Posted Apr 11, 2026 on X by Jeffrey Lax, a Columbia professor



“Today was a busy day @Columbia. Jewish students bravely & proudly held up Israeli flags and dispelled myths in the midst of a protest for Lebanon. Meanwhile, our students and faculty set up a listening table to engage in meaningful dialogue with others. We are proud of them all!”

Posted May 20, 2025 on X by a group of Columbia and Barnard faculty and staff

Key Takeaways

- Online discourse surrounding free speech and dialogue on college campuses is **driven by major moments**. Even during “light news” periods, the major moments when free speech and dialogue make national news are the main topics discussed online.
- Online discourse on these topics is **overwhelmingly negative**. However, discourse around dialogue is slightly less negative than discourse around free speech.
- People online **discuss free speech more often than dialogue**. Language is more polarized and negative when discussing free speech, and positive when speaking about dialogue.
- **Top posters about free speech and dialogue are *not* students**. Posters tend to be male, older, and are often parents.
- **Trump** is the main topic discussed in free speech discourse, and dialogue is often associated with **Charlie Kirk**.
- Students are **less likely to use dialogue** than parents or faculty.
- FIRE's Bottom 5 schools (especially Columbia) generate **much more online discourse** around free speech and dialogue than FIRE's Top 5 schools.



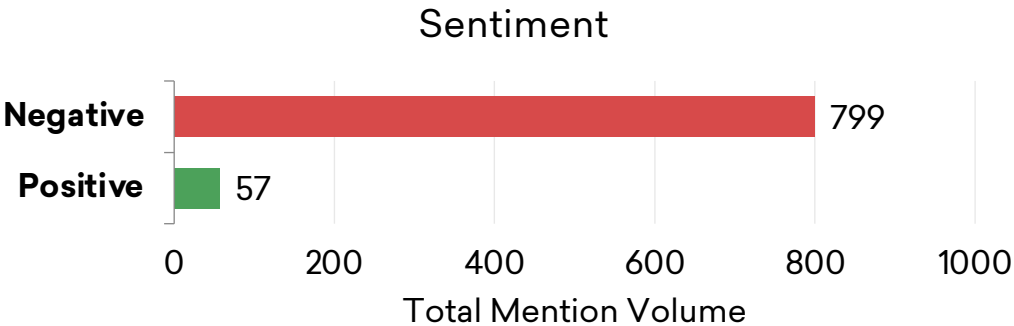
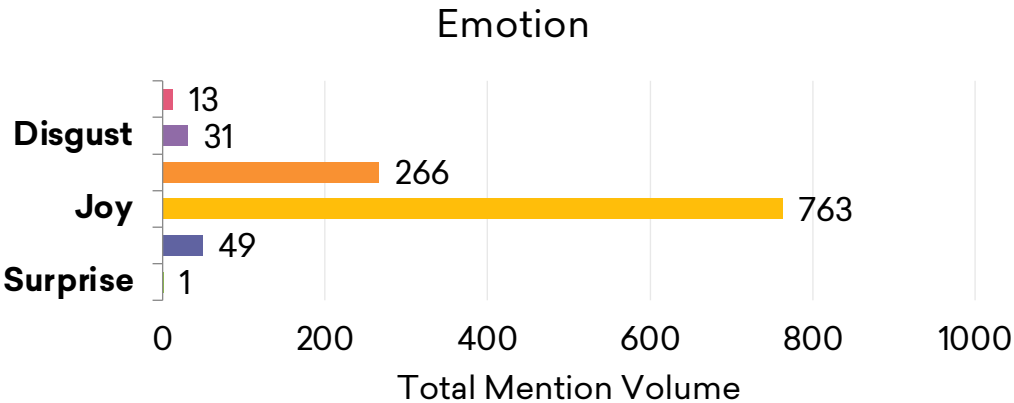
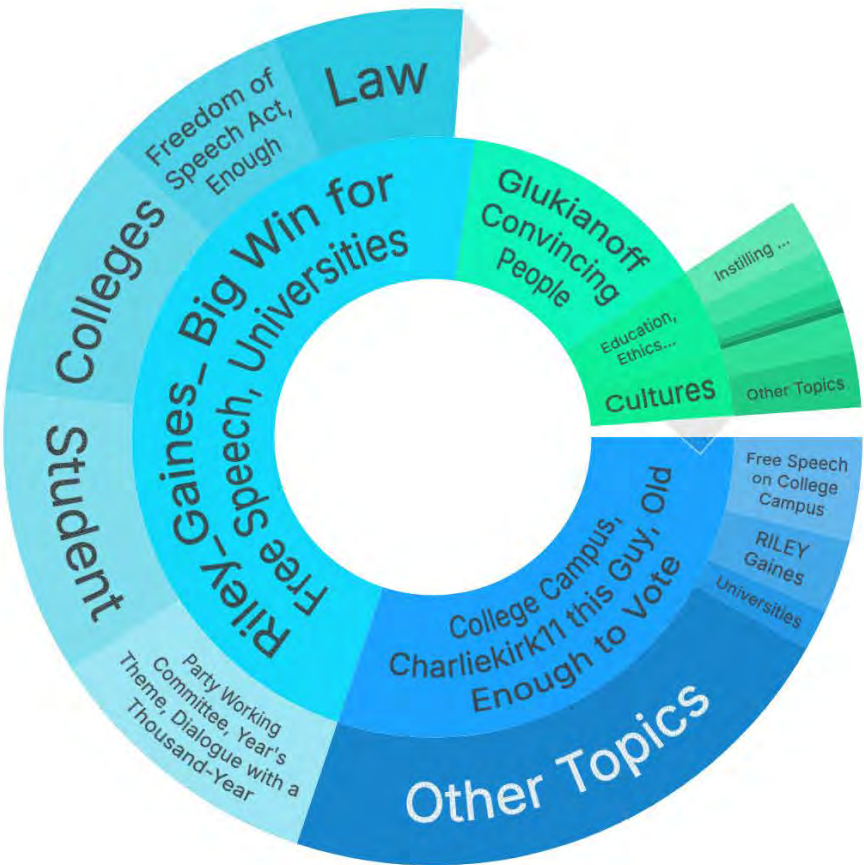
**More in
Common**

Appendix: Deep Dive into Major Moments

Four major moments stand out in online discourse between July 2024 and today.

- **October 2, 2024 – Conservative activists celebrate Riley Gaines’ win in free speech lawsuit against the University of New Mexico.**
 - o Conservative activist and former NCAA swimmer Riley Gaines won a legal challenge against UNM after a federal judge ruled UNM's policy of charging security fees for conservative speakers was unconstitutional.
 - o Approximately 5k mentions that day
- **March 12, 2025 – Aftermath of Columbia graduate Mahmoud Khalil being detained by ICE.**
 - o Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia graduate and activist, was detained by ICE as part of the Trump administration’s crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests. A U.S. District Court temporarily blocked his deportation while legal challenges proceeded.
 - o Approximately 7k mentions that day
- **April 15, 2025 – Day after Harvard rejects demands from the Trump administration.**
 - o Harvard University publicly rejected a series of demands from the Trump administration, resulting in a \$2.2 billion freeze in federal grants and \$60 million in contracts.
 - o Approximately 11k mentions that day
- **September 11, 2025 – Nationwide reaction to Charlie Kirk’s death.**
 - o Conservative activist and Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk was shot and killed while speaking at Utah Valley University in Orem, Utah.
 - o Approximately 11k mentions that day

Riley Gaines Wins Her Court Case: Kirk and other conservative figures celebrate “legal wins” against “viewpoint discrimination” with the assumption that free speech on college campuses should be protected.



Top Hashtags

#freespeech

#defendfreedom

#Isu

Source: More in Common (2026). Analysis via Brandwatch Consumer Research. NOTE: The volume of posts represented in the emotion and sentiment charts does not match the volume of tweets for that given event overall; many posts do not fit into any sentiment or emotion category in Brandwatch's classification model. Visualizing data from October 2, 2024; data pulled on July 2, 2026.

Riley Gaines Wins Her Court Case: A Sample of X Posts



“Big win for free speech!!!! We sued University of New Mexico for viewpoint discrimination, and we've temporarily won. Onward! 🙌”

Posted Oct 2, 2024 by Riley Gaines, a political activist and former college athlete



“HUGE legal win for @TPUSA, RILEY GAINES, and free speech on college campus! Boom!!”

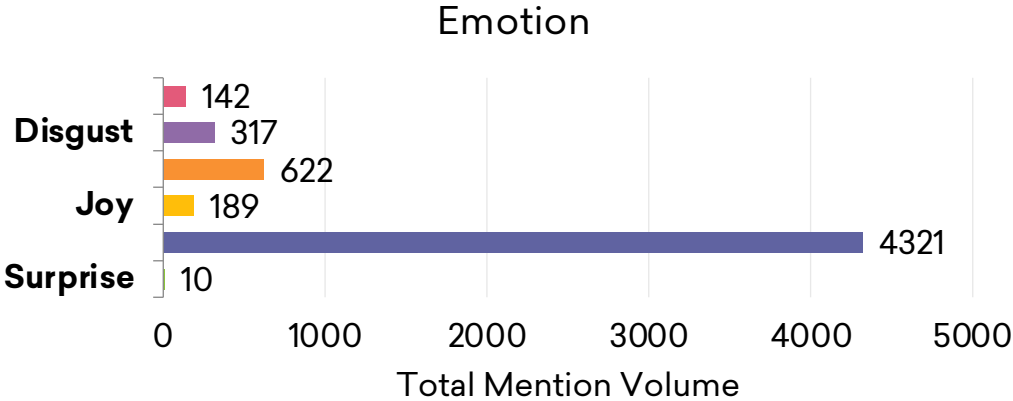
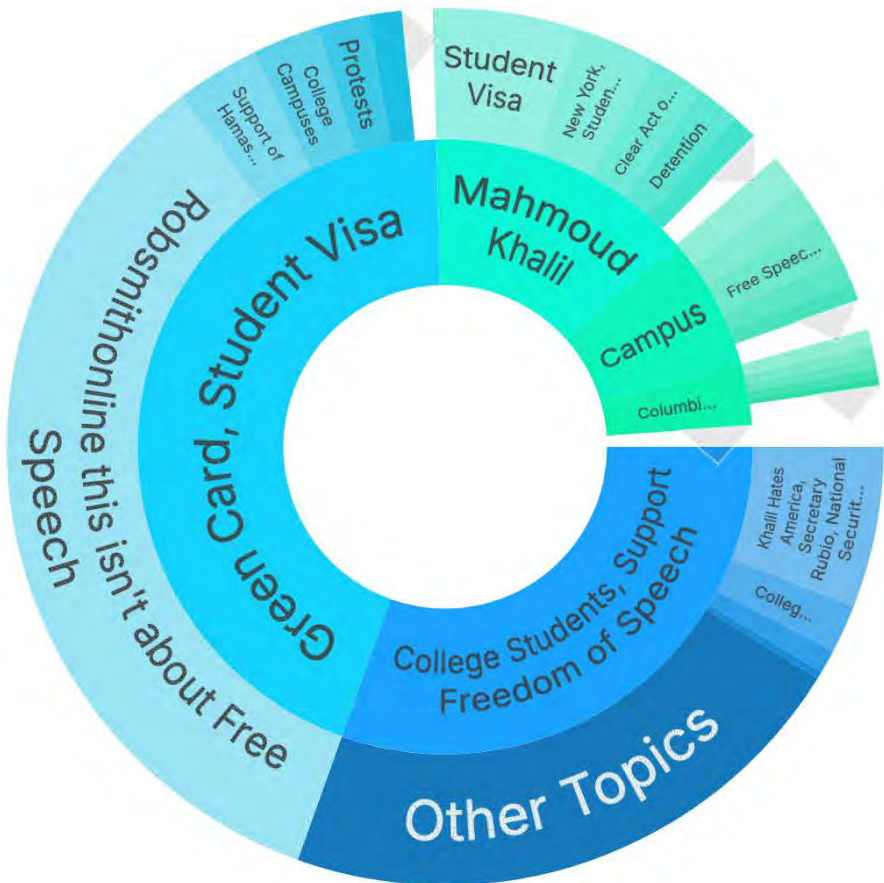
Posted Oct 2, 2024 by Charlie Kirk, a political activist



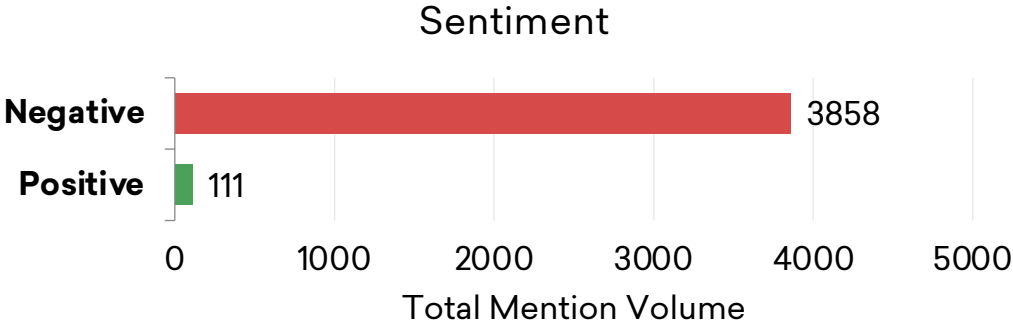
“Free speech is essential to defending freedom — especially on college campuses where political discourse and free thought should be protected. Congratulations to @Riley_Gaines_ on her BIG WIN for #FreeSpeech. #DefendFreedom”

Posted Oct 2, 2024 by Ohio congressman Warren Davidson

Khalil’s Deportation Order is Blocked: Khalil’s case sparks debate over what counts as “free speech” for people with non-citizen status in the United States.



- Top Hashtags
- #mahmoudkhalil
 - #gatewaypundit
 - #columbiauniversity



Source: More in Common (2026). Analysis via Brandwatch Consumer Research. NOTE: The volume of posts represented in the emotion and sentiment charts does not match the volume of tweets for that given event overall; many posts do not fit into any sentiment or emotion category in Brandwatch’s classification model. Visualizing data from March 12, 2025; data pulled on July 2, 2026.

Khalil's Deportation in the Courts: A Sample of X Posts



“Marco Rubio just destroyed the Democrat talking point about the foreigner arrested that's facing deportation: ‘This is not about free speech. No one has a right to a student visa. No one has a right to a green card.’”

Posted Mar 12, 2025 by Gunther Eagleman, a political commentator



“Across the country, people are standing up to reject Donald Trump's persecution of Palestinian student activist Mahmoud Khalil and his administration's war on free speech! In Atlanta, organizers have a message for Trump:

🗣️ ‘You just made us louder, stronger & more powerful!’”

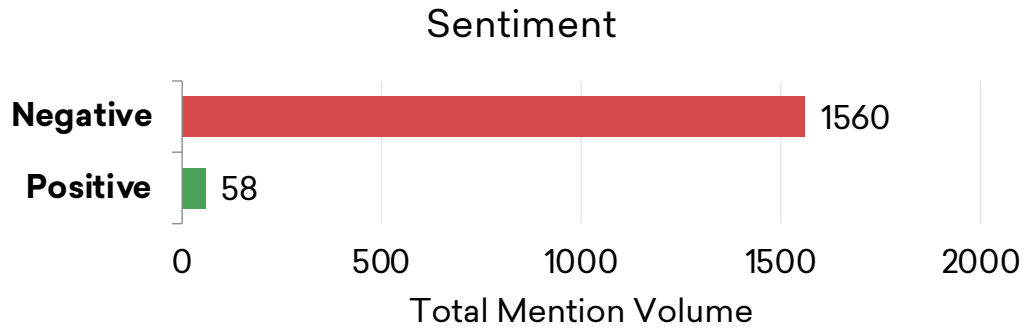
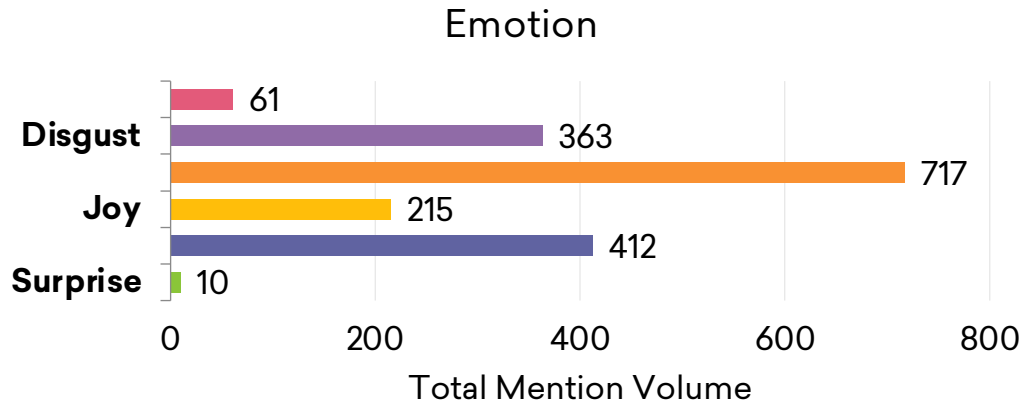
Posted Mar 12, 2025 by the Party for Socialism and Liberation



“ ‘This isn’t about free speech. Nobody has a RIGHT to a Student Visa. Nobody has a RIGHT to a green card!’ Rubio absolutely FLAMES a reporter trying to corner him on Mahmoud Khalil’s green card being REVOKED!’”

Posted Mar 12, 2025 by Rob Smith, a political analyst

Harvard Rejects Trump's Demands: Some criticize Harvard for anti-semitism and free speech violations, while others offer praise for standing up to Trump and protecting academic freedom.



- Top Hashtags
- #harvard
 - #trump
 - #cornell

Source: More in Common (2026). Analysis via Brandwatch Consumer Research. NOTE: The volume of posts represented in the emotion and sentiment charts does not match the volume of tweets for that given event overall; many posts do not fit into any sentiment or emotion category in Brandwatch's classification model. Visualizing data from April 15, 2025; data pulled on July 2, 2026.

Harvard Rejects Trump's Demands: A Sample of X Posts



“Give me a break. Where was this high-mindedness when Harvard ranked dead last out of 251 colleges for protecting free speech? Or when it stood by an antisemitism-supporting President right up until she was caught plagiarizing? Harvard gets \$9 billion in federal funding. Certainly it is a place where important research takes place. But that does not give the institution a license to undermine the First Amendment or violate federal civil rights laws, or defy the Supreme Court.”

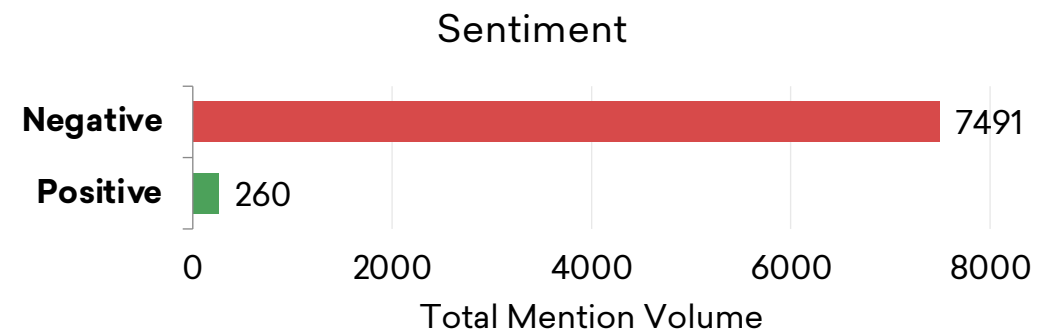
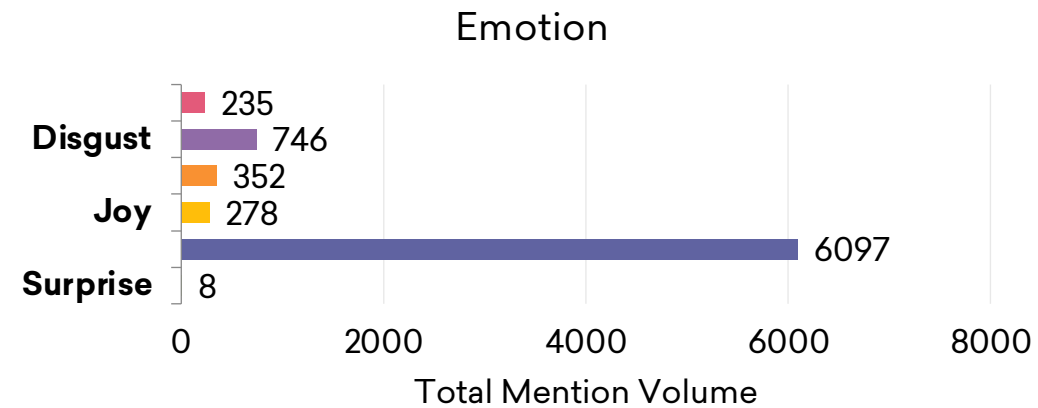
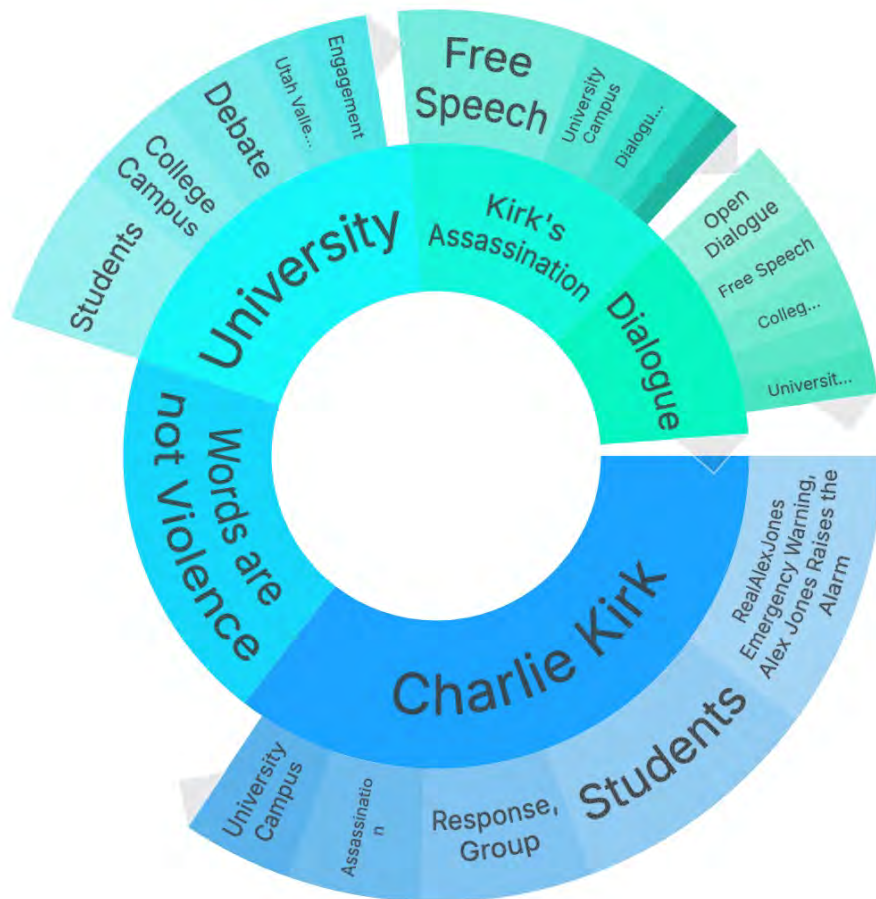
Posted Apr 15, 2025 by California congressman Kevin Kiley



“Harvard University rejected Trump’s unhinged demands to change school policies related to hiring and admissions. In response, Trump froze \$2.2 billion in funding, but Harvard didn’t flinch. They doubled down, with their President speaking out publicly against it. This is exactly how every school should respond to these outrageous and unconstitutional threats by Trump. Fmr. President Barack Obama, who went to Harvard Law School, praised the university for taking a stand, saying: ‘Harvard has set an example for other higher-ed institutions—rejecting an unlawful and ham-handed attempt to stifle academic freedom ... Let’s hope others follow suit.’”

Posted Apr 15, 2025 by Scott Dworkin, a political organizer

Kirk's death: Top X posts condemn violence at "free speech event," blame liberals and "anti-free speech groups," and express sadness.



Top Hashtags

- [#charliekirk](#)
- [#faithandcourage](#)
- [#prayforpeace](#)

Kirk's Death: A Sample of X Posts



“They killed him at a free speech event on a college campus where there was an open mic and you could say anything you wanted to say. Words are not violence. But his were so powerful their only response was to kill him.”

Posted Sep 11, 2025 on X by Clay Travis, an author and lawyer



“Disgusting behavior by Clemson Professor @MelvinEarlMusic Mocking @charliekirk11 on the day of his vicious assassination. Why do @ClemsonUniv and @ClemsonPrez allow someone that publicly celebrated the death of a peaceful advocate of free speech to instruct students?”

Posted Sep 11, 2025 by a Clemson College coalition of Republicans