



If I'd Only Known

University Students Talk About Tolerance and Safety on Campus
A Pilot Study to Develop Tolerance Ratings for Assessing Universities

CAMPUS TOLERANCE FOUNDATION

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Research Conducted by

FDR GROUP
When Research Matters.

For the

CAMPUS TOLERANCE FOUNDATION

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Are America's College Campuses Intellectually and Physically Safe?
A Pilot Study to Develop Tolerance Ratings
Conducted by the FDR Group for the Campus Tolerance Foundation

Overview of the study. This is a pilot study. Its purpose is to create a standardized way for college students to voice their views and report their experiences and observations about their campuses. What is life like for college students, in their own words? What kind of treatment can a student expect if they're a member of a racial or ethnic minority group? How extensive are incidents of bias? How safe are women on campus? Is there intellectual diversity in the classroom or are lessons one-sided? Our goal was to create a format for students to assess the atmosphere on their own campus anonymously in their own voices, and to reach them through a venue they are very comfortable with: online, through *Facebook*.

When parents and students think about college, it's easy enough for them to find admission requirements, course offerings and even ratings of the academic quality and prestige of the institutions – controversial as those might be. This exploratory study is an attempt to provide one missing piece of the higher education puzzle: A systematic way to evaluate tolerance and respect on individual campuses. Parents will obviously want a sense of what their kids can expect on campus. The students we surveyed say they weighed this issue when they were considering which college to attend: 25% of the overall sample said they had given a lot of thought to “how comfortable the campus would be” for them given their background and identity while another 37% had given it a little thought and 36% none at all. As the costs of a college education rise at a seemingly inexorable pace, more consumers will be asking tougher questions about its value.

Because our resources were limited in this initial round, we surveyed undergraduates at only three campuses: Michigan State University, Columbia College, and U.C. Berkeley. In the next iteration, students in many more colleges across the country will be canvassed about their views and ratings will be created for each school.

Key findings:

- Physical assaults, physical threats, verbal insults and graffiti because of students' group membership are surprisingly common on campus. Substantial numbers of students report they saw or personally experienced such incidents of bias at MSU (64%), Berkeley (49%), and Columbia (43%).
- Female students are at risk of sexual harassment and date rape on campus. Disturbingly high numbers of students at MSU (52%), Berkeley (22%), and Columbia (22%) say both harassment and rape are likely to happen at their school.
- To various degrees, intellectual diversity in the classrooms is sometimes stymied at the colleges we surveyed. Respondents at MSU (42%), Berkeley (32%), and Columbia (17%) say either that “lessons and discussions end up being mostly one sided and missing key perspectives” or that

students “often” don’t voice their views because they fear professors and classmates would disagree with them.

- Even as colleges focus on achieving racial and ethnic diversity in the student body, social segregation and hidden prejudice are not uncommon on their campuses. Too many students at MSU (43%), Berkeley (34%), and Columbia (26%) report both that behind closed doors prejudice “readily comes out” and that there’s segregation “where students gather on campus – at parties, in the cafeteria, in the dormitories.”

This pilot study accomplishes several objectives. It shows that students can voice their perceptions on delicate questions regarding the atmosphere on their campuses; that there are differences on crucial issues across campuses and that survey questions can pick those differences up; and that it is possible to develop a methodology to survey students at specific colleges—populations that are notoriously difficult to reach without the cooperation of college administrators. (See a description of the methodology and its limitations below.)

How one interprets these findings depends so much upon the point of comparison – are the data best understood when comparing the colleges to each other or by comparing the ratings of an individual college to the average of all colleges? Or to the ideals and values that inform higher education? For example, although the numbers show that intellectual diversity is not habitually stymied, some may want the numbers to be a lot better given the ideals for which higher education stands. Or should we be more concerned about comparisons over time, as we repeat the study? For example, it is hardly a stretch to acknowledge that the nation’s colleges have become more welcoming over the past century toward women and minorities. But it’s not comforting to know that the physical safety of women is far from guaranteed or that incidents of bias are routine. Finally, how will these schools – and the many others we plan to survey – fare in the future? Many of these problems are, to use the language of lawyers, “actionable” – administrators and students can do something to help solve them.

Methodology. A total of 1,039 students responded to this online survey: 354 from Michigan State University (MSU), 310 from Columbia College and 375 from Berkeley. The vast majority of the sample is derived from responses to ads on *Facebook* (known on the site as “flyers”) targeting current students at the three colleges. The survey was fielded from April 19, 2007 to July 27, 2007. At the time of fielding, according to *Facebook*, there were 53,000 individuals registered at its site who affiliated with MSU; 24,000 individuals affiliated with Columbia University; and 38,000 individuals affiliated with Berkeley. These *Facebook* numbers include alumni, graduate students, administrators and others. The actual number of students enrolled at the undergraduate level at the three colleges is far lower: approximately 36,000 undergraduates at MSU, 4,000 at Columbia, and 23,000 at Berkeley.

To participate in the survey, respondents were required to supply a working “.edu” email address from the respective school. Respondents to the *Facebook* ads who were not currently undergrads were screened out. As is often the case in web-based surveys, incentives were offered to encourage participation—in this case, a random-drawing of cash prizes totaling \$1,000 per school. The sample was augmented by direct appeals to students via email addresses downloaded from University websites.

The sample is self-selected, as it relied on students opting to participate by clicking on a *Facebook* advertisement. It is therefore not possible to calculate and report sampling error for the sample nor can claims be made about how representative it is. Efforts to enlist the help of college administrators in a more rigorous sampling process that would draw from the entire student population frame were unsuccessful.

To help prepare the survey questionnaire, focus groups with current undergraduates were conducted at or near the three campuses. At each campus one focus group was dedicated to interviewing students who might be considered and treated as members of a minority group because of their race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation, and another to a cross section of what could be considered students with majority status. To prepare for the focus groups, we undertook background readings and conducted one-on-one interviews with higher education experts from across the country, administrative insiders at the schools, and students. To minimize bias and insure understandability, the questionnaire was pre-tested on the phone with students before it was fielded online.

I. Bias incidents on campus – likelihood of students witnessing or experiencing bias incidents

	RATING	*The percentage of students who have either : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • been victims of bias or harassment themselves (experienced graffiti, verbal insult, physical threat, physical assault) because of their group membership or • seen others being victims of the same types of incidents
MSU	64%	
Columbia	43%	
Berkeley	49%	

*Full question wording and results for the questions that make up this rating are at the end of this section.

Surprisingly high numbers of students report they have either personally been victims of bias incidents or that they have seen bias incidents perpetrated against other students. At MSU, 64% have seen or experienced bias incidents – defined as graffiti, insults, physical threat or physical assault committed because of someone’s group identification. And although Berkeley’s (49%) and Columbia’s (43%) ratings are better than MSU’s, they still indicate a widespread problem – nearly 1 out of every 2 students has witnessed or experienced bias incidents.

In the survey, some of the students described their experiences:

“I was thought to be a gay male, and threatened with physical violence at a fraternity party by members of the college wrestling team.” MSU

“In the basement of a dorm ‘Jews are pigs’ was graffitied.” MSU

“Racial insults have often been said to me. They have been said somewhat jokingly but usually I can tell they reflect the person’s actual beliefs.” Columbia

“Verbal insults happen all the time when walking around on campus.... Threats have been made out of cars.... 2 years ago I was assaulted because of my sexuality in a frat house.” Berkeley

Are these campuses fundamentally dangerous places, where being different means living in fear? Although bias incidents appear to be fairly common on these campuses, verbal insults are the most typical problem. At MSU, 36% of students have been verbally insulted because of their group identity and another 52% have seen it happen to others. At Columbia 23% experienced verbal insults and 33% have seen it happen to others; at Berkeley 28% have experienced verbal insults and 38% have seen it happen to others.

Across the three campuses, actual physical attacks are unusual but they are hardly unknown. At MSU, for example, 7% of respondents have been physically assaulted because of their group identity; another 17% have seen it happen to others. At Columbia 4% have been attacked and 7% have seen bias attacks; at Berkeley 5% have been attacked and 6% have seen bias attacks.

College administrators may not be aware of the extent of the problem because students do not report the vast majority of these incidents. In fact, about 9 in 10 respondents in each campus say they did not report the incidents of bias or harassment that took place (MSU 87%, Columbia 89%, and Berkeley 92%). This may be especially true when students think these incidents are low level types of harassment or disrespect that do not merit formal investigation. Based on their comments, students often appear to dismiss these incidents as “no big deal” – minor conflicts not worth the trouble of asking officials to get

involved. Sometimes they just doubt that anything useful could or would be done. It's simpler for them to handle the situation on their own or look past the nuisance and go on with their lives.

"It [the bias incident] was out of line, but it wasn't enough to make me lose sleep. I still feel safe, and I have a lot of work to get done." Berkeley

"Unfortunately, it will most likely take physical abuse or assault to make me report an incident. Verbal harassment has not provided the impetus for me to report it. I know that I probably should report it. However, it happens so frequently that it would just become counterproductive."
Columbia

% Responding "yes"

	Have you PERSONALLY ever been a victim of the following types of bias or harassment on campus because of your own group affiliation or identity?			Have you ever witnessed someone OTHER THAN YOURSELF being a victim of the following types of bias or harassment on campus because of their group affiliation or identity?		
	MSU	Columbia	Berkeley	MSU	Columbia	Berkeley
Graffiti	5	5	3	22	18	16
Verbal insult	36	23	28	52	33	38
Physical threat	10	5	8	21	9	12
Physical assault	7	4	5	17	7	6

II. Women’s safety on campus – the likelihood of female students being physically accosted at their schools

	RATING	*The percentage of students at respective college who say that two things are “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to happen: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that women will be likely to be sexually harassed on campus and • that date rape is likely to occur on campus
MSU	52%	
Columbia	22%	
Berkeley	22%	

*Full question wording and results for the two questions that make up this rating are at the end of this section.

On all three campuses, students believe women are at risk at a physical level simply because they are women. Things are at their worst at Michigan State University where 52% of students believe that women are likely to be sexually harassed on campus *and* that date rape is likely to occur on campus. Although Columbia’s and Berkeley’s ratings are better, the fact that 22% of students on both campuses believe sexual harassment and date rape are likely to happen to women is hardly reassuring.

There’s certainly not a sense of the college campus as safe harbor. Even as attitudes about women attending higher education have shifted dramatically in the past several generations, and with female students starting to outnumber males on some campuses, the persistence of wide-ranging sexual harassment is unnerving.

“Fraternity members sexually harass me (and other women) constantly. It did happen on campus, and it should be noted that I don’t attend parties. It happened because the members of these fraternities are blind to their actions towards women and use alcohol as an excuse for inappropriate behavior.” MSU

“I was sexually harassed by a professor. There was no physical contact, he just said inappropriate things, offered to give me a massage, and offered an internship in exchange for going out with him.” Columbia

“During my first week of class a male student grabbed my breasts.” Berkeley

The good news is that there appears to be little intellectual intimidation of women. About 90% of females in each campus say their college is open and accepting of women. In terms of being taken seriously in classroom discussions, or running for student body president, few students at any campus thought being a woman was a liability. Women are not more likely than men to stop themselves from making comments in class. They are also not more likely to report that their comments were belittled by professors or other students. The upshot: the three campuses appear to be intellectually – but not physically – safe for women.

% Responding

	MSU	Columbia	Berkeley
Female students would be sexually harassed on campus			
Very likely	25	8	10
Somewhat likely	34	22	20
Not too likely	30	41	42
Not likely at all	8	21	20
Date rape would occur on campus			
Very likely	25	12	11
Somewhat likely	40	27	29
Not too likely	24	36	30
Not likely at all	6	14	13

III. Self-censorship and lack of intellectual diversity in the classrooms –are colleges exposing students to alternative perspectives?

	RATING	The percentage of students at each college who say either : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that “lessons and discussions end up being mostly one-sided and missing key perspectives” <li style="text-align: center;">or • that students often don’t voice their views because they are pretty sure their professor and classmates would disagree with them
MSU	42%	
Columbia	17%	
Berkeley	32%	

*Full question wording and results for the two questions that make up this rating are at the end of this section.

When people think about what a college education means, they often think that part of the experience is being exposed to different points of view in a setting that encourages intellectual debate. Students themselves believe this, saying that “professors have an obligation to bring in viewpoints that are different from their own and to encourage students to consider competing theories” (79% at MSU, 73% at Columbia, 71% at Berkeley).

Students at the three campuses say it’s possible – but there’s no guarantee – that they’ll get intellectual debate in class from their professors and their fellow students. Too many at MSU (42%), Berkeley (32%), and Columbia (17%) say either that their professors teach lessons that are mostly one-sided or that their fellow students often stop themselves from speaking in class to avoid disagreeing with their professor and classmates.

At MSU, 36% say they typically hear a variety of points of view from professors during class lectures and discussions; at Columbia, 42%; at Berkeley 34%. Overwhelming and persistent intellectual bias appears rare: relatively few say professors’ discussions are generally one-sided (MSU 24%, Columbia 10%, and Berkeley 17%). They are more likely to say it’s about half and half: 36% at MSU, 41% at Columbia, 44% at Berkeley.

“During a discussion in class a professor asked for opinions on the situation in Iraq and when a student spoke out for the war, the professor discredited his statements and embarrassed the student when the student had the facts right. It’s a common problem with super left wing radical teachers who preach instead of giving the students the chance to make their own decisions.”

MSU

Perhaps because they have gotten the message that professors or classmates may think less of them for thinking or speaking differently, students believe their peers self-censor their work. At MSU 34% of students believe their fellow students “often” stop themselves from saying something during class discussions because they feel their professors and other students would disagree with them. At Columbia 14% say it happens “often”, and at Berkeley 24%.

The expectation among survey respondents is that students with politically conservative views will have the hardest time and feel the least welcome on their campuses. At Columbia, only 25% say their campus is “open and accepting” of conservatives; at Berkeley it’s 34%. Even at MSU, a Midwestern college that doesn’t have a particularly liberal reputation, a little more than half (52%) of students say their campus is open and accepting toward conservatives.

“In class people tend to be dismissive of those with more conservative viewpoints.” Columbia

“My conservative political opinions are continually dismissed by professors as well as fellow students. Liberal students here at Berkeley claim to be tolerant but they are simply tolerant of alternative lifestyles and not of the right-wing.” Berkeley

We also asked students what kind of effect a student’s group identity would have on their chances of being elected student body president and offered a list of 12 group affiliations. The only affiliation that a majority agreed would hurt a student’s chances was being politically conservative (Berkeley 68%, Columbia 67%). MSU is somewhat different. Students there say being identified as gay or lesbian would most hurt your chances of being elected (56%). But even at MSU, 40% say being a conservative or Republican would hurt a student’s chance of being elected president of the student body. In contrast, only 9% say being liberal or a Democrat would hurt a student’s candidacy.

% Responding	MSU	Columbia	Berkeley
Generally speaking, during class lectures and discussion would you say:			
Lessons and discussions end up being mostly one-sided and missing key perspectives	24	10	17
You typically hear a variety of points of view from professors	36	42	34
About half and half	36	41	44
How often do you think students in your classes DON'T voice their views because they are pretty sure their professors and classmates would not agree with them?			
Often	34	14	24
Sometimes	46	45	44
Rarely	13	27	20
Never	2	5	1

IV. Hidden prejudice, segregated campuses – how pervasive is prejudice and self-segregation in the student body?

	RATING	<p>*The percentage of students who say both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that “Most students on campus are polite and respectful on the surface, but behind closed doors their prejudice readily comes out” and • that “Where students gather on campus – at parties, in the cafeteria, in the dormitories...students of different races and ethnicities tend to form and segregate based on race and ethnicity.”
MSU	43%	
Columbia	26%	
Berkeley	34%	

*Full question wording and results for the two questions that make up this rating are at the end of this section.

America’s colleges and universities appear to pay careful attention to attaining greater ethnic and racial diversity on their campuses. But while their demographic statistics are tracked carefully, little is known about how socially integrated and accepting their campuses are of racial and ethnic minorities.

It turns out that at the three college campuses surveyed, students belonging to different racial or ethnic groups often end up having limited and segregated social relations – mixed crowds are not necessarily the norm. About 2 in 3 students (67%) at MSU report that “where students gather on campus – at parties, in the cafeteria, in the dormitories – generally speaking.... students of different races and ethnicities tend to form and segregate based on race and ethnicity.” The results at Columbia (46%) and Berkeley (56%), while better than at MSU, indicate that social isolation across groups is there as well.

Outright prejudice can also be a problem at these campuses, though it is often hidden. On the one hand, many students say there’s true respect and tolerance on their campus (MSU, 43%; Columbia, 58%; and Berkeley, 54%). But too many say that while most students are polite and respectful on the surface, their prejudice comes out when they’re behind closed doors (MSU, 47%; Columbia, 33%; and Berkeley, 37%).

When it comes to the quality of race relations, the numbers suggest that colleges have a lot of work to do after students choose to come to their campus. Simply focusing on attracting minority students to improve the racial mix is only half the challenge.

“People use racial slurs in jokes and conversation. It is wrong and needs to stop but they never seem to be directed at specific people. People use them when they think no one is watching.”

MSU

“I have been assumed to be a nonstudent numerous times. I believe this happens because of my race.” Columbia

“I’ve never seen someone saying it [a slur] to another person’s face – only behind their back or out of earshot. In a group of white people racist comments are often made, sometimes without the person realizing they are being racist.” Berkeley

% Responding

	MSU	Columbia	Berkeley
If you had to pick one of these, which one comes closer to your view about students on campus?			
Most students on campus are polite and respectful on the surface, but behind closed doors their prejudice readily comes out OR	47	33	37
Most students treat each other with respect and tolerance on campus – people can be comfortable being who they are	43	58	54
When you think about places where students gather on campus – at parties, in the cafeteria, in the dormitories – generally speaking, would you say that students of different races and ethnicities			
Tend to form and segregate based on race and ethnicity OR	67	46	56
Tend to blend together and mix freely	27	46	38