User's Guide to FIRE's Scholars Under Fire Database

By FIRE August 3, 2021

Welcome to the Scholars Under Fire Database. On this page, you can learn more about what a "targeting incident" is, how we catalog these incidents, and how you can use our database to learn more about this concerning phenomenon.

Since our founding in 1999, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) has fought the culture of censorship on campus. One worrisome trend undermining open discourse in the academy is the increased push by individuals and groups — both on- and off-campus — to target scholars for sanction because of their constitutionally protected speech. In 2015, we recorded 28 incidents compared to 124 in 2020. In the year 2021, 59 targeting incidents have been recorded as of July 1.

Methodology

FIRE researched targeting incidents involving scholars at public and private American institutions of higher education, including both community colleges and four-year institutions, from the year 2015 to present. Data were collected from a variety of sources. Our primary source for identifying targeting incidents was news reports obtained from campus, local, and national news outlets. We then checked the following seven existing sources tracking targeting incidents of scholars (and other individuals) to identify additional cases that did not emerge during our search of news reports:

- Lee Jussim's list of "Threat(s) to Academic Freedom ... From Academics"
- Jeffrey Sachs' list of "The US Faculty Termination for Political Speech Dataset (2000-2020)"
- The "Free Speech Tracker" from The Free Speech Project at Georgetown University
- Duke Law School's "Campus Speech Database"
- The National Academy of Scholars (NAS) list of "Tracking 'Cancel Culture' in Higher Education"
- National Review's list "Tracking 'Cancel Culture' in Higher Education"
- The "Retraction Watch Database"

It is important to note that this research is not exhaustive. It would be nearly impossible to compile information on every targeting incident. However, FIRE is confident that this data accurately documents a growing and concerning trend on college campuses.

Definitions:

Who is a scholar?

A scholar is any individual who engages in acts of scholarship within the academic domain and has an official affiliation with a college or university. This includes teaching at a college or university, conducting research and submitting the findings to the peer-review process, and/or discussing peer-reviewed scholarship at professional academic events (e.g., conferences, panel discussions).

For the purposes of this database, a scholar, based on this definition, includes: professors (assistant, associate, full, emeritus), lecturers (adjunct, clinical, instructors), postdoctoral researchers/research fellows/scholars at universities or university-affiliated research centers (e.g., Princeton University's Institute for Advanced Study, Stanford University's Hoover Institute), attending physicians (medical doctors working in university settings), graduate students (master's, doctoral, law), and medical trainees (medical students, residents, fellows).

We exclude deans and other administrators who have never held a faculty position, as well as researchers working for non-university-affiliated organizations.

What is a targeting incident?

We define a *targeting incident* as a campus controversy involving efforts to investigate, penalize or otherwise sanction a scholar for engaging in constitutionally protected forms of speech. The term also includes instances in which the scholar does not face an attempt at being penalized or sanctioned, but is subjected to harassment and/or intimidation, including death threats. A case where the individual(s) or group(s) expresses opposition to a scholar's speech, but does not make any demands that the scholar and/or institution take action to remedy the situation, is not considered a *targeting incident*, and thus is not included in the database.

What details are recorded for each targeting incident?

For each targeting incident recorded, we document what was being expressed (*topic*); who was being addressed or talked about (*subject*); the reason for the expression (*intent*), and where the scholar's speech took place (*context*). Additionally, we identified those who initiated the targeting incident (*source*); how they want the scholar sanctioned (*demands*); and whether the targeting incident was initiated by those to the political left or right of the scholar. We also included how the scholar reacted to the targeting incident (*response*); how the institution or administration reacted (*administrative response*); and the outcome of the targeting incident (*result).*

For each of the above descriptor categories, the coding options are not mutually exclusive and more than one option could be selected. For instance, when Sandra Sellers, a former adjunct professor of law at Georgetown University, was unwittingly recorded telling her colleague, "I end up having this angst every semester that a lot of my lower ones [students] are Blacks," the *topic* was categorized as "race"; the *subject* was both "scholars" and "graduate students"; the *intent* was categorized as both "provocation/controversy" and "unintentional/accidental"; the *context* was "direct interaction"; the *source* was both "undergraduate students" and "graduate students"; the *demands* included a "list," "termination," and "policy change"; the *scholar's response* was to "apologize" and "leave"; the *institution's response* was to "apologize" for and "terminate" the scholar; and the *result* was that the scholar was "terminated."

For specific details on how each of these categories were coded please refer to the Scholars Under Fire Codebook.

Political motivations for targeting incidents

Often scholars are targeted because their speech is perceived as politically conservative or politically liberal by the source of the targeting incident. However, this does not mean that the scholar being targeted is, in fact, a conservative or a liberal. There are many recorded targeting incidents in which a scholar is not ideologically dissimilar from those targeting them for sanction. Instead, those targeting them tend to be more ideologically committed or extreme.

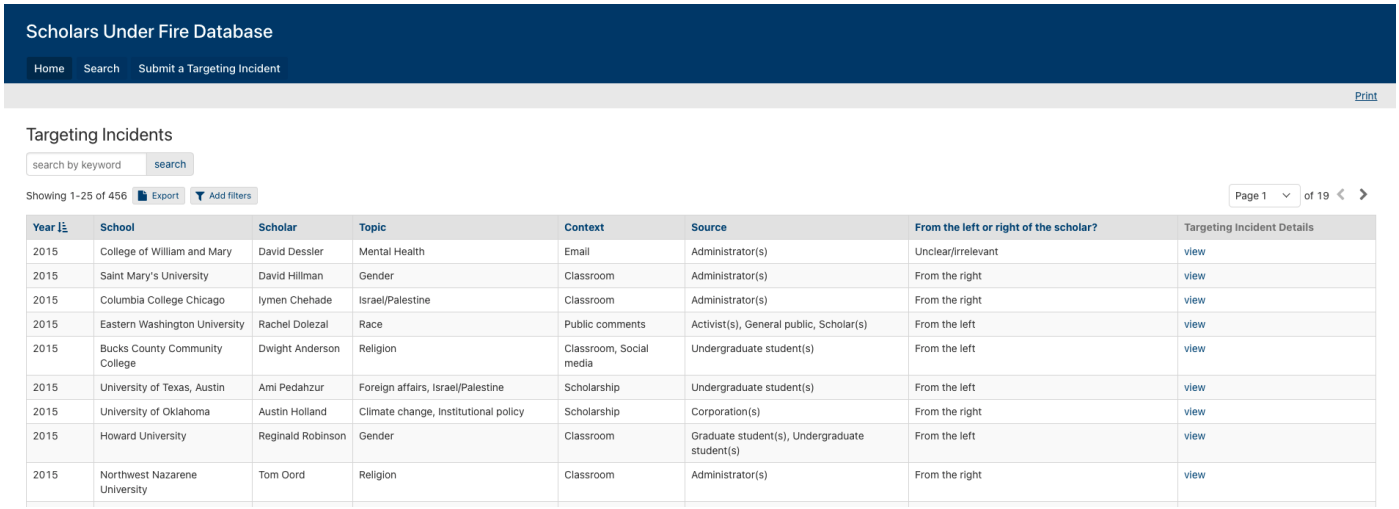
For instance, a scholar may resemble someone who would identify as "slightly" or "somewhat" liberal on an ideological self-identification measure, while the source of the targeting resembles someone who would identify as "very" or "extremely" liberal. Because of this, we classify the political motivation for a targeting incident as relative, coming "from the left of the scholar" or "from the right of the scholar,"

rather than inferring the scholar's actual political orientation. Not all targeting incidents have identifiable political motivations. The political motivations for such incidents are classified as "unclear/irrelevant."

How to Use This Database:

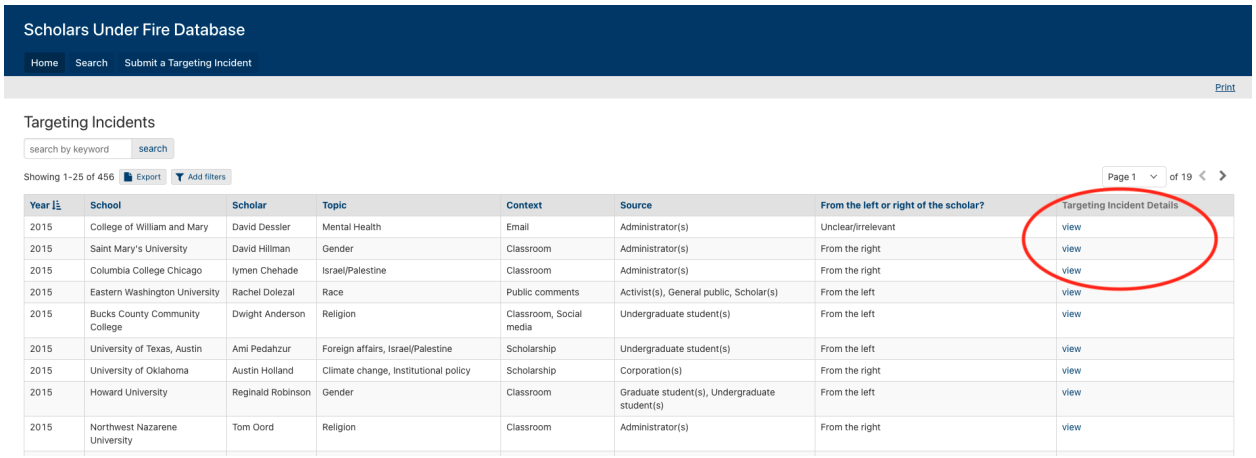
The Main View

Upon accessing the database, you will find yourself at the master table of targeting incidents, which looks like this:

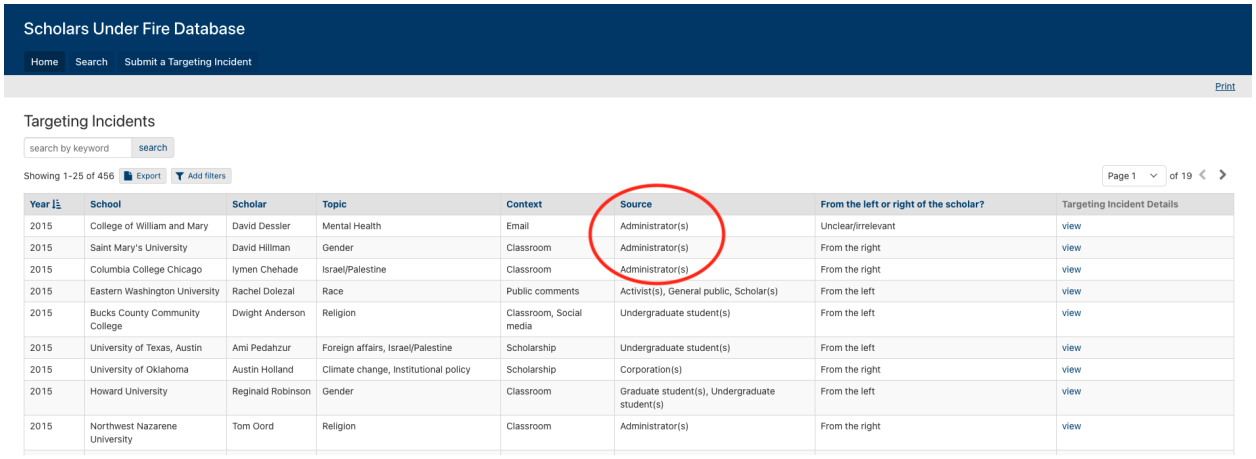


Year	School	Scholar	Topic	Context	Source	From the left or right of the scholar?	Targeting Incident Details
2015	College of William and Mary	David Dessler	Mental Health	Email	Administrator(s)	Unclear/irrelevant	view
2015	Saint Mary's University	David Hillman	Gender	Classroom	Administrator(s)	From the right	view
2015	Columbia College Chicago	Iymen Chehade	Israel/Palestine	Classroom	Administrator(s)	From the right	view
2015	Eastern Washington University	Rachel Dolezal	Race	Public comments	Activist(s), General public, Scholar(s)	From the left	view
2015	Bucks County Community College	Dwight Anderson	Religion	Classroom, Social media	Undergraduate student(s)	From the left	view
2015	University of Texas, Austin	Ami Pedahzur	Foreign affairs, Israel/Palestine	Scholarship	Undergraduate student(s)	From the left	view
2015	University of Oklahoma	Austin Holland	Climate change, Institutional policy	Scholarship	Corporation(s)	From the right	view
2015	Howard University	Reginald Robinson	Gender	Classroom	Graduate student(s), Undergraduate student(s)	From the left	view
2015	Northwest Nazarene University	Tom Oord	Religion	Classroom	Administrator(s)	From the right	view

Due to limited space, only select details are presented in the master table. To view more details about a particular targeting incident, including an explanation of the controversy surrounding the scholar and links to media coverage, click "view" in the "Details" column in the corresponding row:

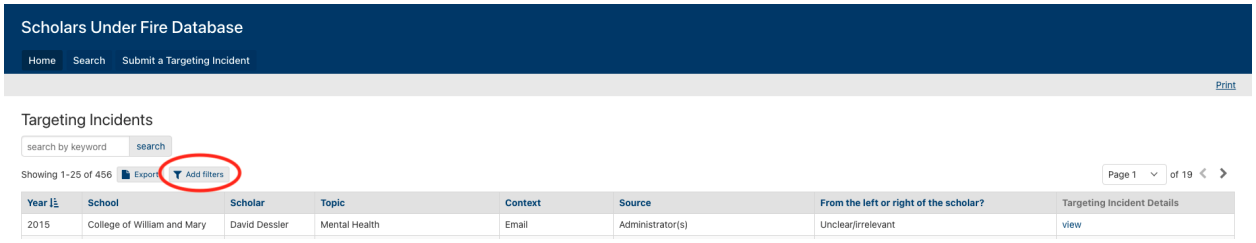


The table is sortable; just click on the column header you want to sort by:

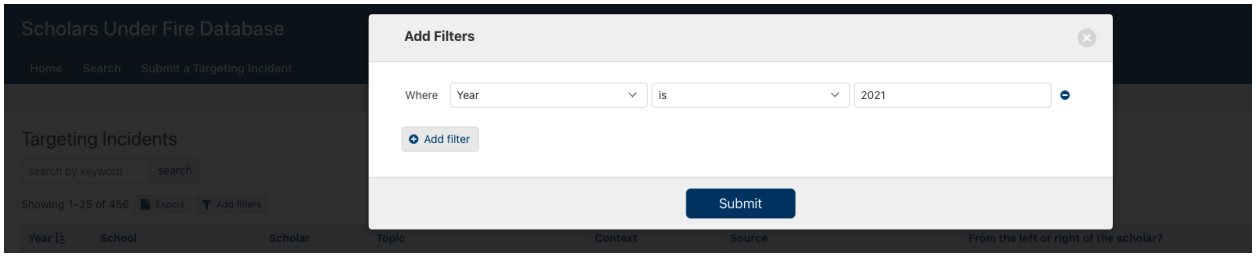


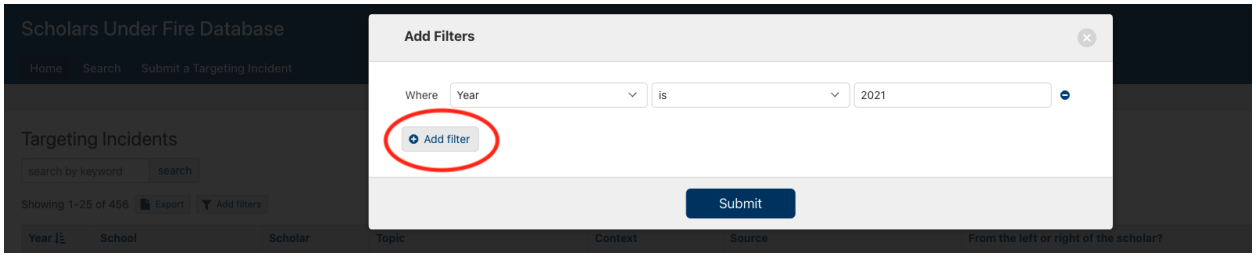
Adding Filters

To find targeting incidents based on type, date, school, or a number of other criteria, you can filter the table view so that it displays only those entries. To add a filter, click on the “add filter” link just above the table and select a criterion to filter by:



Once a filter has been added, you can remove it by clicking the "x" in the filter tag that appears next to the "add filter" link, or even add an additional filter:

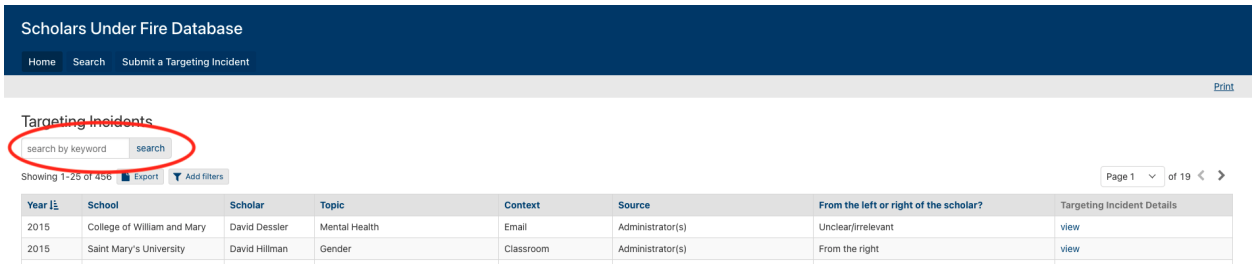




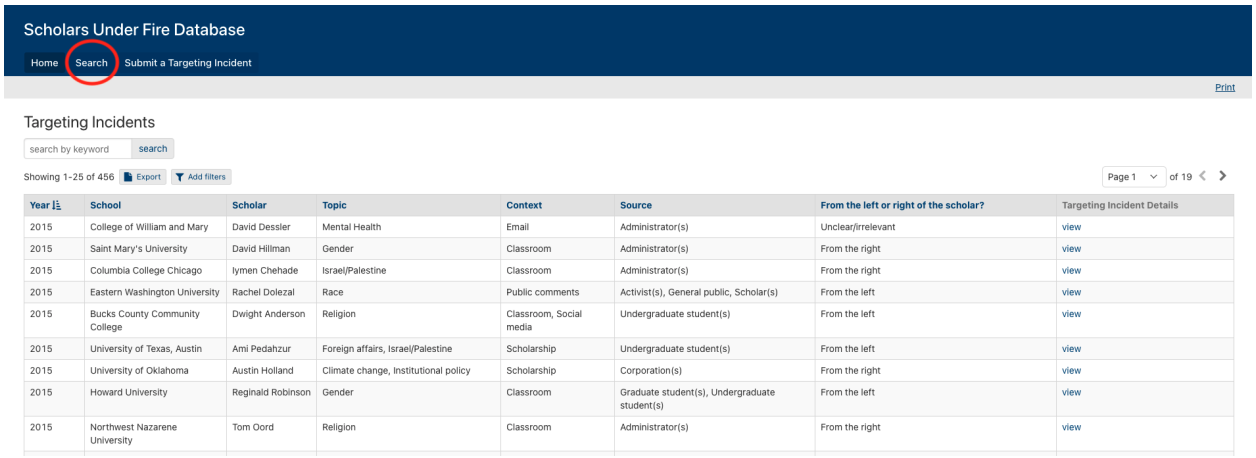
Note: the filtering tool only permits a user to filter by certain criteria. For more in-depth research capability, read on to the next section of this guide.

Searching

A basic keyword search across all fields can be executed by simply entering the chosen keyword(s) into the search box just above the filters:

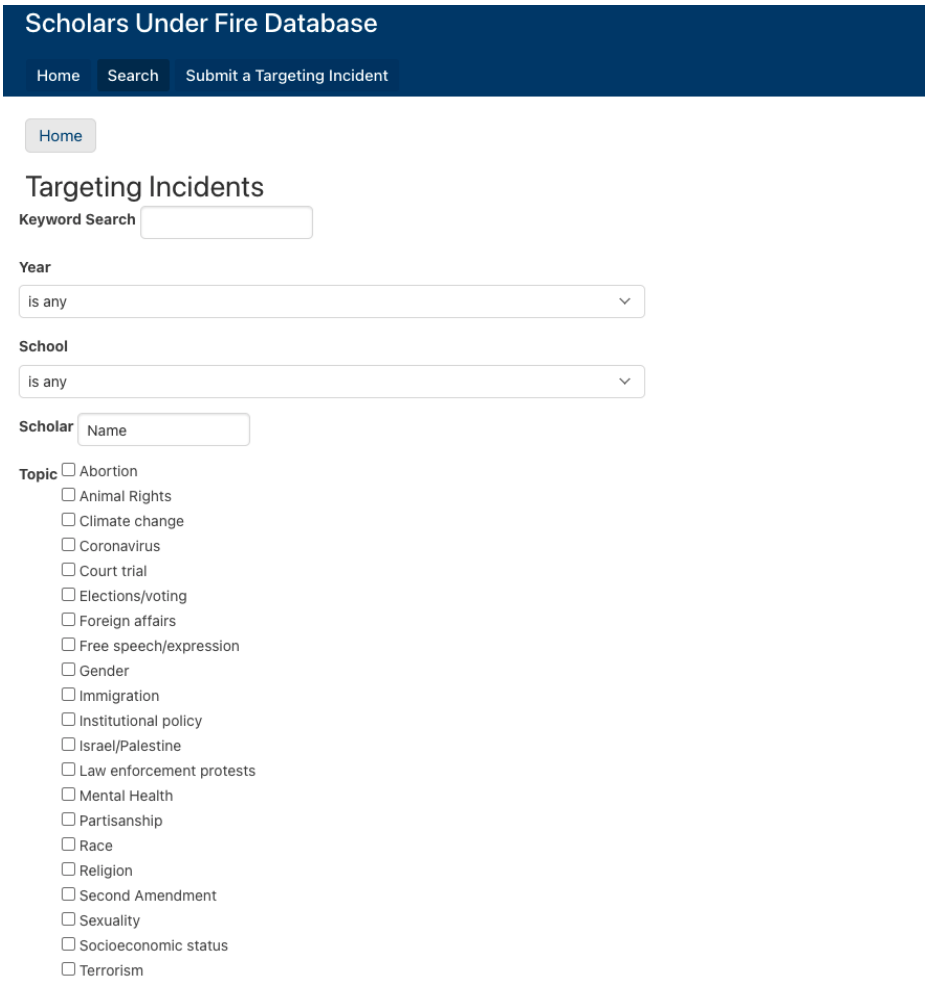


The database also contains a more advanced search function. To access the advanced search, click on the "Search" button in the blue bar at the top of the database:



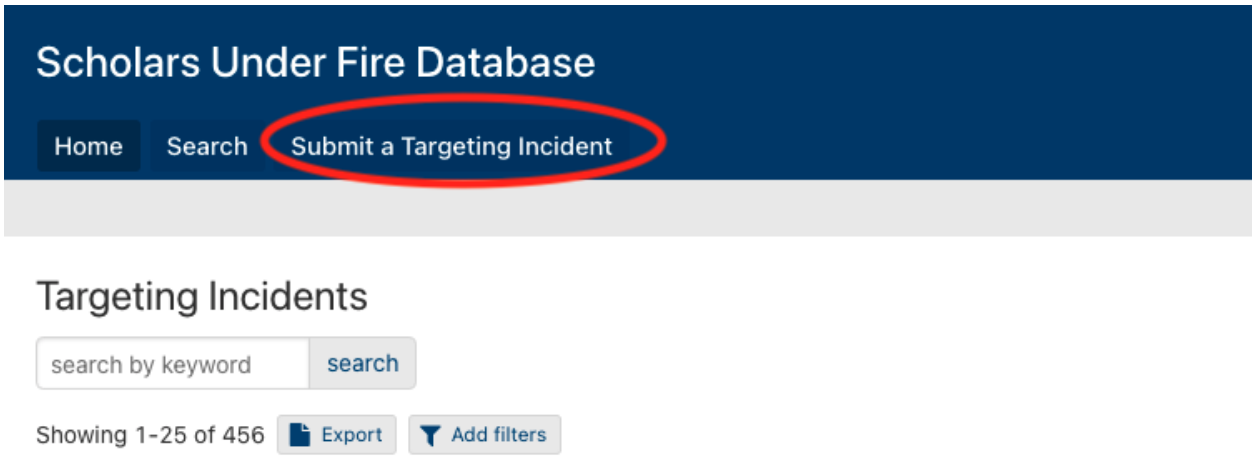
Year	School	Scholar	Topic	Context	Source	From the left or right of the scholar?	Targeting Incident Details
2015	College of William and Mary	David Dessler	Mental Health	Email	Administrator(s)	Unclear/irrelevant	view
2015	Saint Mary's University	David Hillman	Gender	Classroom	Administrator(s)	From the right	view
2015	Columbia College Chicago	Iymen Chehade	Israel/Palestine	Classroom	Administrator(s)	From the right	view
2015	Eastern Washington University	Rachel Dolezal	Race	Public comments	Activist(s), General public, Scholar(s)	From the left	view
2015	Bucks County Community College	Dwight Anderson	Religion	Classroom, Social media	Undergraduate student(s)	From the left	view
2015	University of Texas, Austin	Ami Pedahzur	Foreign affairs, Israel/Palestine	Scholarship	Undergraduate student(s)	From the left	view
2015	University of Oklahoma	Austin Holland	Climate change, Institutional policy	Scholarship	Corporation(s)	From the right	view
2015	Howard University	Reginald Robinson	Gender	Classroom	Graduate student(s), Undergraduate student(s)	From the left	view
2015	Northwest Nazarene University	Tom Oord	Religion	Classroom	Administrator(s)	From the right	view

The advanced search permits you to narrow incidents down by a combination of nearly any of the criteria contained in the database, allowing for in-depth and pointed research into areas of specific interest to you:



Submitting a Targeting Incident

If you are aware of a targeting incident that is not on our list, please let us know! To submit a new incident, click on the "Submit a Disinvitation Attempt" button in the blue bar at the top of the database, and then click on the link to send us an email. Please include as many details as possible, and if available, a link to any media coverage about the incident. If you wish to keep certain aspects of the incident confidential, FIRE will take all necessary legal precautions to do so.



If you have any further questions about how to use this resource, please don't hesitate to reach out.