Constructive Dialogue Institute

Maintaining Campus Community During the 2024 Election

A Guide for Leaders, Faculty, and Staff

Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI)

Founded in 2017, CDI is a non-profit organization dedicated to equipping the next generation of Americans with the mindset and skill set to engage in dialogue across differences. At CDI, we seek to help teachers, faculty, and administrators build learning environments that enable students to feel comfortable engaging with challenging topics so that real learning can occur. To accomplish this goal, we translate the latest behavioral science research into educational resources and teaching strategies that are evidence-based, practical, and scalable.

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Introduction

No event is as effective at shunting communities into "us" versus "them" as a U.S. presidential election. In 2016, the toxicity on many college campuses surrounding the presidential election caught many administrators unprepared—they had no playbook for the intense emotion displayed by students, faculty, and staff alike. Many students—and some faculty and staff—pushed the boundaries of acceptable campus speech in new ways that were not always clearly delineated by existing policy or precedent. The 2020 election coincided with social distancing and, consequently, much less on-campus political activism.

This combination of events leaves many campuses ill-prepared for the 2024 election. Most student affairs staff and senior administrators were likely not in their current position or even at their current institution 8 years ago. Thus, there is thus a lack of institutional knowledge of what tactics were effective and what lessons were learned. This guide is intended to fill that gap. By collating the experiences of subject matter experts and university educators in a range of roles—faculty; staff; offices of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); civic engagement centers; and university presidents–we hope to share knowledge about what works to contain campus conflict and transform discourse.

The 2024 election adds a unique challenge because higher education itself is on the ballot. After years of increasing legislative scrutiny and public critique, November 2024 could mark a significant moment for higher education as a policy focal point. Across the nation, more states are asserting control over curriculum and programming, evident in actions such as book bans and restrictions on content related to race and gender identity. According to the Bipartisan Policy Center, more than 30 states are actively seeking to regulate DEI initiatives on college campuses.[1]

Many college campuses are justifiably worried that this election season will fan flames that they have yet to fully contain. Disturbingly, instances of hate crimes have surged by 90% since 2018, disproportionately affecting Black, LGBTQ, and Jewish students.[2] On many campuses, emotions are still raw; fear of saying "the wrong thing" is still at the forefront; and nerves, patience, and resolve are all wearing thin.

> **We can't teach people if they feel afraid. Minds don't open when people feel insulted or unsafe. I wish that it were a very cut-and-dried question of helping folks navigate between being uncomfortable and being unsafe. But I think that's the work.**
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> **– Faculty and program director**

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1 Lederman, J. (2023, October 20). DEI legislation, academic freedom, and free expression: Where to go from here? Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/dei-legislation-academic-freedom-and-free-expression-where-to-go-from-here/

2 Goldstein, D. (2024). Hate crimes reported in schools nearly doubled between 2018 and 2022. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/29/us/hate-crimes-schools-universities.html

Against this backdrop, university educators are grappling with myriad concerns about how the upcoming election will unfold in their communities. Many lack the confidence to engage in conversations about political issues. Others are demotivated by the public's negative perception of higher education, a field to which they have devoted their lives' work. Regardless of political affiliation, university staff, faculty, and leaders are worried about the impact of negative political rhetoric on the already-strained sense of community on their campus.

We recognize that the election poses many risks to colleges and universities. Yet, this touchstone ritual of democracy also offers an opportunity to encourage students to be thoughtful, engaged citizens. The interconnected social and intellectual skills that students acquire to thrive in postsecondary civic spaces are invaluable across all facets of their lives. The effort invested in preparing for the 2024 election will also help cultivate campus environments that encourage community members to grapple with discomfort, champion freedom of thought, and foster the capacity to listen to others, replacing anger and fear with a spirit of curiosity.

About This Guide

This guidebook will help **university leaders, faculty and staff, and civic engagement and DEI centers** prepare their campuses for the 2024 election. Specifically, we cover the following topics:

1. **Types of conflict:** Based on prior election cycles, what should higher education leaders, faculty, and staff be prepared for?

2. **Policies:** What policies will provide guard rails for a rise in ideological conflict on campus?

3. **Relationships:** How do you build relationships between and across campuses to foster community, encourage engagement across lines of difference, and maintain staff and faculty morale?

4. **Student learning and skill building:** How do you leverage the 2024 election to promote student learning, constructive dialogue skills, and civic engagement?

5. **Professional development:** What types of training for faculty, staff, and leaders will equip them to prevent and manage campus conflict?

6. **Crisis response:** If and when campus crises emerge, how can you be prepared?

7. **Postelection plans:** How can you craft postelection programming and support, with input from the people you serve?

8. **Working efficiently:** How do you activate expertise and coordinate efforts for a cohesive and efficient campus strategy?

We crafted this guidebook based on input gathered through interviews with 21 college presidents, administrators, faculty, and staff. Additionally, we conducted an extensive secondary review of lessons learned from past elections. The guidebook is designed for easy navigation, allowing individuals to access sections that align with their roles within their institutions. This recognizes the reality that decisions are made at every level, and the aggregate of these decisions shapes the overall experience of the institution's culture. Our hope is that, despite the variety of campus contexts, the guidebook has ideas for everyone.

General Principles for Preparing for the 2024 Election

Principle 1

Rather than treating the 2024 election as an isolated event, leverage your existing campus investments in cultural transformation and trust building.

Many institutions are grappling with tension related to the Israel–Hamas conflict. Several of the strategies and practices that result from these efforts will also be useful structures for mitigating election-related conflict. Practices like checking in with stakeholders, creating space for dialogue, and auditing and disseminating policies are integral components of proactive conflict management and community building. They serve as foundational pillars that can be adapted to effectively navigate potential conflicts arising from the 2024 election.

Principle 2

Investing heavily in proactive strategies before November 2024, rather than relying solely on reactive measures, will pay dividends in preventing conflict.

These strategies will also advance the important work of educating students on issues and equipping them with the skills to engage with those who think differently. This forward-thinking approach prepares campuses for the challenges of the upcoming election while contributing to a more robust and resilient institutional fabric.

Principle

3

Campuses require proactive leadership and a clear vision from the top to inspire coordinated efforts across every layer of an institution's system.

The best campus strategy will include leadership, staff and faculty, students, alumni and donors, board members, neighboring communities, and legislators. Leadership can be especially effective at organizing collectives. However, both top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary for cultivating positive campus climates.

Strategies for Leaders

Although it may not be possible to be completely "election proof," leaders can anticipate many of the likely conflicts and prepare for them. Leading up to November, leaders can expect the following:

1. **Increased polarization** and conflict about divisive topics and candidates. The current candidates bring out passion from both supporters and opponents. Abortion access will likely take center stage among issues. Israel and Palestine conflicts will likely resurge as advocates on either side see the election results as either validation or a referendum on their point of view.

2. Increasing numbers of **political speakers** on campus and resulting **protests**. After all, college campuses offer candidates centralized access to the highly sought 18-to-24-year-old voter.

3. Higher education as a sector is likely to feature prominently in this year's presidential election platform. Instances of **perceived partisan behavior** can become ammunition in the ongoing political discourse, contributing to the propagation of entrenched narratives.

4. Pressure to **issue statements** on election-related matters. Students, faculty, alumni, or donors may expect the university to take a stance on campaign speech or election results.

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Culture is something you can design, and you design it with your decisions.

– Gaping Void, a cultural design group

What Does "Nonpartisan" Mean?

An individual or group can be "nonpartisan" if they have either of the following features:

1. Do not expressly support one political party or candidate over another
2. More broadly, do not promote a particular political ideology.[3]

Benefits of Nonpartisanship

A nonpartisan learning environment can have the following benefits:

- Promote diverse perspectives
- Foster open dialogue
- Encourage critical thinking
- Reduce polarization
- Prepare students for civic engagement
- Improve students' sense of belonging
- Build bridges between communities
- Enhance academic integrity
- Strengthen the institution's reputation

Nonpartisanship does not mean avoiding important social and political issues. Instead, administrators, faculty, and staff should encourage thoughtful and respectful dialogue on contentious topics while ensuring that all voices are heard and respected.

3   Ballotpedia. (n.d.). *Nonpartisan*. https://ballotpedia.org/Nonpartisan

Examples of partisan behavior:

- College presidents publicly criticizing political candidates

- College administration trying to influence a political contest

- University leadership disciplining faculty for their views

Examples of nonpartisan behavior:

- Administration designating Election Day as a day off for all students, faculty, and staff

- College president partnering with the student newspaper on an initiative to explore the differences between the candidates and their platforms

- Faculty and staff facilitating deliberative dialogues and topic series to routinely challenge misleading ads or mis- or dis-information, referencing credible fact-checking resources

- Writing a letter of recommendation for a student in good standing who has been doxed

" Partisanship often falls along fault lines of gender, race and ethnicity, geography, educational attainment, wealth and class, and religion. Each identity brings unique experiential knowledge, vocabularies, values, frameworks, and political perspectives, making controversial issues discussions difficult.[4]

– Nancy Thomas, senior advisor to the president, AAC&U and executive director, Institute for Democracy & Higher Education

4   Thomas, N. (2019). *Readiness for discussing democracy in supercharged political times*. Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. https://dgmg81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Initiatives/IDHE/idhe-discussing-democracy.pdf

Evaluate your language.

The language you use and how you frame your communication and programming can inadvertently reveal your ideology. Common use words and phrases, like "safe space" and "harm," may seem nonpartisan, but not everyone defines them the same way. When one of these terms comes up in a conversation, take the opportunity to clarify what the term means and what it does not mean. Facilitate conversations with stakeholders and community members to develop a common understanding of the terms you all use. Take the time to establish and socialize common definitions among your stakeholders. Expect there to be multiple definitions and emphasize the divergence among them. Include definitions in messaging and communication activities. Repeat the definitions or reintroduce them when new stakeholders are engaged. Try to notice words that alienate groups, and work with them to understand why and to find alternatives that welcome participation. Consulting a few cabinet members or a third-party can help identify words in your communication that might unintentionally suggest taking sides, particularly when emotions are heightened.

"The language really matters. A lot of campuses, post-election and even this fall, brought students in a room with different political views and then started off by saying, 'This is a safe space for everybody.' When you use those words, you just silenced every conservative kid in the room. We have to make sure the language we use actually does invite political conversation." – President

Walk the talk.

Encourage thoughtful and respectful exchange by endorsing and modeling constructive dialogue. Acknowledge that talking about polarizing issues can be difficult, uncomfortable, and time consuming. Make it explicit that you believe it to be important.

Constructive dialogue should achieve these goals:

1. Bolster free speech
2. Transform conflict
3. Sharpen thinking
4. Foster belonging
5. Improve culture
6. Support diversity
7. Promote inclusion
8. Build trust

Review your policies.

Campus tension resulting from the Israel–Hamas conflict exposed gaps and inconsistencies in existing campus policies related to speech and demonstrations. Institutions should regularly review and revise these policies to ensure they are fair and transparent and that they uphold the community's values. Start with your physical environment. Examine speaker- and event-oriented policies. Revisit your posting policy. Consider who has awareness of these policies, where they are housed, and how and when they were last disseminated. Time, place, and manner restrictions must be content neutral or they risk violating the First Amendment. Using scenarios that your campus community would recognize can provide clarity and help make policies feel relevant to your unique context. Enforcing these policies consistently can scaffold institutional trust and help you avoid creating your own crisis.

Review these policies and determine if clarifications or revisions are needed:

1. **Speaker policy.** What kinds of speakers are allowed on campus? Who has the right to invite them? Where are they able to speak? What are the related security considerations?

2. **Free expression policy.** Does your policy comply with constitutional and statutory requirements related to free speech? Does it define the boundaries within which expression must occur to maintain a respectful and inclusive environment?

3. **Vendor policy.** Are vendors required to be registered with the campus? What happens if a vendor does not comply with campus guidelines?

4. **Posting and chalking policy.** What can you post? Where can you post? Can you have a campaign sign in your office?

5. **Fundraiser policy.** Who is authorized to solicit funds on behalf of the institution? What are acceptable methods of fundraising, including events, campaigns, grant applications, and partnerships?

6. **Visitor policy.** What forms of identification must visitors show? What, if any, registration process exists? What are the expectations for visitors related to all campus policies, including those related to conduct, harassment, and discrimination?

7. **Hate symbols policy.** What constitutes a hate symbol? What are the reporting procedures if one is encountered? What are the repercussions associated with using hate symbols? What are the exceptions to the policy?

8. **Policy on political activity on campus.** What are the guidelines for campaigning on campus? What is the approval process related to events? What are the guidelines for distributing materials?

9. **University statement policy.** Under what circumstances will the university issue a statement? Who can speak on the institution's behalf?

> 66 **If we make changes—and especially in anything that might remotely touch upon expression in a political year like this—it's going to be important to really be clear about why you are making them. And to underscore that none of this curtails our commitment to freedom of expression. In fact, it's meant to strengthen and enhance that commitment by having an even-handed, thoughtful, understandable policy that is evenly applied.** – President

Best Practices for Disseminating Policies

Muhlenberg College

Raising awareness of changes to campus policy is no small feat. At the outset of each semester, Muhlenberg College disseminates comprehensive policy updates via email to ensure widespread awareness. Subsequently, the institution uses both email and social media platforms to apprise student government, clubs, and organizations of the latest policy developments. To bolster the understanding and implementation of recent updates, six training sessions are scheduled throughout the semester. Mandatory for all student clubs, these sessions incorporate case studies and a dedicated question-and-answer segment.

Looking ahead, Muhlenberg College has plans for a similar series in the upcoming fall term, commencing with the dissemination of their partisan political policy. The institution intends to highlight this policy prominently at events such as the club fair and other student-sponsored activities. To ensure broad policy distribution, including to resident advisors, the nonpartisan, student-led political engagement organization, Berg Votes, will play a pivotal role.

University of Northern Colorado

The University of Northern Colorado has formed a Bears Vote Coalition co-chaired by the dean of student development and the assistant vice president of administration. Since the coalition's founding in fall 2023, it has selected cochairs and has rounded out a cross-functional team to meet its goals, one of which is to "increase civic education, voter education, and political discourse programming and initiatives." The coalition launched a web presence in March 2024 and has been talking with all the constituents it can access. For example, one of the co-chairs meets monthly with the associate deans of all the academic colleges to generate awareness of coalition efforts. Once the coalition's speech resources are live online, it will promote them in weekly campus emails. A student will develop the brand and make stickers. As fall 2024 nears, the coalition plans to embed engagement information into the school's Canvas shell, making information extremely prominent and accessible for faculty and students.

Strategy 4

Engage proactively with campus hot-spots.

Most conflicts are too nuanced and contextual to be settled by policy alone. Thus, policies need to be complemented by shared norms, common values, and a network of trust. Conduct proactive outreach among campus stakeholders, especially those who have experienced previous flare-ups or who represent the perspectives of specific community groups. These relationships build a foundation of trust that will help you navigate any misunderstandings more effectively. As the election unfolds, recognize and reward constructive engagement among your campus communities.

Strategy 5

Coordinate cross-campus efforts.

The desire to achieve a Voter Friendly Campus designation provided the University of Northern Colorado the opportunity to coordinate efforts that had previously been more decentralized across departments like campus police, student life, student affairs, library services, and athletics. The coalition is responsible for ensuring that voter engagement efforts are nonpartisan, legally compliant, coordinated, and promoted throughout the institution and that they are in strategic alignment with student learning outcomes. By mobilizing this cross-functional team, organized by engagement and logistics, the cochairs can maximize their capacity and tap into a wider knowledge base. Efforts like these can help to bridge the organizational barriers that separate student affairs and faculty–two critical vehicles for reaching students.

Strategy 6

Nurture connections with partners and peers.

Established relationships built on trust can serve as a shield during times of crisis. Individuals and groups with whom you have a history are more inclined to offer support when you need it most. They can help to de-escalate within their spheres of influence. Moreover, those with whom you have forged strong relationships are likely to question inconsistent narratives. These connections lay the foundation for resilient communities.

On campus, cultivate relationships between student life and faculty and among student leaders across various organizations. Off campus, it is beneficial to build relationships with government officials and to provide periodic updates to donors and trustees outside of formal meetings. When disruption occurs, reassure your stakeholders or find out what they need with proactive outreach. Last, establish a relationship with a crisis communication advisor before the need arises.

At one of the schools we interviewed, a student challenged the institution to tackle "the hard stuff" concerning difficult conversations after the 2021 Israel–Hamas conflict, predating the current one. In response, two faculty members initiated informal gatherings with stakeholders to assess the prerequisites for such discussions. This endeavor culminated in the organization of three dialogue events involving diverse groups. These newly established relationships served as essential infrastructure for addressing campus tensions that emerged in the fall of 2023.

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You can't wait until the hottest moments to talk about the hard things. It is only because we had things in place and because we had developed relationships with campus partners in student life and with other faculty that after October 7, we could make phone calls to people to say, 'How are you? What do you need?' and it wasn't a weird, invasive cold call. I felt fortunate that we could mobilize an effort that we had already invested in to do a better job at responding. And the take-home lesson is we cannot wait until November to talk about politics in the United States.

– Faculty and program director

Strategy 7

Support your staff.

In the current climate, staff and untenured faculty on many campuses feel particularly exposed. Several individuals interviewed indicated that they perceive this as one of the most challenging periods in their professional lives. Leaders can support their faculty and staff by educating them about the federal and state laws and university policies that govern their speech rights. Keep in mind, however, that such laws and policies are not blueprints for successfully engaging with difficult topics. Provide opportunities for your staff and faculty to obtain advanced training in handling difficult conversations. Finally, staff and faculty will benefit from the support of their peers in similar positions. Create forums within staff meetings for direct reports to offer mutual support. Capitalize on the networks of larger systems like the University of California, where comparable roles span multiple schools, to build relationships across campuses.

Strategy 8

Engage in co-curricular spaces.

Informal settings, like meet-ups at coffee and snack stations, offer students easy access and the opportunity to practice exchanges in a nonthreatening setting. Student government and residence life are two natural pathways for creative or casual leadership touchpoints.

Strategy 9

Join a visible coalition of peers.

A leadership cohort can offer valuable support, generate ideas, provide opportunities for advocacy, or serve as a sounding board. There might be instances where you require backup, and having access to a peer network can help you navigate external pressures. Many states have organizations that promote collective voices, such as the Independent Colleges of Indiana or the Council of Presidents of Virginia Colleges and Public Universities. Consider establishing your own coalition, noting that visible groups foster greater trust than clandestine memberships.

Convene Stakeholders for Policy Reviews

Whom to include:

- Trusted messengers from representative constituencies (ask other cabinet leaders to double check your thinking)

- Activists, people who hold extreme views, or people whose perspectives are otherwise distinct (or who think differently from you)

- Beneficiaries, often sourced from groups with less voice (e.g., students)

Understand your stakeholders:

- Assess the current level of support or opposition each stakeholder has regarding proposed changes to policies

- Decide the ideal level of support you hope to achieve from each stakeholder

- Understand the reasons behind each stakeholder's current level of support or resistance. This can involve identifying whether their resistance is technical (lack of skills or understanding), political (lack of buy-in or fear of loss), or cultural (misalignment with values or norms)

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Invest in advanced professional development.

The dynamic terrain of leadership roles in higher education is characterized by myriad factors: political and societal pressures, financial constraints, public expectations, accountability measures, campus dynamics, and the constant call for innovation. These pressures underscore the complex environment in which today's higher education leaders function, demanding that leaders adeptly navigate through a multitude of challenges while meeting the evolving needs of institutions and stakeholders. Learn to recognize the difference between what you want for your institution and what your institution's systems are actually doing and reconcile the two. What work is happening to build an inclusive culture of free expression? No matter how prepared you feel, campus conflict is inevitable. Obtain training to anticipate and manage these situations as they arrive. Get experience building advanced communication strategies to de-escalate tension and empathize with stakeholder concerns, even under pressure.

CDI Professional Development Offerings for Higher Ed Leaders

Leadership Institute

This program is designed for campus leadership teams to generate and implement a research-driven action plan to create campus environments where free expression and inclusion both thrive. Leaders will also learn strategies for navigating the increasingly complex political landscape facing higher education. An extended cohort model will ensure that leaders feel supported by the Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) and by a network of peers in embarking on this challenging work.

Responding to Campus Crises: Strategies for Today and Resilience for Tomorrow

Designed to help higher education leaders understand best practices for responding to large-scale conflicts on campus, this 10-hour virtual training will teach a framework for crisis management. Participants will learn to strategically generate swift action plans to contain various forms of campus conflict, including disruptive protests, incidents of hate or harm, and expressions of outrage from stakeholders such as students and faculty. CDI facilitators will cover advanced communication, tension de-escalation, addressing stakeholder concerns under pressure, mitigating future ruptures, and how to re-establish and sustain trust.

Scan this QR code to learn more about CDI's professional development programming.

Strategy 11

Promote pluralism.

Establish a communications strategy that positions your institution as a pluralistic campus. During periods of heightened tension, clear and consistent communication from leadership is crucial. Own your narrative to reduce risk of co-option. Clarify key messaging. Understand audience-specific messaging needs. Spotlight people and groups on campus doing pluralism well. Institute regular interaction with your communications team. Look for their guidance on crisis communications and involve them in core crisis prevention and response.

> **Pluralism—which I define as people of diverse identities engaging one another with a respect/relate/cooperate ethos—is a founding value of the United States. The highest ideals of our nation hold that people who come from across the planet, speaking a variety of languages and praying in different ways, can come to this patch of land and build a democracy together....College campuses should be models of cooperation between people of different identities and ideologies and training grounds for leaders who can bridge divides in a variety of sectors, from education to international diplomacy.[5] – Eboo Patel, Interfaith America**

5 Patel, E. (2023, November 9). *Why campuses need centers for pluralism.* Insight Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2023/11/09/why-campuses-need-centers-pluralism-opinion#
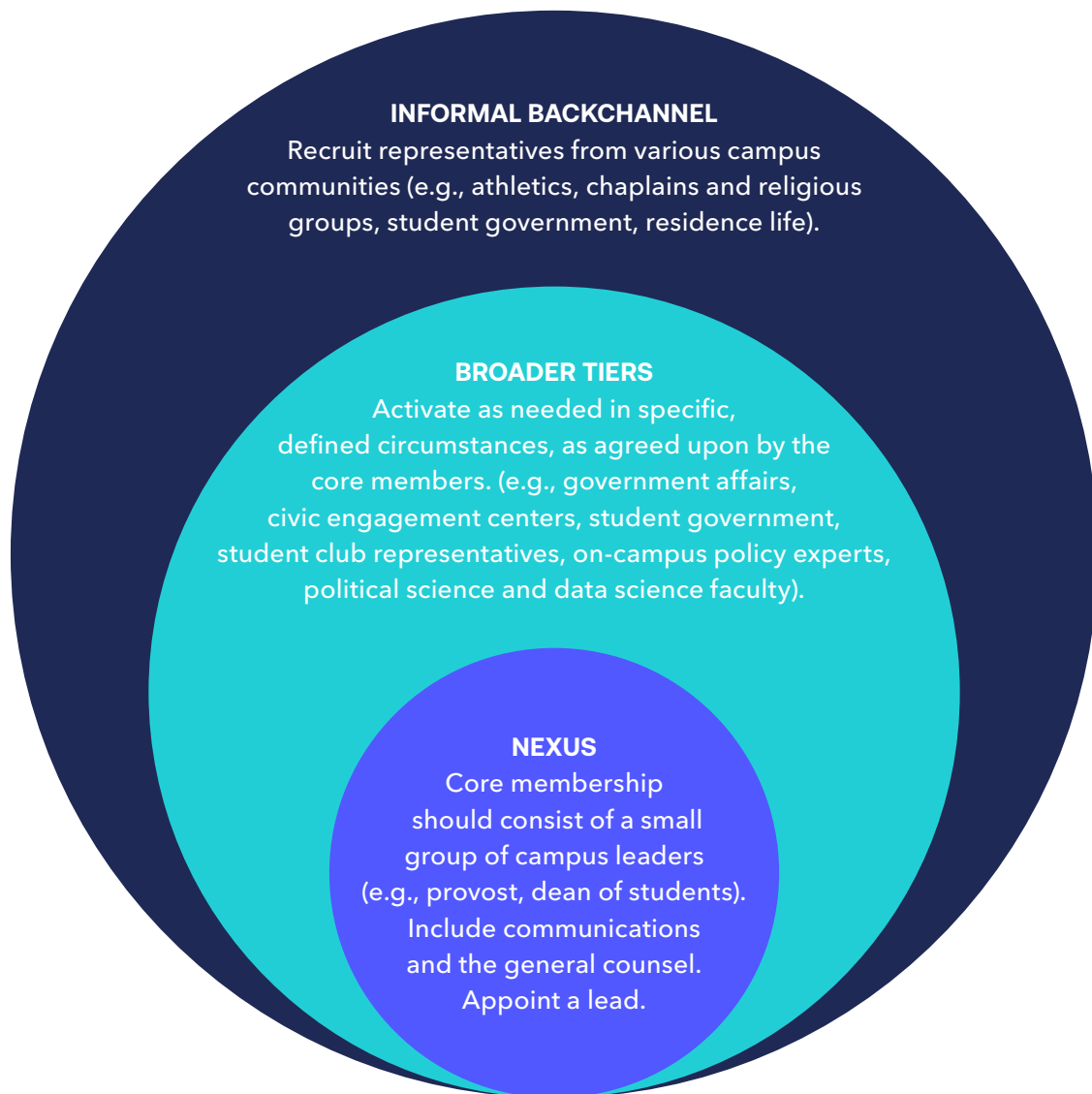
Crisis Response Procedures

Conduct a Readiness Audit

Is your institution ready for a crisis? Acknowledging the possibility of crises can be challenging, even for those in leadership roles. Embracing the notion that crises are not just possible but inevitable is a pragmatic and proactive approach to leadership and crisis management. Paradoxically, this leadership mindset fosters a culture of resilience within organizations, where teams are continuously vigilant and adaptive to changing circumstances. To adopt this stance, invest in robust contingency plans, crisis communication protocols, and crisis response training. These actions ensure that your institutions are well equipped to navigate turbulent times with composure and efficacy. You will not only weather the storms but will also emerge stronger and more adept at steering your organizations through turbulent waters.

1. **Form a crisis response team.** A group of individuals should be trained to coordinate an effective response to mitigate the impact of a crisis, protect people and assets, and facilitate recovery.

2. **Monitor social media.** This function performs real-time information gathering and detects early warning signs.

3. **Evaluate your policies.** Regular policy evaluation ensures that response strategies remain adaptable and responsive to emerging challenges.

4. **Coordinate campus-wide activities.** A unified approach helps avoid confusion, enables more comprehensive understanding, streamlines resource allocation, and improves consistency of communication.

5. **Communicate potential risks.** Awareness of prospective risks empowers the team to plan proactively, allocate resources efficiently, and respond swiftly.

6. **Establish an escalation process.** A structured, organized, and adaptive approach ensures the response is proportional to the severity.

7. **Conduct tabletop exercises.** Training activities simulate realistic scenarios, foster collaboration, and identify areas for improvement in emergency response strategies. Practice repeatedly, not just once.

Form Your Response Team

"An experienced team, with a strong understanding of campus culture and good contacts, is invaluable." [6]

INFORMAL BACKCHANNEL
Recruit representatives from various campus communities (e.g., athletics, chaplains and religious groups, student government, residence life).

BROADER TIERS
Activate as needed in specific, defined circumstances, as agreed upon by the core members. (e.g., government affairs, civic engagement centers, student government, student club representatives, on-campus policy experts, political science and data science faculty).

NEXUS
Core membership should consist of a small group of campus leaders (e.g., provost, dean of students). Include communications and the general counsel. Appoint a lead.

Define roles and responsibilities among the team members and outline which circumstances require the full team. Be explicit about who does what and when and who has final authorization. Determine the meeting cadence. Consider weekly meetings of the core team through November.

6   Post, D. M. (2024). A guide to crisis leadership. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-guide-to-crisis-leadership

Tabletop Exercise

A tabletop exercise is an interactive, discussion-based activity conducted to test or evaluate an organization's response to a hypothetical scenario, typically related to emergency or crisis situations. Participants, usually key stakeholders or decision-makers, gather around a table to discuss and analyze their roles, responsibilities, and actions in response to the scenario presented. The exercise allows participants to assess their readiness, identify strengths and weaknesses in their response plans, and practice coordination and communication strategies in a controlled environment without the pressure of a real crisis.

Steps For Running Election Tabletop Exercises

STEP 1 Educate all team members on existing campus policies and procedures.

STEP 2 Draft worst-case, election-related scenarios for use in tabletop exercises.

STEP 3 For each scenario, discuss as a crisis response team:
- How will the crisis be detected and communicated to the crisis response team?
- How should the team respond in the first 24 hours? What does success look like during this period?
- What should the response be in the medium term (1 to 4 weeks after the crisis)? What does success look like during this time period?

STEP 4 Within each response, identify roles, responsibilities, and escalation processes:
- Who activates the response?
- What would each crisis response team member do?
- How will you communicate with each other?

STEP 5 Debrief the exercise:
- What areas were unclear?
- What decision-making rules did you use?

STEP 6 Codify your process as much as you can, refining it with each subsequent tabletop exercise.

Sample Scenario

As a policy, the campus grants student groups the autonomy to invite any speaker to campus. A student club invited a national election hopeful, who has voted for pro-life registration. A group of pro-choice students organized a petition asking the school to stop the speaker from coming. The students reached out to an external group to rally support when the university did not rescind the invitation. The external group staged a very public protest, which drew counterprotest from another external group. Parents and alumni became concerned about the vitriol being generated online leading up to the event. Campus security decided to seek help from state police and the talk was canceled based on safety concerns. The school was portrayed in the media as failing to defend academic freedom and caving to external pressure. The two external groups involved both promoted the university's reaction as a win for the other sides' voices.

Transition to Resilience Planning

Within an appropriate window of time, shift your response stance to long-term recovery by providing strategies that address the longer-term implications. Many leaders, exhausted from the crisis, neglect this critical step. After the crisis has passed, revisit the incident to understand underlying causes. Invest in programs, practices, and infrastructure that will address vulnerabilities where you can to make such emergencies less likely to occur in the future. For example, protests where students break school policy can have multiple root causes:

- Lack of understanding of school policy

- Lack of tolerance for opposing viewpoints

- Dissatisfaction with grievance procedures or perceived lack of accountability from administration

Each of these root causes (and they can all be true) imply different long-term actions.

Strategy

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## Establish and promote a strategy for making statements.

Under what circumstance will the university issue a statement? This should be considered well in advance of the election, and the guidelines should be disseminated widely. Be principled in adhering to the policy after it is published (so make sure it is a policy you can stick to!).

❝ Think about who should speak on behalf of the university and under what conditions. It took us a year and a half to develop, but we have a policy now. I don't just speak and issue these statements. I talk to the board about it and we have to have a compelling reason why it affects us. Did it affect our students? There has to be that reason and then we tend to circulate that and we would then post it. We decided that only the president or the board of trustees chair speaks on behalf of the university. – President

Strategies for Faculty and Staff
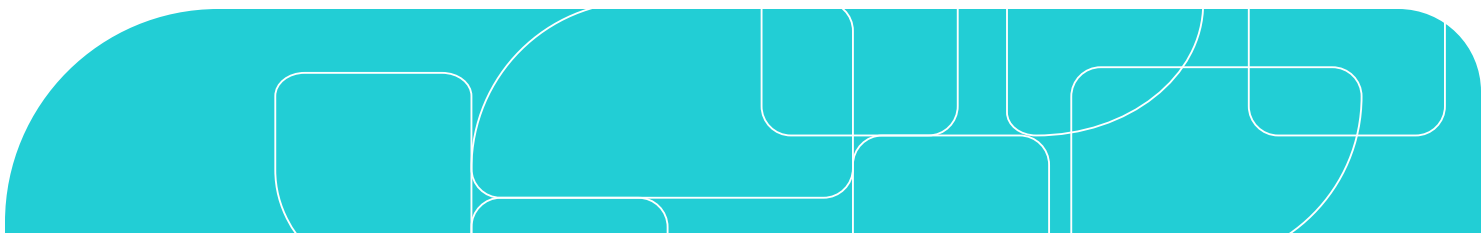
Student experiences are shaped by their day-to-day interactions with faculty and staff. Before elections, offering low-stakes dialogue opportunities provides students with a platform to express their viewpoints, engage in respectful discourse, and refine their communication skills in a nonconfrontational environment.

By participating in such exercises, students can better understand diverse perspectives, build empathy, and cultivate the ability to navigate potentially contentious discussions with civility. This practice fosters a culture of open dialogue and mutual respect, ultimately contributing to a more informed and engaged electorate capable of constructive political discourse. The following are some suggestions for cultivating constructive dialogue in curricular and cocurricular environments.

Strategy 1

Establish election-related norms with students.

Complement campuswide policies with shared norms, common values, and a network of trust. Classroom or program norms fortify a structure for dialogue and social cohesion, which are essential precursors for political discussions. At the beginning of students' engagement with each other, be it in a classroom or cocurricular setting, set clear expectations for respectful and civil discourse within the classroom. Ask students about the election topics they care about and those that worry or rile them. IDHE finds that two agreements are critical: "Assume good will" and "Share responsibility for the quality of the discussion." [7]

Strategy 2

Foster student agency.

Administration, faculty, and staff need to create the structures for dialogue across differences, but successful civic engagement requires student ownership. At the University of Delaware, the Blue Hen poll is an annual public opinion survey conducted by students for students. And, at several campuses, we heard about instances of peaceful, even joyful, counterprogramming, attributed by interviewees to the organic nature of being student led.

Strategy 3

Prepare for aftercare.

Many campuses already use mechanisms to check in regularly with students. For example, Ohio Northern University uses EdSights, an AI-powered text messaging service for students. Human resources or department heads may be using performance management systems to gauge employee engagement. Analysis of these responses can help anticipate categories of unmet or high-volume needs. Consider supplementing these existing practices to also evaluate the election's impact, possibly adjusting the outreach frequency as November approaches. Several interviewees felt caught off guard following the 2016 election. Analyzing preelection check in results could inform priority postelection aftercare.

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7 Thomas, N., & Kennedy, C. (2020). *How faculty can prepare to handle the post-election classroom*. The Scholars Strategy Network. https://scholars.org/contribution/how-faculty-can-prepare-handle-post-election

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We use these little chat bots that will reach out and ask, 'How are you feeling?' The students know it's AI– they recognize the ping. The responses get sorted and then somebody reaches out. They know it's artificial, and they know we will follow up and still they pour their hearts out into it. It has been a game changer. Our retention increased. Unity increased–through AI.

– President

Cocreating Resilient Group Norms[8]

15 minutes for one-time meetings; 45 to 60 minutes for recurring group meetings

Suggested Language for Instructor Framing

"This activity will help us define the type of group culture we want to create together. Creating a culture starts with discussing what our culture will look like. So that's what we'll start doing today."

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Ask students to think about a group of any kind that they have been a part of where they felt they could be themselves, including voicing their stance on a potentially controversial topic.

   Ask them, "What are the elements of that group that made it so welcoming?" Have participants brainstorm words that represent the group qualities they observed, and let them discuss what sorts of elements or qualities they would like to see in this group.

   If you need help kicking things off, use the following list for ideas:

   - Communicate your perspective thoughtfully and with the intention of being understood.
   - Give others the benefit of the doubt. Listen with curiosity first, rather than judgment.
   - Speak for yourself. Use "I" statements.
   - Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process.
   - Be prepared for you, and others, to make mistakes; respond with curiosity rather than judgment.
   - Share the air–speak up, but also make room for others to contribute.
   - Honor confidentiality–what happens here, stays here.
   - Participation is voluntary–you can "pass" if you don't want to share.

2. Solicit student feedback.

   "Here is a list of possible norms we could use. Is there anything about this list that you would like to add, revise, or remove? Which norms need further discussion or clarification?"

3. Revise and refine the list, then test for agreement.

   - Consider group additions and changes together, and add them to the norms list started previously.

   - Check for agreement using a visual sign, such as a thumbs-up, to ensure everyone can agree.

   - "Does everyone agree with these norms? Is anyone concerned about their ability to uphold these norms?"

4. Make the norms visible.

   - Post the norms to the class homepage.

   - Add the norms to the syllabus.

   - If possible, hang a norms poster on the classroom wall.

Suggested Language for Instructor Wrap-Up

"Groups are always a work in progress, and so norms should be, too. That means everyone should feel free to revisit them whenever they think the norms don't fit the needs of the group anymore. This will help us all create the group culture we all want to be a part of."

Strategy 4

Introduce low-stakes practice opportunities.

Encourage students to attend election-oriented events and programs and to report back by asking questions, challenging assumptions, and providing evidence to support their arguments. Source articles from the student newspaper. Start these discussions before the election. Be aware of your own political leanings when interacting with students. Review your teaching or program materials to avoid any perception of bias in your classroom or student-facing discussions. Make it a habit to use examples from across the political spectrum.

" What kinds of programming can you put in place to grow the muscle that you will need to sustain you through the result? What can you do as a parallel to the election that isn't so focused on the election—but it is focused in a constructive way on other issues in the country, in our civic space, in our democracy—where students might be able to see a more constructive path for their own engagement?"

- President

Strategy

5

Initiate dialogue across differences during orientation.

Introduce dialogue across differences during orientation to lay the foundation for constructive engagement on campus. Extend this initiative beyond orientation into academic and cocurricular realms, integrating dialogue training into various programs such as first-year seminars, student leadership initiatives, and residence life activities. By doing so, institutions foster interconnected pathways that promote civil discourse throughout students' college experience.

"The problem we have on college campuses is we tend to do one really good program for 50 kids, and we put it up on the website and claim victory. This has to seep throughout the entire campus culture. Obviously, a lot of this work can be done through student life, but faculty have to own it as well. And so do coaches. Everybody on our campus has got to lean into this space." – President

Situate election events into residence life.

The immersive experience of residential campus life stands out as one of the rare settings where community members gain abundant practice opportunities amid individuals with diverse perspectives. It serves as an environment where encountering disagreements is expected, and how these disagreements manifest significantly shapes campus culture. Yet it is also a space where the absence of room for respectful disagreement can result in irreversible alienation. As such, the election becomes a pivotal juncture for institutions to showcase the value of fostering dialogue and understanding within their academic communities.

Living learning communities can examine election issues important to their residential themes. Postdebate discussions or issue-oriented presentations with local or on-campus experts can inform students while also demonstrating respect for a range of viewpoints and expertise. These programs provide an opportunity to include counseling and psychological services, thus raising awareness of other resources, both generally and postelection. One institution we spoke with has integrated restorative practices into residence life. Resident leaders are trained in circle practices and are given engagement guidelines, which empower students to address conflicts on their own. The institution phased in these techniques, initially targeting a small group before expanding them campuswide with secured funding.

> ❝ **I say to students in our orientation program, my expectation is that you're going to find the person in your residence hall whose life experiences are most different from your own and form a friendship right on our campus. When somebody says something you find deeply politically insulting, we expect you to take them out for coffee. Don't ask about their politics, but ask about their life.** – President

Class Assignment Ideas[9]

- **IDEA 1:** Assign students to cover election-related news for class credit and invite faculty with relevant expertise to engage in the dialogue. Hold classroom follow-up discussions after election events like caucuses, primaries, and national conventions.

- **IDEA 2:** Teach quantitative analysis and data storytelling by assigning students to conduct and disseminate campus community surveys.

- **IDEA 3:** Encourage student groups to develop programming and share their opinions in the student paper linking their lived experiences with policy issues. For example, the campus cadet corps could discuss attitudes and issues surrounding veterans' health.

- **IDEA 4:** Use campus space to program events like the University of Miami's 2020 Healthcare Games where the college Republicans and Democrats debated the Affordable Care Act.

9   Campus Election Engagement Project. (2018). Engaging your campus in elections: Seven key ways to engage your campus. https://civicinfluencers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/7-Key-Ways-to-Engage-Your-Campus.pdf

Dialogue Activities From the Constructive Dialogue Institute[10]

The following are practical, ready-to-go strategies designed to foster and facilitate constructive dialogue in the classroom.

You can choose to go through each resource sequentially, or you can peruse the options and pick one or two you prefer. When choosing which ones to use, you might consider your time constraints, your experience level with facilitating constructive dialogue, or your students' particular needs and interests.

Generally, these are activities and exercises that help *start* conversations. It can often be difficult to know how to broach divisive topics. These suggestions aim to structure conversation in an accessible way so that dialogue can flow constructively from there.

10   Fay, J., & O'Neil, E. (2022). *Constructive dialogue and elections: An educator guide to engaging students*. The Constructive Dialogue Institute. https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/elections-guide

The Questions Game

Suggested Language for Framing

"Constructive dialogue is about understanding, not changing, others' minds. We are going to practice listening without responding, and asking questions that can get people to share even more. Good listening and thoughtful question-asking are fundamental skills of constructive dialogue."

Silent Brainstorm

First, ask participants to think about a political opinion or value that they hold.

Suggested Language

"Start by thinking about a political opinion or value that you hold. To get you thinking, consider your answers to these questions: When you think about the problems of the world, what comes to mind as the most concerning? What is an issue that gets you really fired up and angry? What is the issue you are most likely to write to a politician about or to attend a protest about?"

Pair Work

Next, divide participants into pairs for 5 minutes.

INSTRUCTIONS

- **Person 1:** Share a political opinion or value that you hold.

- **Person 2:** Ask follow-up questions to understand more about your partner's stance. Hold back on responding or sharing anything about your own stance–Person 2 should only ask questions during this time. The questions should have the intention of learning more about where Person 1 is coming from.

- **Person 1:** Share your responses.

After one 5-minute round, pairs should switch roles.

EXAMPLES OF CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS

- What makes you say that?

- Why is that issue so important to you?

- Did a person or experience influence your belief?

- Can you say more about what you mean when you say _____?

- Why do you think that is?

- Have you always felt that way?

Wrap-Up

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- What did you notice or experience in your pairs?

- What did it feel like when you shared your political opinion or value?

- What did it feel like to just ask questions?

- Did anything surprise you?

Facilitator Considerations

- The Questions Game can be modified for varied skill levels or topics. Facilitators can make each pair segment longer or shorter, depending on how in depth you would like the sharing to be.

- Regardless of topic or depth, the key component should always remain the same: one person only asking questions, and the other person only answering those questions (and then switch roles).

Belief Spectrum: Election Edition

[20 MINUTES FOR THE ACTIVITY; 30 TO 40 MINUTES FOR DEBRIEF/DIALOGUE]

This activity prepares students to share about their stance on key issues and belief systems by arranging themselves across a physical spectrum between "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree." Students share their positions (agree or disagree) by moving themselves along a spectrum. From this, students can share silently (which can be easier), and educators can learn which issues or topics represent the most diverse viewpoints among their students.

Set the Stage

1. Put two pieces of paper on opposite sides of the room (the floor or walls): "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree."

2. Suggested language to set the stage:

   - "Everything between these two polar opposites is a spectrum. The middle of the spectrum can be thought of as neutral or unsure.

   - "I will read through a series of statements, one at a time. When you hear a statement, please move silently along the spectrum, based on your opinion or stance on that statement.

   - "The goal of the activity is to begin to see where we differ. So be as honest as you can–don't just follow your friends.

   - "You'll have the chance to discuss afterward, so please hold your comments or questions until that stage. This part is fully silent."

Instruction Tips

1. Read statements twice so students can really think through their stance before moving, and pause for 10 to 15 seconds after reading each statement.

2. After the 10 to 15 seconds, ask students to look around and notice who is near them and who is not.

3. Read the next statement until you have gone through them all.

Instructor Considerations and Modifications

- For a more student-led activity, instructors can choose to ask students to generate their own list of statements in advance.

SUGGESTED PROMPTS

- I think there are things in my country that need to improve.

- I think that my country's political leaders accurately represent my views.

- I feel comfortable sharing my political views openly in this community.

- I think criticizing political leaders is patriotic.

- The best way to make change is to vote.

- The best way to make change is locally and in your community.

- The government has a responsibility to care for its people.

- The two-party system is a good thing for our country.

- I think people make assumptions about my political party that are untrue.

- I have had people unfairly stereotype me based on where I am from.

- I have had people unfairly stereotype me based on how I look.

- When people succeed, it is because of hard work.

- The media is a good place to learn about the world.

- It is better to be a member of a group than a leader of a group.

- I feel hopeful about this election.

Wrap-Up

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- What did you notice about this exercise?

- What did you learn about your peers?

- What did you like about this activity? What was challenging about this activity?

- What questions do you have for your peers about some of the beliefs that surfaced within this activity? Be sure to ask questions from a place of curiosity rather than judgment.

Conversation Simulator

[15 MINUTES]

Follow the link in this QR code to an interactive program to learn three science-backed strategies for navigating difficult conversations and practice them through a personalized interactive online simulator. You will get a chance to practice the following:

- Establish a collaborative goal.

- Get curious.

- Tell a personal story.

When Discussions Get Too Heated[11]

It is normal and expected that when talking about divisive topics that matter deeply to students, some conflict or discord will arise. Here are some ways to intervene to lower the temperature in the conversation.

SCENARIO	INTERVENTION SUGGESTION
A student makes a statement based on misinformation.	• Ask questions to start. Begin from a place of genuine curiosity: "Can you tell me more about what you mean?" "What makes you say that?" "How did you come to believe that?" • Refer to group expertise. "What is it like to hear this?" "I'd like to hear some people's reactions." • Point out shared values. "I can see that many students care about democracy and truth." "Both of you value fairness."
A student disengages from the conversation because it is uncomfortable and awkward.	• Refer to norms: When establishing group norms, we suggest including "Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process." Remind students of that purpose when things get uncomfortable. • Then, consider changing the structure of the conversation to small groups or pairs. Check in with the student one on one to see how they want to proceed and what would help them feel better about staying in the conversation next time.
A student has become frustrated after hearing a classmate's commitment to a candidate or stance with which they strongly disagree.	• Once each student has expressed their point of view, try naming the feelings being expressed. "It sounds like hearing that made you feel frustrated—is that right?" This gives everyone a chance to slow down and lets students know you are listening. • Ask constructive questions: ○ What makes you say that? ○ Why is that important to you? ○ How do you know? ○ Can you say more about what you mean when you say_____? ○ Why do you think that is?
A student expresses feeling shamed because of their identity.	• Connect to norms and purpose: "Everyone is here to learn and understand. Learning and understanding new experiences or perspectives can definitely be uncomfortable." • Promote agency over shame: "Shame can be a strong reaction, and we want to empower students to feel the agency to create change based on what they see and hear, rather than focusing on guilt-based responses." • Ask the following: ○ "These conversations can feel really difficult at times. What do you notice in yourself that feels difficult or uncomfortable?" ○ "What are you learning right now about this group or the world around you? What do you wish were different?"
A student has said something harmful or ignorant about a group of people.	• Change the pace: "I could be wrong, but I want to pause and notice that something was just said that could possibly be harmful to some students" • Name the statement or assumption: "That statement assumes x, y, or z, which could feel hurtful or inaccurate to some of you. Given that the purpose of constructive dialogue is to learn and understand, I want to be sure we're sticking with those values." • Refer to group expertise: "I notice some of our class looks like they are withdrawing from the conversation. Would someone like to address the feelings that may exist or the reactions that are happening?" • Change the structure: Initiate a turn-and-talk: "Share with your partner how you are feeling about this dialogue and a question you may have."

11 Fay, J., & O'Neil, E. (2022). *Constructive dialogue and elections: An educator guide to engaging students.* The Constructive Dialogue Institute. https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/elections-guide

CDI Products For Students, Faculty, and Staff

Programming that large groups of the campus community experience can signal an institutional commitment to the importance of dialogue across differences. New student orientation, first-year experiences, student leadership training, residence life programs, and staff and faculty onboarding are pathways with broad campus reach. IDHE found that "four of the seven highly politically engaged campuses embedded dialogue and discussion skills in a required course." [12]

Perspectives for Students

CDI's research-backed blended learning program uses psychology concepts and interactive scenarios to equip students with the skills for conversation, collaboration, and problem-solving across differences. Features include the following:

- Six asynchronous lessons (30 minutes each)
- Three optional peer-to-peer conversation guides (30 minutes each)
- A dashboard and quizzes to track learners' progress

Perspectives for Faculty and Staff

CDI offers a version of its blended learning program *Perspectives* geared toward faculty and staff. It explores the roots of divisions and equips participants with evidence-based practices to navigate difficult conversations. It includes practice scenarios relevant to campus faculty and staff.

Scan this QR code to learn more about CDI's campus-wide offerings.

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12 Thomas, N. (2019). *Readiness for discussing democracy in supercharged political times.* Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. https://dgmg81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Initiatives/IDHE/idhe-discussing-democracy.pdf

Strategy 7

Foster media literacy and critical thinking.

Efforts to combat misinformation sometimes inadvertently exacerbate ideological divisions rather than bridging them. Throughout history, governments, scientists, and the media have contributed to this issue, eroding trust in them as reliable sources. Hence, it's imperative to cultivate critical thinking skills and champion evidence-based arguments. Encourage students to scrutinize sources and critically evaluate information instead of merely parroting or unquestioningly accepting it. Leading by example, demonstrate transparency by divulging your own sources and methods of information verification. Emphasize active engagement with diverse sources of information rather than passive consumption. Combating misinformation entails actively seeking and absorbing more information.

Strategy 8

Invest in advanced professional development.

Effective conflict management processes are essential for engaging across lines of difference and for fostering a sense of community. Consider attending workshops or training sessions on facilitating classroom conflicts and fostering inclusive environments. For advanced facilitators, consider training in mediation, conflict de-escalation, and restorative practices. Audit your own strengths and deficits. Engage with colleagues to share best practices and strategies.

One of the institutions we spoke with has implemented a training program involving nearly one-third of their faculty and staff. This initiative operates through semester-based cohorts, commencing with a 2-day opening workshop and structured dialogue sessions. Subsequently, cohort members convene every 2 weeks during lunch, facilitated by faculty peers, to discuss topics such as classroom climate, navigating challenging conversations, and experimenting with new teaching techniques. The organizers have now expanded the training to include student-facing staff. This initiative fosters collaboration across traditional institutional boundaries, leading to the development of new relationships among participants

CDI Professional Development Offerings for Faculty and Staff

Research conducted by IDHE showed that students were mixed about whether they prefer faculty to disclose their personal viewpoints on controversial topics. However, the study emphasized the need for faculty to carefully consider their approach in advance.[13] It is possible to navigate difficult conversations when they arise without exhibiting bias, but it requires skill and forethought.

> **I'm worried, especially in this moment, about politicization in the classroom and the ripple effects that come from that. I remember in 2020, students complaining or raising grievances around their perception of propagandizing in the classroom. That's something that I'm trying to be thoughtful about.**
> **– Staff**

13 Thomas, N. (2019). *Readiness for discussing democracy in supercharged political times.* Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. https://dgmg81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Initiatives/IDHE/idhe-discussing-democracy.pdf

Foundations in Facilitating Dialogue

This half-day virtual professional development session for faculty, staff, and student leaders focuses on equipping participants with skills for facilitating meaningful conversations on contentious issues. The session includes out-of-the-box strategies to proactively foster a culture of trust, techniques for supporting students' mindset development, and skills for engaging across differences. It also covers specific tactics for intervening in tense moments of conflict.

Dialogue Facilitation Certification

This 20-hour certification program empowers student-facing staff and student leaders with the skills to confidently facilitate difficult conversations on campus as they arise. The program will equip participants with facilitation techniques and intervention strategies so that they can support students during high-pressure moments, regardless of the situation. After successfully completing the program and demonstrating competency, participants will receive a certification in campus dialogue facilitation from CDI.

Strategy 9

Embrace novel counterprotest techniques.

Encourage students to consider organizing counterprogramming as opposed to counterprotests. For many student groups, a counter program that draws attention away from the controversial speaker is more likely to meet their goals. It is even better if the counterprogram serves to build community or to show support for groups who may feel marginalized by the speaker's statements.

> **"A controversial speaker was booked to come on campus. The campus leadership had a great conversation about 'What do we do? We believe in free speech.' If you believe in free speech, that includes the people you don't like to hear. So make it clear to [the speaker] they cannot encourage violence. And the students had a concert. They had a little carnival going. So what could have been awful turned into almost a nonevent." – President**

Strategy 10

Ask students about their postelection preferences.

Making assumptions about what campus community members need can unleash unanticipated backlash. Before the announcement of results, collaborate with students to discuss and determine what support they anticipate requiring after the election. Schedule designated conversation spaces in advance, and be ready to facilitate open discussions for processing thoughts and emotions. In the days after election results are announced, draw from insights gleaned from prior electoral experiences to ready campuses for fostering well-being services. Establish dedicated platforms where students, faculty, and staff can engage in facilitated intimate discussions to process election outcomes.

By taking these proactive steps, college staff and faculty can create an environment that encourages healthy debate, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue while preparing for potential conflicts related to the 2024 presidential election.
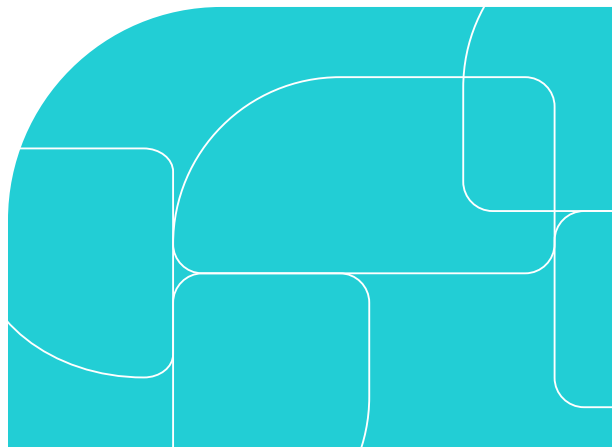
"

Our students really do want to engage across differences, but nobody's role-modeled that for them. We need to help them develop the skills and then have the experiences of doing it.

— President

Strategies for Civic Engagement and DEI Centers

Centers on college campuses can play crucial roles in preparing learning environments for the 2024 presidential election. These centers can take proactive steps to promote voter education, encourage civic participation, and create inclusive spaces for dialogue and engagement. Centers can promote cross-functional cooperation by coordinating campuswide efforts. The election provides a prominent backdrop for partnering with faculty and staff. Successful partnerships combine subject matter expertise with effective student engagement strategies.

Strategy

1

Socialize knowledge from previous elections.

Gather and socialize the lessons center staff collectively learned from recent presidential and congressional elections. Look for opportunities to share best practices with campus leadership, faculty, and staff. Revisit some of the more effective strategies. How can you apply the lessons you learned?

Transform speaker events into conversations.

Middlebury College has developed a recurring salon series named Good Talks 2024, which it intends to expand to twice monthly once students return in the fall. Central to these events is the emphasis on both speaking and active listening, providing students with opportunities to engage in discussions with others about the content presented. The format comprises a 20-minute lecture, recorded and shared on their website, followed by facilitated, small-group discussions guided by open-ended, thought-provoking questions. Subsequently, participants reconvene for a plenary session, which speakers often join. Recordings of speaker presentations are made accessible to community organizations, K-12 institutions, and neighboring colleges and universities.

During large-scale public talks, typically attracting more than 350 attendees, organizers have implemented an 8-to 10-minute "turn-to-two-neighbors" format before the Q&A session. This structure provides participants with an opportunity to absorb the content and to contemplate their questions and reactions. In their ongoing salon-style event series, organizers encourage speakers to perceive their presentation as a communal launchpad for discussion, often necessitating a streamlined delivery of their material.

In 2018–2019, many Middlebury campus partners collaborated to develop a visiting speaker guide. In it, they recommend that speakers present for just under half their allotted time to allow for small group discussion and Q&A.

In general, we recommend that speakers formally present for less than half the alotted time. Below are some examples of formats for events of different lengths.					
EVENT LENGTH	Welcome, small group introductions	Introduce speaker and rules	Presentation	Small group discussion	Q&A
60 minutes		5	25	15	15
75 minutes	5	5	30	15	20
90 minutes	15	5	30	20	20

Above: Engaged Listening Project, Middlebury College. Guidelines for speaker and discussion series. Reproduced with permission.

Guest Speaker Guidelines

Colgate University

These steps, adapted from *The Chronicle for Higher Education's* report Success Strategies for Guest Speaker Visits, outline a proactive approach taken by a faculty group at Colgate University to ensure effective communication, address concerns, promote dialogue, and create a supportive environment for engaging with diverse viewpoints on campus:[14]

STEP 1: Ask yourself the following questions before inviting guest speakers:

- What are the speaker's intentions?
- What is in it for you?
- Can you get the same material online?
- What format will you use?
- Is this the best speaker to bring in?

STEP 2: Engage key leaders for support and feedback.

- Meet with the provost, chief diversity officer, and faculty diversity council to gauge support and identify potential oversights in early planning.

STEP 3: Use meetings as sounding boards and to extend courtesy gestures.

- Discuss ideas, seek feedback, and inform key leaders about plans as a courtesy to ensure alignment and support.

STEP 4: Address previous speaker issues and examine lessons learned.

- Meet with campus dialogue councils, ombuds, or conflict transformation experts to address past tensions, facilitate better communication, and confirm the speaker's flexibility surrounding their visit.

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14   Zahneis, M. (2023). Success strategies for guest speaker visits. *The Chronicle for Higher Education.* https://store.chronicle.com/products/fostering-students-free-expression

STEP 5: Organize a campuswide exploratory dialogue.

- Look for existing spaces to host a campuswide conversation that brings together supporters and opponents of the speaker, allowing for open dialogue and expression of diverse opinions.

STEP 6: Invite participants known for civil discourse.

- Ensure that the invited individuals can engage in civil conversations during the event.

STEP 7: Plan contingencies and fail-safes.

- Schedule the exploratory dialogue with enough lead time (~6 weeks) to allow for any necessary adjustments based on its outcome like the desire for counter protests.

STEP 8: Recognize the value of preparation beyond formal requirements.

- Acknowledge the additional workload involved in thorough preparation and its value in establishing ground rules, fostering diverse perspectives, and enhancing the community culture.

Strategy

3

Tap into campus expertise for issues programming.

Only 35% of youth feel supported to act on their political concerns.[15] However, education about issues and elections, and support from their communities, can help youth engage in democracy. Center staff are ideally positioned to organize efforts to educate students about political issues while showing a diversity of viewpoints. Explore opportunities to pair up faculty and staff members whose expertise overlap to forge sustained cross-functional relationships.

In 2016, Sewanee's Office of Civic Engagement hosted a DebateWatch program. Participants watched and discussed the primary and the presidential debates, following civil dialogue guidelines like these from the Campus Engagement Election Program:[16]

- Be curious and open to learning.

- Be authentic and welcome that from others.

- Show respect and suspend judgment.

- Be purposeful and to the point.

- Look for common ground.

- Own and guide the conversation.

Staff facilitators opened with an introduction to set ground rules. Essential to the format was that the group did NOT listen to any news commentary after the debate. After the debate ended, the group engaged in a variety of structured conversations.

15 de Guzman, P., & Medina, A. (2023, November 29). *CIRCLE pre-2024 election youth survey.* The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). https://circle.tufts.edu/2024-election-youth-poll#information-and-support,-key-to-youth-engagement,-are-often-still-lacking

16 Campus Engagement Election Project. *DebateWatch guide.* https://civicinfluencers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DebateWatch-Guide.pdf

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Students are eager to have structures that allow them to engage and provide space for them to have difficult conversations because they are less apt to do that on their own. They're looking for space that's created for them. – Staff

Deliberative Dialogue Ideas

Providence College

Providence College runs a speaker series called With Mutual Respect. Each year, the series features two discussions: a faculty-led fall session and a student-led spring session on the same topic. Their goal is to inspire diverse conversation, which can be further explored in small dialogues. During the 2022–2023 school year, the topic was abortion, a controversial issue at a Catholic institution. Each conversation included two speakers who are pro-choice and two speakers who are pro-life. The topic for 2023–2024 was dysfunctional politics. In the fall session, a panel of four faculty members shared their perspectives on the challenges of dysfunction in politics, why it is happening, and what can be done about it. In the spring, a student panel will be held on the same topic. The speaker series is president initiated and sponsored by the president's office.

Linn-Benton Community College

Linn-Benton Community College formed a collaboration with its neighbor Oregon State University (OSU). The communications faculty at Linn-Benton worked in conjunction with OSU's dean for the college of business and the provost to orchestrate an event featuring legal scholar Robert George and philosopher Cornel West. The event garnered considerable attention, drawing more than 1,000 attendees. After the event, participants' enthusiastic response underscored a palpable demand for more such intellectually enriching occasions.

This collaboration enables Linn-Benton to leverage OSU's resources and a campus that can more readily host large-scale events. Conversely, OSU benefits from the flexibility that Linn-Benton's size affords. Linn-Benton can function a bit like a democracy laboratory, developing creative concepts to facilitate constructive dialogue and enhance students' educational experiences. They can experiment and test ideas before they are implemented at scale.

Develop shared programming.

Strategy 4

Establish regular meetings with all appropriate center leads within your system to support each other's efforts. Expand your collaborations outside of campus by working with local law enforcement and community organizations. For example, at Christopher Newport University, the Tidewater Community Writing Center is a joint effort between the Alice F. Randall Writing Center and the Center for Community Engagement. Faculty volunteers work with both students and community members. Take advantage of the existing links among community service, civic engagement, and leadership to explore advocacy related to election issues.

> **No one discipline is going to solve all the problems. You have to do interdisciplinary work. Higher ed is not set up to do interdisciplinary work. There's a lot of siloing. Some of the centers are housed in student affairs and they will have a harder time working with faculty. Bigger institutions often have multiple centers, so they're kind of competing in some ways. You have to pull things together."**
>
> **– Faculty and program director**

Showcase balanced expertise.

Strategy 5

Provide educational programming that showcases expertise from in-house and external experts across the ideological spectrum. College campuses are embedded in networks of deep topical expertise. Inform and engage campus citizens with educational programming on topics that they care about, such as student loan debt, affirmative action, reproductive health, free speech, school shootings and gun legislation, and the Israel–Hamas conflict. Display a range of viewpoints on a single topic.

Strategy 6

Model respect for viewpoint diversity.

Create learning experiences outside of politically charged moments. A deliberative dialogue series provides students with physical spaces for difficult conversations. Through their James Farmer Multicultural Center, the University of Mary Washington runs a range of programming and trains peer educators. These spaces and practices can then provide scaffolding to help students consider election issues and process their reactions to election results.

Strategy 7

Engage your wider community.

Encourage participation across campus and with your neighbors. Promote events and dialogues to the full campus community, including health care workers, security, administrative staff, and environmental and food service workers. Invite local community participation, where possible. This can help expand the range of viewpoints to which college students are exposed.

> **A lot of our students want to understand how and why people could be supportive of Trump. We have a lot of really great [staff members] on our campus who are Trump supporters and it'd be good for [students] to hear why. – President**

Reinforce nonpartisanship in popular cocurricular spaces.

Organize civic forums and other programming to follow election events or to accompany campus activities like sports and homecoming to drive student engagement. Invite campus and local policy or issue experts to attend. Encourage faculty to offer students class credit for event attendance or for volunteering with campaigns and reporting back through classroom assignments. At orientation, encourage living learning communities to adopt election engagement as a theme. Coordinate with staff and faculty to infuse election issues into the first-year experience curriculum. Topics to consider include the following:

- How the government works

- Free speech on college campus

- Specific issues in each candidate's platform (e.g., immigration, border security, foreign aid and military support, reproductive rights)

Strategy 9

Operationalize a shared calendar with key events.

Dedicate staff to keep the calendar updated with cross-functional deadlines like including information in orientation communications and programming. Spotlight major campus events and their organizers (e.g., homecoming, football games, concerts) to encourage easier coordination. House the calendar centrally and embed it into high-traffic digital spaces, like your campus intranet. Share it on your public website along with activities to which the public is invited.

Strategy 10

Celebrate student civic engagement.

The University of Delaware hosts a nonpartisan voter celebration event, which it started in 2008. They situate activity stations throughout a large room decorated with balloons. They serve popcorn and ice cream. Visitors receive a stamp at each station and earn free ice cream for visiting them all. In previous years, the stations have included a create-your-own-meme contest or activity, presidential trivia, and placing a pin in the state where you voted. Do not limit these events to election night. This idea could be expanded to incorporate a dialogue passport for use in events leading up to the election, including attending a speaker series or participating in community engagement. Sewanee's Dialogue Across Difference Program has innovatively adopted a Dessert and Democracy format, using sweet treats to entice discussions on voter apathy.

Repurpose Existing Programming

Claremont McKenna College

At Claremont McKenna College, the Athenaeum Program, which occurs four nights a week, fosters connections and meaningful conversations in a low-stakes environment. It is a casual setting where students, faculty, staff, and community members come together to listen to speakers, ask questions, and share ideas over a meal. Students receive preference in attendance and during the Q&A sessions. Formats like these already exist on many campuses and can provide channels for election-related discussions.

> **We had a salon on the Middle East two weekends ago with about 30 people. There were two different professors and students from very different sides of the conflict. Everyone talked, and there were students talking to one another at that event who otherwise wouldn't be talking to or be seen together on many campuses.**
>
> **– President**

Providence College

The Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy Lab at Providence College activates five democracy walls around its campus. Student fellows facilitate the walls by asking questions and then conducting related dialogues in that area of campus. Acceptable speech guidelines are posted next to the walls. Students who might not show up to a forum might respond to the wall or at least read the curated questions and answers.

> **Between the guidelines and having personal relationships with people– because people know the students who are overseeing and facilitating–we really haven't had problems with hate speech. Every once in a while, we have to erase something, but it hasn't been an issue. It's a more accessible way to engage the entire campus.** – Faculty and program director

Mobilize your student leaders.

Student-organized and -facilitated discussions can be more effective than those put on by administration, staff, and faculty. Resident leaders, student government officers, student group leaders, and athletes can be trained to facilitate difficult conversations. The Diversity Education Empowerment Program, or D.E.E.P., Impact Program at James Madison University relies on a peer-to-peer model to explore topics related to identity, culture, and justice. Students receive facilitation training, and campus stakeholders can request their services inside and outside of classroom settings. At Sewanee, the Canale Leaders serve as the boots on the ground. These paid student interns offer invaluable insights into event planning that resonate with student interests. They wield relational influence, heighten awareness, and maintain a direct line to a student advisory board composed of leaders from various campus sectors. Staff rely on their input to shape programming decisions effectively.

Transition into sustained practice once the election is over.

Assess the enduring value of the initiatives, undertakings, and infrastructure you have built. Consider extending them beyond the election season. Looking toward the future, craft a strategic approach to enhance civic engagement capacity. Consider prioritizing investment in faculty skill development and recognize their extended institutional tenures as a crucial cultural influence. For example, Providence College's Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy Lab hosts faculty learning communities to build confidence in facilitating difficult conversations. They also house a student fellows program where 10 fellows are responsible for cross-campus and community events and dialogue work. Those fellows receive a monetary stipend and course credit. They provide year-round opportunities like neighborhood clean-ups and community housing events to illustrate the range of civic engagement.

These initiatives can help combat apathy for democratic processes and provide ample real-life dialogue practice. In contrast to infrequent events like presidential elections, especially those fraught with negativity, participation in activities like board of education meetings, involvement in local initiatives within the mayor's office, or volunteering with community development organizations can offer avenues for meaningful engagement and can strengthen community resilience.

Campus Forums for Discussing the Election

Student leaders are one of the most effective sources for engaging their peers. Staff and faculty advisors should encourage student leaders to access training in facilitation and constructive dialogue.

1. Student government associations (SGAs)
2. Political science clubs
3. Debate clubs
4. Model United Nations
5. Diversity and inclusion committees
6. Journalism and media organizations (e.g., student-run newspapers, radio stations, online media outlets)
7. Civic or community engagement and service clubs
8. Academic panels and lecture series
9. Residential life programs or living learning communities
10. Library resources (e.g., book clubs, reading lists, research guides)
11. Polling and survey organizations

Higher Education Bridge–Builders Provider Landscape

Nonpartisan organizations can also support forums, deliberative dialogues, and skill building to accompany such programming. Scan this QR code for a landscape view of the bridge-building organizations that serve U.S. higher education institutions.

These group structures provide diverse opportunities for college students to engage in meaningful discussions, gain a deeper understanding of the electoral process, and actively participate in the democratic system during the 2024 presidential election and beyond.

"

How do we use what's going to be a contentious election to strengthen what we do on our campuses? This election gives us a chance to push back on what author Amanda Ripley calls conflict entrepreneurs and to reclaim our central mission, which is to educate students–to recenter higher education on the search for truth. Our campuses need to be places where students learn to work across differences because the future of the country really depends on that."

– President

Conclusion

Engaging across lines of difference not only provides an opportunity for personal learning and growth for students on campus but also benefits the entire community. When individuals with diverse views interact, the exchange of ideas can lead to innovative thinking, effective problem-solving, and community resilience. The ability to navigate difficult conversations cultivated through this process contributes to the improvement of our national cultural landscape. Nevertheless, on some campuses, students hesitate to engage in discussions on "political matters" because they do not want to cause offense or incur potential repercussions from their peers or their instructors. Such apprehension poses a significant threat to the vitality of our democracy.

Encouragingly, research indicates that almost all students, including liberals, moderates, and conservatives, agree on the importance of listening with an open mind (94%) and understanding each other's experiences through empathy (90%).[17] Although students express eagerness to practice these principles, they depend on institutions to provide opportunities for skill-building experiences. The upcoming 2024 national election presents a unique chance to meet this need. Rather than a crisis that needs mitigating, the election can serve as a platform for reinforcing the core values of a campus culture that celebrates differences.

Voting for the president of the United States should be a cause for celebration, especially for college students, many of whom are first-time voters. Despite the constant conflict portrayed in the 24-hour news cycle, many higher education institutions already have structures in place to navigate campus conflicts. The Israel–Hamas conflict has put some of those structures to the test, but it offers invaluable lessons for the fall. Every conflict provides the opportunity to teach about free speech and freedom of expression. Treating the 2024 national election as another form of conflict allows administrations, faculty, and staff to leverage existing infrastructure. The key to success lies in adopting a unified, campuswide approach rooted in institutional values and trust. By showcasing the positive impact of universities on fostering understanding, curiosity, and a willingness to engage respectfully, we can rewrite the narrative surrounding higher education and can emphasize its essential role in shaping informed and engaged citizens.

17   Duong, M., Hawkins, S., Welker, K., Duong, F., Oshinski, P., & Yudkin, D. (2023, September 21). Free speech and inclusion: How college students are navigating shifting speech norms. Constructive Dialogue Institute & More In Common. https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/collegesurvey