



Navigating Campus Protests

University Leadership
in the Era of Polarized
Activism

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Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI)

Founded in 2017, CDI is a non-profit organization dedicated to equipping the next generation of Americans with the skills to bridge divides. CDI helps colleges and universities across the country transform their campuses into learning environments that support dialogue across differences. To accomplish this goal, we translate the latest behavioral science research into educational resources and teaching strategies that are evidence-based, practical, and scalable.

Authors

Mylien T. Duong, Ph.D. — Senior Director of Research and Innovation

Keith Welker, Ph.D. — Senior Research Scientist

Mary Aviles — Insights and Experience Lead

Ketura Elie — Research Associate

Jess Walsh — Research Associate

Caroline Mehl — Executive Director



www.constructivedialogue.org
244 Madison Ave, Suite 1098,
New York, NY 10016

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Executive Summary

This report aims to equip university leaders with a foundational knowledge of student activism and best practices for maintaining community cohesion during periods of unrest. We draw from a blend of quantitative data, existing research literature, and 26 interviews with diverse campus stakeholders. Below, we summarize our main findings and recommendations.

Campus Protests: Where, When, and Why?

This report begins with a historical perspective of student activism in Chapter 1. Student activism has played a pivotal role in shaping American history, influencing significant events such as the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and the divestment from South Africa. Over time, the relationship between students and universities has evolved dramatically, particularly with the 1961 *Dixon v. Alabama* decision, which curtailed universities' control over students' lives and upheld students' constitutional rights. This shift has led campus leaders to adopt more strategic and reflective approaches to managing activism, as exemplified by the University of California's 2012 Robinson-Edley report, which offered guidelines for handling protests while respecting free speech. In the wake of recent protests, particularly those following October 7th, universities have a critical opportunity to continue innovating best practices for balancing free expression with student safety.

We then shift our focus to the campus protests that occurred during the 2023-2024 academic year. While media coverage made it appear widespread, only a small proportion of universities (13.9%) experienced any protest activity, with even fewer (3.8%) seeing frequent protests. There were distinct features that set apart schools with frequent protest activity. These schools were characterized by:

- Larger enrollment
- Locations in urban areas
- Lower admission rates and higher SAT scores
- Higher tuition costs
- Student discomfort with discussing controversial issues, Palestinian conflict

A Profile of Student Activists

Chapter 2 provides a profile of student activists, beginning with an examination of student activism more broadly and then shifting into an analysis of pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian activists in particular. Although student activists are vocal and prominent, their views are not representative of the broader student body. Unsurprisingly, activists tend to be more extreme in their stances. Demographically, they often come from more privileged backgrounds and are more likely to attend elite universities.

The motivations and organizing methods of student activists vary across the political spectrum. While left-leaning student activists tend to find support within the university, right-leaning activists often rely on a deep external network of conservative organizations for funding, training, and career opportunities. At both extremes of the political spectrum, however, far-left and far-right activists share a distrust of institutions and a proclivity for more disruptive tactics.

The latter half of Chapter 2 tells the stories of pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian students during the 2023-2024 academic year. Many of these students were personally impacted by the events in Israel and Gaza. Their grief was often invalidated by peers, leading to a sense of isolation. This lack of compassion hardened their views, deepening polarization on campus as students became more isolated within their own groups.

In addition to the entrenched nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a number of characteristics of the pro-Palestinian protest movement made it more challenging for administrators to navigate. For example, the protests were often decentralized and leaderless, making negotiations difficult and frequently stalling progress. In addition, a number of interested stakeholders—including university donors, national activism organizations, faculty members, media, religious centers, and non-student community members—added to the complexity as administrators attempted to meet competing demands. Some higher education administrators had success in partnering with university religious centers to reach Jewish and Muslim students.

Recommendations for Higher Education Administrators

Part 2 details actionable strategies to advance five critical elements of navigating unrest on campus. These include:

- **Trust**, both relational and institutional.
- A **culture** that promotes critical thinking and compassion.
- A set of **policies** that are clear, comprehensive, and consistently enforced.
- An effective **event response team**, with diverse membership, a foundation of trust, and clear escalation procedures.
- A **compassionate approach** to interfacing with student activists.

Chapter 3 of this report underscores the importance of trust in managing campus unrest. Trust, both relational (developed between individuals through direct interactions) and institutional (rooted in the university's overall reputation and consistent actions), is essential for effective conflict management.

Many administrators will find themselves interfacing with student activists who lack trust in the university. We provide recommendations for handling these situations, such as acknowledging the trust deficit, creating small wins, and involving neutral third parties to reduce perception of bias.

Finally, the chapter provides strategies for building trust with campus police, such as involving students in the development of policing procedures, using non-uniformed staff as observers and the first line of engagement during protests, proactively educating students about policing practices, and promoting supportive services of campus police (such as safety escorts).

Chapter 4 outlines strategies to foster campus cultures that emphasize critical thinking and compassion. Many students we interviewed expressed frustration with a culture of intellectual conformity on campus, where binary “us vs. them” thinking prevailed. We provide a blueprint for holistic culture change not just within the student body, but within faculty and staff, senior leadership, and the board. Across constituent groups, the strategies for culture change include setting expectations early, articulating a “why” for dialogue, aligning incentives, and bridging fault lines.

Chapter 5 emphasizes the importance of clear, consistently enforced policies as essential guardrails for managing campus conflicts. We provide a structured approach for revising and enforcing policies that balance free expression with campus safety.

The strategies include forming a dedicated committee, engaging stakeholders, testing policies through scenarios, and ensuring transparent communication and education about policy changes. Recognizing that many campus teams may have limited time to revise policies, which should ideally be completed before significant unrest ensues, we provide versions of this process that can be implemented in 1-3 months, 3-8 months, and 8 months or longer.

Chapter 6 outlines the critical role of effective event response teams in managing campus protests. The chapter emphasizes that successful protest management requires clear roles, consistent communication, and a shared understanding of goals among team members, who often span multiple departments. We detail key strategies, including forming an event response team, establishing a clear escalation process, and conducting regular training exercises to ensure readiness.

Chapter 7 highlights the importance of leading with compassion when supporting student activists. Effective administrators view activism as a healthy developmental process and emphasize the need to maintain a shared sense of humanity with students.

We provide strategies for communicating with activists about their demonstration activities, either as part of planning or while a demonstration is active. These strategies include affirming students' rights to free speech, expressing genuine care, and ensuring transparent communication, particularly when students face physical danger or injury.

We also specifically focus on the role of listening to impacted parties after a divisive event has occurred. This blueprint for listeners, adapted from the Divided Community Project,¹ calls for listening to individuals' emotions, safety concerns, needs for support, and their preferences for continued involvement.

1. Divided Community Project. (2024). *Navigating Conflicts: A Guide for Campus Leaders and Public Safety Personnel*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Introduction

The aftermath of the October 7th attack on Israel made American universities, once again, the battleground for America's cultural conflicts. As protests flared, reports of antisemitism and Islamophobia skyrocketed across campuses. Administrators mobilized to support the well-being of grieving students while at the same time attempted to channel the outrage of some students toward more constructive means of expression. What transpired during the 2023-2024 academic year was not entirely new. As we will see in Chapter 1, college students have always organized for social causes. Youthful idealism and passion for justice provide plenty of fuel for this smart, engaged, and relatively privileged subgroup of students. The philosophical questions raised by the protests are also not novel. Higher education has for decades struggled to find the right balance between one student's freedom to express controversial and even offensive views with another student's equally legitimate right to feel safe and welcomed in the place where they learn and live. Although it does not happen frequently, this past year was not the first time the federal government has gotten involved with campus activism.

But as we will see in the latter half of Chapter 1, these protests were different. They were, by every indicator, much more heated. When we hear the stories of pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel students in Chapter 2, we will understand why. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most intractable in modern history. It directly touched the lives of a large number of students. Students knew people who were killed, had been kidnapped, were missing, were called back to military service, were displaced, and were at risk every day of getting bombed. And as though that was not enough for a 19-year-old to deal with, they also witnessed hate directed at their people on a regular basis. Instagram memes mocked civilian deaths, people called them nasty names, and friends abandoned them because of what they believed. It is no surprise that they began to wonder, as one student put it, "Why isn't anyone doing anything about this?"

Of course, most administrators were desperately trying to address this crisis. But they faced an almost impossible task. How do you support a grieving student when they express that grief as outrage towards other students? How do you bridge two warring factions whose antipathy long preceded either group's relationship with you? How do you give relationships the time they take to form when donor and alumni emails are flooding your inboxes and media outlets are requesting comments? What do you do when donors think you are being too soft and faculty think you are overstepping?

Yet we know that not all university responses were the same. We can all name the highly visible examples of things not going well. But away from the headlines and viral videos were other, less visible instances of administrative teams successfully working with student activists, organizing tense but productive educational events, and staying true to their institutional values amidst the swirl of competing stakeholder demands. What makes these schools different? This is the central question this report attempts to answer.

This report is written in two parts. Part 1, which consists of Chapters 1 and 2, aims to describe the protests of 2023-2024 in context. Chapter 1 begins with a historical perspective on student activism. This provides the grounding for describing the scale and intensity of the protests during the 2023-2024 academic year. We also use large-scale quantitative data to identify the demographic and cultural correlates of student protests. In Chapter 2, we examine the motivations and demographics of student activists. We begin with what is known about student activists broadly, then focus in on the experiences of pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel students after October 7th. We describe the involvement of various stakeholders—donors, national activist organizations, community activists, campus religious organizations, faculty, the media, and Congress—and their role in either deepening or bridging divides.

**“In a very literal sense,
human lives are at stake.”**

—CAMPUS RELIGIOUS LEADER

Part 2, which consists of Chapters 3 through 7, focuses on actionable recommendations for university leaders. These recommendations are derived from the body of existing best practices as well as from 26 interviews with campus administrators, staff members, student activists, community activists, and scholars of student activism. Each chapter presents a key ingredient to successfully navigating campus unrest.

As we head into an election season with the war in Gaza still roiling on and demonstrations already being planned on social media, universities face the growing challenge of navigating student activism in an increasingly polarized environment. Through this report, we aim to equip higher education leaders with the tools needed to foster campus unity and maintain institutional integrity in the face of forthcoming activism.



Methods

This mixed-methods research project used four sources of data:

1. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) database provided information on institutional characteristics such as institution size and admission rates. The most recent complete database was compiled in 2022.
2. We used campus climate survey data collected by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE). Importantly, these data were collected in the spring and summer of 2023, preceding October 7th and subsequent protest activity. The FIRE data contained survey information from $n = 55,102$ students from $N = 254$ colleges and universities. We examined two aspects of campus climate: students' comfort expressing ideas generally and their comfort discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Students' comfort expressing ideas was aggregated from multiple questions. Students were asked how comfortable they felt expressing their views on controversial topics in different campus settings (e.g., "in class," or "in the dining hall"). They were also asked how often they felt that they could not express their opinion because of how other students, faculty, or the administration would respond; how worried they were about damaging their reputation because of someone misunderstanding something they said or did; and if they felt pressure to avoid discussing controversial topics in their classes. Higher scores indicate greater comfort expressing ideas, and students' responses were aggregated by institution to provide an institution-level score.

Additionally, students were asked to indicate whether it is "difficult to have an open and honest conversation" on their campus about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The percentage of students in the school who responded "yes" to this item was used in analyses.

3. Data about protest events came from the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC). Our report focused on protest data from 2024. CCC tracks discrete protest events and associated characteristics, such as arrests, injuries, and police involvement. This database includes all protest events, including those unaffiliated with college campuses. To identify relevant protests, we used keywords related to higher education (e.g., “university,” “college,” “institute,” and “school”) and protest (e.g., “demonstration,” “rally,” “march,” and “protest”) and excluded unrelated terms (e.g., “College Avenue,” “high school,” and “University Hospital”).
4. We conducted one-on-one video interviews with 26 individuals, spanning roles of college/university administrators and staff, student and community activists, and scholars of student activism. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically.



Part One



Student Activism and Student Activists

**“Every social movement
in this country has had
teenagers at the helm of it...
Youth have played vital roles
in the abolition, suffrage,
antiwar, Civil Rights, LGBTQ,
environmental justice,
immigrant rights, and labor
movements, among others.”**

—JERUSHA CONNER²

1

Campus Protests: Where, When, and Why?

This chapter takes a broad view of student activism. We trace the co-evolution of student activism and higher education and judicial responses over time. This historical context sets the stage for a description of the protests of the 2023-2024 academic year. We end by exploring the factors that influenced the frequency and intensity of campus unrest.

A Brief History of Campus Activism

Student activism has a rich and significant history in America, with the earliest campus protest occurring in 1766, preceding even the establishment of the United States as a nation. Student activism has also shaped the course of American history, playing a pivotal role in the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973 and in the U.S. divestment from South Africa in 1986.

It is also worth noting that the nature of the relationship between the student and the university has changed dramatically over time, primarily as a result of student activism. When universities were first founded and until 1961—little more than 60 years ago—the doctrine of *in loco parentis* allowed universities to exercise significant control over students' lives. Universities routinely implemented dress codes and curfews, punished students for “morally undesirable” behavior, regulated social activities, and limited students' freedom of speech and rights to assembly. This changed when, in February of 1960, students from Alabama State College in Montgomery attempted to integrate a segregated diner. Although they were not arrested by law enforcement, Alabama Governor John Patterson directed the college president to expel the student protesters. St. John Dixon and other expelled students filed a lawsuit alleging that their civil rights, including due process rights in the student conduct process, had been violated. This lawsuit ultimately led to the landmark *Dixon v. Alabama* decision in 1961, where the courts ruled that public universities could not expel students without due process and could not violate students' constitutional rights. By diminishing the power of *in loco parentis*, this decision marked a significant shift in the relationship between students and universities.

Campus leaders, for their part, have become more intentional, reflective, and strategic in their approach to activism. The University of California system's Robinson-Edley report, published in 2012, represents a seminal innovation. Building on earlier frameworks and guidance, the report provided detailed recommendations for handling campus protests more effectively and humanely while respecting free speech and recognizing the important role of protest in a democracy.

Much remains to be seen about the consequences of the protests following October 7th. Regardless of their impact on the course of history, campus leaders have an opportunity to continue to innovate on best practices for protecting speech and ensuring student safety.



History of Campus Protests

START



1766

Harvard's Butter Rebellion

In America's first known student protest, Harvard students boycotted the dining halls in protest of rancid butter. Then Harvard President Holyoke suspended half the student body in an attempt to identify the instigator. Harvard's Board of Overseers, however, reinstated the suspended students and put in measures to improve food quality.



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:

Majority of the student body at Harvard



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:

None



RESULT:

Improved food quality at Harvard

1953-1954

In response to a proposal to ban the book *Robin Hood* for its message, Indiana State University students distributed green-dyed feathers to protest censorship and McCarthyism. The movement quickly spread to several other universities. Despite FBI investigations and negative media coverage, the protests successfully helped prevent the censorship of *Robin Hood*.

Green Feather Movement



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:

8 universities



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:

Allegedly investigated by the FBI



RESULT:

Continued discussions on academic freedom

1961

JUDICIAL DEVELOPMENT

Dixon v. Alabama: Before the 1960s, colleges acted "in place of the parent" or *in loco parentis*, enforcing curfews, limits on speech, and character-building policies. After Alabama State College (now Alabama State University) expelled Black students for a civil rights demonstration, the students sued. The case, *Dixon v. Alabama* (1961), reached the Supreme Court and led to the elimination of *in loco parentis*, establishing that it was unlawful for schools to violate students' rights. **This case changed the fundamental nature of the university's relationship to students.**

CONTINUED



1964-1965

Free Speech Movement

The Free Speech Movement at UC Berkeley began when students protested restrictions on political activities. The movement culminated in a mass sit-in at Sproul Hall, leading to the arrest of nearly 800 students and ultimately the overturning of university policies restricting free speech.



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:

Up to 5,000 students at UC Berkeley



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:

800 students arrested; several injuries reported



RESULT:

Catalyzed a wave of political expression on college campuses

1969



JUDICIAL DEVELOPMENT

Brandenburg v. Ohio: The Supreme Court established the “incitement test,” which determines when inflammatory language crosses the line from protected to unprotected speech. In this case, a Ku Klux Klan leader was convicted for using inflammatory language against government officials. The Court overturned the conviction, ruling that **speech could only be prohibited if it was “directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action” and was “likely to incite or produce such action.”**

1940s-1970

College students played a crucial role in desegregating the South through sit-ins and other nonviolent protests, leading to the reintegration of dining facilities by 1960. Protests at Columbia University in 1968 resulted in significant policy changes and the resignation of university leaders.



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:

Widespread across hundreds of campuses



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:

Widespread use of force (dogs, fire hoses, tear gas); numerous violent clashes, requiring federal intervention



RESULT:

Advancements in civil rights

Civil Rights Era Protests

1964-1970

Vietnam Era Antiwar Protests



One of the largest protest movements in U.S. history, students organized teach-ins, large demonstrations, and building occupations. Key events included the 1968 Columbia University protest, where nearly 700 were arrested, and the May 1970 nationwide student strikes following the Kent State shootings, which saw over 4 million students protest, leading to the closure of many campuses.



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:

1,300 campuses involved, 500 closed to due student and faculty strikes



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:

Frequent use of force, mass arrests, and surveillance of group activity; 4 student deaths at Kent State shooting



RESULT:

Influenced public opinion and policy

1970



HIGHER EDUCATION INNOVATION

Scranton Commission: President Richard Nixon established the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest, chaired by former Pennsylvania governor William Scranton. The Commission was tasked with studying the dissent, disorder, and violence on college campuses, particularly the national student strike following the Kent State shootings. In its September 1970 report, the **Commission concluded that the Kent State shootings were unjustified and recommended that universities create codes of conduct** with clear penalties and promptly involve law enforcement in cases of campus violence.

CONTINUED



1973



JUDICIAL DEVELOPMENT

Hess v. Indiana: The Supreme Court applied the “incitement test” to a case involving college protests at Indiana University. During an anti-war protest, a participant yelled, “We’ll take the [expletive] street later” after police cleared the crowd from blocking a street. The individual was arrested and charged with inciting violence. **The Court dismissed the case, ruling that the words were not directed at a specific person or group and were unlikely to “produce imminent disorder.”**

1964-1986

Students at universities across the U.S. organized protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations, pressuring their institutions to divest from companies supporting South Africa’s apartheid regime. Notable actions include Columbia University students chaining the doors of an administrative building in 1985 and widespread participation across over 200 colleges. These efforts culminated in significant divestment by U.S. universities and the passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986, leading to economic sanctions against South Africa.



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:

200 campuses nationwide



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:

Police occasionally involved in campus protests; some arrests



RESULT:

Divestment from South Africa

1992



HIGHER EDUCATION INNOVATION

California’s “Leonard Law”: While private schools are not bound by the First Amendment and can restrict speech more than public institutions, many choose to uphold free speech principles. In California, the “Leonard Law” goes further by prohibiting non-religious private universities from disciplining students solely based on speech or conduct that would be protected under the First Amendment. **This law provides students at private institutions with broader protections for free speech similar to those at public universities.**

2011-2016

Occupy Movement



The Occupy Movement, which spread to over 120 college campuses across the U.S., used encampments inspired by a Serbian youth movement and popularized mic-checks to interrupt speakers. Despite criticism for lacking specific demands, the movement established a global presence and influenced later campaigns like the “Fight for \$15,” contributing to the rise of political figures like Bernie Sanders.



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:

120 campuses



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:

Police used pepper spray and made arrests



RESULT:

Raised awareness of economic inequality

2012



HIGHER EDUCATION INNOVATION

Robinson Edley Report: After incidents of excessive force by campus police at UC Berkeley and UC Davis against Occupy protesters in 2011, UC President Mark G. Yudof commissioned a review of the university’s civil disobedience policies. The resulting Robinson Edley Report in 2012 provided **recommendations to better handle protests** while respecting their historic significance. In 2014, UC President Janet Napolitano adopted the recommendations and instructed campuses to implement them within a year.

CONTINUED



2015

Students from 100 campuses across the U.S. participated in the Million Student March, demanding free education, student debt cancellation, and a \$15 minimum wage for campus workers. The movement included rallies, walkouts, and marches.



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:
100 campuses



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:
Minimal police presence, mostly peaceful



RESULT:
Raised awareness of student financial issues



2014-2020

Black Lives Matter Movement



The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement emerged in response to police violence and systemic racism, with protests beginning in 2013 and gaining significant traction after the killings of unarmed Black individuals like Michael Brown and George Floyd. The movement led to widespread activism on college campuses, including “die-ins.” In 2015, the University of Missouri protests led to the resignation of the university’s president, and by 2020, the movement had sparked over 8,000 demonstrations nationwide, influencing policy changes on campuses.



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:
Nationwide; hundreds of campuses



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:
Police used force including pepper spray and tear gas; multiple arrests and injuries



RESULT:
Policy changes and heightened awareness

2018



HIGHER EDUCATION INNOVATION

Report on Managing Campus Protests at HBCUs: The National Center for Campus Public Safety released a report on managing protests and demonstrations at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The report was based on discussions from the 18th Annual HBCU-Law Enforcement Executives and Administrators Training Conference in July 2017. It aimed to **help campus police ensure that their policies and practices effectively manage protests while preserving the historic role of HBCUs as centers of activism and engagement.**

2023-Current

Students at hundreds of U.S. universities protested for Palestinian rights and demanded their institutions divest from Israel due to its actions in Gaza. These protests involved encampments and demonstrations, and were often met with suspensions, arrests, and police interventions.



STUDENTS/CAMPUSES INVOLVED:
Approximately 400 U.S. campuses



POLICE INVOLVEMENT:
Police involvement varied; some protests saw significant force and arrests



RESULT:
University responses varied



Campus Protests During the 2023-2024 Academic Year

Although coverage of student protests dominated the news cycle for several weeks, only a small proportion of campuses experienced any protest activity in the 2023-2024 school year. This paradox partly arises from the unusually intense escalation of these campus protests when they occurred.

Out of the 2,869 four-year colleges and universities represented in the IPEDS dataset, only 398 schools (13.9%) witnessed any demonstration activity, and an even smaller number (108 schools, or 3.8%) saw frequent protest activity (10 or more protests).

Of the protests that occurred:

- 47.3% involved encampments
- 4.1% involved arrests
- 1.6% resulted in crowd injuries
- 1.4% resulted in property damage
- 0.7% involved the use of chemical agents (e.g., pepper spray)

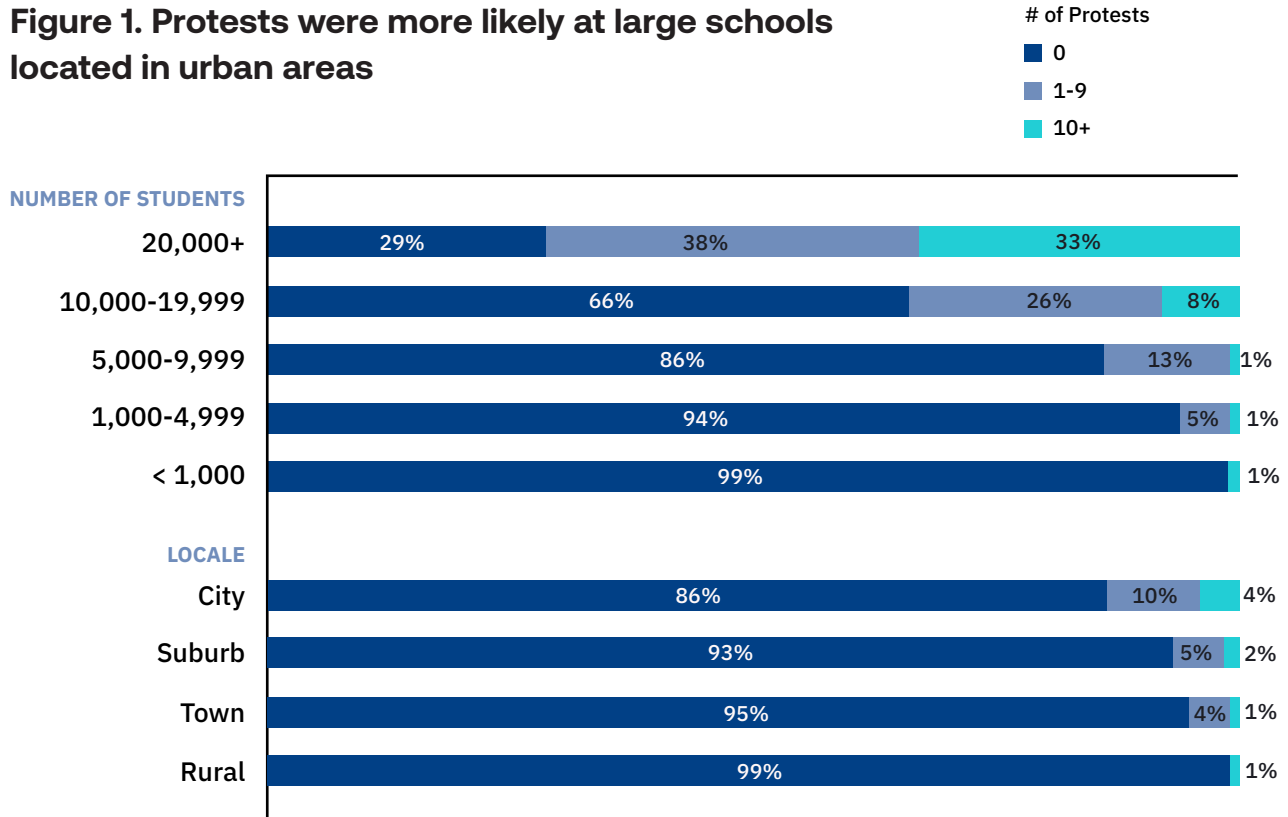
By comparison, in the same time period, there were 13,846 protest events that occurred off campus and were not student-led. These protests occurred in communities throughout the U.S. about a range of issues. Among these events:

- 7.9% involved encampments
- 2.2% involved arrests
- 0.4% involved crowd injuries
- 0.9% involved property damage
- 0.1% involved use of chemical agents

Comparing these two sets of statistics reveals that although campus protests were relatively uncommon, they tended to be more intense than their off-campus counterparts. This may be because campus protests during the 2023-2024 academic year were primarily driven by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which tends to evoke strong, polarized reactions, especially among students who may have direct ties to the region or feel passionately about human rights, justice, and their political identity.

In the remainder of this chapter, we outline the factors that influenced the frequency and intensity of protests, including institution size, location, selectivity, and student perceptions of campus climate. Through this analysis, we aim to provide insights into the conditions that foster or inhibit protest activity across different types of educational institutions.

Figure 1. Protests were more likely at large schools located in urban areas



As shown in Figure 1, among institutions with fewer than 1,000 students, protests were rare, with fewer than 1% of these schools experiencing even a single event. Protests increased in frequency as school size increased. Indeed, at large institutions with more than 20,000 students, the majority (71%) experienced at least one protest, and one-third of these schools reported 10 or more protest events.

Protest frequency also correlated with population density. While only 1% of rural institutions saw any protest activity, this figure increased to 14% for schools located in cities.

There are a number of potential explanations for these correlations. First, social movements often require a critical mass of activists. Smaller schools may simply lack the numbers to sustain them. Additionally, larger institutions often have more diverse student bodies, giving rise to a wider range of perspectives and disagreements that can lead to increased activism. Smaller or rural institutions, in contrast, may have more homogenous cultures. Finally, cities tend to provide greater access to resources such as established networks for organizing, legal assistance, and media coverage.



Figure 2. More elite schools saw more protests

of Protests
 ■ 0
 ■ 1-9
 ■ 10+

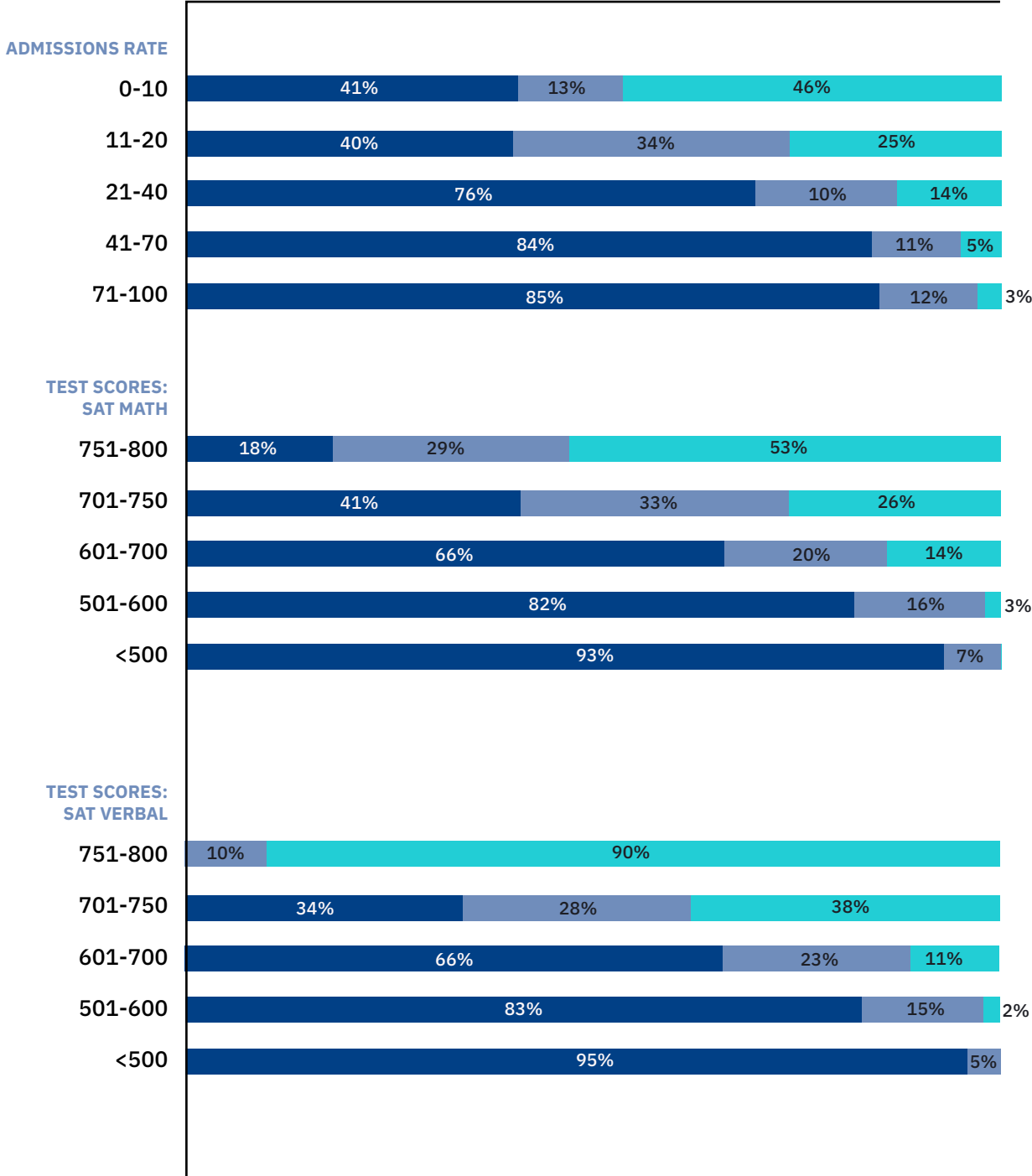
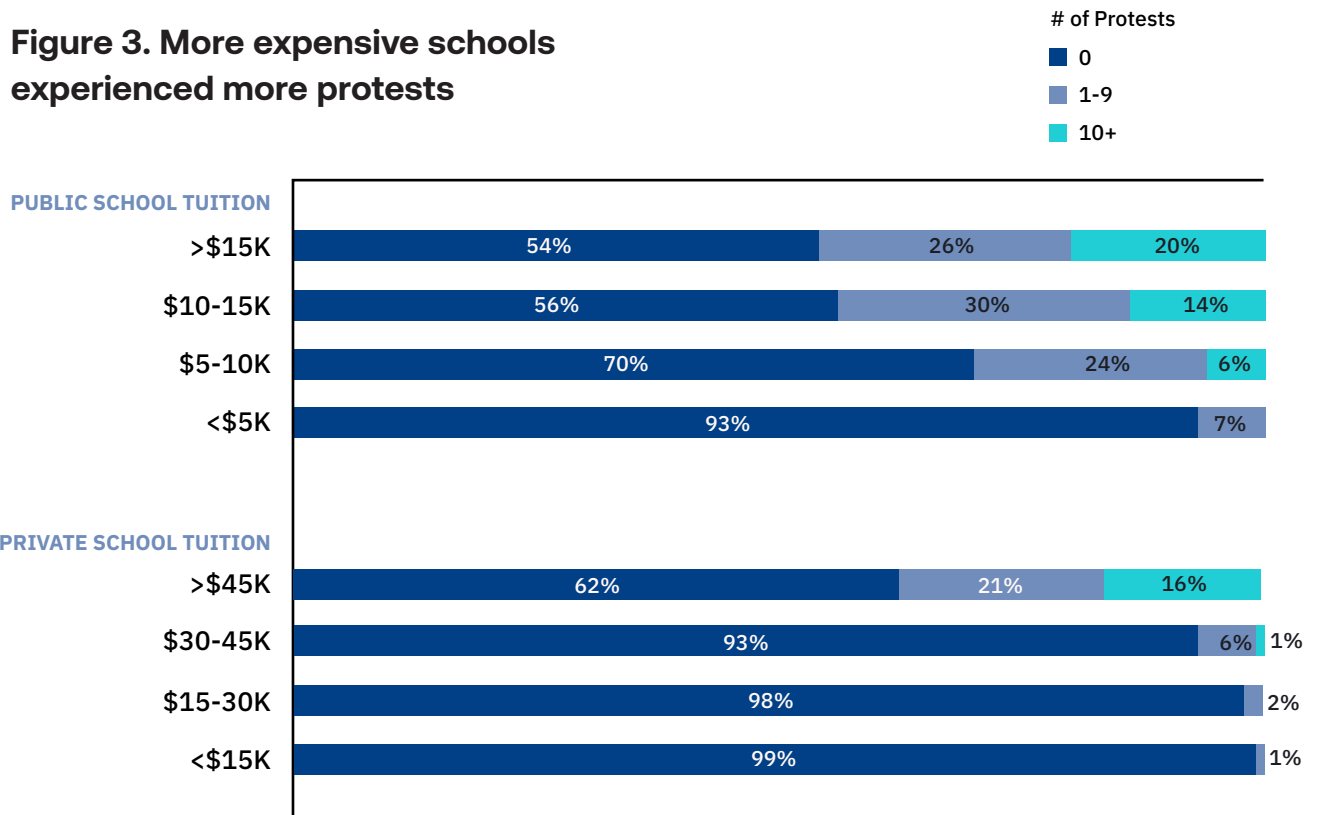


Figure 2 shows that more selective schools experienced higher levels of protest activity. Institutions with lower admission rates (higher rejection rates) faced a greater risk of protests compared to less selective schools. At schools with an admission rate of 21% or higher, the majority (68%) did not experience protests. Conversely, at schools with admission rates of 20% or below, most experienced at least one protest. Highly selective schools—those admitting 10% or fewer students—were especially prone to protests, with almost half (46%) experiencing 10 or more protests.

This trend extended to standardized test scores. The frequency of protests increased as median SAT math scores increased, such that, among the highest-scoring schools (median math scores between 751 and 800), 82% had at least one protest, and more than half (53%) experienced 10 or more. A similar pattern emerged for SAT verbal scores: All schools with scores between 751 and 800 had protest activity, with 90% of these reporting more than 10 events.



Figure 3. More expensive schools experienced more protests



As shown in Figure 3, protests were more frequent when tuition costs were higher. This was true for both public and private institutions. Among public institutions, for example, schools that cost less than \$5,000 a year rarely had protests. As tuition increased, so did the likelihood of protest. For schools where tuition was greater than \$15,000, almost half (46%) had at least one protest on their campus.

There is a similar trend for private not-for-profit institutions, where protests were more frequent at more expensive private institutions. For private schools that cost less than \$15,000 a year, nearly all (99%) had no protest, and that remained true for schools with tuition between \$15,000 and \$30,000 (98% had no protest) and for schools with tuition between \$30,000 and \$40,000 (93% had no protest). However, there was a significant increase in protest frequency among the most expensive institutions. Among private schools where tuition was greater than \$45,000, approximately one-third (37%) had at least one protest.

There are a number of possible explanations for the correlation between higher tuition and frequency of protests. Paying more for college could create a sense among students that they should have a say in where their tuition money goes. Alternatively, wealthier students at expensive institutions might feel more empowered to demand change while these schools' prestigious reputations could attract media attention and contribute to protest frequency. Students who attend costly schools likely come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and may feel more insulated from the risks that come with activism.

Figure 4. Protests were less likely when students felt comfortable discussing controversial issues

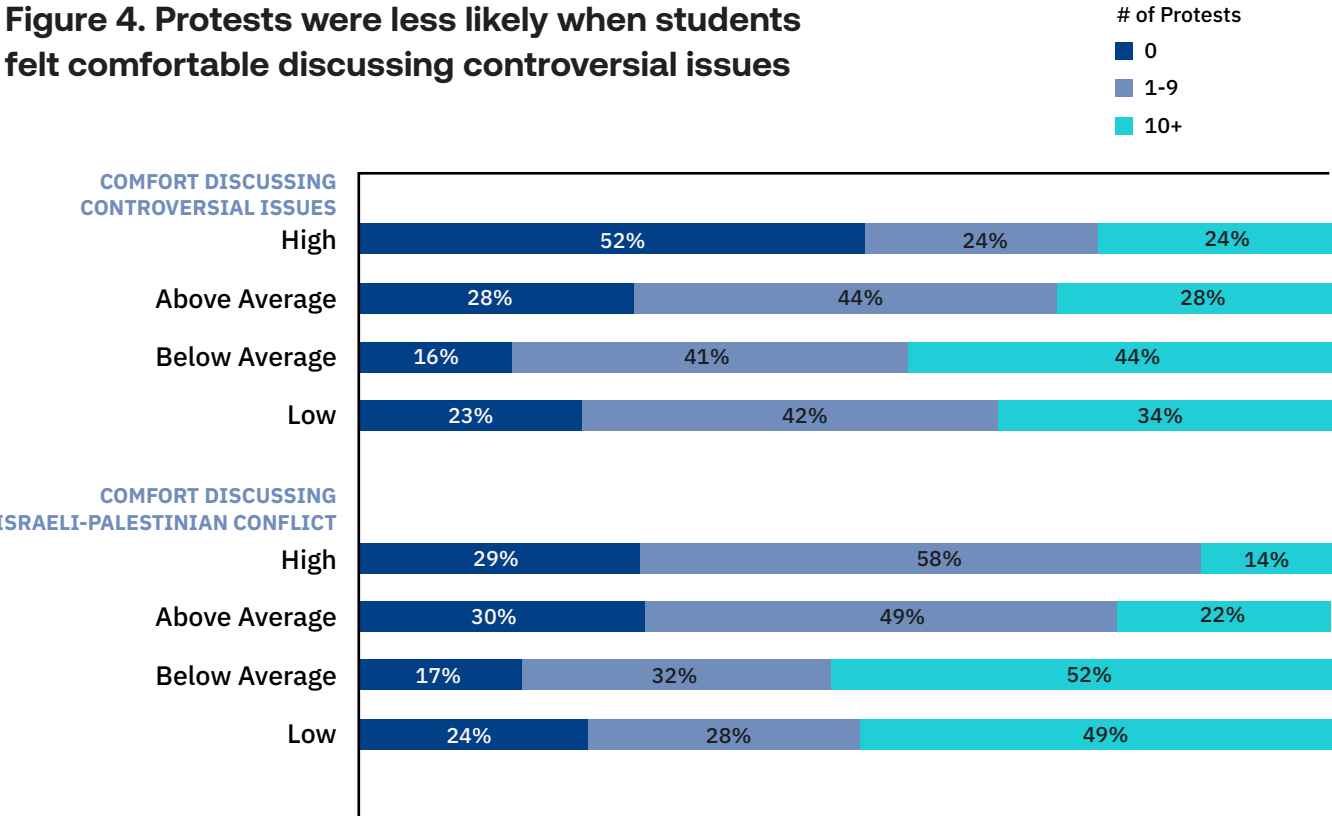


Figure 4 shows that, as students reported *more* comfort in discussing controversial issues, schools had *fewer* protest events. Similarly, as more students reported being *uncomfortable* discussing issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, schools had *more* protest events.

Together, these data help elucidate why protest activity was more common at more selective schools. One factor is that students at these institutions are often more politically aware and exposed to social issues. Socioeconomic factors may also play a role, as students at these schools might have more resources and time to engage in activism. The intellectual climate at these schools may also encourage questioning authority and advocating for change. Relatedly, Yascha Mounk has suggested that the focus on identity politics, which is particularly prevalent at selective institutions, could contribute to heightened protest activity as students seek to address identity-based grievances. Finally, the visibility of these institutions may attract more media attention, making them more prominent sites for activism.

2

A Profile of Student Activists

This chapter explores the motivations and tactics of student activists and the complex ecosystems that serve to channel their energy, and, more often than not, polarize their views. We start by discussing student activism more broadly before focusing on the students engaged in Israeli-Palestinian activism during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Key Facts About Student Activists

1. Student activists are not representative of the student body.

While this statement may seem obvious, it warrants emphasis because, during contentious periods, the most vocal student voices that administrators—and the public—hear about are often those of activists at the political extremes. If we rely solely on media coverage, we might envision the average college student as progressive, idealistic, and uncompromising in their views. Yet, this perception is misleading. Among incoming freshmen, only 14.5% say that there is “a very good chance” that they will “participate in student protests or demonstrations” in college.³ For the past 50 years, more students identify as “middle-of-the-road” than any other political category.³ In 2023, 38.7% of students identified this way, while only 9.2% described themselves as “far left” and 1.7% as “far right”—the groups most likely to engage in activism.³ These “middle-of-the-road” students likely resemble America’s “exhausted majority,”⁴ holding nuanced and flexible views. They are likely to be fed up with polarization and more open to compromise. Because our information ecosystems privilege extreme voices, the exhausted majority is often overlooked in public discourse.

In this context, it is essential for administrators to recognize the diversity of student thought and avoid the pitfall of equating the loudest voices with the majority opinion. Effective engagement with the student body requires listening to a wide range of perspectives, not just those at the extremes, to truly understand the campus climate and address the needs and concerns of all students. To achieve this, universities must improve students’ access to legitimate avenues for influencing campus policies and practices. We discuss this more in Chapter 3.

3. Regents of the University of California. (2024). *2023 CIRP Freshman Survey*. <https://heri.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/DATA-TABLES-TFS-2023.pdf>

4. Hawkins, S., Yudkin, D., Juan-Torres, M., & Dixon, T. (2019). *Hidden tribes: A study of America's polarized landscape*. <https://hiddentribes.us/>

2. Student activists are demographically different from non-activist students.

As a group, student activists tend to:

- Come from upper-middle-class backgrounds with educated, professional parents living in urban areas.^{5,6,7}
- Have higher grade point averages and superior academic performance.^{6,7}
- Attend larger, more selective, elite universities.^{6,7}
- Enroll predominantly in humanities and social science programs.^{6,7}
- Be more likely to complete their degrees on time and pursue graduate education.^{6,7}
- Have higher intellectual orientations.^{6,7}
- Be less decided on careers or lean towards teaching, the arts, or social work, rather than engineering or business.^{6,7}

3. The ecosystems surrounding student activists differ for those on the political left and those on the political right.⁸

Activists on the political left:

- Tend to find more support for their cause within the university. Multicultural centers are a major source of this support.
- Have less external funding.
- Focus on getting administrators to change university policy.

Activists on the political right:

- Tend to look to outside organizations for support.
- Receive support from conservative advocacy groups that offer funding, networking, training, and career opportunities.
- Focus on changing the “liberal status quo” among their peers.

5. Sheppard, P. (1989). *The relationship between student activism and change in the university: With particular reference to McGill University in the 1960s* [Master's thesis, McGill University]. McGill University. <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/tx31qj83t>

6. Kahn, R. M., & Bowers, W. J. (1970). The social context of the rank-and-file student activist: A test of four hypotheses. *Sociology of Education*, 43(1), 38–55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2112058>

7. Linder, C. (2019). Power-conscious and intersectional approaches to supporting student activists: considerations for learning and development. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 12, 17–26.

8. Binder, A. J., & Kidder, J. L. (2022). *The channels of student activism: How the left and right are winning (and losing) in campus politics today*. University of Chicago Press.

For many student activists on the right, involvement in conservative student groups provides a direct pathway to future career opportunities, largely because of their strong ties to national right-leaning organizations. These national organizations offer financial support, expertise, job opportunities, and pathways for continued involvement after graduation. This network of support allows conservative student groups to maintain a robust system for mobilizing, despite typically being in the minority on campuses. The effectiveness of this ecosystem not only helps to build a pipeline of future conservative leaders but also shapes broader political dynamics, by escalating provocations on campuses and influencing public perceptions of higher education.

In contrast, while progressive students often outnumber conservatives on college campuses, their organizing efforts tend to be more localized and less connected to national institutions that could engage them after graduation. As a result, progressive campus activism does not translate as effectively into career opportunities or sustained political engagement at the national level.

4. Far-left and far-right students tend to distrust institutions more than their centrist peers.

As a result, they tend to favor more disruptive tactics. Activism researchers Amy Binder and Jeffrey Kidder (2022) observed that far-left and far-right campus activists tend to believe that current systems are fundamentally broken, so they eschew the more moderate student clubs' tactics to work within the system to create change. In contrast, more centrist students usually have a distaste for the disruptive tactics employed by far-left groups and favor more civil strategies.

This predisposition towards breaking down, rather than working with, the system may partly explain why many of the administrators we interviewed shared that, despite their best efforts, student activists seemed unwilling to engage with them. Understanding where these beliefs stem from provides a framework for establishing trust with student activists. We discuss this further in Chapter 4.

5. Student activism can support major developmental needs for students.

Student activists find a significant sense of belonging in their clubs. Here, they are able to discuss their views freely, away from the judgmental eyes of other students. This is especially meaningful when we consider that almost two out of three college students (65%) report that they feel lonely⁹ and nearly half (44%) are afraid to express their views for fear of offending their peers.¹⁰ When the broader student body is unwelcoming, it is not hard to imagine how students can find respite by seeking out like-minded peers.

While political organizing can at times detract from a student’s academic pursuits, it also provides opportunities to build important career and life skills. For example, research has shown that activism promotes:

- Student engagement¹¹
- A deeper understanding of academic concepts²
- Strong communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills¹²
- Organizational skills, such as managing time and working under pressure¹²
- Self-confidence¹²

During [the 2016 election], Miles wrote a Facebook post in support of then-candidate Trump, and his best friend of many years cut off social ties in response. “That’s when I actually started seeking out Turning Point,” said Miles.

—FROM BINDER AND KIDDER (2022), *THE CHANNELS OF STUDENT ACTIVISM*

9. Active Minds. (2024, May 22). *New data emphasizes the correlation between loneliness and student mental health - active minds*. <https://www.activeminds.org/press-releases/new-data-emphasizes-correlation-loneliness-student-mental-health/>

10. Duong, M., Hawkins, S., Welker, K., Duong, F., Oshinski, P., & Yudkin, D. (2023). *Free speech and inclusion: How college students are navigating shifting speech norms*. Constructive Dialogue Institute. <https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/collegesurvey>

11. Rosati, C., Nguyen, D. J., Troyer, R., Tran, Q., Graman, Z., & Brenckle, J. (2019). Exploring how student activists experience marginality and mattering during interactions with student affairs professionals. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 37(2), 113-127.

12. Rhoads, R.A. (2016). Student activism, diversity, and the struggle for a just society. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 9, 189-202.


Pro-Israel and Pro-Palestinian Student Activists

1. During the 2023-2024 academic year, pro-Palestinian students often built wide-ranging coalitions that brought together numerous student groups.

For example, the protests at Columbia University operated under the banner of Columbia University Apartheid Divest, which included student groups with a history of pro-Palestinian advocacy, such as Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace, but also included 114 other organizations focused on social justice more generally, such as those advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and climate action.¹³ Other universities saw similar coalitions forming to advocate for Palestinian rights.

Our conversations with students who joined these coalitions confirmed that these students were motivated by a sense of social justice. A leader of her school's Latinx student organization told us "a lot of these issues, of genocide, of taking land back, is very relevant in Latin America. So that was really important for me as the months went by, is recognizing that those issues that are happening abroad are a reflection of what's happened to a lot of us in our past, not only here in the United States, but also in other parts of Latin America." Having learned about the conflict primarily by attending teach-ins organized by pro-Palestinian groups, this particular student was surprised by some of the controversy that surrounded the group's chants and was largely unaware of the countervailing narratives.

13. CUAD. (n.d.). *Our coalition* — CUAD. <https://cuapartheiddivest.org/our-coalition>



“Higher education is so expensive. You know, we think a lot about where our money is going and so we wanna make sure that universities are funding or investing into things that reflect our collective student values.”

—STUDENT ACTIVIST

While coalition-building is not new to large-scale protest movements, it posed challenges for the conventional negotiation methods used by administrators. One of the consequences of this broad coalition was that many of the students who attended protests were unfamiliar to administrators, who had focused their limited time on building relationships with individual leaders of political and identity-based advocacy groups. The protests were often intentionally decentralized, lacking official leadership structures and following the model of the National Students for Justice in Palestine. This made negotiations difficult, as it was hard to identify representatives with the authority to negotiate. Those selected to represent their groups often had to bring back the terms and try to achieve consensus within their group, which frequently stalled progress.

The formation of these broad coalitions was viewed as a significant victory by pro-Palestinian activists, as it allowed them to unite diverse student groups under a common cause and amplify their voice on campus. For Zionist students, however, this collective action exacerbated feelings of isolation and marginalization. As one pro-Israel student explained, “It’s not just SJP or JVP; it’s everybody. It’s the Black Student Union, the South Asian Pacific Students, the Latinx Students, all the progressive clubs, the feminists, it’s all the clubs.” This overwhelming sense of being outnumbered by the wide-ranging coalition of progressive groups left many Zionist students feeling alienated, as their perspectives and experiences seemed increasingly sidelined.

2. A subset of student activists was very knowledgeable about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

During Spring 2024, protesters were often portrayed in the media as uninformed students who showed up “because their friends were there.” We certainly found this to be true for some protesters. In our interviews, students willingly admitted that, in many cases, they participated in demonstrations to support their friends and learned about the causes primarily through social media, conversations with activists, activist-led teach-ins, and educational brochures distributed by activist groups. They also readily admitted that “because of social media, it becomes a trend to support a certain side.”

However, we did not find this to be true among the students who were core members of pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian groups. This subset of students was extremely knowledgeable about the history of the conflict, their institution’s track record on Israeli-Palestinian issues, and their rights as protesters. In the most high-profile cases, student activists were supported by a large network of faculty, alumni, politicians, other public figures, and legal organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Palestine Legal. Many of these students tracked and closely read university statements, and were aware of donor and bureaucratic barriers to the university meeting their demands.

3. For many of these students, the issue was deeply personal.

Many pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel activists had extended family in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, and had spent significant time there growing up. For these students, the conflict was deeply personal.

A pro-Israel Jewish student explained how he had to grieve while being forced into a “defensive mode”: “My close family friend who’s 23 years old, two years older than me, her husband got killed on October 7th. My sister’s counselor is still a hostage. [October was, for me,] thinking about all of these things while at the same time being forced into immediate defensive mode on campus with people that were supporting the attack.”

Palestinian students were struggling too. One student who had grown up spending summers in the West Bank described her life in late October 2023 this way: “I would wake up every morning looking through names to see if anyone I knew had died the day before.”

Aside from their interactions with like-minded others, both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel students found that their experiences were not only unrecognized, but actively invalidated, by their peers. A pro-Israel student relayed this story about being part of her college sports team:

“They [the leaders of the team] sent a text to the group chat. This bothered me because I felt like it showed me how impersonal it was to everyone, because they sent it in a text with four other things. It was like “One, we have extended practice. Two, make sure to wear your white uniforms. Three, we’re gonna sign on to [the pro-Palestinian student coalition]. It was so nonchalant, like [signing on to the pro-Palestinian coalition] was the same as extending practice. And it’s like, this is my life, this is my family’s lives.”

Another student—a Palestinian—explained:

“There are people that I know, in real life, watching family members being wiped off the face of the planet. And at the same time, you’d see on social media how many people don’t actually see you as a person. Like, if your family didn’t happen to come here [to the U.S.], and they didn’t know you personally, they’d be just okay with you being a statistic. The most liberal people you’ve ever met in your life have such a cognitive dissonance about where it’s okay for people to die.”

Many—but not all—of these students responded to the lack of compassion they faced by hardening their views. One said, “I was heartbroken first, but now I’m pissed. I can’t afford to be heartbroken.” These students found solace and support only within the group of people who shared their views. Many—and this was particularly true among Jewish Zionist students—had no peers to turn to who shared their views, and found themselves removed from sports teams without notice, disinited from group events, publicly bullied on social media, and simply abandoned by most of their friends. Some were dealing with all of this while grieving at the same time. Many of these students were not lifelong activists, but became more active as a response to their peers’ reaction to October 7th: “It was devastating. I got really depressed. It really shattered my worldview and my reality to the point of I need to do something because if I don’t do anything, then I’m gonna like, I cannot live with this.”

By the time we spoke to students in July of 2024, they were hardened within their position and exhibited many of the signs and symptoms of polarization. Their language tended to demonize the other side while treating disagreeable behavior in their own camp as unfortunate, but understandable given the circumstances. Both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel groups perceived that the university was biased against them, as was American society more generally. Both were acutely attuned to even subtle signs of favoritism. For instance, one student pointed out that during a university-organized listening session, “whenever an anti-Zionist would start talking, [the administrators] would stop taking notes.” This perceived bias and lack of support only intensified students’ sense of isolation and further entrenched the divisions on campus.



Other Key Players in the 2023-2024 Protests

Campus activism does not occur in a vacuum. Colleges largely mirror the polarization present in broader American society, where political division is at an all-time high.^{14,15} Individuals are increasingly prone to distrust, disparage, and demonize others for their beliefs. This broader context influences the actions of both administrators and protesters. The key stakeholders in protest activity during the 2023-2024 academic year included:

1. Outspoken **university donors** often pressed the administration for a specific response. Students were not oblivious to the influence of money. Pro-Palestinian activists, in particular, were acutely aware of big-name donors. Many attributed their university's pro-Israel bias, perceived or real, to the pressure from donors. This further contributed to a narrative of the common people against the powers that be, which served to galvanize pro-Palestinian activism.
2. **National activism organizations.** The two most prominent student activist groups this past year were Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). The National SJP organization drew widespread controversy after releasing a "Day of Resistance" toolkit on October 12, which featured a hang glider—symbolizing one of the methods used by Hamas to cross into Israel. Many campus chapters of SJP adopted and distributed this toolkit, projecting a sense of uniformity among its members. However, while national activism organizations promote coordination and shared values among campus chapters, we found significant differences within and across campuses in terms of:
 - Levels of organization and cohesion
 - Willingness to engage with university administration, and
 - Perceptions of Hamas.

14. Doherty, C. (2014, June 17). *Which party is more to blame for political polarization? It depends on the measure.* Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/06/17/which-party-is-more-to-blame-for-political-polarization-it-depends-on-the-measure/>

15. The Economist. (2022, August 18). *How Democrats and Republicans see each other.* The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/08/17/how-democrats-and-republicans-see-each-other>

3. Faculty members can have a significant impact on either polarizing or uniting the university. Numerous media reports have highlighted faculty who expressed incendiary views in the classroom or on social media, implemented policies that favored specific political viewpoints, or silenced opposing perspectives. Many student affairs staff and administrators shared stories of faculty members obstructing the university’s efforts to enforce policies or reduce the disruption caused by protests. Some even felt that these faculty members harbored ill will toward the administration, further fueling distrust among students.

On the other hand, there were notable efforts by faculty at institutions like Dartmouth and Berkeley to bridge divides and foster understanding. At Dartmouth, Professors Susannah Heschel and Tarek El-Ariss took proactive steps following the October 7th attack by organizing forums where faculty from the Jewish Studies and Middle Eastern Studies programs addressed student questions about the conflict. These forums, which attracted large audiences both in person and online, provided a space for students of diverse backgrounds to engage in thoughtful, civil discussions. The existing relationship between the two academic departments allowed these faculty members to respond quickly and create a constructive dialogue, helping to prevent the campus from becoming polarized.¹⁶ Similarly, at Berkeley, Hatem Bazian, a Lecturer of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures (and, significantly, one of the original co-founders of SJP) and Ron Hassner, Professor of Political Science & Chair of Israeli Studies, co-penned a letter calling for mutual respect and community on campus.¹⁷ These efforts demonstrate the critical role that academic leadership can play in educating their students and modeling civil discourse.

4. The **national media’s** portrayals of the protests often skewed towards coverage of hate speech, acts of violence, extreme viewpoints, and other “newsworthy” events. In a podcast, the Editor-in-Chief of Columbia University’s *Daily Spectator*, Isabella Ramirez, shared this observation about media coverage of the student protests: “I have encountered a lot of press in which I feel it is a misrepresentation of our campus, and I think part of that reason is that, at *Spectator*, we cover every single development. When we cover 100 stories and 5 of those are the shocking and the violent and the abhorrent and maybe 95 others are about the smaller developments and about the intimate portraits of the very many different students on this campus and what they’re feeling...it does paint something a lot more full and a lot more complete.”

16. Simon, S. (2023, November 4). *How two Dartmouth professors are addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/04/1210645223/how-two-dartmouth-professors-are-addressing-student-questions-on-the-israeli-pal>

17. UC Berkeley Public Affairs. (2024, May 17). *A call for community on campus - Berkeley News*. Berkeley News. <https://news.berkeley.edu/2023/10/12/a-call-for-community-on-campus/>

During interviews for this project, we spoke with several students who had received significant national media attention—vilified by some outlets and hailed as heroes by others. We routinely inform all interviewees that their responses to our interview questions will remain anonymous. A number of them reassured us this was not necessary. One student who had been profiled repeatedly said matter-of-factly, “You don’t need to do that, everyone knows who I am.” Being a 20-year-old under such intense scrutiny from major media outlets like *CNN* and *The New York Times* likely impacts a student’s willingness to openly express uncertainty or maintain a sense of humility in such a polarized environment.

5. University religious centers were well situated to serve a number of critical functions this past academic year, including:

- Supporting students’ social and emotional needs.
- Creating a sense of community, connection, and belonging.
- Organizing opportunities for within-group dialogue, where important disagreements, such as whether and how to engage with “the other side,” could be explored.
- Advocating for the needs of Jewish and Muslim students, which helped students feel a stronger sense of trust, knowing their concerns were being represented in key discussions.
- Highlighting blind spots to the administration to ensure a fair response to developing events.
- Encouraging students to collaborate with university administrators, rather than relying solely on disruption to make their voices heard.

Finally, a strong relationship between Jewish and Muslim religious leaders on the same campus can play a critical bridging role. It can model interfaith dialogue for students and guide the administration in a compassionate and fair response.

“I don’t judge them for ever being on the opposite side of the picket line as me or for feeling the need to protest against me for something that I’m doing. I try to give them the comfort that sometimes us being passionate about what we truly believe will have us on opposite sides of the picket fence. But I want you to know that I will always care about you.”

—UNIVERSITY RELIGIOUS LEADER

6. Much of the media labeled **non-student protesters** as “outside agitators.” While students acknowledged that some individuals unaffiliated with the university who attended protests did espouse hateful rhetoric, they more commonly viewed these community members as valuable sources of support. One activist shared: “Palestinian business owners were dropping off trays of chicken. The community was bringing masks, hand sanitizer, tents, sleeping bags, fresh fruit for breakfast. There were three meals a day for 10 days, feeding 150 students. People were involved. It was incredible.” In other words, although some non-student protesters were “outside agitators,” many community members who attended protests and encampments did so at the invitation of student activists. Policies aimed at minimizing disruptions from unaffiliated individuals must be sensitive to students’ views of these community members as sources of support—overly broad policies could be seen as attempts to curb student expression.

7. **Congress’s** highly public investigation of elite universities was perceived by both administrators and students as polarizing. Protests erupted across campuses during the testimony of Columbia University’s then-President Manuche Shafik. One administrator noted that the hearing “radicalized the students. In the beginning, it was a very small number of students who actually cared about any of this,” but after the hearings, both the number and the intensity of the protests grew significantly. The hearings, often framed in highly charged and partisan terms, portrayed pro-Palestinian protesters as antisemitic, which many of our interviewees felt misrepresented them. This deepened their existing distrust of the university and further entrenched an “us versus them” mentality. The national attention also pushed previously disengaged individuals—students, faculty, and staff—toward taking sides. The escalation made it increasingly difficult for many universities to manage the situation. One administrator remarked, “Everything was going fine until Columbia.”

The complexity of these different stakeholders—each with competing priorities and incentives—contributed significantly to the chaos of the past year. The interplay between donor influence, national activism organizations, faculty roles, media portrayals, and community involvement created a highly charged environment. This intricate web of interests and pressures made it increasingly difficult for universities to navigate the challenges, often exacerbating tensions rather than resolving them.

Part Two



Recommendations for Higher Education Administrators

“First of all, I want to thank you, for whatever knowledge or level of support or advocacy that any of you have provided over the past year, as the intensity has ratcheted it up on our campuses. You’re often not acknowledged for that hard work.

The second thing that I want to acknowledge is that you may have a mixture of emotions as you come into the year. You might be excited about the energy that students bring, but that might be tamped down or dampened by the worries and concerns that you might have about the unknown for the coming year. It is valid, whatever those feelings are that you have.”

– LT ROBINSON¹⁸

3

Trust: The Foundation for Navigating Campus Unrest

We cannot overstate the importance of students' trust in administrators in shaping the likelihood and outcomes of campus unrest.

Below, we distinguish between **relational trust**,¹⁹ built through ongoing interpersonal interactions, and **institutional trust**,²⁰ which reflects confidence in the administration as a whole. We provide strategies for university leaders to cultivate both types of trust, with a special focus on providing students legitimized ways of influencing the university as a means of building institutional trust. Recognizing that many leaders may be interfacing with student activists who lack institutional trust, we provide strategies for engagement in these circumstances. We also focus on strategies for building trust with campus police.

“I think a huge part of what [my school] has going for them is that it’s such an amazing community. At the end of the day, before anyone is any religion or political party or identity or background, they’re [school] students first. What’s really helped [my school] in the long run is the fact that they give students a sense of community. I think people my age are really lost and that’s why they’re on social media so much. They’ve lost their sense of purpose and their drive. I think the community really helps them.”

–STUDENT

19. Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610440967>

20. Devos, T., Spini, D., & Schwartz, S. H. (2002). Conflicts among human values and trust in institutions. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 41(4), 481-494.

Building Relational Trust

Relational trust develops gradually over time, as individuals or groups engage in meaningful exchanges. Many of the student affairs administrators we spoke to had employed intentional and creative strategies for building relational trust with student groups, including:

- Presenting at student and family orientation.
- Attending recruitment events for student groups.
- Setting up 1-on-1 meetings with student group leaders at the beginning of the year.
- Offering funding, advice, or logistical assistance with student activities throughout the year, not only when demonstrations are occurring.
- Soliciting student input about issues related to their advocacy area throughout the year, not only when demonstrations are occurring.
- Attending student-centered events to engage in informal interactions with students.
- Organizing forums where students can share their experiences and perspectives throughout the year, not only when demonstrations are occurring.

This proactive approach builds goodwill and a sense of partnership between students and administrators, making it more likely that students will view the administration as an ally rather than an adversary. These relationships were perceived to be extremely helpful in containing conflict. With the lines of communication open, student groups alerted administrators to upcoming demonstration events. In several instances, administrators were able to request changes to the plans (e.g., delaying the protest by a day and moving the location to minimize disruption to classes) in ways that protected students' free expression and simultaneously ensured safety and minimized disruption to other university functions. One student affairs administrator said that these existing relationships helped when she showed up at protests, where students would say to peers, "She's good, she's with us."

“I’ve had conflict moments that I’ve had to manage in the past with my students, and they themselves have had to manage conflict with other students. We built trust as a muscle. And I think it serves to our advantage when there’s difficult conversations that need to be had. So that is the simplest way I could say it– it’s trust. It’s trust that has been built through time and relationships and compromises and hard conversations. To me, that’s the sauce.”

—ADMINISTRATOR

“I don’t want the first time they meet me to be out of reaction. I want them to know that I’m a normal human and I’m trying to make the world a more equitable place too.”

—ADMINISTRATOR

Building Institutional Trust

At the same time, it was clear in our interviews that relational trust was necessary but not sufficient. Student affairs staff ultimately represent the interests of the university. Students knew that, even if they trusted the individuals, these individuals were accountable to university leadership, who in turn had to answer to donors, trustees, and a range of other constituents. Students' trust in the university's response to the protests during the last academic year was influenced largely by the university's prior decisions on issues regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In other words, institutional trust, which is much broader than the trust between specific students and specific staff members, was also critical.

Institutional trust depends on the track record of senior leadership, and can be fostered by:

- Ensuring policies and practices are applied consistently and justly.
- Transparency in decision-making processes.
- Expressions of genuine care and concern for all students.
- Aligning actions with stated values and principles.
- Empowering student voices and taking their input seriously.
- Admitting to mistakes and explaining how they will be addressed.



“The problem is that universities are not democratic. They might be teaching courses about democracy, but they don’t model it.”

—ROBERT COHEN, *SPEECH MATTERS* PODCAST²¹

Universities can actively involve students in decision-making processes to better reflect the democratic values they teach. While students are often at the heart of campus life, their voices can be overlooked in major institutional decisions, which can lead to frustration and protests. By creating structured, legitimized ways for students to influence policies and actions, universities can address concerns before they escalate into protests, empowering students as stakeholders in their educational community while promoting a culture of collaboration and dialogue.

Key research-backed principles for involving student voice include:

- **Building partnerships:** Investing in closer partnerships between staff and student representatives.²²
- **Formal representation:** Having students participate in governing bodies at institutional, faculty, and department levels.²³
- **Diverse representation:** Considering the views of demographically and ideologically diverse student groups, particularly on divisive issues.
- **Continuous engagement:** Regular, ongoing opportunities for student input are more effective than one-off consultations.^{24, 25}
- **Skill development:** Providing training and support for student representatives can increase their effectiveness.

21. University of California. (2024). *Campus activism: Past, present, future*. SpeechMatters. <https://freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.edu/speechmatters-podcast/>

22. UC Berkeley Public Affairs. (2024, May 17). *A call for community on campus - Berkeley News*. Berkeley News. <https://news.berkeley.edu/2023/10/12/a-call-for-community-on-campus/>

23. Conner, J., Posner, M., & Nsowaa, B. (2022). The relationship between student voice and student engagement in urban high schools. *The Urban review*, 54(5), 755–774. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-022-00637-2>

24. Regional Educational Laboratory Program (REL): Pacific. (n.d.). *Uplifting Student Voices: Sustaining student voice in decision making*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/blogs/blog24_uplifting-student-voices-sustaining-student-voice-in-decisionmaking.asp

25. Riley, R. (2023, December 11). *Embedding the student voice in decision making by year group*. Teaching & Learning. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/case-studies/2023/nov/embedding-student-voice-decision-making-year-group>

Strategies for Engaging When Institutional Trust is Lacking

Many administrators will find themselves negotiating with students who do not trust the institution. In those situations, the following tactics may help:

- Acknowledge the trust deficit and address it directly (“I know that as an institution, we don’t have a great track record. I’m committed to doing things differently.”).
- Invest more time in building relational trust.
- Create small wins by establishing short-term agreements and building on them.
- Engage neutral third parties to facilitate discussions.
- Identify and leverage bridges—individuals who *are* trusted by both students and the administration.
- Emphasize transparency, communicate processes, progress, and reasoning behind decisions (“Here’s what you can expect going forward.” “We don’t have a decision yet, but this is where things stand.” “Here are the factors we’re considering in making our decision.”).
- Be consistent—follow through with action items and maintain internal alignment across the leaders of the organization.

Building Trust with Campus Police

The campus administrators we talked to recognized the stigma that some students associate with law enforcement. Campus security and emergency management personnel in uniform are often subject to this bias. For some, the presence of police can evoke fear, anxiety, and a sense of persecution, sometimes rooted in past confrontations with law enforcement. In these instances, the presence of campus safety or police can feel counterproductive, signaling escalation rather than providing a sense of security. A 2018 report on managing campus protests at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) highlighted that “in managing protests at HBCUs, [campus police] tend to have a much closer working relationship with student groups” often participating in protest planning directly with students.²⁶ This intensive approach to fostering empathy and collaboration between campus police and student activists is likely to be useful beyond HBCUs as well.

Interviewees highlighted various strategies to improve communication and relationships between student stakeholders and campus police. These included:

- Incorporating student voices into campus police policies and processes. One interviewee described a series of listening sessions aimed at acknowledging past policing failures while inviting students to help shape future discussions.
- Involving students in formulating crisis response plans. For example, involving student leadership in tabletop exercises and critical response scenarios to provide transparency and insight into leadership’s approach, and to integrate the student perspectives into response planning.
- Utilizing non-uniformed, trained staff members who attend demonstrations and activities and provide consultations to various departments across campus. The absence of uniforms helps these teams build relationships with campus activists, which can be especially challenging when student groups are leaderless.

26. National Center For Campus Public Safety. (2018). *Managing campus protests and demonstrations at historically black colleges and universities*. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/bja/grants/255141.pdf>

- Proactively educating and raising awareness about policing policies. Most students, for example, do not understand the reasoning behind when and why police use riot gear or carry batons at demonstrations. On one campus, the chief of police dedicated time to answering student government questions about police presence and the criteria for calling in municipal police.
- Promoting campus police's non-enforcement services, such as safety escorts and self-defense classes.



4

Critical Thinking and Compassion: Building Resilient Cultures

In our interviews with students, we heard painful stories of isolation, exclusion, rejection, and outright bullying. Both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian students described experiences of being treated as an “other” by their peers, and of having their pain and grief challenged and invalidated.

These experiences of alienation often left students feeling isolated, hurt, and misunderstood, and they frequently turned to the university to condemn their peers' behaviors and validate their own pain. While students may perceive the university as the arbiter of justice in these conflicts, it is often their peers—not the institution—that are the source of their emotional distress.

Students frequently perceived that their school's culture of intellectual conformity, lack of open dialogue, and binary "us vs. them" thinking laid the groundwork for intergroup division. This culture deepened existing divides rather than encouraging the kind of nuanced discussions that help bridge differences. One student articulated this dynamic, saying:

"I would leave the classroom and encounter someone that I didn't agree with. And I didn't even have the background to approach what they were saying because it's never presented in the class. There's always one dominant voice. I think that somehow the school has kind of reinforced the idea of, 'it's okay to stay in your bubble and not really engage with people you disagree with and hold on to your simple ideas very strongly without ever considering the other side.' I mean, that's kind of like the state of our politics in general right now. But I think that schools should break down barriers, not reinforce them."
—STUDENT

The challenge for universities, then, is twofold: to create intellectual environments where critical thinking and open dialogue are prioritized, and to foster a culture of empathy and compassion where students feel supported and heard, even when disagreements arise. This chapter provides a blueprint for creating this kind of campus culture. In addition to promoting dialogue, we also stress the importance of providing proactive education about controversial topics.

Building a Culture of Dialogue

- **Take a holistic approach.** Cultures transcend any discrete group of students. Think beyond just the student body and examine how dialogue is embedded throughout the system, including among the student body, student leadership and student groups, the faculty, the staff and administrators, senior leadership, and the board.
- **Establish clear expectations early.** From the moment prospective students, faculty, and staff land on your website, it should be clear that your campus will be a place where they will encounter diverse perspectives, be challenged intellectually, and engage respectfully with people of differing backgrounds, beliefs, and values.
- **Articulate the “why” for dialogue.** For the student body, emphasize the value of dialogue for their career and life. For student leaders, share historical examples of how free speech and coalition building have driven societal transformations. For faculty and staff, make the connection between constructive dialogue and preparing future citizens and leaders.
- **Leverage beginnings.** Focus your attention on the start of new group experiences: orientation, first-year seminar, new faculty training, etc. Week one is a great time to explicitly establish norms of community and free expression.
- **Align incentives.** Hire, recognize, and reward individuals and groups who excel in working across lines of difference. Provide protected time and funds for relevant professional development.
- **Teach academic methodology early.** The scientific method, critically evaluating information, employing logic, and critical thinking are core skills for students and citizens of democratic societies.
- **Identify the fault lines and bridge them.** Is there dormant animosity between administrators and faculty? Are campus chapters of Turning Point USA and Young Democratic Socialists of America repeatedly counter-protesting each other? Is there a relationship between the faculty in the Jewish and Middle Eastern Studies departments? Actively facilitate collaboration across fault lines by creating opportunities for shared training and social mixing. Deepen the relationships by incentivizing joint efforts and co-led initiatives.

- **Normalize dialogue about contentious issues.** Dialogue is a muscle that must be built and maintained with practice. Build courses that expose students to opposing viewpoints. Structure class discussions to solicit dissenting opinions. Host panels and forums rather than speeches.
- **Measure impact.** Establish clear, multiyear goals, rigorously track progress over time, standardize measures, and adjust as needed. Impact can be measured at a variety of levels, including attitudes, beliefs, competence, behaviors, and a sense of culture.

“This school is about true inclusion in the broadest sense of the term, about being the space for as many different perspectives as possible. And actually, that is our secret weapon.”

—ADMINISTRATOR



Providing Education About Controversial Issues

Students reported that their primary sources of news about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were other students and social media. However, they acknowledged that social media often presents information in a “black and white” and “polarizing” manner. On many campuses, a broad swath of the student body aligned themselves with either Israel or Palestine based largely on information distributed by activist groups via social media, pamphlets, and teach-ins, leading to incomplete perspectives.

Campus administrators can create a combination of formal and ad hoc educational experiences to provide a fuller range of perspectives, helping students critically engage with complex issues and move beyond the simplistic narratives often found on social media. Students we spoke to generally perceived the university’s educational efforts positively. However, many felt that educational experiences could be more frequent and varied in format. They suggested curated resource libraries, infographics, and facilitated discussions as additional ways to make this complex topic more accessible to the broader student body.

“I think a lot of the people who were supporting either the Israel or Palestinian side, a lot of them weren’t actually aware of the actual events, and it became, it’s, and obviously because of social media, it became kind of a trend to support a certain side.”

—STUDENT

5

Clear Policies, Consistently Enforced: Guardrails for Conflict Management

“People started to call us to ask, ‘why aren’t you enforcing your policies?’ Well, we hadn’t been enforcing those policies. We didn’t know how to enforce those policies.” –Administrator

Historically, most campus activism has not directly conflicted with the interests of other students. For instance, the call for divestment from South Africa in the 1980s was unlikely to offend or alienate a large portion of the student body. Likewise, while the Black Lives Matter movement involved strong advocacy, its focus was on pressuring administrators to implement changes, with minimal, if any, opposition from within the student body itself.

This is what makes the campus protests over the Israeli–Palestinian conflict especially challenging for campuses. Unlike previous movements, this issue tends to divide student populations deeply along ideological, religious, and cultural lines. This student-to-student conflict was novel for many campuses, and many administrators discovered that their existing policies did not provide adequate clarity during the 2023–2024 academic year. In the past, many had been lenient about setting and enforcing rules for expressive activity, largely because they had not felt the need. However, as tensions escalated, some campuses found their existing policies unworkable and made revisions mid-year. These changes were often seen by students as attempts to suppress their speech. Revising policies in the midst of conflict also posed other challenges: It is a time-consuming process that strains resources when student affairs teams are already stretched thin. Additionally, the short timeline left little opportunity to involve stakeholders in shaping the new policies.

We recommend campus leaders form a committee as soon as possible to review and revise their policies related to assembly and expression.



Revising Your Policies

Comprehensive reviews, broad stakeholder engagement, clear documentation, and communication of processes represent best practices in policy revision. However, there is an inherent tension between these best practices and the need to ensure that policies are predetermined before potential flashpoints, such as the anniversary of October 7th or the 2024 Presidential Election and inauguration. Below, we provide recommendations that allow administrators to pursue various revision processes based on the time available to them.

IF YOU HAD 1-3 MONTHS:

- **Core Working Committee:** Form a small, efficient committee of key stakeholders, including members of the Events Response Team. Empower the team to act swiftly.
- **Policy Review:** Focus on reviewing free expression policies that have been problematic or controversial. These will likely include any time, place, and manner restrictions. If you have a dedicated space for free expression, the policies governing the use of that space may need to be reviewed. In preparation for the upcoming election, review policies around outside speakers and space reservations. Talk to the Events Response Team and/or select student affairs staff to identify the pain points that occurred during the previous academic year.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Conduct targeted engagement with high-priority stakeholder groups, such as student leaders from politically-based and identity-based groups. Use surveys or rapid focus groups to gather feedback.
- **Finalization and Approval:** Submit revised policies for approval by the appropriate administrative or governance body. Streamline critical reviews by clearly identifying what has been changed.
- **Education and Communication:** Update the policy online with a clear summary. Communicate key changes through an email campaign and a virtual town hall or webinar to ensure key groups are informed.

IF YOU HAD 3-8 MONTHS:

- **Core Working Committee:** Form a small, efficient committee of key stakeholders, including members of the Events Response Team. Empower the team to act swiftly.
- **Policy Review:** Focus on reviewing free expression policies that have been problematic or controversial. These will likely include any time, place, and manner restrictions. If you have a dedicated space for free expression, the policies governing the use of that space may need to be reviewed. In preparation for the upcoming election, review policies around outside speakers and space reservations. Talk to the Events Response Team and/or student affairs staff to identify the pain points that occurred during the previous academic year.
- **Scenario Testing:** Use detailed scenarios to test policy responses. Identify and refine language where there is disagreement or ambiguity.
- **Broad Stakeholder Engagement:** Hold multiple meetings or discussions with various campus groups, including students, faculty, and staff. Ensure that input is systematically gathered and considered.
- **Finalization and Approval:** Submit revised policies for approval by the appropriate administrative or governance body. Streamline critical views by clearly identifying what has been changed.
- **Education and Training:** In addition to online updates and a virtual town hall, start planning mandatory training sessions for relevant student groups and faculty leaders. Offer workshops or seminars on the revised policies.



IF YOU HAD 8 MONTHS OR LONGER:

- **Core Working Committee:** Establish a diverse, representative committee, including members of the Events Response Team, student leaders, faculty, and staff. Set clear goals, roles, and responsibilities for the committee, with a schedule for regular meetings to allow for an in-depth exploration of the historical context of existing policies and recent challenges.
- **Policy Review:** Gather all existing policies related to free expression across campus. Identify inconsistencies, outdated language, and any gaps.
- **Scenario Testing:** Develop detailed scenarios to test how current policies respond to complex or controversial situations. This helps identify vague language, potential oversights, and areas needing revision.
- **Broad Stakeholder Engagement:** Engage a wide range of stakeholders, including politically-based and identity-based student groups, faculty, and staff. Use a variety of methods such as town halls, focus groups, surveys, and individual meetings to gather diverse perspectives. Integrate feedback from stakeholders into the policy revisions. Track common themes and concerns, and adjust policies to reflect the broader campus community's interests. This engagement phase also helps ensure buy-in from key groups and assists in dissemination.
- **Finalization and Approval:** Submit the policies for formal approval through the appropriate administrative bodies or governance structures. Allocate time for potential back-and-forth discussions with decision-makers, ensuring that all final revisions are vetted before the policies are implemented.
- **Education and Training:** Post the new policies online in a central location, summarizing key points in an easy-to-read format. Develop mandatory training sessions for key groups such as student leaders, faculty, and relevant staff. Ensure these sessions are scheduled well in advance and made mandatory where appropriate. Create digital resources, including infographics or videos, to make the new policies easily digestible and accessible. Offer optional workshops and webinars for the broader campus community to ensure widespread understanding of the new policies.

6

Effective Event Response Teams: The Engine of Protest Management

During the spring 2024 protests, student affairs teams were often short-staffed and working 16-hour days to respond to student encampments. One VP of Student Affairs said of this period, “It was pure hell.”

Managing student protests and encampments requires a complex set of skills, including:

- Intimate knowledge of school policies and procedures.
- Managing conflicting stakeholder demands.
- Working under time pressure and public scrutiny.
- Communication and conflict resolution skills.

The work is not done by any one individual, but by a team often dispersed across departments. This requires a strong level of internal alignment and maintenance of that alignment while responding to changing circumstances. This level of high performance is only possible if teams have:

- Clear roles and responsibilities.
- Consistent and open communication channels.
- A shared understanding of goals and strategies.
- A deep level of trust.

Below, we detail recommendations for preparing and responding effectively to protests:

- Form a response team.
- Establish an escalation process.
- Train with tabletop exercises.
- Manage stakeholder expectations proactively.



Form Your Response Team

Core membership of an event response team commonly includes:

- President or Chancellor
- Provost, when faculty members are involved
- VP of Student Affairs and/or Dean of Students
- General Counsel
- VP of Communications
- VP of Government Affairs, when lawmakers are involved
- Chief of Campus Police
- Representative from Human Resources, when labor or union issues are involved

Team preparation:

- Meet at least twice a year, even when no demonstrations are happening.
- Evaluate past responses.
- Do training “tabletop” exercises.
- Establish a chair, with clear roles and responsibilities.
- Establish a way for the chair to call the team to action quickly.
- Establish a way to communicate during an event.

Individuals on the team should receive training in:

- Mediation and de-escalation techniques.
- Crowd management techniques.
- Incident Command Systems, a standardized approach to incident management used by law enforcement agencies and other first responders to effectively handle critical incidents and emergencies.
- Policies related to demonstration, free expression, and police use of force.
- First Amendment and academic freedom, and the potential tensions between these and anti-discrimination laws.

Establish an Escalation Process

Most institutions recognize that involving the police represents a significant escalation, one that often fractures the campus community in profound ways. Consequently, many campus leaders adopt a philosophy of intervening at the lowest possible levels, with the primary goal of preserving relationships. While this approach may vary across campuses, some leaders view their role during student demonstrations as that of observers. Trained to blend with the crowd, they gently remind students of policy violations when necessary. Their focus is on “holding the space” and avoiding disruptions, intervening only when safety concerns arise.

At institutions where strong cross-functional relationships exist between student affairs, senior leadership, and campus police, stakeholders can collaborate to develop a clear escalation process that distinguishes between when student affairs should intervene and when campus police should take the lead. An escalation process is a structured, organized, and adaptive approach to demonstration activities. This escalation process could consider factors such as crowd size and energy, the presence of agitated individuals, disruption to campus functioning, and risk to public safety. Campuses should fully anticipate the revival of protest tactics from the spring semester, including encampments and occupation of buildings. By jointly establishing an escalation process, student affairs and campus police can ensure that the university’s response is:

- Well-coordinated in advance.
- Effective in ensuring safety.
- Proportional to the severity of disruption.
- Consistent across events.
- Predictable by stakeholders.

“Just because the encampment is peaceful doesn’t mean it’s protected by the First Amendment. And just because it isn’t protected by the First Amendment, if they’re being peaceful, a violent law enforcement response is generally going to be inappropriate except as a very last resort.”

—EMERSON SYKES²⁷

To establish an escalation process, generate a plan of action (which can include monitoring) in the following situations:

- During normal operations (no current or planned demonstrations).
- During the preparation phase (after university administration becomes aware of a planned demonstration, but before the demonstration occurs).
- Gathering of students or others in community spaces:
 - With small, moderate, and large sized crowds
 - Peaceful to high energy
 - With and without agitated individuals
 - With no violence, some physical violence (shoving and pushing), and violence that threatens public safety
 - With and without disruption of campus activities
 - Crowds that become mobile
- Students or others marching through campus:
 - With and without disrupting campus activities
 - With and without disrupting traffic
- Encampments:
 - Of small, moderate, and large sizes
 - Peaceful to high energy
 - With and without agitated individuals
 - With no violence, some physical violence (shoving and pushing), and violence that threatens public safety
 - With and without disruption of campus activities
- Occupation of university buildings:
 - Short to long term occupation
 - Small to large sized groups
 - With low, moderate, and severe disruption to critical services
 - With and without health and safety concerns
 - With low, moderate, and high potential for property damage

The team may also consider their responses to the following situations, unrelated to assemblies of students:

- Group(s) not associated with the university using the campus spaces for celebration or protest.
- Civil unrest on or near campus that significantly disrupts the campus or raises concerns for student, staff, or faculty safety and well-being.
- Signs displayed in a public location on campus that create concern or upset.

In each situation, specify the actions of:

- University Event Response Team
- Campus Police
- University Communications
- University Leadership



Train with Tabletop Exercises

A tabletop exercise is an interactive, discussion-based activity conducted to test 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 TABLETOP EXERCISES

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

STEP 2. Draft worst-case 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 TABLETOP EXERCISE SCENARIOS

As an Event Response Team, work through the scenarios below (or develop your own, based on your university's history). After each bullet point, discuss the university's overall approach, as well as each individual's role. Repeat with the next bullet point.

Scenario 1

- A group of students protesting the war in Gaza is active on social media—often posting about their next planned activity, but the identity of the leader(s) is unclear.
- The group sets up a peaceful encampment on the university commons.
- The group begins their protest with a list of eight demands—several of which are unrelated to the war.
- Every few days they present a new, growing list of demands.
- Protesters repeatedly skip scheduled meetings with staff and faculty members.
- Although the activities within the encampment began peacefully, they escalate to disrupting classes with bullhorn call-and-response sessions.
- A small group of fewer than 15 student protesters block access to the university library.
- A separate group of 30 students barricade the doors of the multicultural center, not allowing other students or staff to enter.

Scenario 2

- A group of activists consisting of students, faculty, and community members unaffiliated with the university has a stated goal of disrupting the learning environment. They routinely schedule events, like rallies and speeches, during finals and public campus meetings (e.g., trustee meetings).
- They demand the university make a statement in support of the group's positions. Within the last year, the university had announced a new policy against public statements. This incident is the first challenge to that new policy.
- The university directs the group to the new policy and explains their reasoning—they have to serve all students and taking a position would violate their ability to provide that service. Perceiving this as a lack of response, the protesters escalate the situation. Inflammatory rhetoric and disruptions ensue. Antisemitic behavior flares. Wanted posters go up on campus buildings with images of notable Jewish student leaders and administrators.
- Tensions abate when students go home for the summer, but administrators are nervous about how the lack of resolution will impact the fall semester.

Manage Stakeholder Expectations Proactively

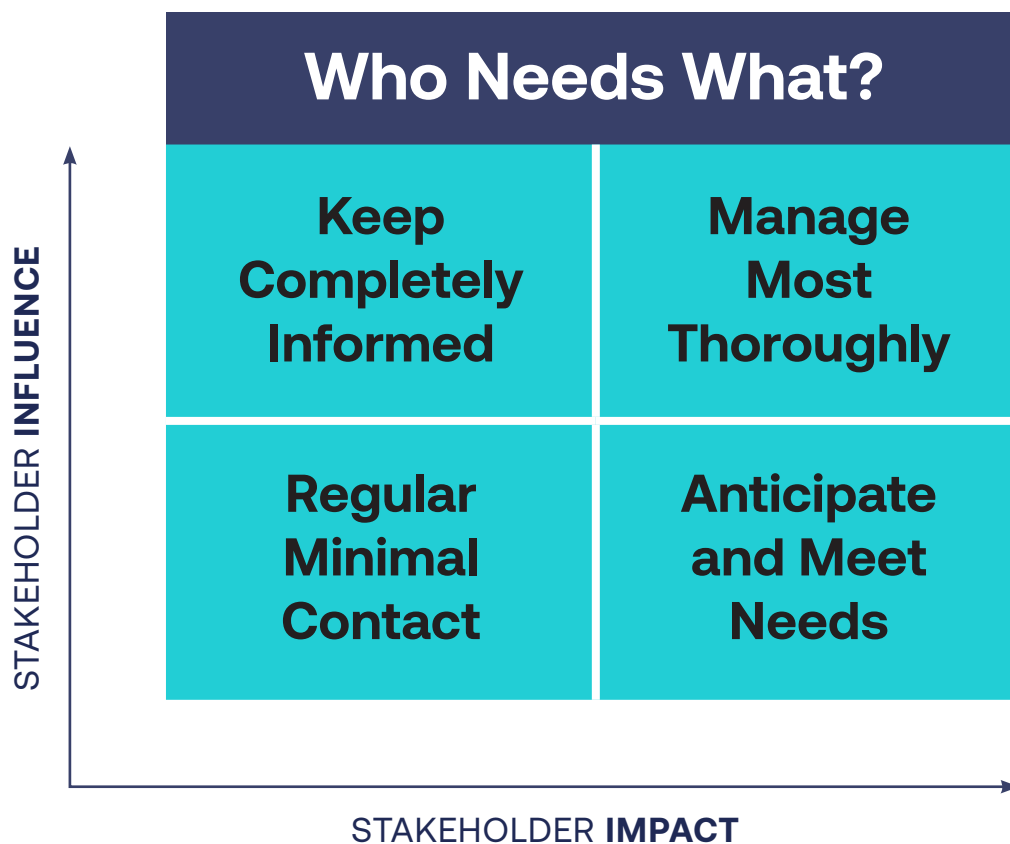
A **stakeholder** is anyone who is affected by the outcome of a decision-making process or is able to influence the outcome positively or negatively. Stakeholders include:

- Student body
- Student groups
- Parents
- Faculty
- Board of Trustees
- Alumni
- Donors
- Members of the neighboring community
- Legislators



Individual stakeholders and stakeholder groups vary in the extent to which they are **impacted**²⁸ and can **influence** the outcome. For example, state legislators may only be loosely tracking the protests on your campus (low interest), but have the authority to influence the university in the short- and long-term (high impact). Mapping stakeholders in these dimensions can guide an efficient and proactive approach to communication.

Most stakeholders lack the knowledge to fully evaluate the university’s responses, such as distinguishing between protected and unprotected speech, understanding legal versus illegal conduct, recognizing what violates university policy but is lawful, and evaluating the proportionality of the university’s actions. Proactive, clear communication can help prevent misunderstandings and reduce the likelihood of escalating demands from angry stakeholders in a tense situation.



28. Pilt, E., & Himma-Kadakas, M. (2023). Training researchers and planning science communication and dissemination activities: testing the QUEST model in practice and theory. *Journal of Science Communication*, 22(6), A04.

7

Leading with Compassion: Supporting Student Activists

Through interviews, we found that the most effective administrators viewed student activism as a healthy developmental process, and recognized the important role of protest, activism, and civil disobedience in American history. Even as they worked 16-hour days, these professionals maintained a sense of compassion for their students. They viewed student activists as students first and activists second. In fact, this sense of shared humanity provided meaning and purpose to their work in a way that mitigated burnout and cynicism.

“What was hard was the fatigue and the pain that I saw of our students who were continuing this activism. Activism is hard and the burnout for activists is real. And it took a toll on them. We would check grades for some of our students to be like, ‘Are they OK?’ We hired a Muslim therapist and said ‘This person is yours, use them as you need. We’ll pay for the services and the fees and the whatever, don’t worry about that.’ We offered the same thing for our Jewish students.” – Administrator

Student activists, for their part, communicated a clear need for administrators to express care for them, even as they challenged the university to change. One student noted:

“Every time we talk to admin, it was like oh just another thing on their checklist to get done, which I know it is. I know that my problems aren’t their problems. But I think that it’s so emotional and personal, it really needs to be approached with a—I don’t wanna say emotional—but not with just an analytical mindset. You have to understand that there’s a lot at stake personally for many students on campus.”

—STUDENT

Expressions of support and care are especially critical if students are physically in danger or injured. One organizer reported that his roommate was injured by pepper spray during a protest. He remarked with shock, “they [the administration] didn’t even reach out to us.”

Below, we provide two frameworks. The first outlines guidance for engaging with student activists in the moment (for example, when approaching a student protest). The second is a checklist for listening to individuals who have been negatively impacted by a divisive event.

A Blueprint for Engaging Student Protesters

This blueprint is intended to serve as a conversation guide for administrators to have with student protesters about their demonstration activities. Administrators can use this guide when they first become aware of a planned demonstration, or when approaching a demonstration in progress. This blueprint is designed to foster a spirit of collaboration and trust while optimizing the probability of a peaceful resolution.

Affirm Their Rights: Acknowledge students' rights to free speech and peaceful assembly, affirming that the university supports their activism while ensuring a safe and inclusive environment for all. Emphasize that these rights are essential to fostering a diverse academic space where differing perspectives can be safely expressed and heard.

- "It's okay for you to be here, you have a right to speak up about this."
- "Your activism is important."

Express Your Intent: Be transparent from the start. Clearly state your purpose for the conversation and your commitment to understanding their concerns. Show that you are open to collaboration and dedicated to finding a resolution that honors their advocacy and the broader campus community's needs.

- "I'm here to listen to what you have to say and understand where you're coming from."
- "My goal is to work with you to find a way forward that respects your concerns and also considers the needs of the entire campus community."

Understand Their Motivation: Go beyond their immediate demands to understand why the issue matters to them. Prioritize listening without interrupting, demonstrating genuine curiosity about their perspectives, and inquire about how the university can support their goals.

- "Help me understand why this issue is so important to you. I want to make sure I'm getting the full picture."
- "Can you share what motivated this specific demand? Understanding that will help us figure out how to address it together."

Acknowledge Concerns: Listen actively, repeating back what you hear. Listen for the unsaid emotions and values. Validate their concerns, even when you may not fully agree with them. Acknowledge the validity of their feelings and the importance of their activism to them and others.

- “What I’m hearing is that you feel powerless about the war, and controlling where your tuition money goes feels like it’s the least you could do.”
- “It’s baffling to you how the university could not take a strong stand against the war, especially against civilian deaths.”

Express Genuine Care: Recognize the pain, hard work, and aspirations of student activists. Show that you value their commitment to making a difference and that you are invested in helping them achieve positive change.

- “I’m so sorry you’re going through that.”
- “I can see how much this matters to you, and I respect the hard work you’ve put into this.”

Stay on Message: Know the university’s position on key issues and overarching philosophy. Keep your communication fair and unbiased.

- “My role is to support all students, regardless of their stance.”
- “If I take a side, it makes it harder for other students to see me as someone they can trust or approach.”

Be Transparent: Clearly communicate your role, your limitations, and the specific actions you can take to address their concerns. Avoid focusing solely on limitations, as this can come across as a lack of willingness to help.

- “I want to be upfront about what we can and can’t do in this situation, so you know what to expect.”
- “Here’s where we might face some challenges, and here’s what I can promise you today.”

Educate on Institutional Constraints: Help students understand the complexities of institutional policies and procedures. Provide context for why certain policies exist and how they function, rather than simply repeating them.

- “I know it may seem like a simple change, but there are a lot of factors behind this policy that we need to consider.”
- “Let me explain how our decision-making process works and the kinds of constraints we have to operate within.”

Follow Through: If you commit to action or further communication, ensure that you follow through as promised. Consistency and reliability build trust and credibility over time.

- “I’ll follow up with you by the end of the week to update you on our progress.”
- “You can count on me to take this to the administration. I’ll keep you in the loop.”

Respect Autonomy: Understand that activists may prefer to engage on their own terms. Respect their autonomy, and exercise patience as they navigate their activism and engagement with the administration.

- “I recognize that you may prefer to move forward in your own way, and that’s okay. I’m here when you’re ready to talk.”
- “You know what’s best for your group, and I respect that. I’m available if you want to explore any potential collaboration down the road.”



A Checklist for Listening to Impacted Parties²⁹

A critical and often overlooked component of dialogue is careful, active listening. This guide, adapted with permission from the Divided Community Project, can serve as a self-audit for administrators. After a divisive event, it is important to understand the perspectives of individuals who were personally affected, who share an identity group with those affected, and who are trusted messengers to the affected community. Gathering information about the items on this checklist can help administrators fully understand their experiences and perspectives and formulate a response accordingly.

LISTEN FOR AND MAKE OBSERVATIONS ABOUT:

For those who personally experienced an incident or conflict:

- Reactions, including feelings.
- Intensity of their feelings.
- Whether they feel safe.
- Whether they feel comfortable continuing to participate in university/college activities.
- Any support that we can provide.
- What they are seeking.
- Comments regarding others who have been affected.
- What they wish other community members would understand about the situation.
- How they want to be involved, if at all, in developing the university's/college's response to the situation.

29. Adapted with permission from the Divided Community Project. (2024). *Navigating Conflicts: A Guide for Campus Leaders and Public Safety Personnel*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

For those who share an identity group with those who are personally experiencing an incident or conflict:

- The same issues as above, plus: What, if any, ways they connect the current situation to something that happened historically on this campus or elsewhere.

For those who are trusted by each portion of the campus:

- What are they hearing in terms of students' emotions, support sought, personal and academic plans, requests for support from the college/university.
- What they think will happen next.
- Whether they agree with at least some of what the university/college leaders express and will they make statements, either publicly or to friends, that reflect that agreement.
- If they are willing to speak out or be quoted by the president on topics of agreement or open to joining with the president in speaking out.



Conclusion

As election day approaches and the war in Gaza continues, higher education leaders will inevitably face significant challenges. While the specific nature of this year's controversy may differ from previous years, the fundamental issues remain unchanged. How do we prepare our students to exercise their rights to free speech with the weighty sense of responsibility that those rights carry? How do we build trust strong enough that individuals will be vulnerable, rather than defensive? When world events tear us apart, how do we remind ourselves of our shared humanity? These are the fundamental challenges of modern higher education.

In these times of uncertainty, higher education leaders must embrace the dual roles of educator and bridge-builder—creating spaces where dialogue can flourish amidst disagreement and fostering communities that prioritize empathy and understanding over division. Leadership in these moments demands a balance of proactive strategy, empathy, and resilience. By focusing on relationship-building, fostering understanding, and navigating complex dynamics with care, campus leaders can transform moments of tension into opportunities for growth and connection. How universities respond to activism will not only shape the immediate campus climate but also define the future of trust, leadership, and unity in higher education.