



Colleges and Universities as Public Forums

**A Playbook for
Campus Speaker Events**

Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI)

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

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	4
Speaker Events as Learning Opportunities	6
Mitigating Risks to Community Well-Being	17
CONCLUSION	35
ENDNOTES	36



Introduction

American higher education has long been one of the nation's most vital public forums. For much of their history, colleges and universities have served as crucibles of democratic engagement; places where students, faculty, and the broader public test ideas, challenge assumptions, and sharpen their civic capacities.¹ They've been stewards of both conventional and contested ideas, helping to determine which ones shape society and which fade away into an obscure stack in a library's forgotten subbasement. Yet today, higher education faces mounting headwinds in fulfilling its role as a trusted host of important conversations.

Some of those headwinds are internal. According to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), more than half of students now say it's acceptable to shout down a speaker, block entry to an event, or even use violence to stop a controversial talk. For the first time, a majority of students surveyed by FIRE opposed allowing any of six hypothetical controversial speakers, whether liberal or conservative, to speak on campus.² Faculty, too, report growing reluctance to voice their views, whether in classrooms or in public forums.³

Other pressures are external. State and federal governments are intensifying their oversight of campus expression, with real consequences for institutions and individuals across all levels of colleges and universities. Although there are signs of a rebound, public trust in higher education has eroded considerably from ten years ago.⁴ Nearly eight in ten senior leaders report being moderately or extremely concerned about declining perceptions of the value of college.⁵ Politically-motivated violence is on the rise.⁶ The recent assassination of political activist Charlie Kirk on a Utah campus demonstrates how high the stakes have become.

Taken together, these dynamics present a sobering picture. Institutions of higher education are losing ground as trusted hosts of public dialogue at precisely the moment American society needs them most. When contentious issues spill onto campus, students and the wider public should be able to look to colleges and universities to provide spaces where ideas can be examined with seriousness, fairness, and intellectual humility. If leaders retreat from their role as stewards of these forums, they risk accelerating public distrust—not only in their institutions but in the very possibility of shared inquiry across divides.

The consequence is more than reputational damage. It's a narrowing of higher education's civic mission. Colleges and universities that once aspired to prepare citizens for democratic life may instead be seen as unwilling or unable to host its most urgent conversations, ceding that ground to less constructive venues where outrage and partisanship dominate.

It's not too late for colleges and universities to reassert their vital role in public discussion, rebuild trust, and reestablish the importance of higher education within American democracy. This playbook aims to help campus leaders meet this moment by returning to the core academic and civic purpose of American higher education. It offers a way forward in the wake of increasing political violence, through insights and recommendations designed to frame speaker events as learning opportunities and mitigate the risks associated with hosting conversation about contested and important social, political, and ethical issues. These recommendations are derived from existing best practice guides as well as work by the Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) with more than 100 campuses, including dozens of conversations CDI has conducted with leaders managing campus climate in tense times.





Speaker Events as Learning Opportunities

Too often, campus speaking events feel like skirmishes in the wider cultural conflict currently driving American politics. Instead of opportunities for inquiry, speaker events can become proxy battles in which students, faculty, and outside groups rehearse national grievances. A single lecture or panel can be framed as a referendum on identity, ideology, or institutional values, with each side seeking the symbolic victory of silencing or denouncing the opposition. This dynamic amplifies polarization, narrows the space for curiosity, and leaves students with the impression that engaging across differences is less about learning than about defending territory.

That's why CDI starts from the position that as much as possible, campus leaders should *frame speaking events as opportunities for learning and exchange*.

When students engage meaningfully across lines of difference, they develop habits that extend far beyond the campus gates. They learn to listen for understanding rather than judgment, to disagree without dehumanization, and to remain curious even when challenged.⁷ These attitudes will aid them in school, in the workplace, and in their personal lives. They're not abstract virtues. They're the very skills that sustain democratic life and enable pluralistic communities to thrive.

Yet learning can't be imposed by fiat. Students are seldom persuaded simply by being told that open dialogue matters. From working with and listening to students, CDI finds that insistence often provokes resistance. The more effective approach is to model the value of engagement. When campus leaders, faculty, and invited speakers embody respectful inquiry, and when events are structured to highlight curiosity over combat, students see for themselves that exchanges across our deepest disagreements are both possible and worthwhile. In this sense, speaker events become less about declaring the importance of dialogue and more about demonstrating it.

There are four ways leaders can more effectively treat campus speaker events as learning opportunities:

- 1. Structure events to model dialogue and exchange**
- 2. Integrate student preparation and follow-up**
- 3. Elevate students' voice and agency**
- 4. Embed events in a broader culture of dialogue**

Opportunity

1

Structure Events to Model Dialogue and Exchange

Speaker events are most powerful when they showcase how ideas can be examined with rigor and respect, rather than staged as battles between adversaries or as one-person monologues. Campus leaders should encourage event planners to use formats that emphasize dialogue, such as moderated conversations, issue-focused panels, or carefully structured Q&A. Campuses don't need to simply recreate soapboxes and platforms. They can require speakers to engage with each other in ways that align with the academic and civic mission of higher education. This shift can help students see disagreement as an intellectual practice rather than a performance of conflicting positions. By highlighting inquiry over spectacle, leaders can create events that better model the habits of democratic engagement students most need to learn.

One recent campus event illustrates how this shift in format can transform the tone of a difficult conversation.





CASE STUDY

Middlebury College's “Good Talks” Series

In 2024, in the runup to the national election, Middlebury College launched Good Talks, a recurring salon [series](#) designed to move campus events away from monologue and toward shared inquiry. The series focused on key election issues, including immigration, health care, foreign policy, and the nature of US democracy. The goal: create public conversations that model democratic habits, such as listening, questioning, and civic reflection. Each session follows a simple structure. A short lecture of no more than 20 minutes provides a shared reference point, followed by 30 minutes of small-group dialogue guided by open-ended, “curious” questions. The group then reconvenes for a full-room discussion and Q&A. Less than half the event is spent in presentation; the majority is dedicated to participant exchange. One session featured political science professor Bert Johnson offering a concise primer on Town Meeting Day, a cornerstone of New England’s democratic practice. He framed the topic around tradeoffs between participation quality and quantity, then turned the conversation over to students, who engaged in facilitated dialogue before coming back together as a full group.

The series was developed in partnership with local schools and community groups, who were interested in adapting the format. By sharing discussion guides and recordings online, Middlebury positioned Good Talks as a resource for both the campus and its broader civic ecosystem. This kind of structure—brief content, guided dialogue, and shared reflection—demonstrates how even contentious topics can be approached in ways that center inquiry over performance. In doing so, Good Talks helps students experience disagreement not as a contest to win but as a practice to develop.

Opportunity

2

Integrate Student Preparation and Follow-Up

Students absorb more when they're equipped to enter difficult conversations with context and confidence.⁸ CDI has learned that before a campus event, students may not feel secure in their own viewpoint of the topic or even their understanding of the key components of a complex issue. CDI recommends three ways that schools can help students feel more prepared for speaker events so they can engage ideas better on their merits:

- 1. Provide background materials before the event.** Supply brief, curated background materials, such as news articles, short videos, or a one-pager, in locations that are accessible and known to students. This can establish a shared foundation heading into a speaker event.
- 2. Engage faculty to frame campus events in relevant and appropriate classes.** Faculty can help prepare students for a campus speaker's remarks by connecting the event to the broader terrain of their discipline. Even a five-minute classroom framing can help provide students with analytical lenses or guiding questions. This can transform events from free-floating spectacles into meaningful extensions of students' coursework.
- 3. Scaffold effective questioning practices before and at the event.** Ask moderators to model open-ended, curiosity-driven questions during the event. Taking the further step of creating a campuswide framework for asking questions that can be used across multiple events may help students start to understand questioning as a skill rather than a performance.

Just as important is what happens afterward. It's a bedrock principle of learning that making space and time to process new information and experiences deepens learners' understanding.⁹ Schools can make these events memorable learning experiences by treating them, whenever possible, as an arc of events rather than a single moment. Making space and time for follow-up will allow students to process what they heard, articulate their responses, and carry the learning forward. Some techniques CDI recommends are:

- 1. Facilitate guided classroom discussions after the event.** Encourage faculty to devote short sections of their class to processing the event. Faculty can emphasize learning by using prompts like, "What surprised you most about what you heard or saw?" or "What questions are you still wrestling with?"
- 2. Host residence hall or student center reflection circles.** Staff or student leaders can convene small-group conversations in common spaces in residence halls and student centers. Use consistent protocols to support these conversations, such as asking questions like, "What did you notice? What surprised you? What are you still thinking about?"
- 3. Integrate cocurricular workshops or panels.** Whenever possible, encourage staff and faculty to continue the conversation for students with follow-on panels, conversations, or skills-based workshops.

An example from one institution shows how deliberate preparation and reflection turned a controversial speaker event into a meaningful campuswide lesson.





CASE STUDY

Practice Seminars at the University of Chicago Institute of Politics

At the University of Chicago’s Institute of Politics, staff recognized that leaving students entirely to their own devices during speaker events—however well intentioned—was not enough to cultivate a culture of constructive dialogue. Although students’ questions were consistently thoughtful, staff realized that their own passivity in the room meant they weren’t modeling how to push back respectfully or how to connect personal experience to policy debate.

One turning point came during a seminar with Karl Rove. As the conversation shifted to immigration, none of the students spoke from their own lived experience, even though many had relevant perspectives. A staff member stepped in, sharing their story as the child of immigrants and directly pressing Rove to engage with it. The exchange not only modeled how to bring personal narrative into dialogue but also prompted a meta-analysis exercise afterward: Why had students stayed silent about their own experiences? What got in the way of connecting personal and political dimensions?

In response to these insights, the Institute began hosting “practice seminars” with visiting speakers. When an alumnus, board member, or political practitioner was already on campus, they would lead sessions where students could rehearse asking challenging questions in a low-stakes but authentic setting. These seminars marked a shift from a culture of passive observation to one of active modeling and shared learning, helping students develop the confidence and skills to connect ideas with lived realities in public forums.

Opportunity

3

Elevate Students' Voice and Agency

When students share responsibility for shaping campus speaker events, they're more likely to approach them as opportunities for learning rather than as impositions from above.¹⁰ Students can play an active role in reviewing speaker proposals as part of the decision-making body or advisory board. Student leaders can also moderate events. In this way, student involvement can foster a sense of shared ownership, demonstrating that the university trusts students to help steward its public forum. Moreover, such leadership roles provide students with the opportunity to deeply understand university policies and processes and how they intersect with federal and state regulations. Through this process, students also get a wide-lens view of how decisions are made and how conflicting stakeholder inputs are considered. Exposure to these often complex processes prepares students to be citizens of their university community and better advocates for their causes.

Staff and faculty liaisons can help students think through not only *what* they want to express, but also *how* they want to engage others in meaningful dialogue. Liaisons can work with student leaders ahead of time to model and practice strategies for inviting diverse perspectives, facilitating respectful Q&A, and managing disagreements in the moment. They can also help students anticipate the broader impact of the event—how conversations might continue in classrooms, residence halls, or on social media—and prepare students to carry forward the same spirit of openness and curiosity beyond the immediate setting. In this way, staff and faculty liaisons serve as mentors who guide students toward seeing free expression and constructive dialogue as habits of mind that extend well past a single event. This approach not only builds stronger buy-in for the event itself but also fosters deeper student ownership of the underlying values represented by these practices.

Opportunity

4

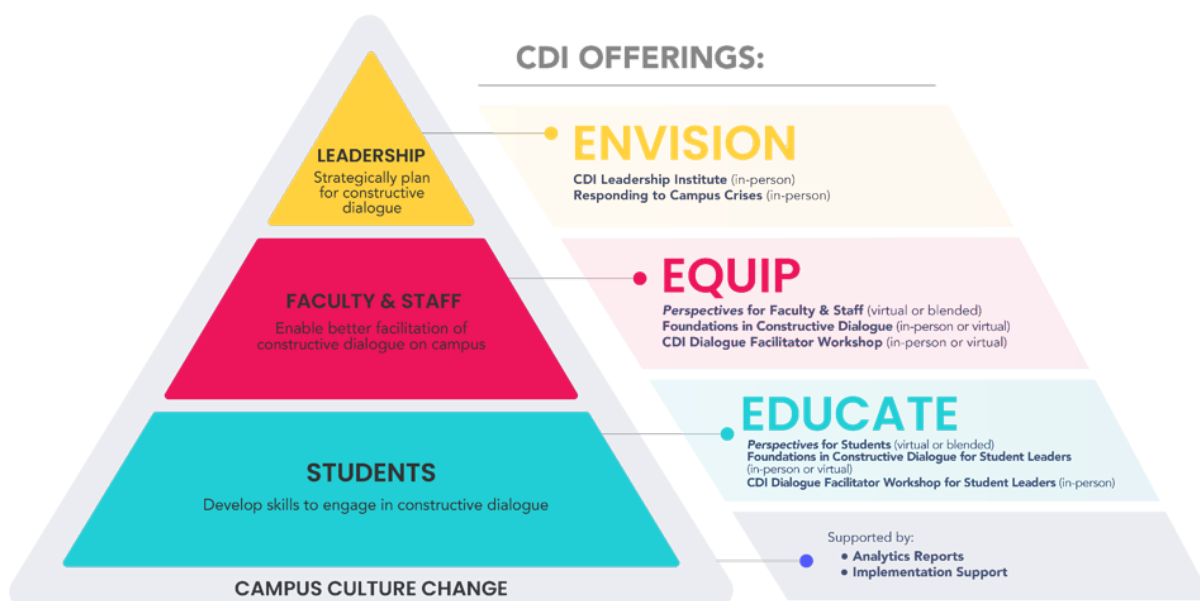
Embed Events in a Broader Culture of Dialogue

Speaker events can't, on their own, shoulder the burden of teaching students how to navigate their differences. When treated as isolated spectacles, events are often ineffective or counterproductive, generating more heat than light. Their true value emerges when they're embedded within a broader institutional culture and strategy that includes curricular offerings, dialogue programs, and cocurricular opportunities for sustained practice. For example, campuses can assign prereadings and host faculty-led debriefs in connected courses, train student leaders to facilitate small-group discussions immediately after events, or require reflection essays that link a talk to ongoing coursework. Institutions might also integrate speakers into themed semesters, tie them to first-year common reading programs, or use them to launch cocurricular dialogue series. Even simple measures—such as pairing each major lecture with a follow-up workshop or residence hall dialogue—signal that these events are integral to the academic mission, not interruptions. This continuity helps students see controversial events as part of a campus culture committed to inquiry and resilience instead of one-off flashpoints.



Building a Culture of Dialogue on Campus

CDI takes a campuswide approach to constructive dialogue, recognizing that student-only interventions can't create or sustain culture. Our Theory of Change, grounded in research and in our experience supporting more than 100 campuses, shows how dialogue becomes a durable norm when every layer of the institution is engaged. At the student level, programs like our blended *Perspectives* course build scalable skills for engaging across differences. Faculty and staff who go through our workshops learn how to intentionally shape classroom norms and cocurricular environments. Our leadership institutes and crisis-response programs help presidents, provosts, and deans embed dialogue into strategic plans, policies, and systems. Across all levels, we provide data analytics and implementation support so campuses can track progress. The result is not a patchwork of isolated programs, but an ecosystem where leaders plan for dialogue, faculty and staff model it, and students practice it—making constructive dialogue a defining feature of campus life.



When campus leaders frame speaker events as learning opportunities—preparing students beforehand, providing structured follow-up, including them in planning, and addressing their concerns—colleges and universities can strengthen their role as public forums. These practices make events alive with the exchange of ideas, stories, and perspectives rather than passive experiences where speakers espouse rehearsed views to an audience that’s already made up their mind. Done well, speaker events spark genuine learning and the co-creation of knowledge that defines higher education. They also serve as visible demonstrations of an institution’s civic responsibility, with students taking an active role in sustaining this tradition. Yet these benefits hinge on leaders’ ability to anticipate and manage the risks that inevitably accompany controversial speakers.





Mitigating Risks to Community Well-Being

Campus speaker events offer students the chance to hear new perspectives, deepen their understanding of contested questions, and see freedom of speech modeled, but they also carry risks to community well-being. They raise practical and ethical considerations for campus leaders, such as how to ensure that events unfold safely, reflect institutional commitments, and support the broader learning environment. Without careful preparation, an opportunity for inquiry may instead be remembered for disruption, misunderstanding, or missed connection.

For this reason, it's important that preparations extend beyond logistics and security to encompass the broader needs of the community. A mission- and community-based approach views safety, institutional responsibilities, and the dynamics of dialogue as interconnected concerns. Framed this way, free speech isn't positioned in opposition to care or caution but as part of a balanced commitment that allows meaningful exchange to take place.

When leaders adopt this posture, they signal that free expression and community well-being can be pursued together rather than treated as competing imperatives. Students begin to see that their institutions are capable of protecting them while also trusting them with responsibility, of upholding shared commitments while still welcoming disagreement, and of building resilience not by avoiding conflict but by engaging it constructively.

These lessons are most powerful when demonstrated, rather than declared. Students are unlikely to be persuaded by statements about the importance of free speech alone; what resonates is seeing leaders model transparency, foresight, and care in practice. When events are organized with this balance in mind, they show that navigating risk is not an obstacle to dialogue but a condition under which dialogue gains its meaning. Forums then become less about guarding against disruption and more about illustrating how diverse communities can wrestle with hard questions responsibly together.

To mitigate risk and the potential impact to the campus community and its membership, campus leadership can focus on the four following strategies:

- 1. Protect people and campus property**
- 2. Align initiatives with institutional mission and values**
- 3. Consider community impact**
- 4. Address tension and conflict**



Protect People and Campus Property

Safeguarding the physical well-being of individuals and the integrity of campus facilities is a central concern when institutions host public forums, and best practices highlight a range of strategies to mitigate risks. A planning process typically begins with a comprehensive risk assessment that identifies potential hazards, evaluates the venue, and prioritizes significant community concerns. These efforts are strengthened through collaboration with authorities such as campus police, municipal law enforcement, and emergency services, who provide expertise and resources to anticipate and manage threats. Building on this foundation, institutions may develop crisis-response plans addressing scenarios such as demonstrations, counterprotests, medical incidents, and property damage. These plans are most effective when supported by a cross-functional response team with clearly defined roles, a decision-making hierarchy, and escalation protocols.¹¹ Regular training and practice, including tabletop exercises and scenario-based drills, prepare staff and student leaders to act with clarity and confidence.

Best practices also emphasize preparations for crowd management and access control, including strategies for regulating entry and exit. During the planning process, institutions should reinforce procedures with a communication plan that delivers accurate, timely information across stakeholders, including college and university staff and administration, students, and police or campus safety officials. Finally, a structured post-event review is essential. Evaluating plan effectiveness, documenting lessons learned, and updating protocols not only strengthens preparedness for future events but also builds institutional resilience and community trust.

Form an Event 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 protest tactics, 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



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 an event response team:

- How will the crisis be detected and communicated to the event 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 event response team member do?
 - How will the team communicate with each other?
-

STEP 5. Debrief the exercise:

- What areas were unclear?
 - What decision-making rules did the team use?
-

STEP 6. Codify process as much as possible, refining it with each subsequent tabletop exercise.

Sample Tabletop Exercise Scenarios

The Event Response Team should work through the scenarios below (or develop their own, based on their university's history). After each bullet point, the team should discuss the university's overall approach, as well as each individual's role. They should 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.



CASE STUDY

University of San Diego's Framework for Managing High-Stakes Campus Events

Before the 2024 election cycle, the University of San Diego (USD) anticipated that politically charged events could escalate quickly without careful event preparation. Leaders expected challenges, such as last-minute speaker requests, controversial rallies, and outside groups seeking media attention. To avoid fragmented responses, USD formed a cross-functional working group that included student affairs, public safety, event services, faculty, and legal counsel. This group became the central decision-making body, aligning policies on event approval, security, and communication.

To test readiness, USD ran tabletop exercises simulating high-stakes scenarios: a presidential candidate requesting space on short notice, a protest escalating into a counterprotest, and news crews arriving before staff had coordinated messaging. These drills revealed vulnerabilities, including unclear authority over space use, uneven understanding of First Amendment obligations, and gaps in how information reached students. They also allowed staff and faculty to rehearse their roles, practicing for coordinated and seamless responses.

At the same time, USD invested in its dialogue culture. Faculty programs prepared instructors to moderate sensitive classroom discussions, while student workshops gave undergraduates tools for engaging across political differences. Low-cost but visible outreach—such as social media templates, talking points, and timely updates—helped the community feel informed rather than caught off guard. By formalizing protocols, practicing them in advance, and fostering a culture of dialogue, USD shifted from a reactive stance to a durable framework: one that safeguards free expression, prevents logistical breakdowns, and treats civic tension as an opportunity for learning rather than crisis management.



Align Initiatives with Institutional Mission and Values

Hosting a public forum often places an institution's commitments under scrutiny. The choice of speakers, the way the event is structured, and the ground rules for engagement can signal what the institution values. In moments of heightened controversy, these decisions become a litmus test for whether the university is living up to its mission of fostering open inquiry.

Best practices suggest that leaders anchor decisions in a clear articulation of mission and values, particularly regarding free expression, belonging, and community well-being. By clarifying these commitments in advance and working with students and community members throughout the planning process, institutions can demonstrate that choices flow from long-standing principles rather than external pressures. Transparent communication that consistently links policies and actions back to the institution's mission helps sustain trust and legitimacy, even when members of the community disagree with particular outcomes. Some ways that campuses can put this into practice are:

- 1. Establish a mission-driven event-review process:** Use a standardized checklist or advisory board to evaluate how proposed events align with commitments to free inquiry, belonging, and well-being.
- 2. Communicate value orientation in advance:** When announcing events, publicly explain how hosting the forum reflects the institution's mission and principles.
- 3. Integrate values into planning and facilitation:** Collaborate with students, faculty, and staff to set ground rules, brief moderators and speakers, and design events that embody constructive dialogue and other institutional values.



CASE STUDY

Colgate University’s “Speakeasy” Preparation Model¹²

In 2022, Colgate University faced a challenge familiar to many campuses: how to host a speaker whose ideas drew both academic interest and controversy. Linguistics faculty invited John McWhorter, a Columbia University professor known for his work on dialects and for critiquing certain antiracist approaches. Aware that his views might spark resistance, Colgate faculty designed a process to ground the event in learning and prepare the community for disagreement.

Before issuing the invitation, faculty consulted the provost, the chief diversity officer, and a member of the Faculty Diversity Council. These conversations clarified risks, expectations, and leadership awareness. Organizers also drew on the Intergroup Dialogue Council’s experience from past speaker visits. Six weeks before McWhorter’s lecture, faculty hosted a campuswide “speakeasy” dialogue. Students and faculty with differing views on the visit came together to share concerns and expectations. The goal was acknowledgment, not consensus: making space for unease while encouraging constructive discussion. Organizers invited participants they trusted could engage respectfully. The session lasted well beyond the scheduled time and acted as a “stress test.” If dialogue had broken down, faculty were prepared to add safeguards for the main event, including anticipating counterprotests.

When McWhorter arrived, the groundwork paid off. His lecture drew strong attendance, and students asked engaged, respectful questions. McWhorter himself described the exchange as “all quite respectful.” Leadership consultation, advance dialogue, and contingency planning transformed a potentially divisive visit into an educational experience. The “speakeasy” model shows how institutions can move beyond policy compliance toward community-building. By offering structured dialogue beforehand, framing the lecture as an academic exercise rather than endorsement, and preparing openly for disagreement, Colgate demonstrated that free expression and inclusion can coexist.



Strategy

3

Consider Community Impact

When a university hosts a public forum, leaders and event coordinators need to anticipate how such forums may affect specific groups, especially those who feel targeted, and respond in ways that reflect the institution's commitments to its community members. A key part of this work is helping all students understand the university's policies and the principles that underpin them, so that policies are seen not as arbitrary restrictions but as safeguards for the integrity and values of the academic community.

Different groups of students will experience these events in different ways. For those engaged in direct activism or resistance to issues addressed in such a forum, institutions can provide opportunities to think through their goals, consider the strategies they want to employ, and reflect on how their actions connect to broader community values and campus policies. For other community members, the primary need may be spaces where they can voice concerns directly to leadership, share how the event affects them personally, and raise questions about broader power dynamics on campus. Across all groups, making mental health support visible and accessible before, during, and after the event signals a genuine commitment to student well-being. Taken together, these practices help balance freedom of expression with meaningful attention to community impact.





CASE STUDY

A Creative Counter to Westboro Baptist Church at Pomona College

When the Westboro Baptist Church—a small fundamentalist church known for its extremist rhetoric and publicity-seeking protests—announced plans to picket at Pomona College, the campus community faced a difficult choice. Rather than respond with confrontation, the student body president proposed an alternative: a disco party. At 8:00 a.m.—the same time the picket was scheduled—students gathered on the quad with loud disco music, dancing, and Doritos. Entry to campus was restricted to those with valid IDs, ensuring that outside groups couldn't join. The event was celebratory, peaceful, and nonpolitical, creating an atmosphere where there was no audience for Westboro's message. By the time the music ended, the picketers had already left.

Behind the scenes, Pomona administrators worked with the Queer Resource Center and the Associated Students of Pomona College (ASPC) to prepare the campus. They discouraged direct engagement with the protesters, offered private spaces for students to process feelings, and covered official signage to block photo opportunities. This combination of joyful counterprogramming and careful planning denied Westboro the spectacle they sought. The disco party became a defining moment in how Pomona managed a potentially volatile situation: channeling student energy into creative expression while protecting the community from escalation.

Strategy

4

Address Tension and Conflict

Public forums often bring campus tensions to the surface, exposing disagreements that may run deeper than the event itself. Best practices emphasize the importance of giving administrators structured opportunities to listen to stakeholders. This can include hosting town halls, convening listening sessions, or creating smaller dialogue circles where students, faculty, and staff can share their perspectives in a more personal setting. When community members feel heard in these ways, tensions are less likely to escalate and more likely to be directed toward constructive engagement.

Managing conflict at a larger scale is strengthened by clear and consistent processes. Institutions that establish frameworks for mediation, facilitated dialogue, and conflict resolution are better able to respond when disagreements intensify. These structures not only provide a way to address immediate disputes but also signal a long-term commitment to handling conflict fairly and transparently.

It can be equally important for leadership to adhere to these processes. Sticking to agreed-on practices, rather than improvising in the midst of controversy, demonstrates reliability and integrity. Over time, this steadiness builds trust that conflict will be handled with care, even when perspectives remain sharply divided.





CASE STUDY

Towson University's Tiger Advocacy Advisory Team (TAAT)

Towson University established the Tiger Advocacy Advisory Team (TAAT) under the leadership of the Division of Student Affairs and the Office of Inclusion & Institutional Equity to foster a campus culture that supports and guides student activism. TAAT serves as a critical liaison among students, campus administrators, and the Towson University Police Department. Its primary mission is to educate and empower students engaging in activism by providing resources, policy clarifications, and real-time support during campus demonstrations. The team ensures that student activism aligns with university policies and legal protections for freedom of expression while fostering a safe and constructive environment.

The multidisciplinary TAAT includes senior student affairs leaders, public safety officials, faculty experts, and student representatives who collaborate to address the evolving needs related to campus activism. Through proactive training, facilitation of dialogue between different groups, and event support, TAAT helps prevent conflicts and promotes safe expression. The advisory team also directs students to counseling and mediation resources when necessary, highlighting a holistic approach to advocacy that balances rights with responsibilities. Since its inception, TAAT has been pivotal in crafting Towson's safe activism policies and emergency protocols, exemplifying the university's commitment to nurturing civic engagement through informed, respectful, and secure means.

Hosting a public forum requires institutions to balance safety, mission, impact, and conflict management with consistency and care. By grounding preparation in best practices and aligning responses with institutional values, leaders can protect their community while strengthening trust, resilience, and the educational purpose of the university.



Conclusion

As this playbook has outlined, campus leaders face both opportunities and risks in hosting public events on contested issues. Higher education faces real challenges in sustaining its role as a forum for meaningful public dialogue. Students and faculty report growing reluctance to speak openly,¹³ external pressures on campus expression are intensifying,¹⁴ and incidents of political violence have heightened concern about safety.¹⁵ These dynamics threaten to narrow the civic mission of colleges and universities at precisely the time when society most needs them to foster thoughtful engagement across differences.

At the same time, the examples and practices highlighted here show that institutions aren't powerless in the face of these pressures. By framing events around learning, providing students with preparation and follow-up, empowering them as co-stewards of conversations, and embedding forums in a broader culture of inquiry and dialogue, campuses can transform high-stakes moments into opportunities for growth. Complementing these learning strategies with careful risk management—grounded in safety, mission alignment, attention to community impact, and constructive conflict engagement—allows institutions to navigate difficult conversations without retreating from them. Taken together, these approaches illustrate that free expression and community wellbeing can be advanced side by side.

Looking ahead, colleges and universities can reaffirm their academic and civic purpose by embracing dialogue not as a challenge to be managed but as a central expression of their mission. The impact of this work is profound: students leave better equipped for civic life, institutions earn renewed trust, and higher education strengthens its role in sustaining democratic society. By committing to this path, campus leaders can ensure that their institutions remain places where even the hardest questions can be addressed with seriousness, fairness, and care.

Endnotes

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