



Maintaining Campus Community During the 2024 Election

A Guide for Leaders, Faculty, and Staff

Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI)

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

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Acknowledgments

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to all the individuals who participated in interviews and contributed their insights to this report. Additionally, they express heartfelt appreciation to those who provided review of earlier drafts, acknowledging their generous contributions of time and expertise.

Special recognition is due to our colleagues: Caroline Mehl for her support with interviewee outreach and Eliza O'Neil for her invaluable updates to the dialogue activities. The authors also extend their thanks to Nancy Thomas for her extensive contributions to the field of aspirational democracy in higher education.



Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

– Faculty and program director

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

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

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

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



General Principles for Preparing for the 2024 Election

Principle

1

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

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

Principle

2

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

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

Principle

3

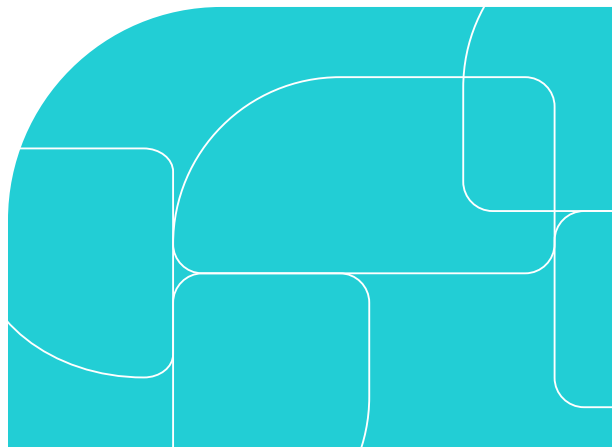
Campuses require proactive leadership and a clear vision from the top to inspire coordinated efforts across every layer of an institution's system.

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





Strategies for Civic Engagement and DEI Centers



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



Socialize knowledge from previous elections.

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

Strategy

2

Transform speaker events into conversations.

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

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

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

In general, we recommend that speakers formally present for less than half the allotted time. Below are some examples of formats for events of different lengths.

| EVENT LENGTH | Welcome, small group introductions | Introduce speaker and rules | Presentation | Small group discussion | Q&A |
|--------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|------------------------|-----|
| 60 minutes | | 5 | 25 | 15 | 15 |
| 75 minutes | 5 | 5 | 30 | 15 | 20 |
| 90 minutes | 15 | 5 | 30 | 20 | 20 |

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

Guest Speaker Guidelines

Colgate University

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

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

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

STEP 2: Engage key leaders for support and feedback.

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

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

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

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

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

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

STEP 5: Organize a campuswide exploratory dialogue.

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

STEP 6: Invite participants known for civil discourse.

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

STEP 7: Plan contingencies and fail-safes.

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

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

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



Strategy

3

Tap into campus expertise for issues programming.

Only 35% of youth feel supported to act on their political concerns.¹⁵ However, education about issues and elections, and support from their communities, can help youth engage in democracy. Center staff are ideally positioned to organize efforts to educate students about political issues while showing a diversity of viewpoints.

Explore opportunities to pair up faculty and staff members whose expertise overlap to forge sustained cross-functional relationships.

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

- Be curious and open to learning.
- Be authentic and welcome that from others.
- Show respect and suspend judgment.
- Be purposeful and to the point.
- Look for common ground.
- Own and guide the conversation.

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

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

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



“

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

Deliberative Dialogue Ideas

Providence College

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

Linn-Benton Community College

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

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

Strategy

4

Develop shared programming.

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

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

– Faculty and program director

Strategy

5

Showcase balanced expertise.

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

Display a range of viewpoints on a single topic.

Strategy

6

Model respect for viewpoint diversity.

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

Strategy

7

Engage your wider community.

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

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

Strategy

8

Reinforce nonpartisanship in popular cocurricular spaces.

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

- How the government works
- Free speech on college campus
- Specific issues in each candidate's platform (e.g., immigration, border security, foreign aid and military support, reproductive rights)





Strategy

9

Operationalize a shared calendar with key events.

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

Strategy

10

Celebrate student civic engagement.

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

Repurpose Existing Programming

Claremont McKenna College

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

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

– President

Providence College

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

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



Strategy

11

Mobilize your student leaders.

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

Strategy

12

Transition into sustained practice once the election is over.

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

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

Campus Forums for Discussing the Election

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

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

Higher Education Bridge-Builders Provider Landscape



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

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



“

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

– President

Conclusion

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

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

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

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