



Maintaining Campus Community During the 2024 Election

A Guide for Leaders, Faculty, and Staff

Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI)

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

– 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.



About This Guide

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

- 1. Types of conflict:** Based on prior election cycles, what should higher education leaders, faculty, and staff be prepared for?
- 2. Policies:** What policies will provide guard rails for a rise in ideological conflict on campus?
- 3. Relationships:** How do you build relationships between and across campuses to foster community, encourage engagement across lines of difference, and maintain staff and faculty morale?
- 4. Student learning and skill building:** How do you leverage the 2024 election to promote student learning, constructive dialogue skills, and civic engagement?
- 5. Professional development:** What types of training for faculty, staff, and leaders will equip them to prevent and manage campus conflict?
- 6. Crisis response:** If and when campus crises emerge, how can you be prepared?
- 7. Postelection plans:** How can you craft postelection programming and support, with input from the people you serve?
- 8. Working efficiently:** How do you activate expertise and coordinate efforts for a cohesive and efficient campus strategy?

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

General Principles for Preparing for the 2024 Election

Principle
1

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

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

Principle
2

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

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

Principle

3

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

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





Strategies for Leaders



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

- 1. Increased polarization** and conflict about divisive topics and candidates. The current candidates bring out passion from both supporters and opponents. Abortion access will likely take center stage among issues. Israel and Palestine conflicts will likely resurge as advocates on either side see the election results as either validation or a referendum on their point of view.
- 2. Increasing numbers of political speakers** on campus and resulting **protests**. After all, college campuses offer candidates centralized access to the highly sought 18-to-24-year-old voter.
- 3. Higher education** as a sector is likely to feature prominently in this year’s presidential election platform. Instances of **perceived partisan behavior** can become ammunition in the ongoing political discourse, contributing to the propagation of entrenched narratives.
- 4. Pressure to issue statements** on election-related matters. Students, faculty, alumni, or donors may expect the university to take a stance on campaign speech or election results.



“

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

– Gaping Void, a cultural design group

What Does “Nonpartisan” Mean?

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

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

Benefits of Nonpartisanship

A nonpartisan learning environment can have the following benefits:

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

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

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

Examples of partisan behavior:

- College presidents publicly criticizing political candidates
- College administration trying to influence a political contest
- University leadership disciplining faculty for their views

Examples of nonpartisan behavior:

- Administration designating Election Day as a day off for all students, faculty, and staff
- College president partnering with the student newspaper on an initiative to explore the differences between the candidates and their platforms
- Faculty and staff facilitating deliberative dialogues and topic series to routinely challenge misleading ads or mis- or dis-information, referencing credible fact-checking resources
- Writing a letter of recommendation for a student in good standing who has been doxed

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

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

⁴ Thomas, N. (2019). *Readiness for discussing democracy in supercharged political times*. Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. <https://dgm81phvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Initiatives/IDHE/idhe-discussing-democracy.pdf>



Strategy

1

Evaluate your language.

The language you use and how you frame your communication and programming can inadvertently reveal your ideology. Common use words and phrases, like “safe space” and “harm,” may seem nonpartisan, but not everyone defines them the same way.

When one of these terms comes up in a conversation, take the opportunity to clarify what the term means and what it does not mean. Facilitate conversations with stakeholders and community

members to develop a common understanding of the terms you all use. Take the time to establish and socialize common definitions among your stakeholders. Expect there to be multiple definitions and emphasize the divergence among them. Include definitions in messaging and communication activities. Repeat the definitions or reintroduce them when new stakeholders are engaged. Try to notice words that alienate groups, and work with them to understand why and to find alternatives that welcome participation. Consulting a few cabinet members or a third-party can help identify words in your communication that might unintentionally suggest taking sides, particularly when emotions are heightened.

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

Strategy

2

Walk the talk.

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

Constructive dialogue should achieve these goals:

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



Strategy

3

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

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

- 1. Speaker policy.** What kinds of speakers are allowed on campus? Who has the right to invite them? Where are they able to speak? What are the related security considerations?
- 2. Free expression policy.** Does your policy comply with constitutional and statutory requirements related to free speech? Does it define the boundaries within which expression must occur to maintain a respectful and inclusive environment?
- 3. Vendor policy.** Are vendors required to be registered with the campus? What happens if a vendor does not comply with campus guidelines?
- 4. Posting and chalking policy.** What can you post? Where can you post? Can you have a campaign sign in your office?
- 5. Fundraiser policy.** Who is authorized to solicit funds on behalf of the institution? What are acceptable methods of fundraising, including events, campaigns, grant applications, and partnerships?

6. **Visitor policy.** What forms of identification must visitors show? What, if any, registration process exists? What are the expectations for visitors related to all campus policies, including those related to conduct, harassment, and discrimination?
7. **Hate symbols policy.** What constitutes a hate symbol? What are the reporting procedures if one is encountered? What are the repercussions associated with using hate symbols? What are the exceptions to the policy?
8. **Policy on political activity on campus.** What are the guidelines for campaigning on campus? What is the approval process related to events? What are the guidelines for distributing materials?
9. **University statement policy.** Under what circumstances will the university issue a statement? Who can speak on the institution's behalf?

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

Best Practices for Disseminating Policies

Muhlenberg College

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

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

University of Northern Colorado

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

Strategy

4

Engage proactively with campus hot-spots.

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

Strategy

5

Coordinate cross-campus efforts.

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



Nurture connections with partners and peers.

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

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

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



“

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

– Faculty and program director



Support your staff.

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



Engage in co-curricular spaces.

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



Join a visible coalition of peers.

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

Convene Stakeholders for Policy Reviews

Whom to include:

- Trusted messengers from representative constituencies (ask other cabinet leaders to double check your thinking)
- Activists, people who hold extreme views, or people whose perspectives are otherwise distinct (or who think differently from you)
- Beneficiaries, often sourced from groups with less voice (e.g., students)

Understand your stakeholders:

- Assess the current level of support or opposition each stakeholder has regarding proposed changes to policies
- Decide the ideal level of support you hope to achieve from each stakeholder
- Understand the reasons behind each stakeholder's current level of support or resistance. This can involve identifying whether their resistance is technical (lack of skills or understanding), political (lack of buy-in or fear of loss), or cultural (misalignment with values or norms)

Strategy

10

Invest in advanced professional development.

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



CDI Professional Development Offerings for Higher Ed Leaders

Leadership Institute

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

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

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



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



Promote pluralism.

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

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

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

Crisis Response Procedures

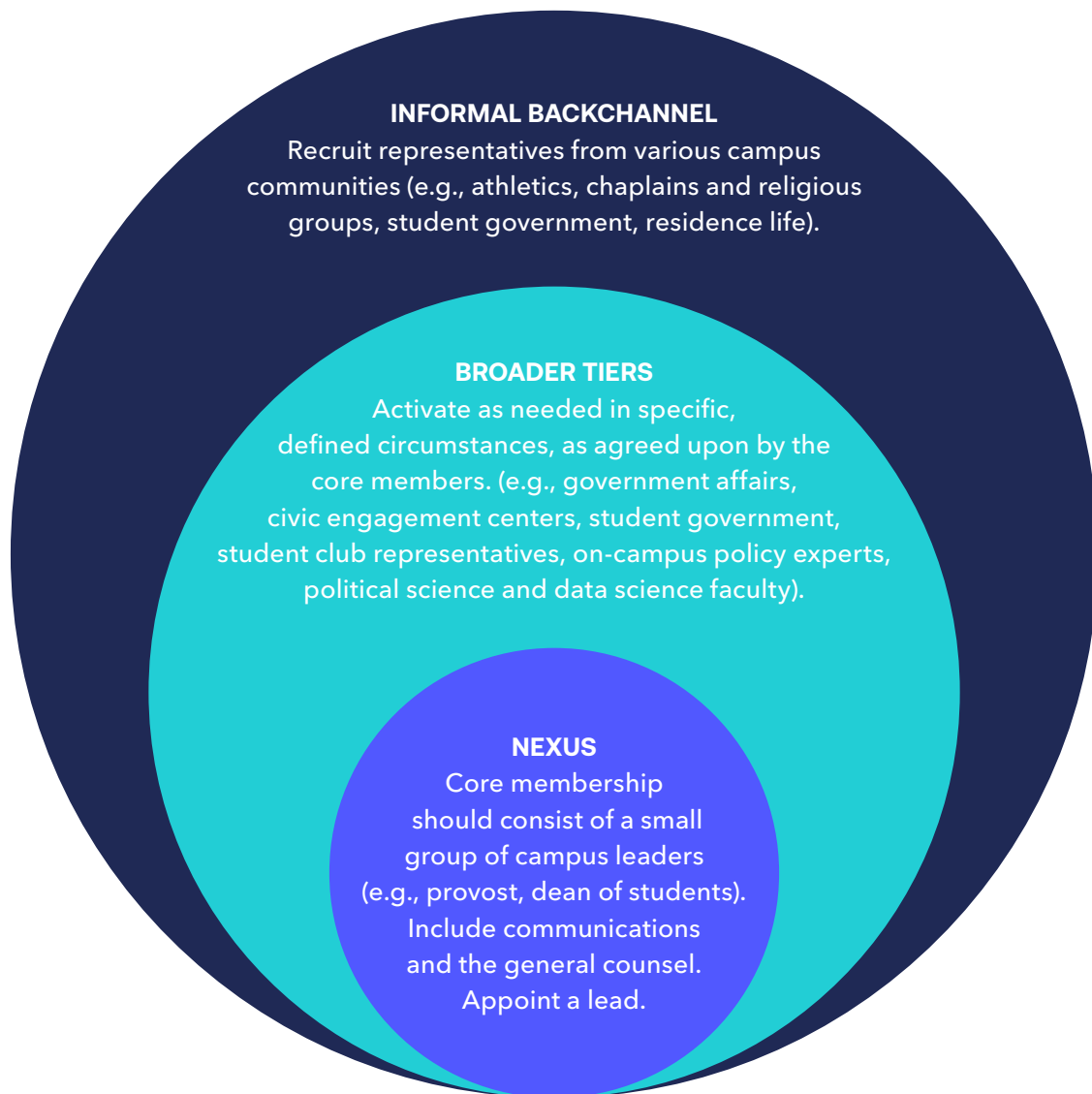
Conduct a Readiness Audit

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

- 1. Form a crisis response team.** A group of individuals should be trained to coordinate an effective response to mitigate the impact of a crisis, protect people and assets, and facilitate recovery.
- 2. Monitor social media.** This function performs real-time information gathering and detects early warning signs.
- 3. Evaluate your policies.** Regular policy evaluation ensures that response strategies remain adaptable and responsive to emerging challenges.
- 4. Coordinate campus-wide activities.** A unified approach helps avoid confusion, enables more comprehensive understanding, streamlines resource allocation, and improves consistency of communication.
- 5. Communicate potential risks.** Awareness of prospective risks empowers the team to plan proactively, allocate resources efficiently, and respond swiftly.
- 6. Establish an escalation process.** A structured, organized, and adaptive approach ensures the response is proportional to the severity.
- 7. Conduct tabletop exercises.** Training activities simulate realistic scenarios, foster collaboration, and identify areas for improvement in emergency response strategies. Practice repeatedly, not just once.

Form Your Response Team

“An experienced team, with a strong understanding of campus culture and good contacts, is invaluable.”⁶



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

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

Tabletop Exercise

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

Steps For Running Election Tabletop Exercises

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

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

STEP 3 For each scenario, discuss as a crisis response team:

- How will the crisis be detected and communicated to the crisis response team?
 - How should the team respond in the first 24 hours? What does success look like during this period?
 - What should the response be in the medium term (1 to 4 weeks after the crisis)? What does success look like during this time period?
-

STEP 4 Within each response, identify roles, responsibilities, and escalation processes:

- Who activates the response?
 - What would each crisis response team member do?
 - How will you communicate with each other?
-

STEP 5 Debrief the exercise:

- What areas were unclear?
 - What decision-making rules did you use?
-

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

Sample Scenario

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

Transition to Resilience Planning

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

- Lack of understanding of school policy
- Lack of tolerance for opposing viewpoints
- Dissatisfaction with grievance procedures or perceived lack of accountability from administration

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



Establish and promote a strategy for making statements.

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

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

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>