

Case Study Compendium of Campus Flashpoints

Purpose of the Case Study Compendium

Climate flashpoints—including protests and demonstrations, controversial campus speakers, and viral social media posts—can catch colleges and universities off guard, making it difficult to craft a swift and appropriate response. Progressive institutions recognize they must have a proactive strategy in place to address student concerns and minimize consequences.

The Case Study Compendium can prepare leadership at your institution for a variety of potential campus flashpoints. In meetings with your department or your institution's crisis response team, use the case studies to brainstorm possible responses to the following scenarios, assess your institution's readiness for potential campus climate flashpoints, and develop strategies to prepare your campus's response.

Consider the general discussion questions below for all case scenarios.

General Discussion Questions

1. Has a similar flashpoint occurred on our campus or a nearby campus before? What did we do well? What could we have done better?
2. What parts of our campus culture could contribute to an incident like this? What pre-emptive measures can we take to address these issues?
3. What is our top priority in addressing this flashpoint? What key response components would serve that priority?
4. How do different groups communicate and coordinate with one another following a campus flashpoint such as this? How do we minimize redundant communication between different points of contact?

Case Study Compendium

Speaker Event Controversy

Case Details

A student group at Elm University, a public institution, invited John Doe, a controversial journalist and lecturer, to speak. Mr. Doe has a history of making inflammatory statements that have been judged as misogynist, transphobic, and intolerant by many observers. However, supporters view him as a crusader for free speech practices, particularly within the higher ed setting. Previous lectures by Mr. Doe on other campuses prompted vocal protests.

The student group followed university protocol and received permission four weeks in advance of the event to invite and host Mr. Doe. The event was publicized according to university norms and admission was open to the general public.

A week before the event, other student groups began to mobilize against Mr. Doe on social media. Students wrote opinion pieces in support of and against John Doe in the student newspaper. Four days before the event, the organizing student group informed university officials that protestors were planning to disrupt the event and they were preparing counter protests as a precaution. Public safety officials developed a plan for protests zones for each group outside the venue.

During the event, as Mr. Doe began to speak, protestors inside the hall stood up and began chanting slogans. The protestors faced taunts and vocal hostility from audience members, as well as Mr. Doe, and were asked to leave by organizers. When they refused to leave, they were escorted out by public safety officers.

Discussion Questions

1. What proactive measures can your institution take to prepare for on-campus events with speakers or guests who are known to have sparked past controversy?
2. How can your institution communicate with student groups about ensuring safety and equity when a group is planning to bring a speaker or host an event that may antagonize others on campus?

Anger over Racist Sorority Event

Case Details

Epsilon Kappa Chi (EKC) is one of the oldest and most popular sororities at your institution and is based at an on-campus property registered to their national corporation.

The sorority hosts an annual themed cocktail event. The stated theme of this year's event was 1960's to 70's. Video and photos from the event show students dressed in camo, rice hats, and displaying the Viet Cong flag. According to campus Greek life guidelines, the university cannot punish fraternities and sororities for party themes, only the national headquarters can do so.

Students and community members accuse the sorority of hosting a racist, Vietnam War-themed event. Within hours, students are on social media, demanding action against the sorority and the sisters in the video. Some call for the university to sever all ties with the sorority, including removing EKC from their on-campus property. Local media reaches out to the university and the sorority's national headquarters for comment.

Discussion Questions

1. How has your university dealt with incidents involving Greek students in the past? What have been some of the lessons learned?
2. What do you view as the primary underlying issues/concerns involving Greek life on campus? How do the rules and guidelines impacting Greek status on campus affect institutional response?

Controversial Faculty Comments

Case Details

Professor Smith is a tenured professor in the physics department. He attends a physics conference in Singapore as an invited lecturer. At a morning Q&A session, an audience member asks Professor Smith what steps he believes are necessary to address issues of gender inequality in the field of physics. A visibly irritated Professor Smith responds with the following statement:

"I don't know why there's an imbalance in the field between men and girls, maybe men just find physics more interesting, maybe girls just don't have a natural affinity for physics. It's not my concern."

Someone captures the remarks on video and posts them to social media, where they quickly go viral. Graduate students from the university see the video and start commenting angrily on Twitter. Students tags the physics department in tweets demanding condemnation and action against Professor Smith. The student newspaper notices the tweets and sends an email requesting a comment from the President's office for an article they are releasing on the incident. The article, along with the accompanying video, is published on the student newspaper's website the next day. The story is picked up by local, national, and international news outlets.

Discussion Questions

1. What guidelines does our institution have for responding to comments faculty make as individual actors, whether in their personal lives or on their personal social media accounts?
2. What measures should be taken to address student concerns about faculty behavior?

Title IX Allegations Against Institution

Case Details

Mary, a rising senior at your institution, reported last fall to Public Safety that she was raped by Nick. The ensuing investigation by Public Safety found that the evidence was insufficient to support Mary's charges.

Earlier this week, Mary lodged a Title IX complaint against the university, alleging that university officials ignored evidence she presented, suggested she was at fault in the situation, and tried to convince her to drop the initial charge. This complaint came just one day after the university published the results of a campus climate survey that found over 90% of sexual assaults at your institution go unreported.

Additionally, Mary notified local news outlets about her allegations and has given several interviews on the incident. Regional media coverage is ramping up and several outlets have requested comments from the university.

Discussion Questions

1. How can our institution remain as transparent as possible in ongoing or confidential investigations?
2. What are possible ways this incident could negatively impact our institution moving forward? How can we prepare for these setbacks?

Viral Video Threatens Diversity Recruiting Event

Case Details

In mid-March, a predominantly white Maple University sports team films themselves enthusiastically singing a popular song with lyrics that repeat the n-word a number of times. The video quickly begins circulating on social media. Early the following week, the video has been posted to 20 online sites and there are 352,000 views of the video on YouTube. The story has also been picked up by national media outlets. News reports highlight that Maple's president hasn't spoken out about the incident and that the team members haven't been disciplined. Student groups start calling the administration "racially insensitive" and multiple local and national outlets publish follow ups on the story.

In early April, Maple University will hold its largest diversity recruiting event of the year, which is key to hitting the school's diversity enrollment targets. It's an overnight event when Maple students will host 200 admitted minority students Saturday night. The university is worried that this news story will negatively impact the diversity recruiting event.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the possible enrollment ramifications of this incident and Maple University's response?
2. How can Maple University prepare now and for the future to address a similar campus climate incident when it surfaces?

Campus History Controversy

Case Details

Cody Phillips was one of the founders of Oak Valley State University. He bequeathed significant land holdings and capital to build the university and is honored by a large bust in Phillips Quadrangle, the main campus green that was named in his honor. However, during his lifetime Phillips supported eugenics against people of color. He mandated the university exclude African Americans from study, justifying this action with comments about white superiority. A previous university president acknowledged this earlier exclusion as a historical injustice.

In light of the national political climate, particularly around race, students become increasingly active on campus about social justice issues. One evening, student protestors smash the bust of Phillips. They are arrested by Public Safety officials, charged with vandalism, and informed they will be suspended.

Students protest in-person and on social media demanding disciplinary hearings be stopped and the bust of Phillips be permanently removed from the university. Additionally, protestors demand the university rename Phillips Quadrangle and create a racial justice commission to address other diversity issues on campus. In particular, students of color voice a series of concerns about institutional racism that draw attention from national media.

Discussion Questions

1. Which buildings and statues on campus could be considered problematic due to the individuals and context in which they were erected?
2. What steps has our institution taken to study/address instances of historical wrongdoing on campus or on the part of past administrations? How do we plan to communicate about these steps?

Outcry over Campus Flyers

Case Details

During the middle of the night, a group of unidentified individuals put up a large number of flyers around campus with anti-Semitic messages, including specific references to individuals and student groups. The vandals also spray-painted a swastika on a first-year dorm and wrote "You don't belong here" on a wall in the meeting space for the student Hillel group.

Public Safety officials are notified about the flyers and vandalism early in the morning and initiate an investigation of surveillance footage. The provost's office is also notified about the vandalism. By mid-morning, students across campus are finding and reading the flyers, sparking strong condemnation on social media.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the best ways to communicate to students that an investigation is ongoing? How can you guarantee that the public will receive updates at regular intervals?
2. How can you support students from marginalized identity groups after upsetting public incidents? How can these moments be used to instigate discussion and change on campus?

Administrator's Insensitive Twitter Reply

Case Details

During finals week, Roger, a student at your university, posts a series of tweets about stress related to finals and accuses professors of being unconcerned about student mental health. His tweets quickly gain in popularity and are seen by university administrators, including Marie, a dean in the Communications department.

After finishing a particularly stressful exam, Roger tweets that he feels like he's going to have a breakdown before his next exam. Marie replies to Roger, writing, "Breakdowns and Twitter can wait. Your exam won't."

An uproar erupts on Twitter over this tweet, with dozens of students accusing Marie of trivializing student stress and being insensitive to student mental health difficulties. Many students associate Marie's tweet with the administration at large and decry the university's approach to student mental health. Several students demand Marie be fired.

Discussion Questions

1. What aspects of this scenario led to such significant backlash from the student body? What steps could have been taken to prevent this incident?
2. How does our institution currently address student health, particularly during high-stress periods like finals or senior year job searching?

Campus Slogan Change

Case Details

Your institution's traditional slogan has been 'Born to Fight,' a reference to your mascot, the Warrior. Concerned the slogan promotes violence and aggression, the Board of Trustees approves a new slogan, 'Fighting for a Better Tomorrow.' The Board sees the new slogan as an effective compromise between supporters of the old slogan and proponents of a friendlier slogan.

The President announces the slogan change in a campus-wide email that immediately elicits significant opposition. In particular, alumni decry the new slogan on social media and in communications to the alumni relations office. Calls to the alumni relations office show alumni overwhelmingly oppose the slogan. While current students share mixed opinions about the new slogan, a plurality of students support the change.

The advancement office shares concerns that the slogan blowback will impact alumni donations. Moreover, student opposition on social media is becoming increasingly vocal.

Discussion Questions

1. What institutional changes do you believe lead to particularly vocal responses from alumni?
2. How can your institution assuage alumni concerns after unpopular changes on campus? What long-term actions can your institution take to ensure concerns do not linger?

Faculty Misconduct Reduces Enrollment

Case Details

A professor at Elm is investigated for misconduct twice, and both times the University found that he did not break university policy. Unhappy with this finding, faculty members publicly voice their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the investigation. A news publication writes a story on the incident, which elevates the case to national news status. Young alumni, who support recruitment at Elm, organize on social media and boycott conducting prospective student interviews. After May 1st, Elm's enrollment manager finds that as result of the negative attention Elm has received, yield of American females dropped 5 percent and yield of underrepresented minority students dropped by 16 percent. First year student net tuition revenue dropped by 10 percent.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the possible enrollment ramifications of this incident and Maple University's response?
2. How can your institution successfully communicate to its student body an impartial commitment to fair and comprehensive investigations about sexual misconduct on campus?

Free Speech Media Attention

Case Details

Ace is a student in Professor Wright's class on 'Philosophy of American Governance.' During class discussions, Ace frequently interrupts other students and makes inflammatory comments about American culture, which makes many students feel excluded and uncomfortable. Professor Wright repeatedly asks Ace to let other students speak and in an office visit requests Ace temper his comments to ensure other students felt safe in the class.

Ace shares this conversation in an online blog and on social media. He writes a series of articles about what he deems a violation of his free speech rights at the university. National media attention is quickly drawn to this incident and Ace is interviewed by multiple news outlets saying your institution is a hotbed of free speech suppression. Ace demands an apology from Professor Wright and a university reprimand of Professor Wright's actions. Several politicians issue statements decrying your institution and Professor Wright specifically. Professor Wright speaks with the Provost and says that she has begun to receive hate mail.

Discussion Questions

1. What free speech policy for faculty, staff, and students does our university have in place? When did we last update it?
2. What divisions and departments should monitor social media in response to this scenario? How can our faculty coordinate effectively and share important information?