



EAB

Navigating the New Wave of **Student Activism**

A Briefing for Senior Institutional Leaders

Student Affairs
Forum





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Executive Summary



The new wave of student activism is here to stay and is likely to intensify.

While student activism has long been part of higher education's narrative, colleges and universities across the United States and Canada were caught by surprise by the swift upsurge of activism on campus in late 2015. Expect the current wave of student activism to intensify in coming years, due to changing demographics on campus and increasingly high expectations from students.



There can be significant consequences to mismanaging the institutional response to campus activism.

Mismanaging an institution's response can affect both the institution and individual administrators. Potential impacts include:

- Reputational consequences
- Enrollment declines
- Declining donations and support from alumni and friends
- Threats to student and community safety
- Possible legal action
- Senior leaders' jobs at risk



Addressing student activism is a campus-wide priority that requires preparation, collaboration, and communication among senior leaders.

While student affairs divisions and campus safety offices typically take the lead in responding to campus protests as they arise, best-in-class institutions recognize that successfully addressing student concerns and minimizing these consequences requires proactive planning and leadership from administrators across the institution.



Three complicating factors make today's campus activism challenging to address.

There are some unique factors to activism today that make it particularly challenging for institutions to address, including:

- Renewed debates around free speech
- Ripple effect of student activism on other on- and off-campus constituencies
- Rapidly shifting timelines



Even institutions that considered themselves "sleepy" or quiet have been recently surprised by outbursts of activism that highlight the consequences of not being prepared to respond.

It takes only one viral social media posting, incident, or cause that activates students to dramatically change the campus environment. This EAB briefing includes background information about the new wave of student activism as well as discussion questions, key to-dos, and case examples for each complicating factor to better prepare institutional leaders to plan for and navigate bursts of activism on campus.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Student Activism Is Here to Stay

Changing Demographics Indicate Heightened Levels of Activism

Although the recent wave of protests came to campuses rather suddenly, EAB anticipates that colleges and universities will continue to see increased levels of student activism across the coming years due to changing demographics on campus.

Recent surveys and studies find that today's younger generations are more inclined to protest on campus and in their community. A 2016 survey found that nearly one in ten incoming first-year students in 2015 expects to protest some issue while on campus— an all-time high. The generational characteristics of today's millennials and tomorrow's Generation Z students, combined with the increased diversity of students on campus, have contributed to a mainstreaming of activism at all types of colleges and universities.

Ready to Protest

1 in 10

Incoming freshmen in 2015 expect to protest while on campus— an all-time high

36%

Of surveyed millennials participated in at least one demonstration in the last month

Meet Today's "Firebrand Millennials..."

- Desire to drive meaningful change from inside their organization
- Expect their institution to address their concerns with society at large
- Possess high expectations for rapid change

...And Get Ready for Tomorrow's **Generation Z**

- Digital prowess with social media and building online relationships
- Care deeply about social issues and advocating for change
- Increased generational diversity

“Students today are much more vocal about issues they care about. Before, you might have had a minority of individuals pushing for something, but there's been a real **mainstreaming of activism**. Now, we have so many more minority and international students on campus that it feels like everyone is asking us for something.”

*Vice Provost for Student Services
Canadian Public University*

Source: "What If I Told You... Gen-Z Matters More Than Millennials," *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/goldman-sachs-2016/what-if-i-told-you-gen-z-matters-more-than-millennials/903/>; Heller N, "The Big Uneasy: What's Rolling the Liberal-Arts Campus?" *The New Yorker*, May 30, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/the-new-activism-of-liberal-arts-colleges>; "Millennials, Politics and Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report," *The Millennial Impact*; New J, "Get Ready for More Protests," *Inside Higher Ed*, Feb. 11, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/02/11/survey-finds-nearly-1-10-freshmen-plan-participating-campus-protests>; EAB interviews and analysis.

'Everything Can Change Overnight'

A Single Event Can Trigger a Movement on Campus

Whatever your baseline of campus activism right now, leaders recognize that institutions need to be prepared to recognize and address risk. Institutions can rapidly shift from being sleepy, with low amounts of activist activity, to experiencing a high volume of protests and demonstrations. An ever-evolving range of campus, community, national, and international causes attracts student interest, making it difficult for institutions to predict the issues that will be top of mind for groups on their campus. When it takes just a single remark or a national event to inflame a campus community, many institutions are often caught unprepared.

It Takes Only a Spark



Single social media post quickly draws attention from the campus and media



Student group invites an unexpectedly controversial figure to campus



Split-second decisions during a response are captured on video and go viral online



Well-intentioned statement from a college draws criticism from a third-party group



National or international causes flare up and gain traction at any time



In an Instant

"We were lulled into this sense of security. We felt like we knew our students and the issues they cared about. When [the protests at] Mizzou happened, we were sort of detached. But then, some of our students started a series of protests and marches in solidarity.

As they grew bigger and more frequent, we realized that our leadership and younger staff were not ready to address students' behaviors or actions on campus. For us, it really did change in an instant."

*Vice President for Student Affairs
Private Baccalaureate College*

Difficult to Predict What Students Get Fired Up About

No Shortage of Causes Among Today's Activists



Racial Discrimination
Protests Ignite at
Colleges Across the U.S.



Students Walk Out of
Offensive Comedy Set



Trump Visit to College
Campus Sparks Protest



Million Student March
Protests **Student Debt,**
Tuition Rates



Stanford Students to
Protest **Sexual Assault**
Sentencing at Graduation



Canadian Student Unions
Stand Behind Egyptian
Students in Their Struggle
for **Human Rights**

'The Stakes Are High...We Need to Get It Right'

Potential Consequences for Institutions and Individuals

Colleges and universities face high stakes when responding to campus protests. For both institutions and individual administrators, there are significant consequences to mismanaging today's activism.

Mismanaging activism can threaten the sustainability of the institution itself, with the potential for dramatic impact on future enrollment and alumni support. Institutions could also face possible legal action from a variety of third-party watchdog groups. In some cases, senior leaders have lost their jobs or faced repercussions for mismanaged responses or student safety issues. As a result, frontline administrators are increasingly asking questions about how their actions regarding campus activism might affect their employment.

Fundraising Declines



\$6M

Total drop in new pledges and donations to the University of Missouri in December 2015

Enrollment Impacts



10%

Drop in applications if *The New York Times* covers an institutional scandal in a long-form magazine article

Jobs at Risk



Ithaca College President Resigns After Protests Over Race Issues



Seattle U. Dean, Subject of Protest, Placed on Leave



When Does a Student Affairs Professional Cross the Line?



Exonerated, University of Rochester President Resigns

Source: Kingkade T, "How Media Coverage of Campus Scandals Impacts College Applications," *The Huffington Post*, July 8, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/college-scandals-applications_us_577e6ac1e4b0344d514e1bf9; Simon CC, "Fighting for Free Speech on America's Campuses," *The New York Times*, Aug. 1, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/07/education/edlife/fire-first-amendment-on-campus-free-speech.html?_r=0; EAB interviews and analysis.

What Makes Today's Activism So Challenging?

Three Complicating Factors Necessitate Institutional Collaboration

Typically, student affairs divisions and campus safety officers are the primary responders to protests and demonstrations on campus. However, today's activism is particularly challenging due (in part) to three factors that complicate how institutions respond. Collaboration and communication among senior leaders across the institution are more critical than ever in order to successfully navigate this new environment.

The following pages provide a brief overview of each factor before outlining discussion questions and key to-dos for institutional leaders. Regardless of the current level of student activism on your campus, EAB recommends that senior leaders discuss these factors as part of developing or refining your institutional response strategy.

1



Free Speech Flashpoints

Balancing pressure to protect free speech and promote an inclusive campus climate

2



Ripple Effect Beyond the Front Lines

Activism affects members of the campus community who are not immediately involved in the protest

3



Shifting Timelines and Expectations

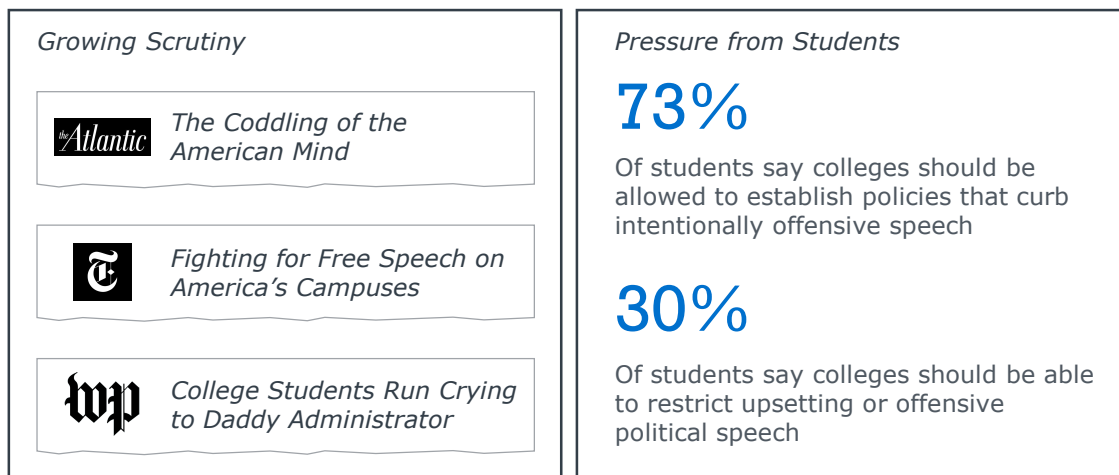
Students and the broader campus community expect an expedited response

Free Speech Flashpoints Intensify on Campus

Modern Campus Activism Challenges Traditional Norms

There are many dilemmas surrounding the current debate over free speech. Institutions must strike a delicate balance in the face of increasing scrutiny from the public about ensuring free speech and growing pressure from students to curb hateful or hurtful speech to create a welcoming campus climate. This balancing act is further complicated by the diverse viewpoints of faculty, staff, and administrators and has received significant attention from the general public and the media.

Striking a Delicate Balance



Understanding Today's Common Flashpoints

Terms in the News

Trigger Warnings

Statement, verbal or written, that warns of possibly disturbing content ahead

Safe Spaces

Designated place (location, group, etc.) where interactions are nonthreatening and people of all identities can feel relaxed

Free Speech Zones

Designated campus location for protests and demonstrations, often governed by formal institutional policies

Third-Party Actors

External groups that monitor campus policies, respond to university activities, or engage student activists

Conflicting Viewpoints

"I appreciate knowing that there's content that might upset me based on my past experiences."

"Today's students are too sensitive about what they are willing to read and discuss in the classroom."

"I need a place where I can find like-minded individuals who understand what I'm going through on campus."

"Students are using 'safe spaces' to hide from ideas they don't like and to avoid difficult conversations."

"Our zone provides a dedicated place that encourages students to advocate for change and share opinions."

"Institutions cannot limit students' rights to free speech and expression to a single campus location."

"We are receiving pressure to update our free speech policy from outside watchdog organizations."

"My advocacy group is receiving training and resources from a national organization interested in a similar cause."

Source: Chomsky A, "The Battle for the Soul of American Higher Education," *The Huffington Post*, May 22, 2016; [Free Expression on Campus: What College Students Think About First Amendment Issues](#), The Knight Foundation, 2018; Heller N, "The Big Uneasy: What's Rolling the Liberal-Arts Campus?" *The New Yorker*, May 30, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/the-new-activism-of-liberal-arts-colleges>; EAB interviews and analysis.

Addressing the Debate over Free Speech

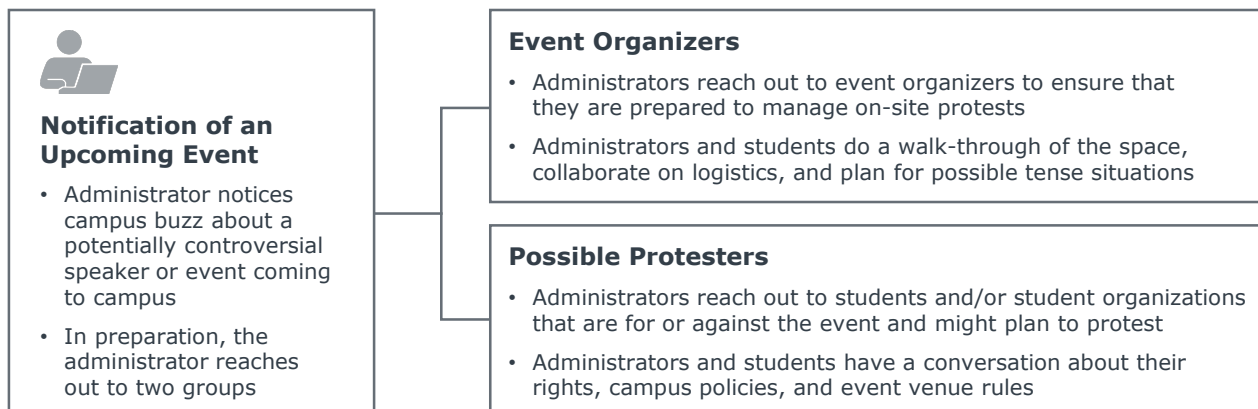
What Senior Institutional Leaders Need to Know and Do Now

An increasingly common flashpoint occurs when potentially controversial speakers are invited to speak on campus. Responding to controversial speakers and events is a task that requires cross-campus collaboration, as illustrated by this example from the University of Michigan. As a campus leadership team, use the Michigan case alongside the following discussion questions and to-dos to audit your current processes and identify areas for improvement.

| | |
|---|--|
| <div><p style="text-align: right;">?</p><h3>Discussion Questions</h3><ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your institution’s policy for speakers and events, including those not hosted by student groups or faculty members? Has the policy been recently revised?• How is your institution tracking events and staying ahead of those that might be controversial?• What is your institution’s process for responding to inquiries about controversial events?• What are the safety and security protocols for your institution when hosting a potentially disruptive event?• How is your institution educating students, faculty, and staff about their rights and responsibilities when hosting or choosing to protest an event on campus?</div> | <div><p style="text-align: right;">✓</p><h3>Takeaway To-Dos</h3><ul style="list-style-type: none"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audit and update relevant policies governing campus speakers and events<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Assess current methods for tracking campus speakers and events<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Review event safety and security protocols<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If necessary, develop for the campus community education strategy and trainings about event-management responsibilities</div> |
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How the University of Michigan Prepares for and Interacts with Potential Activists

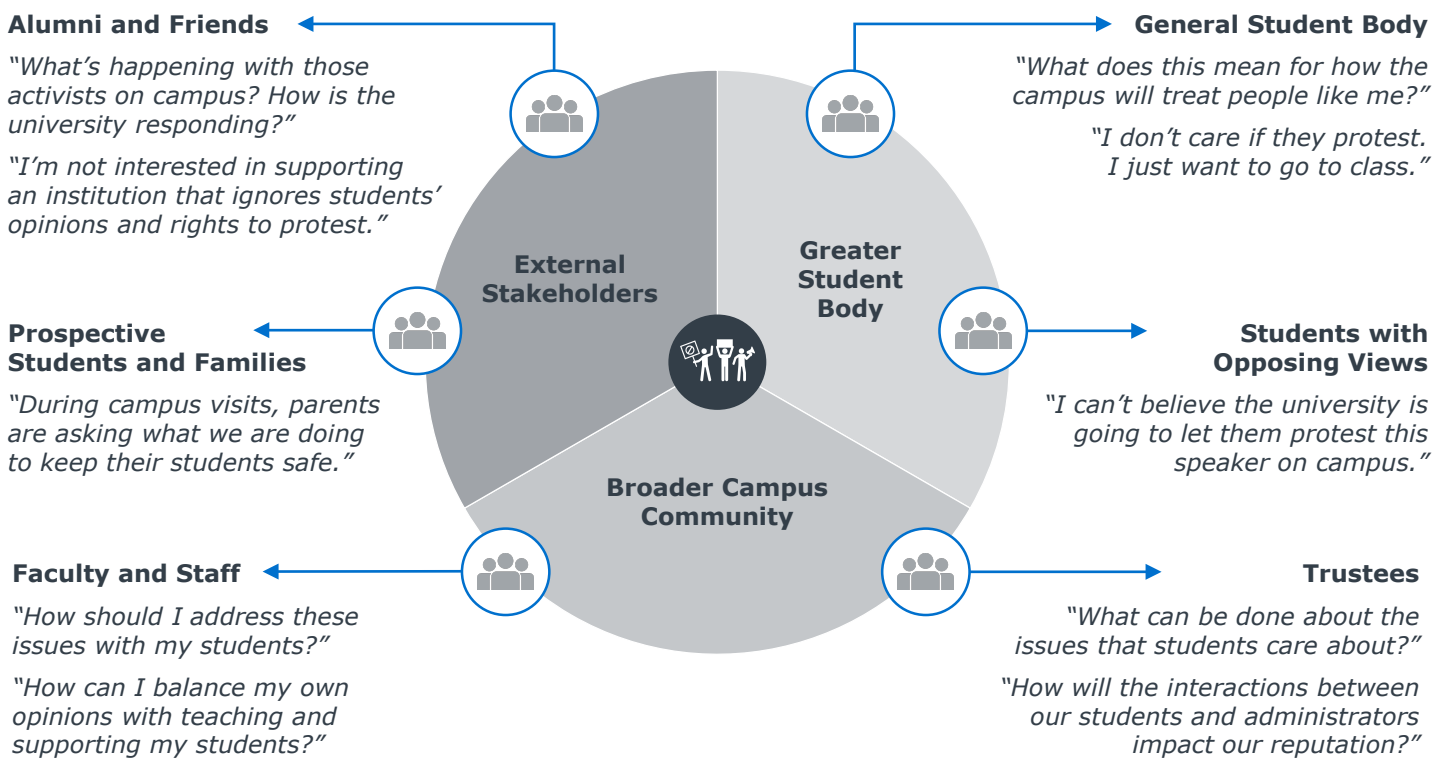
Illustrative Example



The Ripple Effect of Today's Student Activism

Constituencies Across Campus Are Experiencing Activism's Aftershocks

Most institutions experiencing protests or demonstrations focus narrowly on responding to activists and supporting administrators on the front lines. However, campus activism affects more than just the immediate participants. It affects the greater student body, the broader campus community, and even external stakeholders. Each of these constituencies has specific questions and concerns, requiring institutional attention when responding to activism on campus.



Reaching Beyond the Front Lines

What Senior Institutional Leaders Need to Know and Do Now

During an outburst of activism, it is important to address the questions and concerns of the broader campus community and external constituencies. To develop a communication plan, institutions shouldn't wait until they are in the moment. EAB recommends that institutional leaders create a blueprint that can be tailored as the situation unfolds. The questions below are designed to help identify key stakeholders at your institution who need to be better informed about campus activism and to develop an action plan to determine who will communicate with these groups and what information they need to know.

Discussion Questions

- Who are the people beyond frontline activists and responders who should be better informed about campus activism?
- Who is the point person for communicating with each of these constituencies? Should that person change based on the potential cause or movement?
- If an outburst of activism occurs, who will coordinate communications across point people to ensure consistent talking points and messaging?
- What information and key messages does each of these unique constituencies need to know?
- What channels should be used to communicate this information broadly and to specific groups?



With respect to campus activism...

Who **needs to be aware** of what's happening?

- Administrative assistants
- Trustees
- Statewide system officers

Who needs to be able to **educate external stakeholders**?

- Admissions representatives
- Alumni relations and development staff
- Government relations staff

Who needs to **understand how it might affect their daily roles** and responsibilities?

- General student body
- Faculty
- Administrators and staff

Cheat Sheet for Talking About Campus Activism with External Stakeholders

SUGGESTED TALKING POINTS

Sample Categories and Questions

Overview

Short summary of current events on campus

Understanding the Issue

Context about what students are asking for or demonstrating about and why

Articulating the University's Response

Explanation of the response strategy so far and looking ahead into the future

Addressing Top-of-Mind Concerns

Guidance on answering difficult questions

Longer-Term Initiatives

Information about the institution's ongoing or forthcoming efforts to address related issues

Shifting Timelines and Expectations

Administrators Scramble to Keep Pace with and Respond to Student Activity

Today's student activists are able to quickly organize around causes of interest, meaning that institutions need to be prepared to respond at a moment's notice. Using social media, student activists are able to rapidly advocate for change, coordinate action on campus, spread their message far beyond the campus community, and make demands of their institution.

All too often, institutions are caught flat-footed, struggling to stay informed about activists' plans and respond in a timely manner to evolving demands and actions. Colleges and universities need to develop a comprehensive and flexible response to address students' rapidly evolving timelines and expectations.

New Challenges to the Status Quo



Students use **social media** to mobilize and spread information quickly to large groups of people



Institutions struggle to monitor causes of interest, proactively address students' concerns, and provide follow-up



Students are more direct and aggressive about making **demands** of their institution



Institutions dismiss demands at face value, resulting in a breakdown of communication between students and administrators



Students **pop up with protests and demonstrations** to demand change, forgoing traditional routes of input and involvement



Institutions scramble to respond consistently and in an organized way, with the appropriate people, response, and messaging

Developing a Comprehensive Response Strategy





What Senior Institutional Leaders Need to Know and Do Now

Addressing student activism is an institution-wide challenge that requires thoughtful preparation and discussion long before an outburst of activism ever takes place. One of the most important tasks for leaders is the development of a comprehensive strategy that outlines how the institution will respond to current student activists. As a campus leadership team, use the following discussion questions and to-dos alongside the case from the University of Florida to develop a comprehensive strategy and a team of prepared frontline responders.

Discussion Questions

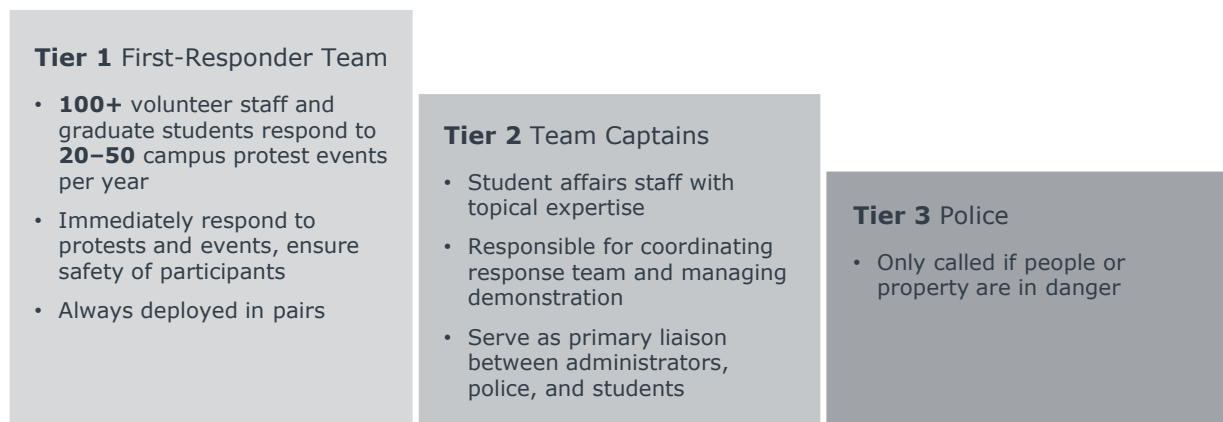
- Once a protest emerges, which stakeholders should be involved in key decisions on how to respond? In cases of disagreement, who will act as the final decision-maker?
- Is there an existing group that can coordinate the response, or is formation of a new group needed?
- Who will respond to activists in the moment? What specialized training might they need?
- What tactics will first responders and law enforcement officers use to de-escalate tense situations and calibrate the response to ensure student safety?
- How will the responders debrief after an event? Who will coordinate necessary follow-up actions?

Takeaway To-Dos

-  Identify point person to develop and coordinate initial response strategy
-  Identify the individuals who will be designated as frontline responders and work with activists directly
-  Define de-escalation tactics for frontline responders, administrators, and law enforcement
-  Establish after-action debrief and follow-up protocols

University of Florida's Protest Safety Team

A Multitiered Approach to Responding to Student Protests and Demonstrations



Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Actionable Guidance on Next Steps

Resources Available Through EAB's Student Affairs Forum

In light of these challenges, EAB has developed research and resources to help members effectively prepare for and respond to activism on campus. Below is a selection of current and forthcoming resources related to student activism and campus climate available to Student Affairs Forum members. All of our resources are available to our members online: eab.com.

The Student Affairs Forum is a membership of chief student affairs officers and other divisional leaders from colleges and universities across North America. Today, more than 200 student affairs leaders rely on our suite of resources and services, including our annual national meeting series, an extensive library of best practice research, professional development opportunities, time-saving tools, and on-demand access to topical experts.

Selected Resources from EAB



Improving Institutional Preparation and Response

- Risk Management Tactics for Climate Flashpoints
- How to Use Social Listening for Climate Flashpoints and Crises
- Prep Pack: Case Study Compendium and Resources



Managing Free Speech Issues

- Free Speech Policy Audit and Compendium
- How to Educate and Engage Today's Student Activists
- Strategies for Responding to Bias-Related Incidents



Building Stakeholder Awareness on Campus

- Cabinet Briefing: Navigating the New Wave of Student Activism
- Student Unrest: What Advancement Leaders Need to Know
- Strategic Communication to Mitigate the Enrollment Impact of Campus Climate Crises



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