



# **Understanding And Surviving The Modern Campus Protest Movement**

Insights

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Each day we witness various factions in our society establishing a stronger platform from which to launch their voices. It seems what used to be taboo or met with disapproval has now become acceptable speech deserving of a place to exist. We have seen groups of people mobilizing on issues in lightning-quick fashion, with focused intent, and an expectation that confrontation will occur.

Young people are looking at adults' reactions to the endless onslaught of current societal friction and modeling these behaviors on school campuses with greater frequency. Whether on the football field or in the classroom, these modern protests carry greater risk to the physical safety and emotional and spiritual well-being of those on our campuses. With this reality in mind, we strongly recommend that school administrators consider acting proactively to prepare their campuses for the day when a modern-day protest lands on your doorstep.

## **Accept Your Campus Is At Risk**

The first step is accepting the fact that no school is immune from a campus protest. While it is true that public schools present greater opportunity for constitutionally protected grievances to be aired, private schools should accept that they, too, are also ripe for an unannounced protest.

The private school often represents an "institution" assumed to reflect or promote a particular side of a societal issue in the public eye. For example, right or wrong, factions of society equate some religious schools as being extremely anti-LGBT. As societal issues emerge that pit religious freedom against LGBT rights, students representing these two positions may bring the issue to your campus, whether proactively or reactively (e.g. student publications, slogans printed on clothes, car decals, statements during student gatherings or in classrooms, protest signs at school events). Once students begin to act out in these ways, the trend will likely continue expanding, sometimes outside of the immediate school community with the help of social media. As the message carries, so too does the potential for reaction to the institution by outsiders, often through protests on campus and by inundating the social or traditional media.

## **Determine Your Campus Identity**

The next step is taking into consideration the identity or character of your institution. How your school prepares and ultimately responds to a protest should be reflective of the values it claims and the type of student it intends to cultivate. Does your school stress compassion? Does it value intellect above all? Do you place focus on personal integrity and community service? By using your school's

identity to frame your plan for a protest, your actions and reactions will be authentic to your institution.

### **Evaluate What Your School Can Do Now**

While schools can certainly maintain a wait-and-see approach, getting ahead of the curve may help to control groups trying to use your school to promote their personal agenda. Whether private or public, schools have the right to establish policies, rules, and regulations. Brainstorm some worst-case scenarios and play them out under your school's policy to determine whether it would be effective, and how you might control your campus identity if the situation cannot be prevented.

Ultimately, it is fine to distance your institution from the views of students or outsiders who are using school facilities to express ideas that do not reflect the school's identity. The key is finding a way to end activities that interfere with your operations or other people's rights.

### **Find Opportunities To Express Your School's Voice**

Some schools may find it advantageous to express your institution's opinion on modern day campus protests before one occurs. For example, in a K-12 setting, consider using age-appropriate teaching methods to help students develop tools for dealing with emotionally charged issues in a manner that aligns with your school's identity. In a college or university setting, consider offering courses or educational sessions that examine the modern-day protest movement through the lens of your institution's identity. This could prove instrumental in setting the expectation of a campus culture that is based on listening and working through differences on societal matters.

### **Be Ready To React Quickly And Squarely**

Finally, the key to your institution's survival of a protest is how promptly and meaningfully leadership reacts. If physical safety is a potential issue, get law enforcement involved right away to demonstrate your commitment to minimizing physical risks.

Numerous examples exist where an institution failed to "take a stand" or respond quickly to protests, resulting in extended negative publicity or removal of top administrators. The reality now is that "timely" almost means "in the time it takes to tweet." Proactive preparation is key to fulfilling this unspoken timeliness requirement. If you know your institution's identity and have a plan to react to worst-case scenarios, you will be in a very good position to identify an appropriate response.

Resist the temptation to issue a public statement immediately. Give yourself at least an hour to use your resources (including your attorney to ensure your communications are privileged) to determine your initial messaging. Once ready to move, identify a strategy going forward to diffuse the situation and minimize negative consequences.

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