

Ideas for Campus Leaders during the 2024 Election Period

As you've likely experienced, these are times of great uncertainty, and even fear for many students, staff, and faculty, regardless of political ideologies. Reactions to the Middle East violence have already strained campus relationships, and the November elections may raise additional challenges. With gratitude to campus leaders and experts who shared these suggestions with us, we offer a few messaging, programming, and planning ideas, separated by pre- and post-election periods. The goals are to increase support for despairing students, help celebrating students remain safe, help students stay in touch across differences, condemn threats and harassment, model respect that spans political parties, and point out the advantages of living in a democracy.

Before Election Results

Students will be more confident that you speak without bias about the post-election period during this time when all are unsure about the Presidential election results. This may be the only period for doing the following tasks, which could have a deep and positive effect on the period after election results are announced.

For presidents and provosts:

- When communicating with the campus community, note the moment (e.g. "We're fortunate to live in a nation in which we vote on candidates for office and key issues. Most people in the world do not have that privilege. I hope you will vote [insert plans to help them with that]. Emotions may run high afterward. We're moving from a period in which nearly all of us are hopeful but anxious to days in which election results will begin arriving, and when some celebrate, and others mourn."). Ask, with a story of your own, students to reflect on being compassionate friends, with approaching news of the prevailing candidates and issues (e.g., "This will soon be like the moment when you walk out of an exam and swallow the temptation to say 'That was easy!' When you see the anxious face of your friend, have the courage to think about what might be the kindest thing to do for your friend in that moment.").
- Delegate to your staff the tasks to be accomplished during this period. Ideas are included in the remainder of this idea list.
- Begin preparations with law enforcement and your cabinet for dealing with threats, harassment, and violence, including from off-campus and off-shore sources.
- Confer with your cabinet, including law enforcement, to plan for spontaneous mass celebrations that might occur when a trusted news source calls the Presidential election for one candidate. Together, consider your reactions as well to potential scenarios that are probably more likely if: the Presidential election is close, the Electoral College result differs from the popular vote, and the losing candidate contests the election. Flashpoint moments might include:
 - recounts with controversy over methods,
 - neither candidate has a majority of the Electoral College votes, and the U.S. House will decide the winner,
 - pivotal litigation (analyzed and updated frequently [here](#)),
 - the December 17 votes of Electoral College electors in each state, and
 - January 6, 2025.
- Send frequent notes of support to your staff and faculty, who are already feeling the stress of dealing with issues related to the violence in the Middle East and soon may be dealing with election-related tensions.

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For student affairs professionals:

- Consider helping student groups with opposing political views issue a message together, exploring what helpful statement both groups might be willing to join in making (e.g., encourage fellow students not to repost a post that might not be accurate, ask students to support friends who favored a losing candidate, etc.). A group of students authored [this manual](#) that offers ideas that they found useful as they convened conversations between leaders of polarized student groups. Please take courage, as you are likely to get many “no’s” before you find two groups willing to do this. Their saying anything constructive together helps to humanize the post-election situation
- Local groups may try to discourage students from voting. You may need to support students as they seek to vote with information on how to vote safely. To report voter harassment or discrimination, file with the [U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights portal](#).
- Do what you can to encourage students who might want to celebrate election results to do so privately or at least in a safe space or manner. Consider that potential violence against celebrants might be committed by a single unbalanced person or an armed vigilante group from the surrounding community. This may do no more than reduce the size of the celebration, but even small reductions may help.
- Organize small group facilitated discussions for students (an example [here](#)) or a larger group with structure (an example [here](#)).

For campus communications professionals:

- Think through who will be the persuasive messengers for each group on campus and begin helping them prepare their potential messages for a variety of scenarios. As you know, repetition of a message helps break through this information fog.
- Suggest and be ready to transmit these messages through a variety of means and platforms that will reach the maximum number of people – the campus social media as well as email? Posters? Posts on campus buses? Photos for the student newspaper of student leaders speaking together? Through messengers whom students trust?
- Deans and other leaders will want guidance from you about what they can include in messages – campus values, programming, etc. – and help with such items as photos they can include in media.

For campus law enforcement professionals:

- Watch and prepare for the moment that a trusted news outlet calls the Presidential election for one candidate, as students may flow out of their living places into campus yards to celebrate, even if this occurs at 1:00 a.m. At the same moment, others in the broader community may erupt in anger and disappointment, so it will be important to watch the perimeter of the student celebrations for potential attacks on celebrating students.
- Prepare a checklist for students who join a mass celebration – how to remain safe, considering the broader community in which the campus is located.

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After Election Results

Your election-related statements from this point forward will be scrutinized for bias. Still, there are moments when your silence would be even worse – an indication that you are clueless or indifferent about what students are experiencing. You also may need to condemn hateful conduct (even if legally protected) or urge safe conduct, especially if anger about election results may tempt broader community residents to use violence or threaten campus officials. Being informed daily on the pulse of the campus and surrounding community will be exceedingly helpful to getting this right.

For presidents and provosts:

- Campus staff may await your direction before deciding whether to undertake the steps below.
- Though multiple messengers are needed when there is distrust, deans and other campus leaders whom student know and see more frequently may feel uncertain about whether they should speak and how to do so effectively. Receiving clear and rapid guidance from your offices will enable leaders to respond in a timely, supportive, and constructive manner.

For student affairs professionals:

- The campus mood may change as election-related litigation proceeds and politicians speak. Feelings will certainly change if there is post-election violence near this campus or among students anywhere. Assign staff members to check in daily with each pertinent group of students or those who interact regularly with them, including influential members of the community, student leaders, and parents. Ask other staff to follow social media used by students, local and national news, and news of what is occurring each day on other campuses. For simple forms for the checking in, see [this guide](#), (p. 12-13). Synthesize these reports daily and send the synthesized version to campus leaders, communications professionals, and campus safety professionals.

- Engage students in conversation, e.g., “What are your plans after the announcement of election results?”
- Work with counseling personnel and campus faith leaders to develop programming responsive to student needs. For example, do some students need to talk (perhaps an administrator, student group’s faculty advisor, or faculty member accompanied by a skilled facilitator might let students know they’re available in a designated room to have coffee with students)? Or does the mood suggest activities to lighten the tone or elevate hope? Is this a moment to avoid crowd events that might be targeted by outside individuals or groups for violence? Might they take workshops in difficult conversations? Would statements of empathy help? For programming ideas, see [this guide](#), (p. 28 to 41).

For communication professionals:

- Read the student affairs reports on the campus mood, brainstorm, and prepare ahead for a range of scenarios with an aim to support, keep safe, provide safe outlets for students’ interests and concerns, and humanize interactions among students.

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For communication professionals (continued):

- Who are potential messengers trusted by each group -- a student leader? a faculty advisor? an alumnus? If one messenger is associated with a political group, balance with another messenger.
- What messages have been identified by student affairs and counseling professionals as important to convey – empathy? humor that might lighten the mood? photos, articles in student newspaper that the campus has joined as one to mourn violence (if it occurs) together?
- What are the similar messages with enough repetition of a theme that they will break through the information fog – for example, to humanize those of opposing political views.
- Offer message templates approved by the president’s and provost’s offices to deans and other leaders who are personally known by groups of students and other constituents.
- Prepare to speak quickly, before false narratives take hold or students decide that their leaders do not care about them.
- Prepare to speak out to condemn and avoid normalizing disturbing acts and speech, even while affirming rights of free expression.
- Try to include positive themes (e.g., most Americans want more unity and reject violence, we are a resilient people, our campus community is stronger together, we are fortunate to live in a democracy).

For deans and faculty:

- It might help for faculty to model respect for those with whom they disagree and express empathy for the various feelings of the students. At the same time, it won’t help if they “spotlight” students to discuss a political topic or make political statements themselves that might make some students worry about whether they will be graded fairly if they hold different political views. For illustrative statements to faculty, with consideration for faculty choice, see [this guide](#), (pp. 9 and 33-34).
- Deans might ask faculty to watch for students in distress or for a student who misses class for several days and, when that occurs, to send an inquiry (“I noticed you have missed class. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”). If concerns persist, faculty members can alert an administrator or counselor to help the students.

For law enforcement professionals:

- Reach out to campus personnel or students who receive threats or who are harassed, offering them suggestions on how to remain safe and offer protection, if warranted.
- Watch for reports that hate groups, which often insert themselves into disasters or conflicts, are working on campus or in the community. Through leafleting, joining crowds, or projecting hate symbols, these groups sometimes aim to secure publicity, recruit new members, and sow division. National updates on hate group activities are available [here](#). Let other campus leaders know of their presence and seek their help in supporting anxious students and building resilience.