LEADERSHIP RESPONSE TO CAMPUS FREE SPEECH INCIDENTS

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To Alyce,

Who manages everything with or without me around

And to Virginia, Charles Eleanor (and Jack),

The crazy crew at 642. Somewhere between the red plate, the chocolate chip pancakes,

and the dancing and singing, magic happens. Thank you for that.
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The poet Marge Piercy writes, in “To Be of Use,” that she likes to surround herself with people who work. She extols the virtues of those “who do what has to be done, again and again.” Her focus is group work and the rhythm created by that collection of tasks done, done right, and then done again.

I have had the great fortune to be surrounded by such people. In the words of Piercy, these are people “who submerge in the task.” These workers include my colleagues at the University of Scranton, my family who pulled together to pull this off, the “dream team” of C-17, my dissertation advisors, and the inspiring leaders who managed the controversies described in these pages.

Fathers Quinn, Keller, and Pilarz inspired me to want to know more about higher education. They lived the ethic of hard work each day. It was from observing them and the issues each tackled that I derived my interest in what equips these leaders to face difficult situations. I should mention that Father Pilarz introduced me to Marge Piercy.

The combined work and accomplishments of my family are catalogued in what we call the Red Plate Book. For the last 12 years, we have memorialized the accomplishments of our clan on the pages of that book, as the honoree is served their meal on the red plate. The book is filled with the hard work and accomplishments of these inspiring people who lift me up and push me to defy the gravities of age, comfort, and believing that I know it all. Nobody works harder, and I try to keep up each day.

Piercy describes those “who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward.” I, like the poet, prefer to be with these people. I had the great fortune to be...
among just that sort in the dream team of C-17. I would join them in that “mud and muck” any day, and some months it felt that way. I was humbly lucky to be among them.

To Peter Eckel, chair extraordinaire, and to Larry Moneta and Pat Leahy, my readers, thank you for distinct reasons. The line “doing what has to be done, again and again” is about Peter Eckel. My drafts, redrafts, third and fourth drafts, all came back in lightning speed, each pushing me to think more clearly. Larry Moneta showed us both, as a professor and in his role at Duke, what heroic and challenging leadership looks like. Pat, my former colleague at Scranton, inspired me to complete the Exec Doc program and by his role as president at Wilkes, and soon at Monmouth. Thank you all.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the help, time, and inspiration provided by those talented presidents and university leaders who managed the difficult events chronicled herein. I came into this project wanting to understand how someone can handle something so polarizing and difficult. The character displayed by these thoughtful leaders is a large part of my answer. I look forward to the chance to speak to them again, with or without a microphone, to learn more about leadership.

Piercy states, “The work of the world is common as mud, Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust. But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.” The common work of my collective team, in this mud, is a “thing worth doing well done.” Our collective experience has a “shape that satisfies.” It has been a privilege to be among the rhythm of that work.
ABSTRACT

LEADERSHIP RESPONSE TO FREE SPEECH INCIDENTS

Robert B. Farrell

Peter Eckel

Free speech incidents on college and university campuses present problems without simple solutions. Examples continue to emerge where a speaker is prevented from coming to campus, or once on campus, is shouted down to prevent the speech. The consequences of that confrontation do not end there. The protests can turn violent. Groups from outside campus are attracted to the spotlight on these events to make a visible stand in the polarized political environment of this time. Commentators lament that colleges and universities, considered the bastion of open thought and discourse, would be closed to controversial ideas. Others argue that certain ideas have no place in the inclusive environments that higher education institutions have worked hard to create. As these events unfold, leaders—often presidents—are faced with decisions that will take time to resolve and require a complex understanding of context, both in the world and in the campus community. The decisions of leaders, when faced with difficult choices, reveal the process by which successful leaders handle adaptive problems for which no solution is readily known and for which hard work is required to understand, grow, evolve, and adapt. The response of leaders for this research is grouped broadly around framing and understanding the problem and then the actions taken to address the problems to understand how leaders respond to the issues presented by free speech challenges at colleges and universities. This research explores four case studies at private nonprofit campuses that hosted controversial speakers invited from outside of the campus...
community: Alma College, Dillard University, DePaul University, and Middlebury College. The events at these institutions offer insight into the ways in which leaders respond to challenges without easy and known solutions.
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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Headlines trumpet an epidemic of free speech intolerance on college campuses (S. J. Abrams, 2018; Brooks, 2015; Continetti, 2017; Freidersdorf, 2016; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; MacDonald, 2017). Similar concerns have been expressed in the United Kingdom (O’Malley, 2018). Consider the case of Middlebury College as an example. There, a group of students shouted down Charles Murray, noted libertarian and father of a Middlebury graduate, who had been invited to speak about his latest book focused on the divide between rich and poor in this country. Twenty years earlier, Murray (1994) co-authored the book, *The Bell Curve*, about which the students’ protests were centered. Murray’s detractors argued that *The Bell Curve* made the case that Blacks are genetically inferior to Whites. Murray disputes that interpretation. Nevertheless, a student group, the American Enterprise Club, invited Murray to speak on his latest book. Middlebury President, Laurie Patton, provided an introduction and cautioned the audience that she disagreed with Murray but thought the students should listen to and question him. However, as Murray took the stage, protesters stood, turned their backs on him, and read in unison a prepared statement about why Murray should not be at Middlebury. Following the reading, the students began chanting. With signs waving, students dancing, and intoned chants, such as “anti-women, anti-gay, Charles Murray go away,” the protesters maintained the din and disruption for 20 minutes. During that time, Murray stood at the podium, silently watching. Finally, a collection of Middlebury administrators, along with the faculty representative there to question and debate him, Allison Stanger, joined him on stage and decided to move the talk. Murray was escorted to another location where the talk and interview were recorded. At its conclusion, a band
of masked protesters waited for the speaker and assaulted Murray and Stanger as they made their way across a parking lot to their car. Stanger suffered neck injuries. The protest continued as the group rocked the car until it could make its way out of the crowd. President Patton, a front row witness of the events of the evening, faced a challenge. She and the majority of students at the talk were vehemently opposed to Murray’s views. Those views challenge, among others, the fundamental values of inclusion and diversity. By defending Murray’s right to speak, she placed herself on his side. Condone the protests, and she would strike a blow against free speech. President Patton chose to condemn the violence and the disruptive protest. While she promised that the college would deal with the matter through its disciplinary process, she acknowledged that free speech requires an understanding of its effect on those at the margins. Further, she stressed disappointment at the way Middlebury students dealt with adverse ideas. Middlebury disciplined 67 students within the next 3 months (Gluckman, 2017). News coverage of the protest was widespread (Continetti, 2017; Goldstein, 2017; Henninger, 2017; Jaschik, 2017a; MacDonald, 2017) as was readily available video of the whole event (DiGravio, 2017).

Given a case such as Middlebury, its stakes, profile, and the issues weighed, a president must be careful in choosing words and taking positions on the issues at hand—in effect, walking a leadership tightrope. Those situations often find presidents trying to lead in a situation that pits fundamental principles of diversity and inclusivity against freedom of speech and inquiry. Does the president side with free speech at the expense of inclusivity? Does diversity of opinion, some of which may be distressing to certain students, create problems for overall campus diversity and inclusion? Is the dignity of
each campus member the coin of the realm, even if promoting that value suppresses speech? Is the campus too sensitive or not sensitive enough? Is the issue erupting today symptomatic of larger societal issues? If so, how does the campus learn from that while not doing harm to the fleeting experiences of the students who sojourn there? That is not to say that other factors remain sidelined. Those might include the negative publicity or the angry calls from parents, donors, and friends.

In these moments, the president is called upon and expected not only to speak, but to lead (Birnbaum, 1992; Nelson, 2000, 2002). Before a president can act, the situation needs to be understood, and factors need to be identified and weighed and balanced. Ultimately, a decision needs to be articulated and supported and a case made justifying the approach that is cogent and carries the gravitas that recognizes the importance of the values at stake.

Free speech is a complex leadership challenge facing many university presidents and likely to face more. What is “free speech”? It is the right to express in words or in actions an opinion or position (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017). It is what the U.S. Supreme Court has called the central ingredient of all other forms of freedom (Cardozo, 1937). Its first amendment siblings—freedom of the press and freedom of religion—are both forms of speech. Neither are the focus of this research, nor is the right of someone to speak their mind on public issues on public property. These issues, while controversial in application and headline grabbing, present a different challenge to a leader. The type of speech under examination here is the voluntary recognition of free speech on private property and the priority given to speech by the academy allowing institutions to pursue the purpose of teaching and learning. Thus, a threat to free speech on campus becomes a
threat to the mission of higher education itself. The weight of that burden exacerbates the
challenge. Free speech is further complicated by the academy’s tradition of academic
freedom. Academic freedom represents a corollary to free speech found uniquely on
college campuses. Academic freedom, as defined by the American Association of
University Professors (AAUP, n.d.) in its 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic
Freedom and Tenure, stands for the freedom of professors to teach, research, publish, and
speak without fear of rebuff by their institutions. This study intends to focus on the
leadership challenges of balancing multiple leadership options where answers are not
easily found or legally defined.

As the Middlebury and other examples demonstrate, free speech and leadership
intersect. This intersection is shaped by a number of factors. First, the application of free
speech on public versus private campuses is complicated. It has a constitutional
component derived from the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and a long history
of Supreme Court precedent interpreting the meaning of the right (e.g., Abrams v. United
Johnson, Snyder v. Phelps). In some ways, the constitutional component, while
complicated and nuanced, is the easy part. For example, as an arm of the government, a
public university may not restrain speech. This fact gives the controversial speaker who
desires to speak on a public campus a right to be there in a way that does not exist on a
private campus. Harder still is the application of free speech on a private college campus.
At a private university, the application of First Amendment legal precedent is instructive
but not controlling. Unlike a public university leader, a private leader is not the
government, nor can that leader fall back upon a legal obligation to avoid a difficult
balancing. The private leader may consider school policies that sound like first amendment rights and may weigh those policy interpretations with other important and possibly infringed rights (e.g., to be free from racist speech). The idea and purpose of free speech become the focus, as does its place at the core of U.S. higher education. As one advocate put it, “Free speech is bred into the bones of a modern university, and any institution that sets those principles aside can no longer be meaningfully regarded as a proper institution of higher education” (Whittington, 2018, p. 28).

The complicated and high stakes issue of campus free speech manifests itself differently on different campuses. For example, as stated above, if private, nonprofit schools are considered, then issues that pertain to strict, First Amendment rights, as applied to a public campus, become instructive but not controlling (Scaduto & Fourlas, 2017). Additionally, the nonprofit sector represents the vast majority of place-based institutions, which consist of the known universe of free speech incidents reported in the last several years. The issue of whether the institution is sectarian may play a role as a factor weighed and evaluated among others (Whittington, 2018). Limitations that may apply to the views allowed or honored on a sectarian campus add a layer of consideration for leaders of those institutions (Fiorenza & Schnurr, 2000; Jaschik, 2018). The common example of this conflict plays out on Catholic campuses each year as pro-choice politicians appear, speak, and receive honorary degrees invoking the ire of local bishops, usually without mentioning that subject. Organizations such as the Cardinal Newman Society seek out these instances described earlier and raise the matter, publicly, with local bishops thereby forcing a public battle. Such battles raise the risk of reputational damage for a Catholic college or university.
As with the sectarian conflicts mentioned previously, free speech incidents in higher education often play out on the front page of newspapers—some local, but others national. Not only will media coverage add a public relations consideration, it may extend or distort the duration of an incident by either follow-up articles or drawing attention to a flashpoint while ignoring the longer term effects or harmonious solution. At that point, the pressures of the response on campus leadership include reputational risk to a greater extent than if the matter had remained a localized or unreported campus controversy (Jaschik, 2017a; Theus, 1993). If the focus of this research is limited to nationally covered events, then campus leaders face reputational harm as a common factor to add to the list of concerns.

Third, free speech incidents as they relate to leadership are fluid. The president may join preparations for an anticipated event. The president may attend the event or respond to the immediate incident via a public statement or a statement to the internal community in the aftermath of the events. The president may choose not to make a statement at all. Public and internal comments may be the same day, the next day, or a week later as the facts become known. The comments are covered by the media. Not covered is the ongoing effort to understand the root of the issue or to heal fissures revealed by the dispute, its handling, and any aftermath. On a college campus, that follow up may extend through the remainder of that academic term, or it may spark a response that is a year or more in the making (Brown, 2017; Gluckman, 2017; Wax, 2018). Thus, though the “incident” may attract news coverage, the focus of this research extends beyond that.
Leadership is a contested space. Leadership on a college or university campus is particularly so as stakeholders represent often divergent interests and perspectives. Students may believe strongly that any speaker who threatens the inclusive community is not welcome. A recent Knight Foundation (2018) poll revealed that students value diversity more than free speech, for example. A subsequent survey revealed a different perspective from faculty (S. J. Abrams, 2018) who overwhelmingly support free speech rights. Leaders must consider other voices as well. Trustees may weigh in on the reputation of the university or any threat to its mission, which has been entrusted to them to safeguard. As mentioned earlier, sectarian authorities may hold certain speakers in contempt in contradiction to the desires of campus constituencies. Community interests may care about the speaker as well. Thus, leadership must consider if and how to engage the viewpoint of the community.

Different institutional leaders may take the lead depending on the institution and the incident. Sometimes the primary leader may be the president, but it need not be (Haidt, 2017; Reilly, 2016; Svrluga, 2016). Internal free speech incidents, such as the instructor at Yale, Erica Christakis (2015), who sent an email to students about Halloween costumes, may fall into the responsibility of a dean or a provost (Haidt, 2017). A member of the campus community speaking on a controversial issue may arouse a set of considerations different from those stirred when the speaker is invited to campus from the outside (Whittington, 2018). External issues such as external speakers, particularly with media coverage, often involve a presidential response (Goldstein, 2017). For example, issues of academic freedom are relevant to the musings of a faculty member in
a way that would not impact a scholar from outside the gates. The internal versus external
distinction may impact from whom the response is delivered.

Therefore, the latest iteration of the free speech battle presents a challenge to
college and university leadership. The challenge requires leaders to respond, in some
way, and confront issues fundamental and important to a diverse group of constituents.
This study attempts to understand how leaders of private, nonprofit universities
understand, frame, and respond to free speech controversies on campus. Given the
framing above, the research questions pursued in this study are:

1. In what ways do private, nonprofit campus leaders frame, articulate, and
   understand the issues at stake when faced with a free speech incident on their
campus?
2. What do those leaders do in response? How is it understood by key
   stakeholders, such as faculty, alumni, and students?

To understand this phenomenon, the study draws upon an adaptive leadership
framework developed by Harvard professor, Ronald Heifetz (1994). Heifetz divides
problems into two categories: (a) technical, and (b) adaptive. Technical problems require
a specific and known action. The example he uses is snow on a road. It causes a problem
when people cannot get through. The technical solution is to plow it—problem solved.
Another example is a bacterial infection for which a physician can prescribe antibiotics.
For these situations, one relies on authority to fix the problem (Heifetz, 1994).

An adaptive problem has no apparent solution. To work toward resolution,
multiple constituencies must come together under the right stresses (Heifetz, 1994); he
likens that environment to a pressure cooker: enough to keep things hot, yet not too much
to avoid exploding. A real-life example used by Heifetz of an adaptive problem was a
copper plant in Tacoma, Washington in the early 1980s. It was spewing arsenic into the
air of the surrounding communities. The plant was the only large employer in the area, and it had spent millions to upgrade its technology to meet standards, yet it still rained arsenic on the community from its smokestacks. The EPA commissioner came into this situation with no clear winning strategy. Instead, he rallied people, provided information, brought the parties together, and gave them time to think about the problem without taking drastic or swift action. In the end, the plant chose to shut down, but not before the community had figured out a process to deal with the impact of its closing (Heifetz, 1994).

Within the adaptive challenge world, Heifetz (1994) defines two subcategories. The first he describes as a known problem with an elusive solution. He uses heart disease as an example. It can be managed but not by the doctor alone. The patient must become part of the solution. The other type of adaptive problem is what Heifetz calls Type III, where there exists no clearly defined problem, no technical fix, and no clear solution. Learning is necessary to understand the problem and the possible solutions (Heifetz, 1994).

Heifetz (1994) speaks of the “strategic assets” (p. 103) needed to get at adaptive responses to a problem. Heifetz (1994) identifies seven:

1. A “holding environment” (p. 103) is a place that holds the stresses of the situation. It keeps them together but does not solve them. It maintains the environment where adaptive work can take place. The holding environment can be based on trust, such as the doctor patient world, or based on fear such as the ability to use force.
2. The ability to “command and direct attention” (p. 103) means that you are in a position to do something about the issue and to make sure that those parties necessary to a solution stay focused.
3. The next asset is “access to information” (p. 103). Because of the role played by the authority and the ability, as stated in #2, to “command and direct attention,” those involved will allow you into the problem, and you are
expected to understand the problem from a privileged viewpoint (not part of
the fray).
4. “Control over the flow of information” (p. 103) refers to the authority figure’s
ability to let information out as needed to address problems. Depending on the
situation, this can be more or less difficult particularly if people have multiple
sources of information.
5. The authority has the ability to manage the question, or the “power to frame
issues” (p. 103). One example of doing this well is to address first issues for
which there is an urgent need for answers.
6. The power to “orchestrate conflict” (pp. 103-104) reveals itself in the ability
to call a meeting and bring opposing viewpoints to a room, or the ability to
structure that room to effectively handle the meeting.
7. Last is the power to “choose the decision-making process” (p. 107). Heifetz
notes that this authority works hand in hand with the holding environment.
Authority creates the environment in which the stress can live, then picks the
means by which it can be released. Heifetz says that four factors contribute to
this decision: the “type of problem” (p. 121), the “resilience of the social
system” (p. 121), the “severity” (p. 121) of the problem, and in what amount
of time the decision must be made.

Heifetz’s (1994) framework will be used to evaluate the responses of leadership to
free speech conflicts. To what extent leaders employ, modify, or do not employ the
tactics Heifetz identified to address adaptive problems was a lens through which the data
were interpreted.

This framework is relevant to this study because a leadership challenge, as faced
by campus leaders during a free speech incident, requires a balancing of many of the
factors Heifetz (1994) identified. A leader must determine the best environment to
discuss an issue and the appropriate timing of a response. The possible need to take
stopgap measures may disorder the responses while a holding environment can be
readied. Leaders have access to information and, to a greater or lesser extent, control over
its dissemination. The effective use of these tools provides a window into leadership
responses to an adaptive problem for which the problems need to be identified, no easy
solutions are presented, and groups need to learn, or adapt, to reach solutions.
This study was conducted via interviews with leaders who have dealt with these adaptive problems. The interviews probed the ways in which leaders used the tools Heifetz (1994) identified, or not, to understand and resolve an adaptive, free speech problem. The review of interview transcripts and documents drafted before, during, and after the event provided a window into the use of authority in these challenging circumstances.

**Significance of the Study**

This research aimed to provide a window into leadership responses to the complexities of free speech by examining the ways campus leaders address free speech controversies at private universities. These incidents are important not only because they are currently newsworthy, but also because they offer a broad window into academic leadership. Free speech incidents are an issue that has been reported in the national press, or for smaller schools, the regional press. National examples include, for example, *The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inside Higher Ed, The Wall Street Journal, or The New York Times*. These incidents are not the only such window into leadership; however, these incidents are prevalent, topical, and critical to leaders and educators who need to stop and take stock of the fundamental values of higher education. While it may seem easy to espouse the value of free speech, one needs to understand and articulate many variables to fashion a campus response. At the end of the day, leadership is called upon to summon what is fundamental about higher education in the context of a particular campus and as those fundamental values may be evolving. How that is done and whether it is done well is important to understand for leaders, the boards who hire and evaluate them, and the constituents they serve.
CHAPTER 2 – THE LITERATURE

The following is an exploration of the literature on free speech on campus and presidential responses to adaptive problems—in this case, incidents where speech is challenged or challenging. It begins with a look at what free speech means and what its origins are. How free speech has been enforced, interpreted, and changed, and the limitations on that right that remain today, bring this discussion to the present day. An exploration of the ways in which the values of free speech have been elevated to the stature of a “civil religion” follows. In addition, examined in this literature review is the potential competition from other core values of a college or university, including diversity and inclusivity.

The overall structure of free speech literature houses an important subset pertaining to free speech on campus. Within that subset lives the related concept of academic freedom and the differences that exist on public versus private campuses. Certain private schools contend with a further complicating factor in the form of sectarian limitations.

Finally, the literature on presidential leadership reveals how presidents influence important decisions and under what circumstances. Does it require intervention? If so, what does that mean, how is the problem understood, and how does a president balance core campus values when, seemingly, those values are at odds?

Free Speech as a Value

Free speech derives from the U.S. Bill of Rights enacted by Congress in March of 1789 (U.S. Constitution). As an incentive to ratify the U.S. Constitution, a Bill of Rights was added to satisfy members who were concerned with potential abuse of authority by
the federal government established thereby. Accordingly, restrictions were placed on the
government, most notably for this discussion, the restrictions contained in the First
Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. That amendment is simple:

   Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting
   the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or
   the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for
   a redress of grievances. (U.S. Constitution)

The drafter of this language was James Madison. The U.S. Constitution had been drafted
without explicit statements of these freedoms, and it was not clear that these rights were
explicitly protected. In response, Madison drafted the language below, although it was
first written in the passive voice, stating, “The people shall not be deprived or abridged of
their right to speak, write or publish their sentiment” (F. Abrams, 2017, p. 7). The
language was amended to make clear that the newly formed federal government could
not make a law that would infringe upon these rights. This phrasing remains critical in the
jurisprudence of the First Amendment as a strong and clear prohibition on the
government, rather than just an affirmative right of the people. This distinction is
important later as it relates to private versus pubic restrictions (F. Abrams, 2017).

The adoption of the language in the Bill of Rights was not radical. The famous
Blackstone commentaries on the law, which pulled together the various common law
traditions in England in what became a general treatise on English law, called for a
similar right. Blackstone noted restrictions, however—that which is “improper,
mischievous, or illegal” (as cited in Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017, p. 30) were still
subject to sanction. This caveat led to the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798, giving the
president the right to imprison those who posed a threat to the federal government and
make criminal a false accusation about the government. Federalist President John Adams put this act to partisan use by closing opposition newspapers, imprisoning opposition members of Congress, and making claims of libel against rivals, including Benjamin Franklin’s grandson (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017).

The debate became heated in the 19th century over the views expressed by abolitionists. Southerners feared that the views expressed were dangerous in that they could incite a slave rebellion. Southern states, in turn, passed laws to criminalize anti-slavery speech. Likewise, that which was considered obscene was banned by the Comstock Law of 1873. Under the jurisdiction of this law, many images and writings were confiscated and banned, including works by Joyce and Chaucer, to name a few (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017).

The years during and after World War I saw a return to concern for mob rebellion in what became known as the Red Scare. The Espionage Act made it unlawful to conduct any activity that would show lack of loyalty or interfere with the war effort. Punishment could result in 20 years imprisonment (Symonds, 2010). The Supreme Court began a process of change over the 20th century, from allowing the suppression of speech rights when the speech had a tendency to threaten or disrupt the government (Abrams v. United States, as cited in Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017) to an understanding of free speech as a right not to be abridged but for the needs of emergency or imminent harm. In the famously cited words of Justice Louis Brandeis, from the dissent in Whitney v. California in 1927, the way to challenge false speech “is more speech, not enforced silence” (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017, p. 39).
The jurisprudence around the first amendment as the 20th century progressed coalesced around the idea of free speech as an absolute right but for limited exceptions, such as obscenity (Roth v. United States, 1957); fighting words or personal attacks that are abusive and commonly considered likely to provoke violence (Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire, 1942); or the restriction of unwelcome speech that invades the privacy of the home (Rowan v. Post Office Dept., 1970). In a quote from the case of Cohen v. California (1971), Justice Harlan writing for the majority stated:

We have . . . consistently stressed that “we are often ‘captives’ outside the sanctuary of the home and subject to objectionable speech.” Id at 738. The ability of government, consonant with the Constitution, to shut off discourse solely to protect others from hearing it is, in other words, dependent upon a showing that substantial privacy interests are being invaded in an essentially intolerable manner. Any broader view of this authority would effectively empower a majority to silence dissidents simply as a matter of personal predilections. (p. 21)

Cohen was particularly enraged at the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. He entered a Los Angeles County courthouse wearing a coat emblazoned with the words “Fuck the Draft.” Although he removed his coat, he was charged and convicted under a California law that prohibited offensive conduct if it had the tendency to provoke or disturb the peace. The court overturned the conviction (Cohen v. California, 1971).

More recent decisions of the Supreme Court have confirmed the stance of the court on the first amendment as it related to offensive conduct. Texas v. Johnson (1989), written by Justice Brennan, affirmed an appeals court in Texas that threw out the conviction of a man who burned the American flag in protest of the 1984 Republican National Convention in Dallas. The right to use offensive speech was upheld again in Snyder v. Phelps (2011). Chief Justice Roberts wrote for the majority, upholding that the exercise of speech rights could not subject the speaker to tort liability for infliction of
emotional distress. Snyder and members of the Westboro Baptist Church, most of whom were his family members, protested military funerals from the viewpoint that God was punishing the United States by killing soldiers. Signs held by the protestors included such sentiments as “Thank God for Dead Soldiers,” “Priests Rape Boys,” and “Fags Doom Nations,” among others. Snyder’s protest was held to touch upon matters of public import and was done on public property, peacefully, and without disrupting the funeral of the Plaintiff’s son. Chief Justice Roberts concluded the opinion with these words:

Speech is powerful. It can stir people to action, move them to tears of both joy and sorrow, and—as it did here—inflict great pain. On the facts before us, we cannot react to that pain by punishing the speaker. As a Nation we have chosen a different course-to protect even hurtful speech on pubic issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate. (Snyder v. Phelps, 2011, p. 15)

The extremity of the cases demonstrates the commitment to the principles of the First Amendment, leads to an understanding of how speech has been valued in this country, and sets the foundation for its importance on college campuses.

**Free Speech on Campus**

The applicability of the First Amendment on public college campuses is settled law. In *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* (1957), the Supreme Court not only applied the First Amendment to activities on a public college campus, but it did so with language that stressed the fundamental nature of the rights of free speech, on a college campus in particular:

The essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident. No one should underestimate the vital role in a democracy that is played by those who guide and train our youth. To impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation. No field of education is so thoroughly comprehended by man that new discoveries cannot yet be made. Particularly is that true in the social sciences, where few, if any, principles are accepted as absolutes. Scholarship cannot
flourish in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise, our civilization will stagnate and die. (p. 250)

*Sweezy v. New Hampshire* pertained to the questioning of a faculty member about “subversive activities” related to the Communist Party in the 1950s. *Healy v. James* (1972) applied the first amendment to public colleges and universities but not to private schools. Only California, through what is known as the Leonard Law, applies First Amendment restrictions to private schools via threat to withhold state funding (Scaduto & Fourlas, 2017).

In the college campus setting, where speech rights are secure and enjoy a long tradition of enforcement, some are beginning to think that free speech rights are taken for granted and replaced by an overly sensitive expectation of trauma-free zones of limited expression (Brooks, 2015; MacDonald, 2017). Others argue that the upheaval of 2017 and the election of Donald Trump as President have changed perceptions in a political landscape that has become sharply partisan (Drabold, 2016, as cited in Ben-Porath, 2017; Stack, 2017). Some have likened the new sensitivity to free speech as a problem with “snowflake” students (MacDonald, 2017), while others have noted that the push for speech codes impacts both the right and the left (Friedersdorf, 2016). Still others attribute to a new generation a powerful need to protect others from speech or conduct that may be harmful. They have been raised with knowledge of the impact of bullying and believe in the values of tolerance (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017). Chemerinsky and Gillman (2017) surveyed a class they taught on free speech at the University of California, Irvine. They were struck by the fact that their students were not raised to understand the protection of free speech as the protection of the marginalized. The students had not
experienced the Civil Rights Movement or the Vietnam War. Notably, the authors and the students possessed opposing reactions to speech that was offensive or rendered the listener uncomfortable (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017).

A recent Knight Foundation (2018) survey showed that students value diversity (53%) over free speech rights (46%). This survey and its results are similar to one taken in 2016, but the trend is to favor diversity increasingly over free speech. Sam Gill of the Knight Foundation found that students believe that certain restrictions on free speech are appropriate, even restrictions, such as on hate speech, that are not supported by the law. He feels that greater education on the depth and nuance of the First Amendment is needed (Knight Foundation, 2018).

On the heels of the Knight Foundation (2018) poll, the American Council on Education (ACE) surveyed college presidents on their commitment to free speech and inclusivity (Espinosa, Crandall, & Wilkinson, 2018). A larger percentage of college presidents considered it “extremely important” to protect inclusivity than to protect free speech (Espinosa et al., 2018). By contrast, 96% of presidents surveyed thought that students should be exposed to offensive and biased speech rather than shielded from it (Espinosa et al., 2018). Presidents thought their own campuses were much more tolerant of controversial speech than other campuses and thought that shouting down speakers was “never acceptable” by an 85% margin (Espinosa et al., 2018).

A counter narrative to the Knight Foundation poll, and citing data collected from the General Social Survey since 1970, Matthew Yglesias (2018) made the case in *Vox* that society has become far more tolerant rather than less. Looking at who should be allowed to speak, broken into categories of communists, militarists, racists, homosexuals,
and antitheists, the data show a growing trend in tolerance on all speakers, with the exception of the racist speaker, where the line remained relatively flat (Yglesias, 2018). Data prove that those who identify as extreme liberals are more tolerant of free expression; however, the moderate left has become less forgiving of racist speech (Yglesias, 2018). Others have argued that the context of the modern college and university is complex:

Universities and colleges are institutions with aims that go well beyond the general goals of a democratic republic, and it makes sense for them to be organized and managed based on additional principles. Moreover, because they provide diverse educational contexts, colleges indeed should be concerned about inclusion and about actively creating a sense of connection and belonging. (Ben-Porath, 2017, p. 9)

The author argued that free speech remains important, but it may look different on a college campus (Ben-Porath, 2017). Other authors have gone further, arguing that the free speech claims of conservative speakers and their argument that they are silenced on campuses is laughable and not worthy of a response (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004).

The call for greater protection of inclusivity and diversity has spawned a debate over, first, whether the two ends are truly at odds, and, second, over the measures employed to counter the threat, such as speech codes and trigger warnings. Some have argued that free expression relies on a baseline of dignity and equality, and, unless you are upholding both, you cannot truly have either. Delgado and Stefancic (2018) used this premise to advance the position that hate speech should be abridged by law. Conversely, the Dean of Students at the University of Chicago, John Ellison, sent an open letter in the fall of 2016 to all students indicating that students should not expect safe spaces or
trigger warnings—what students should expect is that they will be confronted with challenging ideas and controversy (as cited in Palfrey, 2017).

Speech codes have been under assault from cases in the federal courts. In particular, the Supreme Court contends that campuses represent an important venue for free speech because of the important role played by universities in the preparation of citizens (FIRE, 2016). In *Doe v. University of Michigan* (1989), a federal district court held that the proposed speech code at The University of Michigan, by which any behavior that stigmatized individuals on the basis of protected class, was forbidden. The court refused to enforce the code on the basis that speech that is restrained simply because it is offensive violates the First Amendment. The same holding was reached in *UWM Post v. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin* (1991). Therein, the federal district court held that speech limitations designed to shield protected classes against a hostile environment have little support in the U.S. Constitution. These harassment codes provide a regular, free speech battleground in the courts (FIRE, 2016). In fact, the treatment of harassment-based speech codes provided the only private school case where the first amendment was applied to render the code unconstitutional. In *Corry v. Leland Stanford Junior University* (1995; slip op), a harassment code designed to prohibit speech directed at protected classes only was deemed to fail the test of content neutrality. The aforementioned Leonard Law in California afforded the plaintiff the protection of the first amendment at a private school (FIRE, 2016).

Trigger warnings, as a concept, have been around for some time but have experienced a resurgence in the college context. Originally seen as a way to recognize troubling events for survivors of World War I suffering from posttraumatic stress
disorder, trigger warnings are now applied more broadly due, in part, to the Internet. Websites began using the warnings as a way to avoid flashbacks when viewing certain content. This use of trigger warnings has jumped to college campuses in the form of student demands that material being taught include such warnings (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). A more moderate view of trigger warnings likens them to manners. A reasonable approach to challenging material is to give advance warning that the topics may be difficult. The author states, “Trigger warnings, used sensibly in moderation by caring people, are simply good teaching. Put another way, borrowing the language of The Economist, trigger warnings are “good manners” (Palfrey, 2017, p. 548).

A related trend is the rise of discussion on microagressions. Although it has gained widespread recognition lately, the term dates back to the 1970s as a way to identify subtle disparagements, primarily racial. The use of microagressions has grown to include any discriminatory statement. The focus is on the reaction of the student to experiencing the speech. This has been termed “the supremacy of their subjective judgments” (“The Colliding of the American Mind,” 2016, para. 10). The effort to avoid microagressions led to such events as a rally to raise awareness of microagressions being canceled because other students considered the rally itself a microagression (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). As an oft-cited example of these trends, Yale experienced turmoil over an email sent by a lecturer in early childhood education, Erica Christakis, wife of a residential college associate master, suggesting that the school had gone too far by recommending that students be sensitive in their choice of Halloween costumes (as cited in Ben-Porath, 2017). In provocative words, whether intended or not, Christakis pleaded in a message entitled “Dressing Yourselves”:
I wonder, and I am not trying to be provocative: Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious . . . a little bit inappropriate or provocative, or, yes, offensive? American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience; increasingly it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition. (as cited in Ben-Porath, 2017, pp. 29, 30)

Erika Christakis resigned, and her husband Nicholas stepped down from his residence advisor position and left for a sabbatical year in the uproar over her message (Ben-Porath, 2017).

**Academic Freedom**

No discussion of free speech on campus would be complete without an examination of the related concept of academic freedom. A 1915 committee of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, n.d.) crafted a statement on academic freedom entitled the *1915 Declaration of Principles*. Ten years later, the ACE, at a conference, articulated a statement on academic freedom and tenure which became known as the *1925 Conference Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure* (AAUP, n.d.).

The definitive statement on academic freedom, crafted after 6 years of conference work, appeared in 1940 (AAUP, n.d.). The collaboration of the AAUP and the Association of American Colleges produced a restatement of the 1925 statement. It is known as the *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* (AAUP, n.d.). Thirty years later, footnotes were added to the 1940 statement to reflect interpretations of it over that time. The first two parts of the statement are relatively simple as stated in relevant part:

1. Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties;
2. Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation so their subject. Limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment. (AAUP, n.d., paras. 9-10)

The 1970 footnotes address two topics in particular: controversial and religious subject matter. The 1970 drafters emphasized that the intent was not to remove the “controversial” from the classroom. In fact, the document insists, “Controversy is at the heart of the free academic inquiry which the entire statement is designed to foster” (AAUP, n.d., Comment 2). Further, the caveat for church-related schools was deemed vestigial 30 years after its drafting due to the lack of interest among those schools in such an exception (AAUP, n.d.). During those 30 years, the U.S. Supreme Court had occasion to consider a matter of academic freedom in the case of Keyishian v. Board of Regents, State Univ. of N.Y. (1967). New York had enacted a law to prevent the hiring of “subversive” teachers. To make this evaluation simpler, the board made a list of offending groups. If a teacher’s name was on one of those lists, such as the Communist Party, the teacher was deemed subversive. The court overturned the law for vagueness. In doing so, it penned language explicitly protective of academic freedom as a “transcendent value” and that the First Amendment “does not tolerate laws that cast a pall of orthodoxy over the classroom” (Keyishian, as cited in FIRE, 2016).

That standard is not the same at private colleges. Policies in favor of free speech are often enforced by the court using a contractual theory rather than first amendment jurisprudence (FIRE, 2016). Further, academic freedom is not universally accepted at religious schools as the AAUP footnote suggests (AAUP, n.d.). Brigham Young University, for example, limits such speech when “the faculty behavior or expression
seriously and adversely affects the university mission or the Church” (as cited in FIRE, 2018, para. 13). In a 2008 speech to American Catholic college presidents, Pope Benedict warned not to hide behind academic freedom to espouse beliefs not sanctioned by the Catholic Church. He argued that an effort to shroud positions contradictory to the teachings of the Catholic Church beneath academic freedom would get in the way of the mission and identity of the school. He went so far as to call it a betrayal (House, 2010).

In a different take on academic freedom, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement on the application of *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, an Apostolic Constitution drafted by Pope John Paul II in 2000. The Bishops argued that Catholic schools have freedom because they can incorporate religious values within their academic pursuits. That freedom, however, requires a “commitment to be faithful to the teachings of the Catholic Church” (Fiorenza & Schnurr, 2000, p. 5). Pertaining to faculty, Catholic schools are expected to seek out Catholic faculty with the goal that Catholics make up a majority of the faculty body (Fiorenza & Schnurr, 2000). With regard to Catholics who teach in the disciplines related to theology, the document calls for a “Mandatum.” This designation shows that the professor will teach in a manner condoned by the Bishop and in line with the Bishop’s duty to protect the faithful under his care (Fiorenza & Schnurr, 2000, footnote 40). Ten years after the Bishop’s application statement was penned, an evaluation of *Ex corde’s* impact was conducted. The conclusion was that *Ex corde* created less of a firestorm than predicted, and “there has been no loss of academic freedom” (House, 2010, p. 1). Though some think *Ex corde* irrelevant to today’s Catholic university, others see it as a means to make Catholic education distinctive from secular education (House, 2010).
Presidential Leadership

The literature on presidents and their role in shaping, handling, and leading through problems for which there are no obvious answers contains contradictions in terminology and advice. Much literature on free speech makes reference to the centuries-old notion of a “civil religion” for which schools, and their leaders in particular, are duty bound to preserve and pass on. In this respect, free speech and academic freedom are not just for the secular anymore in that these principles make up part of the dowry each president must bestow on graduates. Other literature has examined the ways in which presidents lead. This is seen alternatively through the lens of the leader as inspirational figurehead versus the leader as manager.

The term civil religion dates back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *On the Social Contract*, or *Principles of Political Rights*, written in 1762 (Nelson, 2000). The term found modern relevance in the article published in 1967 by Robert Bellah, then a Professor of Sociology at Harvard, entitled “Civil Religion in America.” The essential religious tenets of this faith, according to Bellah, are as follows: that God exists, that there is a life after this one, that good will be rewarded and evil punished, and that all religion should be accepted. These ideas are embedded in the writing and beliefs espoused by the American Founding Fathers and the documents that they produced. This ethos continued in the words of presidents such as Lincoln and Kennedy. Bellah cited the words of Lincoln in his second inaugural and Gettysburg address and the fact that the images are of God, morality, justice, and deliverance. He noted that these concepts are, at once, part of the Jewish and Christian traditions, and stated by a president, Lincoln, who was not overtly denominational (Bellah, 1967).
Contemporary authors have suggested that moral or value-based leadership is necessary for the college president (Nelson, 2000, 2002). The stakes are high. As Nelson (2000) claimed in his chapter, “The Moral Leadership of College Presidents”:

Presidents cannot escape the temptation to be morally silent. However, competing ideological constituencies impatiently and irrepressibly demand definitive moral sanction for distinct and incompatible moral positions. Beyond all the rhetoric lies the true issue: a battle for the soul of the university. (p. 5)

Nowhere is this moral voice more critical than in the support of such values of the civil religion as free speech. Hardened by the McCarthy era of speech restrictions, and the support from the courts through the civil rights and Vietnam War struggles, free speech as a value has an honored place in the academy. Against this position, some have posited that the push for diversity represents a counterforce. Nelson (2000) cited the effort of former Columbia president, George Rupp, in his inaugural address to address the thriving values of heterogeneity and “interaction” that provide a “struggle,” which is at the heart of the Columbia community. In an effort to confront offensive speech within this struggle, Rupp argued that community members must condemn it. He pushed the position of the U.S. Supreme Court in that he advocated an antidote of more speech, not less (Nelson, 2000). The argument for the value of diversity has strong advocates too (Ben-Porath, 2017; Palfrey, 2017). The U.S. Supreme Court joined this dialogue with the two cases of *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016), the second of which was decided in 2016 long after Abigail Fisher, who was denied admission to Texas, had graduated from another school. The court upheld the practice of race-conscious admissions practices at the University of Texas under certain conditions. In doing so, the court affirmed the need for diversity at both U.S. universities and for U.S. democracy (Palfrey, 2017).
Whether it is free speech or diversity, Nelson (2002) likened the contemporary president to a “high priest [of] an evolving American civil religion” (p. 3). In this role, presidents must juggle the charged issues of racism, affirmative action, social justice, inclusivity, and freedom of speech, and Nelson depicted those challenges through the actions of several presidents. These principles can be difficult to reconcile in a more pluralistic age. The democratic heritage handed down to previous U.S. presidents came from their predecessors who were “united by a set of readily and commonly agreed to cultural, political, social and religious principles” (Nelson, 2002, p. 14). Nelson (2002) argued that presidents must focus on education as critical for democracy and “civic virtue” by adherence to three beliefs: first, America has fundamental moral and religious beliefs; second, colleges and universities have an obligation to grow the values needed for civic duty; and third, the education of citizens is needed for democracy. These values are at the core of the civil religion of democracy (Nelson, 2002).

Nelson (2002) cited the example of Harold Shapiro of both Michigan and Princeton as an exemplar of leadership on racism. Shapiro championed the need for “pluralism” over the temptations and restrictions of “fundamentalism” (Nelson, 2002, p. 15). Nelson (2002) charged the president with the need to lead this charge: “[Shapiro] believed presidents bear responsibility to lead discussion about the common beliefs which shape the academy” (p. 16). James Duderstadt at the University of Michigan is described by Nelson (2002) in religious terms by virtue of using his presidential “pulpit” to advance inclusivity and affirmative action.

Nelson (2002) cited the example of James Freedman, the President of Dartmouth College. He challenged a conservative paper called *The Dartmouth Review* that was not
officially part of the college, but that made frequent attacks on affirmative action programs, women, minorities, and, in one instance, Freedman. It wrote a story with an allusion to the Holocaust, accusing Freedman of herding conservative students and sending them away. Freedman confronted this by publicly condemning what had been written and the fact that they were pulling the community apart. He charged them with disturbing the ability to find common ground among the community members and, in doing so, damaging the values of the Dartmouth community. Further, he questioned their integrity as journalists and their ethics. Tellingly, he did not challenge their right to publish. The impact of the President’s public intervention (before a rally of 3,000 angered by the publication) was that others at Dartmouth rallied against the published opinions. Eventually, the paper became increasingly marginalized (Nelson, 2002).

In a case pitting free speech, academic freedom, and inclusivity, Nelson (2002) considered the actions of Diana Chapman Walsh, President of Wellesley College. A professor in the African and Afro-American Studies Department included a work on the syllabus about the complicity of Jews in the slave trade. The controversy pitted the Jewish and African American communities against one another. As the professor received increasing criticism, he decided to publish an account of all that had happened to him over the issue, naming names and accusers in the process (Nelson, 2002).

Walsh used the chance to affirm the fundamental and common values of the Wellesley community. Accordingly, she defended the rights of faculty to express themselves and defended free speech as an essential liberty for democracy and higher education:
Her position was based on one of the fundamental principles for which American democracy, and colleges and universities must stand: speech, no matter how detestable, is best and most properly contested openly in the marketplace of ideas. Speech is itself a civic virtue on which civil discourse in a democracy ardently depends. (Nelson, 2002, p. 20)

Walsh condemned the content of Martin’s book but stated, cleverly, that she needed to walk the line between “censure” of the book, on one hand, and avoiding “censoring” of the book on the other (Nelson, 2002).

Nelson (2002) called for basic values in the academy and of democratic society, which he referred to as a civil religion. Adherents to this creed need to cling to these notions of freedom of speech that are in danger due to the draw of special and individual interests pulling in different directions. The only bulwark against this is a notion that all ideas are welcome into this mix (Nelson, 2002). Some have argued for the need to capture the competing ideas within rules as a way to resolve disputes. By establishing a code of what can and cannot be argued, some think that the tension will be alleviated (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004). Nelson thinks it will be exacerbated.

The value of the president as symbolic leader is shown in the example of the president as the high priest in a pulpit presiding over congregants adhering to a civil religion (Bellah, 1967; Nelson, 2000, 2002). Much has been written about the symbolic value of the presidency. For example, Birnbaum (1988) described the functioning of the system in which a president operates as “cybernetic.” He portrayed a world in which many layers of the enterprise are structured to sense, catch, correct, and respond to any stimulus or potential error. He called these layers “organizational thermostats” (Birnbaum, 1989). If an alarm is triggered at any of these levels, a response is generated. Sometimes that response is sent up the chain of command. Other times, it is not. The
challenge to the president upon receiving this signal is not how to respond, but whether to respond. The cybernetic system is particularly sensitive to interventions (Birnbaum, 1989). Birnbaum (1989) argued that these types of systems “run themselves.” He set forth a simple set of principles for the cybernetic leader:

- If it’s working, keep doing it.
- If it’s not working, stop doing it.
- If you don’t know what to do, don’t do anything (Birnbaum, 1989, p. 14).

In addition to cybernetic, the organization of higher education has been termed “loosely coupled” (Weick, 1976; Eckel & Kezar, 2016). Others have described the system as biological in its sensitivity. An intervention that was ill timed, premature, or unnecessary can cause more damage than not acting at all (Eckel & Kezar, 2016). Loosely coupled, as explained by Weick (1976), holds that though some structure or organization exists within a loosely coupled system, one needs to look at the educational operation as a whole to make sense of the enterprise. These systems do not fit the traditional notion of rationally organized systems that are structured and hierarchical, each responding in kind to a directive that works its way in a linear fashion through the connected layers of the enterprise. Loosely coupled systems need to be understood in a dramatically different way (Weick, 1976). As he wrote:

Thus, in the case of an educational organization, it may be the case that the counselor’s office is loosely coupled to the principal’s office. The image is that the principal and the counselor are somehow attached, but that each retains some identity and separateness and that their attachment may be circumscribed, infrequent, weak in its mutual affects, unimportant, and/or slow to respond. Each of those connotations would be conveyed if the qualifier loosely were attached to the word couple. Loose coupling also carries connotations of impermanence, dissolvability, and tacitness all of which are potentially crucial properties of the “glue” that holds organizations together. (Weick, 1976, p. 4)
In addition to this linkage, these systems are capable of grafting other elements easily and removing those elements when necessary. Many characteristics define loosely coupled systems. A few that pertain to education include: (a) lack of coordination; (b) multiple resources that could at any one time produce the same end; (c) discretion exercised at many levels of the organization; (d) common inputs do not produce common outputs—that is, the expectation that outputs and inputs share some common connection is nonexistent; (e) conversely, efforts to try to keep doing something differently may result in the same result; and (f) the organization can be described as decentralized, disorganized, unregulated, incapable of being fully observed, and unresponsive by design (Weick, 1976).

Loosely coupled systems defy definition and structure. As a consequence, the participants struggle to find meaning and connection among the parts of the system. That struggle produces myths as a way of injecting meaning and connection into a system that appears to be devoid of both. This vacuum points to the importance of a mission and the ability to articulate that vision as a means of bringing the elements together (Schein, 2004). In other words, into this void steps the moral voice referenced by Nelson (2000). Conversely, the lack of structure and the mythmaking that knits it together presents a vulnerability to competing myths. For example, the loosely coupled parts are vulnerable to a myth that the mission is being ignored by some part, or by leadership. Similarly, the myth of “community,” by which the parts see themselves, could be both a blessing and curse depending on how some action or part is viewed either within or outside of the community. This concept is related to theories around “culture” as a means of meaning making in environments (Schein, 2004).
A similarly popular term used to describe the “structure” of higher education is the seemingly oxymoronic “organized anarchy” (Cohen & March, 1974). Birnbaum (1988) described the organized anarchy as characterized by not knowing what is going on at any given moment. People who are at once involved and not involved participate in pursuit of goals that are neither clear nor accepted. This is not necessarily bad, but makes it difficult to understand and difficult to lead (Birnbaum, 1988). Any attempt at leadership in an organized anarchy requires a willingness to accept varying challenges of ambiguity. Leaders must wrestle with ambiguous goals and power while not having any clear sense of what to make of their tactics and strategy and not really knowing if the leader has been successful (Cohen & March, 1974).

Within the system of controls, Birnbaum (1988) identified two categories of control: “structural” and “social” (p. 182). A structural control, for example, is an account that has a certain balance of funds. It either has the money to spend or it does not. When it no longer has funds, or is nearing empty, a structural control is triggered. Social controls are performed by those whose job it is to see that the important tasks get done. The value placed on a task will generate more or less of a response. In Birnbaum’s assessment, the stability of the organization relies on these self-correcting feedback loops. Given this complexity, it is impossible for one person to adequately impact operations. That person must rely on a series of decision makers to act, guided by sometimes vague goals, such as the pursuit of academic excellence. These goals are neither understood nor does anyone know when they are achieved. How do colleges cope with this? Birnbaum (1988) noted, regarding his fictional college, “Huxley College deals with the issue of ultimate organization objectives by avoiding them” (p. 184). In
Birnbaum’s (1988) words, “Their [the leader’s] responsibility is to keep the institution in proper balance, and not to “run” it” (p. 204).

The literature on the role and power of the president presents a fascinating dichotomy. Prominent among these views are those who believe that the president does nothing more than accompany the natural progress of the institution (Birnbaum, 1989), (Cohen & March, 1974) and is thus, by the nature of the position, a symbol. By contrast, others have pointed to the essential power of the president and the characteristics of the president as the driver of the educational enterprise (Fisher & Koch, 1996). Cohen and March (1974) offered a striking assessment of the role of the president:

The president is a bit like the driver of a skidding automobile. The marginal judgments he makes, his skill, and his luck may possibly make some difference to the survival prospects for his riders. As a result, his responsibilities are heavy. But whether he is convicted of manslaughter or receives a medal for heroism is largely outside his control. (p. 203)

Fisher and Koch stressed the need for good leadership. The authors pointed out the debacle that were faculty-run institutions, historically, namely the University of Paris, Oxford and Cambridge, and the New School. All realized their folly and returned to administrative structures. Believing that the president makes a difference, and the faculty and the institution need a good president, the authors offered: “The effective president is a strong, caring, action-oriented visionary who acts out of educated intuition. He or she is transformational rather than transactional and less collegial and more willing to take risks than the usual president” (Fisher & Koch, 1996, p. 57).

From the results of a survey of successful presidents cited by the authors, the collegial president is the first to exit in the time of a crisis. Fisher and Koch (1996) claimed that being presidential requires distance. Collegial behavior is respected but not
to the extent that it hampers their ability to lead and make difficult decisions. Friendships with those the president must lead, for example, are not favored. An effective president will be warm and concerned about those in their care, but they will not befriend them lest that make more difficult the job of leading and deciding. The authors urged the president to surround themselves with advisors who are brighter than they are and to include them in many decisions. However, they should be kept at a cordial distance. Any socializing with the staff, according to the authors, is a waste of the president’s time (Fisher & Koch, 1996).

It is important to consider how academic leaders lead. Birnbaum (1992) suggested that understanding the needs and complexities of a given college campus is paramount. However, certain common characteristics of good leadership can be generalized across campuses. Birnbaum (1992) listed the 10 characteristics of good academic leadership as follows:

. . . making a good impression, knowing how to listen, balancing governance systems, avoiding simplistic thinking, de-emphasizing institutional bureaucracy, re-emphasizing core value, focusing on institutional strengths, encouraging others to be leaders, evaluating your own performance, and knowing when to leave. (p. 172)

Birnbaum (1992) stressed what he calls “cognitive complexity” (p. 180). He argued that presidents with this characteristic have the ability to solve problems faster, make fewer mistakes, use information wisely, allow better for uncertain situations, and welcome contrary evidence (Birnbaum, 1992).

Mitroff (2001) wrote about effective leadership in a crisis. He advocated for seven steps that leaders should take when faced with a crisis. First, prevent the crisis by acting on the signs that something is impending. He posited that all crises give off early warning
signs and that leaders should pay attention to those indicators. Second, focus on crisis planning and actions to be taken in a crisis. Do not look just to communications. While important, communication is but one of many elements of good planning. Third, leadership in a crisis is as fundamental to organizations as finance or legal affairs. Fourth, make sure that the truth, no matter how damaging, is revealed as early as possible. Fifth, make sure that the first response of a leader is to the emotional needs of the public. Do not respond with numbers. Sixth, get an independent investigation done of the events and take this action quickly. Seventh, and finally, try to find some crisis that is pending every year. In so doing, a leader can focus on how to respond, get ahead of the issue, and keep crisis planning in the forefront of organizational attention (Mitroff, 2001).

Others think less of the fundamental centrality of the executive. Arguing that presidents are symbols of leadership rather than engaged leaders, one author questioned the credit and blame attributed to college presidents for the everyday occurrences on campus (Fain, 2007). Despite his fatalistic approach to the role of the president, Birnbaum (1988) offered some attributes that will serve a president well in the higher education mix: (a) a good understanding of higher education; (b) knowledge of their school; (c) competence in the tasks at hand; and (d) the ability to interact with constituents, particularly external ones. Or, said in a more humorous way, the president must have “white hair for that look of experience and hemorrhoids for that look of concern” (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 24).
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

This research was a look into how leaders understand and respond to free speech incidents at private, nonprofit colleges and universities. The incidents and reactions have been explored and understood in the broadest sense, understanding how leaders think about the incident and respond, and how key stakeholders react to the leadership. The response reveals the leaders’ use of authority when confronted with what Heifetz (1994) calls an adaptive problem.

The research questions were focused on the ways campus leaders frame, articulate, understand, and, ultimately, what they do in response to a free speech incident. These questions lent themselves to exploratory, case study research.

**Research Design**

Case study research was appropriate for these questions. Such an approach focuses on recent events; thus, it involves observation of actions, accounts of those actions or incidents, and interviews with the participants (Yin, 2018). The case studies were multisite, using four campuses and leaders from those institutions, and comparative, as the different framing and responses were compared to each other. Yin (2018) described six sources of evidence that may be useful in conducting a case study. These sources consist of documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Most of the above evidence played some role in the case studies conducted for this research. Interviews were the central data collection vehicle in this study. Yin divided interviews into shorter and longer categories depending on the time. An hour or less is short. Two or more hours, or extending over multiple days, is long. All but one of the interviews were 1-hour long. Documents,
archival records, and campus observations were all important to understanding the adaptive, free speech problem as it played out on a given campus and how leaders responded. All have been used. Though direct and participant observations were not a possibility given that these events have already happened, in two of the four cases, video of the events were reviewed. Physical artifacts, such as a sign used in a protest, or a damaged article of property, were not used.

Site Selection

Using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014), sites for this research were limited to private, nonprofit institutions. The distinction between private and public institutions is a substantively differentiating characteristic related to free speech. On a public campus, the institution and those acting on its behalf represent the government. That puts those schools and individuals under the specific restrictions of First Amendment rights. Leaders facing speech issues at a public university may default to legal obligation, thus avoiding the careful weighing of factors necessary to address an adaptive problem. A private leader is guided by First Amendment law but not compelled to follow it. The private leader’s response is, for that reason, more nuanced. The reason for the selection of nonprofit institutions pertains to the simple distinction that the majority of these incidents are place based, as are the majority of nonprofit institutions, as compared to many for-profit universities that use online learning. Furthermore, the study of the complexities of academic freedom, as a subset of free speech, becomes a more difficult and adaptive problem when issues of tenure are involved. A tenure system and robust academic freedom appear more commonly among nonprofit universities than for profit institutions. A further distinguishing characteristic of for-profit institutions is the concentration of
authority at the top of the hierarchy, resulting in a more traditionally corporate and employer/employee relationship among stakeholders.

Within the broad category of private nonprofits, smaller institutions with student body populations of between 1,000 and 8,000 were the primary target group for the practical reason that access to leaders, particularly the presidents, was easier. Other than reasons of access, smaller institutions were selected because leaders have more direct contact with constituents. One larger institution was used in this study, DePaul, because the president had a direct connection to the events and the resolution of the events.

To identify and define “incidents,” I reviewed the higher education publications, popular press, and recent books and articles published on the issue of free speech on campus. One author was interviewed. These sources provided a list of candidate schools. Thus, the incidents studied for this research had been noticed in some way. In other words, the matters had coverage in a regional or national publication. The impact, scope, and stakes all increase with media coverage and present a more challenging adaptive problem for leaders, as a broad, external audience viewed and judged the actions of the school and its leaders.

Timing is a consideration. Free speech incidents have received considerable media attention for many years; however, in the last 3 to 4 years, the issue has appeared more regularly in national publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* (Brooks, 2015; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; MacDonald, 2017; Stack, 2017; Svrluga, 2017). In addition, the incidents of the last few years present a common thread of liberal protest against conservative speakers. Often, the content of the speech runs counter to prevailing opinions on a campus, and the incident
becomes an exhibit in the case against universities as hypocritical, indoctrination centers for liberal thought. The speech being defended in these recent university cases is that of Republicans and Libertarians, not antiwar protesters or flag-burning advocates, as was the case in the 1960s when campuses faced similar challenges related to free speech.

Timing is a consideration from the standpoint of access as well. In the event that litigation was filed over the incidents in question, participants may have been less likely to be interviewed. That was the case at Dillard University where the police chief, on advice of counsel, declined to be interviewed. At DePaul University, the General Counsel declined to be interviewed, although he did not prohibit other leaders from speaking.

Access to interviews at an institution whose incident occurred over 2 years prior to this study, without litigation, may have been easier, as the threat of litigation with a 2-year statute of limitation would have passed. In all four cases, the interviews were granted either before or near the expiration of those limitations. The only exception was Middlebury College where the statute had not run out as of the time of the interviews.

When to start and stop the clock for this study was the final consideration of timing.

Preparation for an event with a controversial speaker usually begins before the event. Not all the speakers in these cases gave the same warning, and the incident became an “incident” before leaders had a chance to prepare or to prepare adequately. The clock stops at varying times but must at least include any follow-up work at the campus to resolve the adaptive problem. It is expected that this could take months, a year, or more.

The timing of the solutions and authority used by leaders was one of the adaptive problem strategies employed by leaders.
Data Collection

Data were collected primarily from interviews. The interview process was semi-structured (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Each interview participant was presented a series of questions regarding the event and the ways in which the problem was identified, articulated, and solved. The participants’ views are important, as are the sources of support relied upon by those leaders to formulate an answer and make sense of the issues. As the participants engaged in the interview process, however, additional questions emerged, triggering additional inquiries and follow-up questions, or a different focus based on the unique perceptions of each participant.

The review of news accounts, records, and archival sources, coupled with interviews, interview notes, and any follow-up questions, allowed for the triangulation of information (Fielding & Fielding, 1986). That use of cross-referenced sources enabled piecing together a more accurate picture of the events and allowed for questions that tugged at the validity of the responses. This “thick description” approach is a valuable tool described by Ravitch and Carl (2016):

Thick description connotes a depth of contextual detail, usually garnered through multiple data sources, including observation and field notes; it allows readers to have enough information and a depth of context so that they can picture the setting in their minds and form their own opinions about the quality of your research and your interpretations. (p. 194)

By contrast, Maxwell (2013) described thick description as more than detail. He referred back to its origins as a way to focus deeply on the perceptions of the interview participant and less on the interviewer:

Some qualitative researchers refer to these sorts of data as thick description, a phrase coined by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949) and applied to ethnographic research by Geertz (1973). However, this is not what either Ryle or Geertz meant
by the phrase. Thick description, as Geertz used it, is description that incorporates the intentions of the actors and the codes of signification that give their actions meaning for them, what anthropologists call an emic account—one that represents the meanings and perspectives of the participants, not simply those of the researcher (Fetterman, 2008). It has nothing to do with the amount of detail provided. (Maxwell, 2013, p. 138)

Maxwell’s use of the term has been important for this research as a means to plumb the meanings that each campus leader attributes to their role, and the role of the institution, in relation to a subject as fundamental as free speech. Interview participants targeted first were primary informants. These individuals identified the senior leaders involved in a particular incident and helped negotiate access to those leaders, including presidents. The review of documents and news coverage revealed that the president issued a statement or was otherwise involved in each of these cases; thus, the president was targeted for an interview. Snowball sampling (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017) allowed for the identification of others who participated in decision-making or on whom the principal authorities relied for consultation or help. Interviews with those sources was helpful as well.

The data for this research came from multiple sources. To be fully knowledgeable of the incident, media accounts of what happened were reviewed. Many of the incidents studied had garnered attention from multiple news outlets. The reactions varied depending on the political viewpoint of the outlet. That is particularly true with regard to the free speech incidents on college campuses that generated polarized reactions depending on the speaker, the student reaction to the speaker, the institutional response to the speaker, or the student discipline or lack of discipline that resulted. In addition to traditional media, student newspapers and editorials provided a rich insight into the reaction to events. Video of many events is available, particularly the kind taken on a
cellphone. These videos record the incidents in real time. Video provided a valuable way
to experience the incident as if on the campus. Other valuable records included speeches,
white papers, editorials, or other documents written about the incident.

**Data Analysis**

Sensemaking of the data required careful analysis of the interviews for themes. To identify the themes needed to understand the leadership response, Heifetz’ (1994) conceptual framework was used. That framework furthered an understanding of the leadership response to the campus free speech incident via Heifetz’ adaptive problem lens. By coding the data according to the research questions, emergent themes among the schools and the responses of their leaders to adaptive problems presented by free speech incidents were identified. A review of the responses to the incidents allowed for common elements to emerge and data to be organized (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Heifetz’ framework was used to understand the responses of leadership to free speech conflicts. The extent to which leaders employ, modify, or do not employ the tactics identified by Heifetz, or tactics revealed through the research questions, to address adaptive problems was the lens through which the data were interpreted. Heifetz’ (1994) elements are:

1. “Holding environment” (p. 103). A place that holds the stresses of the situation. It keeps them together but does not solve them. It maintains the environment where adaptive work can take place.
2. The ability to “command and direct attention” (p. 103).
3. “Access to information” (p. 103).
4. “Control over the flow of information” (p. 103).
5. “Power to frame issues” (p. 103). The authority has the ability to manage the question.
6. The power to “orchestrate conflict” (pp. 103-104) which means the ability to call a meeting and bring opposing viewpoints to a room, or the ability to structure that room to effectively handle the meeting.
7. Power to “choose the decision-making process” (p. 107). Heifetz notes that this authority works hand in hand with the holding environment. Authority
creates the environment in which the stress can live, then picks to means by which it can be released.

The cases did not reveal the use of these strategic assets at all institutions. Thus, the first approach to the data focused on the research questions. The ways in which a leader framed and understood the problem, and what the leaders did in response, were the focus of the initial analysis of the data. To the extent that Heifetz’ (1994) framework helped to understand those actions, it was used as a tool of analysis as well.

**Coding Reliability and Quality**

All interviews were recorded and transcribed to insure an accurate record of each interview. The transcriptions allowed the interviewer to pay attention during the interviews without the need for intensive note taking. The written transcripts provide a full record of the interview data from which careful analysis took place. The author followed Stake’s (1995) checklist for interviews and field work preparation and analysis, from preparation, conceptualization, data gathering, and analysis, to ultimate understanding.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical questions arose during the course of this research. Interview participants at DePaul were careful to allow their interviews to be used only for this dissertation. Any additional use of this data was allowed, but only with written permission of the interview participant.

The approach to human subject research was cleared through the Internal Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania, and at the individual institution, if necessary. Those protocols ensured a thorough consideration of protections, including informed consent.
consent forms for each interview participant. All data produced from interviews and document gathering were kept on secure servers or to the extent in hard copy, kept in a locked office.

A final consideration was off-the-record comments. Certain participants identified specific comments made during interviews as “off the record.” The author honored those requests. Institutional anonymity, in addition to the identity of the president, was not offered. This is due to the fact that matters studied in this research were limited to those that have been resolved “successfully.” That means that the presidents were not fired or asked to leave for the handling of the events.

**Limitations**

Access to the data proved to be a challenge and played a role in purposeful sampling. The data received may have been produced to persuade or tell a certain version of a story. A careful review of the documents and cross referencing of them against other sources was necessary to account for that possible bias. Institutions were hesitant to speak about incidents if the institution feared lawsuits, either from injured bystanders or participants, activist groups, or students involved in the discipline process. It required a review of the applicable statutes of limitation for the anticipated actions and negotiation with the General Counsel at several of the institutions about access to institutional representatives. Depending on the participants, certain individuals were willing to speak to the interviewer. That was the case at Dillard University where the police chief was initially scheduled for an interview and then canceled based on the advice of counsel. Also, at Dillard, the General Counsel suggested that the institution was not a good case study. She argued that the incident was controlled by an interpretation of a contract to
host the Senate debate and that issues of free speech were not on the table. Careful attention was given to the possibility that the considerations at Dillard may not have been rich and sophisticated enough for the questions posed in this study. The author conducted the interviews despite that hesitation and found the interviews significantly rich and the considerations of leadership thoughtful and robust, including legal considerations and more.

Although a limitation in most qualitative work, this study is not generalizable. The number of schools in question and the purposeful sampling of them does not allow for the type of conclusions that may be applied to a broader swath of higher education institutions. Further limiting this study is the author’s bias as a University General Counsel. Having experienced the impact of controversial speakers on campus and the ramifications and decision making behind a response, particularly a presidential response, the author may pollute some of the analysis with his own bias. The author’s positionality is that of a senior administrator who has worked closely with presidents and other senior leaders for the last decade. That role requires a particular focus on the tools necessary to understand a complex problem, and the relationships among senior administrators and presidents, to use those tools. The author has been mindful of his experience of those relationships so they do not color his understanding of the data produced in each case. Finally, given that interviews were the primary source of data gathered for this study, the limitation of memory may impact validity. Efforts to triangulate information from data sources, in addition to interviews, were used to mitigate these effects but not eliminate them.
CHAPTER 4 – CASE STUDIES

Alma College

Overview of the Incident

Alma College, in Alma, Michigan, faced a difficult situation. Should it allow an invited speaker with controversial views about homosexuality and other social issues, disinvite the speaker because his beliefs were antithetical to those on campus, or allow the speaker and note that all views, controversial or not, are allowed on campus? Famed neurosurgeon and burgeoning political candidate Ben Carson spoke at Alma College on April 1, 2015, in the Hogan Center. He spoke with little incident, with only a few t-shirt clad students protesting, not so much against Carson as in favor of the groups his comments disparaged. Following the speech, he was taken to a waiting car and driven to the airport, where he had a flight to catch to his next engagement.

The college leadership aligned itself with the third position noted above while signaling that it did not share some of Carson’s views. Outspoken alumni and faculty publicly chastised the leadership for inviting (or failing to disinvite) Carson based largely on statements he had made about homosexuality being a choice and therefore not eligible for the same protections one might accord race, for example. The appearance of Carson on the Alma campus immediately on the heels of his rising political candidacy and at the time that he began to speak his mind on highly controversial issues presented a stark problem for leadership. Clearly, Carson the world-famous neurosurgeon was no longer his public persona. He was now Carson the political candidate who denigrated homosexuals. Alma risked linking its reputation to his as he appeared as part of their annual Honors Day celebration. The college leadership maintained its position
throughout the controversy that Carson would not be disinvited, and it used the lessons of the dispute over Carson to focus inward on the values of Alma as a liberal arts college and on the ways in which a college community can address conflict, protest, and controversial ideas.

**Alma College and Alma, Michigan**

The college was founded in 1886 by Scottish Presbyterians. Inspired by the tagline “Plaid works,” the proud Scots of Alma College occupy a prominent place in the small community of the same name in central Michigan. The city of Alma is located one hour north of Lansing, Michigan’s capital. The school there is a small, liberal arts college enrolling 1,450 students, all undergraduates, from 30 states and eight other countries (Forbes, 2018). The college takes its Scottish heritage seriously. Not only does it possess its own tartan, it offers programming in the highland arts, features a pipe band that performs at all major university functions, has award-winning kiltie dancers, and employs a football coach who wears a kilt on the sidelines. The school is 77% White, 5% Hispanic/Latino, and 4% Black or African American (Forbes, 2018), much more diverse than its surrounding community.

The city of Alma has a population of around 10,000, having been settled as a town in 1872 and incorporated as a city in 1905 (City of Alma, 2019). It occupies a small space, only six square miles. Despite its relative size, it is the largest city in Gratiot County (City of Alma, 2019). The area is politically and socially conservative: “If you want to get elected here, you run as a Republican,” said longtime resident and Alma’s former provost Michael Selmon. He does not think a Democrat has been elected from the
county in decades. As such, he noted that many from within that community were excited to hear what Carson had to say.

President Jeff Abernathy

Jeff Abernathy is in his ninth year at Alma College, having arrived in 2010. Alma counts him as its thirteenth president (Alma College, 2018). For Abernathy, Alma is his first presidency, and he hopes his only one. He graduated from Longwood College with a degree in English, followed by a master’s in the same field from Virginia Commonwealth University. He earned a PhD in American literature from the University of Florida. His book *To Hell and Back: Race and Betrayal in the Southern Novel* (2003) was published by the University of Georgia Press and focuses on race through the text of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Alma College, 2018).

His career in higher education began at Illinois College as a professor of English and assistant dean. From there, he served West Virginia Wesleyan College as the vice president for academic affairs and dean of the college. He left West Virginia Wesleyan for Augustana College in Illinois. He served Augustana for six years as vice president and dean of the college, the position he left to come to Alma in 2010 (Alma College, 2018).

Abernathy is serious about his hope to remain at Alma. He authored a piece for Forbes in August 2018 in which he derided the current habit of colleges and universities to hire presidents as if they have, in Abernathy’s words, “expiration dates.” He cautioned that leaders in higher education must work within systems of shared governance and expect any change to be slow. To be effective, he argued, presidents need the strong support of their boards to weather the ebb and flow of short-term setbacks to achieve
long-term visions. Abernathy signs the article as an English professor who happens to be the college president, signaling his intent to establish himself within the community rather than on top of it. He made this point again in his interview, stating that the faculty at Alma know him. They know that he is “really an English professor.” He feels that when he speaks to the faculty, on any issue, he does so as a colleague who is able to cut through the posturing and ask, fundamentally, “What are we talking about here guys?” In his words:

I think I had to act, in some ways more, with my faculty colleagues, more faculty member. Which I’m not, but I’m a professor, and they know that to be my core identity. This is all fate and fortune that brings me here. Wrong turn somewhere along the way, right?

Abernathy takes the long view on Alma and his tenure there. In this sense, he is much like his faculty colleagues, which is consistent with his view of himself as a faculty member first, but one who just happens to be the president. As a faculty member, Abernathy stresses that he and the faculty share a commitment “to preparing citizens. Committed to discourse. We disagree, we disagree. We say that, and we have a conversation.”

The president’s page of the Alma website quotes Abernathy as defining the core of an Alma education as the preparation of citizens who can “take on the most vexing of society’s problems” (Alma, 2018). One such problem is how polarized views have become in our society, and American society in particular. Alma is not immune from those contrasts. For example, Abernathy has spearheaded the expansion of the traditional liberal arts curriculum to include professional degrees such as nursing, neuroscience, healthcare administration, special education, and new media studies. Those majors are
pursued by increasingly large and diverse classes (Alma, 2018). Given the diversity of programming and the students attracted to the modern Alma, Abernathy considered the campus to be in transition. Its diversity and the increase in international students represented examples of this transition at Alma under Abernathy. By contrast, Abernathy described his board as conservative, as viewers of Fox News, the news outlet where Ben Carson served as a commentator. Currently, Abernathy thinks the college is well situated to dwell in the midst of these diverse viewpoints. He stated that in “these polarized days of ours, [if] anyone or any entity is going to lead us back to some semblance of sanity and public discourse, it’s the colleges.”

**Carson’s Talk at Alma**

Ben Carson was scheduled to be the Honors Day speaker at Alma College on April 1, 2015. Honors Day is a celebration of student research, and the speaker for the day is meant to complement and mirror the achievements of the featured students. The announcement of Carson, also a Michigan native, as Honors Day speaker proved controversial on campus. Though the invitation was first sent in 2012, the campus only focused on Carson’s visit as his political notoriety grew. Once Carson appeared on national media and espoused his views, Carson’s visit became a hot-button issue. As the news began to swirl about Carson’s visit on Honors Day, leaders needed to decide if his invitation should be rescinded. Alumni were vocal on social media that it should be.

Abernathy, along with his provost Michael Selmon, decided to consult the Co-Curricular Committee, which made the decision to adjust the schedule and remove Carson as the Honors Day speaker while still keeping him on the program. But this was not enough to quell the furor. One-quarter of the Alma faculty petitioned Abernathy to
rescind. Local media picked up the story and published the dissenting faculty’s statement on the matter. Abernathy had to make a choice. He did not agree with Carson the politician but respected Carson the neurosurgeon. His choice is the focus of this case study.

Benjamin Solomon Carson was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1951. He and his brother were raised by their mother, who had a third-grade education and was married at the age of thirteen. Carson’s father abandoned the family when Carson was eight to join another, secret family that he had secretly kept from them. With the strict guidance of his mother, Ben Carson moved from poor student to star pupil, eventually matriculating at Yale and then the University of Michigan for medical school, where he focused on neurosurgery. After graduating from Michigan, he interned at the Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore, Maryland. Five years later, in 1982, his skills propelled him to the position of chief resident in neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins. After a brief stint in Perth, Australia, Carson returned to Johns Hopkins in 1984 and became the nation’s youngest director of pediatric neurosurgery at thirty-three years of age (Biography.com, 2014).

Two years after his return to Hopkins, Carson achieved worldwide fame as he successfully separated craniopagus, or conjoined twins fused at the cranium, a rare pediatric condition with an even rarer connection (Terris & Kirchner, 2015). Carson’s fame grew as he performed various other high-profile separations of twins, not all of which resulted in survival. He began a speaking career in addition to his medical practice, and he authored several books, including an autobiography, *Gifted Hands* (1990); *Think Big* (1992); and *Take the Risk* (2007). His accolades include the Spingarn Medal, the
highest honor bestowed by the NAACP, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, awarded by President George W. Bush (Biography.com, 2014).

Carson pivoted to politics around 2013 as he became a contributor to Fox News and authored the book *One Nation: What We Can All Do to Save America’s Future* in 2014. He announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president in May 2015. As his potential candidacy gained traction, Carson drew attention to himself for different reasons. In an interview with CNN, Carson told Chris Cuomo that he believed that homosexuality was “absolutely” a choice and, as such, should not be accorded the same discrimination protection offered to race, for example (DelReal, 2015). Pressed for his reasoning, Carson responded, “Because a lot of people who go into prison go into prison straight and when they come out they’re gay. So did something happen while they were in there?” (as cited in DelReal, 2015, para. 8). Carson echoed his position on protections for gay couples. When he spoke about gay marriage, he argued that the definition of marriage itself did not need to be changed in order for gay couples to receive what he deemed the principal benefits of a domestic relationship, such as property rights. He backed away from these statements the next day while defending his position, saying that no definitive studies exist that have determined that people are born into a particular sexual orientation (DelReal, 2016).

Carson developed a reputation for making outrageous comments and then backtracking with apologies. In a famous interview with Sean Hannity on *Fox Nation* on April 1, 2013, he said:

> It [marriage] is a well-established, fundamental pillar of society, and no group, be they gays, be they NAMBLA [North American Man/Boy Love Association], be
they people who believe in bestiality, it doesn’t matter what they are. They don’t get to change the definition (as cited in Wyler, 2013).

To *The New York Times* in December 2014, he pointed out that he did not mean to equate homosexuality with pedophilia or bestiality. Rather, he was disturbed by the erosion of the definition of marriage, that if it slides for one group, then it will continue to slide for other groups (Gabriel, 2014).

Carson’s penchant for controversy was not limited to statements about the gay community. At a speech at the Richard Nixon Library on October 19, 2014, Carson stated, “Many of them [the American people] are stupid” (as cited in Corn, 2015, para. 1). He was trying to qualify his thought that Americans were not “stupid” enough to believe his political opponents in the schools and the media. He did not stop there. He stated that Fox News, as an outlet for conservative views such as his own, was the sole bulwark against the United States becoming Cuba (Corn, 2015). These beliefs have been traced to Carson’s support of W. Cleon Skousen, who published *The Naked Communist* in 1958, which argued that communists had infiltrated American society. Skousen pointed with suspicion to the civil rights efforts, homosexuality, modern art, Social Security, and Medicare, identifying all as vestiges of this takeover. As recently as 2007, Carson supported the latest edition of the book by providing a quote for its cover about the speed with which political progressives have attained their goals (Corn, 2015).

Carson’s book *A More Perfect Union: What We the People Can Do to Reclaim Our Constitutional Liberties* (2005) asserts that Nazi Germany would not have risen to power or been able to carry out the Holocaust had the German people been armed. This argument has been used before by opponents of gun control in ways that have raised the
ire of the Anti-Defamation League, which described such comparisons as “inaccurate and offensive” (Baumann, 2015, para. 4).

Carson’s political leanings began to emerge as he rode the speaker circuit and authored more books. His views, and his commentary on American society, became more salient in the period leading up the Republican primaries in 2015. The attention on Carson for his views stood in stark contrast to the attention he received for his accomplishments as a neurosurgeon spanning the previous three decades. Alma College issued its Honors Day invitation to Carson in 2012 based on his medical accomplishments and his personal connections to nearby Detroit, where he had been raised and where he directed significant philanthropic support—his former school there had even been renamed the Ben Carson High School. Delays and complications in scheduling postponed the talk until after Carson had received attention as a political candidate and after he made his views on various social issues known. That left the leadership at Alma with a problem.

The Case Against Ben Carson

Abernathy and Michael Selmon thought that the decision to rescind Ben Carson’s invitation was not theirs to make. The invitation had gone out via a faculty committee, so the two administrators punted the decision to the Co-Curricular Committee. That committee consisted of three faculty members; Michael Silverthorn, the associate vice president for communications; and representatives of the students and staff. Dale Sanders, the faculty member who invited Carson from the Health Administration Department, served on that committee, as did articulate opponents of Carson’s appearance. The committee, thus, rigorously debated the propriety of the invitation. A
A librarian on the committee argued that they could not disinvite Carson just because they disagreed with him. Ultimately, the committee turned down the request that Carson be disinvited. Silverthorn said that this decision emphasized the idea of Alma as an educational institution that values diverse opinions—it should stand by its invitation so that students could hear what Carson had to say.

As the fall semester of the 2014-2015 academic year began to wind down, the campus anxiety over Carson’s visit began to rise. At this point, the national spotlight on Carson was bright. That light uncovered older views held by Carson through his writings, supplemented by a trove of new information generated from interviews and newspaper accounts.

**The Storm Brewing From Within**

The provost, Michael Selmon, read the newspaper. A graduate of the University of Maryland, Selmon grew up on *The Washington Post* but read *The New York Times* too. Within their pages, he discovered the emerging profile of the politically contentious Ben Carson, the Honors Day speaker invited to Alma several years earlier. He knew that Carson would be controversial, but perhaps his gaffes were one-off mistakes, the kind that any novice politician might make. Then came more comments. As Carson’s views surfaced on multiple occasions, it became clear to Selmon that Carson was speaking his mind, not being misinterpreted. It became clear too that Carson’s opinions were gaining popularity and that he was being encouraged to run for president.

President Abernathy realized the growing problem around the same time that Selmon did: “The guy’s a genius surgeon. He’s not a genius politician, as we found out.” He described Carson’s remarks as “wild haired.” Once Abernathy did the research on
Carson’s statements, he concluded that he faced a choice. He said, “Obviously this is a mess. Because nobody on this campus would, in any way, endorse the kinds of statements that he was making. They were crazy.” He admitted that his first reaction was to side with the faculty who were angered by the appearance of Carson. He and Selmon huddled, and Selmon helped him step back from that initial reaction and take the long view on the situation. Selmon urged him to recognize that Carson was saying these things for political advantage. Abernathy recognized that Carson was clumsily trying to do what Donald Trump does well: pander to an audience with outrageous remarks.

Abernathy found himself between the rock of allowing Carson and his appalling views the platform of the Alma campus and the hard place of withdrawing the invitation that would result in a short trip to Fox News. Abernathy knew that his conservative trustees were Fox viewers, and the prospect of being criticized on the channel carried weight in his deliberations. What made Carson’s appearance more stinging was that he was invited by the college and being paid for his talk. Political speakers have appeared many times, but they had been invited by student groups. The college had made it clear to Carson and his agent that it did not invite political speakers, a clarification Carson both understood and ignored.

At the time of Carson’s visit, Ann Hall was the vice president of communications and marketing at Alma. She noted that a press release always precedes any speaking engagement, which means opinions on the speakers tend to surface. With Carson, however, she and her team were braced for the worst. They were aware of his comments and the increasingly brightening spotlight on them. The first wave of criticism as the fall semester wound down came from Alma alumni via social media. Openly gay Alma
alumnus Branden Miller posted on December 8, 2014, that he was appalled that Carson was coming to Alma. He urged the college to treat Honors Day as “a celebration of scholarship and creativity, not a platform for bigots” (Miller, 2014, para. 2). To ground his outrage in Carson’s statements, Miller described in his post the various statements by Carson relating to homosexuality. As Miller (2014) pointed out:

> Imagine someone saying such repugnant things about Jews or Black people. I doubt the College would invite (and pay handsomely) such a speaker to appear at Honor’s [sic] Day. This is not the stuff of serious academic discourse and it’s embarrassing that the College would host such a speaker for this important event. (para. 6)

He then encouraged all to reach out directly to Abernathy and Selmon, to the school paper the *Almanian*, to the trustees, and to faculty and express outrage at the invitation of Carson. On December 10, 2014, Miller posted a letter to Abernathy written by W. Robert Schultz III, a self-described “black gay man and Alma graduate with a life[-long] commitment to social justice” (Schultz, 2014, para. 2). In it Schultz thanks Abernathy for speaking to him by phone and urges him to share his letter with the Co-Curricular Committee, which was scheduled to meet that day to consider the Carson event. Schultz (2014) argues that Carson “has chosen to use his life’s work as a passport to disseminate hate and disunity” (para. 2). Schultz’s statement had support from others in the social media world and carried particular weight given his connections to the college. He reminded readers that his sister served at the time on the Board of Trustees, and that both of his sisters are Alma graduates. He mentions that his nephew intends to enroll as part of the class of 2019. He and his siblings had also established a scholarship in his mother’s name, and he mentions a long relationship with his fraternity brothers, who are welcoming to gay men, a spirit that he considers to be an Alma College tradition. Though
it’s clear that Schultz supports the idea of open engagement with those who he disagrees with, he believes that Carson passed beyond rational discourse. In addition, he believes that Carson’s comments are so explosive that Carson will be the focus rather than the work of students and faculty, which are supposed to be the spotlight of Honors Day (Schultz, 2014).

As the social media storm began to gather, Abernathy pulled his cabinet together, including his trusted provost Selmon. (Abernathy gives partial credit to Selmon for his appointment to president at Alma. When Abernathy began as the vice president for academic affairs at Augustana College, he connected with Selmon at Alma, where he had become an administrator after serving as an English professor. Their friendship was a decade old at the beginning of the Carson debate.) The vice president for communications, Ann Hall, was a long-time colleague too. She and Abernathy had known each other for seven years. Abernathy had hired the rest of his cabinet since his arrival. He credits the cabinet with allowing the needed space to assess the situation; their invaluable conversation and discussion, as well as their years of experience at the college, enabled them to level a measured response at what was at first a shocking situation. In particular, the cabinet recognized the internal politics and the need to consult bodies beyond themselves: the Co-Curricular Committee.

In December 2014, with the recommendation of the faculty committee in hand, the cabinet convened and produced a statement from the president addressing the Carson visit. Selmon was the principal drafter. The statement was released on December 12, 2014. In it, Abernathy recognized the voices that had criticized the invitation of Carson. He recognized too that the controversy around Carson might obscure the real purpose of
the Honors Day celebration: Alma College students. Abernathy pointed out that not everyone had been critical—other voices had expressed an interest in hearing what Carson had to say. To add context to the decision they would have to make, Abernathy reminded his readers that Carson had initially been invited three years earlier on the basis of his prominence as a neurosurgeon and that his most controversial statements had come in the years since the invitation was extended. The decision was more complicated, however, than simply addressing a scheduling conflict. Abernathy stated:

In recent years Dr. Carson has frequently expressed his personal opinions in ways that disparage and insult members of our local and national community. Certain of these comments have been deeply offensive to many and are inconsistent with Alma College’s commitment to non-discrimination, tolerance and respect for human dignity. We wish to be clear that Alma College does not endorse these opinions. They are contrary to our values. (as cited in Gittleman, 2014, para. 27)

Abernathy then made clear that he did not intend to withdraw the invitation to Carson despite his disagreement with Carson’s views. His reasoning was twofold. Because Alma should be a marketplace of ideas for the betterment of its students, he cautioned that Alma was “preparing graduates who think critically and who, when they leave Alma, will live in a global society where not everyone shares the same values and beliefs” (Abernathy, 2014, para. 9). This second point spoke more to strategy than to principle. Disinviting a speaker only turns a spotlight on the views being suppressed, he argued, without challenging the speaker to defend those views in open dialogue.

Abernathy credited the liberal arts as the foundational tool in his toolbox. A liberal arts education, if not academia as a whole, he argued, was about preparing students to become citizens. He described that the statement he issued was the clear-minded response that followed the initial panic:
Once we got out of the scramble period and the panic period and put in the framework of hold on, our central values say that we don’t rescind invitations. That we don’t ban speech, that we welcome a multiplicity of views. Once we had that framework it was pretty easy then to move forward. It was a good reminder of those values and [of the fact that] we certainly had the tools we needed.

Despite the certainty of the decision, Abernathy recognized the challenge to the Alma community, which he described as “Midwest nice.” To deal with the controversy, he kept coming back to his letter and the principles stated there.

Abernathy’s letter goes a step farther. After setting forth the principle that Alma does not disinvite speakers with whom it disagrees, he acknowledged that some form of process would be needed to address the divisions caused by this appearance. He announced that Carson would not be the keynote speaker for Honors Day, as planned, but would be a guest speaker on the night before Honors Day, a move that Silverthorn recognized as “semantics” but done with recognition of the controversy. Beyond that move, events around Honors Day would feature opportunities for “public civil intellectual discourse” (Abernathy, 2014), the details of which he only alluded to in the presidential statement. Hall described the issue with a question: “What is the role of differing opinions on a liberal arts campus?”

An important process was born to allow for a broader discussion around the Carson talk. An essay contest was developed to occur after the Carson speech and was designed to allow students to write essays about whether he should have been invited. Further, it was a chance to offer postscript opinions on whether the college had handled the matter properly. The winning essays were to be read on Honors Day afternoon, the day after Carson’s speech. Hall described the essay contest as a great “teachable moment” where students were selected to read their essays aloud and take questions from
those present. The event was well attended, and it allowed conservative students to express support for Carson and to express that their voices were generally not as loud on campus as they should be, and that they felt as though they could not speak up in class. In the words of Hall:

> It was awkward. There’s no way around that . . . the one thing that I absolutely believed, and I think most of the people on campus believed, was that it’s okay to disagree, as long as you do so courteously and you use it as an opportunity to learn and understand each other better. Which is what we were trying to do [with the contest].

Hall emphasized that she was not worried about safety around the Carson talk. She did not believe that it would engender violence, as some campuses experienced. But with the essay contest, students and the community were given a chance to make a positive experience out of a speech that was likely to offend members of the community.

Preceding Carson’s speech on Wednesday evening, Alma scheduled a day of events in which Carson participated. Of note, certain campus members were invited to have lunch with Carson. This was met with anger by the most outspoken faculty member in the case against Carson: Brandi Stupika (2015), assistant professor of psychology, described as “funny” how she almost broke bread with Carson:

> At first I accepted the invitation because I thought the Diversity and Inclusion Office was hosting a lunch about Dr. Carson’s visit. I thought surely there was no way that the office in charge of promoting equality on campus would host a lunch with Dr. Carson. I sincerely thought the lunch (if it were about Dr. Carson’s visit) was the College’s way of trying to make amends for the wave of hurt and insult that followed on the tide of Dr. Carson’s visit. The day of the lunch, however, and much to my horror, I realized that the lunch was with Dr. Carson. I quickly rescinded my acceptance of the invitation after I realized my mistake because I choose not [to] socialize with or give my precious time and resources away to people who publicly and brazenly spew hate for the people and the causes I love. (para. 2)
Stupika (2015) asserted that the college “stood on the throat of inclusion” (para. 3) by hiding behind the ruse of supporting diverse viewpoints. The fact that Carson was not allowed to speak about politics in his role as a paid speaker for Honors Day only angered Stupika (2015) more. She thought it was a cowardly action: “You invited someone with an apparent agenda to marginalize gay and feminist Scots and decided it would be okay as long as everyone promised not to bring up the pink elephant in the room. Shame on you” (Stupika, 2015, para. 4). She chided herself for not doing more. She wished that she had organized a “day without women” or a boycott of the talk. Significantly, she apologized to her students for not “protecting” them from Carson’s talk. Her open letter, posted the day after Carson’s appearance, brought forth strong reactions from the blogosphere, some anonymous and some not. Lyndsay Hicks, an attendee of the talk from Traverse City, Michigan, said of Stupika, “You are a bully; a stupid, self centered [sic], immature egotist” (as cited in Stupika, 2015, para. 1). Another writer, labeled only as “Alma Scot” and signed “A concerned Scot,” stated that the writer does not agree with Carson’s views and that history will bear that out. He/she agreed with the college, however, that the decision to initiate an open dialogue rather than to rescind an invitation and close the campus closed to diverging opinions was the right one. The writer agreed with Stupika, however, that speech has consequences but disagreed with Stupika’s conclusions. In fact, the writer urged Alma to take action against Stupika: “The only intolerance should be that of ignorance, not necessarily the ignorant.” Alma Scot accused Stupika of wishing ignorance upon the students of the college, an accusation indicating that Stupika, in the eyes of Alma Scot, was in the wrong business (Stupika, 2015).
Abernathy reacted by stating that Stupika’s comments about the event worked against the “ethos of the place.” He called Alma “a friendly place” that was disturbed by the way Stupika went about arguing against the Carson appearance. Because the college is small, she had strained the relationships of people across the campus by positing that colleagues were not acting on solid values or were lacking in courage (Abernathy, 2018). In the lead-up to the talk, she threatened protests and demanded rescission of the invitation. Abernathy believed that yelling at the administration and making demands was Stupika’s way of proceeding, and that her own colleagues, at times, found it embarrassing.

The Broader Faculty Response

Days before Carson was to give his talk, many in the faculty spoke out. Many of them were Provost Selmon’s friends. Interestingly, Selmon suggested that if he had been a faculty member, he might have joined them in their protest. In a carefully worded letter sent to the Alma College Almanian on the Monday before the Carson speech and published the next day in local paper, The Morning Sun, a full quarter of the Alma faculty protested the speech. From the outset, the tone of the letter was careful. The faculty “wish to express our concern” about the Carson appearance. The faculty position follows:

Dr. Carson’s address is still problematic in that his publicly espoused views are antithetical to the values of Alma College. This choice of speaker seems fundamentally at odds with our commitment to scientific and humanistic inquiry based on evidence and critical thinking, and with the very nature of a college claiming to welcome all, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. (Arnold, 2015, para. 1

The letter continued, mentioning some of the more controversial statements by Carson, which the faculty derided as ill considered, illogical, and not based on any evidentiary
standards. They claimed that these statements divide the community rather than unite it and work against its inclusivity. Twenty-four of 100 Alma faculty signed the letter. Abernathy did not feel the need to respond. He felt that he had made his statement and did not need to elaborate. He thought that the optics of a potential response would be too negative: “I didn’t want to be seen as battling with my faculty in The Morning Sun, for goodness sake.”

The Anti-climax of Carson’s Speech

Carson spoke on Wednesday evening of the Honors Day celebration in the Hogan Center, a larger venue than the Presbyterian Hall where he had originally been scheduled. Hall regrets the decision to move to the bigger space. She thinks it helped generate greater interest in the event. Silverthorn recalls being geared up for the event from a media standpoint. He opened the talk to all media, though not many came. He noted that The Detroit News had been interested in the controversy about Carson coming to campus, but they wouldn’t make the three-hour trip for a paid speech that wouldn’t be political. The closest television affiliates hail from Saginaw, Flint, Bay City, Grand Rapids, and Lansing, all at least an hour away. None of them covered the talk.

Despite a lack of media attention that day, the college was prepared. Silverthorn described an effort to update the college’s protest policy and protocols to anticipate actions by students or faculty. Contacts were made with local police to handle any protests and to prepare the venue. Questions were allowed at the event, but they had to be submitted in writing. The written questions were vetted by a panel convened in a side room. The selected questions were provided to Silverthorn who would ask them of Carson following his remarks. Silverthorn credits Alma’s readiness for the types of issues
that might arise in these situations to their experience with other high-profile speakers, such as Bob Dole, George McGovern, Vincente Fox, and Madeleine Albright.

Abernathy recalls that Carson and his wife were lovely people who chatted with him in his office prior to the talk. He used the term “lousy” to describe the talk, however, because Carson made it political despite their warnings. It was well attended by about 400 people, a mix of students and members of the community. Hall noted that the closest thing to a protest was a group of students who appeared at the event wearing t-shirts with slogans on them. The message was not offensive, and Hall thanked them for the measured tone of their protest.

Contrary to usual practice, a meet-and-greet did not follow the talk. Carson was thanked for the talk and escorted to a waiting car, which drove him to the airport. As Hall describes it, “We basically needed to get him off campus.”

The Campus Follow-Up

Honors Day came and went. The essay contests were held the next day. Carson flew off to his next appointment, declared his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president, and ultimately received a nomination and confirmation as the secretary of housing and urban development in the Trump administration. Alma’s Diversity and Inclusion Office sponsored what it termed “Diversity Dialogues” one week after Carson’s visit. The dialogues were described by that office as “a safe space for students and the Alma community to discuss critical topics in regard to race, culture, gender, stereotypes, multiple identities, diversity and multiculturalism in our community and around the world” (Brown, 2015, para. 1). The dialogues were scheduled to take place once a month
at lunchtime. Suggested topics included “LGBTQ and the Church” and “Stereotypes and Media Representation Affecting Cultural Relations,” to name two (Brown, 2015).

Selmon noted that faculty who were fighting with each other during the fray leading up to the speech admitted afterward that they had learned from one another. Some who thought Carson was not worthy of the Alma invitation admitted that they did not realize how important Carson was for the African American community. Others, such as the faculty member who invited Carson, found themselves in the uncomfortable position of supporting someone with whom they did not agree politically, a position that was a learning experience in its own right. Still, Selmon thought that once Carson left the campus, most of the energy left with him, and that little good discussion came out of the subsequent programming. He thinks that the programming would have been effective if it had been designed to diffuse the arguments over having Carson in the first place. If the programming was designed to have a good dialogue about the issues, he did not think it was successful—that dialogue all happened before the visit and died down once it was over.

Abernathy also spoke of the initial desire to diffuse the situation. “The worry is that you do act out of the crisis and how do you tamp it down,” he cautioned. He noted, however, that if he had listened to that initial instinct, he would have abandoned the ground upon which, in time, he was able to firmly plant this flag: the core community value of the marketplace of ideas. Abernathy considers this commitment to values as the fundamental lesson of the Carson incident. He would advise any other president facing such a situation thusly:
Consider your values, the values of your institution, the values of academia, and in your power statements and all your conversations, stay there. Take that high ground. You’re still gonna get shot at, but if you come down from there it’s only gonna get worse.

**Dillard University**

**Overview of the Incident**

David Duke, former grand wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, appeared on the campus of Dillard University, in New Orleans, LA, a historically Black college and university, on November 2, 2016. Dillard’s president, Dr. Walter Kimbrough, defended the appropriateness of Duke’s appearance to the campus community. In Kimbrough’s words, “If we say we’re liberal arts, you’re gonna protect free speech. You have to have this. It has to happen.” Duke’s visit incited a rash of events: students were bussed in from neighboring universities to protest, arrests were made, pepper spray was used on both officers and crowd members, protestors laid across streets, and national and international news coverage appeared at the campus, all causing the administrators to fear for their safety and that of their students. These complications were made more difficult by the fact that Dillard had about forty-eight hours’ notice that Duke would appear on campus.

Dillard officials initially thought they had an out: they had not invited David Duke. Duke was there to participate in a candidate debate. He was running for the Senate seat from Louisiana. He had polled just high enough, 5% in a recent statewide survey, to qualify as a viable candidate according to the debate rules. Though Dillard had only rented out its space for the debate to Raycom Media, the event’s actual host, Dillard had a history of allowing this type of event to be held on its campus and considered its
engagement with the community important above and beyond any legal obligation for space rental. It wanted its students to have the opportunity to see democracy in action and to know that important and hard conversations could take place on its campus. To that end, Dillard had directly invited controversial speakers to campus before. In fact, Duke had spoken on the campus in the 1970s, not as part of a large-scale political debate but as a solo speaker to the students and community members who attended. Given the fact that Duke had been granted direct contact with Dillard students before, the university underplayed the debate on November 2, 2016, which was scheduled to be taped by a film crew in an empty auditorium with no handlers, supporters, protestors, or cheering sections.

Based on the fact that Dillard had a contract to provide the space for the event and nothing more, including obligation for further involvement, its leaders thought the school was insulated from controversy and absolved from responsibility. Its legal counsel, Dr. Denise Wallace, advised the president that Dillard was under contract, and that to violate that contract just because it did not like the views of one of the candidates would amount to a breach of contract that she could not defend. In her mind, this was straightforward; there were no larger issues to consider.

Despite these facts, Kimbrough realized that another issue was at play. He knew that hosting the event had larger implications and presented a practical learning environment for his students. The ability to confront people and ideas that may be alarming and controversial was a skill that Kimbrough wanted his students to learn. Technical distinctions remained, but Kimbrough determined to defend the underlying propriety of the event, legal advice notwithstanding.
Dillard University

Dillard is a four-year liberal arts college. It is affiliated with the United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church. It enrolls 1,300 students and just over 200 graduate students. Its enrollment is overwhelmingly female at 76% and African American at 91%. The university consists of three colleges: the College of Arts and Sciences, which graduates the largest number of Dillard students; the College of Business; and the College of Nursing. Its most popular majors include public health, biology, nursing, and communications, according to its website (Dillard University, 2019).

Formed by the merger of Straight College and New Orleans University, both of which date to 1869, Dillard University was founded in 1935 to serve men and women of all races, but with a focus on providing the African American community with a Christian education. The institution was named after a well-known African American educator, James Hardy Dillard. The school has a tradition of bringing in the outside world to the campus. William Stuart Nelson, Dillard’s first president, established an arts festival that invited leaders from the local and national arts community. The school’s third president, Broadus Butler, began what was known as the Scholars-Statesmen Lecture Series, which outside educators, judges, artists, and writers attended. Butler’s successor, Samuel DuBois Cook, in addition to making the admission requirements more rigorous and demanding more terminal degrees for faculty, initiated the National Conference on Black-Jewish Relations, which became a national center (Dillard, 2018a). That tradition continues today under Kimbrough in the form of his lecture series titled Brain Food (Dillard, 2018b).
Hurricane Katrina

President Marvelene Hughes, Kimbrough’s predecessor, served Dillard as its first and only woman president. Her tenure included the tragedy that was Hurricane Katrina. Dillard was hit particularly hard by the storm. The total damage to the school exceeded $400 million.

Less than two weeks into the 2005 fall semester, students who had just arrived were evacuated to Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana (Elliot, 2009). Then, they moved to the New Orleans World Trade Center and the New Orleans Hilton Riverside Hotel, where they lived and took classes (Associated Press, 2006). By January 2006, other New Orleans campuses, such as Tulane, the University of New Orleans, and Loyola University, were opening their campuses to students again. Not so for Dillard. Only half of the Dillard students returned. Formerly at 2,200 students, the Dillard student population fell to half that size and 800 of them were living at the Hilton (Associated Press, 2006). In total, thirty-five buildings on the Dillard Campus were impacted, and the first floor of every dormitory contained four to eight feet of floodwater (Guy, 2009).

Walter Kimbrough

Dr. Walter M. Kimbrough was selected by the Board of Trustees of Dillard University to serve as its seventh president beginning July 1, 2012. For the eight years before that, Kimbrough held the position of president, a position he assumed when he was thirty-six years old, at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas, a small, historically Black college with 750 students. Known at Philander Smith by his Twitter username of “HipHopPrez,” Kimbrough developed a reputation for being able and willing to communicate with students about issues that mattered to them, ones that were
not always easy to discuss. For example, Kimbrough decided to take on the issue of sexually transmitted disease and out-of-wedlock children in the African American community at Philander Smith (Nolan, 2011).

He is fond of noting that he is a preacher’s son from Atlanta, Georgia. When he was lambasted on social media for hosting the debate with Duke, he thought it was funny that some were concerned for him based on what was being written. His response: “I just said, ‘Look, I know some of y’all out there are cussing me out on social media.’ I said, ‘Well, I’m a preacher’s kid, I’ll cuss you all out too.’” Kimbrough matriculated at the University of Georgia, then did graduate work at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, before earning his doctorate in education from Georgia State University. Kimbrough worked at multiple higher education institutions in the student affairs division before landing in 2000 as the vice president of student affairs at Albany State University in Georgia when he was thirty-two years old. In 2004, he became the president of Philander Smith (Dillard, 2018).

Kimbrough was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity at the University of Georgia, and his writing has focused on the Greek systems at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). He authored the book *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities*. He has been honored as one of the twenty-five to watch by *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* in 2009. In 2010, he was listed among the Power 100 list in the African American community by *Ebony* magazine. He shared that honor with Barack and Michelle Obama. In 2014, he was named the male HBCU president of the year by *HBCU Digest* (Dillard, 2018).
Kimbrough is active on social media. He appears as HipHopPrez on Instagram, Twitter, and on his blog. The Chronicle of Higher Education among others have recognized Kimbrough for his use of this medium.

The presidents of Dillard have all had lecture series to foster greater community spirit, promote the arts, or promote social awareness. Kimbrough is proud of Brain Food, the lecture series that he started/continued at Dillard. He decided that a school in New Orleans, known for its food, should have a series to feed the brain. Inspiration came from a Kenyan proverb that stresses that it is wise to fill the brain before emptying the mouth. Kimbrough has made a point of enlisting diverse viewpoints for this series, including Candace Owens, a conservative communications director and African American from Turning Point USA, and Lena Waithe, an Emmy Award–winning actress, producer and screenwriter (Dillard, 2018).

The Gentilly Neighborhood

“Gentilly is one of the most celebrated neighborhoods in New Orleans” said Dr. Roland Bullard, the vice president of student success at Dillard. It was the neighborhood where rich African Americans settled for three decades in the early twentieth century, and it is home to Dillard. Dillard is known colloquially as the “Jewel of Gentilly.” Bullard was surprised at first that residents of Gentilly did not raise any concerns about the Duke incident. He thought that everybody would be upset that Dillard would hold an event with a character like Duke. Then he realized that Dillard was known for hosting controversy. It became clear to Bullard that Dillard serves the community and that the community trusts Dillard to be competent with these events. As Bullard commented, “We’ve got a couple of projects and things going on in the community, and we hear from them in one minute.
if something’s out of the way. A blade of grass is out of the way, they’ll call.” He noted that Dillard was getting grief from New York and California, but Gentilly was quiet. If Gentilly served as a bellwether for the Duke event, then it appeared as if all would be well. That quiet turned out to be more “calm before the storm” than bellwether.

**The Debate That Brought Duke Back to Dillard**

Roland Bullard met with representatives of a news station who were preparing the details of the upcoming Louisiana Senate debate to be held on the campus of Dillard. He was brought into the conversation as they considered where on the campus to hold the event. Although this type of event would normally work through auxiliary services, Bullard was brought in to make sure that security was in place given the high-profile people that would be coming to campus, one of them a sitting senator. This was several weeks ahead of the November 2, 2016, event.

Weeks after the meeting, the names of the candidates who qualified for the event came out. When the bar for qualification was first determined, five candidates passed the 5% polling and $1 million fundraising cutoff. For this debate however, the rules changed, and the only qualification was polling percentage—the fundraising total was dropped. With the bar thus lowered, David Duke qualified for the debate. It was also the first time his polling numbers had appeared that high. The Mason-Dixon poll used for the debate showed Duke at 5.1% despite being shunned by the national Republican Party and having no real campaign, fundraising, or statewide organization (Benen, 2016). *The Baton Rouge Advocate* reported on the irony of Duke holding the debate at historically Black Dillard, a fact that Duke found “amazing,” adding that he still intended to appear for the debate (Benen, 2016). Duke worried about the appearance too, noting that he had been
critical of the Black Lives Matter movement and that “Dillard is pretty supportive of
Black Lives Matter” (Jaschik, 2016, para. 2).

That did not sit well with Kimbrough. “This is rigged,” he said. “Every poll after
that and on election day, he was below. It’s the only time in the entire cycle he was over
[five] so that he could qualify for this debate. I still believe that somebody did this on
purpose.” Now the debate that was to have five candidates had six with Duke’s
qualification. Raycom, the television outlet, was not the first to notify Dillard. Dillard
officials found out on social media. Marc Barnes, vice president of the Division of
institutional Advancement, was the first to discover it, and he spoke to Kimbrough.
Kimbrough’s reaction: “We were like, ‘What the hell is going on?’” Kimbrough
described it as a shock to find out in that way. He was not happy with the station’s
general manager for not alerting him directly, and he would be equally incensed later as
the station did not step up as Dillard was under fire and share responsibility for “inviting”
Duke. Kimbrough was in Washington, DC, at the time, at a reception at the home of
Howard University’s president. “My phone just started blowing up,” Kimbrough said.
His wife told him that Rachel Maddow was reporting that Duke would be at Dillard. He
stayed up to watch her report, which he describes as sympathetic and symptomatic of the
larger craziness of the election cycle. Maddow (2016) described Duke as the “former
grand lizard [emphasis added] of the Ku Klux Klan.” In Maddow’s (2016) words, from
the night of the debate:

Dillard, of course, agreed out of the kindness of their heart to be a host for the
debate. At the outset of the campaign, they had no idea that [it] would ultimately
involve an invitation to the nations’ best self-promoting Klansman and white
supremacist.
Kimbrough’s first communication was to his Board of Trustees. He explained that Dillard was not aware of Duke’s participation until the last minute. The conversations with the board and cabinet centered on Dillard’s relationship to the event, and they came to a conclusion. “We rent it out, let’s do it,” was the final call, the message that Dillard officials used, in part, to distance themselves from the invitation. The general counsel argued that the issue was simply contractual. The rental agreement contained no clause that would allow Dillard to cancel the event if it did not like one of the candidates.

Kimbrough took the legal advice but went further in his logic:

So, she [the general counsel] was just like, “If we need to think about this going forward, that’s fine, but right now we really don’t have a clause to break it.” So her [opinion] was just based on the law. . . . For me it was much more like if we say we’re liberal arts, you’re going to protect free speech. You have to have this, it has to happen. You don’t run from this because you have this one person.

Kimbrough was frank, however, in that if the board had told him to shut it down, he would have. But they did not. As such, Kimbrough kept insisting that Dillard did not invite Duke and that its role was limited to renting the space.

It was at that time that Kimbrough began to hear a counternarrative that Dillard should not have Duke on its campus. Some reminded Kimbrough of the fact that Duke has been to Dillard before, in the early 1970s when Duke, then a member of the Klan, was doing a campus speaking tour. He spoke at Dillard in front of the student body. Kimbrough heard from former Dillard students who saw Duke speak there. They argued that this setup, as one of six debaters, was no big deal. Kimbrough thought, “Why do you cancel the whole thing because of one person?” Beyond that, Kimbrough knew that one of the people invited to the event would be their next senator, and he would need that person to help with, among other things, the money needed to fix Katrina damage. He
wanted whoever that new senator would be “to be on campus, to have a personal experience at Dillard.”

Duke’s candidacy, the appearance at Dillard, and the outcry against it, amounted to a publicity stunt by Duke, Kimbrough thought. He argued that Duke had been chasing relevance for decades and that any battle over his right to appear on campus only helped Duke’s cause. He opined that Duke would win the battle if his appearance turned into a big deal. Kimbrough wished that the focus could be on the real needs of students, particularly students in the flood-ravaged areas of New Orleans, instead of on a candidate who was not at all likely to win (Williams, 2016).

Kimbrough, Barnes, and Bullard all pointed to a nascent grassroots group called Take ’Em Down NOLA that had formed in New Orleans to remove Confederate monuments in the area and their impact on the events of November 2. Several months earlier, David Duke has spoken against the removal of a monument, drawing the ire and attention of the group. Barnes described the issue as “hot” in the New Orleans community and the cause of real tension. This group was expected to populate the crowd that night and incite some of the violence that erupted.

A few days before the scheduled event, Kimbrough received an anonymous list of demands from a group purporting to be Dillard students. Kimbrough was not impressed: “I don’t do demands. We’re too small for that. You got a question, you come see [me].” Upon finding out later who some of the authors of the note were, Kimbrough was nonplussed. They were students who had asked him for football tickets and had shared thanksgiving dinner at his house. He feared that students could not have a conversation over something about which they disagreed without it being anonymous and adversarial.
“I don’t do either. That doesn’t work for me,” replied Kimbrough. Bullard noted that students at this time started to get more interested in what was happening:

The students are becoming a lot more interested in the conversation because folks are talking to them on social media, and they’re going, “Hey, how can you go to this school?” or really giving them sort of a tough time about it. Then, they start to get an opinion about what this looked like.

Bullard decided the best way to address student concerns was to engage with them. He had only started at Dillard the previous July and did not really know many students. He described their reaction to him as one of faint familiarity. He took the opportunity to address the students the week of the debate, telling them to stop and think for themselves and not to simply react to what they were hearing on social media.

According to Bullard:

So, I asked them to go out and look at the history of this thing. The fact that he had been on campus before in the seventies and what that looked like. Really starting to think about what it meant to have critical discourse on a college campus and the fact that that really was our purpose. That was messaging that actually had come from the president, which I absolutely agreed with.

Eventually, Bullard engaged the Student Government Association and asked them to take on the issue. The SGA agreed. They thought the event should go on as planned and that Dillard should be the site of “critical discussion.” Bullard was extremely proud of the way that the SGA stood up in that moment. He recalled writing a letter of recommendation for one of the association’s members sometime later in which he recounted the courage exhibited in that moment. The SGA planned a counter-event. They called Brownies and Ballots, where they handed out brownies and talked about the ballot, how to fill it out, how to register to vote, and the critical issues on it. These events were happening in advance of the debate night while the press coverage was heating up—as
was the criticism of Dillard. Despite that, Bullard felt pretty good about what was happening and how the narrative around it was being perceived.

On the morning of the debate, Kimbrough took to Twitter to reiterate his belief that the polling was rigged. He said, “Pretty clear polling rigged as Trump would say for ratings. Any protests become part of reality show masquerading as news” (as cited in Seltzer, 2016, para. 21). Bullard left campus at around 3:30 p.m. to grab an early dinner so he could return in time for the event. As he exited the campus, he noticed about ten students picketing in front of the campus. Their messages were not anti-Duke per se or critical of Dillard for hosting him. The messages centered on Duke’s beliefs. Bullard said:

I remember thinking that was an interesting distinction that the student had made was, that it wasn’t Dillard’s so terrible for bringing him, or the president was this, or it wasn’t that. It was, “Hey, we’re not aligning with your beliefs.” Which I thought was fine.

Bullard got word from Kimbrough that the student protesters had been contacting him to complain about harassment by the media, including such outlets as the BBC, CNBC, and CNN. Kimbrough asked the students to keep marching despite the difficulty and tasked Bullard with making sure that additional police were dispatched to watch over their safety. Bullard described that moment as follows:

I thought that was one of the most powerful things that happened that night is when I was telling you, the students were picketing. They emailed the president and he says, “Keep marching.” I thought that was amazing. It’s one of the things that gives me goosebumps, because that just makes me say, “This is why we’re doing this.”
The plan for Duke’s security was to get him in and out of the facility quickly. He was to be brought in via a back gate, delivered to the back of the auditorium, and escorted out the same way as inconspicuously possible.

Kimbrough was not on campus during the debate, but he was on the phone with his communications VP Barnes and being kept up to date on the evening’s events. He was trying to get back to campus to deal with the situation. Barnes told him to stay away. He described Kimbrough as being really upset and wondering if this would be the end of his presidency. Barnes was convinced that they had made the right decision, however, not only to protect the president physically but also to avoid having him try to answer the questions of the protestors. Barnes noted that he was worried about Kimbrough. He had not seen him face a situation like this in the several years that they had worked together. He described a moment after the event was over when Kimbrough’s wife was spotted on campus leaving another event. Members of the crowd began screaming at her. Barnes described the whole episode as “pretty scary.” Kimbrough was also in contact with the secretary of the SGA, and she gave him the same advice: stay away from campus. Kimbrough recalled Barnes’ practicality as well, as he told Kimbrough to stay away so that resources would not have to be diverted to protect him.

Kimbrough could only follow the event through third parties. He remained in touch with his board. He told them, “[If] we feel like it did not go well, it’s the president’s responsibility. I’ll be happy to resign.” Kimbrough notes that he told his wife in advance that he felt strongly about the need to bring Duke to campus and not cancel the event. He warned her that this decision may cost him his job and that he would resign rather than cancel. Kimbrough was adamant that Dillard and its community not give
Duke that power. He described him as one man in an empty auditorium speaking for not more than ten minutes at the most. Shutting him down would offer him publicity and power. He told his board these thoughts and reiterated that he was willing to stake his job on that choice. The board told him to stop speaking about resignation.

Bullard returned to campus around 5:00 p.m. to find approximately 250 people/community members milling about campus. He was concerned at this point having not anticipated this many people would appear on a campus with a student population of 1,300. Around 6:15, he walked over to the auditorium to check on the event, which was scheduled to start at 7:00. No one was to be present for the debate beyond the candidates. As Bullard arrived, he found the candidates on the stage, a moderator, and two boom operators—he described it as nine people in a room that holds 400. He deemed the room to be fine and received the “all clear” from the chief of police. The police had secured all doors into the building, except for one where students could access evening classes upstairs. In addition, because of the volume of media requests, they had set up a media room with television screens in the building. The media sat at long tables and reacted to the debate on social media or other forms of communication. Dillard had arranged for press credentials for several of its students so they could experience the event with the press. Again, in Bullard’s words, “We kinda thought we had it kinda zipped up.” Then Bullard turned and looked down the hallway.

At the glass entrance to the building, Bullard describes the scene as “an angry mob outside the door. They [were] just irate, and [they were] pressed against the door. We literally [had] to keep everybody out.” Among the crowd were people with megaphones who were leading chants about Duke. Bullard still thought that he could
handle the situation. He believed in the power of addressing students. In his own words, Bullard said:

So, me in all my wisdom, I decided I was gonna go out and have a conversation with our students and say, “Hey, look. This is what the situation is. Everybody know[s] you’re upset. This is what it is.” So I walk out, and I grab the mic. . . . So I was like, “Hey, this is our situation. We are hoping that everybody can really settle down.” As I’m looking across the crowd, they aren’t our students. Then they became angry. Who is this guy? They started yelling. I was like, “Oh no.”

Bullard retreated into the building and the crowd began pressing against the door.

Eventually, seven to eight officers were deployed at the door to keep it closed. The crowd began to throw water bottles and other items at the door. Bullard learned later that several local universities had bussed their students to the Dillard campus to protest. He was not happy to find out that this had happened without any advance communication or offer to send security or staff, a point he conveyed to at least one of the universities after the event.

Footage of the chaos at the doorway made the national news. One image showed a man swinging down upon the heads of state and local police officers as one officer pointed what looked like a gun (but was in fact a taser) at the man. As the man was taken down and arrested, the decision was made to use pepper spray on the crowd. A number of officers were impacted by the use of the spray, but it enabled them to get the door closed and secured. The crowd violence diminished at that point.

Barnes became afraid. He described the scene as follows:

The night of the event, I was actually afraid for my safety because people were trying to get into the building. They were throwing stuff. We didn’t know if people were going to bring in weapons, like we just didn’t know. It was really scary inside that building. Particularly as people began starting to infiltrate the building from other spaces so now, we’re calling in for police reinforcement.
There was no way for us to get out because the people were at that point all over the building. Barnes thinks that their response was not forceful enough from the beginning and that the crowd would have relented under a stronger display. He said, “We almost allowed the crowd to just bully us for a while.” As the crowd pushed its way into the building, more police were called to stop their advance, and pepper spray was used.

As the crowd began to thin and the event came to a close, Bullard thought that it was all over. What he did not know was that the crowd had moved over to the suspected exit of the auditorium to await Duke. Fortunately, they had the wrong door. As the candidates left, but not before some of the debate participants began to criticize Dillard’s handling of the evening as a restraint on free speech. Bullard noted that many outside the hall were angered that they had not been allowed into the event and believed that Dillard had arranged it this way in order to quell protest. Bullard also described a “scrum” of their students who were angry with Dillard for bringing this situation to their campus. Although he tried to talk to them, it did not go well.

As debate participants were leaving the campus, one of the two main entrances to campus was shut down. The two entrances connect in a large horseshoe. For some reason, people believed that the candidates were still on campus, and to prevent anyone from entering, they lay across the street to stop any traffic. This resulted in a backup of fifty to sixty cars trying to enter the campus. At this point, Dillard asked the police to arrest those blocking traffic. Of the six arrested, only one was a Dillard student. After this, the protests and the events of the evening that had started seven hours earlier settled down around 11:00.
The night was not over for Bullard, Barnes, and their cabinet colleagues, however. Kimbrough held a conference call at midnight to find out how everyone was doing and to debrief the evening. They planned to have the president address the student body the next day and tell them why Dillard had done what it did. Some students had begun a call on social media to fire the president. Kimbrough asked the students to locate the people who arrived before the event, told the Dillard students what to do, and pledged their support. He said, “Where are they now? Have they been back? Have they been back to check on you?” Kimbrough noted to the students that many sought what he termed “social media activism.” In his words, “People came so they could put it on social media and be in the paper to say, ‘Yeah, we protested David Duke.’ But if there were real issues over here, they abandon you so quickly.” He noted an adjunct faculty member who encouraged her students to protest and decry the administration’s actions. He recalled that he received a text message from her later indicating that she had it wrong.

Kimbrough’s favorite story of the events of that week occurred on the Friday following the debate. His secretary told him that he had an unannounced visitor. It was Dyan French Cole, known simply as “Mama D,” a noted civil rights activist in New Orleans who passed away in 2017 (Reckdahl, 2017). She was there with one of the students who had been arrested. Mama D had been the first woman president of the NAACP chapter in New Orleans in 1975. Former New Orleans mayor Marc Morial relied upon Cole as a resource and someone who would not take no for an answer. Senator Barack Obama, campaigning for president in New Orleans, conferred with Cole to determine what the city needed most (Reckdahl, 2017). Kimbrough recalls of his encounter:
My secretary called to say, “Mama D is here to see you.” I was like, “Oh Lord, I’m about to get . . . I’m about to get beat up.” So I see her walking with this student, and I was like, “Oh my God, I’m about to really get it.” And she said, “Look, I’m here to tell you something. When David Duke was on your campus the last time in the seventies, I was here. I had lunch with him that day.”

He described her as “the most radical person in the city.” She told Kimbrough that people like Duke, and those like him in the local community, only want to start a fight. She told him not to pay attention. She told Kimbrough that when Duke was on campus, she determined that she was going to be in that space with him, even though she was the NAACP president at the time and he was in the Klan. The meeting was a seminal moment for Kimbrough. He discovered that she had sat down and shared a meal and a conversation with someone who wouldn’t even be welcomed on campus today. As Kimbrough thought from that moment forward, “If you don’t like it, you go talk with Mama D.”

Kimbrough wanted to ensure that communication channels were open to all the constituencies on campus and that everyone knew what had happened. He explained the process that Dillard followed and acknowledged his decisions. He reiterated that he believed that Dillard had acted in the right way. If the events surrounding Duke’s visit had somehow damaged the fabric of the university, he was willing to accept responsibility and to step down. A journalist who was a former student of Kimbrough’s at another school contacted him in support. He told him that if Dillard could not handle David Duke on its campus for one night out of its 140-year history, then it should close. Kimbrough considered that a powerful message.

Bullard was left with a lingering sense that he had lost sight of himself and his role in student affairs in the course of the evening. He thinks that he should have made
sure the students got the most out of the evening. He felt that the evening devolved into crisis management as agitators were dealt with, and it was all the more frustrating that most of them were not even Dillard students. He noted that all of the pieces came together to conspire against him, particularly the external forces and his status as a newcomer to campus. He suggested that if faced with a situation like this again, he would advise himself to “stay in that moment, [trust] your instincts to say, ‘This is what I’ve been trained to do up to this point.’ That’s what you have to sort of stick with.”

Of note, Bullard regrets that he thought he needed to have the answer to the problem: “I felt like, in that moment I had to have the answer. I didn’t have to have an answer.” He wished that he had stopped at some point in the evening to ask himself what his students needed. He thought that it would have been easy for him to separate what was happening in the moment from the needs of the students because the students were not really at the center of the events. He observed Dillard students in the midst of the melee and felt terrible. He wishes that he could have identified the Dillard students and brought them into the building to talk to them. Instead, he reacted by treating everyone on the outside of the glass as an enemy. In the final analysis, Bullard acknowledged that he possessed the tools to deal with the situation but that he wished he had used them differently.

Bullard noted that the impact on the whole campus was misunderstood. He spoke to people the next day who asked what happened the night before. They were surprised. He thought the critics of Dillard’s actions overplayed the impact on the campus. Those critics were reacting to the student complaints, many of which came from those who did not even know a debate was taking place. He used as an example the student assembly
the next day when Kimbrough answered questions about the event, at which he did not observe any adverse student reaction, such as demanding answers or refusing to return to class. Kimbrough’s event, held at the chapel on campus, attracted faculty, students, and staff. Kimbrough explained that the university was prepared to demand its community to think critically, and events like the one held the night before served as an example.

Kimbrough also addressed a separate group of students who had brought forth anonymous concerns focusing on the needs of the LGBTQ community. Kimbrough chastised them for leveraging the Duke appearance for their own gain. He told them that the needs of their community were important and worth public discussion. Instead, their anonymous protests of Duke empowered him, and they should be mindful of that.

Bullard noted that his staff practiced events like this afterward. If another Duke event were to take place, what would they do differently? The police updated their protocols. A new student handbook came out with updated language on protests that would give the division some advance notice. Bullard noted that the division and Dillard have no problem with protests, “none whatsoever.” For his part, Bullard wished that he had not been wearing a suit that evening because he looked too much like “administration” and could not deal as effectively with students and protesters in that outfit.

Kimbrough still encounters lingering animosity from the events of November 2. He occasionally runs into people who question the police’s use of pepper spray and the clashing with protesters at the doors to the event. Barnes has an alum who emails him regularly about the Duke event and who rebuffs any attempts by Dillard to reach out to him. The alum reminded Dillard that it is the place that allowed David Duke to speak on
campus. On the other side of the equation, conservative alumni and students applauded Dillard’s actions, pointing out that the students and community of the university are not of a single political voice. They also applauded Kimbrough’s Brain Food lecture series that invites conservative speakers. In particular, Kimbrough invited conservative African American Candace Owens.

Barnes on the other hand dealt with the Duke backlash and then that surrounding Owens. Barnes expressed the following takeaway from the Duke incident:

I think that we have to create a space, particularly on a campus like ours, we’re predominantly African American, traditional student, and by traditional, I mean the traditional eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old student. We have to create a space where they understand, not everybody thinks like them. And we have to create space where they can be comfortable listening to people who may even make them mad in terms of what they’re saying, but understand the right way to react to that. . . . I think that when we don’t allow people to come on our campus because 90% of our campus disagrees with that individual, then I think we are doing them a disservice. And we are not doing our job as educators to teach them how to deal with stuff that they’re gonna face in the real world. The world does not look like the university.

Barnes is convinced that the right decision was made at Dillard. He wished only that he had taken the opportunity to have conversations with students about these convictions or that Kimbrough’s event that occurred after Duke’s appearance had happened prior to it.

The following March, notably after Charles Murray was shouted down at Middlebury, Kimbrough authored an op-ed for The Chronicle of Higher Education. He wrote about his experiences during his presidency at Philander Smith College and its speaker series called “Bless the Mic.” Kimbrough reflected on being in his second year of his first presidency at Philander Smith and being only thirty-eight years old. While there, he had invited Ann Coulter to speak. She appeared, spoke to over five hundred guests, answered tough questions, and left. The purpose of the series was to “make people
uneasy,” in Kimbrough’s words. One of his guests was Charles Murray. He lamented in his editorial that colleges do not engage ideas anymore, and those that do are put to extreme tests. Riots, police activity, injury, and outside agitators make the cost questionable. As Kimbrough put it:

   I’ll admit. I’m scared. The robust discussion I have always sought to expose my students to doesn’t seem to be worth it anymore. It feels as if the best thing to do is to play it safe and simply invite either entertainers and athletes to speak as feel-good events or hard-core academics whose presence will go unnoticed. It means going in the opposite direction of my “Bless the Mic” days and finding that boring lecture on dark matter.

He illustrated the power of open dissent with the story of an alumnus of Philander Smith who wrote an open letter criticizing the invitation to Murray. The alumnus wrote a similar letter when Coulter was invited. The power of the argument and the thoughtfulness of the alumnus’ position persuaded Kimbrough to hire him as the director of an institute at Philander Smith. He used that story as an example of thoughtful discussion, illustrating that it is the kind of dialog that would be lost if everyone played it safe.

**DePaul University**

**Overview of the Incident**

The story of professional provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos’ May 24, 2016, visit to DePaul University’s Lincoln Park campus in Chicago is one of reaction. Nobody anticipated what was to come. Thus, we begin with the incident, primarily, and proceed from there. Yiannopoulos was invited by the College Republicans student group as part of his self-styled Dangerous Faggot tour. He was scheduled to speak at an event held at the Student Center, a large, centrally located venue in the heart of the Lincoln Park
The crowd that had assembled was large, with 680 registered guests, but anywhere from 70% to 90% of the audience did not attend DePaul. Many had arrived early to the campus, and with their free time before the event, they entered various student offices, such as the Black Student Union, and shouted epithets to whomever was present. A popular shouted question was “Is this your safe space?” Students and staff reported that they were called “niggers” and “spics.”

The talk never happened, though. As Yiannopoulos and the moderator from the College Republicans sat in chairs onstage, a group of students approached and occupied it, walking back and forth in front of the speakers and eventually taking the microphones from both the moderator and Yiannopoulos. Up to that point, Yiannopoulos had been narrating the events from the stage with highly charged language, even suggesting that the protestors were angry because he had likely “fucked their brothers” (Gray, 2016). One of the protestors swung the microphone in Yiannopoulos’ face to taunt him, and there was some dispute as to whether she struck him with it. The crowd, most of whom were there to see Yiannopoulos, became increasingly agitated and began yelling at those who took the stage. The students onstage sent messages via text and social media to others on campus about what they were doing and that they felt threatened. As a result, many students from the campus rushed the student center, banging on the glass doors to get in.

The tense standoff lasted for about fifteen minutes before the security guards hired to control the event told those in charge to cancel the event because they could not guarantee safety any longer. Upon hearing this news, Yiannopoulos urged the crowd to leave the student center and march across the campus to the president’s office. As the
crowd exited the building, it encountered the students who had gathered to protest. The crowd pushed through this group. Shouting and fighting ensued, and several participants were physically injured in the fracas. The Chicago police were called in to disperse the crowd.

This event occurred during a time when the president, the Board of Trustees, and the provost had all traveled to France. The chief diversity officer was in Germany. The communications vice president was on DePaul’s other main campus in Chicago. All had to make immediate emergency plans to return to the school, where they found a campus deeply divided by the incident. Complicating matters, the campus had also been trying to address divisions that had arisen from divergent reactions to the Black Lives Matter movement. The fifteen minutes that protestors had occupied the stage set off a series of events that some say lasted anywhere from one to three years. Others say the healing process is ongoing.

**Father Dennis Holtschneider**

Father Dennis Holtschneider is a Vincentian Catholic Priest. He first served in the field of higher education as a faculty member at Saint John’s University in New York City. There he was promoted to assistant dean, and then to associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, located at what he describes as “one of their remote campuses.” From Saint John’s, Holtschneider returned to his alma mater, Niagara University, after a large shakeup thereduring which the administration had been fired, leaving the university in need of significant attention. Holtschneider was hired as the executive vice president and chief operating officer of Niagara. After four years at Niagara, Holtschneider left to join DePaul, which was facing similar circumstances that Niagara had been when he
became its COO. The president and senior leadership there had been fired, and he was asked to come to DePaul, a much bigger school, to serve as president and oversee a turnaround there. He describes his first 2 years as “heavy stabilizing” and “keeping the banks away.” After those first two years, Holtschneider remained at DePaul for eleven more, and during that time, he was able to build the university after he had removed it from life support.

After he received an undergraduate degree math education, Holtschneider began an MBA program in finance before changing tracks and earning a doctorate from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education in Administration, Planning, and Social Policy. Along the way, he earned master’s degrees in theology and divinity from Mary Immaculate Seminary (Freund, 2018). Holtschneider attributes his rapid rise through leadership positions to his connection to the universities that have employed him: “The truth is, I also got early opportunities to do some of this because I’m a Vincentian priest at Vincentian universities, and that’s a little bit like being a family member in the family business.” He believes that the schools wanted a Vincentian, so he was hired at a young age for these top jobs. He was forty-two years old when he became the president of DePaul. Holtschneider served as the president of DePaul until 2017, when he left to become the executive vice president and chief operations officer of Ascension Health. In late fall 2018, Holtschneider was named the new president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

Holtschneider lectures at the Harvard Graduate School of Education on strategy, governance, and management and has served as a board member to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, on the executive committee of the
American Council on Education, and as board chair for the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (Freund, 2018). Seven schools have awarded him honorary degrees.

**DePaul University**

DePaul University began life as Saint Vincent’s College in 1898 in Chicago. An existing church building operated by the Congregation of the Mission, an order of Catholic priests known more commonly as the Vincentians, was renovated to accommodate the fledgling college. The college opened without a president at first, with only its seven faculty members. That lasted a year. The Rev. Peter Byrne, C.M., was named the school’s first president in 1899 and held the position for a decade. The college became chartered as DePaul University nine years after its founding. It was named after the founder of the Vincentians, Saint Vincent de Paul (DePaul, 2018a).

Today, DePaul spans two principal campuses, in Lincoln Park and downtown Chicago, although it operates on a total of five campuses in both Chicago and the surrounding area. The university consists of ten schools: Driehaus College of Business, the College of Communication, the College of Computing and Digital Media, the College of Education, the College of Law, the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, the College of Science and Health, the School of Music, the School for New Learning (focusing on adult education), and the Theatre School. These colleges and schools collectively offer over 130 undergraduate majors and over 175 programs of graduate study (DePaul, 2018b).

The student population at DePaul is just under 15,000 undergraduates, with about 8,000 graduate students. The demographics consist of 52% White students and
approximately 20% Hispanic. Its Black or African American population is 8%; 9% of the student body is Asian. Four percent of the student body lists two or more races, and 3% are foreign students. Overall, only 18% of undergraduates live in university housing, although 68% of first-year students live on campus (College Xpress, 2018). The Lincoln Park campus hosts the major residence halls. These residence halls all sit within a block or two of the university student center on Belden Avenue (DePaul, 2018).

Student clubs and organizations offer a glimpse of the diversity at DePaul. Currently, over 350 such organizations exist. The list includes many of the usual suspects, such as club sports teams, fraternities, and sororities, as well as lesser-known groups such as the Baseball Uniform Appreciation Club and the Beekeepers of DePaul. Clubs represent a diverse array of student interests and opinions. For example, besides the Turning Point USA club are two organizations for undocumented students: Undocumented Student Movement and the Undocumented Vincentians and Allies Club. Catholic Campus Ministry shares a line on the club web page with United Muslims Moving Ahead. African American clubs and organizations appear throughout, spanning approximately thirteen associations, including Greek houses. LGBTQ groups, Latinx groups, groups supporting people of color, and a variety of religious and cultural heritage groups fill the roster of clubs (DePaul, 2018). Among these is the College Republicans. The diversity of the student body at DePaul is mirrored by the diversity of the clubs and organizations, any one of which can invite speakers to campus to speak from the viewpoint of the club members.
The City of Chicago

DePaul is a large private university in a large city. The City of Chicago, as of July 2017, had a population of 2,716,450 people. Its population is relatively young with only 11% above the age of sixty-five years old. Its population is 49% White, 30% Black or African American, and 29% Hispanic or Latino. Of that population, almost 21% are foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Within the city of Chicago is the neighborhood of Lincoln Park. Just north of the heart of downtown Chicago, Lincoln Park gets its name from the 1,200-acre green space of the same name that sits beside Lake Michigan and features beaches, trails, a zoo, a nature museum, a conservatory, and athletic facilities. An urban area, Lincoln Park mixes retail and residential with business districts, all within view of the downtown skyscrapers (Chicago Welcome Home 2018a). That downtown area is known as the Loop, which is home to signature landmarks by some of the world’s most famous architects. Iconic public art, a central business district, urban rivers, shopping, restaurants, and urban parks all occupy this downtown area, with Lake Michigan acting as a stark, solid eastern border of blue ending at the horizon (Chicago Welcome Home, 2018b).

The DePaul Mission Statement

The setting of DePaul is echoed in the opening paragraph of its four-page mission statement, where its three principal “distinguishing marks” or characteristics are listed: it is simultaneously Catholic, Vincentian, and urban. Recognizing that its core population comes from the greater Chicago area, DePaul seeks to serve the interests of that diverse community. Its policies for the recruitment of students, staff, and faculty reflect its commitment to equal opportunity. The fundamental mission of DePaul is traced to Saint
Vincent de Paul, the founder of the Congregation of the Mission, which sponsors the university. The mission statement says:

Motivated by the example of Saint Vincent, who instilled a love of God by leading his contemporaries in serving urgent human needs, the DePaul community is above all characterized by ennobling the God-given dignity of each person. This religious personalism is manifested by the members of the DePaul community in a sensitivity to and care for the needs of each other and of those served, with a special concern for the deprived members of society. (Board of Trustees, DePaul University, 2016, para. 12)

As stated by Gene Zdziarski, the vice president for student affairs, he has never worked at a place where the mission is shared equally by faculty, students, and staff as it is at DePaul. “Everybody has this sense that they’re committed to the mission. Now exactly what that mission is? It gets a little nuanced from group to group because everybody feels like they’re living it out in their own way.”

**Milo Yiannopoulos Comes to DePaul**

Months before Yiannopoulos set foot on the campus of DePaul, President Holtschneider began dealing with the issue of racial tension. In January 2016, Holtschneider was speaking to the president of the student government, an African American from Detroit, Holtschneider’s hometown. Holtschneider asked if he, as president, should be listening to the concerns of students of color on campus. The answer was yes. Based on the conversation, Holtschneider set up listening sessions with student groups over the next several months. Students at the sessions spoke directly to Holtschneider about not feeling welcome on campus and being questioned by security as if they did not belong there. The events at the University of Missouri and the Blacks Lives Matter movement stirred the climate leading up to these discussions. The student stories that surfaced at the sessions “broke my heart,” said Holtschneider. Zdziarski
recalled that the conversations were productive and that a line of communication was
opened between the students and the administration. He said, “We felt like we were out
in front on many of the issues.” Following on the heels of these discussions,
Yiannopoulos came to campus.

The political discourse in the nation in the run-up to the November 2016
presidential election had made its way to DePaul. If it is happening in the country, it will
make its way to a college campus, asserted Linda Blakely, the school’s vice president for
public relations and communications. “We work very, very, very hard to live our
commitment to diversity,” Blakely said. That spring, there were a number of students
who felt that their experience of DePaul was not as positive as it should be. As she put it,
African American students were not “feeling as at home at DePaul as we want all of our
students to feel.”

“I never heard of Milo Yiannopoulos,” said Dr. Elizabeth Ortiz, vice president of
institutional equity and diversity. Holtschneider reflected on the fact that many
controversial speakers have visited DePaul in the past. In his mind, Yiannopoulos was
“another outside paid speaker.” Invited by the school’s College Republicans,
Yiannopoulos had spoken at the University of Pittsburgh before coming to DePaul. His
appearance there generated protests from the campus, and the ideas he expressed were
not particularly attractive to the administrators who reviewed the request to bring him to
DePaul. The College Republicans had the money to invite him though, and the school
could not see why his ideas should not be spoken, heard, and debated on the campus.
“This will be fine. We’ve had controversial speakers before. We’re the marketplace of
free ideas. It’s going to be fine” was the reaction recalled by Ortiz as she anticipated the visit.

Zdziarski had heard of Yiannopoulos. Though the more incendiary events at the University of Washington or Cal Berkeley had not happened yet, he was aware of the type of speech that Yiannopoulos would deliver. Zdziarski was in his second year at DePaul, but he came with a background in crisis management. Not only did he write his doctoral dissertation on the subject, but he had served in the student affairs division at Texas A&M when the bonfire collapsed and twelve people died. His experience told him to follow the procedures DePaul had in place. He consulted DePaul’s speech and expression guidelines, which had been developed around 2007. They sounded familiar themes to Zdziarski, who had experience at several large, public institutions. As he put it, DePaul’s policy made it “open to all forms of speech and expression and no matter how much it might go against the people’s thoughts or ideas at the university.” Yiannopoulos raised concerns to another level, however, as his ideas were thought to attack the core of DePaul: its mission. Zdziarski and his staff assembled a briefing, which they shared with the cabinet, president, and general counsel. He acknowledged that DePaul supports free speech, but it had options as a private university to make decisions about whether to allow a speaker or deny him access to campus. Ultimately, the university decided to move ahead with the event. It did not have a process by which it could vet this particular speaker without it appearing as if it were censoring a particular group. DePaul would get through this event, he thought, and then use the experience to institute an appropriate process afterward.
May 24, 2016

“It’s a good time for me to be away because, frankly, near finals nobody generally needs the president nearby, they’re so busy,” explained Holtschneider as to why he was in France at the time of the Yiannopoulos visit. He takes new trustees every two years to Paris to orient them on the history of Saint Vincent de Paul. It is a serious and intense study of the origins of the university’s mission. “It’s a week where you can go away from campus and things are usually pretty quiet. That didn’t turn out to be so,” he said.

According to Ortiz, the audience members for the Yiannopoulos talk began arriving on campus and queueing for the event by 3:30. They were shouting at staff, faculty and students both in the student center and inside officers located there. Students and staff reported being really frightened. A student from a focus group reported being told to “go back to the zoo where you belong” and “build a wall” (OIDE, 2017). Others yelled that Blacks commit more crimes than Whites, which explains why they represent a larger portion of the jail populations (OIDE, 2017). A sixty-four-year-old staff member, born in the United States, was rendered in tears upon being told, “Spic go home” (Ortiz, 2018). Another student, a disabled African American, reported being afraid to leave the student center after a class. He described seeing the line of people wearing “make American great again” hats. He would not leave the student center unless he had to. When he requested an escort from public safety, he was denied because of short staffing (OIDE, 2017).

At the same time, students were holding a peaceful protest in the form of a poetry reading about what events such as the Yiannopoulos talk meant to them. As soon as the event began, students charged the stage and violently took the microphones from the
moderator of the College Republicans and Yiannopoulos. The students sat on the front of the stage and walked back and forth in front of the speakers. While this was going on, Yiannopoulos narrated the scene with a monologue about the protestors. Gender and racial slurs abounded as the crowd became increasingly restless. This lasted for about fifteen minutes before the private security hired for the event told the organizers that it could not guaranty their safety and the event would have to be canceled. It was at this point that Yiannopoulos encouraged the disappointed attendees to join him on a march through the campus to the president’s office (Gray, 2016).

Students from inside the event were communicating with students outside and indicating that they were in trouble. Students rushed the doors of the hall, all glass, and began pounding. The protestors from outside the doors met the crowd from inside, led by Yiannopoulos, and began to mix with them. Event attendees emerged and began to parade around campus. Pushing and shoving followed as the attendees pushed through the middle of the protestors. The yelling continued. Fistfights erupted, and two people were knocked to the ground. The Chicago police was called, and one arrest was made.

“We were very fortunate, it didn’t turn into a full-blown riot,” remarked Zdziarski. He noted that the vast majority of the attendees before, during, and after the event were not DePaul students. They were unresponsive to requests to curb their behavior from public safety or student affairs staff. DePaul student protesters were ushered into another space to cool down. Chicago police dispersed the crowd. Yiannopoulos got into his Uber and left.
The Immediate Response

In France, Holtschneider awoke to an inbox full of emails about the incident that had occurred the day before in Chicago. Zdziarski communicated to his boss that student leaders had stormed the stage at the Yiannopoulos event, taken the microphone from those on stage, and prevented the speech. After being prevented from speaking, Yiannopoulos led a march out onto the campus to protest the cancellation of his talk. The president was told that the assembled audience marched around campus and left. To his ears, this sounded like an incident where the student leaders, mostly African American, had not respected free speech rights. He wrote a letter that day to be distributed to the university community. The letter was written from Normandy. Holtschneider wrote of the impact of the cemetery there: “The rows on rows of white crosses in the American cemetery speak to the selflessness of the human spirit at early adulthood to lay down their lives for a better world” (as cited in Neff, 2016, para. 9). He recognized that many of those who interrupted the speech has similar ideals to the soldiers he mourned at Normandy, but he chastised their methods. Holtschneider said, “Those who interrupted the speech were wrong to do so” (as cited in Neff, 2016, para. 7). He made clear that he did not agree with the views espoused by Yiannopoulos, but he also emphasized that among the rights that American soldiers died to defend was the freedom of speech (Neff, 2016).

According to Zdziarski, the message from the president was not well received. Those on campus felt like he did not fully understand what had happened. Ortiz was thinking about those on campus. She, like Holtschneider, was in Europe, delivering a talk at a conference in Germany. She viewed the video and felt powerless to help from her
distant vantage point. She would have preferred a simple statement that the administration cared about the well-being of their students and that they would launch an investigation into what had happened and why. She sensed that there were two sides to the story and that more information was needed. She decided that she needed to get back to campus immediately and left the conference.

Holtschneider asked if he thought that he needed to fly back from France, and Zdziarski said yes. Holtschneider took an overnight flight to get to campus as quickly as possible. He believed that the matter had to be handled fast. In his words, “Presidencies have been lost for less.” Holtschneider knew that he did not have much time to fix the situation on campus because graduation was less than two weeks away, and any lingering problems would disrupt it. He made sure that people knew that he was taking the matter seriously, and emphasized it by letting everyone know that he had flown back overnight to be on campus. Ortiz remembers that Holtschneider brought his leaders into a room. He told them, “I want to solve this.”

Zdziarski was faced with another problem at the time. The bill for security for the event was to be borne by the College Republicans. The university had required that the number of security guards be increased from eight to fifteen. However, having canceled the event at the university’s insistence, the university agreed to cover the cost of security for the full contingent of fifteen officers (Paras, 2016).

Holtschneider realized that he, as a president and priest, was in a unique position at that moment in time. He needed to be visible. He already was well known around campus. He had been at DePaul for thirteen years at that point. He was visible too for his
black suit and Roman collar, the garb of a Catholic priest. He put the importance of symbolic leadership in this way:

And so, the president has an extremely symbolic role in these moments. And I used the symbol with a lot of weight. . . . Truthfully, if you don’t understand how much people invest in a single person in these moments, you’re not going to last as a leader. And so, you have to be the person that is publicly wrestling with these issues.

Holtschneider emphasized that he had to listen to the ideas that people were sharing and speak back to them so that they knew that he heard and understood them. By speaking back the values and concerns that people raised with him, he felt that he could convey to the community that he would solve this problem. He cautioned that it would require everyone to think it through it, and that the community as a whole would have to get better at handling situations such as these. He realized that improving in these circumstances would take on different forms to different people. As he described the emergent nature of the situation, “This is not a moment to wait and see how things develop. You have to be in the fray.” He described his position as thinking out loud with his community about issues of free speech and other issues they value, as well as the rules by which they respect each other.

Holtschneider acted:

We . . . immediately scheduled three town halls: one for students, one for staff, one for faculty, to talk about what we had just been through, and what we needed to learn and what we needed to think about this and what we needed to do next. There were two reasons to do that. One is the obvious, it’s a university. You need to create a space where people can think collectively and think out loud.

His other reason he described as political: he needed to protect graduation. He worried that if he did not give the anger and frustration an outlet, it would migrate to the next available symbolic event.
He led the town halls as “the centerpiece of that conversation,” in his own words. He sat on stage at these meetings and listened to everyone’s concerns. “I absorbed an awful lot of energy and anger from the groups,” Holtschneider said. He repeated what he heard each time and from each person to allow all perspectives to fit into the picture and the conversations to evolve. Asked if he molded his communication differently for different groups, he said no. In his words, “I learned a long time ago that you better not deliver different communications to different groups, because it always gets out.” Thus, he said the same thing to the students, faculty, and trustees.

The perspective on the town hall meetings from other campus leaders was stark. Ortiz describes how Holtschneider stood on the stage, took responsibility for what had happened, and admitted that he got it wrong. When asked how they were able to get through this time, she said that it was the leadership at the top that made the difference. Blakely described leaders who “got beat up verbally. Took the punches.” In the words of Ortiz, speaking of Holtschneider, “I have never seen a person take so much abuse with so much grace. He said he was wrong. He said he was sorry. But it didn’t matter. People were angry.” Given the cathartic nature of these events, the plan was to let everyone say whatever they wanted to say. Notes were taken and ideas shared among groups and stakeholders. Notes from the student forum revealed that they did not feel safe. Others reported feelings of post-traumatic stress that were not being appreciated by others on campus, particularly faculty. They reported feeling betrayed by their leaders and their campus. They had lost trust in the school. The marginalized were preyed upon by the dominant groups. The school had not been prepared (OIDE, 2017).
Faculty voices were more strident, with some calling for the president to resign, a feeling that was shared by the Black Student Union (OIDE, 2017). Holtschneider described being chastised by the assembled faculty. He noted that those who criticized him the loudest had already been critics of his throughout his tenure at the university. Following the faculty forum, he was invited to a private reception by a group of faculty members who offered him a lifeline. They told him that he could gain trust and support among the faculty if he were to agree to replace a particular conference table with which they were unhappy, or he could gain trust if he were to support the applications of several faculty members who aspired to administrative positions and provide more funding for faculty activities. According to Holtschneider, they gave him a list that they tied to the events of the town hall. He used this example to illustrate that many agendas emerged though the exigency of the situation, as some parties thought they could take advantage of his vulnerability.

Holtschneider decided a more formal apology was in order. He expressed the importance of admitting a mistake: he had gotten it wrong, and felt that he needed to let the campus know. Thus, on June 2, 2016, he issued a second campus-wide email in which he described what he had learned since returning to campus. He reflected back on what he had been hearing from constituencies and in town halls and took responsibility for the hurt caused to community members by his first communication about free speech:

They read my letter about free speech as they were still shaking from the frightening effects of the hate speech they experienced. They further felt exposed and blamed for the escalation of the crowd’s behavior. And I’m concerned that my own silence in recent days, as we’ve begun a series of meetings to hear people’s feelings firsthand, has been deafening. In short, many of our students, staff and faculty felt insufficiently supported by the DePaul community last week, including by me. For all of this, I deeply apologize. (Holtschneider, 2016)
Holtschneider related the totality of events that he had learned to that point. He wrote of the taunting before, during, and after the event. He made sure everyone knew of the pushing and fighting that took place in the march that followed the event.

Holtschneider (2016) described as “pure evil” an online harassment campaign that followed the event, which targeted anyone who supported the students who disrupted the event or challenged the messages. This campaign included setting up fake accounts reputed to belong to the spouses of these individuals. He detailed that a noose was found on campus and an anti-Mexico slur was painted on a sidewalk. These actions were contrary to the school’s Vincentian values, he asserted, and he made a point of distinguishing these “actions” from “speech” alone. He apologized again:

Perhaps we should not have been surprised, but I think all of us—protesters, event organizers and administrations alike—were taken aback by the level of vitriol that was unleashed and the damage that our community would experience. I am truly sorry that members of our faculty, staff and students have experienced this kind of hatred. (Holtschneider, 2016, para. 4)

He mentioned further that a number of initiatives were underway. He solicited feedback from student groups. He wanted to revisit the speech policy from 2008. He asked his President’s Diversity Council to look into all the concerns of the different groups and to schedule more listening sessions. He further predicted that some of the divisiveness would accelerate as the presidential election neared. He closed with the observation that “communities are not built alone but as a collective of people who care and respect one another” (Holtschneider, 2016, para 10).

While certain town hall participants called for his resignation, Holtschneider held back a secret. He had already resigned. He had completed a successful comprehensive
campaign and a strategic plan. He could have signed up for another six to eight years, but in consultation with his religious superiors and the Board of Trustees that March, he had decided to step down from the presidency at the end of the next academic year. No one in the campus community knew that, however. That announcement would not reach the campus for another two weeks, the day after graduation. The timing of the announcement and the publicity of the event with Yiannopoulos were conflated across the media. Holtschneider noted that Yiannopoulos dismissed the possibility that the two were related. In an interview with the student newspaper, he also denied that the two had anything to do with each other, and the matter went away for the most part.

Lingering through all of the efforts to recover was a nagging reality. The students who had disrupted the university event needed to face discipline. Student affairs does hold students who violate the school’s code of conduct responsible, and these student leaders, despite all the ugly events of the Yiannopoulos visit, were going to answer for their actions. The significant tension this created on campus lasted into the next academic year.

On June 9, 2016, a leadership coalition of faculty and staff of African descent issued a five-page letter regarding the Yiannopoulos event. The group called itself the DePaul University Black Leadership Coalition (DPUBLC). The group explained the context for the Yiannopoulos visit by reminding everyone that race relations were already frayed at DePaul. It cited the president’s response, which it deemed “tepid,” to the November 2015 rally in support of the University of Missouri. It referenced a sidewalk chalking in April 2016 with the messages “Build a wall” and “Blue lives matter.” Finally, contemporaneous with the Yiannopoulos visit, it referenced the painting on sidewalks of
“Trump 2016” and “Fuck Mexico” (Woelfel, 2016). In this context, the community learned that the College Republicans intended to bring in Yiannopoulos as part of his “Dangerous Faggot” tour of college campuses. The letter asserted that students personally petitioned Holtschneider to rescind the invitation to Yiannopoulos. It quoted Holtschneider’s response that he did not feel the same level of alarm as the students regarding their exposure to Yiannopoulos and his ideas. The group felt that allowing Yiannopoulos on campus was “unpardonable” (Woelfel, 2016). Further, the group charged that the university’s position was “contrary to the intrinsic and fundamental values of what it means to be a Vincentian” (Woelfel, 2016, para. 16). The DPUBLC reacted strongly to Holtschneider’s letter and his apology to the College Republicans over the disruption of their event. It cited the escalation of racial intimidation and threats as faculty and staff received numerous hate messages. A noose was reported on campus the day following the event, and several staff members organized escort services for members of the African community who felt unsafe walking across campus (Woelfel, 2016).

The DPUBLC cited silence from the president until he issued his second statement on June 2. The group was not happy that his letter did not address any failure by inviting Yiannopoulos in the first place. The DPUBLC remained cautious as it evaluated a fact sheet and FAQ issued by the communications office. Of particular note was the suggestion, which it found offensive, that the students who disrupted the event may face discipline (Woelfel, 2016).

In response, the DPUBLC issued eight “expectations” from the university. It wanted, among other things, a group that represented the voice of those of African
descent. It wanted a vice president for academic diversity and inclusion. Notably, this position would rest within Academic Affairs and require a tenured faculty member. Further, it demanded that a “Diversity Advocate” be established in all ten colleges. It demanded an African American Center on campus and biannual town hall meetings between the board of trustees and the DPUBLIC (Woelfel, 2016).

A month later, on July 7, 2016, DePaul denied the College Republicans’ request to have Yiannopoulos back in the fall. Zdziarski issued the denial, citing the difficulties of the May event and the school’s inability to ensure the safety of the campus (Hinton, 2016). The College Republicans responded by calling the denial “contemptible” and that it amounted to a “heckler’s veto” (Gartland, 2016). The Republicans countered that Yiannopoulos represented an opportunity for the community to hear a different viewpoint, which they deemed a minority viewpoint. They claimed that they would have Yiannopoulos back in September of that year, an event that Yiannopoulos put on his event calendar (Gartland, 2016).

When news of the cancellation made its way around, DePaul received unwanted attention from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). FIRE publishes a list of the “Worst Colleges for Free Speech” each year. Although the schools are not ranked, it opined that DePaul would be in the running for the top (or bottom) spot. FIRE takes great exception to the banning of talks by Yiannopoulos and conservative speaker Ben Shapiro, as well as that of partisan chalking or messages on campus. It cited a letter from Holtschneider in 2005 where he allows posters regarding events but does not allow posters to protest speakers at events. FIRE accused DePaul of hypocrisy when it tries to assert its support for free speech while banning forms of speech based on content and
allegations that the speech would be “inflammatory,” quoting Zdziarski’s reasoning for why Yiannopoulos would not be welcomed back (Cohn, 2016). FIRE noted further that the standards of discriminatory harassment do not apply either, given that any student offended by the talk could simply refuse to attend (Cohn, 2016).

“I Didn’t Even Know Where to Begin. We Had So Much Work to Do”

Both Ortiz and Zdziarski related that they had deep tenures in higher education but had not experienced anything like this before. Zdziarski said that he had been at Texas A&M when the bonfire collapsed, where twelve people died and twenty-seven were seriously injured. He was a young staffer, the associate dean of students, and he coordinated the operation center of the university response team. He noted that the events of May 2016 and its aftermath at DePaul were far worse. In Zdziarski’s words:

While certainly comparing the death of twelve people and serious injury of twenty-seven others to this situation doesn’t seem appropriate. The level of mental stress and anguish that we went through on this situation with Milo and then the two years afterwards has been the worst of my career.

Unlike at Texas A&M, where the community rallied around a common purpose, the community at DePaul was torn apart. The community fought with Zdziarski and his staff, and his staff were fighting among themselves. As he related, “It was horrible. I had to seriously consider whether or not DePaul was the right place for me [and whether it] was . . . time to leave.”

Ortiz noted that she was in the right position, as president of the Diversity Council, to begin to act. She was in charge of two important tasks: the emotion of the campus and how to channel that emotion into practical solutions. The council was a thirty-member body consisting of a diversity advocate from each of the ten colleges that
comprise DePaul, in accordance with the official request of the DPUBLIC. The council included representatives from seven, existing employee resource groups, as well as from the faculty, staff, and student councils as well. She used this existing mechanism to mobilize people from all parts of the campus. Then she used the group to implement suggestions as they came forward.

Ortiz realized that she and Zdziarski needed to create new and novel structures to deal with the tasks ahead of them. They had to identify stakeholder groups with whom they should speak. Then Ortiz and Zdziarski had to begin what she called a “listening tour.” They attended student and faculty meetings. They went to orientations and other events where they could receive feedback. At these sessions, they made sure that what was happening and what was being said was shared among constituencies. The next item on their agenda was to develop an action plan. As they listened to the needs of the community, they kept a list. For example, if they heard that the counseling center lacked an employee of color, they needed to hire one. If the financial need office could not provide students with a private space to reveal their problems, thus inhibiting students from seeking help (it currently operated out in the open, at a counter), that needed to be changed. A speech and expression task force was convened. It was charged with developing a new process for vetting speakers coming to campus, evaluating the situation from the point of the invitation to the time that the speaker arrived on campus. Collected in a spreadsheet as the DePaul University Action Plan on Speech and Race, the tasks were categorized as “Policy and Process,” “Education and Awareness Training,” “Student Services, Student Feedback, and Involvement in Partnership with Student Affairs,” “African American Student Resource Center Models,” “Faculty and Staff
Diversity,” and “Data Collection and Reporting.” Under each category, a goal was established and a target date set. No target date extended beyond 2017 (DePaul, 2017).

Among the policies targeted in this action plan was the university’s speech and expression policy. This was a faculty-led process that took an entire year to accomplish. Before it could be finalized however, Zdziarski needed to come up with solutions for student groups that wanted to invite speakers. For example, the College Republicans were still angry that their speaker did not get to speak. They considered bringing Yiannopoulos back, or at least a speaker just like him. Zdziarski needed a process to respond to such requests. It was this pressure that resulted in the creation of the student organization speaker review process. It consisted of an advisory committee composed of two faculty, two staff members, and three students that would review any request made by a student organization to invite a speaker to campus. It made recommendations to Zdziarski, who held the final decision, of whether to bring a speaker to campus. Zdziarski noted that this process was controversial and that he and his staff were subject to ridicule each time someone was denied access. However, certain practical considerations needed to be in focus. They had to consider whether an event would cut students off from vital services, such as dining services or critical offices located in the student center. They had to determine how best to help students deal with the fears and misunderstandings that resulted from certain speakers. Training faculty and staff to deal with microaggressions, for example, became part of their task. Zdziarski had had to balance the interests of competing groups through this whole process. He walked a fine line between student needs and the needs of others who experienced hurt and pain when exposed to certain speech, as well as the competing need, at times, to allow for open speech on campus.
Thus, even when he disagreed with the viewpoints of a given speaker, he had to defend the rights of that speaker to appear in order to walk that line. He believed that a middle-of-the road position was a requirement of his job. He did not have the luxury of picking a side. His job was to serve all students.

It is interesting to note that had the new policy been in place in May 2016, and Yiannopoulos were invited to DePaul, he probably would have passed the test, according to Zdziarski. There would have been differences in the event, however. It would not have been held in the student center due to ingress and egress concerns and the fact that the building is located next to too many vital student services. Second, DePaul would not have allowed non-students to attend the event. Another element of the new policy, adapted from the experience, was that if a controversial speaker were to come to campus, the event would not be scheduled for a date when the president and the diversity vice president were away from campus.

Aside from the speaker policy, DePaul implemented a university-wide Bias Response Team. It offers professional development to faculty, staff, and students. Programs under the professional development umbrella include implicit and explicit bias training and avoiding racial profiling for public safety. Workshops were prepared for the joint council on speech, race, and difference. Students were offered workshops on protesting successfully and diversity awareness. The school updated its procedures on harassment by social media. Resource centers for different groups were researched, including an African American Resource Center (DePaul University, Office of Institutional Diversity & Equity, 2017). In all, four resource centers were established including an undocumented student coordinator position.
The process for Ortiz was very difficult. She wanted to say, “Dammit, both sides, give us a break. We’re human. We make mistakes, right? We didn’t intend for this to happen.” She noted that hard feelings exist to this day, particularly among faculty. They don’t feel that enough was done. Ortiz is willing to accept this, but she does not agree that the administration did not do everything that it could. That said, she is constantly willing to try new means of bringing understanding among the groups on campus that remain in conflict. Blakley noted that discussions about race are never easy—nobody really knows how to talk about it. One of the first things she did was to schedule an offsite meeting with the communications staff. They convened as a group to try to find ways to talk about race with an outside facilitator and to train in diversity awareness. She had her own version of open discussion with her staff. She did not want any of them to feel afraid to walk around campus. She reported that “it hit [her] in the gut” when the noose was found. As an African American, Blakley related her personal view on the situation with Yiannopoulos:

I will tell you that I recall being in conversations where . . . about the Black students who were protesting during the event and I owned up to people that I have a son, and I don’t know what would make me more proud if my son had been able to sit there and listen to vile things that Milo said and not do anything, or if my son had said, “I’m not going to allow this to be heard, and I’m going to do what I can to stop it.”

Blakley stressed the need to understand that each member of the DePaul community does not experience DePaul in the same way. She thought that many leaders want to ignore this point, but the Yiannopoulos event brought this distinction into the light.

Ortiz made the rounds to the diversity and inclusion events at all ten colleges at DePaul, which took the form of free speech panels or teach-ins. She stressed four points
at each event: First, that DePaul’s mission stood for the human dignity of each individual. Second, that the safety of each student, staff, and faculty member was the first priority. Third, that DePaul had established policies, and if they are broken, there will be consequences. Finally, that a university remains a marketplace of ideas. Within that marketplace, all players need to find ways to disagree civilly and with respect.

Holtschneider focused on what he called “the quiet middle.” When faced with screaming from both directions, he focused on the fact that a complex organization like a university will always have this middle group. He believed that they are always listening and trying very hard not to get involved. He used email for many communications as a way to get to this group. He wanted this group to understand what he was doing and why. He did this with a confidence that those at the polar ends of the conversation were never going to be satisfied with his actions. However, if this core group was satisfied that the approach was sensible, then he was satisfied. He felt that he was able to diffuse some of the energy from these polar groups and speak to the middle when he apologized for his actions and admitted mistakes. As he recalled, “It was not often I said I was wrong at DePaul. And so to see me say I was wrong was actually . . . caught people up short and went a very long way towards calming the organization and helping them sit back and listen about the issues.”

Middlebury College

Overview of the Incident

Controversial conservative speaker Charles Murray’s visit to Middlebury College in Vermont did no go as planned. On March 2, 2017, Murray returned to Middlebury, an elite liberal arts college, where he has spoken seven years earlier. Murray was invited by
a student club to speak about his new book, *Coming Apart*, which discusses the separation of the White working class from the White upper class. Murray derived his reputation, however, from a book he co-authored twenty years earlier titled *The Bell Curve*, which purports to advance the argument that intelligence may vary by race. On his return visit to Middlebury, however, he did not speak to a live audience. As he initially took to the podium, protesters shouted, chanted, and denounced him in such a sustained fashion that he aborted his speech in favor of a streamed broadcast with a faculty moderator. Following the broadcast, the faculty moderator was assaulted by protesters upon leaving the building, and she suffered a concussion as she protected Murray from a crowd of masked individuals believed to be non-students.

Although many campuses have experienced unrest over speakers, the violence at Middlebury cast the event in a new light in relation to other controversies in the battle between free speech and inclusivity on college campuses. By the end of the semester, the college disciplined seventy-four students for their part in shutting down the events of that evening and various other acts of violence and disruption. No arrests were made by the Middlebury police.

Laurie Patton, president of Middlebury since July 2015, is the first female president of Middlebury in its 218-year history. Her presidential appointment at Middlebury is also the first of her career—she came to Middlebury from Duke University where she served as the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. When Charles Murray appeared on campus in March 2017, Patton had just completed her first year as president and was about to experience her first big controversy. Her first year had been a honeymoon of success. Middlebury was Patton’s first experience with a small liberal arts
college since her initial faculty experience at Bard twenty years earlier. A graduate of Harvard and the University of Chicago, Patton had taught and held administrative positions at Emory and Duke. An experienced scholar and administrator, Patton was by no means a rookie. Being the president in the midst of a free speech incident would present her with her first major challenge, one on a subject about which she held deep commitments. Following the Murray visit, Patton’s (2017c) messages to the community focused intently on the need for free speech:

We must find a path to establishing a climate of open discourse as a core Middlebury value, while also recognizing critical matters of race, inclusion, class, sexual and gender identity, and the other factors that too often divide us. That work will take time. (para. 5)

**Middlebury College**

Middlebury College was founded in 1800 by a group of citizens from the town of Middlebury, Vermont. Its first president was Jeremiah Atwater, and its first class consisted of seven students enrolled primarily to become ministers, or to enter other “learned professions.” Although Middlebury has grown from its modest beginnings, it remains a small liberal arts college: it now boasts an enrollment of 2,500 undergraduates at its main campus majoring in forty-four different subjects. Another 750 students take graduate classes at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, California. Middlebury operates the Middlebury C.V. Starr Schools Abroad in seventeen countries and thirty-seven cities around the globe. Undergraduate students come from all fifty states and seventy foreign countries (Middlebury, 2018).

Middlebury has earned an international reputation for its language schools in particular, operating graduate and summer programs in eleven languages. Its Bread Loaf
School of English and the writers’ conference of the same name attract writers to its Bread Loaf campus in nearby Ripton, Vermont (Middlebury, 2018).

The faculty at Middlebury, described by President Patton as left leaning, numbers just over three hundred, an 8-to-1 faculty-to-student ratio. It has a focus on teaching, given that no classes are taught by graduate assistants. Class sizes are small too, averaging sixteen students. Middlebury celebrates its size and emphasizes the close relationship developed between students and faculty (Middlebury, 2018).

Despite its small size, Middlebury has a large physical presence. Its main location consists of 202 acres of campus, plus another eighty-nine acres of athletic fields and twenty-one acres of parking lots. Fifty-one academic buildings dot the campus, along with fifty-seven residence halls. The Breadloaf campus consists of approximately one thousand acres on which the college maintains twenty-eight buildings. In nearby Hancock, Middlebury runs its own ski mountain, the Middlebury Snow Bowl (Middlebury, 2018).

Middlebury College fields thirty-one NCAA teams, and 28% of its undergraduate population participates in varsity athletics. A Division III athletic powerhouse of sorts, Middlebury has claimed thirty-five national championships since 1994 in a variety of sports, and the school is an original member of the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC) (Middlebury, 2018).

The college is governed by the president and fellows of Middlebury College, also referred to as the Board of Trustees. The trustees govern the college via regular committees, called Standing Committees, and Boards of Overseers. The equivalent of an Executive Committee is called the Prudential Committee, which consists of the president,
board chair, vice chairs, and chairs of the Standing Committees and the Boards of Overseers. The board meets three times a year and maintains no more than thirty-five members (Middlebury, 2018).

Middlebury College and the town in which it is located in Vermont share the same name. The town, population 8,500, is the “shire town” or county seat of Addison County. Chartered in 1761, it sits along the Otter Creek at the Otter Creek Falls, which has served historically as a site for various operations, including a sawmill, grist mill, paper mill, iron foundry, and marble quarry (Middlebury Vermont, 2018). Today those operations are silent, save for the roar of the Otter Creek Falls in the center of town. The former industrial shell houses restaurants, art galleries, coffee shops, and amenities one would expect from a small college town.

The Middlebury accepts between 16 to 18% of its applicants each year. The student body is largely White (64%) and about 10% Hispanic/Latino, with another 10% nonresident alien students. Its Black/African American population hovers around 3.5%, with another roughly 7% Asian students. The majority of the student body comes from wealthy families. Seventy-six percent comes from the top 20% of earners, according to data from 2017. Of that number, 23% come from the top 1%. Almost 3% (2.7%) come from the bottom 20% of U.S. household earners. The most popular majors at Middlebury include economics, political science and government, environmental studies, and neuroscience. In the category of National Liberal Arts Colleges, Middlebury is tied for fifth according to U.S. News & World Report in 2018 (U.S. News 2018).
President Laurie Patton

The college’s seventeenth president, Laurie Patton arrived at Middlebury in 2015 following eight years serving as the dean of arts and sciences at Duke University and the Durden Professor of Religion. Patton served on the faculty at Bard College and Emory University prior to Duke. An accomplished scholar, Patton focuses on South Asian history and religion. She is the author of many articles and books, including a translation of the Bhagavad Gita, and two volumes of poetry. She earned her undergraduate degree from Harvard University and a PhD from the University of Chicago.

During her short tenure so far as Middlebury’s president, Patton has focused on engaging the campus in dialogue about important issues and entering the “public sphere.” In a town hall address on December 11, 2015, she offered a talk on the importance of, among other ideas, free speech and the willingness to engage ideas:

I want us to have an open and complex understanding of free speech. Free speech is not the opposite of inclusivity. We need both if we are to move forward in any meaningful way. In fact, the very way that we create a more inclusive community is by exercising free speech and continuing to create understanding even in the midst of difficult tension-filled conversations. If we do not exercise free speech, we will never learn what others are thinking, and we will never learn how to understand what we may have said or done that makes the world harder for someone else. (Patton, 2015, para. 10)

She speaks further about the problems of bias and the need to converse about these issues, acknowledging that not everyone will necessarily agree. She emphasizes the need for ongoing work and conversation within the Middlebury community and beyond.

According to Patton, her commitment to free speech and open inquiry derives, to a certain extent, from her graduate work at the University of Chicago. She asserts that her commitment to open debate has roots that extend to her childhood too. Verbal
competition and accomplishment were part of her family life as well as her identity formation, and they were fundamental to her understanding of intellectual intensity. In her words, she believed, mistakenly, that upon arriving at Middlebury she had entered “the University of Chicago in the mountains.”

Patton describes her first year at Middlebury in exuberant terms. She engaged with the campus in a variety of ways. She met alumni from many different classes and noted their distinct experiences at Middlebury. She met students for meals or coffee, held office hours for faculty and staff, taught classes on translation, and walked the campus and town to encounter those in the community and to learn about their lives and experiences. She reflects on her naïveté in that year as she recounts the difficulty of the Murray visit, less than two years into her tenure. “Students would write me little love letters on the blackboard. I should have known from that year that that was not fantastic. That was ‘Danger, Will Robinson. Danger, Will Robinson’” On the other hand, she may have been uniquely qualified to serve through a crisis like Murray’s visit. As she put it, “I grew up in Salem, Massachusetts. I know the DNA of my cultural heritage has to do with mass hysteria . . . it’s more like social contagion or emotional contagion.” She recognized a piece of what happened at Middlebury via this lens, and it enabled her to understand that for some (though not all) of her students, the spirit of the Murray protest spread like an infection. Or, to use a less pejorative metaphor, the protest had a magnetic pull that drew students in. In an interview at the end of her first year, Patton reflected on the issue of campus diversity. Presciently, Patton offered:

I also think we need to learn and re-learn how to have tough conversations across difference. I think Middlebury is uniquely equipped to do this, and I want it to be one of the signatures of my time as a leader here.
Understanding Patton’s role as the president of Middlebury through this time requires a complex understanding of both the presidency as an office and Middlebury as a college. Constituents, be they students, faculty, or staff, look to the president for leadership. Some want that leadership expressed in the form of firm positions on firm principles. Others want to be nurtured and understood. In some corners, this second aspect of presidential leadership is called “pastoral.” At Middlebury, an elite liberal arts college, the president stands as both an operational leader and an intellectual leader. In that role, Patton described herself as “teacher in chief” while still needing to be “mediator in chief.” As such, she was required to straddle both camps in the battles of free speech versus diversity/inclusivity. That no-man’s-land of a position left Patton vulnerable to attacks from both sides, a vulnerability she had to accept and endure to promote dialogue and healing.

The “Shout” (Down) Heard 'Round the World at Middlebury College

On March 2, 2017, Charles Murray, PhD, arrived at Middlebury College to deliver an address on his new book, *Coming Apart*. Murray was no stranger to Middlebury. He has spoken there seven years earlier and was the parent of a Middlebury graduate. The evening was planned by the American Enterprise Institute Club at Middlebury, a conservative student club. Murray’s talk was cosponsored by the Political Science Department. It was to be followed by a question-and-answer session moderated by Professor Allison Stanger, PhD, of the Political Science Department. Following a discussion on rules for the evening from Bill Burger, vice president for communications, descriptions of the speaker from members of the AEI Club, and an introduction from
President Laurie Patton, Murray strode across the stage to the podium placed at the far left. Sensing the tension in the room, Murray spoke but one line about the anticlimax that he expected his talk to be. At that time, a majority of the audience stood, turned their backs to Murray and the stage, and began to read in unison from a prepared statement describing why they believed that Murray should not be speaking on the Middlebury campus. When the prepared statement concluded, chants began. As each chant made its way through the crowd, the number of participants increased, as did the volume. Signs appeared, held aloft, accusing Murray of promoting eugenics, which were interspersed with cruder, more direct messages such as “Fuck Murray.” Chants intoned by audience members included, “Racist, sexist, anti-gay, Charles Murray go away.” As the chants increased in length and intensity, audience members began to dance along with the chanting. Murray stood silent at the podium. As the chants included “Black lives matter,” Professor Stanger could be seen clapping along with the audience from the edge of the stage (DiGravio, 2017).

The dancing and chanting lasted for fifteen minutes. Murray remained at the podium, watching. Eventually, Bill Burger joined Murray and Stanger and conferred on whether to continue the event. Stanger approached the microphone and pleaded with the audience to let the talk proceed, promising that she had developed some really tough questions (DiGravio, 2017). Though Murray still wanted to speak, he and the moderators eventually left the stage to the cheers of those protesting.

Murray and Stanger retreated to a green room behind the stage, set up ahead of time in the event that the speech was disrupted. There they proceeded with the talk, which was streamed live, with questions received via Twitter. The shouting and chanting
continued, fire alarms were pulled, and audience members raced from room to room, trying to determine where Murray and Stanger were speaking.

When the talk and discussion concluded, Murray, Stanger, and Burger proceeded to Burger’s car, the closest to the building. As they exited Wilson Hall in the McCullough Student Center, they were met by a waiting crowd. Murray, Stanger, Burger, and two security guards waded into the crowd. Murray thought they were going to be shouted at and resigned himself to that. When a large man with a sign stood in their way and would not let them pass, Murray realized that he was in for something else. The security guards would not let them stand still surrounded by the group, so they shoved past the man with the sign (Murray 2017a). The ensuing pushing and shoving included one protestors yanking Stanger’s hair while another pulled her the opposite direction. She received a concussion and whiplash from the tussle. Murray reflected on how unsettling it was that many in the crowd wore ski masks. He described the scene as follows:

If it hadn’t been for Allison and Bill keeping hold of me and the security guards pulling people off me, I would have been pushed to the ground. That much is sure. What would have happened after that I don’t know, but I do recall thinking that being on the ground was a really bad idea, and I should try really hard to avoid that. (Murray, 2017b, para. 12)

Stanger echoed Murray’s view of the evening. In a statement to the Middlebury community on March 4, 2017, the professor lamented that students and faculty in particular had disrupted the event, particularly given that many admitted that they had never read anything written by Murray. She expressed the personal pain she felt as she “look[ed] out at a sea of students yelling obscenities at other members of my beloved community” (Stanger, 2017, para. 3). Stanger described how protesting students could not look her in the eye. She felt that they had dehumanized her, and she opined that
despite what they might see as difficult in the world today, “nothing good ever comes from demonizing our brothers and sisters” (Stanger, 2017, para. 3). Stanger described her passage through the crowd on their way to the car. She saw signs with expletives and her name. In her eyes, she felt surrounded by hate, and she actually felt that her life was in danger (Stanger, 2017).

Although Stanger was injured in the fracas, she and Burger held Murray by the arms as they raced to Burger’s car. Once in the car, protesters jumped on it, pounded the windows, and began to rock it. Burger pulled away as slowly as possible (despite later being accused of trying to run down protesters)—there was a dinner planned after the event with about twenty invited guests. Murray complimented Burger on his caution in the heat of the moment. Murray admits that he likely would not have shown the same restraint (Murray, 2017a).

The events of the evening were not over, however. Upon arriving at the Kirk Alumni Center for the dinner, Burger called public safety to let them know that the dinner party was underway and that some security should be sent to the location. He had taken an indirect route to the Center in an effort to misdirect anyone who might try to follow. The director of public safety, Lisa Burchard, told Burger that the protesters knew where he was. At that point, he grabbed Murray to leave. Their exit was so rushed that Burger drove over the curb and sidewalk to get out. Murray suggested that they retreat to the Middlebury Inn where he was staying, which is walking distance from the campus. Burger decided, however, to drive Murray and Stanger out of town. As they drove, he called a restaurant in a neighboring town and confirmed that it could handle a party of
twenty-eight for dinner. When they arrived at the restaurant, they sent word to the other guests of their location.

After the dinner ended, Burger returned to campus. The president called a cabinet meeting that evening at midnight where she heard about the events of the evening in greater detail. Stanger was taken to the hospital by her husband, and Patton met them there. Middlebury was about to make national news as yet another glaring controversy of campus free speech.

**President Patton and the Murray Talk at Wilson Hall**

While Burger and Stanger experienced one side of the Middlebury fracas, Patton experienced another. Word of the violence would not reach her until about one and a half hours later, and she would learn more from her phone call with Burger and the cabinet meeting. Though present in the room for the protest, Patton did not experience the group’s chaotic exit—she remained in Wilson Hall with students after Murray left. As the college’s president, and as a relatively new one at that, she felt the need to stand as a witness.

Though Patton never felt physically threatened, she did experience moments that troubled her. She saw a student at the protest holding a sign stating, “Fuck Rhetorical Resilience.” She recognized part of the phrase: she had been encouraging the students to practice “rhetorical resilience” in many talks throughout her first year as president. The sign felt like an attack on her. As she approached the student with the sign, she reached out her hand, but the student refused to greet her.

Patton described the students left in Wilson Hall as “alive and in an altered state. You could see that.” She felt that the students were determined to make change in
response to feeling helpless about the Trump presidential election the previous fall. She described it as a “social contagion.” The students acted in an ecstatic manner for any number of reasons, one of which was the fear of being called a racist. In Patton’s assessment, some students, within two weeks, could not recognize themselves. In that moment though, she believed that the students felt a need to do something about the election. Once that “something” was accomplished, as Patton put it, they could return to being “the Middlebury I recognized.”

Patton led a discussion that night in Wilson Hall about what had happened and how different groups could speak to each other across political and ideological divides. She felt compelled at that moment to act as the “teacher in chief,” although her role became challenging going forward following the Murray fracas. But in that moment, when it came to free speech and inclusivity, she needed to be “both/and.” To the students present, she described free speech as a right and inclusivity as a responsibility. Patton found herself placed between warring sides. As the semester progressed, she took abuse from both. In particular, when Middlebury disciplined seventy-four students by the end of that spring semester, she was challenged by the left for the discipline, and challenged by the right for being too soft.

Three days after the Murray visit, a large group of faculty members published a statement in The Wall Street Journal of fourteen principles in defense of free expression. The statement was signed, ultimately, by about 140 professors at Middlebury, roughly half of the faculty. The statements were prepared by two professors, Jay Parini of the English Department and Keegan Callanan of the Political Science Department. The principles were based on reflections that Parini had offered to CNN the day before about
his dismay at the way students had responded to Murray. Parini had been curious about what would happen at the Murray talk, so he made his way to Wilson Hall on March 2. He was not able to get into the hall however due to the crowd. He watched from outside, heard the chanting, and learned shortly thereafter what had happened. He was outraged at what had occurred, and so he and Callanan drafted the free speech principles, which took them about an hour.

The principles laid bare a point of view on the side of free expression. They included such statements as “Exposure to controversial points of view does not constitute violence” and held that any protest that prevents a speaker from addressing his or her audience is coercive. Parini was adamant, as stated in the principles, that no person or professor should have the right to deem certain ideas closed for discussion. He recalled a conversation he had about this notion, wherein a colleague argued to Parini that Middlebury could not have free speech but must have “monitored speech.” Parini insisted on knowing who in the colleague’s mind would do the monitoring, and the colleague answered that it could be done by a committee. Parini acquiesced, but only if he were crowned head of the committee and his colleague was left off it. Parini explained to his friend that he did not trust what he was saying, and therefore he would not allow him to participate in monitoring speech. He laughed about this exchange, but stressed that it illustrated the difficulty of “monitored speech.”

Parini’s popularity as the advocate for free speech at Middlebury skyrocketed following the publication of the principles. He awoke the next morning to 800 emails from supporters around the world. His position was particularly popular with the political right. He was invited to appear on many talk shows, which he thought was particularly
funny given his liberal history. He appeared on NBC, Fox News, and Tucker Carlson’s program. As Parini put it, he was a liberal from the old school who had spoken out against the Vietnam War in the sixties and, as a student activist, had thrown fake blood on the Pentagon. To be thrust into this role was both ironic and amusing to him. He recognized that he was being used by the right as well, as he believes that they are “weaponizing” the free speech issue. In that sense, they were happy to use Parini, a very public and “well-known liberal guy.” He described his position as an uncomfortable one, because he did not want to be a pawn for the rights, though he believes strongly in free speech.

Parini played a key role as the leader of the free speech position among the faculty. Many wanted the principles to become a plank in the faculty handbook, and they elected Parini to serve, in his words, as the “designated hitter” to get that done. Many others, who Parini described as his “usual allies,” did not come off as free speech purists when confronted with this incident. They argued that Murray was so offensive to minority students that his presence at the school shoved that offense in their faces. Parini argued back that it was not in any student’s best interest to be protected from difficult or challenging ideas. The world waited for them with the same challenges, and their job as faculty was to teach and prepare them to face those challenges. His friends disagreed with him, refusing to sign his petition. Thus, two factions arose from within the faculty, and in many ways reshaped the formerly understood faculty camps of “right” and “left.”

Parini was a hesitant leader for the free speech cause. Bluntly, in his words, it was a “pain in the ass.” He believed that he fell into the role because of who he was among the faculty. He had been in teaching for 44 years, at Dartmouth, the University of Saint
Andrews, Oxford, and Middlebury. He preferred the quiet solitude of his office, where he could proof manuscripts and poetry, to the roiling debate on campus. Despite that, he accepted the role to be front and center. Important to Parini was the fundamental function of a university. He described that function in terms of the Hegelian dialectic, where ideas are brought forth, resulting in conflicts because of them. The ideas meet their antithesis, which breeds conflict, resulting in a new synthesis; then a new thesis follows, then more conflict. To him, this was the life of the mind. As he implored his colleagues, “I kept saying again and again, we’ve lost our purpose in life if we all agree on everything. We’re here to argue, there’s nothing wrong with good, solid arguments.” Like Laurie Patton, Parini urged his colleagues to understand that free speech and diversity were linked: the latter depends on the former. Further, he reminded his colleagues that they exist in the rarified air of the university campus, an atmosphere not breathed by most of the country. Parini is quick to reference his working-class upbringing in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and the fact that for people in much of the country, the access to information is not the same as that at Middlebury. For that reason, Parini believed that Middlebury needed to stand as an example of how ideas are permitted to thrive. For Patton, the polarized positions represented two valid viewpoints. She felt that as president, she could not enjoy the luxury of picking a side and needed to find herself present at both ends of the spectrum. She considered the integrity of living this way not only as essential to her leadership but also as one of the most critical issues of our time.

The day after the visit, Patton wrote to the campus community. She condemned the violence and expressed her deep disappointment with those who decided to disrupt the event. Further, she promised disciplinary action against those who violated
Middlebury’s codes. Patton framed the challenge as follows: “How does one acknowledge the true discomfort that a true liberal education must entail, while at the same time recognizing and respecting the often difficult and unfair experience of our students who have walked in the American margins?” She continued with a quote from First Amendment scholar Geoffrey Stone, who notes that if we allow certain viewpoints to be silenced, then the risk is real that our own viewpoint could be silenced. In other words, the risk to all is real when fundamental rights, such as free speech, are threatened. She called for better reason and logic to address challenging ideas.

A group of Middlebury students challenged Parini’s principles, which were titled “Free Inquiry on Campus,” with a document titled “Broken Inquiry on Campus: A Response by a Collection of Middlebury Students.” The students elevated, for example, the right to respond emotionally. They stated, “We contend that experiences and emotions are valid ways to see the world, and that the hegemony of rational thought-based perspectives often found in a university setting limit our collective creativity, health, and potential.” Further, the students argued that “incivility and coarseness” are the daily diet of marginalized students, and to deny them the right to protest in this fashion applies a double standard. The students did not accept that ideas could not be violent. They quote Toni Morrison:

> Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. . . . Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (As cited in Brockelman et al., 2017, para. 5)

Further, the students asserted that the topic of violent ideas would be worth a debate on their campus, more so than the ideas of Murray. They argued that “some views
are not worthy of a platform,” which sounds eerily like Parini’s pledge to head a committee on permitted speech. In what is the most succinct statement of the students’ position, they asserted:

> We respectfully submit that it is necessary for many Middlebury administrators and professors to venture from the comfort of their opinions and prejudices. To realize that retreating to the moral absolutes of free inquiry cannot and will not insulate our community from the perils of injustice. To realize that such isolationism in higher education, rather than protecting our community, actually reinforces inequalities. (Brockelman et al., 2017, para. 5)

The students argued that the “basic equality of all individuals” is a “fundamental human agenda.” This “core tenet” cannot be questioned, and being “open-minded” requires that any contrary idea be rejected. They urged, “We mustn’t be required to ‘hear both sides’ when one side seeks to undermine the core values of a free, democratic society” (Brockelman et al., 2017, para. 5).

The students’ position was echoed in an open letter to President Patton dated May 3, 2017, which was written by a collection of faculty and friends of Middlebury. Only five of 177 faculty signatories were from Middlebury. Another 322 signatures followed those of the faculty representing friends, graduates, and parents from Middlebury. The letter argued that Charles Murray was so dangerous that the administration and any other members of the campus community who invited him bear responsibility for all the actions and violence that occurred during his visit. They argued that “to punish students and to defend Murray is to degrade the meaning of academic freedom and free speech.” They insisted on “critical thinking and reflection in an environment that is safe for all students and members of the Middlebury community.” The letter urged that the students
should not be disciplined for their actions, news of which was beginning to emerge as of the date of this letter.

At this moment, Patton remained between a rock and hard place. Praised by many for holding the students accountable, she faced opposing criticism for the lack of severity of the sanctions. As explained by Bill Burger, all Tucker Carlson wanted to know was how many students were being expelled and how fast. The rift between students caused by the decision to hold those accountable for their actions proved difficult for Patton. She realized that the bridges she was building with students over her first year were being threatened by her responsibilities as president and her commitment, stated openly that first year, that Middlebury should be a place where difficult conversations could take place.

As Parini crusaded for free speech among his faculty colleagues, and as others objected to his efforts, the rest of the campus instigated a series of events to deal with the aftermath of the Murray visit. Town hall meetings were called where Patton endured the wrath of both sides. For example, at a May event, forty students, Professor Linus Owens, and twelve other faculty members met with administrators about the disciplinary actions. According to Owens, hard questions were asked, and administrators addressed them in a meaningful way, despite the contentious atmosphere. He thought that the exchange with Patton and other leaders was worth more than anything Murray could have offered. Articles appeared across the country describing the incident, some authored by Murray, Patton, and Stanger. Of interest, students and faculty who wrote about the Middlebury experience and the responses of free speech–supporting professors argued that reason and logic were tools of White supremacy. Stanger was particularly alarmed by this response.
She called on students to read Murray and not third-party accounts of what he had written. She famously called on students and faculty to stop “outsourcing their thinking to a website” (Stanger, 2017, para. 9). Patton asked that students be willing to be offended and afraid.

Patton addressed the campus community in April 2017, urging them that “if ever there was a time for Americans to talk on arguments that offend us, it is now” (para. 7). Patton (2017) acknowledged that she was becoming a “preacher” about these issues, saying:

If ever there was a time when we needed to risk being offended, to argue back even while we are feeling afraid, to declare ourselves committed to arguing for a better society, it is now. Engaged, committed speech, speech countering other speech, courageous speech, fearless speech, is today essential to our well-being as a nation. (para. 7)

In her address, Patton challenged the community in three ways. First, she asked that they read together. In particular, Patton recommended that they read the study by Pen America, a group that she invited to campus, called “And Campus for All: Diversity, Inclusion, and Freedom of Speech at U.S. Universities.” Second, despite a clear call for freedom of expression, Patton urged the community not to rush to any conclusions. She stressed that learning and debate around the struggles at Middlebury were an important process toward understanding. Third, she lamented that students from both ends of the political spectrum felt afraid to speak out. She urged the community to express their ideas without fear and to encourage such speech. While the community wrestled with these charges, Patton put forth the problem as a battle between being exposed to and engaging fully with different ideas and enabling students to have the skills and courage to improve the world. While these goals are usually in alignment, on March 2, 2017, they were not.
While both are important, Patton made clear that she considers the first to be necessary to achieve the second. For that reason, “academic freedom, and freedom of speech [must be] defended on all sides” (Patton, 2017, para. 15). She promised to work alongside the community and declared that there is no more important challenge than the one presented by this conflict.

On May 8, 2017, Patton and Provost Susan Baldridge announced the formation of a campus-wide committee to discuss the issues that the Murray visit brought to the surface. The challenges at stake according to Patton (2017) were “freedom of expression, inclusivity, and the educational and civic challenges of the 21st century” (para. 1). The provost issued an open invitation to the campus seeking the participation of students, faculty, and staff. They selected twelve members, consisting of four faculty (two from the Political Science Department), four students, and four staff. While not giving the committee any governing authority, the president and provost were clear that it could make suggestions for policy if it chose to do so. Its agenda and structure were left to the committee to design (Patton, L. L., Baldridge, S. 2017).

During this time, the campus continued to proceed with the disciplinary processes related to the Murray event. The college disciplined seventy-four students in total. The sanctions ranged from probation to some form of official campus discipline. Forty-eight of the students were disciplined for actions that took place in Wilson Hall. The other twenty-six students faced the more serious charges for actions both within Wilson Hall and outside the building. Those students were processed through the Community Judicial Board, which consists of four trained students, two faculty, and two staff. As for the criminal assaults that took place outside of Wilson Hall, the Middlebury police conducted
an investigation and were unable to charge any particular person. They did indicate however that their investigation revealed about eight masked individuals who took part in the disruption. Further, they concluded that the actions of these individuals revealed that they had undergone training in disruption.

In January 2018, the Committee on Speech and Inclusion issued a report and recommendations based on its eight months of work, noting, “Robust disagreement is useful and necessary in higher education, but that disagreement must be based on respect and careful listening. We are each responsible for the way we speak and engage with other members of our community” (Committee Report, 2018, p. 2). The committee described its work as “thorny,” but it was able to find a way to identify four areas where inclusivity can grow within the community: dialogue, such as the informal meetings with different stakeholders held before and after challenging speakers; community standards focused on respect, growth, integrity, and inclusive open minds; increased attention to classroom climate, pertaining specifically to polarizing opinions and the challenges they present; and finally, a more thoughtful approach to selecting visiting speakers, with the aim of considering power and privilege and the ways these might impact marginalized community members. Ultimately, the group cautioned against attempts to limit or regulate speech. It reflected on the setting of Middlebury as a White, liberal campus in a liberal part of the country. Rather than shout down speakers, it recommended advance dialogue and alternative programming (Committee Report (2018).

President Patton acknowledged that the episode and deliberations were fraught. She did believe, though, that Middlebury became a stronger college and community as a result of the affair. In the spring of the Murray incident, the campus had more campus
visits than ever before. The following year, it had its highest number of applicants ever. In this number, it had the highest number of students of color too. Other than applicants, Middlebury received its highest peer ranking as well. Patton cited a study of incoming first-year students that spring revealing that not a single student withdrew. These students were asked about their impressions of the school. According to Patton they said, “Are you kidding? Middlebury is the place where stuff goes down. They liked it. That was interesting for us too.” What did that tell Patton? She cautioned presidents against plunging into the rabbit hole of reputational anxiety, which she described as infinite and worsening in a polarized society. Her approach, and what she tells those who ask her how to handle such situations, is to respond with integrity: “The first thing I would say is, where do you stand with integrity where no matter what happens, you know what you’re saying is your piece? If they fire you, you behave with integrity.”

She described how constituents told her that Middlebury was going to be recognized as the school of the far left. For example, there is a meme circulating where she introduces Murray and explains that Middlebury is a far-left campus. She thought she was saying, “Let’s admit who we are and then pivot to stretch to a place where I’m uncomfortable,” but that is not how some heard her. Others told her it was a school of racists. A prospective student from India told her that she wanted to come see this revolutionary school. Another student spoke to her following convocation to tell her that she chose Middlebury because it stuck to its principles. Patton described conservative alums running into each other at cocktail parties and being embarrassed about events at their alma mater. Her response was characteristically strong:
Standing strong in the face of wealthy alums who’ve made their money on Wall Street, . . . telling you how much this school is being mocked. It’s like . . . yeah, I get it. Here’s the way you can stand strong in that moment if you’re uncomfortable. Here’s what we know. Every single indicator of our reputation went up.

Patton understands that many ideas will be thrown at a president and that the response to these ideas runs a reputational risk—this can result in a president approaching these ideas in an overly cautious manner or over-responding to them. She said, “There needs to be, and this is very hard in this day and age, a place from which you stand with integrity.”

Patton emphasized repeatedly that the issue of gender expectations for a president needs to be understood. She was asked repeatedly, “What’s in your heart?” Her own team did the same. She described an exercise with her senior leadership eight months from the Murray event. It was termed a “restorative circle.” Patton’s team wanted to see if she could vent too, to see if she could be “emotionally authentic.” She dealt with the people on one side who told her not to cry and the others who wanted her to be “emotionally authentic.” She questioned if this would be asked of a man. As she put it:

Back to, what’s in your heart? That has been a very interesting moment of reflection about my own way of dealing with stress. The . . . I think you were talking a lot about almost the hydrology of it or the economy of it or how you think about it. My thing was, get up every day. Be available to everyone.

She admitted that managing stress was difficult in part because she had never experienced anything like the Murray event. It was violent in many ways, though she insisted that she did not feel physically threatened. Her release valve included tears. She did not mind that faculty or students saw this from her. She believed that students wanted her personal response to be clear and distinct from her institutional response. This was
felt acutely as she supported the disciplinary sanctions. A trustee defended her with students who wanted to know if Patton supported the sanction “in her heart.” The trustee, according to Patton, chided them by saying, “She doesn’t owe you that for a second. Why does she owe you that? Stop that.” Patton’s take was that these students were looking for a “mommy.” She continued, “They are longing for the transcendent, articulate female that’s going to move us out of the CEO president that did everything top down, et cetera.” But Patton warned that being a sympathetic leader is a particular challenge for a female. She cautioned that a female leader will look indecisive and like she is playing to both camps. She particularly felt this challenge as a scholar and a leader drawn to listen to both sides out of scholarly interest, which is a leadership weakness of hers according to feedback she received. Her instinct needed to change: she needed to state her position more decisively.

She described the challenges of the warring ideologies among the faculty and students as difficult but manageable. Her point of acute stress derived from severed personal connections as a result of the events. She recounted with sadness the anecdote of the student who would not greet her, who was among a group of women who were receiving a scholarship that Patton helped to create and for which Patton had raised money. The snub by that woman has remained with her, more so than the numerous tasks in the aftermath, of working with police or drafting and making public statements. She hosted a dinner for alumni of color in her home. During the evening, one man became angry with her and with what he described as her ridiculous actions around Murray. Her board chair was in attendance, so she simply had to listen to the man and empathize with him.

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Patton’s response remains always to exhibit integrity: being clear, as a leader, about the principles that are most dear to her rather than reacting to each situation as it arrives. This mooring has helped her throughout the Murray furor. Also helpful, and from a deeply personal place, Patton recalled being bullied in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. She drew strength from that memory as the anger rose, and the emails flooded in. She retreated to that grade school space and drew upon the strength of knowing she could walk into this situation, just as she walked into those grade school classrooms, and do her job no matter what came at her.
Framing and Understanding the Problem

The nature of the problem. The nature of the problem at Alma focused on free speech but within a particular context. The call from those upset about the appearance of Ben Carson was to disinvite him. Alma and its leadership took the position that someone should not be disinvited to a campus because campus constituents or leaders are not happy with the speaker’s viewpoints.

Institutional and national context. The national picture complicated the free speech issue at Alma by bringing increased attention to leaders’ decisions, giving amplified voice to on-campus opponents, and adding off-campus individuals into the situation. The nature of Alma as a small, liberal arts college provides essential context to understand the dispute over Carson’s visit. Though Carson’s views struck at the heart of inclusivity by marginalizing certain groups, Alma’s leadership planted its flag on the ground it considered higher. It determined that the “marketplace of ideas” represents the important keystone among the structural elements of a liberal arts education. Thus, divergent views are permitted, even if the leaders find them repugnant. For some, this argument made sense. For others, the issues were deeply personal, and no amount of reasoning about diverse viewpoints would persuade them that Carson belonged at Alma.

Beyond the campus, the national context of the 2016 presidential election fundamentally altered, if not caused, the disturbance over Carson. When Carson was first invited three years earlier, he was simply a famous neurosurgeon, the doctor from Detroit
who had successfully separated twins joined at the head. By the time he arrived, however, reporters were opening his closet doors and revealing opinions on a wide range of issues. As those opinions surfaced, Carson’s reputation changed. His notoriety became less about neurosurgery and more about anti-gay bias. Scholars and pundits scoured books he had written years earlier for insight into the responses he provided interviewers. Once known, Carson’s views cast him among a crowd of right-leaning politicians seeking the Republican nomination.

The national political swirl of the time brought heightened media attention with it. Newspapers from Detroit and other, closer outlets followed the story. Social media posts regarding Carson drew the attention of Michiganders who had no known connection to the school. Though it generated interest, the Carson event did not motivate any groups to protest or otherwise attempt to disrupt operations at the central Michigan campus.

**How leaders framed issues, and how that evolved.** Leadership perspectives on the controversy evolved in a number of ways. For example, upon hearing of Carson’s views, President Jeff Abernathy was appalled and did not want Carson on the Alma campus. He tempered that view upon consultation with his trusted provost Michael Selmon. Combining Selmon’s advice and insight with his own sense of what was important to Alma as an institution, Abernathy was able to refine his initial reaction. Thus, what was a divisive and offensive issue in the Alma community became a more measured stand: “Alma does not disinvite speakers when it does not agree with their views.” Once Abernathy landed on that reasoning, he was able to frame the issue in a way that made sense to him logically and morally. He could defend Carson’s invitation, despite the speaker’s “wild-haired” views, as Abernathy described them.
Abernathy insulated the decision further. He framed the issue around the question, “When should a speaker be disinvited?” That way, any discussion of Carson’s views could not be discussed in terms that would impact an initial discussion on whether he or some other speaker should be selected to speak at Alma. Rather, because the train had left the station and Carson had been invited, the question was limited to, “Under what circumstances do we call it back, or disinvite, the speaker?” Framed this way, Abernathy was able to indicate that a faculty group had made the initial invitation and their judgment should not be second-guessed by those who might have made a different decision in the first place.

**Stress: Individual and institutional and how that needed to be addressed.** The stress at Alma was limited to the period before the talk—little disruption occurred during or after it. The campus arguments, the attention in the newspaper, and the conversation among faculty before the event created the most stress for the campus. It was because of this attention that the Detroit press took notice. When it became apparent that there would not be a large organized protest of the event, the media lost interest. Thus, the story of stress at Alma focuses on the lead-up.

The leadership at Alma faced a series of stressful situations that were independent of one another. One key area of stress was with the Board of Trustees, resulting from attempts to balance competing interests. Abernathy knew that he had to manage a conservative board in a conservative part of the country. As he put it, he did not want to appear on Fox News for telling a conservative speaker that he was not welcome on campus. It was not an easy decision for Abernathy to make, however. A second form of stress came from the faculty. An increasingly diverse student body, and a large
percentage of the faculty were impacted by this event. Twenty-five percent of the faculty signed the petition, which they published locally, asking that Carson be disinvited. Selmon admitted that if he were a member of the faculty at the time, he would have joined them. Abernathy felt these pressures.

These two areas of stress, while felt by the president, did not reinforce each other or come into contact with one another. Instead, the president had to divide his attention and work to balance the two different sources of stress. Using an easy solution to relieve one point of conflict likely would have heightened the other. Had Abernathy wanted to quell the faculty tension only, he had opportunities to do so. He could have disinvited Carson and hoped for the best. However, disinviting the conservative speaker would have created problems for the conservative board. He could have avoided the essay contest, which kept the controversy in focus once Carson left. Finally, he could have abandoned the diversity dialogue series, which allowed the discussion to continue. Though the intensity of the controversy died down once Carson left, these efforts kept the tension alive but manageable.

A third area of stress in this case was the personal or private stress Abernathy felt as he managed the Carson event. He knew that the tensions were real. Once he made up his mind to cling to the need for free speech and that invited speakers do not get disinvited for controversial views, he knew that he was taking a professional risk, that if he had made a bad decision, his job would be at stake. To understand that pressure, it is important to note that Abernathy has indicated that he does not aspire to another presidency beyond Alma. He has authored an opinion piece on the benefits of presidential
longevity. It was important for him to find a place of conviction and stand there. It was not easy to do.

**What Leaders Did**

**The role of the president and the role of the team.** To address the Ben Carson issue, the leadership expertise of not only the president but also the provost and to some extent other members of the administrative team were required. Leadership was a group effort. To understand Alma’s response to the Carson event requires an understanding of the leadership team. Unlike some of the presidents in the other cases, Abernathy relied heavily on his provost Selmon as a foil and sounding board. Selmon convinced Abernathy that the invitation should not be rescinded. He reiterated that the invitation had come from a faculty group, and thus that group should be involved in any discussion around rescinding it. Further, Abernathy used Selmon as a blocker when navigating the faculty opinions on this matter. Once he had released his statement, which Selmon helped to draft, Abernathy made no more pronouncements beyond what was contained in print.

From his role behind the scenes, Abernathy was able to rely on others too. He had Michael Silverthorn, the associate vice president for communications, run the essay contest at Honors Day, for example. His equity and inclusion office arranged for meetings with Carson while he was on campus. Though Abernathy met with Carson and his wife before the talk, Ann Hall arranged to have Carson shuttled off campus as soon as it was over. In these ways, Abernathy issued one statement, stuck with it, and otherwise avoided being the point of the spear.

**How leaders communicate, and how campus communicated to leaders.** The parties to the disagreement at Alma wrote to each other. Alma did not have a large town
hall or open forum to discuss the positions of the parties. Abernathy issued a written statement to the entire community, early in the semester, and stood by that statement. The faculty, when Carson’s visit drew near, published an open letter in the local paper. The back-and-forth discussion on this topic was thus formalized.

Within smaller settings, the formality relaxed. The Co-Curricular Committee, to which Abernathy sent the question of whether Carson should be disinvited, engaged in discussion and debate among its members. When its consensus was reached, it created a statement and a conclusion but did not engage with the broader community.

Selmon as provost spoke directly to constituents. He was tasked by Abernathy to handle the faculty issues around this talk. Thus, he presided over meetings at which faculty expressed their ideas. The formal statement, however, arrived later, published in the paper just days before the talk. Abernathy, for his part, recognized that speaking to the campus through a local paper was not healthy. He chose, therefore, not to respond to the open faculty letter.

**Stakeholders on and off campus and coalitions.** Abernathy made use of several groups on and off campus to evaluate the Carson visit and considered their input. First, he utilized his team, particularly Selmon, as discussed above. Second, he heard from the voice of alumni and considered their message. Many prominent and outspoken alumni were outraged over the Carson visit. They encouraged others to complain to leadership either directly or through an outlet such as the student newspaper.

The trustees played an important stakeholder role, and Abernathy remained in close contact with them throughout the buildup to Carson’s visit. He knew that this critical body leaned conservative. Thus, he was accurately aware of the fact that a
rejection of Carson based on his views was, as Abernathy labeled it, a “short trip to Fox News.”

The Co-Curricular Committee played an important constituent role. Abernathy relied on this group, which had invited Carson in the first instance, to deliberate over whether that invitation should be withdrawn. Student needs served as an important consideration as well. It was the students who were the focus of Honors Day, the event that Carson came to attend. Leadership gave the students the authority to discuss the merits of the Carson visit through the vehicle of the essay contest.

Finally, the faculty as a body must be considered. Nearly one-quarter of all Alma faculty signed the open letter protesting the decision to have Carson on campus. Though Abernathy did not change his position, he needed to hear that voice and determine how best to address it. He did that by using his Provost Selmon who was long tenured at Alma and understood this constituency best.

**The aftereffect on institution and people.** According to Selmon, the impact of the visit ended when Carson left following his speech. Selmon stated that the events that were held afterward lacked any steam. It is true that no protests erupted, and the only outward signs of dissent were consolidated in a few t-shirt-wearing students. The larger market press chose not to cover the event. By those measures, Selmon may be correct that all died down without much fuss afterward.

Brandi Stupika, the faculty member who most vocally opposed Carson, however, continued to blog about the error of having Carson. Her comments and actions at that time led members of the Alma community to question whether she was truly dedicated to the institution given her willingness to attack it in opposition to Carson.
The Carson visit taught Abernathy a lesson. He realized the importance of standing for a principle, even if it meant losing his job. He was comfortable that he had taken the right stand on the issue. If that meant losing the job he wants, and from which he does not aspire, then those were the stakes. He remained willing to play that hand.

**Dillard University**

**Framing and Understanding the Problem**

**The nature of the problem.** Leaders have the opportunity to frame controversy as educational and not simply respond to a crisis thrust upon them. Walter Kimbrough is an example of this. At a time when controversial speakers are chased off campuses, what could me more volatile than a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan coming to the campus of a historically black university? Further, he appeared as a candidate for office, running for senator from Louisiana. Despite the high stakes and the fact that Duke’s appearance did indeed spark protest and riot (for which the police had to deploy pepper spray), Kimbrough took the position both before and after the talk that this former Klan leader should be able to appear and speak on a campus like Dillard.

Kimbrough had options to distance himself and Dillard from the controversy. Though he flirted with those options at first, he chose not to rely on them, instead deeming the appearance of controversial speakers to be a Dillard hallmark. His general counsel even gave him a legal way out: he could assert that Dillard had a contract to rent space for the political debate and that the contract did not have a clause that would allow Dillard to cancel an event if it did not like the views of one of the candidates. Though compelling and true, Kimbrough chose not to stand on that ground. Rather, he chose to embrace the challenge of difficult ideas. He realized that this type of challenge was not
one that Dillard only faced today but one it had also faced throughout its history, dating
back to its founding. Kimbrough had continued a long-standing tradition of Dillard
presidents who bring speakers to campus. He had his Brain Food lecture series through
which he hoped to fill the heads of Dillard students before they chose to empty their
mouths.

What is startling about Kimbrough’s leadership in this instance is that he
established his stance in only forty-eight hours. He heard that Duke had qualified for the
debate, and so he had to manage the attention and controversy of this matter in only a
short period of time. He was then able to debrief the event, speak to his community, and
reassess his position in the days following the debate and the campus protests and riots.
His conclusion: difficult speakers should appear at Dillard, and Dillard should embrace
the challenge. Further, student protest done right is an important lesson, and he wanted
his students to learn the skill.

A matter that begins as a controversy rather than a crisis may give leaders more
latitude and control over the issues. In the case of Dillard, the arrival of Duke sparked a
controversy but not a crisis, at least at first. In that window, short though it was,
Kimbrough was able frame the event as a matter of educational importance to the
students in keeping with the mission and history of Dillard. As Kimbrough asserted,
Dillard could not consider itself a “liberal arts” institution if it were not willing to
confront difficult ideas.

Institutional and national context. The Duke appearance attracted outsiders who
added fuel to the fire and transformed the controversy into a crisis. This process was
impacted by the timing and geographic proximity to other smoldering issues. In the lead-
up to the 2016 presidential election, the nation was experiencing increasingly polarized politics. The Duke appearance was connected to that political atmosphere. First, the senate election was a major event itself, and second, Duke was a polarizing figure hoping to capitalize on the extremes at play in the national elections.

The charged environment included controversy over the history of racism in the south, particularly in the form of Confederate monuments. This controversy intensified the attention on Duke and escalated the response by students and the media. A group called Take ’Em Down NOLA dedicated to the removal of such monuments had even formed in New Orleans. If that cause were not controversial enough, Duke had recently spoke out against the removal of one such monument. The proximity of Dillard to the activities of Take ’Em Down NOLA, Duke’s insertion into their cause, and the opportunity to push back as Duke took the stage at nearby Dillard made the debate an opportune event for protest. The core group of Take ’Em Down NOLA protestors, along with busloads of students from other schools, mixed with Dillard students both outraged and curious to complete the crowd of protestors, some of whom turned violent over the course of the evening.

Dillard had the option to assess these risks and decide to avoid the controversy. For example, as Kimbrough noted, if his board told him to cancel the event, he would have done so. Dillard and Kimbrough decided that such a course of action was not in keeping with the kind of school Dillard was. Its institutional context was important. As an HBCU, Dillard is a homogeneous place. Over 90% of its student body is African American. In this setting, Kimbrough, as did his predecessors, felt the need to import
diverse ideas and controversy to allow the students to engage with issues that would not otherwise appear on campus.

**How leaders framed issues, and how that evolved.** The controversy/crisis at Dillard proved to be fluid, and its leaders initially struggled to understand what was happening. However, Kimbrough picked a frame and began to act accordingly. Kimbrough’s struggle had the added complication of a small amount of time with which to work. As the controversy became known to him, he tested several frames. First, he removed Dillard from responsibility. He claimed that the polling was rigged to generate controversy. Someone wanted the spectacle of Duke at Dillard and fudged the polling numbers to allow that to happen. In that frame, Dillard was merely the passive victim of political shenanigans. Next, Kimbrough framed the issue legally. He again removed Dillard from the center of the event by sidelining its involvement. He positioned Dillard merely as the unsuspecting host with a legal contract that it could not break. His thinking eventually evolved to embrace the event and place Dillard at the center as an intentional actor in this play. Kimbrough framed Dillard as the place where difficult conversations could take place, as well as the institution that historically brought difficult issues of the day to campus, including a visit from Duke in the 1970s when he was still a Klan leader and had spoken directly to the student body. Kimbrough framed the controversy as one where he as the president of a liberal arts school, like his predecessors, was proud to bring in controversial speakers. Once he framed it in that way, it was clear to Kimbrough that the debate must occur, that the campus must be ready, and that he would live with the decision.
Stress: Individual and institutional, and how that needed to be addressed.

Kimbrough faced a high level of personal and professional stress and turmoil. It is clear that the stress impacted Kimbrough. He wanted to be on campus the night of the protests and felt helpless as the controversy enveloped Dillard. He told his wife that he was willing to lose his job over the decision to move forward to include Duke in the debate. He told his Board of Trustees the same thing. He also told them that if the campus suffered as a result of his actions, he would be willing to step down. He knew that he was in a precarious position relative to his board. As he put it, if the board had told him to cancel the event, he would have. However, his board made the situation easier for him by supporting his stance regarding the debate and telling him to stop talking about resignation.

These events were stressful for Dillard as an institution too. The situation on campus the night of the debate was described as a riot. That said, Dillard was fortunate that the stress seemed to end when the evening did. Once the outside agitators left campus, the controversy left with them. Kimbrough was quick to point this out to his community when he addressed them the day after the debate.

Real and lasting institutional stress can inoculate a campus from the strain of a passing controversy or crisis. Such was the case with Dillard. It had suffered staggering financial losses due to Hurricane Katrina. Its student body remained less than it had been before the storm. Its students had to live in hotels, and all of its dormitories were flooded. The campus today still bears the scars from the storm as work continues to make it less susceptible to floods. Beyond Katrina, Dillard had hosted controversial speakers before the Duke debate, and it would again. after the Duke debate. As stated above, Duke had
appeared on the campus as an invited speaker when he was arguably more controversial as the Klan leader in the 1970’s. The fact that Dillard had survived that kind of direct interaction added evidence of resilience and a sense of confidence to Kimbrough’s perspective on the current visit of the former Klansman. Further, Kimbrough’s predecessors at Dillard had invited controversy to campus for years, a tradition that Kimbrough embraced and continued with his Brain Food series. To a campus like Dillard, the brief rioting of outside agitators for one evening was not as impactful as it might have been on an institution not thusly inoculated. Consider as evidence that Kimbrough had a pragmatic reason to keep the debate on campus. One of the debaters would be elected senator, and that official would decide on continuing aid for Dillard for Katrina damage. He knew that the financial issue was larger and more important for Dillard, and he wanted that future senator to appear on his campus.

**What Leaders Did**

*The role of the president and the role of the team.* At Dillard, Kimbrough had to understand when it was important for him to lead and when it was important to allow his team to lead. The night of the debate is a key example of this. Kimbrough was off campus and wanted to return to manage the unfolding situation. Marc Barnes, his vice president for advancement, and Roland Bullard, the vice president for student success, were both on campus that evening. Each one told Kimbrough to stay away. Kimbrough spoke to a student government officer who told him the same thing. Barnes and Bullard realized that the situation on campus was getting dangerous. Kimbrough’s wife was on campus and ended up being verbally assaulted by members of the crowd who recognized her. Barnes had additional and practical reasons to keep Kimbrough away: he needed all
the police and security he could get, and he couldn’t spare any to protect Kimbrough if he
decided to come to campus. Bullard needed to get out in front of the students even though
he was relatively new on campus at the time. He attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to
speak to the crowd and calm them once he realized they were not Dillard students.
Kimbrough himself was personally anguished over not leading in this moment of
controversy/crisis, but he knew that his team had worked hard to plan for the night and
had contingencies in place, such as establishing a clandestine entrance and exit to the
auditorium for Duke. Kimbrough also knew that backup law enforcement was on campus
to help with the crowd. Confident in their preparation, Kimbrough left the night to his
team.

The time for Kimbrough to lead occurred before and after the event. Before it, he
took the reigns and framed the event as important for Dillard and central to its mission.
Kimbrough had to decide whether Dillard would stick with the legal deflection argument
or embrace the debate. After the event, it was Kimbrough who stood on stage and
addressed the Dillard community the next day. He explained what had happened the night
before, which was news to many in the audience, and he told them why Dillard and its
leadership had acted as they did. The following year, when more speaker controversies
occurred around the country, Kimbrough again took the lead to write about the difficulty
of these issues, thereby leveraging the controversy to gain positive attention for Dillard.

**How leaders communicated, and how the campus communicated back.**

Kimbrough was a savvy communicator. For example, he was intentional about using
social media and engaging the community face-to-face. Social media indeed played an
important role in the Duke debate controversy. The president learned of Duke’s
participation through Barnes via social media. Dillard students were agitated by outsiders via social media to protest the appearance of Duke. The social media storm made the Dillard students question how they could allow someone like Duke on their campus. Students made demands of Kimbrough using these outlets on which they could appear anonymous. (And Kimbrough was not happy with that. He refused to deal with student demands. As a small place, he believed that Dillard community members should speak to each other.) Finally, Kimbrough derided the outside agitators who arrived, rioted, and left. He stated that they simply wanted to have their social media moment where they could post that they protested David Duke.

Kimbrough was no stranger to social media and thus aware of the way that messages could stray in that setting. The student voices on social media reacted quickly and gravitated toward the easy conclusion that a former Klan leader had no business on the campus of an HBCU. On the day of the debate, once Kimbrough had firmly framed the situation, he took a different approach, encouraging students on social media not to make a big deal out of Duke’s appearance. He indicated that such a disturbance only gave Duke the controversy and power that he wanted.

Kimbrough strategically and effectively shifted from impersonal to personal communication. He addressed the Dillard community the day after the debate. He was quick to point out that those who acted as agitators the night before were not currently present with the Dillard community. He made sure that the community knew that he and his team were there that day and would be there the next too. Using this vehicle of personal address, Kimbrough was able to solidify his point that those who really cared about Dillard were there to help them, educate them, and stand with them in the wake of
this controversy, just as they had done through an event as difficult as Katrina.

Kimbrough spoke directly in contrast to the anonymous demands made by students. He wanted to stress that Dillard was small and a family and that as such, communication happened out in the open and directly. This is not a message that he could deliver, authentically, via Twitter.

**Stakeholders on and off campus and coalitions.** Certain stakeholders, both on and off campus, made the Dillard event more intense, but others had a calming influence. The Take ’Em Down NOLA group exacerbated tensions during the debate with Duke. Add to that tension of the underlying challenge of the history of racism in the Deep South that undergirds the controversy surrounding the Confederate monument removals. Both of these factors fanned the flames of the Duke debate.

There were elements of the situation that had the opposite effect as well. Consider that Dillard and New Orleans had survived Katrina. Consider too that Dillard had invited Duke directly to its campus in the past. This point was made clearly to Kimbrough by Dyan French Cole, aka Mama D. She told him that to create a fight over Duke’s appearance was just what he wanted. When he had appeared on campus in the 1970s, she had joined him for lunch. She reminded Kimbrough that he was the Klan leader at that time and that Mama D was the leader of the NAACP. This helped to put the current controversy into perspective for Kimbrough and provide him with an example of civil confrontation.

A final stakeholder to consider is the neighborhood in which Dillard is located. Gentilly was not disturbed by Duke’s appearance. As Bullard pointed out, if something was amiss in Gentilly, even of a small nature, Dillard would hear about it. Gentilly,
however, was quiet. Social media was filled with protest from New York and California, but Gentilly was not upset.

**The aftereffect on institution and people.** At Dillard this controversy offered the campus an opportunity to achieve clarity of its values and its preparedness for future types of similar events. Kimbrough used the Duke debate to understand better both the history and the role of Dillard as a place where difficult talks can occur. He added his Brain Food series to the long line of presidential speaker events at Dillard. He learned of the challenges Dillard had faced in the past from his encounter with Mama D. He took the position that Dillard should stand its ground as a liberal arts college and embrace difficult conversations. Yet despite finding clarity around Dillard’s values, Kimbrough remains afraid that higher education institutions will shy away from controversy in the future to avoid crisis.

Dillard learned of its preparedness as well. It took the opportunity to revisit its protocols. The Student Success division has done tabletop exercises to practice for this type of event. Bullard noted that he now knows to find himself in these moments and not get caught up in the crisis. He wishes that he had remembered his training that evening instead of trying to quell the disturbance at all costs.

**DePaul University**

**Framing and Understanding the Problem**

**The nature of the problem.** Father Dennis Holtschneider initially could only understand the controversy on his campus from a distance and in a vacuum, and he could not appreciate the nuance of the problem or the emotions attached. In France on a retreat with senior leaders and the Board of Trustees, Holtschneider could not experience the
disruption of Milo Yiannopoulos’ aborted talk. Not only was he away from campus, he had limited information. He was given an account from Gene Zdziarski, his vice president for student affairs, as well as video of the event itself. The video did not reveal what had happened before or after the talk. All Holtschneider could see was an event that could not take place because a group of students had occupied the stage, taken the microphones from the moderator and the speaker, and, in the case of one protester, threatened or struck the speaker with a microphone. With this narrow window into the events on his campus in Chicago, Holtschneider framed the event as an affront to freedoms, such as free speech. He contrasted that to the scene at Normandy Beach where young Americans had died to protect those freedoms. When he was told that the campus was in turmoil, he flew home.

It is important to keep in focus that Holtschneider’s initial campus-wide email in which he chided those who disrupted the event was a first impression. He did not have time to think about the event and watch it unfold. He did not have the chance to speak to his leadership team or with constituents on campus. His understanding of events was only hours old when he drafted it.

Holtschneider missed recognizing the impact an event such as the Yiannopoulos visit would have on the campus. Prior to the event occurring, leadership thought it would not be a problem. DePaul’s student body is diverse. Nearly half its student population is not White. Its setting in a diverse major city like Chicago, where more than half of the population is also not White, adds to the threat presented by this event. DePaul was already sensitive to the fact that not all members of its community experienced the school in the same way. This meant that belonging was particularly important. DePaul’s leaders
were keen to make all members of the community feel as though DePaul was their home. Threats to that community were taken seriously, including those posed by speakers pushing the boundaries of the marketplace of ideas.

Holtschneider missed the emotion and anxiety of his community in his initial framing. He was not on campus and did not fully understand what was happening there. By contrast, when he returned and met with his community members face-to-face, he was able to see this impact clearly. As he put it, his “heart broke” when he heard stories of members of the community being marginalized by these events. As he spent time among the DePaul community and heard how this event compounded existing feelings of disunity and divisiveness, he became aware of the emotional impact of the Yiannopoulos visit. Holtschneider arrived at this understanding the hard way. He put himself out as the target of campus anger and anxiety, and he absorbed that energy. He did this purposefully. As he took in the perspective of one group, he repeated it back to them to make sure he got it right, and he made sure to repeat what other groups said to him as well. He wanted to make sure that anyone feeling this pain knew that he had heard them.

**Institutional and national context.** DePaul’s campus climate around race prior to Yiannopoulos’ visit exacerbated its impact. DePaul was only months from the Black Lives Matter unrest. Holtschneider had met with leaders of the Black student associations and hoped that he had both heard and addressed their concerns. The understanding of where that conversation left off was mixed. To the leadership at DePaul, they were in a good place and were working toward solutions. In the eyes of the student and faculty groups at the heart of this matter, the university response had been termed “tepid.”
The national divisions in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election made the Yiannopoulos visit to DePaul an attractive fight for outside conservative agitators. The vast majority of those in attendance for the talk were not students at DePaul. Some DePaul students were inside the hall while others were outside at the competing poetry reading. Many of the event attendees were clad in “Make America Great Again” attire. Yiannopoulos’ visit and his caustic approach to discourse was nothing more than an attractive nuisance. Into this welcoming, inclusive, and diverse campus environment came Yiannopoulos with his conservative, if not hateful, viewpoints, expressed as jabs at everything that DePaul stood for. The crowd viewed this an opportunity to unleash powerful aggressions. The campus was fertilized with hateful commentary before the scheduled talk, and then that aggression manifested outside the hall when the talk was suspended. The product of that mix of cultures was a series of struggles, both verbal and physical, that DePaul officials were fortunate to keep from becoming a riot. The Chicago police were ultimately needed to quell the furor as Yiannopoulos left the scene.

**How leaders framed issues, and how that evolved.** Initially, the leaders at DePaul mistakenly thought that its community could withstand, or at least ignore, ideas as diverse and controversial as those lobbed by Yiannopoulos. When considering the potential disruption of the event, leaders emphasized that a university campus is the marketplace of ideas. As such, it could withstand Yiannopoulos and his brand of provocative exchange.

Holtschneider made this point as he framed the issue from France. As he made the case for freedom of speech, and without the benefit of all the facts, he managed to widen the divide forming on the DePaul campus. He stressed that the soldiers buried in the
Normandy cemeteries died for the freedoms that DePaul protesters were suppressing. In doing so, he was unaware of how the campus was primed for disruption by the events leading up to the talk.

Once Holtschneider returned to campus and discovered the impact Yiannopoulos’ visit had had on the DePaul community, he framed the issue differently. Thus, instead of evolving, his thinking leaped to a different place. His focus turned to the impact the disruption had on DePaul. As he placed himself emotionally among those in his community and understood what it felt like to be the recipient of the hate that preceded the visit, occurred during the talk, and spilled out onto the Lincoln Park campus afterward, he was able to change his framing. Not only did Holtschnieder focus on the damage to the DePaul community, he also made solutions to this damage a singular focus.

Stress: Individual and institutional, and how that needs to be addressed.

DePaul’s leaders experienced a level of stress unlike anything they had encountered before in their careers, and they were unprepared for its personal, emotional toll. Zdziarski noted that he had worked at Texas A&M when the bonfire collapsed and multiple students died. He said the DePaul event was much worse. Unlike A&M where the community came together, the community at DePaul tore itself apart. He had his degree in crisis management and thus some familiarity with the issues which might arise and yet the DePaul experience hit him hard. In his estimation, it was the worst of his career. He considered whether DePaul was the right place for him. It was not until three
years after the event that Zdziarski was able to say that he finally feels as though he is back to some sense of equilibrium.

Holtschneider too was aware that presidencies had been lost due to mishandling events such as these. Holtschneider’s quiet resignation in March of that year made his response to the situation unique. Unlike the presidents in the other case studies, he knew that his term had an expiration date. In some ways, that could explain his willingness to stand in front of the DePaul community and absorb the brunt of the anger and anxiety.

DePaul was experienced at handling controversial speakers, or so it thought. Holtschneider remarked that DePaul had hosted many controversial speakers and that Yiannopoulos was just one among many. This confidence in the university’s ability to handle difficult speech may have led some to think that DePaul could manage Yiannopoulos as yet another boundary pusher in the marketplace of ideas.

What Leaders Did

The role of the president and the role of the team. Holtschneider realized that in the midst of a controversy, the community would look to the individual leader as an important symbol. He specifically stated that it would be a great mistake to underestimate the importance of individual leadership in a situation like this. To that end, he made himself visible and vulnerable. He was aware that he looked different, with the garb of a Roman Catholic priest. Additionally, he was aware that his term as president was limited. In this sense, he had more freedom to “take one for the team” and use his position as the key, visible, individual leader to absorb the campus anger and frustration.

The individual leader could not handle everything though. While Holtschneider was the focal point of the campus response, symbolically sitting on the stage alone at the
open forums, he realized that he needed his team and the larger campus community to implement broad-ranging initiatives. In this way, he took a balanced approach to attending to both emotions (through his role as the lone leader) and actions (through the multifaceted response of his team and campus committees).

**How leaders communicate, and how the campus communicates back.**

Holtschneider believed in email communication. He used this medium to reach the broadest possible campus audience. He described a vast “middle,” which included the members of campus who paid attention. They were reasonable. They wanted to understand why he had taken certain actions, but they were unwilling to get involved beyond that. He believed that email was able to both reach and persuade them.

Face-to-face communication was the vehicle Holtschneider deployed in order to understand his community and demonstrate visible leadership. He did this after the first email communication backfired. He did not abandon written communication, however. He followed up these open forums and discussions with written notes. All of these experiences eventually led to his second email, in which he told the campus that he had gotten it wrong and apologized. His communication was both broad and inclusive, but also personal.

DePaul’s leadership created multiple opportunities for the campus to make its voice heard. It established three open forums, one for faculty, one for staff, and one for students. It assembled many campus groups, most of which existed, but some of which were new. It called on the president’s Diversity Council, the Faculty Senate, and the Speech and Expression Task Force, which was formed in the wake of the event, as was a
Bias Response Team and an African American Resource Center. All of these groups found common bond in tethering to the mission of DePaul and its Vincentian values.

**Stakeholders and coalitions, on and off campus.** Holtschneider focused on the stakeholders within the community, in particular the students and faculty. He focused intently on the impact of the Yiannopoulos visit on the students at DePaul. To the faculty, he assigned the slow and labor-intensive process of revising the university speech policy. These ranks joined together in the DePaul University Black Leadership Coalition, composed of both students and faculty. This group made demands of leadership, many of which were ultimately accepted by Holtschneider, including the creation of an African American Resource Center.

The experience with Yiannopoulos turned DePaul and its leaders inward, toward the campus community. Their goal was to understand how the community was impacted and repair that rift. This was made particularly important in light of the fact that the cause of the pain came from outside the university. The vast majority of those attending the event and disrupting the campus were not DePaul students. It is worth noting that in trying to mend fences at DePaul, leadership did not call on outside groups. It crafted its own response to deal with its own problem.

**The aftereffect on institutions and people.** A serious incident such as the Yiannopoulos visit at DePaul may require years to recover. Zdziarski indicated that 2018 was the first year in the last three that he was able to feel like he could look ahead and not feel haunted by the lingering effects of Yiannopoulos. In that time, he considered whether he should quit. Holtschneider, too, knew that presidencies can be lost by the mishandling of events like this, though he knew that his presidency was ending by his own choice.
DePaul as an institution chose to err on the side of community protection over freedom of speech. Its leaders took from the Yiannopoulos experience that not all in the DePaul community experienced DePaul in the same way. This was made particularly clear when Linda Blakley, the vice president for communications, indicated that she was not sure what would have made her prouder, for her son to sit quietly during the talk or for him to take the stage and prevent it. Other students expressed a fear about walking across campus. Student groups arranged escorts. Clearly, the experience of DePaul was not the same for everyone. Its preference for community has drawn the criticism of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). It lists schools with policies that it deems antithetical to free speech. While the list is unranked, FIRE has placed DePaul at the top—or the bottom, depending on perspective—of that list.

DePaul has developed structures and approaches to better anticipate these events going forward. The Student Speaker Review Team makes recommendations to Zdziarski. Each time he refuses to allow a recommended speaker on campus, he takes flak from FIRE. DePaul developed a Bias Response Team to triage incidents on campus that may cause tensions and bring resources to bear quickly. Four centers were created, including an African American Resource Center. Among these initiatives, an undocumented student coordinator was hired.

Middlebury College

Protestors prevented Charles Murray from delivering his address at Middlebury College’s Wilson Hall. As he left the location, one of his faculty escorts was assaulted and injured. The case reveals the ways in which Middlebury’s leadership responded to this incident both before and after the talk. Though President Laurie Patton convened the
cabinet the night of the Murray incident, the leadership role at Middlebury was a lonely one occupied exclusively by Patton. Patton realized quickly the leadership challenge presented to her. The campus was divided along ideological lines, not all of which were familiar to her, with both camps claiming the moral high ground. She had to understand what the problems facing her campus were, frame those problems for the campus, and work with the campus to determine a path toward healing, a path on which the campus continues well after the event.

**Framing and Understanding the Problem**

**The nature of the problem.** The problem facing Middlebury College in the wake of Charles Murray’s visit was in many ways an unsolvable problem. The divide within the campus and among those watching nationally pitted fundamental values against each other: on one side, free speech; on the other, inclusivity.

**Free speech versus inclusivity.** The issue at Middlebury was not about one set of values and ideals crashing against another, but rather about institutional identity. On one hand, one group argued that the issue was about the importance of speech on a college campus, even inflammatory speech; on the other, a second group framed the issue as a sense of inclusion and belonging. Some in the Middlebury community thought that the supremacy of reason and the critical eye of the academy presented the perfect foil to threatening ideas and viewpoints, such as those attributed to Murray. Others believed that the college was the home to multiple viewpoints and a safe environment where, as Patton often repeated, they all “belong.” These sometimes competing notions of free speech and inclusivity found their way to the heart of the struggle at Middlebury. Patton stressed that
free and open discourse was necessary if for no other reason than to act as a tool to better understand the divisive nature of issues such as race, class, inclusion, and identity.

What becomes apparent from Patton’s framing of issues is that she never relented on the fundamental need for free speech. Patton defined free speech as a right, while diversity and inclusion she designated as responsibility. In doing so, Patton provided an answer to those who thought that one or the other idea should exclusively hold sway. This statement allowed Patton to stress that both are important. She emphasized, however, that those at the margins are just as threatened by a lack of free speech as anyone, and that they too are vulnerable to the loss of their voice. Thus, when she formed a campus-wide committee to review these issues in the months following Murray’s visit, she challenged the committee to address “freedoms of expression, inclusivity, and the educational and civic challenges of the 21st century.”

By not viewing free speech and inclusivity as mutually exclusive, Patton used her power to frame issues to include both ideas rather than side with one over the other. As each side laid claim to the moral high ground of either free speech or inclusivity, Patton took the position that Middlebury stood for both, and that she stood for both. She admits that she should have come to this position sooner and that she wishes that she had been more decisive in reaching this decision.

**Institutional and national context.** One must consider both the institutional and national context to fully understand Middlebury. At Middlebury, the nature of the college has always been critical, which is described by Patton in her introduction of Murray as leaning to the left. That left-leaning college’s action took place within the larger context of a controversial national presidential election.
Linking the mission to the problem. Middlebury’s mission provided a foundation for both sides of the argument. Middlebury is a college where dealing with difficult issues in a broad-based way is central to how they conceptualize their mission as a liberal arts college. Patton insisted that students engage in and grapple with free speech and difficult ideas as the “discomfort of a liberal education.” This was a value and a role that she actively advocated during her tenure. She even had what could be called a catchphrase about this point, as she often challenged her students to practice “rhetorical resilience.”

However, Middlebury also defined its mission with a second component: that of inclusivity and diversity. The belief on campus and advanced by the president was that education was not complete unless the students understood and took into account the inequity and experience of those who “walked in the American margins” (Patton, 2017, para. 5).

Thus, the Murray speech and its fallout firmly hit the college in both of these areas. That each element was thought to be a primary framing device was evident in the fact that a faculty group published a list of free speech principles, which it held to be inviolate, only to have a group of students publish a counterstatement challenging the faculty’s right to claim such a foundation. Therefore, it was important for Middlebury, and thus for Patton, to engage multiple viewpoints on this spectrum and not believe that one side of this argument was right and the other side wrong.

Placing the issue in the broader national context. The events at Middlebury were shaped by a larger, national dialogue. Murray arrived at Middlebury two months after the inauguration of Donald Trump as president. Groups stunned by Trump’s
election began to speak out, and Patton viewed the Murray talk as one such opportunity.
The implication at Middlebury was that it injected outside groups into a campus
discussion that had been internal until that point. It exacerbated the feelings of campus
constituents who were already feeling marginalized, particularly around issues of race.
The shocking nature of the election provided the impetus for both groups to act out.

For many students and the outsiders who attended the event, Middlebury provided
an opportunity for students to express an idea, which for the most part was a frustration.
Murray, though an outspoken opponent of Trump, represented the rise of conservative
views, which the election had ensconced in the White House. Patton described the
students as caught up in a “social contagion,” which, as a native of Salem, Massachusetts,
she understood from her geographic DNA. The students rallied to stand up for the
community members who experienced racism. They needed to do something about the
election and inauguration of President Trump. Patton thought the students came alive in
that moment.

A sharply polarized political landscape should provide a cautionary signal for any
leadership. The battle lines that formed on the Middlebury campus represented a
microcosm of the larger divide in American society, not only exemplified by the election
of Trump but also represented by the polarized nature of the political parties. As Patton
noted, the students behaved as though they were in an altered state stemming from what
she perceived to be a need to represent their side of that national debate.

The national picture became magnified further when the faculty identified Parini
as a leader of the free speech movement. His elevation to a national stage and the
accompanying spotlight meant that those who disagreed with his position were motivated
to make their voices heard and ideas known as if to say, “Parini is not Middlebury.” The conservative media already considered colleges and universities as hostile to free thought and used Parini, an outspoken liberal, to add credibility to that assertion. In fact, he noted that Middlebury was being “weaponized” by the right to show how the left had overwhelmed higher education and would not permit anyone to raise a contrary opinion. He described himself as an old-school Vietnam War protester being used as a pawn of the right in the larger national battle. This weaponized use of free speech was significant for Middlebury. The right sets a trap: either campus leaders agree that conservative speakers deserve a platform on campuses, or stand trial for hypocrisy.

The impact of the national spotlight on Middlebury proved to be both negative and positive. Negatively, leaders felt intense pressure to respond and comment. Editorials and articles appeared in many national publications, a number of which were authored by members of the campus community. The divisions within the campus, thus, played out in the media. Further, Patton struggled with pressure from alumni who were tired of seeing their alma mater lampooned in the news, and trustees did not want to see their college on the leading edge of this difficult issue. Patton had to confront it. Patrons of the school who watched conservative media and made their money on Wall Street were disgruntled.

On the positive side, Patton was quick to remind these friends of the institution that by many metrics, the Murray event was a net positive. In the spring of the Murray event, Middlebury had more class visits and more campus visits than ever before. It enrolled its second largest class ever. One year later, it received its largest number of applicants. Among those large numbers, Middlebury had the largest number of applicants of color in its history. Peer ranking went up during this time. Middlebury was viewed as
both a place full of leftists who prevented Murray from speaking and a place so
conservative that it would invite Murray in the first place. As Patton described it,
prospective students took notice of the school in rural Vermont as the place “where stuff
goes down.”

One vestige of the polarized national climate was the presence of outside agitators
drawn to a campus event as a platform for protest. These individuals drove what might
have been a benign student demonstration to a large-scale disruption complete with
violence. But for the outside agitators, Middlebury would have been a small news story.
The presence of people described by the Middlebury police as trained in disruption not
only increased the intensity of the protest (for example, the pulling of multiple fire alarms
around Wilson Hall) but also caused the assault which propelled the story nationally.
Although no arrests were made, the masked group waiting for Murray, Allison Stanger,
and Bill Burger as they left the hall was believed to be composed of non-students. It is
this group that assaulted Stanger and jumped on Burger’s car. Due to the actions of this
group, the Middlebury protest turned violent. Had the event been limited to students and
not entangled in the national debate, Middlebury would have received far less notoriety.
Middlebury’s leaders were prepared for disruption. They had the green room waiting so
the talk could be streamed separately if protests disrupted the live event. They had been
thoughtful about picking Wilson Hall as a place where crowd control was simpler. But
they were unprepared for outside agitators who were intent on violent disruption. A
balance needed to be struck between appropriate safeguards and marshal law, which in
and of itself can spark controversy. However, even with this high level of planning and
preparedness, the event still resulted in large-scale disruption, both immediate and over the long term.

**How Leaders used the opportunity to frame issues, and how that evolved**

**The power to frame issues.** A strategic asset of Heifetz (1994), framing issues was an important tool in the response to the Middlebury incident. Campus voices framed the issue. As mentioned in the previous section, Patton too used the power to frame issues to claim the middle ground. As her campus community took to one battle line or another, free speech or inclusivity, Patton framed the issue in the middle. In other words, Middlebury stood for both.

**Formal versus informal framing of issues.** The issues were framed by multiple sets of actors. Patton did one set of framing, but she also had to respond to how others—such as students, Parini, different groups of faculty, and outside agitators—framed what was happening. Consider the divide as old Middlebury versus new Middlebury. The older faculty were grouped as the supporters of free speech, while the younger students were the diversity warriors. Others described the war as that between the academy, with its respect for robust and open debate, and the community, where all are welcome and where all belong. According to the latter group, the community is threatened by ideas that have the effect of marginalizing any member. The alternative framings of the issue found voice in the warring manifestos published first by Parini and his faculty colleagues in which they set forth the principles of free speech as a rational and logical component of scholarly inquiry. The students countered that emotion should not take a back seat to reason and, to the extent that reason ignored the importance of emotion, that reason itself was oppressive.
An event like the Murray visit to Middlebury caused a personal divide for the president. Patton reflected on the fact that she needed to be both “teacher in chief” and “mediator in chief” to both lead and help the educational community learn and grow from the experience. In this sense, she experienced her own divide. She had an academic interest in what was happening, but she also had the added responsibility to hold the constituencies of the campus together. Her complex understanding of her role enabled her to see the merit in the positions espoused by all camps. Rather than chide those who spoke out on either side of this issue, she celebrated them. She held Middlebury up for scrutiny and acclaim given that it was having a campus-wide conversation on something as difficult as race.

The understanding of the problem may change over time. Patton, as the leader, offered multiple framings over the course of events. The challenge never presented itself fully formed or in complete detail and clarity. Patton asserted that Middlebury stood for both free speech and inclusivity, but she did not reach that position immediately. She admitted that she should have come to this position sooner. She wished that she had been more decisive on the need to be “both/and.”

Personal convictions and external voices. Patton’s personal conviction as a leader, based her on background, scholarship, interests, and training, impacted the institutional response. Consider who Patton was. Her background as a University of Chicago–trained PhD, her experience at other large institutions such as Duke and Emory, and her familial appreciation for the need of debate and good argument all contributed to a strong predilection toward the supremacy of free speech. She admitted thinking that
when she arrived at Middlebury, she had arrived at the University of Chicago “in the mountains.”

Patton’s convictions followed her to Middlebury, and they haunted her during and after the crises. In one sense, the baggage of her belief in free speech caused her to feel assured that its supremacy as a value of higher education was sacrosanct. Her addresses over the course of her first year were peppered with references to the need for free speech and inquiry. She called on her students to practice “rhetorical resilience” as they tackled difficult ideas and debated them.

Patton’s personal convictions shared space with other voices from within the community at Middlebury. Her own tendency toward free speech needed to be tempered by those who argued that speech could be violence, against which violent response may be justified. Others, particularly students, argued that the supremacy of reason over emotion was a form of oppression. Still others expressed the concern that the community of Middlebury suffered real harm, which was more important than an abstract notion of free speech.

**Stress: Individual and institutional and how leaders address it**

**Leaders need to understand and handle a level of stress.** Patton had to manage stress across a multitude of fronts. How the national debate manifested itself on campus is discussed above. The personal stress on Patton, however, is important to understand. In particular, she struggled with the rift caused by holding students accountable for violating the code of conduct. This threatened the bridges that she had built over her first year in an attempt to bring people together around difficult issues. What is not known is whether Patton could have ministered to both sides of this debate without the bridges in place to
go back and forth between the camps. The difficulty of her situation was revealed in the
terms that Patton used for her divided self. She referred to her dual and sometimes
competing roles as “teacher in chief” and “mediator in chief.” Though she wanted to
straddle the warring camps in an effort to keep the campus together at some level, she
had to impose discipline as required by her position as president. Further, Patton called
on personal resources to deal with the pain of the conflict. For example, she knew from
her upbringing the importance of good argument, but she also drew from her junior high
experience of managing tasks in an environment where she was treated as a pariah.

Patton had to navigate the complexities in the situation caused by her gender.
Patton was Middlebury’s first woman president in the school’s 215-year history. Patton
was cautioned not to cry but told to be “emotionally authentic” at the same time. She
noted that she was willing to let people see her cry, and it spawned an overwhelming
interest in what she termed the “hydrology” of her response. Further, she was questioned
repeatedly about whether she “believed in her heart” in what she was doing. This
question emerged in particular as she supported sanctioning the students for their code of
conduct violations. Patton was certain that male leaders would not have had the contents
of their heart searched in moments like these. She noted that she was naturally
sympathetic to the plight of her community. Some read that sympathy as indecisive and
weak. Further, as a scholar, she wanted to understand, instinctively, both sides of the fray.
This too, left her vulnerable as the “teacher in chief” and as the sympathetic “mommy”
that some demanded of their woman leader.

One of the issues Patton needed to understand but ultimately used as an important
frame was that some members of the Middlebury community were afraid to speak out.
This troubled her. She felt that exposure to challenging ideas requires the ability and space to argue and debate. If members of the community do not share in that freedom equally, then the debate is not as rich, and the full community is not empowered to handle tough subjects. She wanted Middlebury students to have the power, skills, and willingness to take on the challenges of this century and improve it. 

**What Leaders Did**

**The role of the president and the role of the team.** Patton took the leading role at Middlebury during this crisis. She relied on the input and advice of her team, but when the time came to be the focal point, it was all Patton. She led the impromptu session with those students still in Wilson Hall following the aborted lecture. She authored the opinion piece published in *The Wall Street Journal* on the matter. She addressed the campus both in person and in electronic form. She ran the town hall. She met with prominent donors and alumni and absorbed their wrath from both ends of the political spectrum. She convened the task force and gave it its charge. And, not to be forgotten, she introduced Murray as the event itself began.

Patton used her team but not as the front line. The cabinet was convened at midnight on the night of the incident. She relied on Burger, the vice president for communications and chief marketing officer, to understand, firsthand, what occurred around the assault of Stanger and the events that followed the aborted talk. Further, she worked with Burger on her statements and communications. She relied upon the larger committee of college representatives to do the work of the task force.

**How leaders communicate, and how campus communicated to leaders.** Patton it known that her position was one of respect for both free speech and diversity. She did
this early and often and through multiple outlets. She sent campus-wide email
communications, including one immediately following the event. She used this format
several times over the course of that spring semester. She published her opinion in
national publications. In this way, Patton placed herself distinctly at the center of the
issues at Middlebury.

Patton needed to be intentional about the way she communicated and open to the
possibility that it was not always her strength. She convened a town hall to hear and
absorb the community concerns. It was this event that brought her communication skills
into focus. Patton considered communication a strength. She was told however that she
needed to communicate differently as an outgrowth of the town hall and the difficulty of
that session. She admitted that the decision was good, but it was still hard to hear.
Another lesson that she learned was that, as a president, there is a need to repeat oneself.
She likened it to preaching. She emphasized that good preaching requires repetition and
that repetition can impact the culture of an organization. She laughed at her new
president-self who did not realize that people would not hear her until she said something
for the fiftieth time.

Though leaders voiced opinions and accounts of the event to both local and
national audiences, Patton chose not to respond to these audiences directly. Rather, the
discussion was robust within the Middlebury campus. The students responded to faculty
leadership by publishing a counterstatement of principles designed to rebut each of the
faculty statements. As stated above, campus voices spoke out at the town hall and in
meetings with leaders, both on or off campus. Students authored numerous pieces
published in the campus paper. Middlebury facilitated this communication by compiling
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an open website on which all communications pertaining to the event resided, both internal and external. Patton remained the facilitator of these communications but did not act to rebut any of them.

**Stakeholders on and off campus and coalitions.** Patton needed to manage stakeholders who wished to pull her in opposite directions. She did this without placing herself in one camp or another, a fine line to walk. Her management of stakeholders is a key example of her role as “mediator in chief.” Alumni of color attended a dinner at Patton’s home and let her know how unhappy they were with Middlebury. Trustees worried about reputation and risk and being on the front edge of such a complicated issue. Donors repeated trustee concerns to Patton and worried that the reputation and ranking of the school would plummet. In addition, they were tired of Middlebury being the target of negative media attention, particularly for what was perceived by many as misbehaving students.

**The aftereffect on institution and people.** The impact and implications of the Murray visit to Middlebury carried on long after the event. It affected Patton in that she took a position with which both sides would be less than satisfied. Her solace was that she was able to support that position with integrity. Patton stood at the center of the controversy and allowed herself to take the heat for the decisions made. She withstood criticism by the right for being too lenient as she spoke about inclusivity and the need to understand the broader community, and she was criticized by the left for staking a claim on behalf of freedom of speech. She was clear that she needed to stand in a place where she believed in the integrity of her position, even if it meant that she would be fired for that conviction.
Middlebury managed to turn what many would call a negative national news story into a positive case for itself. Patton acknowledged that the specter of reputational risk was ever present and repeated to her by leaders. She cautions, however, to step back from that notion of reputational risk and all the rabbit holes down which leaders may chase it. If she had tried to minimize the story of what happened at Middlebury, its rebound might not have occurred, for example. As groups complained to her about the incident, she would educate them on the fact that Middlebury was a campus that was able to have a campus-wide conversation on a topic as difficult as race, and that they should be proud of a school that could do that. She also stressed that Middlebury fared well institutionally through the controversy. By most traditional markers of success, such as total applicants and peer evaluation, Middlebury improved in the time following Murray’s visit.

Despite the external markers of success, Patton admits the sting of broken relationships. She laments the loss of connection to students who were not happy with the institution or with her. Though she was able to manage through the difficulties and establish better processes (initiating a crisis-management team for example), she still remembers the student who would not shake her hand the night of the talk.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

The following section compares and contrasts the four cases across the findings. It is organized around the research questions. The first group of findings for comparison pertains to the ways in which leaders framed and understood the problems associated with the incident on their campus. The second group of findings compares conclusions about what leaders did when confronted with these incidents.
Framing and Understanding the Problem

**Placing the issue in context.** The polarized political climate surrounding the 2016 presidential election complicated events at each of the four campuses. That climate rendered the campus speakers, which campuses have hosted for years, in a much more contentious light. The climate motivated outside groups and agitators to gravitate toward controversial campus speakers. These groups were not members of the campus community. They did not have to consider how their actions might impact the community, much less whether community standards and discipline would apply to them.

The election cycle shone a spotlight on these events. National and international news media arrived on campuses to cover these struggles. They allowed a front-line look at the clash of ideologies playing out among the American electorate.

Dillard, DePaul, and Middlebury experienced the impact of outside agitators. On all three campuses, groups descended, caused disturbances to the point of violence, and left the campus officials to pick up the pieces. Dillard’s campus was used by the Take ’Em Down NOLA group, which had been protesting Confederate monuments in New Orleans. David Duke had made comments critical of this movement in the lead-up to his appearance at Dillard. In contrast to the Dillard students peacefully picketing on the street in front of the school, the outsiders to campus, a group that included busloads of students from other campuses, engaged in violence to the point that police had to use pepper spray to subdue the group trying to force its way into the debate venue.

The outside group that came to DePaul was not organized around a specific cause. Many wore Make America Great Again hats, and all were eager to mock the inclusive environment of the DePaul campus, both before and after the event. When Milo
Yiannopoulos was prevented from speaking, this group joined him in a march across campus that turned violent as they engaged with student groups who became aware of the confrontation that occurred at the aborted speech.

Middlebury attributes the high profile of the Charles Murray event to the appearance of outside agitators. A local “antifa” group was suspected by authorities of being behind the disruption in Wilson Hall and the violent attack as Murray left it. Police believed that their actions revealed training in disruptive tactics. Middlebury’s leaders believed that if the talk had merely been shut down by rowdy students, it wouldn’t have been a news story for more than a day. Given that Allison Stanger was injured in the effort of the agitators to attack Murray, the Middlebury incident became international news.

All four schools and the controversy surrounding each were the subject of news media interest. With Dillard and Alma, the media had prepared for the event because the controversy emerged during the buildup. The controversies at DePaul and Middlebury transpired at the events themselves. Dillard, DePaul, and Middlebury were covered by national and international news outlets. Dillard had CNN and the BBC at the gates of the school the night of the event, and a media room was set up in the same building as the debate. It was a surprise when the subsequent rioting and police action became the story. Alma received the least attention. The Detroit newspaper was interested in the Carson visit and the controversy that it engendered. When it appeared as though the event would take place without significant protest, and that the speech was not supposed to be political, the interest from the Detroit paper waned.
The threat of reputational risk. Leadership will face claims of reputational risk and damage to external perceptions of the institution no matter what position they take, either in support of free speech or as the champion of diversity and inclusivity. Three of the four leaders in these cases feared how the outside world would perceive of the institution and how that would resonate with constituents. One did not: Dennis Holtschnieder focused on the internal needs of the DePaul community.

Alma, Dillard, and Middlebury all faced the specter of reputational risk. At Alma, Jeff Abernathy was concerned about Fox News. He knew about the conservative trustees, and he did not want Alma’s approach to the Carson talk to wind up on Fox News as another example of an intolerant liberal campus that would not allow a conservative to speak.

Laurie Patton confronted reputational risk from all sides. She was warned about being too conservative and warned about being too liberal. She decided that fear of reputational risk was a rabbit hole she did not want to go down, and she determined that leaders must be wary about being drawn into it. Patton is emphatic about this point due to the fact that, by traditional markers of success such as applications and peer reputation, Middlebury actually improved in these areas as a result of the Murray controversy.

Holtschneider at DePaul focused inward on the campus community. His first take on what had happened at DePaul was from the remove of France, and he had missed what was really happening on campus from that perspective. He did not dwell on how the outside world would perceive DePaul but instead focused on what the internal community of DePaul needed for it to heal. That did not mean that the outside world ignored DePaul in return. FIRE, for example, took notice of DePaul’s restrictive
approach to speakers and placed DePaul on its list of campuses that unreasonably restrict free speech.

Though Dillard had to deal with a national and an international press intrigued by the former Klan leader appearing on the campus of an HBCU, Walter Kimbrough took his arguments and focus inward. He felt it was important to tell his community about Dillard as a place that welcomes diverse thought and to emphasize that when all the media trucks and protestors left, the only people left were the members of the Dillard community. In that sense, he pulled the community together by stressing that it was, indeed, a community.

The mission high ground. Each side of the conflict claimed the mission high ground; no clear right or wrong side emerged in the controversies. At Alma, Abernathy immediately reacted with revulsion to comments circulating from Carson. He thought they did not fit with the mission of Alma, particularly given his initiatives for diversity. He then considered the alternative mission. In consultation with his provost Michael Selmon, he sided with the mission of the liberal arts to confront difficult ideas and to not bar (or in Alma’s case, disinvite) a speaker because leadership disagreed with his views. The outspoken faculty took a different mission-based approach. They argued that the ideas that Carson had spoken and published were antithetical to the ideals and values of the inclusive and diverse Alma community.

Dillard faced criticism from a national audience. As leadership pointed out, they received opinions from New York and California about how antithetical it was to the mission of an HBCU to have former Klan leader Duke debate on campus. This plea to mission found its way to Dillard students via social media in an effort to instigate protest.
Like Abernathy and his reaction to Ben Carson, Kimbrough was not happy about the appearance of Duke on his campus. Also, he came to a conclusion similar to Abernathy’s, in that the mission of Dillard, going back to its founding president, was to bring speakers from all viewpoints to the campus. Kimbrough viewed this mission as part of what made Dillard the “Jewel of Gentilly.”

The constituents at DePaul all laid claim to the mission high ground. With an unusually long, four-page mission statement, DePaul’s community took the mission of a Vincentian school seriously. As Gene Zdziarski pointed out, each group claimed to understand and follow the mission of DePaul in their own way. The juxtaposition of Yiannopoulos and his hateful comments against the language of DePaul’s Catholic and Vincentian statement struck many in the community as reason enough to keep someone with views like his from campus.

Middlebury struggled to identify whether one side had the mission high ground or whether both were right. A group of faculty published their principles of free speech and planted their flag atop the idea that difficult ideas need to find space in the academy to be challenged by countering ideas. The thought that an idea would be dismissed because it is controversial is antithetical to those principles. A group of students opposed this idea with their own set of principles. They contested that rational discourse grounded in open, free exchange is the hallmark of the academy. They also responded that reason and emotion are partners in the enterprise of learning and that to dismiss the latter and the impact events have on the latter was a form of oppression. They further contended that ideas themselves could be violent and that violence was not tolerated or in the interest of learning.
Patton had to struggle with these competing camps. Beyond coming to terms with dueling principles, Patton had to confront those in the faculty who believed that the community at the institution was the highest principle (“Old Middlebury”), as well as those in the faculty who espoused the idea that freedom of speech was important enough to hold students accountable who disrupted it. She chose to find the high ground in the middle of the two positions, affirming the merits of both. Patton argued that the two principles were not mutually exclusive but symbiotic: an inclusive environment needs free speech and free speech needs an inclusive environment.

**Framing by multiple groups.** Groups on campus beyond leadership framed what was going on. The president in each case had to make sense of the different forms of framing, decide how to frame their own take on the events in light of others’ thinking, and reframe the narrative if necessary. They did not have an opportunity to simply make sense and give sense to the campus, but had to react to constantly changing and competing understandings of the issue at hand. At Alma and Middlebury, for example, the faculty and students framed their perspectives in writing. One-quarter of the Alma faculty framed the issue to reflect that Carson and his views did not belong at Alma. They did this after Abernathy decided to retain Carson’s invitation, a decision they were specifically critical of. At Middlebury, the framing came from both camps. A group of students framed the issue that speech can be violent and their emotional response to this should be given equal weight to free speech and reason. A faculty voice framed it otherwise, as discussed above. Beyond these two groups, the faculty themselves split into Old Middlebury versus New Middlebury and framed the issue around whether community was the coin of the realm versus this purely rational notion of free and open
speech. Patton’s own leadership team was torn. She found a way to establish a lonely middle ground using key points of the framing of all groups.

Holtschneider at DePaul made the mistake of framing from the distance of France, only to encounter a campus community that framed the incident differently. The campus communicated this to him in multiple open forums and meetings with campus groups. Once confronted with how his community framed the Yiannopoulos event, which it had experienced the reality of, Holtschneider changed his framing to one of community first.

Dillard students had the Duke visit framed for them. Groups from outside campus, such as Take ’Em Down NOLA, told the students that it was a travesty that a former Klan leader would speak on their campus, even to an empty auditorium. Students from other campuses did the same. They arrived for the event, participated in the violent disruptions on campus for their “social media moment,” as Kimbrough described it, and left.

**Personal backgrounds.** Leaders’ personal backgrounds or contexts helped to shape their understanding of events. Three of the four leaders in these cases reflected on their backgrounds as influential to their response. Patton was the most direct. She spoke of her childhood experience as a foundation in free speech and verbal challenge. She described a childhood household in which good argument was held in high esteem. In addition, she was open about being bullied in junior high. This experience gave her the armor under which she could protect herself and carry on her responsibilities when everyone around her was angry. As she put it, she could retreat to “sixth grade” and know that she could persevere.
Kimbrough knew that he and his predecessors at Dillard had been bringing controversial speakers to campus for years. He knew that he had done this not only at Dillard but also at his previous presidency at Philander Smith. He believed strongly that this experience was needed by both schools to challenge the status quo.

Abernathy’s background and worldview was that of an English professor. He saw himself as a member of the faculty who happened to be president. This view shaped his approach to remain in the background on the dispute once he had made his statement and decided not to disinvite Carson. He did not vigorously challenge his faculty. In fact, Abernathy’s first instinct was the same as theirs: disinviting Carson was antithetical to the mission of Alma.

It is worth noting that Holtschneider at DePaul did not dwell on his personal background as a Catholic priest as a distinctive part of his response. However, it should be noted that he was aware of the powerful symbolism that his presence on campus made, particularly as he wore the garb of a priest. In addition, Holtschnieder had been brought into challenging leadership positions at Niagara University and then at DePaul. He downplayed the importance of the roles he had occupied at both in light of his background. He likened being a Vincentian priest at Vincentian institutions to being a family member in the family business. He posited in a self-deprecating way that his promotions were based on relationships more than skills.

**Emotion factoring into the problem and the response.** The conflict engendered by these events was deeply emotional not simply rational. All four speakers generated an emotional reaction, and all four presidents had to confront that emotion in some manner.
That response had to take into account and validate the emotion. For example, none of the presidents allowed the response to be limited to an application of policy alone.

At Middlebury, the students were explicit about the importance of emotion. They argued that their emotional response to the threat of Murray’s ideas was just as valid as a rational response. They considered a wholly rational approach to the conflict oppressive. Patton, in turn, responded emotionally as well as rationally. She noted that she was not afraid to let community members see her cry, nor was she unwilling to acknowledge the power of the emotional response of the campus. She distilled that response to a sense of “belonging,” which she considered critically important for every Middlebury student.

Holtschneider, from the distance of Normandy, France, responded with reason tinged with the emotion of the Normandy battlefield cemetery. He learned, however, that he applied the wrong emotion for the situation. He needed to return to campus to understand how the event was perceived at DePaul. He addressed, further, the raw campus emotion at the later open forums. He validated that response by his willingness to consider the impact on the DePaul community when vetting speakers. The purely rational response would be to say that all speech is open and that the remedy is more speech. At DePaul, by contrast, leaders balanced the response they felt with the logical response of their actions.

Kimbrough and Abernathy did not engage the raw emotions of their campus in their formal response. Both took a more rational approach, emphasizing the importance of free speech. Kimbrough bolstered his response with the added argument that Duke’s appearance was covered by a contract. This was in contrast to his first reaction, which was to argue that the polling was rigged. Abernathy used the argument that “disinviting”
Carson was not what Alma would do. Both grounded their positions on reason. That is not to say that neither president ignored the power of an emotional response. Kimbrough appealed to emotions the day after the event when he asked the assembly to find the protestors and rioters from the night before. He pointed out that they were not present. The only people who had gathered together were the members of the Dillard community and that they, not the agitators that put them on the news, would be the group who cared for their own well-being.

Choosing the communication medium. Leaders made a communication choice—face-to-face, written, or social media—to reach their audiences. Holtschneider was clear about this choice. He indicated that he used email when he wanted the whole campus to know what he was thinking. He said that this communication device brought his message to the “quiet middle” who did not want to get involved but who wanted to be informed. He used face-to-face communication when it was important to be seen speaking and listening. This method had a symbolic effect beyond simply conveying the message.

Kimbrough is known for his effective use of social media. He used it in the lead-up to the Duke appearance to try and influence the perspective of students. He wanted them to understand why the appearance of Duke on their campus, and the predicted angry reaction, was part of a larger game to attract attention to a failing campaign. His understanding of social media allowed him to frame the motives of the protesters too. He told his community that they were not interested in Dillard but wanted only a “social media moment.”
When it counted, and Kimbrough wanted to convey that he was present among the community, he stood before the school and spoke to them face-to-face. He made a point of emphasizing too that at a school the size of Dillard, people spoke to one another. At Dillard, anonymous threats via social media do not work. He noted that when unmasked, those making demands under the guise of social media were people who had shared meals at his house or asked for the favor of sports tickets from the president.

Though Patton held a town hall meeting, she and Abernathy communicated their most important messages in writing. Patton was aware that it was important to be present and to continue working among the campus community. Her main messages were in writing however, either in open letters or in opinion pieces. Abernathy did not engage in person.

**What the Leadership Did**

**Being present and visible.** The leader’s presence and visibility are vital tools that help them understand and address the situation. Holtschneider was not present in Chicago when Yiannopoulos arrived. That made all the difference when it came to his initial misunderstanding of the event’s impact. When he returned, he realized that his visibility was necessary to lead and reconcile the community. Not only did he stand center stage at three angry open forums, he made sure that he was seen repeating to each constituency what the other had said. He conveyed the idea, thereby, that he was listening. Further, he emphasized his presence by how he was seen: in the clerical garb of a Catholic priest. Like Holtschneider, Kimbrough was not present for David Duke’s appearance on the Dillard campus. He used strategic visibility the next day, however: Kimbrough took the stage and addressed the Dillard community after it was disturbed by rioting protesters. He
made sure to emphasize his presence and that of his team within the Dillard community that day. He contrasted this by pointing out that the protestors were not present and had left Dillard and its members to pick up the pieces.

At Middlebury, Patton was present and remained present. She was present at ground zero of the Murray controversy. She introduced him in Wilson Hall. She remained present in that hall when the talk was aborted, then led the group of students in an impromptu discussion of the event. She remained front and center on her campus. She made sure that people saw her working and continuing to work. She engaged with alumni, students, and donors as each processed the event and the impact of the controversy.

Abernathy at Alma was present but not as visible as the other presidents. He relied on his written statement as his only response to the Carson dispute and redirected any questions back to that statement. The controversy was not as great as that of the other case studies, which may have allowed Abernathy to rely on a single, written response. In addition to his personal distance, he was able to use his leadership as more of a front line. For example, Selmon organized the essay contest that followed the Carson appearance and allowed students to express opinion on the event.

**Timing and presidential tenure.** All four presidents confronted the reality that their job was on the line, but the differences in where they were on the timeline of their tenure as president shaped their response. For example, Holtschneider was aware that presidencies were lost over the handling or mishandling of these events. More significantly, he held back a secret. He knew he was resigning, but the announcement would not be made for another two weeks. With one year left on his tenure as president,
Holtschneider wanted the impact of Yiannopoulos addressed within that year. The initiatives begun by his team, therefore, did not have end dates that stretched beyond the last day of his presidency.

Abernathy was in a different boat. He was not leaving Alma and desired no other job. He indicated that he was willing to stand or fall based on his decision in the Carson matter. However, he did not aspire to or want any other position. In fact, he had authored an article on the damage to colleges and universities when presidencies were treated as if they had expiration dates. Kimbrough had experience as a president. Dillard was his second stint in the role. He too confronted the reality that his presidency was on the line, and he did so directly with his wife and his board.

Patton was a new president. She had just finished the honeymoon year of her first presidency. She thought the successes of that first year should have been a warning sign to her that it could not last. Taking a position on the controversy, any position, she understood to be risky. As she put it, she needed to find the space where she could “stand with integrity.” If standing in that space meant losing her job, she was willing to accept that consequence. Despite the stress and controversy surrounding the Middlebury incident, Patton was not overtly focused on losing her job.

**Collective assistance: The task force.** Leaders at all four institutions relied on some form of group to help address the controversy, whether an ad hoc task force or existing representative body. The use of these groups occurred primarily in the aftermath of the controversy with the exception of Alma. It assembled its committee voice asset in advance of Carson.
Alma used an existing committee in a key function. Abernathy relied on the Co-Curricular Committee to determine whether the invitation to Carson should be revoked. This committee had invited Carson in the first place. Abernathy believed that the committee had an important say in how the event was to be handled. When the committee said that Carson should not be disinvited, Abernathy followed its suggestion.

Middlebury created a task force to define the relationship between free speech and diversity for the twenty-first-century university. DePaul too engaged with a new task force when a coalition of African American organizations banded together to demand reforms in campus policy and practice. Holtschneider met with this group and engaged the faculty senate to review the speaker policy; he also used his existing President’s Diversity Council to act as a steering committee for efforts being made across the ten colleges at DePaul.

Dillard did not rely on groups to the same extent as the other schools did. One organization with which Kimbrough had a strong relationship was student government. It was a student government leader to whom Kimbrough spoke on the day of the event and who told him to stay away from campus. Bullard also engaged the student government to decide before the Duke event whether former Klan leader should be allowed on campus. It said yes. In support of that decision, the group planned a counter-event called Brownies and Ballots at which it spoke to students about voting.

How to engage the community. Leaders need to face and address the community when the matter creeps beyond a controversy and toward a crisis. Different strategies were used to engage the community at the institutions in these studies. In three of the institutions, it was important that leaders did not try to downplay the problem or pretend
that it did not happen. At those schools, Dillard, DePaul and Middlebury, the use of face
to-face meetings was an important factor in the response. Kimbrough met with the
campus community the day after the Duke visits and the rioting protestors. Holtschneider
addressed his community in three open forums, one with faculty, one with staff, and one
with students. Patton too faced her community in a town hall and in an address to the
faculty. In each case, the leader being present and speaking directly to, and hearing from,
the community was deemed critical. Only Abernathy chose not to take this approach.
Given that the situation at Alma did not escalate to violence, Abernathy scaled his
approach to the needs of the situation. Had the situation been different, the community
likely would have demanded that its leader be physically present.

**Stress and coping.** The personal stress on leaders in these situations required
specific coping mechanisms. Patton provides the best example of this. She was candid
about the difficulty of her experience and the ways that she managed to respond. She
found work to be a good foil to the stress. If she had twenty tasks to accomplish, she
would dive into those efforts rather than wallow in stress. Additionally, as has been
mentioned before, she had the personal experience of being bullied in grade school. She
used that experience to know that she could withstand an environment where everyone
was mad at her. Knowing that she had once survived a situation like this convinced her
that she possessed the strength to endure it again, particularly as she navigated the
difficult middle between the polarized camps.

Zdziarski at DePaul, the vice president for student affairs, tried to call upon his
experience handling the bonfire collapse at Texas A&M. He had been part of the student
affairs staff at A&M and been centrally involved in the campus response and recovery
from that tragic event where twelve people died. His experience there proved ineffective at preparing him for DePaul. He found DePaul far more difficult. The community at A&M rallied around the problem and each other. At DePaul, by contrast, the community was fractured. The difficulty of this fractured environment made him consider whether DePaul was the right place for him.

Kimbrough and Abernathy both considered whether their jobs would survive the event. They handled the stress by acknowledging that if they were to lose their jobs, they were confident that they had made a decision (in both cases to allow the speaker to proceed) with which they were comfortable.

**Working with stakeholders.** Leaders had to work with different stakeholders, students, alumni, media, community, faculty, and faculty coalitions to address the problems generated by these events. Patton managed all of these groups. She managed students by helping them process the events of the Murray protest the night of the event and by authorizing discipline months later as the matter of student misconduct was adjudicated. She had to confront angry alumni who took advantage of events at her home to vent their anger. She balanced the interests of faculty who were vocal on both sides of the divide between the supremacy of free speech and inclusivity. And she addressed the larger community with her nationally published opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Holtschneider conducted open forums with faculty, students, and staff. A small group of faculty made him an offer to resolve the controversy expressed at the open forum. Invited to a private meeting following the forum, they offered to solve his problems in exchange for his approval of some of their pocket wishes. He is distinct from
the other leaders in that he did not address the broader community beyond DePaul. He focused on his internal stakeholders.

Kimbrough, Abernathy, and their teams fielded the opinions of alumni who either supported the decisions made by the institutions or objected to them. For Alma, in particular, the initial push against the Carson visit was spurred by alumni complaints.

Bullard at Dillard noted that the surrounding neighborhood of Gentilly was an important constituent. He thought that the Duke visit would be an important event for Gentilly. In contrast, it was a non-event. He noted pointedly that Dillard was receiving complaints from New York and California but that Gentilly was silent. He considered that silence telling given that the neighborhood residents were willing to speak up when something was amiss at Dillard.

**Practice and preparation: Important but not enough.** Practice and preparation for what can happen during a free speech controversy are important, but they may not be enough. Holtschneider and his team thought they had the Yiannopoulos visit covered. They had vetted him and his other appearances on campus (up to that time). They had secured additional security for the event. They knew Yiannopoulos was controversial, but they believed that they could handle the difficulty of a single event and then follow up and address any concerns about the visit. They were not prepared for the violence and anger that occurred before, during, and after the event, nor could they have anticipated how to deal with the level of stress that it caused the DePaul community.

Patton and her team knew that Murray was going to be controversial. They had planned an alternative space for Murray and Allison Stanger from the political science department to have their talk if the planned event was disrupted. That planning proved
effective. They did not plan, nor could they have anticipated, that their quiet New England campus would be the target of trained disruptors. In preparing for Murray, as prudent as it was, they could not have anticipated that the night would end in violence and injury. Nor could they have prepared for the long healing process necessary to understand where the Middlebury community stood in the free speech landscape.

Dillard planned for Duke as well, though in the limited span of two days. He was to enter and exit via a back entrance. Extra security was on hand. The hall where the debate was to take place was empty, and the news media had a room with a live feed to report on the debate to the public. Bullard was content that they had the situation secured with these precautions. Then he noticed the crowd pounding on the glass doors and throwing water bottles. Dillard’s preparations did not account for the activists and the students from other campuses, who descended upon their campus to protest. To effectively address that situation beforehand, Dillard would have needed a police presence large enough to make the school appear as if it was under martial law.

In each of these cases, what the preparations did not take into account was the charged political context, which turned the events into opportunities to express political anger and frustration. Several leaders said that the events on their campus gave them a window into the polarized 2016 presidential election.

**Conclusion**

The comparison of the cases across subjects grouped within the two research questions provides insight into the similarities and differences among the leaders and the institutions. The leaders and their teams framed and understood the events in particular ways, particularly with an eye toward recognizing the distinct communities present on
each campus. In addition, leaders acted in ways that engaged those communities as events demanded. The next section will discuss implications from these events and the leadership responses.
CHAPTER 6 – DISCUSSION

This chapter builds upon the facts set forth in the case studies and analysis in the previous chapter. It begins with a discussion of the salient findings. It will include elements of the literature, which will help to explain the phenomena. Additionally, this chapter discusses the implications for presidents, senior leadership teams, and general counsels. The final section of this chapter will explore ideas for expanded research around these topics.

Salient Findings

The case studies discussed herein provide a number of leadership lessons within the context of responding to a free speech incident. The more prominent and prevalent examples follow.

The Impact of the 2016 Election

While recent collegiate free speech controversies are often framed as a campus issue, the reality in this study is that the external context greatly shaped the magnitude of each controversy, the individuals involved, the types of responses generated, and the level of attention given to each incident. First and foremost, the presidential election of 2016 created the tension that shaped the controversies surrounding the highlighted speakers highlighted. In all four case studies, the disturbances on the campus were linked, in some way, to the election. At Alma, Ben Carson received attention because he was preparing to enter the Republican primary as a candidate for president. Though some of his opinions had been stated years earlier, many others were being highlighted in interviews with him and brought to wider attention due to the spotlight of the election campaign. Dillard’s controversy was spawned by a Louisiana senate election debate,
which brought David Duke to campus. Though Milo Yiannopoulos was not a political
candidate himself, his brand of polarizing political rhetoric found a welcome audience
among the clashing ideologies during the 2016 campaign; many of those who came to the
DePaul campus that day and engaged in the rioting afterward were wearing the signature
political hat of the Trump campaign emblazoned with the words “Make American Great
Again.” Middlebury faced a slightly different situation with Charles Murray, who
happened to be the only speaker to arrive on a campus after Trump was sworn in. Laurie
Patton believed that the actions at Middlebury stemmed from the students’ need to
express something about the election.

The national elections generated not only tension but also attention. The spotlight
on issues, coupled with the anxiety mentioned above, attracted outside groups to
campuses. In three of the four cases, such outside groups generated the core disturbance
that put these events on the news. At DePaul, the conservatives were drawn to the diverse
campus to support Milo Yiannopoulos and mock the campus climate. At Dillard and
Middlebury, respectively, groups opposing conservatives descended on campus to
generate the protests of Duke and Murray. At each institution, leaders have considered
ways to regulate the appearance of outside groups as one method to limit the risk posed
by a controversial speaker.

One author has argued that the notion of free speech changed due to the Trump-
generated political environment (Ben-Porath, 2017). Jay Parini experienced this change at
Middlebury. As a well-known liberal, he was “weaponized,” using his own term, by the
right in order to denounce the left’s intolerance of conservative ideas. Free speech, which
historically had been used to elevate the voice of the marginalized, was now being
asserted by those with privilege. This juxtaposition formed the basis for much of the controversy encountered on the campuses studied herein.

What Students Value

The twist on speech rights mentioned above requires leaders to understand what today’s students value. Chemerinsky and Gillman (2017) argue that the modern student takes speech rights for granted, replacing them with a perceived need for limited expression. They assert that the new generation sees the need to protect people from speech, no longer viewing freedom of speech as a protection of the marginalized. This view is reflected further in polls from the Knight Foundation and the American Council on Education which reveal that diversity and inclusivity are higher priorities than free speech for both students and presidents (Knight Foundation 2018), (Espinosa et al. 2018).

The modern student did not grow up on the rhyme that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.” In fact, as asserted by the students at Middlebury, words can be violent. This view was not shared by a group of Middlebury faculty who championed free speech. Other faculty members agreed with the students. Understanding that students feel that words may make them unsafe is critical to navigating the modern campus populated with modern students. Thus, the cases reveal what might be considered a generational difference between “liberal” faculty and “liberal” students. Both might claim the same moniker, but groups adhering to similar values might still have opposite perspectives on the role of free speech on campus.
The Need for Both Immediate Leadership and Leadership That Evolves

In free speech incidents, leadership needs to appear quickly and impose itself, but not too quickly. Mitroff (2001), in advice to presidents facing crises, points out that a president needs to respond to the emotional needs of a community first. The presidents in the case studies who experienced the greatest disruptions at their campuses—those at Dillard, DePaul, and Middlebury—did just that. Each faced their community and made sure that their leadership was visible. As Dennis Holtschneider cautioned, a president must not underestimate the symbolic power of the office when faced with a situation such as that at DePaul.

What did not occur quickly, however, was the framing of issues. In all four cases, the president’s reaction to the situation needed time to develop. DePaul faced a more acute problem because Holtschneider distributed a campus-wide statement first, then he arrived on campus to learn of and address the emotional needs of the community. In his case, he needed to issue a counterstatement to his first and apologize for initially getting it wrong. Patton at Middlebury needed time to realize that her students were caught up in the charged environment of a post-Trump election. She had argued for “rhetorical resilience” from her students in her first year, and she needed to tend to both those who agreed with that approach and those for whom speakers like Murray represented violence. At Alma and Dillard, Jeff Abernathy and Walter Kimbrough reacted one way to their speakers at first only to land on the notion that free speech and open access to controversial ideas is fundamental to what happens at their liberal arts campuses.

Heifetz (1994) considers the ability to frame an issue as one of the strategic assets of leadership. All four presidents used this ability to navigate the free speech incident
they encountered. The cases illustrate a nuanced risk involved in framing—that is, the leaders can get it wrong. Nor does this ability anticipate that the framing may change or evolve with the leader’s understanding. By using the ability to frame an issue, all four leaders directed the attention of the community to what was happening and how to view the adaptive problem.

**Institutional Context Matters**

If the external environment matters in terms of magnifying and complicating a controversy, understanding the internal campus environment matters in crafting an acceptable campus-specific response. To be informed and ready to handle a challenge such as those presented in these cases, a leader needs to understand or be ready to engage the values, emotions, mission, history, and culture of the institution she or he is leading. This knowledge is imperative to crafting a response, dealing with constituents, and, if needed, strategically exercising leverage. The institutional context matters. Nelson (2000) confirms this by arguing that a president needs to understand the core values of an institutional community. Kimbrough at Dillard exemplifies this concept well. His first reaction to Duke was to suspect that the polling that allowed him to participate was rigged. As he thought more about the values that Dillard represented and that he wanted to instill in its students, however, he realized that bringing controversial speakers, ideas, and people to campus was in the Dillard DNA. Understanding this allowed him to move ahead and reframe the incident not as a contractual issue but as an educational opportunity. He also knew that this situation would come with institutional downsides. Not everyone would be able to understand a rationale that would justify a former leader of the Klan setting foot on the campus of an HBCU, much less speaking there. However,
Dillard’s history was important for Kimbrough. The first president of Dillard initiated a speaker series, and Kimbrough carried that tradition forward with his own, Brain Food. Upon realizing that Dillard had hosted Duke before, for example, Kimbrough was able to better understand that Dillard had a history of controversial speakers, particularly this speaker.

Holtschneider realized that the DePaul community needed to close ranks around its diverse members to make those who felt marginalized feel welcome and at home. The focus of DePaul’s mission statement from its founding was on students of diverse backgrounds. When Holtschneider considered what was at the core of the DePaul mission, he landed on the idea that members of the community and their sense of belonging and home were paramount. As a consequence, he decided to limit speech that might impinge on that community. He and DePaul drew the ire of groups such as FIRE that monitor free speech. FIRE was not Holtschneider’s core focus, however. He spoke to the constituencies on his campus, listened to their concerns, understood DePaul’s mission to serve these diverse constituents, and decided that their interests were at the heart of DePaul’s community and its needs.

Patton had a sense of Middlebury’s values from her first year, though that knowledge matured as she engaged with the Murray controversy. She first thought that Middlebury was the University of Chicago in the mountains and had a similar commitment to free speech. She learned however that Middlebury valued both free speech and community. From her earliest comments, and from the stage as she introduced Murray the night of his talk, she emphasized that belonging was important. She believed that Middlebury stood for an intellectual commitment to an engagement
with difficult ideas in a context that explored the ways that certain groups who did not have full participation in those ideas were marginalized by them. For Patton, the blend of interests was summed up in her thought that free speech was the right and inclusivity was the responsibility.

Patton believed that her position in the middle was a place where she could stand with integrity. She knew the community, and she knew that it, and her understanding of it, required a position that she termed “both/and.” Middlebury’s reputation did not suffer based on Patton’s pursuit of a middle ground. In fact, the opposite occurred. Patton heard from students around the globe that Middlebury was a place where “stuff went down.” She heard from others that they came to visit because they wanted to see the place that was such a champion of free speech. She also considered objective measures of the school’s success. Throughout the spring of the Murray visit, not a single student withdrew. She checked admissions data for the class applying to Middlebury for the following year. Applications were up, in fact the by the largest margin ever, the following year. Campus visits were up. Applications from students of color were up. Middlebury’s peer ranking went up. Patton noted that whenever she would encounter frustrated alumni, embarrassed that their school was being lampooned in the news, she would recognize their frustration but equip them with the knowledge that by all traditional measures, the reputation of the school had gone up.

The president’s role to frame and understand the fundamental nature and values of an institution is critical in a “loosely coupled” university system. Weick (1976) defined loosely coupled systems as those in which the different elements are responsive to one another but maintain an essentially separate nature. In the absence of a tight connection
among the separate components of such a system, they become vulnerable to
encroachment by unifying ideas or myths to help knit together those units. The ideas or
myths could be created by any number of stakeholder groups. Schein (2004) pointed out
that into this void between loosely coupled units seeps notions of mission, community,
values, and culture, all of which were understood differently by different constituents.
Community members use myths to bridge the divide between these loosely coupled
elements. Leaders need to understand these myths, use them, mold them, and frame them
in such a way that connects otherwise unconnected parts of the campus. In the cases
studied, the leaders used this strategy to rally their institutions around what was
important. In this sense, the leaders used existing myths and framed new ideas based on
how they framed the institution and the issues. At Dillard and Alma for example, the
leaders rallied their communities around the idea that as liberal arts institutions, they need
to uphold free speech and confront difficult ideas. Both campuses already had a notion of
themselves as champions of the liberal arts, and Dillard had the added reputation as a
place where difficult speakers appear. At DePaul, Holtschneider framed the core values
around community. Patton found a place in the middle. She believed that Middlebury
could be both open to controversial ideas and still committed to awareness of the issues
that marginalize members of the community. In this sense, she knitted existing myths
together and framed them as the joint goals of a sophisticated twenty-first-century liberal
arts college. This was precisely the framing she offered to the task force following the
Murray event.
Emotion and/or Reason

Leaders facing a free speech controversy need to use both their head and their heart. Problems faced by leaders and the necessary responses may require empathetic listening followed by analytic study and the drafting of policy. A leader may need to accompany students who are experiencing pain, discomfort, or marginalization due to ideas that strike at the core of their belonging to a community. For example, opponents of Murray attribute beliefs, such as the idea that African American students who are struggling at Middlebury do not belong there, to him. Though a statistical response to such an assertion may be helpful at some point, the presence, listening ear, and understanding of a leader is critical and needs to come first.

The cases studied herein support the conclusion that a leader needs to address the emotion first. The campuses of DePaul, Dillard, and Middlebury were not looking for an exacting application of speaker policies. Nor were they looking for a treatise on free speech and the need to counter offensive speech with more speech. The communities needed a leader to address their emotional needs. Holtschneider did this by sitting through three intense open forums where he absorbed the anger of the community about being subjected to the hate of the Yiannopoulos event and those who arrived on campus to attend it. The campus was still healing from the Black Lives Matter movement and its view of the institutional response to it. Yiannopoulos and his supporters only increased the lingering anger.

The students at Middlebury addressed this concern directly. They argued that rational thinking was oppressive in these circumstances and that the school needed to validate the emotional response of students, faculty, and staff to events like the Murray
visit. By contrast, consider the response of Alma. Abernathy did not reply with emotion, at least publicly. Though he was initially outraged by Carson’s views and wanted to disinvite the speaker, he stepped back from that position to review the case rationally. He and his provost Michael Selmon crafted a statement that spoke to the rational notion that a school such as Alma does not disinvite speakers with whom it disagrees. In fact, to engage the community on the topic, Alma developed an essay contest for Honors Day to reflect on whether inviting Carson was the right idea. This approach, like Abernathy’s statement, was rationally based. Fortunately for Abernathy, the emotional response to Carson at Alma was mild compared to that at the other institutions. Had there been more controversy, such as a protest or riot at the event itself, Abernathy would have had to address that reaction with a more passionate response, even if he remained committed to open and free dialogue in the end.

The importance of addressing the emotional needs of a community reveals a point about policy. The institutional tendency is to focus on policy change and implementation in response to events like those studied in these cases. Speaker policies will be tightened. Protocols around police response and incident management will be honed based on the experience of what went wrong. However, in these moments, communities do not need immediate policies. They need leaders who are visible and present, who feel at that moment what their constituents are feeling. The policy discussions can progress concurrently but as part of a package of remedies.
Controversy Can Be Negative and Positive

Presidents face a litany of concerns and risks related to free speech incidents. First is the safety and security of the students, staff, and administrators. Second is the threat to academic and institutional values. Third is reputational risk.

Safety cannot be overlooked. At Dillard, police had to use pepper spray to quell rioting protestors. The president was advised against returning to campus that evening because his team was worried that he would not be safe. His own team members were not sure if they were safe that evening. DePaul faced a similarly dangerous situation. The Chicago police were called in to stop what had become a violent confrontation between disappointed attendees of the Yiannopoulos talk and students who were angry that the talk happened at all. At Middlebury, Allison Stanger was injured trying to protect Murray, who was himself fearful that the crowd would knock him to the ground.

Academic and institutional values can be threatened as well. Carson made disparaging remarks about homosexuals and their rights before arriving on the Alma campus, where the values of the institution and the president’s efforts toward diversity stood in sharp contrast Carson’s views. Dillard was a striking example. As an institution founded to educate African Americans, it was inviting a former leader of the Klan to its campus. Murray threatened the rights of African Americans by suggesting they were not smart enough for Middlebury, which was in direct contravention of Patton’s efforts to emphasize belonging.

Leaders also must focus on threats to reputation, especially given the twenty-four-hour news cycle and the ubiquity of social media. This is exacerbated in a tuition-dependent competitive environment. Reputational risk, however, may not be as
substantial a concern as some believe. Patton warned other presidents not to run down the “rabbit hole” of worry about reputational risk. She indicated that advisors caution about reputational risk around every turn. The consequence of heeding this advice is that a leader will be afraid to make a decision or feel compelled to go against instinct and/or institutional history and culture and make the wrong decision. In her case, reputation was threatened by the image of Middlebury as a school full of leftists who could not handle a conservative’s presence on their grounds. Patton announced, famously, in her introduction of Murray that Middlebury was a left-leaning place. In fact, a meme circulated on the internet of her saying this. And yet, her reputation was threatened by the need to discipline seventy-four students for disrupting the event. For this action, Patton faced reputational stigma from the left, which now viewed Middlebury as a place where students were disciplined for exercising their right to protest a speaker they viewed as racist, anti-homosexual, and supportive of eugenics. Faced with these competing choruses, Patton suggested that leaders should find a place where they can “stand with integrity” and make decisions based on what they feel is right and not on what will allow them to avoid reputational loss. This notion is supported by the writing of Fisher and Koch (1996) who suggest that in a time of crisis, a strong, visionary leader is needed who is not afraid of taking risks. By contrast, those authors believe that collegial leaders are ineffective at these times (Fisher & Koch, 1996). Patton’s experience at Middlebury was, once again, in the middle. She took risks while also remaining collegial, with resulting reputational gain.
Personal Background and Identity of the Leader

Just as free speech incidents reflect both the external and the specific campus context, the response of leaders is contextualized also. In these studies, the most meaningful element of context could be found in the leaders’ personal background and identity. Both played a prominent role in the framing and response of the leader to the incident. Consider Holtschneider at DePaul. Not only was he aware of the importance of the symbolic role of the leader in times of stress, he was also aware that he was a uniquely symbolic leader. As a Catholic priest, Holtschneider was conspicuous on the Catholic campus of DePaul. At a time when it was important to be present and seen on campus, Holtschneider stood out. His experience as a Vincentian priest at a Vincentian school is worth mention as well. Holtschneider downplayed his importance at DePaul and his ascension at a young age to the presidency there. He claims that he is like a family member in the family business because the Vincentian order elevates Vincentian priests to roles they may not have earned. By contrast, Holtschneider had come from Niagara University prior to his appointment at DePaul, where he led a significant overhaul of the school’s finances. Though it may be argued that Niagara, another Vincentian institution, only placed Holtschneider in the role because he was a “family member,” his experience there and the results he oversaw indicated that he was effective in his role, regardless of how he had come to it.

Not only is the background and identity of the president important, but it is required of the key leadership team as well. The responses to these incidents are a team effort. The leaders need to understand the institution and have the self-knowledge to make the right decisions. The leadership team needs to possess similar insight. The team
needs to work in concert with the president in roles that neither have rehearsed to function effectively. For example, Gene Zdziarski relayed the initial report of the Yiannopoulos incident to Holtschneider. Though he may have reported the facts that he knew at the time, the report lacked a sense of the emotion on the campus. The first letter from Holtschneider, for which he had to apologize later, reflected that lack of information.

Zdziarski was no stranger to these incidents. He brought a unique personal background and perspective to his work. He has been on the student affairs staff at Texas A&M when a bonfire collapsed as it was being assembled for an annual student tradition. Twelve people died. Not only had Zdziarski experienced the horror of this tragedy from within the student affairs world, he had written his doctoral dissertation on crisis management. With this background, he believed that he knew how to deal tough situations, as the incident at A&M was far worse than the Yiannopoulos visit to DePaul. But Zdziarski discovered that the incident at DePaul was actually more difficult for him. Despite Zdziarski’s personal background, the campus at DePaul was torn apart as it fought among itself. Three years after the event, he was finally able to begin looking forward again.

The story of Patton at Middlebury, with her background and identity, had two distinct elements. First, she understood herself one way—that is her identity. Second, as a woman, she was perceived in a certain way by her community.

Patton’s personal background and identity were significant in two respects. First, her childhood played an important role in her identity and response in two ways. First, she came to Middlebury formed by a foundation of verbal challenge and excellence. She
described her family as verbally competitive and one that championed good argument. Her education took her to the University of Chicago for her PhD. The university is famous for its stand on free speech and lack of safe spaces.

Second, Patton’s childhood played a role in her identity and response. She described being bullied in junior high. Though terrible, the experience provided her with resilience. She knew that she could enter a hostile environment and survive. When the emails came flooding in following Murray’s visit, she described her response as retreating to sixth grade, meaning that she could plow through what needed to be done because she had done it before.

Being a woman president represents the second significant part of Patton’s personal experience and important aspect of how her community reacted to her. Fisher and Koch (1996) mention that collegial leaders do not survive in a crisis. She noted that she was able to stand with both sides of her community. She did this in part because she perceived her role as both teacher in chief and mediator in chief. This dual role reflects the two aspects of her identity. She thought of herself as an academic who was interested in understanding both sides of a situation. The campus needed her to act as the president, though. In that role, she had to be the mediator in chief to hold the various communities together. Beyond that, as a woman president, she sensed an expectation from the campus that she would provide a consoling role to the community. She believed that the campus expected their new woman leader to be a grand conciliator. As she put it, many in the community wanted a “mommy.” She noted that this would not have been expected from her male predecessors. Further, community members and members of her own team wanted to know if she could be “emotionally authentic”—they wanted to know
if she could cry. Patton took a humorous view on this notion by wondering why there was so much fascination in the “hydrology” of her response.

The Ways That Leaders Communicate

Leaders used several different means to communicate to their communities and frame the issues for them. Heifetz (1994) notes that leaders must exhibit the ability to frame issues, an important strategic asset. The leaders in the case studies utilized this asset, but in different venues. Important among the venues used to frame issues and communicate, in three of the four cases, was the open forum or town hall. The open forum/town hall played an important role to allow leaders to gather information, to provide an opportunity for healing, and to frame collectively for the community what was important and what was happening. At Dillard, the open forum came the day after the riotous visit from Duke. Kimbrough addressed his community directly and took their questions. He wanted to emphasize in that setting that he was physically present. Further, he wanted the community to know that his team was there. He emphasized that the agitators and rioters from the night before were not present. He challenged the community to find them. He asked if they had called to check on the Dillard students to see how they were doing that day. In that moment, he brought the Dillard community back together around the idea that they were a small community that talks to one another. As he put it in response to the anonymous demands he received, “I don’t do demands. We are too small for that.” Kimbrough wanted his community to know that it was small, closely knit, together in good times and bad, and that they could talk to one another as they were doing that morning. He used the open forum to solidify that point.
Abernathy at Alma, who framed the issues similarly to Kimbrough, did not use the open forum. He communicated via his written statement alone, and had personal meetings with individual community members. A notable difference at Alma was that there was a lack of violence, protest, and agitation. That mix at the other institutions created a need to capture and hold the intensity of the stress and provide a live, real-time focal point for the community to allow them to bring and express their frustrations. Notably different at Alma as well was the sequence of the controversy. At Alma, the controversy preceded the event and died down both during the event and afterward. At the other three, the controversy continued in one form or another either at the event itself (Dillard) or for years hence (DePaul and Middlebury).

That distinction was notable at DePaul. Holtschneider used the open forum to absorb community anger. He scheduled three such events, one each with the faculty, students, and staff. He sat in the middle of the stage and allowed each audience to vent. He noted that he used these opportunities to repeat back to the assembled audience what he was hearing, both from them and from the other groups he had spoken to, so that everyone could sense that he was listening. These open forums, along with a host of campus listening sessions with smaller groups, provided the basis for his change of heart, his second letter to the community, and his apology for getting his response wrong in the first place. This was a powerful moment for him: he did not often say at DePaul that he was wrong.

Patton used a town hall event as well. At hers, like Holtschneider, she absorbed anger and frustration from the Middlebury community. She thought that the experience was positive, however. Others thought it was awful. Trustees, for example, used it as an
illustration of why she may need some coaching on communications. Different at Middlebury however was the significance of the town hall. It was one of a menu of responses Patton used in the aftermath of the Murray incident. It was not of the same significance as the open forums at DePaul. Notably, there were three open forums at DePaul as opposed to a single forum at Middlebury, but the experience of those open sessions remains seared in the memory of DePaul’s leadership in a way that the town hall at Middlebury has not.

In the three cases where the town hall/open forum was used, the sessions represented a holding environment where stress could be contained and managed. Heifetz (1994) identifies the use of holding environments as one of the strategic assets that leaders can use to address an adaptive problem. The importance of the town hall/open forum as a holding environment is that this asset is not used as a way to eliminate or avoid stress. A holding environment manages stress so that its energy can be channeled into solving the problem while remaining at a level that allows the problem solving to occur.

In addition to the open forum/town hall, the other prominent means of reaching campus is the presidential letter. Alma, DePaul, and Middlebury used this approach. Abernathy only used this approach. He determined to send a letter setting forth his position that a speaker should not be disinvited because the community did not like the speaker’s views. Once he made that statement, he issued no more. If he were asked about an aspect of the Carson situation, he would refer back to his letter. When the faculty published an open letter against the Carson visit, Abernathy chose not to debate his faculty and referred back to his letter instead.
Holtschneider at DePaul was intentional about his use of email to communicate his thoughts to the entire community not once but twice. He acknowledged his desire to reach the “quiet middle,” which was interested in what was going on and wanted to understand why actions were taken but was unwilling to get involved. He used email to speak to this group.

Holtschneider’s use of email may have reached the intended audience, but his messages caused him trouble as well. He chose a campus-wide email as his response to the Yiannopoulos event upon first learning of it, doing so from Normandy, France. From that distance, he was not able to understand the emotional state of the campus in Chicago. He focused on free speech and the rights of Americans, which were preserved by the fighting and dying of young American soldiers buried in the cemeteries at Normandy. Though his response appealed to both reason and emotion, it was contrary to the advice that he should have attended to the emotional needs of the campus first (Mitroff, 2001). Further, the negative reaction Holtschneider received to his first letter stands as an example of how that advice may be sound.

After enduring the open forums and the anger of the DePaul community resulting from both the Yiannopoulos visit and his first communication, Holtschneider issued a second email. In it, Holtschneider apologized. He admitted that he was wrong and that he needed to put the needs of the community first.

Patton used convocation addresses, letters, and opinion pieces to get her point across. Unlike Abernathy, she continued to state her position and allowed it to evolve as she worked her way through the process of healing at Middlebury. The impact of and attention on the Murray incident at Middlebury reached a national audience, and Patton
used her communication tools to frame the event for campus, local, national, and international audiences.

**How Does Heifetz Help Understand the Findings?**

This study adopted a leadership framework to understand how leaders, and presidents in particular, react to free speech controversies. That framework by Heifetz (1994) outlined a series of strategic assets that may be used by leaders when responding to what he called an adaptive problem. Such problems do not have easy or obvious technical answers. Plowing a snow-covered street is a technical solution to a technical problem, for example. Healing a fractured community is an adaptive problem, particularly as the community can be divided into multiple and dueling camps, each clinging to the moral high ground and citing the university mission in their defense. These free speech incidents in the case studies were examples of adaptive problems.

One key element of the Heifetz (1994) framework is that the management of stress is key to addressing an adaptive problem. The Heifetz concept of the holding environment acknowledges how leaders should monitor and mitigate stress and its role in addressing the situation. Stress was an important and omnipresent part of each case study. Heifetz argues that leaders need to maintain a certain level of stress to keep the problem urgent while not allowing too much stress so that nothing can get done. Heifetz sees this holding environment as the means through which the positive energy of stress can be exploited while the negative side effects of stress can be minimized. But the focus on stress as an institutional issue fails to address its individual impact. All four leaders had to manage personal stress. Each president confronted the possibility that they would lose their job over the incident and their response to it. For Kimbrough and Abernathy, the
reality was front and center, as they openly discussed whether their job was at risk. The leaders who lead through an adaptive problem experience levels of stress that force them to confront whether or not they will keep their jobs. Facing that realization is significant to a president as he or she makes decisions in response to a free speech event. With job preservation removed from the list of presidential worries, a leader is free to take the stand for integrity, as Patton noted.

Another key component of the Heifetz (1994) framework is the ability of leaders to frame the situation. Leaders at all four institutions used their power to frame issues. It was not a power they wielded exclusively, however. The presidents framed issues in one way only to encounter a different type of framing from a campus constituency. Consider DePaul. Holtschneider’s first letter to the community was an attempt to frame the issue: “I know you’re upset, but free speech is an important issue, so try to see the bigger picture that young Americans before you have died for that right.” Upon hearing that the campus context was one of emotional turmoil, hurt, and anger over what transpired on the DePaul campus, Holtschneider had to reframe his position. Kimbrough needed to reframe as well. He thought the Duke visit could be explained away with distance. He argued that Dillard did not invite him but merely had a contract to rent the space where he would be debating, and those who attended were not Dillard’s responsibility. Upon encountering the fact that controversial speakers were part of the history and tradition of Dillard, including Duke himself in the 1970s, Kimbrough reframed. He framed the need to confront difficult ideas and the importance of that confrontation in the education of Dillard students as a core value of the institution. Patton had to do the same at Middlebury as she evaluated the reaction of her students and faculty to the violence of the
Murray visit. The implication is that leaders in these situations should not simply frame in a static, one-time fashion. Instead they have to frame, counterframe, and reframe based on the shifting dynamics on their campuses.

The power to choose the decision-making process is a Heifetz (1994) strategic asset, one manifested by the leadership in their response to these free speech incidents. This asset is related to the holding environment: by allowing certain processes to move forward, some of the bottled stress is released. DePaul and Middlebury used the power of the disciplinary process to this end. In both cases, students violated the code of conduct, and sanctions had to be applied. Both Holtschneider and Patton had to confront the reality that discipline was necessary despite assertions on both campuses that the students had not only acted appropriately but also, according to some, heroically. The use of this asset, in this way, proved to be a precarious decision. Both leaders knew that the decision to discipline would be poorly received by some and applauded by others. The only way that either president could successfully use this strategic asset would be to apply it in concert with multiple other responses to show their communities that they understood and listened to them. Both leaders made sure that their campuses knew that the sense of community was important to them. Had either chosen discipline alone, or in a vacuum, the asset would have elevated instead of released stress.

The Implications for Practice

The findings from these case studies offer a rich collection of implications for the higher education practitioner. In particular, the cases offer important lessons for presidents, leadership teams, and, in particular, the general counsel, who may be called in early to “resolve” an issue according to legal principles. Those implications follow.
Advice for Presidents

The findings of these cases are particularly pertinent for presidents. The following implications are organized according to the research questions. The first set of implications pertains to the ways that presidents should frame, articulate, and understand what is happening on their campus. The second group pertains to what presidents should do.

To understand an incident, and potentially plan for one, a president should keep a finger on the pulse of both the external environment and the internal campus values. The political context in which a president leads is important and filtered into each of these case studies as a driving force behind the events. The 2016 presidential election polarized American politics. The opposing sides found little common ground: one side was horrified at the prospect of a President Trump, and the other side thought that Hillary Clinton belonged in jail. Although easier to see in hindsight, a leader needs to have a sense of this polarization and the impact it may be having on campus. This strain from outside forces could result in reactions to events on campus that would not otherwise occur. The failure of a leader to anticipate this strain could leave a campus exposed to controversies such as those that occurred in these free speech incidents.

Related to understanding the political environment, presidents need to understand what is fundamental and essential to their institution and its community. If it is the idea of community or the idea that the campus is home, then the president needs to know this and determine whether it is threatened by the incident at hand. The president could get it wrong, or they may need to adjust and evolve with this understanding as events progress. Holtschneider got it wrong. He did not have a strong sense of where his community
stood, and how he framed what was fundamental to DePaul missed the mark. To his credit, he rectified that error and changed course.

Presidents must understand the importance of taking a position and framing it properly. This position becomes particularly important when a president is faced with what could be perceived as a lose/lose situation. Make one choice, and the president will anger conservatives. Make another choice, and the president will be perceived as an adherent to the right wing or, worse, as racist. Constituents will each want their own resolution, and not everyone will be happy. Patton still encounters alumni who are angry over the Middlebury response. Kimbrough does too.

As the president frames the understanding of the essence of the university, the president needs to act with integrity and confront the possibility that this position may come with a cost. The presidents in the case studies each felt that he or she reached an understanding of the true purpose and mission of their institution. Having reached that conclusion, each took this understanding as their guiding light. As such, the president could “stand with integrity,” to use Patton’s term, in the event that her or his job was sacrificed for taking that stand.

A president should act logically but also emotionally. The logical side responds to policy and procedure. The emotional side reflects how the campus is feeling. An incident can spark a necessary and important review of policy and procedure to address a controversy. Those policies and procedures, though, and their logical application do not address the campus’s critical need to have their emotional response understood and respected. If a president is going to understand and frame an event on the campus, the president needs to be able to plug into the emotion surrounding it. The students at
Middlebury, joined by some faculty members, explicitly made this point. They did not want to hear rational arguments about free speech. They were hurting and reeling from what they perceived to be a platform given to a racist on their campus. They wanted the president to recognize that their emotional response was valid.

Presidents must be prepared for personal and institutional stress. Part of understanding a situation on campus is understanding the personal stress on the president. The president needs to have some vehicle for addressing the personal and psychic stress encountered. It could take the form of a support group. It could manifest itself as experience or knowledge that he or she had been through something like this before, as Patton had. Patton tried to take time away from campus when possible. Working through the stress is another strategy used in these cases; examples include creating a list of the tasks that need to be accomplished and charging through them. Institutional stress must be managed as well. A president needs to understand how the campus is managing its level of stress. Once the president has sensed and understood it, he or she should find ways to manage, mitigate, or release it. The use of a town hall, open forum, or other form of listening session may be an effective means of managing institutional stress, depending on its intensity.

Beyond framing and understanding the problem, a necessary implication for presidents facing a free speech incident is action. In other words, presidents should be ready to do something in response to an incident like those in the case studies.

The first piece of advice is to be present. A president cannot “mail in” their leadership and expect to manage the issues presented by a controversy. Notably, this implication has a spectrum. Abernathy, for example, was present and involved with his
stakeholders, but he remained in the background. His event engendered the least controversy, allowing him to be distant. Patton was present for the Murray lecture. She remained in the middle of events as she held an impromptu workshop with the students who remained in Wilson Hall that evening. Her presence and visibility on Middlebury’s small campus was a vital part of her response to an issue for which commitment to community was important. DePaul is the glaring example of the need for presence. Holtschneider was in France when Yiannopoulos visited, and riots followed. His distance from the event caused him to misjudge its full impact on the DePaul campus. To his credit, he realized this quickly and took an overnight flight home, a fact that he made sure the campus community knew. He then made himself visible. He walked the campus and met with many groups, including his three open forums. He did all of this in the garb of a Catholic priest, making his presence more visible still. Kimbrough also made his presence known and used that as an important tool. Though his team kept him from campus the night of the Duke debate, he was there the next day to address the community. He stressed that he was there, among them, and would be there the next day, week, month, and year. He emphasized, through his and his team’s presence, that they cared for Dillard in a way that the protestors did not.

Presidents must be aware that what may seem like a campus issue can spill over beyond its boundaries. The leaders of the three schools who had to deal with outside agitators all agreed that, if they had limited the events to their students, the outcome would have been different. This is the logical and rational part of a presidential and leadership response. The leaders engaged in some form of policy review. Notably, each
one worried about policy from the comfort of an after-action report rather than initially addressing it.

Finally, presidents need to be wary of responding and acting based on a fear of damage to the institutional reputation. Patton made this point directly. Middlebury faced national and international news about the Murray visit. Commentators were unhappy with what the students had done. Factions on the campus were weaponized to make claims in support of one cause or another. Inevitably, the president was warned that Middlebury’s reputation stood to be damaged through this process. Patton cautioned that this fear alone might prevent a president from making a decision. More telling, Patton emphasized that Middlebury’s reputation actually improved as a result of the controversy. As stated above, traditional markers of success around applicants and peer reputation showed improvement following Murray. Middlebury’s example teaches a leader that though reputation may be an issue during a difficult event, the impact on reputation may in fact turn out to be positive.

Advice for the Senior Team

The senior team plays an important role in helping the leader frame, understand, and respond to an event like those covered in the case studies.

Presidents should rely on their senior leadership team to help them make sense of the campus community and frame or counterframe the issues based on what other stakeholders have said. Abernathy used his provost Selmon to adjust his initial negative reaction to Carson and frame a perspective on the event that was limited to the question of when a speaker should be disinvited. Patton worked with Bill Burger, her communications vice president. Holtschnneider relied on his team for a different type of
framing. He needed his team to help him understand the campus, the first impression of which he got wrong from his initial vantage in France. Whether the president is strategically or unintentionally keeping distance from the community, the team can help either by running interference (as occurred at Alma), managing the scene (as occurred at Dillard), or assembling and transmitting information (as the team did for Holtschneider when he was in France).

In a free speech incident such as those studied here, the support for the president goes above and beyond the day-to-day understanding of that requirement that most leadership teams would intuitively consider part of their job. Teams need to understand how personally taxing these events are on the person standing at the front of a town hall audience. They need to understand that the president is likely staring at the potential loss of her or his job as decisions are made and responses are crafted. Understanding this level of stress is important when the leadership team thinks about how best to support the president. This support is not always agreement. Abernathy’s first reaction to the Carson visit was outrage. He was ready to side with those who thought he should be disinvited. His provost Selmon talked him out of it. Consider Kimbrough’s team. The night of the Duke debate, Kimbrough was off campus. He wanted to return. Roland Bullard and Marc Barnes told him to stay away because the temperature on the campus was too hot. In this sense, they helped Kimbrough by knowing that the evening of the Duke debate was a time to allow them to lead. This decision came during a time when Barnes recognized that he had never seen Kimbrough under such stress. The team may need to supplement the efforts of the president. Elizabeth Ortiz and Zdziarski at DePaul made sure that they went to as many meetings across campus as possible. In part, they were inspired by
Holtschneider. Everyone witnessed the amount of abuse he took in the open forums and the way that he managed those situations with grace, as Ortiz described it. That inspired them to take on some of the burden. In each of these cases, effective teams and team members recognized the strengths and limitations of their presidents. They were willing to challenge the president or supplement the president’s skills with their own when needed.

What leaders do is critically important as well. Leadership teams need to plan, assemble other teams that can respond in an incident, follow the policies and procedures that are in place, and be ready to accept that their precautions may not be enough. It may be a cliché, but leadership teams must “expect the unexpected” and know that some event will stretch their planning in unforeseen ways.

Policy, procedures, and plans are important. Leaders must follow and rely on them with an understanding of their limitations. Dealing with the immediate and critical aspect of campus emotion is an example of the limitation of policy. Stakeholders, students, faculty, and staff may all be upset. Policy and procedure will not address that emotion. However, following through on policy and procedure, such as the imposition of discipline, is a needed part of the menu of responses to the event.

Leaders must be willing to recognize that they cannot prepare enough. What may seem like a controversial speaker event can morph a crisis once a large crowd of agitators from outside the campus arrive. Bullard at Dillard is a good example that one can always prepare further. He was trained as a competent student affairs administrator, but that training did not allow him to address an angry mob of protestors, almost none of whom were students.
Finally, leaders must understand that the work can continue after the incident. This requires an understanding of how to prioritize responses. Deal with the emotion first. Know that the policy, procedure, and related responses will be important but may not be the first consideration. Know too that incidents such as these may take years to resolve. Though that realization may be daunting, it allows breathing room to structure and prioritize responses in both the shorter and longer term.

**Advice for the General Counsel**

A free speech crisis will inevitably land on the desk of the general counsel, likely early in the process. A general counsel should know and consider that while this is a free speech (legal) issue, it is also much more.

The general counsel must contextualize the advice. The legal advice of the general counsel is one piece of the puzzle. Other factors may be important pieces as well, if not more important. Consider Dillard. It had a contract to host the debate for which Duke was invited to appear. The general counsel, rightly, advised the president that the contract did not allow Dillard to breach the terms and cancel the debate just because it did not like the views of one of the candidates. Kimbrough heeded that advice but found that it was not enough. Not only did that explanation fail to address the emotion of the situation—a former Klan leader to appear on the campus of an HBCU—but it failed to consider an important reality: under certain circumstances, Kimbrough would have breached the contract anyway. For instance, if his board told him to cancel the event, Kimbrough would have done so and let the legal chips fall as they may.

The general counsel must know that policy fidelity alone does not solve the problem. Lawyers are quick to fall back on policy to address a controversy. While
following policy is a generally good piece of advice, adherence to written policy as a solution to the initial and loudest issues does not solve those immediate and loud issues. Again, emotional needs are not likely to be met by a rational application of policy. For example, Holtschneider noted that students had potentially violated the student code of conduct by disrupting the Yiannopoulos event. This response may have been accurate by application of policy, but it was tone deaf to the way that the event and its disruption had impacted the DePaul community. There is an important lesson here. The advice of the lawyer, though critical, may be “back-pocket” knowledge as leaders initially respond to the incident. It is important to balance the need for policy and risk avoidance with the need to address other issues, some of which may need to happen first.

The general counsel must know that what the institution is allowed to do and what the institution should do are two different things. A general counsel at a private school will indicate early in the conversation that a private school is not the government and has the ability to restrict speech without violating the First Amendment. This is accurate legal advice. In the end, the legal advice and the overall decision may align with each other, but they will not always do so. Abernathy, for example, could have told Carson that he did not want him on campus because of what Carson was saying as a political candidate and the fact that it was antithetical to the mission and values of Alma. He was within his legal rights to take that position and was encouraged to do so by many. If he had taken that position, he would have missed the opportunity to focus on the ideals that were at the core of Alma and its liberal arts mission.

The general counsel must be prepared for potential errors and admitting those errors. Leaders may admit error, and it may be necessary for them to do so. Holtschneider
admitted to the DePaul community that he did not interpret correctly what had happened and that he had let them down. Lawyers are hesitant to approve an admission of error. In Holtschneider’s case however, it was the first and necessary move to allow his campus to begin a healing process. While admission may not be the best way to avoid liability, it may be necessary to address the controversy. This may be true despite the anxiety of the general counsel, who anticipates the complaint that will include the glaring admission of the institutional CEO. Once again, though the advice and input of the general counsel are critical in these responses, the effective general counsel will be able to see where that advice fits in the long view.

The Role of the Board

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2018) released a guide for trustees that covers the top strategic concerns for boards for 2018-2019. Among these concerns is free speech. The suggestions in this publication both align and diverge from the findings in these cases. For example, the AGB suggests that legal issues will be an important part of the considerations of any governing body. However, it urges universities not to frame their responses in terms of legal rights. It suggests instead that the university should state its position in terms of its mission statement and the values of its community. This suggestion is consistent with the findings from this study, in which campus values mattered and shaped responses. However, the AGB doesn’t fully acknowledge the emotion behind the necessary campus responses. The need to address the emotion of the campus should come first, and the leader’s response should match that emotional intensity. Additionally, the framing of the response should center on the common and lived values of the community, not simply on the
mission in a broad way. Thus, it is critical for leaders and their boards to have a clear understanding of the core values of their community. While it is helpful to state that understanding in terms of the mission, the core values may be held and understood in words and ideas that may or may not found in the mission statement. At DePaul, mission was central to the varied understanding of what it meant to be Vincentian, but the value that mattered most was a strong sense of community and inclusion. Middlebury, by contrast, had a difference sense of community, which was paramount to a large segment of the campus.

The AGB article differs from the case findings in that it puts the board on the front lines of these issues. The AGB suggests that the board should engage with students about their concerns on free speech. None of the cases studied had the board on that front line. Though the board was an important voice behind the scenes (for example, Abernathy’s concern for his conservative board and Kimbrough’s discussions with the board about stepping down if he acted to harm Dillard), none of the boards at the institutions studied took such an integrated role in the management of these issues. Given the importance of the president as leader, both from a strategic and symbolic standpoint and in considering the use of the Heifetz (1994) strategic assets, the injection of the board in this process would serve only to diminish that important role. Holtschneider, for example, stood as a lightning rod before three open forums. He was the visible leader at DePaul and made himself visible on the campus to both lead and be seen leading. To inject a higher authority—Holtschneider’s board—would render his role less effective and his decision making more tenuous. Heifetz recognized this important strategic role of the leader. His strategic assets should be utilized as management tools to address an
adaptive problem. The assets, such as the power to frame issues and the ability to contain
and manage stress, need to be wielded by the leader or the leader’s team. These tools are
rendered less effective when a higher authority injects itself into the management of the
institution. That authority, the board, may counterframe a response, counterinterpret the
mission or values of the institution, or attempt to inject or release the stress by means
other than the actions of the leader. Any of these actions leave the leader on the sidelines,
which is no place for a leader to be when responding to such a controversy.

Questions for Future Study

The research and findings from these four case studies are limited. The research
questions, the fact that only four campuses were studied, the time allotted, and the
limitations associated with qualitative research all add to the imperfect nature of this
study. While doing this work, however, many intriguing subjects were unearthed that
present possibilities for further research. The first such issue was raised by Laurie Patton.
She knows that the story of Charles Murray’s visit to Middlebury and its aftermath is one
of success. The school weathered the storm and came out with better indicators of
success than before. It begs the question of whether institutional reputations always suffer
as a result of these controversies. The broadest understanding of risk encompasses the
notion of risk as opportunity. Perhaps a free speech incident handled well is an
opportunity to enhance an institution’s reputation.

A second area of inquiry is more personal. The leaders who endured these
controversies shouldered a great deal of emotion in responding to the events and the
needed healing. What toll does that take on the leaders? This study touched on personal
stress, but a more directed study to find out what happened to a group of leaders who had
endured controversy of this sort may discern some interesting side effects of handing a matter of this nature. Perhaps, as suggested in the discussion of reputation above, the leaders went on to greater success.

Third, and timely, would be to determine if the divisiveness of the 2016 election, which impacted each of these events, will rise again in anticipation of 2020. American politics gives no indication that it will be any less divisive as the 2020 presidential cycle nears. If anything, it will be more divisive. A look at how campuses are preparing for 2020 and its aftereffects or how the two election cycles may have been different would be worthwhile research. Given the prominence of 2016 in this study, it may prove to be a significant issue.

Future research should center on the unique experience of women presidents in these events. These case studies featured one woman president, Laurie Patton at Middlebury. She noted that her experience had unique elements because of her gender. A more directed look at leading as a woman through controversies such as these may be beneficial.

This research focused exclusively on private universities in an effort to remove the strict application of the First Amendment and the analysis of university leaders as government actors. Whether that distinction actually makes a difference in campus response needs further study Presumably, the emotions would be the same whether the campus is public or private. A comparison of public and private responses may prove that the distinction is without difference in the world of leadership response.

Finally, this research did not focus exclusively on the distinctions of a response based on the tenure of the president. Might a president who has occupied the position for
twenty years respond differently than Patton did at Middlebury, for example, who had completed only one year when Murray arrived? More intriguing still, what if the responses were the same?

Conclusion

Leadership responses to free speech incidents on campus present a rich and timely insight into a world of complex problem solving. Some, such as Heifetz (1994), have termed the problems arising from the events “adaptive” due to the fact that they cannot be addressed by the application of some simple or technical fix. Sometimes, the answers take years to unfold. This research has focused on four such cases: at Alma College, Dillard University, DePaul University, and Middlebury College. Each school faced the appearance of a controversial speaker. Each leader was pressured to prevent the speaker from appearing on the basis of that speaker’s views. None of them did. By allowing the speakers to appear, the leaders experienced varying levels of distress, if not outright violence.

To understand the leadership response in these four cases, this research has first presented findings around the ways leaders framed, articulated, and understood the problems presented by the controversial speaker events. Second, the research has focused on how leaders responded to these events. The understanding, framing, and corresponding actions provide insight for leaders and their teams as these incidents abound on campuses, particularly in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. As the country awaits the presidential election of 2020, more such incidents are likely to occur, to which leaders can apply, hopefully, some of the lessons learned.
Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Title of the Research Study: Leadership Without Easy Answers: Navigating Free Speech Disputes on Private Campuses.
Principal Investigator: Dr. Diane Eynon, eynond@upenn.edu, (215) 573-8072
Co-investigator: Robert B. Farrell, XXXXX@scranton.edu, (570) XXX-XXXX

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate or not to participate there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Before you make a decision, you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study and what you will have to do if you decide to participate. The research team is going to talk with you about the study and give you this consent document to read. You do not have to make a decision now; you can take the consent document home and share it with friends, family doctor and family.

If you do not understand what you are reading, do not sign it. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a copy will be given to you. Keep this form, in it you will find contact information and answers to questions about the study. You may ask to have this form read to you.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose is to understand how college and university leaders respond to free speech incidents on their campuses. This study is being conducted for a dissertation by Robert B. Farrell, a Doctoral Candidate in the Graduate School of Education’s Executive Doctorate of Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania.

Why was I asked to participate in the study?

You are being asked to join this study because you are a campus leader who resolved or participated in a free speech incident on your campus.

How long will I be in the study?

You are being asked to participate in a 45- to 60-minute interview. You may be asked to answer follow-up questions in the following 6 months. The study will take place over a
period of 1 year and will include interviews of approximately 20 administrators and faculty.

Where will the study take place?

Participant interviews will take place at their respective institutions, or over Skype or like software, if an in-person interview is not possible.

What will I be asked to do?

Participants will be asked a series of semi-structured questions that seek to understand the leadership considerations to resolve the issues at stake when speech is threatened or abridged.

What are the benefits and risks of the study?

The primary risk is a breach of confidentiality. The benefit is that leaders face issues either of this precise nature, or like this. The results of this study may aid leaders to better recognize and understand where others have proceeded well, or regretted steps taken.

What happens if I do not choose to join the research study?

You may choose to join the study, or you may choose not to join the study. Your participation is voluntary.

How will confidentiality be maintained, and my privacy be protected?

Data will be kept and accessed using a secure site with a password needed to gain entry and two-way authentication. All data will be destroyed after the project is completed.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Who can I call with questions, complaints or if I’m concerned about my rights as a research subject?

If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you should speak with the Principal Investigator listed on page one of this form. If a member of the research team cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any
question, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614.

When you sign this document, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. If you have any questions or there is something you do not understand, please ask. You will receive a copy of this consent document.

Signature of Subject: __________________________________________________

Print Name of Subject: _________________________________________________

Date: _____________________________________________
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Questions for Leaders

I’m studying the responses of presidents (other leaders) to free speech incidents on their campuses to better understand how he/she encountered the leadership challenges associated with this incident.

The Incident in Question:

• I’m interested in discussing X. Can you tell me the story about X?
• Could you be more specific about how you as leader understood (first) and then framed, and articulated (second) what was happening and its challenges?
• Tell me about your role at the time. What was going on at the institution that shaped the event and how you made sense of what was happening?
• I want to talk specifically about how you came to understand what was happening and made sense of the incident and then to talk about what you did to respond.

Thinking/Making Sense of:

• When did you first learn that a controversy was brewing or potentially brewing? From whom did you learn that? In what ways did your understanding evolve from your first understanding as more points came to light? How did that affect your thinking and your responses?
• Who were the other key players? What roles did they play (both constructive and “less so”) in making sense of what was happening and what the possible paths forward might be?
• You had internal leadership discussions but also had to inform and engage the campus. I’d like to know more about how you talked about incident X with people on your team and in the broader campus and community?
• Help me to understand why (or why not) you spoke with your leadership team and talked about the incident in the same or different ways outside of the at group? (Possible probes: with the faculty, the board, with external groups, and with the media)
• What was the driver of doing so and what information did you stress to the community or communities?

Actions:

• You’ve told me the story of what happened and identified some key points in time. Can you talk more about what you did and your rationale or reasons for what you did at those key points in time?
Probes:
- As you think back on what you did, to what extent did you have the “tools in your toolbox” or did you and the institution need to create new and novel responses?
- What did you have to do to focus the campus on the right issues or the right ways? (I used the word “right” and I’m curious as to what that meant to you in this context.)
- How stressful was the incident for the campus? What did you (or others do) to moderate that stress so the campus could move forward without pretending that the issue was solved? What strategies seemed to work well? (and not so well)?
- Did you establish any process or processes by which the problem could be understood or made sense of and addressed?
- What were some of the conflicts that surfaced among people or ideas, and as leader, what did you (or others) do to address them?
- In what ways was your position as President helpful or a hindrance in this effort? Please explain how you may have used it or disguised it.

Background:
I think it would help me to understand more about you and your career as it led to the position you hold now.
- For example, have you been a president before?
- How long have you been at this institution?
- How long have you worked with the people who surround you?
- Are there people who worked with you at the time of the incident we are discussing who are elsewhere now?

General:
- Was there any part of our discussion which struck you as particularly important or relevant to this topic?
- If another leader was to call you asking for advice about how to make sense of what is happening and how best to respond, what advice would you offer?
- Is there a question that you think that I should have asked you but did not?
- To whom would you recommend that I speak on this topic?
- May I contact you later if I have additional questions or follow up?
Appendix C

Interview Participants

Alma College
- Jeff Abernathy
  - President
- Ann Hall
  - Vice President for Planning and Chief of Staff (formerly, Vice President for Communication and Marketing)
- Michael Selmon
  - Professor of English (formerly, Provost)
- Michael Silverthorn
  - Associate Vice President for Communications

Dillard University
- Walter Kimbrough
  - President
- Roland Bullard
  - Vice President Division of Student Success
- Marc Barnes
  - Vice President Division of Institutional Advancement

DePaul University
- Dennis Holtschneider
  - Executive Vice President and Chief Operations Officer of Ascension Health, President elect of Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (formerly President of DePaul)
- Elizabeth Ortiz
  - Vice President for Institutional Diversity and Equity
- Gene Zdziarski
  - Vice President for Student Affairs
- Linda Blakely
  - Vice President for Public Relations and Communications

Middlbury College
- Laurie Patton
  - President
- Bill Burger
  - Vice President for Communications and Chief Marketing Officer
- Jay Parini
  - D.E. Axinn Professor of English and Creative Writing
Appendix D

Transcript of Posts Made to Alma College Alumni Board

Brandon Edward Miller, December 8, 2014

Alma College alums—I am distressed and am frankly dumbfounded that Ben Carson (retired neurosurgeon, cable news commentator, conspiracy theorist, and likely Presidential candidate) will be this year’s Honor’s Day speaker. Carson had made many beyond the pale, deeply offensive remarks about gay people including comparing them to pedophiles and practitioners of bestiality.

Honor’s Day is supposed to be a celebration of scholarships and creativity, not a platform for bigots. The College certainly would not honor racists or anti-Semites with such an important role. It is disappointing that it is doing so with someone who dangerously demonized and dehumanized gay people. The type of vile rhetoric espoused by Carson fosters an environment in which gay kids are harassed by bullies and rejected by parents and, all too often, consider suicide.

Some of Ben Carson’s remarks:

On pedophilia and bestiality: “No group, be they gays, NAMBLA, be they people who believe in bestiality, it doesn’t matter what they are, they don’t get to change the definition [of marriage].”

Equating homosexuality to murder: “How I feel and what I think isn’t just my opinion. God in his Word says very clearly that he considers homosexual acts to be an ‘abomination.’ Whenever I point out that God calls homosexual behavior a sin, I am usually quick to add that the Bible just as clearly calls a lot of other things wrong—lying, cheating, adultery, murder, gluttony—and I am not going to try to justify any [sic] those things in order to be politically correct either.”

Claims marriage equality advocates are “directly attacking the relationship between God and his people.”

On gays leading to the downfall of civilization (wow, we’re powerful!): “[I]f we can redefine marriage as between two men or two women or any other way based on social pressures as opposed to between a man and a woman, we will continue to redefine it in any way that we wish, which is a slippery slope with a disastrous ending, as witnessed in the dramatic fall of the Roman Empire.”
Imagine someone saying such repugnant things about Jews or Black people. I doubt the College would invite (and pay handsomely) such a speaker to appear at Honor’s Day. This is not the stuff of serious academic discourse and it’s embarrassing that the College would host such a speaker for this important event.

Please consider reaching out to Alma College | President Jeff Abernathy, Provost Michael Selmon, members of faculty, the Almanian, the Alma College Alumni Association, the Almanian, and members of the Board of Trustees if you share my concerns.

Brandon Edward Miller with Robert Schultz, III. December 10, 2014

A beautiful letter on the Ben Carson Situation at Alma College written by W. Robert Shultz [sic] III, ’77. President Abernathy has convened a meeting this afternoon to discuss the issue with some faculty. Sure hope they do the right thing here.

—

Dear President Abernathy,

I want to thank you for speaking with me by phone yesterday. I would like you to share the contents of this letter with the Alma College Co-curricular committee meeting scheduled for today.

As a black gay man and Alma graduate with a life to [sic] commitment to social justice, I was speechless when I learned about the selection of Dr. Ben Carson as a speaker for the spring Honors Convocation. From my vantage point, Dr. Carson has leveraged his admirable life accomplishments as a platform to spread homophobic rhetoric. With his anticipated run in the spring primaries for public office, I expect this line of rhetoric to increase, as his appeals are to an audience that fears the diversity of humanity. Dr. Carson first came to my attention on the public stage as a messenger with a divisive message. It is only later that I learned of his noteworthy accomplishments in the medicinal field. I am disappointed that he has chosen to use his life’s work as passport to disseminate hate and disunity.

At my first Alma College Convocation, Board of Trustees member Rev. Dr. Allan J. Weenink set forth a challenge for those attending Alma that has served as a mantra for my life: noblesse oblige. By that measure because of his rhetoric, Dr. Ben Carson falls short of that standard. I would hope that any Speaker chosen by Alma College should be someone who would at minimum affirm the diversity of all humans and human rights of all including LBGT (lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgendered) people.

As you know, my connection to Alma is deep and familial. From the moment, as a freshman class prospect, when I met President Robert Swanson, during my first campus
visit, I have always felt like I am a member of the Alma College family. Indeed my sisters followed my footsteps to be Alma Graduates. I am proud that my sister Carolyn serves on the Board of Trustees, and my only nephew Nathaniel intends to be part of the Alma class of 2019. I am proud that along with my sister Sonja, my siblings established and Alma College scholarship in our Mather’s memory. I have developed relationships with many of my fellow Zeta Sigma fraternity alumni, some of whom are openly gay. Our brotherhood accepts us. Alma College tradition as a welcoming place is important to me.

Alma College also affirmed the value of intellectual debate and inquiry. However there are some rhetorical boundaries that when crossed deprive one of being an ethical participant deserving a public platform. Whether the interest is to learn from a distinguished African American, or a conservative, or scientist I believe there are others from across the spectrum whose department is more in keeping with Alma College’s values. I have always sought principled engagement with those I disagree with and support that ideal in public forums.

I implore those responsible to take steps to find an ability continue to affirm those Alma values we hold dear and find a speaker other than one whose strident public posture will over shadow student and faculty accomplishment that are the center piece of an Honors Convocation.

Sincerely,
W Robert Schultz III—Class of 1977
Appendix E

Alma College Faculty Letter to the Editor on Ben Carson

Morning Sun:
Letter to the editor: Alma College faculty protest Carson speech

Mar 31, 2015

Alma College faculty protest Carson speech

We, the undersigned members of the Alma College faculty, wish to express our concern regarding featuring Dr. Ben Carson as our speaker the evening before the 2015 Honors Day. We recognize that he is no longer the designated “Honors Day Speaker” and that the college president has issued a statement distancing the college from this particular choice. To a great many students, faculty and staff members, alumni, and friends of the college, however, Dr. Carson’s address is still problematic in that his publicly espoused views are antithetical to the values of Alma College. This choice of speaker seems fundamentally at odds with our commitment to scientific and humanistic inquiry based on evidence and critical thinking, and with the very nature of a college claiming to welcome all, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

Our position has nothing to do with whether a speaker is liberal or conservative, nor would this be as much a concern if an individual or campus group sponsored the event. We accept that he has his admirers. However, the college itself is sponsoring this event.

It does not take away from Dr. Carson’s impressive earlier career to insist that many of his more recent statements are at odds with our values as an institution. His assertion that Obamacare is as bad as slavery and comparing the United States to Nazi Germany are ahistorical. His labeling the president a psychopath is not just at odds with basic civil discourse in an academic community, but is not supported by any commonly accepted form of psychological analysis, nor is his assertion that homosexuality is a choice based on the supposed conversion of inmates’ sexual orientation while in prison. Comparing the
passionate commitment of ISIS fighters with that of the founding fathers of the United States and suggesting that the new Advanced Placement history curriculum could lead one to want to join ISIS are similarly not examples of the critical thinking we seek to encourage in students.

Alma’s mission is centered on promoting carefully considered, logically argued, and evidence-based scholarly work, and artistic creation and performance which showcases the best of the liberal arts: what unites us as humans, not what divides us. A speaker so well known for divisive, incendiary assertions, regardless of occasional efforts later to clarify or apologize for some of them, is wholly out of keeping with our mission, a distraction from our primary focus, and sends mixed messages about our commitment to a diverse and inclusive community.

Sincerely,

Julie Arnold, Karen Ball, Mike Bishop, Kate Blanchard, Mary Theresa Bonhage Freund, Murray Borrello, Barbara Burdick, John Davis, Deborah Dougherty, Brian Doyle, Catherine Fobes, Patrick Furlong, Joanne Gilbert, Joe Jezewski, Timothy Keeton, Ed Lorenz, Holly Lui, Sandy Lopez-Isnardi, Scott Messing, William Palmer, Cameron Reed, John Rowe, Marc Setterlund, Brandi Stupica, Robert Vivian
Appendix F

E-mail to DePaul Community, June 2, 2016, from Dennis Holtschneider

Document File Title: June 2016 communication_coedits

To: All FT and PT faculty; all FT and PT staff and all faculty and staff emeriti; all students
Mailbox being sent from: DePaulPresidentsOffice@depaul.edu
Launch date and time:

Subject line: DePaul Must Do Better

Dear Members of the DePaul University Community,

As a community, we are limping to the end of this academic year, and many among our number are beleaguered and afraid. We have much work ahead.

Students, startled that the Milo Yiannopoulos lecture and the events surrounding it could happen at DePaul, feel let down that the university community did not more immediately close ranks around them when they needed it most. When discussing this in classrooms, our students heard other students recommend that they develop “thicker skins” or “shake it off.” They were surprised to find that some faculty were unaware of the events and that the stress and trauma of would adversely affect their ability to complete the term successfully. They read my letter talking about free speech as they were still shaking from the frightening effects of the hate speech they experienced. They further felt exposed and blamed for the escalation of the crowd’s behavior. And I’m afraid that my own silence in recent days as we’ve begun a series of meetings to hear people’s feelings firsthand, has been deafening. In short, many of our students, staff and faculty felt insufficiently supported by that community last week, including by me. For all of this, I deeply apologize.

Let me recount what was obvious to many of the recent events, but perhaps not to all.

You have seen the videos by now of the crowd attending the Milo Yiannopoulos lecture harassing and verbally abusing DePaul students of color and others. Some students were shoved and hurt. Sixty-nine percent of the crowd were not from DePaul, but we also have reports of DePaul students joining in the taunting. The abusive taunts targeted protestors in the room, those peacefully gathered outside, students simply studying in the Culture Center, and also our staff who were trying their best to keep a bad situation from devolving further. A number of faculty, staff and students are still reeling from being subsequently targeted by the blogosphere, especially individuals who supported our students or who challenged the racist, xenophobic, anti-feminist, homophobic, transphobic,
anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim messages that they encountered online. Not merely were our email and social media accounts overrun with hate-filled and threatening messages, but we witnessed anonymous attempts to ruin personal reputations or fake Twitter accounts set up in the name of loved ones. The pure evil of this activity has no name and we had few means to protect ourselves from it.

The discovery of a noose as well as the sidewalk tagging with an anti-Mexico slur added great fear among the student body, especially as the culprit who fashioned and left the noose has not yet been identified. One young man at last night’s student gathering talked about the collective effect of all this, courageously describing his fear walking alone to his car.

We are not talking about speech alone on these matters, but people’s actions. At DePaul, we will never tolerate actions that are antithetical to the Vincentian values we teach and hold ourselves accountable from the first day our students, faculty and staff set foot on our campus. I am deeply sorry for the harm that was unleashed by a speaker whose intent was to ignite racial tensions and demean those most marginalized, both in our society and at DePaul. Perhaps we should not have been surprised, but I think all of us - protesters, event organizers and administration alike - were taken aback by the level of vitriol that was unleashed and the damage that our community would experience. I am truly sorry that members of our faculty, staff had students have experienced this kind of hatred. No member of our community should ever feel unsafe at DePaul and we will do all that we can to protect our students, faculty and staff.

I am grateful for the many faculty and staff who have worked tirelessly trying to support students and their own colleagues through this. Student Affairs and Public Safety immediately began new safety initiatives, including 24-hour campus escorts, visible staff presence during class exchange, and expanded patrol presence. Faculty spent long hours speaking with students, giving reassurance that students had someone in their corner. Indeed, the students did that for each other as well. That was DePaul at its best, and seeing the care you showed for each other reassured me and made me proud.

All of this has a context that is important. The Black Student Union told us earlier this year that they were growing weary of the racism they found within DePaul, which they described in details that enabled the President’s Diversity Council (PDC) to begin designing specific actions for each of their concerns. The BSU were not the only students feeling these things of course; they were simply the first voice invited to come forward. Other student groups of Latino/a students, as well as STRONG, Feminist Front and others have now come forward and are contributing their own observations to the mix. Faculty are as well.

Several of you, for example, have asked if, hypothetically, DePaul would invite the head of the KKK to speak on our campus. My answer is no, but it immediately makes obvious that the university has no bright line defined for such questions. A task force of faculty and staff gathered and created a statement on speech at DePaul in 2008, and it has served
us well, but it does not address the full range of questions that now faces us. Is there any person DePaul University would not permit to speak on campus? What would the criteria be? Who would decide? Is there a difference if university funds are used or an outside entity pays? What if the students hold the event off campus? These are dangerous waters to navigate – for the bar for free speech is extremely high at a university - but others have charted them before us and we have the resources to address it. I appreciate the care many of you have taken in sending me your views and will work with all of you to reconstitute that Task Force when we return in the Fall.

I personally worry for the months ahead as the election continues to embolden and unleash the worst elements of society. Those voices will rankle within the university, and will threaten to divide us further. The question for DePaul is how to strengthen and maintain a human community where all of us commit to kindness and civility first, even as we discuss matters where we disagree. And for this, I write to beg your help today.

A number of you have already met with me or other university administrators to talk about these matters. In each case, we have sought advice on what initiatives DePaul should consider now and for the future. Those meetings will continue. Your ideas are already being collected and will be carefully reviewed by the PDC and/or the relevant university office responsible for those activities. I will also set aside funds in the coming year so that these initiatives can be initiated immediately – without waiting for the usual budget cycle to begin. In the immediate term, we will continue to monitor people's communications and reports daily, actively listen and support and care for the community in every way we can. Please know that, in addition to all the usual ways to communicating with one another, a hotline has been established that will be monitored throughout the day. [hotline info]

Communities are not built alone but as a collective of people who care and respect one another. I am fully committed to devoting my energies to creating a culture of kindness and attentiveness in the coming year, but I also know it will take the whole village. We cannot eliminate all of the racism and sexism around us, but together we can and must do a great deal better within DePaul.

Thank you for being DePaul University at this moment in its history. May God bless us all and particularly our summer months ahead.

With great respect,

Rev. Dennis H. Holtschneider, CM
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