Academic Year 2021-2022:
Are College Campuses Ready?

Association of American Colleges & Universities
and
American University

Authors

Scott A. Bass, PhD
Professor in the Department of Public Administration and Policy, School of Public
Affairs, American University.
Executive Director of the Center for University Excellence (CUE) and Provost Emeritus
at American University.

Laura McMahon Fulford, MPA
PhD student in the Department of Public Administration and Policy, School of Public
Affairs, American University.

Ashley Finley, PhD
Vice President for Research and Senior Advisor to the President at the Association of
American Colleges & Universities.

Introduction: How Prepared Are Colleges and Universities for the Current Academic Year?

In the eighteen months between the COVID-19 pandemic's initial impact on higher education and the start of the 2021-22 academic year, many events shaping and crystalizing ideological perspectives transpired across the nation and around the world. In the spring of 2021, researchers at American University (AU) and the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) surveyed 140 senior campus administrators, primarily presidents and vice presidents. The survey results provide timely insights into their priorities and concerns for the current academic year in the wake of these unprecedented national and global events.[1]

The murder of George Floyd by a police officer; national protests for racial justice; an embattled presidential election; the violent insurrection at the US Capitol; thousands of lives lost to a virulent virus. The trauma and severity of these events, which occurred while many students studied alone and online, or not at all, will take time to digest. Adding to their consequences are the willful and misguided misinformation campaigns that have

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intensified already-sharp ideological divisions. Social media has been a significant driver of these divides. Alongside organized groups and activists working online and in person to reject hate and disinformation and embrace racial justice, there is a virtual world of conspiracy theories, organized

protests and counterprotests, the emergence of QAnon, strident armed militias, and White supremacists and nationalists. In late 2020, the US Department of Homeland Security declared domestic violent extremism to be the

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most pressing and lethal threat facing the country.[2] Almost everywhere we look, there is mounting evidence of an increasingly internally confrontational and polarized United States.

For the millions of college students returning to campus, as well as for faculty and staff, the environment of the academic year will be like no other they have ever encountered. The emotional upheaval of 2020-21 is sure to

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affect the views and experiences of those returning to campus. This year, many more students arrived stressed, anxious, and uncertain. According to the annual Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement, more than half of the first-time students entering colleges and universities this year reported substantial increases in their experience with mental and emotional exhaustion.[3] Some have lost loved ones to the lurking virus, often without being able to say goodbye. Some families have lost jobs or businesses,

while a small minority of wealthy families have grown even wealthier. Students of color and White allies are now part of an expanding wave of collective action for racial justice. Countering that movement are others who feel threatened by a multiracial nation. The internet and social media, in particular, have been powerful lenses through which students have witnessed these events. The internet and social media were mechanisms of unprecedented access to information during the pandemic's forced isolation, but algorithms filter this information to offer targeted, often highly curated perspectives. As students return to campus, they are likely to encounter a potpourri of diverse views that pose distinct challenges to the ideological comfort of their pandemic information bubbles.

Historians Doris Kearns Goodwin and John Meacham compare the nation's current polarization to that of the 1850s, which eventually led to the Civil War.[4] Students returning to campus undoubtedly reflect the perspectives in which they have been immersed. They will make their voices heard on any of a myriad of divisive issues, and others may be equally vocal in their opposition. Though some campuses tend to attract more homogenous student bodies,

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many more are increasingly enrolling students who reflect the country's larger demographic shifts toward diversity. The findings from the AU-AAC&U survey of senior campus leaders raise questions about institutional

expectations and preparation for the multiple psychosocial and ideological dynamics that may play out over the current academic year.

In general, the survey findings point to campus prioritization of issues that were salient before the pandemic: engaging in more meaningful diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts; supporting student well-being (including mental health); fostering students' sense of belonging; providing more financial aid and improving retention efforts for underserved students; improving coordination across existing student services; and expanding the use of data analytics. However, findings also flag the potential for campuses to be caught off guard in dealing with issues exacerbated during the pandemic and now reflected in the nation's increasing polarization. Could such polarization and ideological differences spill over and erupt on our nation's campuses?[5]
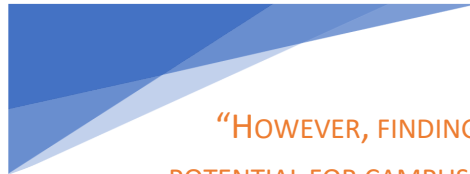
"HOWEVER, FINDINGS ALSO FLAG THE POTENTIAL FOR CAMPUSES TO BE CAUGHT OFF GUARD IN DEALING WITH ISSUES EXACERBATED DURING THE PANDEMIC AND NOW REFLECTED IN THE NATION'S INCREASING POLARIZATION."

Findings

What Issues are Campuses Prioritizing for the 2021-22 Academic Year?

Among senior administrators' top eight campus priorities for the 2021-22 academic year, the top two priorities are focused on student well-being and increasing students' sense of inclusion and belonging at their college or university.

The next cluster of priorities in rank order focus on strategic expenditures and cost savings, both immediate as well as long term, and on ensuring that the academic program is effectively linked to career skills and workforce readiness. Relatedly, college and university leaders hope to enhance the communication regarding higher education's value position in the marketplace.

The lowest three items on the list of senior administrators' priorities address external pressures and influences such as strengthening civic and democratic engagement, and addressing higher education's responsibility

**Figure 1. Rank order of priority issues identified for the Fall 2021 Term[6]**

Top Priorities for Fall 2021

1. Supporting student well-being and belonging.
2. Developing meaningful diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies.

Second Tier Priorities

3. Implementing short- and long-term resource strategies.
4. Connecting curricula with career preparation and workforce readiness.
5. Communicating higher education's value position.

Bottom Tier of Priorities

6. Strengthening civic and democratic engagement.
7. Reenvisioning and supporting liberal arts majors.
8. Addressing higher education's responsibility to contest the spread of misinformation.

to contest the spread of misinformation. Finally, in seventh place is an issue with influences of both an internal and external nature. This issue concerns the reenvisioning and supporting liberal arts majors. This may be a function of a decline in student enrollments in the liberal arts majors and a desire to reshape and enhance these important programs along with supporting the students they serve.

Ironically, the three topics to which senior academic administrators accord the lowest priority—contesting the spread of misinformation, strengthening civic and democratic engagement, and re-envisioning and supporting the liberal arts majors—are ones that might help reduce the divisions among America's many factions discussed previously.

Senior administrators were also asked to prioritize three overall challenges probed throughout the survey: (1) student protests or other forms of collective action; (2) student resource challenges and college affordability; and (3) student support needs. The responses are summarized in figure 2. Administrators at private institutions ranked student support needs as the highest priority (51%), followed by student resource challenges and college affordability (46%). The reverse was true among the senior administrators at public institutions, for whom student resource challenges

Figure 2. In light of the many administrative and financial challenges your institution will face in AY 2021-2022, how do you prioritize the three issues listed below?
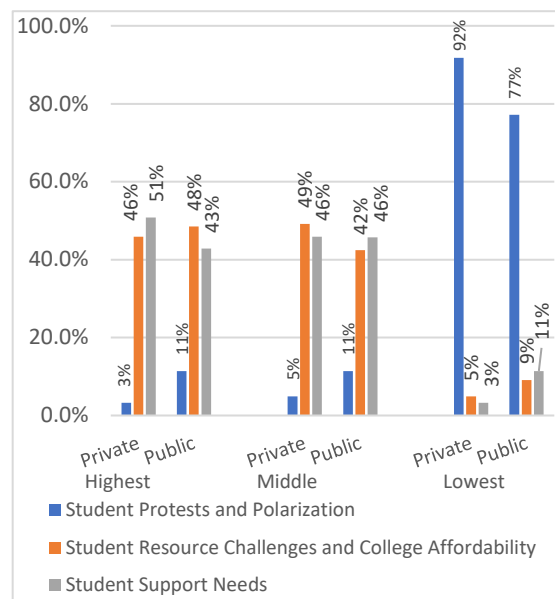
and college affordability is the highest priority (48%), followed by student support needs (43%). However, both senior administrators at both public and private institutions ranked campus protests and polarization as the lowest priority issue. This was the nearly universal verdict among senior administrators at private

"HOWEVER, BOTH SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS AT PUBLIC AND PRIVATE RANKED CAMPUS PROTESTS AND POLARIZATION AS THE LOWEST PRIORITY ISSUE"
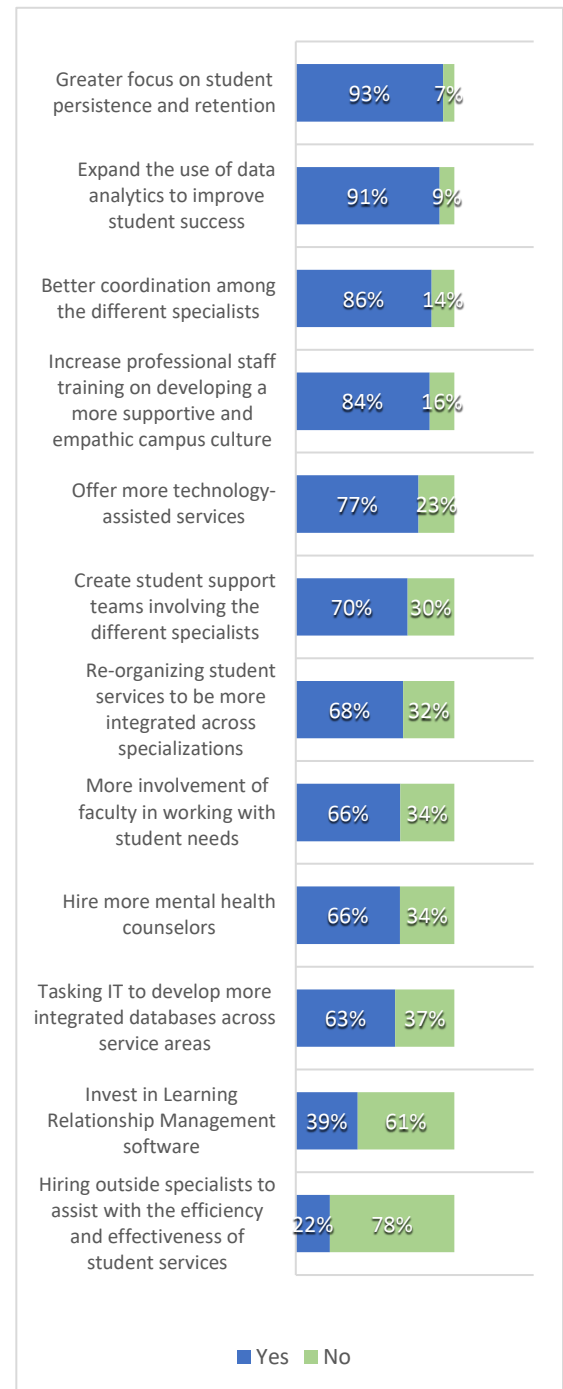
institutions (92%), while just over three-quarters of administrators at public institutions identified student protests and polarization as the lowest priority among the three.

How Will Students Be Supported in a Polarized Climate?

As students, faculty, and staff continue to cope with multiple challenges following intersecting public health, social, and economic crises, senior administrators indicated a clear intent to improve the delivery of a wide array of student support services for the fall 2021 semester. The priority areas for improvement of student services are presented in rank order in figure 3.

These findings highlight the extent of internal investment in student services and the overwhelming desire to enhance initiatives targeted at student success and well-being. The demands on existing personnel will likely increase as there will be more vulnerable and stressed students who require more intensive and well-organized services.

Figure 3. Are you considering any of the following approaches to improve the delivery of student services at your institution?

	Yes	No
Greater focus on student persistence and retention	93%	7%
Expand the use of data analytics to improve student success	91%	9%
Better coordination among the different specialists	86%	14%
Increase professional staff training on developing a more supportive and empathic campus culture	84%	16%
Offer more technology-assisted services	77%	23%
Create student support teams involving the different specialists	70%	30%
Re-organizing student services to be more integrated across specializations	68%	32%
More involvement of faculty in working with student needs	66%	34%
Hire more mental health counselors	66%	34%
Tasking IT to develop more integrated databases across service areas	63%	37%
Invest in Learning Relationship Management software	39%	61%
Hiring outside specialists to assist with the efficiency and effectiveness of student services	22%	78%

## Are Campuses Ready to Manage Student Protests and Activism?

In an exploration of possible issues that might trigger an eruption of student protest or activism on their campuses, senior administrators indicated that the issues most likely to erupt are: (1) race (54%), (2) hate speech (36%), (3) public safety or policing (31%), (4) sexual harassment or violence (29%), (5) transgender rights (27%), and (6) public health and vaccinations (26%).

Figure 4. Top issues that may trigger student protests or activism on campus.
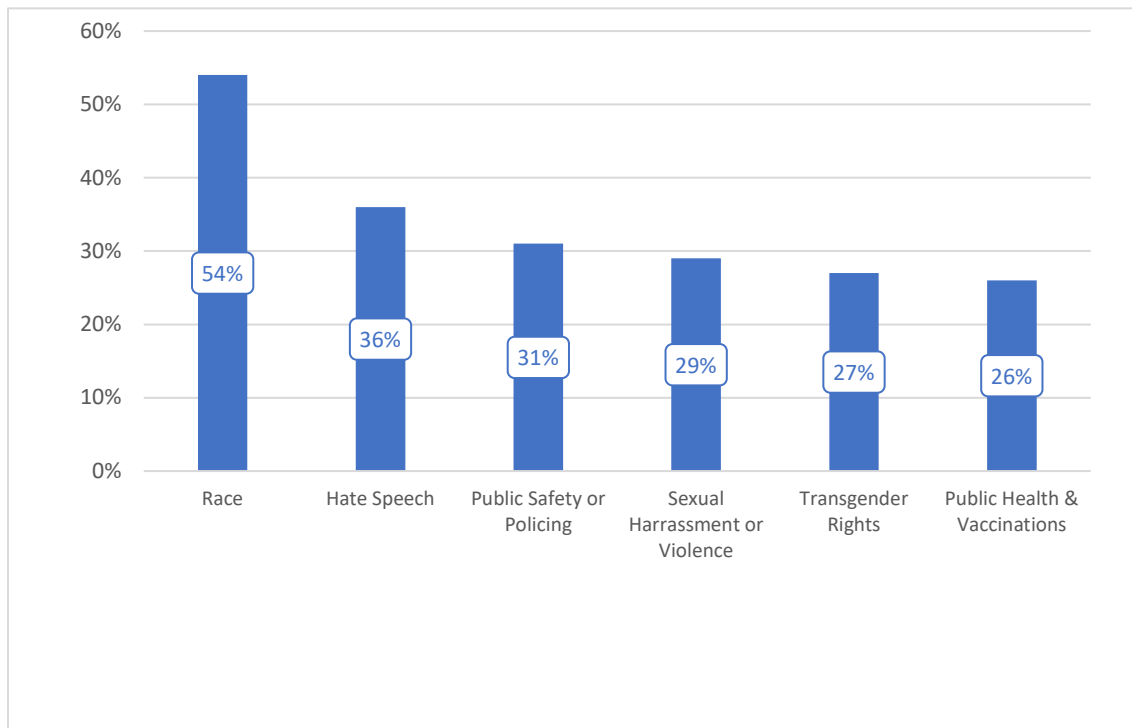
When asked about the existence of policies for managing campus protests,

Figure 5. Does your institution have in place student policies that delineate activities related to protest or other forms of collective action and that address the place, manner, and time of the student action?
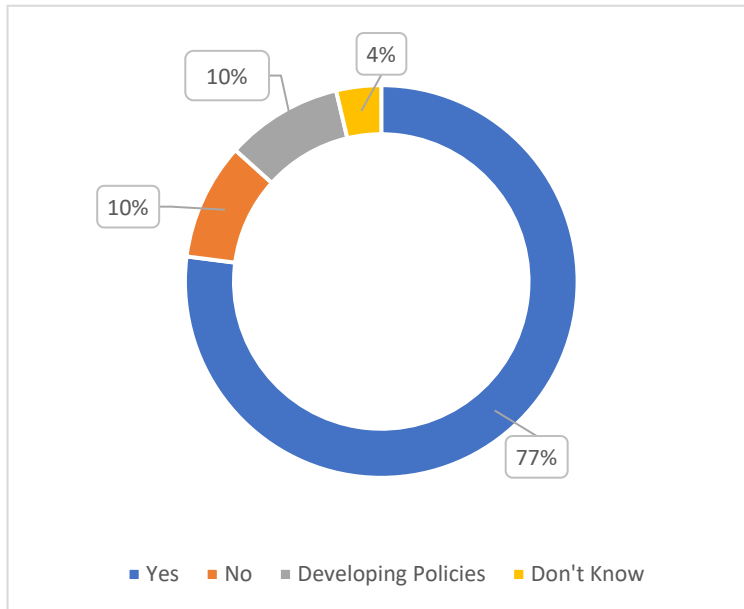
such as the place, time, and manner in which students may protest or take collective action, nearly three-quarters of survey respondents indicated that such policies are in place at their institutions. As highlighted in figure 5, this leaves almost a quarter of campuses (23%) without formal policies for managing

77%
10%
10%
4%

■ Yes ■ No ■ Developing Policies ■ Don't Know

protests (including 4% whose senior administrators did not know whether such policies exist).

Furthermore, the majority of respondents (57%) reported that their institutions currently do not have policies for managing confrontations between protesters and counterprotesters (including 13% who do not know whether these policies exist; see figure 6).

Figure 6. Does your institution have policies in place for managing confrontations between protesters and counterprotesters?

13%
11%
33%
43%

■ Yes ■ No ■ Developing Policies ■ Don't Know
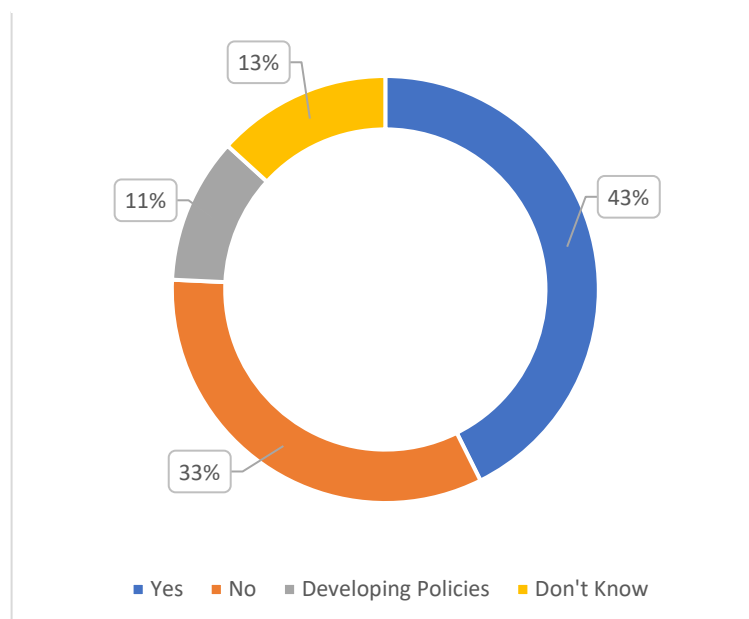
Here, the survey found only minor differences between public and private institutions. Slightly more respondents from public institutions (54%) than from private institutions (48%) responded "yes" when asked whether their institution has policies in place, but respondents from private institutions (16%) were nearly twice as likely as respondents from public institutions (9%) to report that policies are being developed.

When it comes to the possibility of a confrontation between protesters and counterprotesters, the majority of senior administrators (59%) believe such encounters to be unlikely or very unlikely (see figure7, scale 1-3) on their campuses. Slightly more than 1% of respondents believe such confrontation to be very likely.

Figure 7. In response to the protest or collective action, how likely is it that your campus might encounter student counterprotest activity?
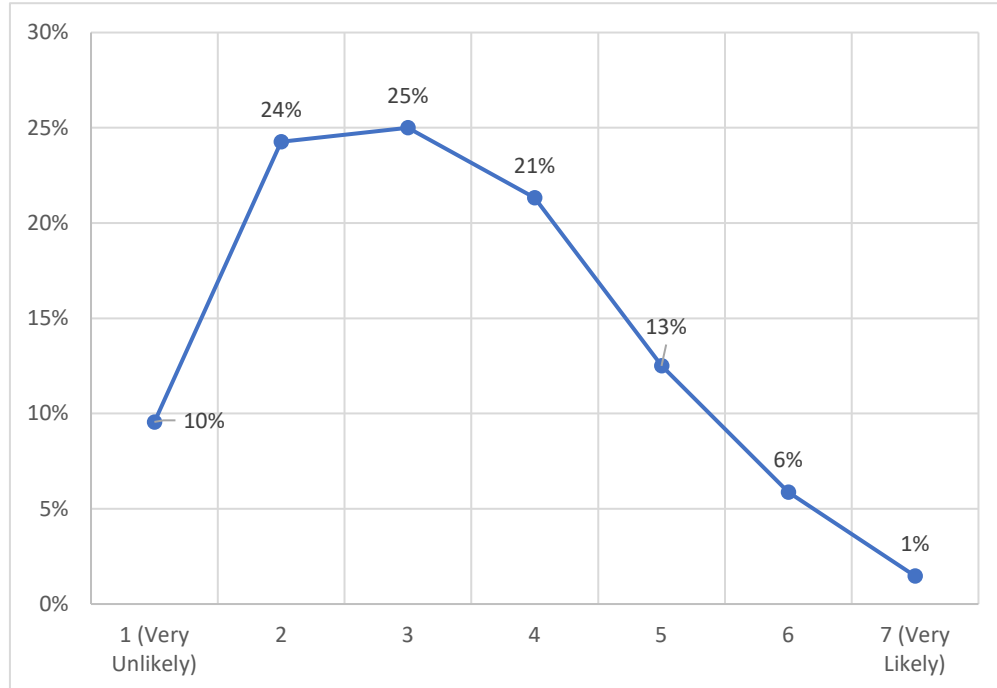
Mean: 3.26; Median: 3.00

In fact, fewer than 1% of senior administrators are very concerned that confrontations between student protesters and counterprotesters might lead to violence on their campuses this academic year (see figure 8, scale 1-3). Nearly four out of five senior administrators (78%) are less concerned or not at all concerned about such an event happening on campus. There is a difference between private and public institutions with respect to whether their senior adminstrators selected the most extreme option of "not at all concerned" about confrontations between protesters and counterprotesters: 23% at private institutions and 14% at public institutions selected this option.

Figure 8. To what extent are you concerned that confrontations between protesters and counterprotesters might lead to violence on your campus?
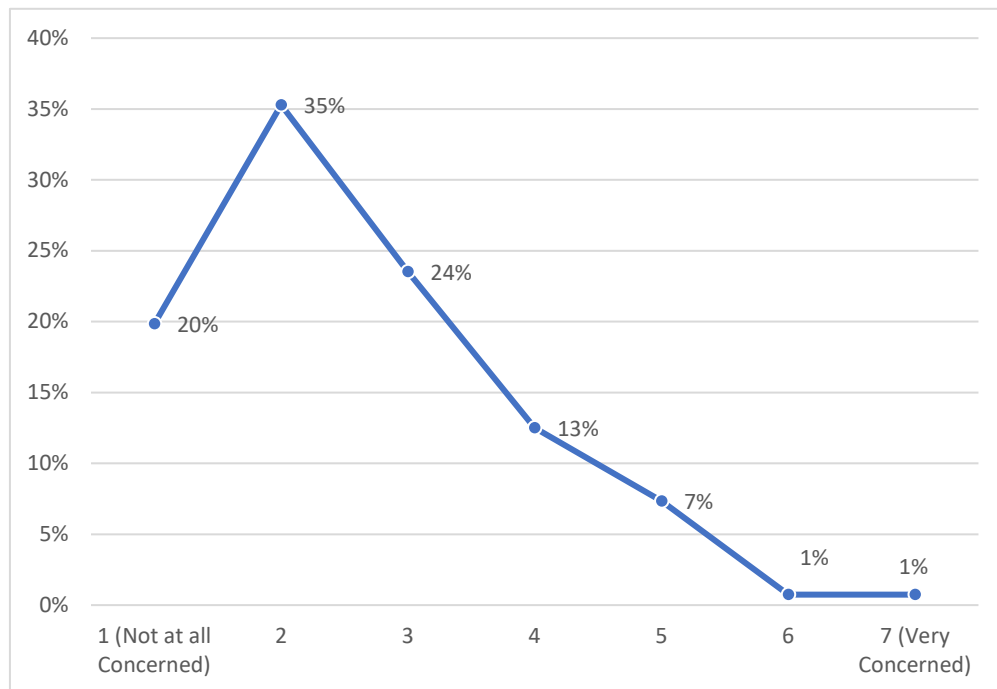

Mean: 2.57; Median: 2.00

Who Is Trained to Manage Conflicts on Campuses?

Only 24% of senior administrators reported that their public safety officers have had robust training experience in handling face-to-face confrontations between groups on campus, and even fewer (16%) indicated that their student affairs personnel have had such training. However, in both cases, senior administrators reported that, on a scale of 1 to 7, most of these professionals have received some training to manage face-to-face conflicts on campus. At the upper end of the scale (see figure 9, scale 5-7), 72% of campus public safety officers and 70% of student affairs personnel have received such training.

According to the senior administrators surveyed majorities of faculty members (69%) and student groups (63%) have had little to no training in managing conflicts (see figure 9, scale 1-3); only 2% of faculty and 1% of student groups reported having robust training. This finding suggests that faculty may be

Figure 9. To what extent have the following personnel at your institution been trained to manage face-to-face campus conflicts involving groups with different perspectives confronting one another?

underprepared to deal with classroom confrontations between students with different ideological and political perspectives.
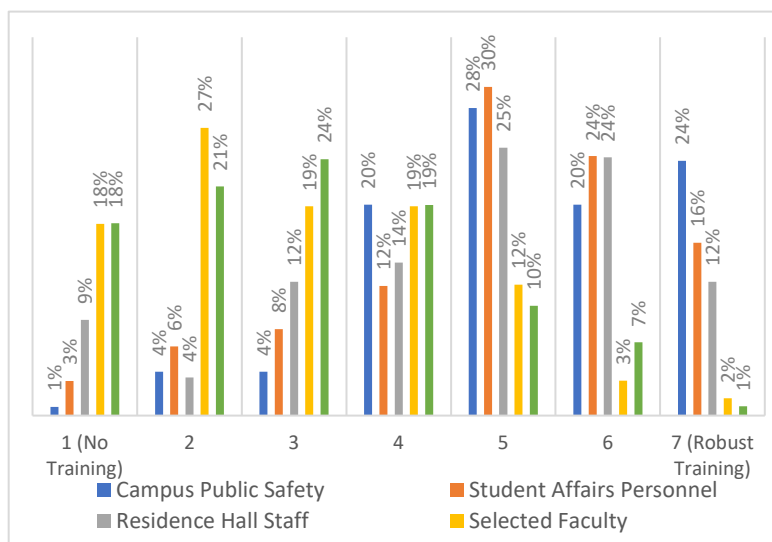
What Is the Role of Campus Public Safety or Local Law Enforcement During Campus Conflicts?

In light of the increasing public focus on police behavior, senior administrators were asked about their institutions policies and practices related to the role of campus police/safety officers in maintaining campus safety. Substantial differences were found in the responses between senior administrators at public institutions and those at private institutions (see figure 10). 86% of senior administrators at public universities and just 37% at private institutions indicated that their campus police/security officers are permitted to carry weapons.

Figure 10. Are campus police/safety officers permitted to be armed with items such as firearms, tasers, pepper spray, batons, or tear gas?

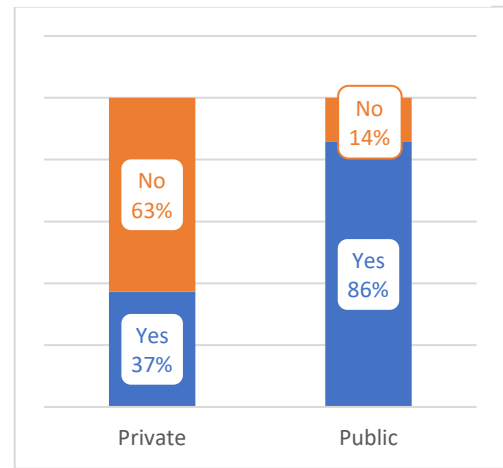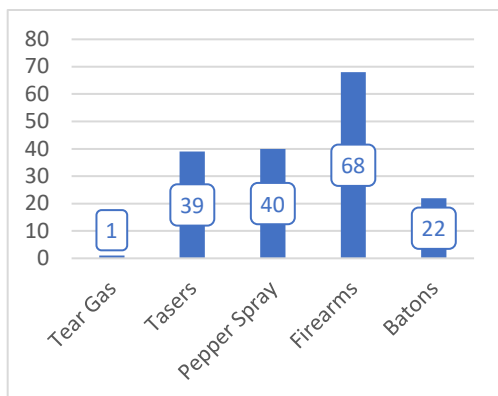Private — No 63%, Yes 37%
Public — No 14%, Yes 86%

Figure 11. Items that campus police/safety officers are allowed to carry by count. (Respondents that said weapons are allowed to be carried were asked to select each type that is allowed.)

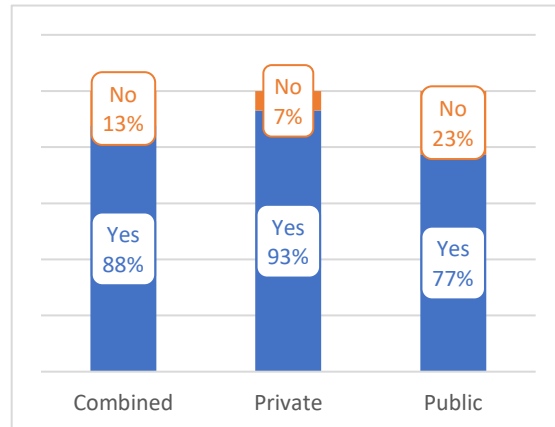Tear Gas 1, Tasers 39, Pepper Spray 40, Firearms 68, Batons 22

Senior administrators reported that the types of weapons campus police/security officers are permitted to carry include firearms, tasers, pepper spray, batons, and tear gas. Among the senior administrators who responded "yes" to permitting weapons by campus police/security officers, 68% indicated that such personnel are specifically permitted to carry firearms (see figure 11).

Further, 88% of respondents indicated that, should student confrontations
escalate, local police officers (beyond
campus security) could be engaged
(see figure12). However, private
institutions (93%) are more likely than
public institutions (77%) to involve
local police.

Figure 12. Do you allow involvement by or utilize local police officers (distinct from campus security personnel) when dealing with escalating student confrontations on campus?

Notably, as discussed previously and
presented in figure 4, public safety
and policing were ranked third among
the issues most likely to trigger student protests or activism on campus.
The underlying concern here relates to longstanding issues of
inappropriate, sometimes lethal use of force by police targeted at
communities of color. Further, as reported above and revealed in figure 9,
only a quarter (24%) of senior administrators reported that their public
safety officers have had robust training in managing conflicts among
campus groups.

Discussion and Conclusion

There is little question that students welcome the return to face-to-face classes in the fall of 2021, though many need time and assistance to adjust after the challenges encountered since the onset of the pandemic. With the continued uncertainty for health and safety with the rise of the Delta coronavirus variant,[7] it is little surprise that the majority of campus leaders surveyed ranked additional support for students as their top priority. Specifically, beyond just offering the usual existing services, leaders also seek to improve the coordination of those services to better support students' well-being and success.

Additionally, given the financial toll of the pandemic, it is understandable that administrators are intent on avoiding extraneous costs (e.g., new software and external experts) in favor of focusing resources directly on student needs, such as enrollment support, efforts to improve student retention and graduation, and increased financial aid. This was especially evident among senior administrators in the public sector.

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But given the nation's accelerating ideological and political divisions, and the potential for violence, what is surprising is that senior administrators believe the likelihood of confrontation between student demonstrators and counterprotestors to be low. Further, they have little concern that such

confrontations would lead to violence. This expectation that there will be few or no student confrontations on campus during the current academic year is reassuring. With all the challenges facing senior administrators, including those related to the ongoing pandemic, no one wants campuses to be embroiled in the kinds of confrontations we have witnessed in the public sphere among dissenting groups. Similarly, no one wants to see the pent-up anger and vitriol that has spilled over to issues such as the wearing of face coverings, COVID vaccinations, and election results made manifest by students on campus. Still, students have been inundated with examples of such polarization and confrontations, whether from social media or their own family members.

On the one hand, there is a national mood of agitation and anger that would have been unimaginable a few years ago, with many tensions surrounding issues of race. This is part of a mindset for some students returning to campus, including those who disparage the increasing multiracial demographics of the nation. On the other hand, the AU-AAC&U survey found that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) activities on campus in recognition of historic inequities are high priorities for senior administrators at colleges and universities. Could well-intentioned efforts at inclusiveness and efforts to confront individual and institutional racism become another issue for those in opposition to confront? As the 2021-22 academic year progresses, will students of color or other underrepresented groups be adequately protected?

The survey also found that issues of race, hate speech, and public safety or policing are potential triggers for student protest and activism on campus

(issues of public health and vaccinations are not far behind). Evidence indicates that hate speech, particularly online, has accelerated since the onset of the pandemic,[8] and administrators will need to balance the rhetoric of good intentions with actionable policies and planning to keep students, especially minoritized students, safe.

Nevertheless, the survey findings indicate that while some campuses have developed policies and provided robust training for targeted professional groups to help manage campus disruptions and conflicts, many more have not. Hopefully, student conflicts will not arise on campuses. But if they do, public safety, student affairs, and other members of the community need to be prepared to manage the situation, deescalate tension, and avoid violence. For campuses that do not have policies regarding protest activities, whose professionals have insufficient training to manage protests, including those involving conflicting groups, and that rely on local police officers in cases of student conflict, better preparation is in order. Being prepared is the best protection to avoid escalating confrontations and possible disruptions on campus. Ongoing dialogue across student, staff, and faculty constituencies remains one tool in a multifaceted arsenal.

"EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT HATE SPEECH, PARTICULARLY ONLINE, HAS ACCELERATED SINCE THE ONSET OF THE PANDEMIC, AND ADMINISTRATORS WILL NEED TO BALANCE THE RHETORIC OF GOOD INTENTIONS WITH ACTIONABLE POLICIES AND PLANNING TO KEEP STUDENTS, ESPECIALLY MINORITIZED STUDENTS, SAFE. "

The findings also point to limited or not training in conflict management

among faculty or students. The notion of the classroom as a safe space for ideas is evolving with evidence of increasing student complaints about faculty bias. A recent review found that student action against faculty in response to their statements or actions in the classroom increased more than five-fold between 2015 and 2020. The review was based

"THE NOTION OF THE CLASSROOM AS A SAFE SPACE FOR IDEAS IS EVOLVING WITH EVIDENCE OF INCREASING STUDENT COMPLAINTS ABOUT FACULTY BIAS. "

initially on student complaints that resulted either in a petition against a faculty member or in their sanction or termination.[9] The leading three topics that triggered students to report an incident with faculty were race, political partisanship, or gender. A related survey found that the stories published by *Campus Reform,* a conservative website on which student journalists and others report campus incidents of perceived liberal biases or

"IN THE CURRENT CLIMATE, 40 PERCENT OF THE FACULTY MEMBERS IDENTIFIED ON THE WEBSITE REPORTED RECEIVING MESSAGES OF HATE, THREATS OF VIOLENCE, OR DEATH THREATS. "

restrictions on free speech, have resulted in actual threats to faculty. In the current climate, 40 percent of the faculty members identified on the website reported receiving messages of hate, threats of violence, or death threats.[10]

Added to this overall context, some elected state officials have raised concerns about the content taught in college classrooms, particularly the teaching of critical race theory. For example, in response to concerns over potential bias, the Florida State Board of Education requires public universities to assess the "viewpoint diversity" of all of their courses.

Several other public officials are engaged in discussions concerning faculty promulgating their own points of view in academic instruction. Such actions, fears, and concerns add tinder to an already volatile situation.[11]

Given this climate of polarization and the disputes over facts, it is striking that civic and democratic engagement, liberal arts education, and institutional responsibility to contest the spread of misinformation were given relatively low prioritization by senior administrators. This may be an artifact of a forced-choice survey question. It may also be the case that, in reality, issues defy ranking and only become priorities once they come to a head. But the question remains as to how senior administrators will seize this time of great challenges to what are often considered the fundamental components of institutional missions. Will college leaders "double down" on their civic responsibility and democratic commitments? Will students' civic and campus activism be viewed as valuable elements of personal and social development or simply as disruptions? Will administrators step into the fight for academic freedom, or will faculty be left to defend this core value on their own?

> "BUT THE QUESTION REMAINS AS TO HOW SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS WILL SEIZE THIS TIME OF GREAT CHALLENGES TO WHAT ARE OFTEN CONSIDERED AS SOME OF THE FUNDAMENTAL COMPONENTS OF INSTITUTIONAL MISSIONS. "

Colleges and universities have long served as beacons of truth, knowledge, and light–even in the darkest of times. They are incubators of democratic values, preparatory settings for future generations of civic leaders, and ideally, create multicultural communities that reach beyond any single

ideology. Colleges and universities could not be more important to a nation facing a public health crisis, a struggle for racial and social justice, threats to its democratic institutions, political–almost tribal–polarization, a growing far-right constituency prepared for insurrection, and a global environmental crisis. Will they be ready for what lies ahead?

Notes

[1] The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) and American University (AU) conducted a national survey involving 140 senior college and university administrators (92% being presidents and vice presidents) in late spring of 2021. The ninety-eight-item survey clustered twenty-nine questions focused on anticipated trends and priorities for the 2021-2022 Academic Year. The questions were split into three categories: Student Protests & Polarization, Student Resource Challenges & College Affordability, and Student Support Needs.

The survey was distributed twice. The first collection period began on March 30, 2021, and was paused on April 13, 2021 due to low response rates and the potential for academic calendar conflicts. The survey was reinitiated on May 21, 2021 and closed on June 18, 2021. A total of 140 responses reflected a 4.7% response rate. At the 95% confidence level, the margin of error is 8 percentage points. This response rate is lower than previous AAC&U surveys, perhaps reflecting the impact of the longevity of the pandemic and the weight of other priorities facing college and university leaders.

Responses from campuses in the Midwest were overrepresented (30.2%), with participation from colleges and universities there nearly equal to that from all other regions except for the Southwest, which was underrepresented (7.29%). Responses from four-year private universities were also overrepresented (62.89%).

With the limited sample size, the authors have been cautious in interpreting survey findings. There is considerable variability in approaches and priorities among colleges and universities in the United States. Therefore, the findings highlighted in the Discussion and Conclusion are those that are clear and robust in their affirmation.

[2] Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "From 9/11 to 1/6: The War on Terror Supercharged the Far Right," *Foreign Affairs,* September/October 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/war-on-terror-911-jan6.

[3] "Optimism and Weariness: Results for Students Entering College 2021," Center for Postsecondary Research, Indiana University Bloomington School of Education, Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement, Figure 4, https://nsse.indiana.edu/bcsse/reports-data/bcsse-covid2.html.

[4] Doris Kearns Goodwin and Jon Meacham, "A Fourth of July Special," interview by Fareed Zakaria, *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, CNN, July 5, 2021, audio, 9:03, https://www.cnn.com/audio/podcasts/fareed-zakaria-gps?episodeguid=203a4ada-6c14-4787-9e07-ad5b01055c00.

[5] For additional information, see Alexander C. Kafka, "Could Political Rhetoric Turn to Campus Violence?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 26, 2021, https://www.chronicle.com/article/could-political-rhetoric-turn-to-campus-violence, as well as Eric Kelderman, "The Far Right's College Crusade," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 28, 2021, https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-far-rights-college-crusade.

[6] Note: respondents were also given an open-ended "Other" option.

[7] Note: this survey was completed prior to the dominance of the Delta coronavirus variant in the United States.

[8] Anti-Defamation League, *Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience 2021*, March 2021, https://www.adl.org/online-hate-2021#executive-summary.

[9] Colleen Flaherty, "Tracking Attacks on Scholars' Speech," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 31, 2021, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/08/31/fire-launches-new-database-tracking-attacks-speech.

[10] Hans-Joerg Tiede et al., *Data Snapshot: Whom Does Campus Reform Target and What Are the Effects?*, American Association of University Professors, Spring 2021, https://www.aaup.org/article/data-snapshot-whom-does-campus-reform-target-and-what-are-effects#.YS5Q645KiM-.

[11] Florida enacted the law on July 1, 2021, and Indiana has since introduced a similar bill. A proposal has been put forward banning the teaching of critical race theory at the University of Nebraska by one of its Regents, but it was recently defeated.

AAC&U is the leading national association dedicated to advancing the vitality and public standing of liberal education by making quality and equity the foundations for excellence in undergraduate education in service to democracy. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,000 member institutions-- including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, research universities, and comprehensive universities of every type and size. For more information, visit www.aacu.org

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